
The Christian as a Soldier

Ephesians 6:10-18

Stevan Vaughan

Introduction

An Opening Illustration - Little Round Top

Little Round Top is the smaller of two rocky hills south of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. It was the site of a fierce assault by Confederate troops against a small, but determined Union regiment on July 2, 1863, the second day of the Battle of Gettysburg.

The Union regiment (20th Maine) ordered to defend Little Round Top was commanded by Col. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, whose men fought the most famous engagement there, and who would be awarded the Medal of Honor for his following actions.

A Confederate Regiment ascended Little Round Top at nearly the same time that Chamberlain's Regiment began positioning itself. When Chamberlain's Regiment first observed the Confederates approaching, they opened fire and sent the 15th Alabama scurrying for cover. The Confederates then regrouped and ordered a rush up the hill towards Chamberlain's position, threatening Chamberlain's left flank. As Chamberlain continued to lose soldiers, he ordered the left flank to withdraw so that the Regiment formed a "V", like a swinging door. Repeatedly, the South rushed Chamberlain's position and threatened to overwhelm the Regiment. Despite heavy losses, the 20th Maine held through two subsequent charges by the 15th Alabama and other Confederate regiments for a total of ninety minutes. As the 20th Maine's men were expending their last ammunition, Chamberlain ordered them to fix bayonets and prepare to charge.

These are Chamberlain's own words concerning that day: "Not a moment was about to be lost! Five minutes more of such a defensive and the last roll call would sound for us! Desperate as the chances were, there was nothing for it but to take the offensive. I stepped to the colors. The men turned towards me. One word was enough. BAYONETS! It caught like fire and swept along the ranks. The men took it up with a shout, one could not say whether from the pit or the song of the morning sat, it was vain to order "Forward!". No mortal could have heard it in the mighty hosanna that was winging the sky. The whole line quivered from the start; the edge of the left-wing rippled, swung, tossed among the rocks, straightened, changed curve from scimitar to sickle-shape; and the bristling archers swooped down upon the serried host- down into the face of half a thousand! Two hundred men!" (Voices of Battle: The Gettysburg National Military Park Virtual Tour - National Park Service)

Before the Confederates were able to assess the situation, Chamberlain's Regiment came charging down Little Round Top, opening their “hinged door”, and overwhelmed the Confederate Regiment. Unable to maintain their position, the Confederates were forced to retreat off the hill.

This was the first picture that entered my mind when I was considering an illustration demonstrating the overall character and command of Ephesians 6:10-18. Chamberlain's forces were small in comparison to their enemy (half the size), but held a position of strength. They fought hard to stand their ground even to the last bit of ammunition. They knew they could not budge no matter what the cost. If they failed in their defense, in their stand, the Union could easily lose that day, and much more as the Battle of Gettysburg would continue.

As we heard this morning, as Christ is warrior, we are called to be soldiers. In this continuation of our identity in Christ, Christ calls us and empowers us to be prepared, armored, and trained, to stand our ground. We too are in a position of strength, but it is not because of our own doing and prowess, but because of Christ's work as warrior and ruler.

The Setting for Paul's Writing – A Guarding Soldier

I want you to consider the context of this passage with me. Paul, while in prison in Rome, probably wrote this letter to the Ephesians. There is indication in scripture that the Praetorian Guard would have been guarding Paul in prison. This guard was an elite corps of soldiers, established to guard the Emperor of the Roman Empire. Augustus established the soldiers to attend the person of the praetor or Roman general. The official duty of the Prefect was to keep in custody all accused persons who were to be tried before the Emperor. Paul had been delivered to the Praetorian Guard to await trial before the Emperor.

Some speculate that it is because of Paul's close association with these guards that he writes his finale to his letter to the Ephesians. Paul knew that a Roman soldier might come to mind when he wrote this letter, but actually, Paul has in mind a different soldier as he concludes his letter to the Ephesians.

The Argument for the Book

It was helpful for me to understand the general flow of the book of Ephesians as I sought to understand the full implications of Paul's concluding charge in this letter, so let's begin by examining the progression to Paul's concluding remarks:

Seated with the Father (Ch.1-2)

The structure of Ephesians takes a progressive flow from beginning to end. You can trace three escalating themes through the letter: Seated with Christ, Walking with Christ, and Standing for Christ. In chapters one and two, the book begins with Paul's emphasis of Christ's position and dominion over ALL heaven and earth. Christ is seated with the Father and he will one day unite all things to his glory.

We may take this statement for granted, and I think we do. However, what is amazing and empowering for our work as soldiers is that, not only is Christ seated with the Father but also, we are seated with Christ. Even more amazing is that all this happens when we are dead in our sin against the Father. We were following Satan, and living in the futility of our thinking when Christ raised us up with him, and seated us with him.

Walking with Christ (Ch. 2:11-Ch. 4)

A large part of the book is assigned to what I see as the next progression in Ephesians and that is walking with Christ. Walking with Christ is about Christian maturity and unity. Paul addresses the need to put off our old self, and put on the new, to recognize the Mystery of the Gospel, which entails being unified in the Body of Christ with the Gentile believers. No longer were the Ephesians supposed to walk in pagan thinking, or be carried along by false teaching, but they were to grow up together and be knit together as one Body.

We are to walk in love, renew our thinking, and speak the truth to one another. As we walk as imitators of Christ, we are to walk in light and in love, giving ourselves up for one another.

Please keep in mind that Paul is addressing disunity on multiple levels; Jew and Gentile, husband and wife, parent and child, master and slave.

Standing for Christ (Ch.6:10-20)

The last section in Paul's letter to the Ephesians describes the believer's position of strength, maturity, and responsibility. Once the believer recognizes who he is in Christ, and begins walking as an imitator of Christ, then he is called to stand for Christ.

Like the Battle of Little Round Top, we are to stand together in strength, and hold our position at all costs. However, our reinforcement is far greater than our fellow soldiers alone can provide.

Standing in Strength (6:10-13)

Please turn with me to Ephesians 6:10-18, while we focus on the final section of this letter:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. ¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, ¹⁵ and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming

darts of the evil one; ¹⁷ and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, ¹⁸ praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, ¹⁹ and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

Let us look more closely at this text. Verse 10: Finally be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Where do we gain the strength to fight against the powers of darkness? Where do we gather the strength to stand?

Strength in the Lord and in His might

First, we find strength in the Lord. Paul begins the conclusion of his letter to the Ephesians with an emphasis on God's great power. Just like the beginning of the letter, the emphasis here is on God and his sufficiency in a time of spiritual warfare. Paul himself is in a difficult situation in prison and the letter he is finishing has just outlined areas of change and areas of spiritual warfare. These situations cannot be overcome on human strength alone; we need Christ's strength in this struggle.

Strength from our Union with Christ

Paul uses battle language throughout his letter to the Ephesians. If you remember earlier in the letter, he describes the rule and superiority of Christ, reminding the Ephesians that Christ is seated with the Father above ALL rule and dominion (1:20), and as believers through salvation, we have been raised with Christ and seated with Him. The Church is the Body and Christ is the head, and both are seated with authority with the Father. This is the second area of strength Paul has described in his letter to the Ephesians

Paul prays for believers that they may comprehend this great surpassing truth. This is an important step in understanding the strength we have in Christ, and Paul recognized that part of the inner struggle is our own inability to accept our standing with Christ. In this letter, Paul is concerned with the believer's tendency to deny their position in Christ, to accept a weak view of our unity with Christ and one another. This did cause and will cause serious divisions in the Body of Christ. The Ephesians were not walking in a manner worthy of the calling of Christ. They were proud, hard-hearted, impatient, and not loving one another. They were being "carried away" by false teaching through human cunning, craftiness, and deceitful schemes. They were angry, lying to one another, bitter and harsh to one another (Ch.4).

