

True Security, True Faith

Psalm 73: 1-26

Ephesians 6: 10-20

It seems like every month our home gets solicited either by a door-to-door sales rep or by phone to subscribe to an alarm security company. When updating my Prism TV service, the rep made the offer because, of course, the phone company is in the game, too.

The original owner of our house had had a break-in because she left the garage remote in her car, which someone took, unbeknownst to her. When she left, they opened the garage door, and gained access to the house. In response, she had an electronic security system put in.

We're satisfied with deadbolts. Neither my wife nor I have any interest in alarming, un-alarming, and making stupid mistakes which bring deputies to the house for no good reason. We're okay if they want to break into the garage; they're welcome to clean it out. And we'll say, "thank you!" We have an outdoor keypad by the garage door. It doesn't do anything, but it's there and gives witness to the *intention* of having security in place, a deterrent placebo, if you like.

Security systems are big business. I don't doubt their ability to deter criminals. This personal concern with security is nothing new as our scripture texts will show.

The Kingdom of God is an empire of sorts, far more encompassing than any worldly nation-state. Is security an issue? For the earthly citizens, it sure is. We're people of faith. But how far will you take that faith when it comes to your security?

For the earliest Christians, it was one thing. For Christians *after* Constantine in the 4th century when the church became wedded to the Roman Empire, it became something else. The empire merged with the Kingdom of God, or so earthly authorities seemed to believe. And we in the church today live in the shadow of Constantine, and this messy marriage of church to state plagues us still. Today's typical church would be a horrible corruption in the eyes of Paul and the faithful of his day.

For the earliest Christians, in Paul's era and for the next few centuries after, Christians stood apart from the Roman Empire. Yes, they were residents and sometimes citizens of the Roman Empire, but they saw themselves as citizens of the Kingdom of God. They refused emperor worship as successive Caesars saw themselves as saviors of the people and literally as the son of god who brings deliverance, peace, and the blessings of good life in an orderly, lawful society. The regent and his empire defined what is good, true, and wise, except for early Christians.

These early Christians were avowed pacifists who would accept *former* soldiers, but refused to accept *active* soldiers into their midst. Converts needed to renounce the sword and its violence, and pledge themselves to the Lord Jesus, renouncing Lord Caesar. You can see how this Christian practice would cause problems for the Romans, having a substantial religious group that undermined military security, along with the Christians' peculiar beliefs that were already dismissive of Roman authority.

Yet nearly everywhere in earliest Christianity, everywhere that Paul evangelized, the daily face of the Roman Empire stood before them, garbed in the clothes of the Roman soldier,

the centurion. Having sworn off violence in resistance, a major concern of early Christian church communities was security. How do you stand against worldly power, first with the odds strongly against you in *any* fight, and second, doing so with your hands tied behind your back, theologically speaking?

This is the context of Paul's reply to the Ephesians in chapter 6 as he comes to the end of his letter. Previously, he had talked about being in the light, filled with love, not behaving as those of the world do, saying, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."

Then he launches into discussions about **submissive** behavior, between wives and husbands, then children and parents, and even slaves and masters. Submission in each case may *sound* like surrender. But that's not what Paul means. He urges them to a state of self-understanding and personal security that is faith-based. As a model, he uses the military garb of a typical combat soldier, the centurion.

From whence does strength and security come, the Ephesians might ask. Paul says: *Put on the whole armor of God ... for our struggle is **not** against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the **spiritual** forces of evil in the heavenly realms.* The forces arrayed against the citizens of the Kingdom are greater than what you merely see and experience; those are mere imitations and servants of these spiritual powers. (I'll need to preach another sermon about the nature of these spiritual powers that animate the worldly powers.) Suffice for now to say that whatever stands against the Kingdom and God's will is **spiritual** in nature. It is a shadow that even transcends the forces we witness at work in the world. Paul sees a completely **spiritual** struggle, and calls his toddling Christians to shun the ways of the world, embracing the ways of the Kingdom, and waging the struggle for freedom, justice, and new life with "armor" that befits the spiritual nature of the struggle.

Paul describes what the "whole armor of God" is.

*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**.*

From head to toe, Paul clothed the faithful in entirely different equipment from the Roman centurion, one that makes the believer ready for the spiritual nature of the struggle. Sadly, when I googled a picture of the "whole armor of God" for the bulletin cover, every single image was of a Roman centurion. I think the metaphor was hopelessly lost, and in our post-Constantinian church, we actually expect the "whole armor of God" to mean that we're combat ready for action on a real blood-and-guts battlefield, *completely missing* the critical **spiritual** nature of the message.

