

Hope for When it Seems Hopeless 2024
Exodus 14:10-14, 30-31 Ephesians 6:10-18, 23-24

Exodus 14:10-14, 30-31 (New Revised Standard Version)

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” But Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.” Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

Ephesians 6:10-18, 23-24 (New Revised Standard Version)

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ.

One time in college, on the way back to my dorm after class,

I took a shortcut across an athletic practice field.

Suddenly, a strange looking ball sailed over my head,
and when I looked back to see where it came from,

I saw a wild mob of fierce rugby players charging toward me
shouting and rushing to get around and past me after the ball.

That rather frightening scene comes to mind when I read the story
about Pharaoh's army coming after the Hebrew slaves from Egypt,
trapping them against the sea with no place to go or escape.

One of my Old Testament professors recommended
that when we read OT stories, to drop ourselves into the action
and try to imagine how that experience might have felt to them.

Descended from several generations of Hebrew slaves in Egypt,
the only life they had ever known had been harsh and unpleasant,
and can you imagine what out of Egypt must have felt like to them?

But then, looking back off into the distance,
they notice a huge cloud of dust coming toward them,
& they gradually make out that it's Pharaoh's army in hot pursuit.

A most terrifying moment of fear & panic, as they cry out, vs. 10~12,

In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? ... For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

In Exodus, reluctantly, Pharaoh allowed the Hebrew slaves to leave,
then changed his mind and led with his chariots to bring them back.

When the Israelites saw Pharaoh's army coming after them,
they were terrified,
for there was no way they could fight the Egyptians.

They were trapped with the Red Sea in front of them,
and Pharaoh's army charging up quickly behind them.

It was seemingly an impossible and hopeless situation,
and they angrily blamed Moses to putting them at such risk.

Moses responded with God's word & promise to deliver them, vs. 13-14,

"Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. **The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.**"

The verses following this passage describe the sea parting
for the Israelites to escape and walk to safety on dry land.

When Pharaoh's army tried to follow in pursuit,
the parted sea fell back on them, drowning them.

God accomplished what the Israelites could not do for themselves.

There is nothing about grab your weapons to defend yourselves,
but the promise, hope and assurance is that the Lord has got this,
and those attacking you, you won't see them after today,

The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.

The victory wasn't something that the people accomplished,
but the victory was won entirely without their help, vs. 30-31,

Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

All through Scripture we are reminded again and again,

**that God's power, promises and abiding presence,
these are our sure and certain pathway toward victory,
which is the same message as the Ephesians 6 passage.**

I was sitting with a seminary friend in his apartment one time,
and one of his two little boys came charging in from a back bedroom,
sobbing, "Jacob hit me with the **breastplate of righteousness.**"

Then Jacob came running out, also in tears, complaining,
"But Dad, he hit me first with **the shield of faith and the belt of truth.**"
Noting my confused and quizzical look, Frank explained,
that the boys' grandmother had given each of them
a plastic Ephesians 6 "armor of God" play set,
and they'd been fighting "**spiritual battles**" ever since.

I'm pretty sure there was some questionable theology involved,
along with a significant misunderstanding of **put on the armor of God.**

**The Christians in Ephesus were feeling discouraged and hopeless,
while facing severe persecution, the power and might of Rome,**
for at that time, there was an intense and concerted effort
to wipe out Christianity entirely by persecuting the church

and it was a very discouraging and difficult time for believers,
who were trying to be faithful amid a very hostile pagan culture
facing opposition from Rome while trying to proclaim the Gospel.

And for Paul, his situation was also difficult and disappointing,
for instead of preaching, teaching and proclaiming God's word,
the Apostle finds himself imprisoned in a dank, dark dungeon.
It's not looking promising or hopeful for the Apostle or the Church.

It is out of a sense of the struggle & hopelessness of the situation,
and the absolute impossibility of fighting harder to win victory,
that the true power, promise & hope become crystal clear, vs. 10~12,
... be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, ...
For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but ... against the spiritual forces of evil ...

In the Greek, **be strong** is in the form of a passive verb,
and better translated, not as **be strong**, but **be made strong.**
So it's not about us being strong by our own effort,
but by the power of the Lord, making us strong.
It's prayer & faith, as we cling to the strength of God's grace & love.

Perhaps the guard's armor led Paul to think about God's protection
which inspires a more faithful perspective of hope & optimism. vs. 13
**Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that
evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.**

The Apostle recognizes and proclaims,

that we cannot possibly defeat the forces of evil on our own.

It is only through God's gracious care, love and goodness
that we're protected & enabled to stand fast & persevere...

... just as he sees the parts of armor protecting the guard, vs. 14-17

Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ... take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ... take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

'fasten the belt of truth around your waist'

A Roman soldier wore a wide leather belt
that held all the other pieces of armor together...

