

**Ephesians 6:10-
01 Sept. 13**

“Fully Protected”

Remember that three word summary of the letter to the Ephesians? Sit. Walk. And now Stand. To quote from an alternate translation, ¹⁰⁻¹² “And that about wraps it up. God is strong, and he wants you strong. So take everything the Master has set out for you, ¹³⁻¹⁸ Be prepared. You’re up against far more than you can handle on your own.”

And then, as if to stress how important, how difficult is this struggle of standing tall and living as God’s people in a world where God’s ways are mostly ignored, the writer uses military language, as if what we are doing in trying to stand tall is akin to getting ready for battle. You’re up against more than you can handle on your own. You’re going to need a military belt, a breastplate, shoes for marching, a shield, a helmet, and a sword.

Why? Because of who and what we are up against. Our struggle is against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

No wonder there’s a hymn titled Onward Christian Soldiers. Which, by the way, comes from a time in the 19th century when many inside the Church considered the Church threatened by what was going on in popular culture. Sound familiar? This has been going on a long time. If you grew up in 1940s and 50s or 60s, you grew up in an abnormal time.

I get where the hymn comes from. A good, faithful life is a battle against all kinds of forces, powers, influences, and trends that would drive us down, wear us down, lead us astray, suck us in to their ways. So maybe military language is appropriate.

This reading in our series gives voice to our sense that many of the problems our neighborhood, our world, and we ourselves face are beyond our capacity just to roll up our sleeves and muscle our way out of. Throughout Paul’s letters, sin is a power rather than a type of human action, and Ephesians continues this idea: “Our battle is not against enemies of blood and flesh...” (6:12). Christian life, individually and together, means persevering against forces way bigger than ourselves when we would rather fold, or fight, or flee. Onward! Christian Soldiers.

But have you noticed that almost all of the military stuff in Ephesians 6 is defensive in nature? The thrust of this passage is not a sword thrust; it’s not destruction of the enemy but protection from it. The military language is not about defeating any people but rather about battling those forces that would drag us down, lead us astray, suck us in.

This leads me to wonder if perhaps a different mind set, other than military, might be useful. I notice that Onward Christian Soldiers is not the *ELW*, the hymnal that the ELCA put out a few years ago. That might be because the editors were uncomfortable with military language in a church context. And it might be because of the history of various regimes co-opting the Church

to back up their wars of aggression. And it might be because Christians sometimes confuse battling the powers of sin and darkness with battling people with whom we disagree.

So, maybe the military metaphors aren't the most helpful. I mean, if God's mission is to convert the world to God's ways, God's love, God's justice, then killing is not exactly one of our options. What if instead of seeing enemies all around us, we saw people to be converted to God's ways? The question then becomes, "How do we go about doing this mission of God?" Perhaps those same defensive (and one offensive) implements (truth, righteousness, the Gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the Spirit) might just be the right tools.

Make no mistake, there are power words in this text. They may not be military words, but they are words of power: truth, righteousness, the Gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and God's own Holy Spirit. Our faith has a resilience to it. With it we *are* able to withstand the powers and principalities that are aligned against God. With it we *are* able to withstand those countless voices, including the voices inside our own heads, that tell us we do not belong, we are unworthy, we are too weak.

Fully armed, that is, fully protected, we make our way in this world. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words. Learn how to apply them. You'll need them throughout your life. God's Word is an *indispensable* weapon. In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare. Pray hard and long. Pray for your brothers and sisters. Keep your eyes open. Keep each other's spirits up so that no one falls behind or drops out.