

"THE WHOLE ARMOR OF GOD"
August 18, 1991

TEXT: Ephesians 6:11 "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil."

The other day I heard about a game called "You know it's going to be a bad day." It is a simple game which any number of people can play. And you do not need any special equipment except for your own wits. You just go around the room with each person finishing this sentence: "You know it's going to be a bad day when _____." The person who supplies the cleverest answer wins. Here are some possibilities.

"You know it's going to be a bad day when your twin brother forgets your birthday."

"You know it's going to be a bad day when you turn on your TV set and they're showing emergency routes out of town."

"You know it's going to be a bad day when you're backing your car out of the drive and you hit another car --and it's a police car."

"You know it's going to be a bad day when you're driving down the street and your horn starts to blare --and you can't get it stopped --and you're right behind a group of Hell's Angels."

Well, you get the idea. It sounds like it might be fun at a party, but the truth is we all have bad days now and then. Most of us can handle them if they only last for a day. But sometimes one day runs into another, and then another, and pretty soon it has been a bad week, or a bad month, perhaps more. It is bad enough when the problems are little ones --especially if they come one after another. But if the problems are big ones --or if they go on and on with no sign of letting up, they can be truly overwhelming.

That is what Paul was concerned about in this morning's scripture lesson. That is what he saw ahead for the church at Ephesus unless he could do something about it. So he wrote to them from prison, giving the very best advice he could. Advice which he summed up with these words: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might."

Now, at first, that might not sound very helpful. I do not know about you, but when I am feeling blue the last thing in the world I want is to have some well meaning friend or relative smile and say, "Cheer up!"

If I could I would! And having someone tell me to do so only makes matters worse. And, when I have been as strong as I can for as long as I can, and I have just about run out of strength, and patience, and courage, I certainly do not want someone telling me to "Be Strong!" They may not mean it that way, but what that says to me is not "Be strong!" but "Stop being such a weakling?" As I said before, if I could I would.

But, you see, Paul did not say, "Be strong!" He said, "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might." And that is altogether different. "Be strong!" implies that somewhere deep down within me I have --or at least ought to have-- strength enough to deal with my problems. "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might" reminds me that, even though my own strength may be depleted, I am not through yet. I can call on God's unlimited power to see me through.

And not just in life's big tragedies. When a loved one dies, or a child becomes ill, or a son is sent to Saudi Arabia, as mine was a year ago today, friends flock around to offer their support. And, with their help, we somehow rise to the occasion. What we often need most is not strength on the grand scale for some great act of courage, but strength for the common life, for day after day of ordinary duties. And there, too, God's power will see us through --if we know how to tap it.

Right now, in this very room, there is a huge supply of energy. As I noted in my children's sermon, for instance, there are radio waves all around us. But to make use of them we need a receiver. And we have to know how to use it. And there are wires in the walls around us which are connected to enormous supplies of electrical power. But we have to know how to plug into it. Those same walls also contain heating and cooling ducts. But to heat or cool this room you have to know where the thermostats are and how to adjust them.

Imagine, if you will, that you are here in this room some dark, cold night. All the things you need are right here: heat, light, even entertainment. But they will not do you any good unless you can use them. The same thing is true of spiritual power. God's strength is there --and not only in the tragedies of life, but in the daily grind which so often gets us down. But that strength may not help us much unless we know how to use it.

In his book, A Faith for Tough Times, Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote, "Many persons today are spiritually insolvent. Life demands from them more than their resources can supply. Like exhausted reservoirs in a drought, whose constant expenditure is unbalanced by adequate replenishment, they run dry." But it does not have to be that way. Fosdick writes, "Just as around our bodies is a physical world from which we draw our physical strength, so around our spirits is a Spiritual Environment, with which we can live in vital contact, and from which we can draw replenishing power."

As most of you know, the troops who fought in the Persian Gulf were given all kinds of equipment to help them do what they had to do: helmets, boots, gas masks, rifles, grenade launchers, anti-chemical warfare suits, sun glasses, face masks, meals-ready-to-eat, and a whole lot more. Would they not have been foolish if they had not used everything they had?

But that is just what so many of us do. We go through life using only part of what God has supplied to meet our needs? So Paul writes, "Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand" Yes, use the skill and strength which God has built into your bodies. Yes, use the mental powers which God has given you. But do not stop there. Put on the whole armor of God. Use your spiritual gifts, as well.

Quoting Fosdick once again, "Any faith fitted for tough times, therefore, involves a gospel of available power for daily living. Jesus, seeing his disciples overstrained and fatigued, called them away to replenish in solitude their spent resources. Without that nothing notable could have come from the hard-driven group of his first followers. They found through him wide margins of reserve around their daily need, and deep wells to draw their strength and courage from."

At the very heart of the Christian life is a divine-human encounter, a direct connection between the soul and its Creator, through which there flows inner strength and refreshment sufficient for all our needs. All the power we ever need is right there waiting for us, but we have to know 1) where to find it and 2) how to turn it on.

When we find ourselves in need, it is one thing to cry, "O God, help me." But, unless we have spent time with God, getting to know Him, learning to trust Him, that cry may seem to go unanswered. Not because God is not there. And not because God does not care. But because we have never learned to recognize His answers when they come. You can not wait till the battle rages all around you before you start looking for a rifle. Just as those professional football players have been practicing and developing their athletic skills getting ready for the season to begin, so we must hone our spiritual skills before we need them.

So Paul urges us to gird our loins with truth, to put on the breastplate of righteousness, to shod our feet with the gospel of peace; to take the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." In short, to prepare ourselves in the things of the spirit so that, even when we are weak, we may "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might."

We all have bad days sometimes. Perhaps even bad weeks, months, or years. But the good news is that there is nothing in this world --no troubles, no problems, no pains-- that you and God together can not overcome. "Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand. . . ."