

Sermon Text: Ephesians 6:10-24

Now, I have a confession to make. It's a confession I made this morning already in the early service. Probably Coach Dula will not remember this. Here's my confession. I'm not proud of it. I was once thrown out of a football game for fighting. You probably don't remember that. I remember it was in Clinton. My point is this. A fight on a football field is not that big a deal. It isn't. Now think about it, if you must fight, you're wearing a helmet, a protective cup, knee pads, shin pads, hip pads, big ole shoulder pads, all the way down to your chest is covered, and you have more on your hands and your arms. If you've gotta fight, that's the way to do it. When I see a football player get so mad that he starts swinging and then takes off his helmet, now that's just dumb! That is just dumb!

Through trust in God, we can have the light of God's Holy Spirit. We can know the truth of His Word, and have the armor that Paul was talking about, the armor of righteousness and the strength to overcome temptations and evil. If God provides armor for the fight of faith, wear it! Wear it!

I had a good friend years ago who worked at the Savannah River Plant, and I always knew when he came to church if he was about to do or had just done a very dangerous thing because once a year, he would come to church with no beard. Once a year, he would come clean-shaven. Some of you know what that means. He had to do certain procedures once a year where he had to put on a full protective suit and a respirator, and for the respirator to really protect him, it had to fit perfectly, and for it to fit perfectly, his beard had to go. It had to go. In order for him to have full protection, that beard had to go.

Now, sometimes there are things in our lives that have to go so that our armor of faith fits and really protects us in spiritual battles. Imagine a respirator, you're going into a room filled with radioactive dust, and you've got the respirator hanging over your shoulder. It's not going to help, is it? It's not going to help a bit. Neither will the Gospel of Jesus Christ nor the truth of God nor the righteousness of God assist you in daily struggles if you just have them hanging over your shoulder as theoretical help, or if you have a poncho with the names of the books of the Bible that you're wearing as we had with Lisa just a few moments ago. We need God's Word internally. We need God's Spirit internally. We need the trust and the faith and the truth and the righteousness to be a part of us, heart, soul, mind, personality, and priorities – through and through – to be dressed in the armor of God for the fight of faith.

I have seen people in the midst of crises take off their loose-fitting faith, and cast it away, and then start swinging into the fight with whatever power or whatever threats or whatever money or whatever advice from pop psychologists or astrologers or whatever the hot movie stars are doing these days or whatever their friends said they should do. In a crisis, people will very often just grab at straws because their faith is lying crumpled, untried, unused on the ground. To make us feel safe and protected in the material world,

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we will use many things, and I don't blame you. We'll use deadbolts and burglar alarms, and I don't fault that.

In my last church, I have not mentioned until today, but in my last church, an elderly neighbor who lived two houses away had her throat cut in the daytime. Two houses from us! You'd better bet, the next day I was talking to the trustees and to my wife and to a burglar alarm company, but we felt only just a little bit safer. We didn't feel entirely safe. When something like that happens, you lose your naïve innocence of “it can't happen here” because it did happen here. I think that 9/11, September the 11th, 2001, has in a way done that to all of us.

Back in 2003, my family and I went to the United Kingdom, and we were in the same London, we were in the same tube station, we were on the same bus route, which were later bombed. Where in the world can you be safe and armored and protected enough in this world? You've heard that some wealthy people are building houses now with safe rooms, safe rooms with steel walls or bulletproof glass walls, and they have cameras and stored up food and stored up water and a communications center so they can survive any sort of attack, at least for a little while.