But to imagine the struggle as spiritual only is just as flawed as imagining the struggle as a religious *Mortal Kombat*. Paul and the early Christians realized that the spiritual realm and the worldly realm were interwoven, not separate in a black-and-white, good-and-evil, either-or dichotomy. It was not "spiritual is good" and "worldly is evil" dualism. They're seen as inseparable. Paul would have you make no mistake; the forces against God have their power in a spiritual structure. Indeed, evil's truest strength is in its spiritual anchor, and the powers

arrayed against the Kingdom always use their best weapons. Paul wants his people ready, spiritually.

In the selection from Psalm 73, it doesn't seem too related to this issue of security until you reach the end when the psalmist finally says: *My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the **strength** of my heart and my portion forever.* And at the very end, the psalmist says: *But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge.* You can hear how the psalmist has given up on the worldly resources that might bring some relief and instead has come to God in faithful devotion for his security and his peace.

Let's start at the beginning of this instructional lament. *Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked.* We hear an affirmation about the goodness of God initially, but then it immediately collapses for the psalmist as he confronts the ambiguity of God's goodness on one hand, and then his own struggles on the other, knowing that the "arrogant" and the "wicked" were blessed with "prosperity." What's up with that, God?

He continues. Also, listen here to the imagery that describes these arrogant and wicked ones inside and out:

*For they have no struggles; their bodies are sound and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are; they are not plagued like other people. Therefore pride is their **necklace**; they **clothe** themselves with violence. From their callous **hearts** comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their **minds** know no limits. They scoff and **speak** with malice; in their **arrogance**, they threaten oppression. Their **mouths** lay claim to heaven, and their **tongues** take possession of the earth.*

The psalmist is complaining about the gross injustice of all of this, and complains that it's happening on God's watch. Where is God in this? Shouldn't God be the active defender of his people, the one who balances the scales with justice, who sets them right? Why are the sinful and wicked and arrogant being blessed in this way?

His next argument turns to what this injustice does to the spirit of the people. *Therefore the people turn and praise them [the wicked and arrogant], and find no fault in them. And they say, 'How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?' Such are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.* Not only is this affecting the society of God's people negatively, God's people come to **disbelieve** that God is even with them, doubting God's presence to hear and know and act. This is awful, laments the psalmist. And if we're observant, we can also hear in the psalmist's complaint how the spiritual forces are actively at work, eroding the hearts and spirits of the people who become quite willing to **deny** their God.

The psalmist laments in frustration his own efforts to remain faithful: *All in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all day long I have been plagued, and am punished every morning. If I had said, 'I will talk on in this way', I would have been untrue to the circle of your children.* His attempts to be faithful, to act righteously, and seek justice brought him nothing but contempt, oppression, and dismay, yet he cannot seem to adopt the ways of other spirits.

He admits to being at the end of his rope, when in vs. 17, it suddenly all comes together when he hears his pastor's **awesome** sermon. Okay, it doesn't say that; it says: *I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny ... As a dream when one awakes, so when you rise, O Lord, you despise them as fantasies.*

With this awareness, he now looks back on himself and his spirit: *When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was stupid and ignorant; I was like a brute beast towards you.* The psalmist can hardly recognize himself; he was so beaten down by his experience.

But he has a new bearing now, a new peace and a new strength of spirit: *Yet I am always with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterwards you will receive me with honor. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has **nothing** that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the **strength of my heart** and my portion forever.*

The psalmist discovers that God is always there, taking him by the hand, holding him up, leading him forward, regarding him with honor and esteem. Worldly things, worldly powers, worldly injustices must be met with spiritual resilience and a trusting faith in God.

In the background of his commentary on life and its faithful living is tacit recognition that the spiritual powers of this world consume people rather than lift them up. The forces that deny God and the values of the Kingdom trap and enslave people rather than free them for their greatest purposes. Corrupt spiritual structures bind people and social systems to greed and jealousy, endorsing ruthless exploitation and naked oppression, urging violence over reconciliation and aggression over peacemaking.

The psalmist has experienced all of that every day, coming to a state of despair. He even began to find his faith itself became meaningless. But when he recognized the spiritual nature of the struggle for the Kingdom, he was given strength, granted peace, embraced true security, and a vision of new life. The full armor of God is the true faith, active and practiced by the follower of Jesus who finds their true security in true faith.