

“Facing Evil”
Dr. Jim Beard

I don't know if you remember or ever saw the movie *Braveheart* (Gibson) about the Scottish leader and fighter, William Wallace who fought off King Edward I of England to keep Scotland free. Wallace, played by Mel Gibson, rides before his warriors and gives a rousing speech about freedom and Scottish independence. His face is painted with blue face paint, and he is encouraging his troops to fight to keep the English out of Scotland. Now, in spite of the fact that *Braveheart* is a horribly inaccurate film from a historical point of view, Wallace's speech is a good example of the kind of words given to inspire troops before a battle. Such speeches down through the ages have been given by monarchs, emperors, generals, and other military leaders to rally the troops to victory over the enemy.

Some speeches inspire in other ways. Christopher Klein tells this story about Theodore Roosevelt.

Theodore Roosevelt's opening line was hardly remarkable for a presidential campaign speech: "Friends, I shall ask you to be as quiet as possible." His second line, however, was a bombshell.

"I don't know whether you fully understand that I have just been shot. ..."

The horrified audience in the Milwaukee Auditorium on October 14, 1912, gasped as the former president unbuttoned his vest to reveal his bloodstained shirt. "It takes more than that to kill a bull moose," the wounded candidate assured them. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a bullet-riddled, 50-page speech. Holding up his prepared

remarks, which had two big holes blown through each page, Roosevelt continued. “Fortunately I had my manuscript, so you see I was going to make a long speech, and there is a bullet — there is where the bullet went through — and it probably saved me from it going into my heart. The bullet is in me now, so that I cannot make a very long speech, but I will try my best. ...”

X-rays taken after the campaign event showed the bullet lodged against Roosevelt’s fourth right rib on an upward path to his heart. Fortunately, the projectile had been slowed by his dense overcoat, steel-reinforced eyeglass case and hefty speech squeezed into his inner right jacket pocket. (Klein)

Although Roosevelt didn’t win that election, I am sure that this display of valor under such conditions did inspire many people.

What we have in today’s scripture is a strong speech for the Christians of the day using some military language to encourage them to stay the course and be faithful followers of the Way, i.e., the Christian faith. Why the military imagery? There is something rousing and exciting about military talk until we get to actual war. Some of what is happening here is using that kind of imagery to inspire. We often see that in hymns, where many of us enjoy a song like “Onward Christian Soldiers” in spite of its military overtones, because it is rousing and upbeat. One thing to note in all of this imagery, is that except for the sword all are defensive things: armor, belts, breastplate, shield, and helmet. Even the sword can be used defensively. Much of the imagery here

is from various places in the book of Isaiah. To use more modern terms, we could speak of the riding in the Humvee of God.

Humvees are pretty safe except that when they run over an IED, i.e., bombs in the road that exploded from underneath. It took the Pentagon awhile to understand what the soldiers knew already. Consider this story from ABC news in 2006 during the second Iraq war.

When reservists in the Army Reserves' 428th Transportation Company showed up at Fort Riley, Kan., to prepare for deployment, they were warned by their buddies already in Iraq that without [undercarriage] armor on the vehicles, they'd be in danger.

Maj. Keith Porter said he took the warnings seriously. 'They suggested it would be a good idea to add steel plating as additional protection,' he said.

The Army, though, had none to give them. While production of armor has been stepped up, supply is far short of the need. So Porter and his soldiers started looking for ways to armor their vehicles themselves.

Local citizens, hearing of their plight, donated money, and a local steel company offered to turn 12,000 pounds of raw steel into armor custom-fit to their trucks — free of charge. (Hayes)

What I am suggesting is that the message here is to defend the faith against all of her enemies both physical and spiritual. There is absolutely nothing in the scripture lesson which suggests anything offensive. All of us as Christians are called to stand firm against the various evil forces that oppose us.

A major issue for all of the Christians of the Western World is the question of the devil and of evil forces. Some of us sophisticated, educated folks simply don't understand the devil as a real person and further don't see evil as a thing. We tend to chalk everything up to human free will and random chance. That simply doesn't mesh with the world view of the writer of Ephesians. In this writing the devil is real and is marshalling evil forces against us.