Not all assaults come from outside! Some assaults come at our minds, our souls, our faith, and our hearts. No steel vault can protect our soul. People do want to be protected though. That desire has begun to show up in our advertising. Everybody got it this morning, but we don't talk back much in big 11:00 church so maybe one of you will be brave enough to do it. There's an odd mixture of safety and fear and guilt in marketing these days. Have you noticed this? If you really love your family, and you want them to be safe in a car, the kind of car you would buy would be? It starts with a V. Volvo. That's what they say. I saw one advertisement for Volvo, and it had a voice saying, “I remember walking away from the car thinking we could have died.” Now, many other manufacturers have started to tout their crash ratings. Safety, fear, and guilt – if you don't buy the very best to protect your family, then what kind of person are you? One tire manufacturer, well known in our area, has a plant in Greenville. They blatantly mix fear and safety and guilt in their commercials. Michelin has a series of commercials where the little babies are in the tires rolling around and floating around, and up under, at the end of the commercial, it says, “because so much is riding on your tires.” If you really want to keep them safe, you'll buy Michelin.

We all want to do as much as we can to keep our families and our loved ones safe. In a worldly sense, we will go to extraordinary measures to keep our homes, our cars, our money, our jobs – even our reputations – safe. On a physical level, we want to keep our value high in the marketplace and society by eating well and dressing well and working out and cosmetics and even plastic surgery. We don't want to lose value as a commodity in the marketplace in society. We are willing to work hard to keep our families and our possessions and our careers and our reputations safe against any sort of crisis.

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What about our souls? What about our souls? What are we willing to do to keep our eternal souls, our emotional, our personal, our spiritual selves safe? That part of us that is truly us, that is real and lasting, after these bodies and after these possessions and after these resumes we have built have all turned to dust, on that day, when we meet God face to face, no one, no one will care where you lived or where you worked or what you owned. There will be only two categories. Did you trust God or did you trust only yourself? Are you a child of God or are you not a child of God? I know that brings up confusion because in a generic sense we are all children of God because we are created in God's image, but in another sense, in an important sense, not all have a relationship with God as Savior, as safe keeper of our souls. Not all of us see themselves as sinners in need of forgiveness and grace found in Jesus Christ. Not all of us have accepted the offer of salvation made to whomsoever will come. The truth is, though the offer of eternal safety is free for whomever will come, not all will come. So there are two categories for eternal life. Forgiving sinner and just sinner. How can we keep our souls safe, ourselves, our true self?

For the same reason it is a bad idea to take off your helmet in a football field fight, it is also a bad idea to take off the helmet of salvation, and by the helmet of salvation, I mean the knowledge that you are completely dependent upon Christ as you work your way through this world, as you are assaulted by different ideas, and there are so many ideas such as “Go for the gusto!” or ideas like “Everything you want to do is just okay! Go for it!” Or ideas like “Live fast, die young, and leave a good-looking corpse!” People say that, but I've never seen it on a cemetery stone. Ideas such as “The one who dies with the most toys wins!” I saw another bumper sticker like that; it said “The one who dies with the most toys still dies!” All these philosophies, and that is what they are, ways of looking at life, are out there, trying to get into our heads. Ideas such as marriage is meaningless, as vows are old-fashioned, just have a good time! Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die! Now, that last one sounds familiar, doesn't it? That's not new. That is found in Luke, the 12th chapter. Do you remember the story of the rich fool? He said, “I will say to my soul, soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years, take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.” God said to him, “Thou fool! This night your soul is required of you and the things that you have prepared, whose will they be?” So it is with he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.

You're saying, “Soul, I've got mine. I'm set for the rest of my life.” God says, “Tonight you die. Now what?” If you take off the helmet of salvation and think you can fight the fight of faith alone without the protection of the Gospel, if you reject the idea that you are a sinner saved by grace, there will come a day when those other things will let you down, way down! Salvation is a gift of grace. Take that off and try to find your way. To try to win without it as you fight your way through this world is dumb. Many, many will seek security and seek identity by following so many superficial things. Like pop culture and actors, they will try what they try, they will eat what they eat, they will listen to the music they listen to, they will try the religion of the month that they are trying. To be saved from isolation, people will do very shallow things. There is no celebrity fad or no movie that will define anyone's life for more than that passing moment. In the grand scheme of

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things, that's all dust and decay. It cannot protect you from a meaningless life. It cannot save you from a meaningless life. The world is a difficult place. Keep your helmet on.

