

The Helmet of Salvation

Ephesians 6: 17; 1 Thessalonians 5: 7 – 11; Isaiah 59ⁱ

The Helmet of Salvation

IN Ephesians chapter 6, Paul, having exhorted us to be clothed with the truth, righteousness, and peace of Christ, went on to say:

¹⁶ In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; ¹⁷ **and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,** Ephesians 6:16–17 (ESV)

All of this so that we will be ready to stand against the schemes of the devil, and:

¹³ ...able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Ephesians 6:13 (ESV)

The emphasis and motivation were echoed by the Apostle Peter too, when he wrote:

⁸ Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. ⁹ **Resist him, firm in your faith...** 1 Peter 5:8–9 (ESV)

and they were essentially a repetition of the text that was read a few minutes ago from 1st Thessalonians, chapter 5:

⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. 1 Thessalonians 5:8 (ESV)

Thinking about this “helmet of salvation”, I used to believe, along with many commentators, that this was referring to the fact of salvation itself. Charles Hodge wrote:

...salvation is itself the helmet. That which adorns and protects the Christian, which enables him to hold up his head with confidence and joy, is the fact that he is saved.ⁱⁱ

And beyond that, I never gave it much thought. But, as I was studying this out, I came to a different conclusion, along with all the other commentators who do not so much disagree with Hodge, as think that he doesn't consider the analogy in all of it's fullness. What I mean is this. The whole book of Ephesians was written “to the saints”.ⁱⁱⁱ In chapter 2, just after that familiar “by grace you have been saved through faith”^{iv} verse (which is itself obviously directed toward people who are already believers), Paul wrote:

¹¹ Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— ¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Ephesians 2:11–13 (ESV)

So, these people, those who have been brought near by the blood of Christ, are those who are commanded to

...take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,
Ephesians 6:16–17 (ESV)

This is true in 1st Thessalonians 5 as well. Paul wrote:

⁵ For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. ¹ Thessalonians 5:5 (ESV)

Compare that to Colossians 1, verses 13 and 14, where he wrote:

¹³ He [the Father] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Colossians 1:13–14 (ESV)

Being children of light means that we are children of God,

⁶ So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, **and for a helmet the hope of salvation.** ¹ Thessalonians 5:6–8 (ESV)

It's still more obvious when we consider that in Isaiah 59 God Himself puts on a helmet of salvation. In verses 14 and 15, Isaiah wrote,

¹⁴ Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands far away; for truth has stumbled in the public squares, and uprightness cannot enter. ¹⁵ Truth is lacking, and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey... Isaiah 59:14–15 (ESV)

Sounds kind of familiar, doesn't it? It's a bit like reading the paper or watching the news. And it's worth noting that "justice" does not need an adjective like "social" to precede it. Neither does the word "gospel". And having said that:

¹⁵ ...The LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. ¹⁶ He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him. ¹⁷ He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak. Isaiah 59:15–17 (ESV)

The point here is what we seen all along. The armor of God—the armor in which we are to clothe ourselves—is not merely armor that is from God, it is the armor that God Himself wears. And since it is clear that the Sovereign God was never lost and therefore never needed to be saved, the helmet of salvation is not referring to personal salvation from sin and

death, but rather to the salvation that God would bring to His people when, after repaying them according to their deeds,

²⁰ “...a Redeemer **[would]** come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression,”... Isaiah 59:20 (ESV)

“The Redeemer shall come *for the sake of Zion*’, so the Septuagint reads it.”^v This, then, is a promise—it is The Promise—of Jesus Christ bringing redemption to His people, to all those who will repent and forsake their sin and turn to Him in faith. Isaiah describes this as God Himself going forth into battle to accomplish by His own strong arm the salvation which He Himself has decreed, and as He goes forth into the battle He puts on His armor—the breastplate of righteousness, the helmet of salvation, garments of vengeance for clothing, and zeal as a cloak.