...just as our Christian life is held together by **God's truth**,
that Truth which is, that God loves us and seeks to bless us,
and everything else about our faith and how we live,
builds on the Truth of God's love and gracious purpose.

It is all in a trusting response to God's grace, hope and promise—

- all our fear, disappointment, shame, defeat and mistakes,

- it also includes the secret wounds & scars we've endured,

for our loving Lord does not want us to bear all of that,
but for us to allow healing power to bring cleansing renewal,
open to the Light of grace shining into our hidden darkness.

'and put on the breastplate of righteousness'

The breastplate was the important armor that covered the chest.

But it is not our righteousness that protects us from harm,
rather it is entirely God's righteousness that protects us,
which we receive by faith, by grace through Jesus Christ...

... **God's grace toward righteousness, that is our true protection.**

'take the shield of faith'

There are specific words in the Greek
that each refer to and describe different kinds of shields.

This particular one, was a large rectangular leather shield
that would be soaked in water before a battle
so it could defend against the enemy's flaming arrows.

The frame of each shield could also interlock with the one next to it,

and by placing their shields together,

the soldiers could form a wall or a shell,

that together, protected them from all harm.

Though of course we do make an individual faith-decision about

responding to God's love & grace as offered & given through Jesus,

that faith decision to receive God's grace and healing also,

simultaneously, connects us by that faith to all other believers

**truly making us a part of the community of faith – the Church,
where we combine our shields of faith with others.**

Haven't we all had the experience of reaching the end of our rope,
and amid feeling defeated, weary and failing, ready to give up,
God sends someone to strengthen, encourage and uphold
**someone to hold up their shield of faith beside us, to support us
against the fiery arrows of distress and defeats of this world?**

And so it goes that with all of the pieces of armor mentioned,
we are not to attack anyone or fight by our own strength,
for the battle isn't won on our own terms or by our hard work,

**for there is always far more going on than what we can perceive ---
healing, helping and blessing, the limitless abundance of grace,
for putting on the armor is putting on our hope in Jesus Christ,
uniting with Christ through the work & presence of the Holy Spirit,
so that God accomplishes his plan and will, in us and through us,
something far beyond and above outward appearances & expectations.**

So as we continue to face disappointments and unending challenges,
and as we work through the ongoing uncertainties of these days,
the way ahead won't always be clear, familiar or easy,
and we could slip into overwhelming fear and panic.

So our call is not to fight the battle by attacking evil on our own,
but by seeking a growing and deepening relationship with God,
by trying to discern and keep up with whatever God is doing.
The victory happens when we are in alignment with the Lord's will.

**Our call is to be no more and no less than who we truly are,
each of us created unique, loved and equipped to serve,**

exactly as God graciously, deliberately & specifically created us,
and by believing that the Lord, by trusting that the Lord
will give us the courage, wisdom and strength that we need,
and that it will be God who does the fighting for us,
in fact God has our path to victory already laid out.

It was just a few years ago, seemingly an easier time,
that at the annual Session retreat we were discussing
the growing threat and uncertainty of the spreading Wuhan Virus,
so the elders decided to cancel fellowship until we knew more.

That week at Salt and Light, I asked one of the parents
who often posted videos of our S&L music in worship on Facebook,
to record the whole service on her phone and try posting it,
just in case, and the next week everything got shut down.

But God had already prepared us, and all through Covid-19
we never once missed posting a worship service each week.

It was truly incredible how amazing, faithful & dedicated people cooperated & somehow made all the details come together so well, far beyond the skills or knowledge we had when we began.

I am totally and gratefully convinced that it was all God's doing, though it looked like a pretty hopeless and discouraging situation.

These days that remarkable & blessed experience helps remind me to pray, trust and wait upon God, **before I go into panic mode.**

I never want to forget that things are not always as they appear, and that God may be up to something mysteriously more wonderful, that is way beyond and above my expectations and understanding.

Sometimes when our problems seem most impossible, crushing and daunting, it turns out that God is **most present**, in full control and at work already accomplishing way more than we ever thought possible.

Our battles and our struggles and problems, as we read in Ephesians are not about flesh and blood, nor about defeating other people, but putting on God's armor which we accomplish when we pray, and if we choose not pray, we are leaving that armor, God's gift, our defense & power hanging on the wall.

From my own prayer-life and dealing with problems and challenges, the practical questions I've learned to consider include these:

- what is the truth, the whole truth and the truth I'm not recognizing?
What are some other perspectives that I'm not understanding, and how can I best glorify and honor God through all of this?
- how is this consistent with the God that I know & trust who loves me, and is there something that God is trying to teach or reveal to me?

As we're promised by God, Lam. 3:22-23 and Eph 6:10-11, 18

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. Therefore, **be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power**. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand ... pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere...