

# “Who Are You Wearing?”

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## Psalm 84:1-4, 10-12 (CEB)

<sup>1</sup> How lovely is your dwelling place, LORD of heavenly forces!

<sup>2</sup> My very being longs, even yearns, for the LORD’s courtyards.

My heart and my body will rejoice out loud to the living God!

<sup>3</sup> Yes, the sparrow too has found a home there; the swallow has found herself a nest

where she can lay her young beside your altars, LORD of heavenly forces, my king, my God!

<sup>4</sup> Those who live in your house are truly happy; they praise you constantly....

<sup>10</sup> Better is a single day in your courtyards than a thousand days anywhere else!

I would prefer to stand outside the entrance of my God’s house than live comfortably in the tents of the wicked!

<sup>11</sup> The LORD is a sun and shield; God is favor and glory.

The LORD gives—doesn’t withhold!—good things to those who walk with integrity.

<sup>12</sup> LORD of heavenly forces, those who trust in you are truly happy!

## Ephesians 6:10-18 (CEB)

<sup>10</sup> Finally, be strengthened by the Lord and his powerful strength. <sup>11</sup> Put on God’s armor so that you can make a stand against the tricks of the devil. <sup>12</sup> We aren’t fighting against human enemies but against rulers, authorities, forces of cosmic darkness, and spiritual powers of evil in the heavens. <sup>13</sup> Therefore, pick up the full armor of God so that you can stand your ground on the evil day and after you have done everything possible to still stand. <sup>14</sup> So stand with the belt of truth around your waist, justice as your breastplate, <sup>15</sup> and put shoes on your feet so that you are ready to spread the good news of peace. <sup>16</sup> Above all, carry the shield of faith so that you can extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one. <sup>17</sup> Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is God’s word. <sup>18</sup> Offer prayers and petitions in the Spirit all the time. Stay alert by hanging in there and praying for all believers.

When I preach on the book of Ephesians, I think it’s good if we’re reminded of two things about the title and author of this letter. First, although many Bibles entitle this book, “*Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians*,” it should be really called “a letter in the *tradition* of Paul...” because it was written well after Paul had died. It was written by some of his students, his followers, who were familiar with Paul’s theology and wanted to continue his ministry, so it’s convenient to call the unknown author by the name “Paul.”

The second reminder is that the oldest copies of this letter don’t include the Greek phrase meaning “to the Ephesians.” That suggests that the letter wasn’t written specifically to the Christians in Ephesus, but rather it was an “encyclical” or a letter to be circulated among several churches—a sort of “To Whom It May Concern.” Indeed, some Bible scholars suggest that this letter might actually be the so-called “missing letter to the Laodiceans” that’s mentioned in Colossians 4:16. All this is said in the interest of accuracy; in no way is the impact diminished for this letter, which we

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conveniently call “Ephesians” written by an unknown author we conveniently call “Paul.”

This book is famous for that section we heard today in which God’s spiritual blessings to us are described as though they were body armor provided by God: Paul urges each Christian to “put on” the “belt of truth,” the “breastplate of righteousness,” the “shoes of the gospel of peace,” the “shield of faith,” the “helmet of salvation,” and the “sword of God’s eternal word.”

Naturally, “donning armor” is a metaphor. Paul is not calling the Christian church to form a militia. There was no need: it doesn’t appear that Christians in that time and place were being particularly persecuted by their neighbors or by the government and its forces. The situation of those early Christians was nothing like the situation of twentieth-century African Americans living in the Deep South who were in real danger of being lynched for no reason at all by ignorant, violent mobs of racists. No, it seems unlikely that many Christians in Paul’s time were threatened with physical violence because of their acceptance of Jesus Christ.

So what did Paul have in mind, then, when he urged Christians to put on the spiritual armor of God? What was their greatest threat?

What threatened them is what still threatens Christians today – we are vulnerable to “selling out” our faith – compromising what we believe--so we don’t have to make tough choices.

Christians in Paul’s day had to make tough choices. As you well know, some of the Christians had formerly been Jewish. They may have felt some urge to maintain Jewish customs, to keep up the appearance of Jewish life, so they wouldn’t alienate their Jewish friends or feel left out of Jewish society. Perhaps they were battling with the temptation to compromise their faith so they would still be acceptable to their friends.

Other Christians had formerly been pagans, worshiping local folk deities: fertility gods, moon and sun gods, gods of good fortune, and so on. Because the worship of those gods may have become strong family traditions, those formerly pagan Christians may have been reluctant to stop honoring those gods at family altars. Perhaps they were battling the temptation to compromise their faith so they could keep familiar, comfortable traditions like worshipping idols.

Maybe some of those early Christians were engaged in occupations that the rest of the church found offensive, such as piracy, prostitution, collaboration with the Roman army, or extortion under the guise of tax collecting. Maybe those new Christians were reluctant to give up those lucrative occupations. Perhaps they were battling with the temptation to compromise their faith so they could continue to do things that were contrary to the will of God and the spirit of Jesus, and in some cases, against the law.

When you believe Jesus Christ calls you to commit yourself completely to God's service, you're faced with some powerful enemies. It's as dangerous as being a double agent if you think you can serve both God and human desires. You need some strong stuff to do battle with the seductive, alluring enemies. That's why Paul urges the Ephesians to clothe themselves with the armor of God: the "breastplate of righteousness," the "shield of faith," and so on. That clothing metaphor reminds me of that inevitable question shouted by photographers to celebrities sporting those glamorous dresses as they stroll down the red carpet: "Who are you wearing?" they ask. We Christians should answer, "Who are we wearing? God!"

In this enlightened, educated day and age, what are we modern Christians vulnerable to? Are our struggles much different from the struggles of ancient Christians?

I don't think so. It's as though we've invented other gods that compete with Jesus Christ for claim on our lives. What might these other so-called gods be?

I think many of us are lured by the gods of conspicuous consumption. We want to have it all because we pretty much can have whatever we really need... at least we could until the supply chain disruptions of the pandemic. We can't believe that we can't have whatever we want whenever we want it. But in the depths of our hearts don't you think we feel uneasy because we know that there are so many others who would welcome the chance to live on what we throw away?

I think many of us are tempted by the gods of self-centeredness. We find it easier to look out for ourselves and ignore others than to consider the impact our choices have on others, and then act in a responsible manner as a result.

I think many of us are seduced by the gods of workaholism. We think that work is the most important aspect of our lives, and that our value as a person, as a spouse, parent, and provider is determined by our achievements and output. We forget that work is intended to be a means to an end, namely, to provide for a household and to contribute to the public good.

I think many of us are mesmerized by the gods of leisure and pleasure. We mistakenly imagine that entertainment is an obligation, and that we are entitled to feel good at all times.

The result is that we face as many temptations as those Christians addressed in the Bible – temptations to give only partial allegiance to God, and to devote an inappropriate amount of attention to ourselves, our wants, our desires, our sense of self-determination. In the same way that a married man who's having an affair is said to be "cheating" on his wife because he's not giving all of himself to her, we tend to cheat God by holding back part of ourselves. We hold back because we have been deceived

by a consumer-oriented, hedonistic, you-can-have-it-all society – deceived into imagining that we know better than God what we really need.

Society isn't persecuting us. It's eroding our spiritual commitment. We need strong armor to withstand society's subtle but persistent assaults against us.

Well, have I got something for you...! It's God's "armor" – spiritual armor that protects us with truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, enthusiasm because we know God's good news in Jesus Christ. When we try to go it alone without the power of God, we're as powerless and vulnerable as a soldier without the proper equipment and protection. But when we immerse ourselves in God, we're protected like a soldier outfitted for battle. We receive strength beyond our own ability to withstand the subtle but persistent assaults against our trust in God.

There have been times in the past when it was easier to be a Christian than it is today. Church was not just a *religious* center but also a *social* center of a community. The entertainment industry used to show more respect for organized religion than it tends to today. There didn't used to be anywhere near as many activity options competing against a Sabbath day of rest and worship. The work world has blurred the distinction between company time and personal time. People of faith today are the easy target of ridicule, or they're dismissed as irrational.

Being a Christian is no cakewalk. Subtle forces try to neutralize our influence and downplay our significance. But as we heard from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, God offers us the resources we need to stand firm, knowing that our trust in God is wisely invested.

Let us pray. *God our Protector: Open our eyes to the subtle forces that try to pull us away from you. Guard us; arm us with your spiritual blessings so we may remain completely devoted to you through trust in Jesus Christ. Amen.*