This was their weakness, this was their battle, and these were Satan's schemes. In the midst of the sinning and division, their focus was on blaming one another. Yet Paul clearly argues that even though we think we are struggling against flesh, this battle is actually taking part where we cannot see, in the heavenly realm.

Our strength for battle comes from WHO we are in Christ.

Strength as the Body of Christ

This letter shows us the position of strength that we have from the Father and our union with Christ; but we are not called to fight alone. Paul makes it clear throughout the book that part of the Ephesians' strength for battle was to come from the very persons they were fighting. Fight the spiritual fight together! Paul addresses this letter to the whole Church as an army, not merely as individuals in single isolated battles. The whole book is addressing corporate body concerns. Now Paul in his conclusion is encouraging and defining action. Action to live out appeals given through the book of Ephesians, to fight spiritual warfare together as the body of Christ seated at the right hand of the Father, living as imitators of the Head. Destroying disunity in the Body, speaking the truth in love and destroying Satan's schemes.

This is clearly a battle we cannot and are not intended to fight alone!

Strength with the whole armor of God

Verse 11 reads, Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. ¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm

The final area of strengthening comes from putting on the armor of God. Twice Paul exhorts the Ephesians and us to put on, or take up, the whole armor of God. Paul uses a serious tone in writing about the nature of our enemy and the source of the battle in order to emphasize the seriousness of the conflict. The true battle is in heaven. We are warriors in a battle we cannot always see, but our involvement and preparation is important. You are in the battle if you are a believer, whether you want to be involved or not. The Ephesians simply did not see the real ramifications of their struggle with sin and one another.

Yet, in courage and preparation, we are called to stand firm, like the union soldiers on that hot July day in 1863.

Standing Prepared (6:14-17)

Paul calls us to stand prepared for battle with God's armor. Let's look closely at the prerequisites for battle and our preparation.

Prerequisites for Battle (Stand Firm)

Stand therefore, Having fastened the **belt of truth** (vs.14)

Paul's Gentile readers would have initially thought of a Roman soldier in their immediate context, and this is often what is portrayed in today's illustrations of this text. However, Paul begins at Isaiah to direct his readers to align their thinking to a different soldier. Turn in your Bibles to Is. 11:1-5;

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. Moreover, the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. In addition, his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness, he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips, he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

Whose belt of righteousness is being described here?

Paul begins his description of our prerequisites for battle through the terms of Christ's armor. It is interesting to note that the terms righteousness and truth here refer to a quality of character. D.A. Carson says, "Paul is saying that the church's basic equipment in the spiritual battle is integrity and righteous living"... (Which directly addresses challenges the Ephesians' were struggling with)... "they are effective because these qualities bear the stamp of Jesus and the new creation he brings". The belt or girdle was of vital importance in ancient times as part of the warrior's preparation for battle. It was the initial step in readying oneself for armor and action.

Having put on the **breastplate of righteousness** (continuing verse 14), Paul directs us to Isaiah 59:17, so let us turn there.

He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak. John Calvin says of this verse in his commentaries, "The meaning of the verse amounts to this, that God is in want of nothing for discomfiting his enemies and gaining the victory; because from his righteousness, power, and grace, and from his ardent love of his people, he will make for himself complete armor." This verse has a sense of justice. We have to be dependent on the supremacy of God described in Chapter 1, and the fact that we are being seated with Christ. This relationship has to be a prerequisite of preparing for spiritual battle. The breastplate protects the vital areas of the body, the life sustaining organs, the heart. It is the last line of defense, and the first to be prepared.

Having put on the **readiness** provided by the gospel of peace in verse 15 concludes the prerequisites of spiritual battle. Turn to Isaiah 52.

