



# THE CALL TO BATTLE

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

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Ephesians 6:14-20  
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Planes. Oh! I love them! But this time everything was different. It was the evening of July 15th, 1988. I boarded a Lufthansa Airlines flight out of Frankfurt, Germany, in company with 12 others, to fly *East*. Once on board, we dispersed and sat alone in silence. The time for smiles and laughter was over. My throat was dry, my palms sweaty. I had never traveled behind that forbidding Curtain before. A multitude of questions whirled in my head: Would we make it through customs? Would our Bible commentaries with their phony covers be detected? (Some of the more fearful had already jettisoned their books in Frankfurt.) Would our teaching outlines hidden in our money belts be discovered? Would we be followed? Would our hotel rooms be bugged?

Our seasoned leader, of Italian descent, a tile-setter by trade, had spent hours briefing us on what do at every juncture. Step by step he drilled us on strategy. But nothing he said prepared me for the wave of fear I was feeling. It didn't help when the plane made sudden, sharp turns as if to miss unwanted air space. I wondered what was I doing traveling to a country whose very name evoked ancient memories of the Roman Emperor Trajan. His territorial expansion, in the first century A.D., had given the nation its language and culture. It had also given it its initiation into bloody persecution.

The reigning emperor of this land had followed in Trajan's footsteps. He had starved his country to feed his belly, and built his palace on the blood of thousands of martyrs. He had no use for religion. He confiscated Bibles and turned them into toilet paper. An anti-Christ supreme, he had organized a network of secret police whose web covered all of society in a stranglehold. One out of every three citizens was an informer. His secret police, hand-picked from orphanages in Libya, Iran, and Iraq, were absolutely loyal to him. He had nurtured them and schooled them in intimidation and brute force. They knew no morals; they had no ethical base. Their reward was a life of ease and profit for a job done well. And here we were, 13 foreigners, a threat to everything the dictator stood for. We would be monitored night and day. Any contact with nationals was forbidden. If we were caught in their homes, they would pay a high price: a year's wages.

The plane touched down. Here we were at last in enemy territory—Communist Romania! Would God really do battle with us? I wondered. Paradoxically, it was here, in the most dangerous place I had ever ministered, that I discovered the true joy of putting on the full armor of God. In the words of a contemporary theologian, "One is safest in the fight."

Today we come to our final study in the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Our text, from the closing verses of this marvelous epistle, expounds the Christian's call to battle. Every day the Christian must don his spiritual clothes, leave his home, and enter into enemy territory. As we study the inspired words of this text this morning my prayer is that you will learn to put on the armor of Christ every day before you enter out into the fray. We must do this, for Paul says that life is a constant struggle with the devil himself.

In these closing texts from Ephesians now, the apostle will

instruct us on how to implement God's strategy for dealing with an extremely wily and potent enemy.

Paul writes:

**Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.** (Ephesians 6:14-17)

In earlier studies we learned that the apostle wrote this letter while he was imprisoned in Rome, chained day and night to a member of the Praetorian Guard. Paul did not have to look far for an analogy to help him illustrate his call to battle. His exhortations here are based on the battledress of a soldier about to enter the fray.

The first thing to notice is that the initial three pieces of armor are to be put on prior to entering into battle. (Note that the verbs are all in the past tense.) The next two pieces of armor, on the other hand, are taken up as the Christian advances into enemy territory; while the last weapon (which, incidentally, is the sole offensive weapon) is used when contact is made with the enemy.

## I. Preparing for the Battle (6:14-15)

...having girded your loins with truth...

### (a) A Soldier's Belt: The Readiness of Integrity

A Roman soldier's belt was fashioned from a piece of leather 6 to 8 inches wide. This belt actually was more a part of his under-garments than his armor as its function was to gather up his long tunic in order to help make him ready for battle. Today, we would say that he was "rolling up his sleeves" in readiness.

What is it that enables Christians to be prepared for the spiritual battles we face every day? According to Paul, our belt is "truth." His words are a direct quote from Isaiah 11, describing the clothes which would be worn by the coming Messiah. (The Greek word "truth" is a translation of the Hebrew word for "faithfulness.") Isaiah 11:5: "Also righteousness will be the belt about His loins, And *faithfulness* the belt about His waist." Christ always wore the belt of faithfulness. He was utterly sold out to his Commander-in-Chief.

