

Ephesians VIII
Ephesians 6:10-20**Pastor Wayne Peterson**
August 29/30, 2009

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. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

When I was in second grade, my home congregation started something new – a children’s choir. It may not strike you as a great innovation, but the congregation had never had one before, even though it was 92 years old at the time. Actually, we started two choirs at the same time – the Chapel Choir was for kids in grades 4-8 and the Cherub Choir was for kids in Kindergarten thru 3rd grade.

The director of the Cherub Choir was Ruthie Sill. At that time Ruthie must have been in her mid-forties. She had no formal musical training, and being single, she had no children. But she loved working with kids and she did a great job with the Cherubs for many years.

One of the things I remember about our rehearsals is that she would take a break about halfway through the hour for a marching song. Sometimes Lillian Thune would simply pound out a march from the big old upright piano (which someone in a moment of senility had painted a pale green). But often we would sing the song we will sing after the sermon this morning – “Onward, Christian Soldiers”. About 25 of us would march in single file around the room, bellowing out the first stanza two or three times before it was time to sit down again.

Now, almost 50 years later, I think there is still a Cherub Choir in my home congregation. Though Ruthie is no longer the director, they likely still take time for a marching song now and again in order to get the “wiggles” out of their system. I would be surprised, however, if “Onward Christian Soldiers” is used very often. You see, something changed between 1962 and 2009.

In 1962, most of small town Minnesota understood the United States to be a Christian nation. Many of the kids in the Cherub choir had fathers who had served in the armed forces in World War II or Korea, where a just cause against an evil enemy was clearly evident in the public mind. As my friends and I sang this song, I think we understood that the cross of Jesus was going before our army and navy and that the Church of Jesus was nearly synonymous with the United States of America.

But then came Vietnam, an unpopular war in which citizens were sharply divided over America's involvement. Many church leaders believed the war was justified and gave it their blessing, many others decried it and called for its end. As Christians struggled with the moral ambiguity of that war, hymns with militaristic images began to be sung less often and now, thirty years later, have largely faded away from the repertoire of most churches.

You might recall about twenty years ago that quite a fuss was made when the committee creating a new hymnal for the Methodist church recommended that "Onward, Christian Soldiers" and other hymns with militaristic imagery be omitted from their new hymnal. Their rationale was that if the Christian church is to be working for peace on earth, then it should not sing songs that seem to glorify war.

As soon as that news hit the papers, the committee quickly found that people do not relinquish their favorite hymns very readily. An onslaught of letters to the editor and protests at the national Methodist headquarters ensued, and when the Methodist convention gave its final approval to the hymnal, "Onward, Christian Soldiers" was once again in the index.

When the list of hymns for *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* came out four years ago, "Onward, Christian Soldiers" was not on the list. This time I don't recall any public outcry about the omission. My guess is that with American soldiers serving in Iraq, there was a greater sensitivity about imagery that might feed the mistaken notion that this war was in some way a battle between Christianity and Islam.

To a certain extent, I agree with the concern that we should not in any way glorify war. War is sometimes a necessary evil taken to combat a greater evil, and being a soldier is an honorable vocation, but that does not mean war should be glorified. However, if we were to purge military images from the Christian faith, we would have to be prepared to take a scissors and cut large chunks out of our Bibles, for the Bible is full of such imagery. Our passage from Ephesians, talking about the "whole armor of God", is one of the foremost examples. Rather than trying to eliminate the militaristic imagery in our tradition, we would be better off trying to understand its purpose.

To do so, it is important to recognize two things about this "war" which we Christian soldiers are to be fighting. We must be clear about whom we are fighting and what weapons we are fighting with.

This "war" we sing of in our hymns this morning is not the kind of war we hear about on the evening news. It is not a war against another country or an evil dictator or a social evil like terrorism or drugs – and yet this war is a struggle between life and death. The nature of the battle is described in the third sentence of our reading: "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh (a human foe), 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."

Paul often talked about these rulers and authorities. And we often talk about rulers and authorities. But we don't use these terms like Paul did. For us, a ruler is the head of a country and authorities are those who enforce the ruler's decrees. We hear the terms "rulers and authorities" and immediately think of political power that must be overthrown when it is corrupt.

Paul is not talking about human rulers and authorities. He is talking about the spiritual realm. Paul saw the world locked in the midst of a struggle between God and the forces of evil, forces that were personified as the devil and demons.

There are many who find such talk of devils and demons and evil spirits irrelevant at the beginning of the 21st century. Much of what was unknown and mysterious in the first century was attributed to spirits. Today, we have scientific explanations for many of the things that were once mysterious. Whether or not Paul's imagery is meaningful to us, it's important to listen carefully to what he's saying when he uses this imagery.

Paul is saying that we humans are involved in a struggle that goes beyond the powers of human nature on its own, that the evil we experience in the world all too often seems to have the upper hand, and that God in Christ can and does subdue those forces.

People may debate the existence of the devil, but there is no denying the existence of evil. Anyone who has had to deal with alcoholism or other drug addictions knows they have met evil face to face. Anyone who has dealt with depression and other mental illness knows they are contending against more than flesh and blood. The incomprehensible violence of men like Josef Stalin, Pol Pot, and Saddam Hussein cannot be dismissed as the effects of an unhappy childhood. The force of evil is greater than the sum of all human evil in the world. Human sin and suffering are just too complicated to explain away on a purely human level. This is what Paul tells us we are fighting against.

Paul makes no secret of the fact that we are in a hopeless situation if we try to fight this battle relying only on our own talents and resources. This is a battle only God can win, and the only weapons we have are the ones God gives to us. To fight a spiritual war, we must have spiritual weapons – the elements of the Christian faith: truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, and the word of God.

Martin Luther well understood this battle between God and the devil. His great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God", is packed with battle imagery. Listen to the third stanza:

*Though hordes of devils fill the land all threat'ning to devour us,
We tremble not, unmoved we stand; they cannot overpower us.
Let this world's tyrant [the devil] rage; in battle we'll engage.
His might is doomed to fail; God's judgment must prevail!
One little word subdues him.*

The "little word" that Luther says subdues the devil is the gospel, which Paul terms the "sword of the Spirit". It is the only offensive weapon Paul describes in the armor God provides us. Everything else – the helmet, breastplate, and shield – are used for our protection. We are sent into this battle not with bullets and bombs, but with only the word of the gospel.

I say “only” the gospel because in this technological age, the message of “Jesus loves me, this I know” seems quite simplistic. It doesn’t seem like much of a weapon. We may be tempted to look around for something else to substitute for it. But Paul’s metaphor of the armor of God reminds us that the gospel is truly the only weapon we have, and the only weapon that we need, in this struggle against evil.

When understood in this way, I have no problem singing “Onward, Christian Soldiers”, or “Stand up, stand up for Jesus, you soldiers of the cross”, or any other hymn that uses militaristic imagery as a metaphor. As long as we keep in mind who we are fighting (the devil and the forces of evil) and what our single, solitary weapon is (the word of God), the imagery is appropriate and helpful.

May the God who sustained and strengthened Paul, strengthen and sustain you, a soldier of the cross. Amen.