Is. 52:3-7; For thus says the LORD: "You were sold for nothing, and you shall be redeemed without money." ⁴ For thus says the Lord GOD: "My people went down at the first into Egypt to sojourn there, and the Assyrian oppressed them for nothing." ⁵ Now therefore what have I here," declares the LORD, "seeing that my people are taken away for nothing? Their rulers wail," declares the LORD, "and continually all the day my name is despised." ⁶ Therefore my people shall know my name. Therefore in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here am I." How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

A good soldier is always prepared. Readiness is especially vital in spiritual battle. Paul is exhorting readiness, a state of readiness, a character of readiness, which the Gospel of Peace provides. Paul uses Isaiah to confirm the certainty that believers will be fully prepared for their future hope of salvation (even in the midst of battle), even in the midst of Exile. The Gospel of Peace prepares and readies His soldiers, because believers can be confident that God's word is true.

Preparation for Battle (In all Circumstances)

Take up the **shield of faith**

In verse 16, Paul continues with our preparation for battle. Let us read verse 16 together. "In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one."

The most necessary instruments of our warfare are the sword and shield, both closely related to the Word of God. Both of these pieces of armor Paul describes as essential equipment that we need to take up in our stance for spiritual warfare. By faith, we depend on the Word of God and repel all of the attacks of the devil. Historically, Hebrew shields were the size of the soldier, usually covered in leather and soaked in water to repel arrows of fire. All of the shields together formed a wall, or roof overhead, to repel the attacks from the battlefield archers, which would launch volleys of arrows by the hundred or thousands. His water soaked shield would protect the soldier and his partners when the rain of fiery arrows fell. In the context of Ephesians, D.A. Carson writes, faith will repel "...the steady rain of temptation to fear, bitterness, anger and any division that would break up the unity of the Church." The Ephesians struggled with division, with brotherly love in the Church, and in their personal relationships. There was bitterness between Jewish and Gentile believers, and fear concerning the new unity that the Gospel brought. However, Paul tells the Ephesians to take up faith as the shield against these schemes of Satan. This stance together as an army, dependent on the faith that Christ provides is the only way to repel Satan's attacks (together).

Take the **helmet of salvation**

Continuing in verse 17 Paul writes, and take the helmet of salvation referring again to Isaiah 59, so flip back to Isaiah 59:17. He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak. In this illustration of the helmet of Salvation, I believe Paul is using Isaiah to point the Ephesians back to the beginning of his letter where he clearly describes the strength and comfort of a believer's eternal standing with Christ through salvation. Even in the most aggressive attack from Satan, there can be comfort, peace, and strength, knowing who we are in Christ. The helmet of Salvation points to victory through hope, and our eternal standing with Christ.

...and the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God. Paul also references two Old Testament texts here: Isaiah 49:2, and Hosea 6:5, so let's turn quickly to those texts.

He made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand, he hid me; he made me a polished arrow; in his quiver, he hid me away. Is. 49:2

Therefore, I have hewn them by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of my mouth, and my judgment goes forth as the light. Hos.6:5.

Is it not a blessing that we do not manufacture our own weapons? We are fully dependent on God and who He is, and God supplies the weapons needed to stand against Satan's schemes. This sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God in this setting, points the Ephesian Church back to Isaiah 11:4, Isaiah 49, and Hosea where the powerful words of the Messiah effect judgment. Here is one weapon where the Ephesians understood they had an ability to protect themselves and to strike back at the enemy. The Word of God is a weapon of truth and judgment. The Word of God is a weapon that one has to be active with, choosing to take it up. However, just like a real sword, used for defense or offense, it has to be drawn. It has to be wielded, practiced, and known.

Standing in Prayer (6:18-20)

The Character of Prayer

Carson cites concerning verse 18, that, "Technically this is not a new sentence..., but qualifies *Stand Firm, then*. However, prayer is not the seventh piece of armor, nor is it the means of "donning" the six, but prayer is closely associated with them." Theological truth and prayer cannot be separated, "Spiritual understanding of the gospel combined with an alert prayerfulness is the combination Paul seeks".