The first thing that makes us ready for battle is our willingness to be true, faithful people. If we insist on going into battle half-heartedly, we'll get blown away. It's impossible to fight the deceiver if we are holding onto deceit. Whenever Israel had to go into battle, draft dodgers didn't have to look hard for an excuse to stay home. Anyone who had built a new house, or had just planted a vineyard, a recently engaged man, or anyone who was fainthearted was excused from the battle to come (see Deut. 20:5-7). The issue is clear: God's bat-

bles are won by faith. Anyone entering the fray with a divided heart, or lacking integrity, is doomed.

A Christian, then, must first “gird his loins with truth,” donning his belt of Christ’s faithfulness, before he goes out into the world to join the spiritual battle.

Here is the second thing he needs:

### **(b) A Soldier’s Breastplate: The Assurance of Righteousness**

The soldier’s breastplate was constructed of leather-covered metal and shaped like a sleeveless vest. It protected his vital organs from both the front and the back. Again, we find a reference in Isaiah to the clothing of the Messianic King: “He put on righteousness like a breastplate” (Isaiah 59:17).

This is a frequent theme in the Psalms. The king did not feel free to go into battle unless his relationship with the Lord was on a solid footing. Often, that relationship came under attack. For example, if difficult circumstances were causing the king to suffer, he could be open to ridicule. In such times he would pray,

**The Lord judges the people;  
Vindicate me, O Lord, according to my righteousness  
And my integrity that is in me...  
My shield is with God,  
Who saves the upright in heart.** (Psalm 7:8, 10)

Here, the king was saying, in effect, “God, I have done right by you. Will you now do right by me? Take up my cause and vindicate our relationship.”

Christians, too, come under attack and ridicule. The devil will question our relationship with God and accuse us before we even reach the battleground. Unlike the king, however, when this happens we must pray, “Vindicate me, O God, before the accuser, according to *your* righteousness”—according to Christ’s righteousness. We can pray this with confidence because we know that we are accepted in the Beloved. This assurance gives us a clear conscience, enabling us to do battle. G.G. Findlay wrote: “The completeness of pardon for past offense and the integrity of character that belong to the justified life, are woven together into an impenetrable mail.” If we lack a clear conscience, of course, we are paralyzed and unable to fight.

There is the third piece of armor we must don before the battle:

### **(c) A Soldier’s Shoes: The Mobility of Peace**

In his *Jewish War*, Josephus says that in order to promote facility of motion, soldiers wore shoes thickly studded with sharp nails. William Hendriksen comments: “One important reason for Julius Caesar’s success as a general was the fact that his men wore military shoes that made it possible for them to cover long distances in such short periods that again and again the enemies were caught off guard, having deceived themselves into thinking that they still had plenty of time to prepare an adequate defense. In the victories won by Alexander the Great this same factor had played an important role.”

What is it that enables us as Christians to be ready to fight and ensures mobility and stability? It is this peace that the apostle speaks of: “having shod [our] feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace.” Nothing paralyzes the will more than a lack of peace. And this refers not merely to arming our own hearts with the gospel of peace, but being ready on all occasions to take that peace into the world in order to reconcile all men to Christ; to announce the good news that the tyr-

anny is over, that Jesus Christ is victor. Once more, this image comes from the prophecy of Isaiah:

**How lovely on the mountains  
Are the feet of him who brings good news,  
Who announces peace  
And brings good news of happiness,  
Who announces salvation,  
And says to Zion, “Your God reigns!”** (Isaiah 52:7)

The most comforting sense of peace we can know is found in the fight. If we lack peace, it may be due to the fact that we are more concerned with getting our own rights than dedicating ourselves to being soldiers for Christ.

