

**Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18**

24:1 Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God.

24:2a And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors--Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor--lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods....24:14 "Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.

24:15 Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

24:16 Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods;

24:17 for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed;

24:18 and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God."

**Ephesians 6:10-20**

**6:10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.**

6:11 Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

6:12 For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

6:13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

6:14 Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness.

6:15 As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.

6:16 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.

6:17 Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

6:18 Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

6:19 Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel,

6:20 for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

## Proclamation of the Word

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"Be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of his power." (Ephesians 6:10)

Ernest Hemingway wrote: *The world breaks everyone, and afterward, some are strong at the broken places.* Strength. We all need it because the world breaks everyone some time or another. Consider these popular sayings and what they tell us about being strong.

For our men, contrast: "Real men don't cry." with this quote by General Douglas McArthur, "Build me a son, O Lord, who will be strong enough to know when he is weak, and brave enough to face himself when he is afraid, one who will be proud and unbending in honest defeat, and humble and gentle in victory." That's a different way of being strong.

For our women, I love the quote by Eleanor Roosevelt, "A woman is like a tea bag - you can't tell how strong she is until you put her in hot water." Real strength is born out of testing. Strength. We all need it when life presents us with challenges, tests, and trials. Today's passage begins, "Be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of his power."

As we unpack this passage from Ephesians, let's put ourselves in the shoes of those Christians in Ephesus, Asia Minor, in the first century. We must remember that the Ephesians were living under Roman pagan rule. Christianity was illegal. The early Christians were struggling against very real powers. The Roman soldier represented, quote "the man". To confess that Jesus Christ is Lord was a direct affront to the Roman Caesar who was considered to be appointed by the gods. The author of our letter uses a very political image, the roman soldier, and then turns it upside down.

We might picture a football player suited up in helmet, shoulder pads, cleats. The apostle Paul would know the Roman soldier better. Paul was on the receiving end of the famous *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace-keeping system, having been thrown in jail numerous times for preaching the gospel. Proclaiming Jesus is Lord was illegal because it undermined the Roman system of domination and good order. So when he writes, we do not struggle against flesh and blood, but against rulers, authorities, cosmic powers, spiritual forces, he understood that the struggle was bigger than man to man, person to person. The world was set up for winners and losers and at that time, the Christians were on the losing end. So the Ephesians were being encouraged in this time of trouble to be strong in the Lord, but they were weak on their own against such powers.

This struggle, this language, may sound strange and archaic, but peoples and minorities today continue to struggle against powers and principalities.<sup>1</sup> Lest we forget, after the Remember majority persecuted Christians, once Christianity became legal under Emperor Constantine in the year 325 AD, Christians returned the favor. The first Christians duked out their theology and brutally punished heretics at the Councils of Nicea, Chalcedon, and then Ephesus.

During the Medieval Crusades the Roman Catholic Church slaughtered Muslims, Jews, and Eastern Christians, those whose descendents are losing their lives today in places like Syria.

The Protestant Reformers, our ancestors, persecuted the Turks, Jews, heretics, and "witches." Even Lutheran theology and Martin Luther was anti-Semitic. This was the soil in which the Nazi culture

could take root in church and state in Germany. The powers of darkness did produce a struggle between flesh and blood. They are not separated, but connected. There is no separate spiritual and flesh and blood realm. Both work together.

We have to realize that this passage has been used to justify such violence even though we are called to proclaim a "gospel of peace." (see Ephesians 6:15) And in the early church, Christians, were pacifists according to historians and scripture. If we read the passage, it is call to stand and be prepared for such challenges relying on the strength and power of God. Soldiers were to stand in formation ready for battle, but these weapons belong to God and are wielded by God. They are truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, salvation, the word of God, prayer. God gives the protection, the armor, not weaponry, to endure such assaults.

How does this strange passage play out in our times when it was written to a persecuted minority while we enjoy the freedom to worship? For one I find myself indignant at the treatment of Christian minorities across the world. But if I am honest, sometimes I find it harder to see the situation in my own back yard.

It's been fifty years since another Martin, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at our Montreat Conference Center in the mountains of NC. This weekend over 1,000 people have gathered for a conference, *Dr. King's Unfinished Agenda; a Teach In for Rededicating Ourselves to the Dream*. I have been following speakers on social media since I could not attend. Yesterday, NY Times columnist, Charles Blow reminded the audience of these words Dr. King spoke in Montreat 50 years ago. Listen!!!

*The law may not be able to change hearts, but it can constrain the darkness.*

*The law may not make you love me, but it may keep you from lynching me.*

Those who contend against the powers that keep one segment of people as 2nd class citizens, know what the powers of darkness feel like in a real way. Now, I know that progress has been made, but talk to your African American friends and neighbors and you will hear terrible stories of continued struggle and fear.