The Fight

But His armor is our armor. The old Puritan, Matthew Henry wrote of this:

When righteousness is His coat of arms, salvation is His crest. In allusion to this, among the pieces of a Christian’s armour we find the breast-plate of righteousness, and for a helmet the hope of salvation, **and it is called the armour of God, because He wore it first and so fitted it for us.**^{vi}

But this armor is our armor because this fight is also our fight. See, sometimes we think of “spiritual warfare” as something that happens when we are alone in our prayer closet and find ourselves under mental assault by the fiery darts of the wicked one—blasphemous thoughts, or maybe just trivial, empty thoughts that distract and turn our hearts away from the Living God, and certainly that’s part of it. If the Lord is willing we will see in a couple weeks that it is in and through prayer that we put on this armor and even, to some extent, lift the shield of faith and wield the sword of the Spirit.

At the same time, let’s not over-spiritualize the nature of the battle, because this is not all about the prayer closet and the interior life. Spiritual warfare may be and must be engaged when you wake up in the darkness of the night with an overwhelming sense of fear and dread, like the powers of darkness are surrounding you and trying to take you out of the fight. It happens, and when it happens, those powers must be resisted with prayer and praise derived, as we will see next week, from the sword of the Spirit which is the sure and certain Word of God. But I don’t believe that the solitary conflict with temptation in the darkness and silence of the night is the primary reference that Paul had in mind when he wrote this passage, because this passage on the armor of God comes to us in the context of the whole book of Ephesians.

So, what is this battle? At what point does the Christian meet the opposition of the spiritual forces of evil? Well, if we go back to chapter 2 we remember that not only were we once dead in trespasses and sins, but in them we once walked,

² ...following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience... Ephesians 2:2 (ESV)

In the words of Colossians 2, we were dwellers in and citizens of the dominion of darkness. But

⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, **[God]** made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, Ephesians 2:5–6 (ESV)

¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Colossians 1:13–14 (ESV)

This is what Jesus was talking about in Mark, chapter 3, when He said:

²⁷ ...no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man... Mark 3:27 (ESV)

Jesus bound the strong man—He bound Satan that he might not deceive the nations any longer—and ever since His resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God He has been plundering Satan's house, rescuing His chosen people from the domain of darkness and transferring them to His own kingdom of light.

Understandably, this is not a happy thing for the principalities and powers (Really, who likes it when someone steals his stuff?), so they resist. They fight to hold on, trying even to take back what they perceive to be theirs (as if they could). But in Christ, God has delivered us from sin, and death, and Satan—He has delivered us from the domain of darkness—

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. Ephesians 2:8–9 (ESV)

Further,

¹⁰ ...we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:10 (ESV)

And we have been instructed

¹ ...**to walk** in a manner worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called... Ephesians 4:1 (ESV)

And this is the fight, to keep advancing step by step in holiness, purity, and love, walking in the good works which God prepared beforehand for us to do. But this is not a stroll in the park. The Christian life is not the back nine on your favorite course on a perfect day as

summer gives way to fall. It's a battle. It's a fight. It's an advance against the foes of God who seek to defend the gates of hell even as we go forth assault them.

And make no mistake, every time we proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ by word or deed, every time we gather together to worship in Word and sacrament proclaiming the Lord's death until He comes, every time we love our neighbor by standing for the truth of God's Word, in all of these things we push up against the gates of hell and the gates of hell will push back with all of the fury of a foe who knows that he has been defeated and his time is short because (Glory be to God!) Jesus said, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell **will not** prevail."

So, what I am saying is this. When Paul tells us to take up the shield of faith, and the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God, he's not saying that the camp is about to be attacked and we need to be ready. He's saying that the trumpet has sounded, the enemy has been spotted, and it is time (as it is always time) for the church to follow our Lord into the battle. And just as He put on the helmet of salvation when He went forth to deliver His people, we put on the helmet of salvation and join Him in the fight, confident that he will overcome all who array themselves against Him; confident that He already has.

⁵ For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. ⁶ So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

⁹ For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. ¹

Thessalonians 5:5–11 (ESV)

i All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

ii Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1858), 387–388.

iii Cf. Ephesians 1: 1.

iv Cf. Ephesians 2: 8.

v Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1200.

vi Matthew Henry, *Commentary*, 1199.