If Paul had insisted on writing to Christians to lobby for his release from prison, we would never have had this wonderful letter to help us in our struggles with the adversary today. What he did rather was tell rulers like Agrippa, “I wish you were like me (a Christian) except for my chains.” He knew that God was behind his imprisonment, and that his confinement would not hinder but rather spread the gospel of peace. Do you want peace at work, at school, or abroad in the community? Then you will have it if you wear your shoes of the gospel of peace. When I was in college, a pastor who disciplined me would not let me escape any arena without first sharing Christ. Whenever the gospel was challenged, it was there I shared my testimony. This helped me overcome my natural timidity and brought me a peace that truly passed all understanding.

So there we have the Christian’s wardrobe for the daily spiritual battle: the belt of faithfulness (the preparedness of integrity); the breastplate (the assurance of righteousness and a clear conscience); and the shoes of peace (which assure freedom and mobility).

Next, the apostle lists some other things the Christian needs as he enters the fray.

## **II. Entering Into the Battle (6:16-17a)**

**In addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation...**

### **(a) The Shield of Faith**

The Roman soldier carried two shields, one small and round, the other (the one to which this text is referring) rectangular, measuring about four feet by two feet. This shield “consisted of two layers of wood glued together and covered first with linen and then with hide; it was bound with iron about and below” (Armitage Robinson). It was specifically designed to extinguish flaming arrows which had been dipped in pitch, lit and fired. A legion of soldiers would march in rank toward the enemy, undaunted by his attacks, with shields raised to form a solid iron canopy.

When Christians advance into enemy-held territory, the devil launches flaming missiles at us because he is threatened. For instance, out of nowhere we suddenly find ourselves thinking strange, lewd thoughts; we begin to hear slanderous accusations against us that have no basis in fact; we are overwhelmed with a sense of inadequacy. These flaming arrows are designed to terrorize and paralyze us. The devil launches them at us because he is terrified of the coming confrontation. But our faith demands that we keep advancing, undaunted by intimidation, sheltered from the attack under the shield of faith. This was what the psalmist meant when he said, “For it is You who bless the righteous man, O Lord, You surround him with favor as with a shield” (Psalm 5:12).

It is the enemy who should feel intimidated, not the Christian.

### **(b) The Helmet of Salvation**

The Roman helmet was made of bronze or iron. "An inside lining of felt or sponge made the weight bearable. Nothing short of an ax or hammer could pierce a heavy helmet, and in some cases a hinged visor added frontal protection" (Barth). In Thessalonians, Paul makes reference to putting on "the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the *hope* of salvation" (1 Thess. 5:8). The helmet of salvation keeps the mind calm, clear, and free from chaos and confusion by reminding us that the outcome of the battle is assured. God is utterly committed to our salvation. The battle is his; salvation is not up to us.

Second Chronicles records the great story of how King Hezekiah reformed the land and purged the nation of idolatry. But then came a Satanic attack on what he had accomplished in the person of Sennacherib. His Assyrian hordes came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and seized them. Sennacherib sent messengers to Jerusalem and blasphemed the Lord. Hezekiah responded by putting on his helmet of salvation. He went around the city wall and told his people, "Be strong and courageous, do not fear or be dismayed because of the king of Assyria, nor because of all the multitude which is with him; for the one with us is greater than the one with him. With him is only an arm of flesh, but with us is the LORD our God to help us and to fight our battles." After Hezekiah and Isaiah prayed, the Lord sent an angel who destroyed every mighty warrior in the camp of the king. So the LORD saved Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Returning home to his own temple, Sennacherib was assassinated by one of his sons (2 Chron. 32:7-8, 20-22).

Psalms 46 in all probability was inspired by this great victory of the Lord. Inspired in turn by the psalm, Martin Luther wrote the wonderful Reformation hymn *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*.

So when you are face to face with the enemy, raise your shield of salvation to extinguish the flaming darts of the evil one; and put on the helmet of salvation to keep your mind clear and calm in the face of attack.

There is one thing left.