Let us read verse 18 ...praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints...

Prayer is to be present at all times, just as armor for spiritual battle is a readiness and preparedness for every circumstance. Paul has outlined the struggles in the Ephesian Church, and he understands that change will not be easy, and that prayer at all times has to be a constant companion in this spiritual warfare. Paul instructed the Ephesians to pray in the Spirit, to be dependent on the Spirit in their struggles against evil, to pray to receive energy and strength for the battle, and not to be dependent on their own power to fight evil, but always to be in communion with the Lord.

Paul encourages us to be in a constant attitude of prayer and use all prayer and supplication to pray for others. Particularly in this context, pray for those in the Church who are fighting the same battles, who are standing shoulder-to-shoulder, brandishing shield and sword.

The Content of Prayer

When Paul says to pray with alertness (with all perseverance), he knows we are in a long hard struggle against evil. The battles of the Church will end with the fullness of time, when Christ unites all things in heaven and earth. Until that time, we, as the body of Christ are to pray for one another in our struggles against false teaching and

teachers who seek to divide the Church; praying for practical strength to walk in a way worthy of Christ, and for daily power to put off sin and to renew our thinking.

Paul's desire is that all saints pray for one another in this struggle to the end, in all perseverance. Is it not the ultimate in "one-anothering" when we pray for one another regularly? In the context of the armor and the struggles in this book, is it not directed to the Church body as an army, not merely individuals?

Also, look closely at verse 19. Paul is ultimately requesting prayer for himself. Paul is struggling and the battle is hard. If Paul needs prayer, how much more do you and I need prayer, and need to pray. Also, observe closely Paul's request: Does he ask for relief, or comfort, better conditions in prison? Does he ask for prayer for his release?

No, Paul asks prayer for words and boldness in evangelism in order to further proclaim the message of Christ, and that he may have the courage to speak truth, as he ought, in the difficult circumstances of his struggle. How does Paul's request for prayer mirror the content of our prayer?

Lessons

We are called to be imitators of God. As Christ is warrior, we are soldier. As we move through life, and deal with a variety of circumstances and relationships, we need to recognize where the real struggle is. It is NOT against one another.

Our strength comes from God, and from his armor. However, it is our responsibility to take up and put on the armor. We cannot simply be an innocent bystander. We are called to action, to war, to stand our ground.

Because of our position in Christ, we have the power, strength and authority, to be fully committed to the engagement against sin, destruction of character, disunity and human deceit.

We are called to stand together and stand united. As the Body of Christ, we form the army whom Christ empowers to battle the forces of disunity and false teaching. Together we can deflect and extinguish all of the attacks from the enemy with faith secured by hearing and the proper study and understanding of God's Word.

The vital importance of the use and skill of God's Word as our main weapon against sin and Satan cannot be stated strongly enough. We are only as effective as our skill in handling God's word within our relationships, body life and prayer life. Do all you can to hear, learn, and grow in your use of our primary offensive weapon, God's Word.

Keep alert. As God's soldier, we are to be in a constant state of readiness. We cannot neglect our daily preparation of putting on God's grace and Christ's armor. We begin with the security of salvation, and strength of character.

Pray. Pray at all times. Be ready for prayer at all times. Be in a relationship of prayer with the Father at all times. Read God's Word on types and content of prayer. Often I feel we pray for our desires and not God's. We need to know and understand what God desires in our prayer life.

We need to pray for each other in this battle. Pray for courage and bold proclamation of the gospel.

Conclusion

Heroism is latent in every human soul.... However humble or unknown, they (the veterans) have renounced what are accounted pleasures and cheerfully undertaken all self-denials; privations, toils, dangers, sufferings, sicknesses, mutilations, life-long hurts and losses, death itself—For some great good, dimly seen but dearly held.

- Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain,
Memorial Day 1897

Let us as Christian soldiers, and imitators of Christ as warrior, stand for that great good, dimly seen, but dearly held.