

A Plea For Preparedness

Six pieces of borrowed armor, and one word: keep alert

SPEAKER	Geno Hildebrandt
DATE	Sunday, February 23, 2020
PASSAGES	Ephesians 6:10-20; John 8:32; 1 John 1:9; Revelation 12:10; Genesis 3:1-5; Romans 8:15
MESSAGE	Begins at 0:00:00 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Paul tells the church to get ready for spiritual opposition by suiting up in the armor of God. It is God's armor, not ours – truth, righteousness received as a gift, the peace of the gospel, faith, the knowledge that we belong to him, and his word – and the heart of the passage is two words: keep alert. Our fight is never with flesh and blood.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ The New Testament tells us to prepare for two things above all: spiritual opposition and the imminent return of Jesus.
- ◆ The armor is an analogy. The strength is in the Lord and in his might, not in us and not in the details of a Roman soldier's kit.
- ◆ It is a demonic misuse of this text to turn it against people. Never demonize an opponent – to demonize is to dehumanize, and Jesus told us to love our enemies.
- ◆ Righteousness is either a gift or a burden. If you think you must be good to please Jesus, you have not yet understood grace.
- ◆ The accuser's darts are lies about God, ourselves and others, often half true. Faith puts them out by embracing the report that Jesus is real and has made a way.
- ◆ The helmet of salvation is the knowledge that you belong – adopted, and adopted children cannot be given back.

- ◆ Know the Bible. Christian faith is an intellectual faith, in that you must use your mind and know its content.

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The week before, Geno had talked about daily preparedness. Hope Chapel had by now handed out some 175 copies of the What's Next ATX booklet, alongside about 300 other Austin churches, and he wanted the congregation spiritually ready for the new avenues of ministry it might open. Any task worth doing requires preparation, whether baking a cake or building a house – and the New Testament, he found, is full of exhortations to get ready.

Two things to prepare for

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Two take up the most space: spiritual opposition and the imminent return of Jesus. Geno planned two weeks on each, and titled this first one “A Plea for Preparedness.” He confessed that while studying he realized most of us do not know what Paul means by principalities and powers – so he had written a second message, “Demonology 101,” and decided, with so many guests in the room, to save it for the following Sunday.

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No ballerina performs in hiking boots, he said, and no construction worker shows up in a tutu – he had found a photo of one, presumably after a lost bet. Paul uses that familiar idea to talk about the unfamiliar: we prepare for spiritual opposition “by thinking rightly, by believing well, by studying this word, and by praying.”

The text

► 0:06:16

“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 schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

EPHESIANS 6:10–12 ↗

Geno pushed back on teaching that dwells on how a Roman legionnaire dressed. Paul is not trying to teach us military history. “The strength is in Jesus; it’s not in us.” The devil does have schemes, but we do not need to spend much time studying his ways. We need to know God’s, “because the ways of God trump the ways of the devil in every case,” even in the simplest follower of Christ.

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“Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”

EPHESIANS 6:13-17 ↗

When is the evil day? Whenever you are under attack – which, he said, is most of the time.

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“Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains.”

EPHESIANS 6:18-20 ↗

“Keep alert,” Geno said, is probably the essence of the whole passage. We are far less likely to be bowled over, depressed or disillusioned by opposition when we expect it and are ready for it. And pray for all the saints – “not just the ones you like.”

It is God’s armor

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Scholars suggest Paul, chained to a guard, was looking at the man as he wrote. But the analogy is a help, not the gospel.

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The first thing to notice is that it is called the armor *of God*. The passage is not about mentally strapping on a helmet and a belt each morning. It asks what God has given us that prepares us to stand: the mind of Christ, faith in him, his righteousness. It does not originate with us.

Never against flesh and blood

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Geno slowed down here because, he said, this text has been badly and even demonically misused: become a soldier for Christ, put on your armor, go and defeat the heathen. “I promise you that is an illegitimate use of the text.” Paul says we stand against the schemes of the devil, not of people. Someone may oppose you, and there may be evil ideas or forces behind them, “but that person is not the devil. That’s a person that Jesus loves, and you should love, even if they are oppressing you.”

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“When we demonize somebody, we dehumanize them.” That is why wartime posters of the enemy always have a dark shadow or pointed ears – we demonize people so that we can kill them. “That is anathema to the New Testament. Never, ever demonize your opponents. Love them. That’s the Jesus way.” Christians, he admitted, have a long history of religious warfare. The way to stay clear of it is to refuse the first step.

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On what the rulers and powers are, he gave a preview: the Greek behind the text hints at cult leaders binding followers to sun and moon worship through blood sacrifice, at small-g gods in the form of bulls and goats, and at astrology – systems that bind human destiny to the stars. Roughly a third of people, he said, still lean on it. “Please don’t do that. You’re following the doctrine of demons.”

The belt of truth

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The belt held everything together – the scabbard hung from it, the breastplate rested on it, and a soldier tucked his tunic into it to run. It was about readiness for action. Geno pointed to Jesus’ words, “you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free,” and named two truths: who Jesus is, the Son of the living God raised from the dead, and who we are, sinners in need of a Savior. If you think you are strong enough without him, “you have no idea how strong the enemy really is.” Those who hide in Christ find he is the one fighting, and he has already won at the cross.

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He told of John Newton, the former slave-ship captain, preaching in his eighties with a young man behind him pointing to his place in the text. When the young man got impatient, Newton turned and said: “I may have forgotten many things in my life, but two things I remember: I am a great sinner, and I serve a great Savior.” Under pressure, Geno said, remember that.