### **III. Engaging in Combat: The Sword of the Spirit (6:17b)**

...[take] the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

#### **(a) David's Use of the Sword (1 Samuel 26)**

The life of David is a story of spirit and word overcoming flesh. Saul loved to brandish his spear, but David was skilled on the harp. Saul, who towered over David, went around seeking to impale someone, but David sang songs of praise to his God. The sword was no match for word and spirit. Once Saul was encamped with his army of 3,000 choice men, his spear by his side, surrounded by his troops (1 Samuel 26). The Lord caused a deep sleep to fall on Saul's men, and David sneaked down into the camp. Abishai recognized a perfect opportunity for David to rid himself of his pursuer. "Let me kill him with the sword," he pleaded. But David would have none of it. Instead he took Saul's spear and departed to a nearby hill. Then he woke up the entire camp and cried: "Behold the spear!... the LORD delivered you into my hand, but I refused to stretch out my hand against the Lord's anointed. Now behold as your life was highly valued in my sight this

day, so may my life be highly valued in the sight of the Lord, and may He deliver me from all distress." David returned the spear to Saul, refusing to become involved in bloodshed. Instead, he used the sword of the spirit, with continual allusions to Scripture, to convict Saul of his sin.

#### **(b) Jesus' Use of the Sword (Matthew 26:52)**

A scene similar to David's encounter with Saul was repeated on the night when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane. A horde of soldiers came seeking him, and Peter, like Abishai of old, responded by grabbing a sword and cutting off a man's ear. But Jesus told him: "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? How then shall the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen this way?" (Matt. 26:52-54).

What is the lesson we must learn from David's and Jesus' use of the sword? It is that the kingdom of God is not advanced by the sword; it is advanced only by Spirit and word. The writer of Hebrews describes the effectiveness of the word in his letter: "For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and the intentions of the heart" (4:12).

Here is how Martin Luther put it in his hymn:

*The prince of darkness grim,  
We tremble not for him.  
His rage we can endure,  
For lo, his doom is sure:  
One little word shall fell him.*

Christians are effective only to the degree that the Word is hidden in their hearts. The word is the arsenal that the Spirit uses when we are in hand-to-hand combat with the enemy. Philosophy won't work. Anger is ineffective. Authority is useless. It is the word and only the word that will prevail. So learn the word! "But," you say, "there are 66 books in the Bible. I can't learn it all." Then do what Jesus did. Major in Deuteronomy (the law), Psalms (the writings), and Isaiah (the prophetic writings). Those were his favorite books. Then begin with three books from the New Testament: Mark, Acts, and Ephesians. There is an arsenal that the Holy Spirit can use.

And one final word: Use the word gently. Do not shout it. A surgeon does not use his scalpel like a spear, does he? He washes and soothes his patient and gently uses the scalpel to do the work of cleansing and healing. This is how Christians should use the word of God. If we do, his word will penetrate deeply and advance God's kingdom (see 2 Tim. 2:25-26).

So there we have the Christian's armor.

This brings us to a soldier's posture.

### **IV. A Soldier's Posture: Constantly Alert (6:18-24)**

**With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints, and pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.**

Not only must a soldier be properly dressed for battle, he must also be alert to his commanding officer at all times in order to survive the battle and defeat the enemy. Likewise, we

must be alert to pray at all times, keeping open the lines of communication with our Commander by praying at all times, with all perseverance.

Why is this?

#### (a) Constant Danger of Attack

We should pray at all times because, in the words of Peter: “Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). We must pray at all times because we are in danger at all times.

Before the battle we are tempted to be fearful; we don’t want to fight. We are tempted to make peace or to compromise with the enemy. Then, during the battle, we are tempted to become discouraged and worn down. But we need endurance. Peter failed to pray in the garden, preferring to sleep instead. He fell prey to the devil, and impulsively made use of the wrong sword. Then, during the trial of Jesus, he denied his Lord three times.

And after the battle we are tempted to pride and lust. In his book, *Good-bye Darkness*, a personal memoir of World War II, William Manchester describes an incident when a shell wiped out his entire squadron and barely missed him. He awoke and found himself lying in bed, hallucinating about a prostitute (the “whore of death,” he called her) coming into his room. This, he said, was his moment of maximum temptation. “Desire is the sequel to danger,” he wrote. Even when the battle is over we still need to be on the alert.

There is another reason we need to be ready.