I want to talk here about evil and not so much about the devil. The nature of the devil if he is a person is very hard to pin down and doesn't gain us much in the end. The important thing is the visible result which is the presence of evil in our world.

In 1983 Dr. M. Scott Peck wrote a book titled, *People of the Lie* which deals very directly with the problem of evil from the point of view of a psychiatrist. (Peck) Dr. Peck took a look at patients he had dealt with over the year. Most cases were ordinary and some manifested real issues of mental illness. But there were a collection cases that caused him to question if there some people who were not mentally ill but rather just evil, hence the people of the lie. I don't know that he gave me a simple way to tell what mental illness is and what evil is, but he did convince me that evil does exist. It may exist in individuals or it may exist in systemic powers and forces that seem to simply overpower many people.

There are many systems that are evil and that cause pain and destruction, but one that we have become ever so much aware of recently is racism. It represents a system of evil that is very hard for us to get away from. Race doesn't actual exist but is rather a social construction. It was actually invented by a Portuguese Prince, Henry the Navigator in the late fifteenth century to justify his new slave trade from sub-Saharan Africa.

Slaves from other sources were simply getting too expensive. So, Henry set about convincing Europeans that these black people were somehow less than human and made really good workers. Once the Europeans bought into this, the African slave trade flourished. (Kendi)

Europeans came to America and two things happened. 1) We displace and/or killed the native populations because we want their land. We were white and Christian and thought we were entitled. 2) In 1619 we brought the first African slaves. The need for labor on the southern plantations was immense; hence, slavery flourished across the south.

All of this very quickly became an evil system that was bigger than the individuals that profited from it. I am not saying that the tyrannical plantation owner was somehow not evil because of the system, but rather the evil system was so powerful that it tended to suck everyone into it. The slave system was so powerful that it survived the Civil War. Yes, the slaves were freed and had some power and influence in the twenty years after the war, but soon Jim Crowe appeared, and the south figured out creative ways to re-enslave the Black population. This problem of course still exists at various levels. Blacks generally have lower paying jobs, live in poorer housing, live in fear of the police, have fewer educational opportunities, and are much more likely than whites to be incarcerated. The reason that this evil system is so successful is that we who benefit from it do not see it as evil. What generally is true is that those who have privilege will do what is necessary to keep it even if the methods are sinful.

Did you ever wonder why perfectly nice, church going, white people in the first decades of the twentieth century would happily join in on a lynching? Didn't they know that killing was a sin. They, however, needed to keep the blacks in their place.

Racism is not the only evil system we face. There is religious intolerance, there is militarism, there is fascism, there is ethnic hate, and there is uncontrolled nationalism.

So how do we combat these evil systems. It is by putting on the 'full armor of God' which can show itself as the power of love. Martin Luther King saw clearly that the racist system that he was fighting required the power and love of God. The Rev. Dr. Courtney Cowart of the Society for the Increase of the Ministry made these comments concerning Dr. King:

In a sermon delivered in Detroit in March of 1961, Dr. King meditated on the power of love in the face of the evil systemic powers of racism in America - asking us all, the whole church gathered, to take a stand for love, equipping ourselves with the power of God's own love.

Dr. King instructs that we will know when it's God's love that is at work against the Powers by the outcomes.

...The Powers serve to **destroy**. But Love serves to **build up**.

...The Powers seek **destructive ends**. Love seeks **constructive ends**.

...The Powers seek to **annihilate**. Love seeks to **convert**.

...The Powers seek to live in **monologue**. Love seeks to live in **dialogue**.

And for these reasons, Dr. King asserts that it is only through love that we are able to redeem and transform what he called the “enemy neighbor.” (Coward)

Putting on the Armor of God means that the power that we need to fight evil comes from God. We do not muster up the courage and fortitude on our own, but rather through prayer it comes from God.

Most people of about my age grew up in a culture that for the most part thought of itself as Christian. Oh, yes, not everyone went to church and in a small town we whispered about them. However, if asked they would generally say they were Christians. We never met a Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist. There were a few Jews around but not many. And as for actual atheists, they were scarce as hen’s teeth. They certainly didn’t advertise their existence. About the same could be said for agnostics.