The breastplate of righteousness

► 0:22:13

The breastplate guards the heart, and the helmet will guard the mind – two battlegrounds trained by the word and by prayer. “Righteousness is either a gift or it’s a burden. It’s nothing else.” At the cross Jesus took our filthy rags and gave us his pure righteousness. “We do good because he loves us. We don’t do good in order to obtain his love.”

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And if you sin? Memorize 1 John 1:9: if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us. It was the second verse Geno ever memorized, almost fifty years earlier. “Magnify Jesus; don’t magnify your sin.” It has stayed with him because he still sins – less often and less deeply, thanks to sanctification.

Shoes: the gospel of peace

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Rome conquered the world above all by mobility – roads, and hobnailed sandals built for footing and long marches. Interpreters are all over the map on this phrase, Geno said, but he reads it this way: when we come to Jesus, the first thing we receive is peace with God. He remembered the night he asked Jesus to be his Lord, and the peace that came over him.

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Peace with God makes peace with ourselves possible – for him that meant two or three years of going back to people to ask forgiveness. And then peace with others is far easier, even with those who mock us. “It’s a gospel of peace. It’s not a gospel of holy war.”

The shield of faith

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The flaming darts come from the one Scripture calls the accuser of the brethren: you're no good, you're just like your mother, you got drunk two weeks ago so you will always be a drunk. He is a liar, and his favorite tactic is getting us to swallow lies about God, ourselves and others – slippery because they are half true. In the garden he accused God of holding back the best from Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:1–5), and he has been lying ever since.

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What puts the darts out? Not a shield – faith. Do you belong to Jesus? You know it by faith: you heard the report and you choose to trust it. “There’s no such thing as God, Jesus wasn’t a real person – I throw that down, I stomp on it and I spit on it. It’s a lie. My faith says he was real and he loved me and he made a way for me, and it was costly.”

The helmet of salvation

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The helmet protects the mind, where we fight false ideas with the truth. Geno said he wanted to keep things on the bottom shelf: a soldier’s armor was as familiar to him as everyday clothes, and Paul wants thinking rightly and believing well to become that familiar to us.

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Salvation means rescue in many senses, but first it means: I belong to God. When he is disheartened by something he is ashamed of, and tempted to think he will never be as holy as someone else, he works his way back to one truth. “It doesn’t matter if I’m as good or as holy as Frank. What really matters is that I am a son of God, period.” We are adopted, and adopted children cannot be given back. In Romans 8 Paul says we have received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry, “Abba” – a word Geno has heard tiny Jewish children use for their fathers.

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“The helmet of salvation is not a helmet. It’s the knowledge that I belong.” And we did nothing to make it so – he came after us. Geno offered it plainly to anyone listening: “the greatest deal on the face of the earth.” You can become a son or daughter of God in an instant, simply by trusting that Jesus made a way for you.

The sword of the Spirit

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The only offensive weapon in the set is the word of God. It is fine to call your Bible a sword, he said, but the point is whether you know it. “The Christian faith is an intellectual faith” – not that you need a PhD, but that you must use your mind and know its content. “How sharp is your sword?” Study it daily, or as often as you can, and if you do not know how, ask Matt, Mark, Lynette, Frank or almost anyone in the room.

Keep alert, and pray

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Paul ends with prayer at all times, perseverance and supplication for all the saints. Geno heard it as: pay attention. Notice what is going on with your spouse, friends, children, co-workers, fellow students, the people you meet on the way. “Don’t always be wrapped up in the sorrows of your own life.” Then lift up a ten-second prayer. Supplication simply means asking.

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He left six diagnostic questions, one for each piece. Do I know the truth about Jesus and about myself? Do I walk in righteousness as a gift or a burden? Do I have peace with God, with myself, with others? Do I believe I am part of God’s family? Do I know God has rescued me for himself and his purposes, not just for a great life? Am I growing in my ability to handle the Scripture? To anyone who could say yes to all six: “Well done, good and faithful servant. Stay prepared.”

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Then the room broke into groups of three, each person answering one question – where am I meeting spiritual opposition? – and the other two praying for ten seconds. He sent them out to “go in the peace of the Lord and serve his purposes in the coming week,” with people waiting at the front to pray with anyone who wanted it.

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- Ephesians 6:10–12
- Ephesians 6:13–17
- Ephesians 6:18–20
- John 8:32
- Isaiah 64:6
- 1 John 1:9
- Revelation 12:10
- Genesis 3:1–5
- Romans 8:15

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Geno said this passage has been used to turn people into enemies. Where are you tempted to treat a person as the problem rather than someone Jesus loves?
2. Right now, does righteousness feel more like a gift or a burden to you – and what gives that away?
3. Which lie of the accuser – about God, yourself or others – do you find hardest to throw down?
4. What does it change in a hard week to know you are adopted and cannot be given back?
5. Of Geno's six diagnostic questions, which one exposes you most, and what will you do about it this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Geno Hildebrandt serves Hope Chapel as its senior leader. He grew up around the newspaper business and came to faith as a young man, with a roommate who knew him well; 1 John 1:9 was the second verse he ever memorized, nearly fifty years before this message. Here he continued a series on spiritual preparedness, turning to Paul's armor of God.

Watch the full message:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UmwSs5wuq_A&t=0s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.