We cannot stick our heads in the sand on the matter of racism especially after the year our nation has had, especially after the Mother Emanuel shootings on June 17 in Charleston, SC. This fall we will study racism with the help of members like Don McKale, Harold Cheatum, Rameth Owens, Lin Dearing, and Mary Morrison as part of our Fort Hill Seminary of higher learning. As Christians we must do the hard work of confronting racism in our own hearts and community. It is a matter of social righteousness today.

I was struck in my preparation for this sermon in reading a site devoted to an African American reading and applications of today's Scripture. Dr. Luke Powery, of Princeton Seminary, writes about this passage in the context of a day celebrated in many black churches called "Men's Sunday."<sup>ii</sup> He writes that in the black church it is important to celebrate men. In a culture where the rate of incarceration of black males is staggering and images of Black males in the media are very negative, men who are faithful and making good contributions need to be uplifted. They need to hear that they are made in the image of God and have a calling and purpose. The Sunday after the Charleston shooting, I arrived at Abel Baptist Church for our community prayer service as members were visiting after their worship. The absence of black men was very noticeable. The only men I met at church that afternoon, were the preacher, Emanuel Flemming and his father.

I have become more conscious of the subtlety of racism lately. We haven't seen a lynching lately, but the issues have been in the news. I was helped by reading an article written this week by another Dr., Dr. Robert Williamson, Jr., "Bobby" to us. Bobby is the son of Eva and Bob and grew up at Fort Hill. He is a professor of Religion at Hendrix College and pastors a church serving the homeless poor. Bobby helped me by framing our issues as an ongoing cultural belief in White Supremacy, a spiritual force that infects us without our being aware of it. The first step to fighting the powers and principalities is naming it. And white privilege is the name. In his article he quotes another author,

*[The author] Coates writes of white Americans existing in a dreamlike state: "I have seen that dream all my life. It is perfect houses with nice lawns. It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways. The Dream is treehouses and the Cub Scouts. The Dream smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake." Yet if we were to wake up, Coates insists, we would recognize that "the elevation of the belief in being white...was not achieved through wine tastings and ice cream socials, but rather through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land; through the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents; the destruction of families; the rape of mothers; the sale of children; and various acts meant, first and foremost, to deny [us]...the right to secure and govern our own bodies."<sup>iii</sup>*

The legacy of slavery is still with us. In fact, at the close of worship we will sing a Civil war hymn, *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, written for the Union side. We are singing it in the heart of Dixie. But it was written by those who felt their cause to defeat slavery and division in this nation, a cause of Christian truth and righteousness. The legacy of slavery is still a spiritual force, a darkness, a cloud that works to dehumanize some for the privilege of others. Bobby reminds Christians that we who are white must continue to wrestle with the powers of white supremacy. He writes,

*It calls white Christians to relinquish the traditional armor of privilege and power and to replace it with righteousness, faith, and truth. It calls us to attack the Dream of white supremacy with the Word of God, which demands justice for all and not privilege for a few. It calls us to take off the boots we have used to trample down others and to strap on "whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace." It calls us into the struggle against our own white privilege, which smells like peppermint but smacks of death.<sup>iv</sup>*

Friends, for those of us who enjoy such privilege, this may be a very difficult word, but it is prophetic. The sword of the Spirit is the word of the Lord. It is a direct reference to the Old Testament prophets who spoke on behalf of the Lord calling the people to true worship and righteous living toward neighbors especially the poor and the mistreated. A sword cuts. It is a difficult word. But all the armor of God is meant to provide for the protection of God's children. It is designed to keep us true to God's will.

God who has protected his people from the promise made to Abraham and Sarah to be a nation, blessed to be a blessing, to the time of the escape out slavery under Pharaoh in the Exodus. God protected the people in the wilderness, providing for their needs. When they made it to the promised land they were asked respond in thanksgiving and make commitment, to choose whom we will serve.

God is faithful to his promises and his people. And he calls us to make choices every day, to choose his good and gracious will as we seek to love the Lord and love our neighbor.

We have all the equipment we need for the Lord provides us with our shoes, our helmet, our belt, our sword, our shield, his own Spirit. We may have to remove our armor of fear, of self-preservation, comfort, and of violence.

Today's scriptures are a call to make a choice about whom we will serve.

Let us serve the cause of truth and righteousness....

Let us serve the gospel of peace and salvation...

Let us be guided by God's word always wrapped in prayer.

As we do so we will be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of his power.

Laura Smith Conrad  
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<sup>i</sup> I am always indebted to the resource *Feasting on the Word* and *Interpretation* Commentary series for exegesis and commentary.

<sup>ii</sup> see Luke Powery, "Men's Sunday" for Sunday, June 17, 2008 at [theafricanamericanlectionary.org](http://theafricanamericanlectionary.org)

<sup>iii</sup> Robert Williamson, Jr., "The Politics of White Supremacy" August 17, 2015 at [politicaltheology.com](http://politicaltheology.com)

<sup>iv</sup> Williamson, IBID