The armor of God is a completely different identity when we take it on. It takes on and projects God's truth from our life. God's Word is your life plan. You put on the armor by trusting the salvation of God more than anything that the world can offer. Once on, and once God's Holy Spirit is within, you're able then to grow in righteousness and to deflect the lies and the assaults of evil and temptation. Trust God, and believe that no matter what the world says or how the world tries to beat it out of you, God's Word is truer than any worldly promise. Faith is not us just pulling out of the world. Faith is a complete immersion into the world as dangerous as it is, but immersion in the world completely connected to and covered by the grace of God. We know there will be battles, there will be temptations, and there will even be doubts. With God's help, with God's help, a life of righteousness is possible. Our job is to wear our faith and to offer others a place to be, a place to be in this church, a place to join and to find a life worth living – so wear your faith openly. Dare to wear it! Be dressed up to beat all! Others will see and they will come, and they will see in you and in us a life that matters.

The end of this Scripture ends holding up the power of prayer. Now very often, people kind of make a small thing of prayer. It always makes me cringe just a little. Just a little is the expression that makes me cringe. If somebody says, oh, before you leave preacher, just say a little prayer for us. Like it's not a really important thing, and we're asking you in advance to not make it long, and it won't really do anything, but you're a preacher so say a little prayer. We treat prayer as a diminutive thing, as an insignificant thing, as a thing to be endured sometimes, as a time to look around and see if other people are closing their eyes or not. I had one of my staff members say a few weeks ago, “Jim, you didn't close your eyes during the prayer.” How did she know? We treat prayer as not much, but in this Scripture, prayer under girds everything because in prayer we are relating to God. It is a high and Holy moment. Prayer in the spirit is encouraged as a way to gain strength and comfort, a way to put on the armor tighter and truer.

I wanted to tell you just briefly about a time in which prayer meant a great deal to me, a time when I almost died, a time when I thought that I had died. In college, to overcome my fear of heights, I decided I would try a mountain-climbing expedition. 250 feet, three pitches to the top, and the guy leading it said it was going to be an easy climb, but I didn't know he was a Frenchman and had climbed all over the world. What was easy to him was not easy to me. At 200 feet, at one point, I slipped. I fell away from the mountain. The only thing that was holding me was Guy Jacobson, the Frenchman's right arm. I wasn't connected into the wall. I was on his arm, and he was connected into the wall. I spun away from the mountain. I was wearing essentially a World War II ammo belt, and as I exhaled, that ammo belt went up my rib cage so that I couldn't inhale very deeply the next time, and that was going on, and I felt myself beginning to pass out, spinning away from the mountain. I prayed. There was no one else. There was nowhere else. There was no resume or GPA that I had in college, the fact that my father had connections, nothing meant anything. In that moment, I realized my life came down to trusting God

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because I thought I was going to die, and I said a very simple prayer, “Lord, I am a sinner. I pray that you forgive me of my sins. In the name of Jesus Christ, receive me into your Kingdom.” Some very short prayer with those elements in it I prayed. In that moment, I didn’t feel prayer was a little thing. I felt prayer as a powerful thing. I felt bigger than that mountain. I felt certain that I was still going to die, but I did not care. I did not care because I felt complete trust in God that whatever happened, I would be with God. I don’t really remember what happened. I was six feet from that ledge. I was pulled up. I think Jacobson, who was a GEO instructor as well, pulled me up the last six feet. I have no recollection of climbing.

Prayer in a crisis like that means so much. It makes you realize just what matters, but here’s the point. Don’t wait for a crisis! Every single day put on the armor of God. Every single day seek guidance from the Word of God. Seek a deeper indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Every single day, know what I knew in a crisis, that I am completely dependent upon God. That’s the truth, crisis or no, and living that way is what Paul is encouraging. It’s what helps us grow, and helps us glow as a witness to the community around us. Complete and total trust in God is how we put on the complete armor of God, and can handle any crisis. In life, in death, and life beyond death God is with us. We are never alone. Amen.