#### (b) Constant Opportunities for Witness

Keep in mind that the very attack you face is an opportunity for advance! God is always opening doors, utilizing attacks to advance his kingdom. In a way, the book of Acts is a divine comedy against the devil. No matter what he did to persecute the church—martyrdom, hypocrisy, or tribulation—throughout the book we find repeated use of the phrase, “and the church continued to grow.” No matter where you find yourself, or what happens to you, remember this: these are always opportunities to advance the gospel.

So Paul sees himself in prison, a victim of Satan’s attack, and he asks the Ephesians to pray for him that God might use his imprisonment to advance the kingdom. He asks for prayer that he be granted two things. First, boldness. “The word originally denoted the democratic freedom of speech enjoyed by Greek citizens. It then came to mean ‘outspokenness, frankness, plainness of speech, that conceals nothing and passes over nothing,’ together with ‘courage, confidence, boldness, fearlessness, especially in the presence of persons of high rank’” (John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* [IVP, 1979] 285, quoting Bauer, Arndt, & Gingrich).

Wisdom was the second thing Paul needed in order to present the gospel. Everyone is different, so we need to be original and wise in our approach to them. We must dignify every person with a custom-made presentation of the glorious gospel. John Stott put it this way: “clarity not to muddle it, passion not to compromise it.” We need therefore to pray for freedom: not freedom from confinement, but freedom to witness.

That’s all very fine, someone says, but does God really hear our prayers?

#### (c) Constant Attentiveness In Heaven

Eugene Peterson, in his book, *Reversed Thunder* (Harper & Row, 1988), describes a wonderful scene from the book of Revelation as the prayers of the faithful ascend to heaven:

When the seventh seal is opened, there is silence in heaven for about half an hour...While conflicts raged between good and evil, prayers went up from the devout bands of first century Christians all over the Roman Empire. Massive engines of persecution and scorn were raged against them. They had neither weapons nor votes. They had little money and no prestige. Why didn’t they have mental breakdowns? Why didn’t they cut and run? They prayed.

It was in order to hear those prayers that there was silence in heaven. Out of the silence, action developed: an angel came before the altar with a censer. He mixed the prayers of the Christians with incense (which cleanses them from impurities) and combined them with fire (God’s spirit) from the altar. Then he put it all in the censer and threw it over heaven’s ramparts. The censer, plummeting through the air, landed on earth. On impact there were “peals of thunder, voices, flashes of lightning and an earthquake” (Rev. 8:5). The prayers which had ascended, unremarked by the journalists of the day, returned with immense force—in George Herbert’s phrase, as “reversed thunder.” Prayer re-enters history with incalculable effects. Our earth is shaken daily by it. (pp. 87-88)

Everything we say, every groan, every murmur, every stammering attempt at prayer: all this is listened to. All heaven quiets down.

In their prison cell in Philippi, Paul and Silas began to sing at midnight. Heaven fell silent, and an earthquake shook the city. The foundations of life fell apart, and the kingdom of the world collapsed in order that the eternal kingdom might be made manifest. The prison walls fell down, and the two men walked out. The Philippian jailer, terror-stricken, was led to Christ by Paul. The man took his captives home, washed and fed them, and he and his whole household were saved.

Does God hear the prayers of the faithful?

On Tuesday night, August 2nd, 1988, the 13 who had gone to Romania were sitting by an Austrian lake, now returned to the West, singing hymns of praise and thanksgiving to God. We would never forget our new-found Romanian friends. Suddenly the heavens opened and a lightning storm covered the lake. In the storm, we knew that God had heard. We knew, too, that if we endured in faith and prayer, an earthquake would follow. Fifteen months later, the earthquake struck, and a kingdom crumbled. On Christmas Day, Romania’s anti-Christ met the Christ, the Judge of all. The saying is true: “Not by might, not by power, but by My Spirit says the Lord.”

Paul concludes his letter with these words, which will be our benediction today:

**But that you also may know about my circumstances, how I am doing, Tychicus, the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord, will make everything known to you. And I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know about us, and that he may comfort your hearts. Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ with a love incorruptible. (Eph. 6:21-24)**

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