Someplace along the line the game changed with 69% of people identifying as Christian down from 95% in 1955 and falling. And the fastest growing religious segment of the population isn’t the evangelicals but is rather those who confess no religious affiliation at all, the nones.

We, Christians, are no longer the presumed dominate force in society, but we still have the religious plurality. When the writer of Ephesians began to create this document, I doubt that he could have imagined a world where Christians were anything but a tiny minority. The Christians of that day were a marginal group and often persecuted by neighbors, society at large, and/or the Roman authorities. We simply do not face that kind of opposition. The most you will get in our culture is perhaps a little ridicule from some quarters.

In order to understand where the book of Ephesians is coming from, one needs to consider the plight of Christians in a land in which Christians are a decided minority. In 1993 a young American, Andrew Brunson, with a Ph.D. in New Testament from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland moved along with his wife Norine to Turkey to do mission work. Turkey is a largely unevangelized country and is likely the largest such country. The Turkish government although technically secular has increasingly fallen under Islamic and authoritarian rule. The strong man of Turkey is one Recep Erdoğan, President.

Andrew was reluctant to go at first, but eventually he and his wife felt called to serve there. It was difficult and challenging work, but over the years they had managed to establish churches in various places. As the wars nearby ramped up, they worked with Syrian refugees and Kurdish refugees. Working with the latter group produced some danger as the Kurds are generally hated by the Turks.

In 2016 some things happen that changed life for Andrew. In July of 2016 there was an unsuccessful coup attempt against Erdoğan which on the surface would not appear to have anything to do with Andrew and Norine Brunson. However, Erdoğan used the attempted coup as a way to stifle opposition and rid the country of his opponents. In the ensuing months anyone who had even a passing connection to anything or anyone related to the coup was arrested and as a result, Andrew and his wife found themselves in jail. His wife was soon released.

I don't have time here to go through the ins and outs, but as an American, Christian missionary being held on clearly trumped up charges this developed into the political game of push and pull between the Turkish government and the U.S.

government. As Brunson became more and more well-known the Turks felt they could use him as leverage to get things they wanted. This whole mess drug on for two years.

What I want to talk about is the story of this man who spent two years behind bars as a Christian political prisoner. Andrew Brunson lived out what Ephesians 6: 10-20 is about. He put on the Armor of God and held fast to his faith as a Christian.

HOWEVER!

It wasn't easy. We often think of the great Christian leaders and martyrs and assume that they had some special gift that made witnessing and holding fast easy. That is not true they are human just like the rest of us. The book that he and Craig Borlase wrote about his incarceration, *God's Hostage*, is a gut wrenching and honest portrayal of all he went through. (Brunson) The book shows his high points, but also shows his low points when he was not sure he could make it and honestly doubted God for leaving him in this horrible mess.

At one point Andrew was in a new prison and being told that he might not be able to see to wife. With that concern and new and the unfamiliar surroundings, he began to have deep doubts. Here are a few excerpts.

You've betrayed me! You've turned me over! Why?!

How could you do this to a son who loves you, a son who has obeyed you.

Do you even care, or have you handed me over and walked away?

Did you deceive me? Did you lie to me? (Brunson)

And a little later he was concerned that there was no one to turn to and he says:

Not to the God I loved, whom I addressed as Papa. He had turned me over to be savaged.

Not even to Norine, whom I was desperate to see. I needed her to hear my terrible thoughts and to speak truth to me, to persuade *me* that I was wrong.

But I could only talk to myself. Or to God-I had to keep talking to him ... and WHY was he so silent? I yelled at him, not out loud but in my heart: *I may as well talk to this wall!*

All I heard was silence.

My tears blinded me. *Where are you when I most need you? You have wounded my heart. How can I ever recover?*

I was having a faith meltdown.

All the progress I'd made in my final weeks ...had vanished.

(Brunson)

The book as does life has its up and downs. There are in the book high points of faith and reliance on God. The book is the honest portrayal of a man who struggled mightily to put on and hold dearly to the Armor of God.

When life tests each of us, I pray that we will be honest with God and struggle with his word and in the end stand firm as disciples in the presence of God.

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