

## “Contenders”

Isaiah 59:15-19; John 1:9-17;  
Ephesians 6:10-24

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It's been an interesting summer. How many of you have had an opportunity to watch some of the Olympics? I thought that would be a fairly common thing that we have done. I got to do a little bit of that. It was fascinating to see some of those competitions and to think about what those athletes had to do to prepare themselves to be there, to be in any kind of contention for a medal. Think about all the different things they did. It takes having the right place to practice and the right kind of equipment. It takes a lot of practice and hard work. It takes somebody who knows the game and helps you understand it. And you have to understand it; you have to get your head around it. You have to have the right kind of attitude and be able to maintain that throughout the competition. Those are at least some of the things you have to do to be a good athlete and to prepare to be a contender.

What does it take to be a contender in life? The interesting thing is that I think they are pretty similar. It helps when we have the equipment we need. Sometimes we think about equipment as education, perhaps. We need a lot of hard work and practice at the things that make us better in life. We need to be able to get our head in the right place, have the right attitude, understanding, and insight. It helps to have a good coach—somebody who helps you understand what it means to go through life.

In some ways we can make that comparison between athletics and the life we lead to be a contender in life, to make it in life. In some ways I think that's what Paul is coaching us with in Ephesians. He's saying that we have encountered the love and grace of God in Christ. In fact, early on he says we've been saved by grace through faith. It's like we've begun to play the game. We've entered in. We've recognized God's love and are beginning to be rooted and grounded in that love. We are being drawn into a life that is good, true, and righteous. We are becoming wiser. Today he is wrapping that up in one metaphor.

There was a particular game during Roman times that might have some influence on this. There were people they called Gladiators and it was really a contest of life and death. Sometimes I think Paul is really talking about our contest of life and death. It's a life that is alive or a life that is dead. Are we going to be contenders in that?

So he begins to give us this description, this imagery of a guy putting on his armor. He starts out with the belt of truth, and then there's the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes that will take us to proclaim faith, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit. So are we supposed to go around in life looking like a Roman soldier? He gives us all this imagery, all the equipment to play the game, but he does something really interesting with it. He begins a transformation with it. Let's think about what each one of these pieces that he describes are.

The belt holds things together. It's something to hang your sword on, attach your breastplate to, all that. It's the belt of truth grounding us in reality. It's asking us to look beyond what we might see as the façades, all the possibilities that are pure imagination. There are so many things in our lives that come at us that need to be grounded in reality. We need to begin to understand how we can gird ourselves with the truth.

The breastplate of righteousness. What does the breastplate do? It protects our heart. It's interesting, what's righteousness all about? It's about being in right relationships. What protects our heart better than anything else? What hurts our heart more than anything else? Relationships. It's as we gird our lives with right relationships that our heart is protected.

There's something really interesting about the shoes. In Roman times, the shoes the soldiers wore probably would have been hobnail-like things so they could really grip. If you think about it, if there are two guys on a gravel road and one guy had basically cleats on and the other one doesn't, which has better footing? It's those cleats that grab on and give us the traction we need to be able to proclaim peace. It doesn't say that we will create peace; it says that we will proclaim peace. Why? I think it's because he's talking about us as individuals. These are the things that we can do ourselves. The most we can do is be a spokesman for peace because for peace to really happen is dependent on the group. We can proclaim it. We can argue for it. We can try to help it happen, but it takes the group to make it happen.

After the shoes, as we're gripping in, we have the shield of faith. As much protection as our relationships give us, as we have a grip on life to go forward towards peace, as we have this sense of reality, there are always these zingers that life seems to throw at us. We need faith to help protect us from those zingers, those arrows, those ways the unexpected comes.

After the shield we have the helmet of salvation. It's interesting the helmet is salvation because what is it that gets into our heads? It's how are we going to be safe, how are we going to be the best, how are we going to be whatever we are going to be? That's what salvation is about – being the right kind of people, leading the right life. What gets in the way? Our attitudes, our understandings, our insights. We can begin to think about all kinds of things that might save us. My relationships might save me – particular kinds of relationships with people of importance. I can think about the things I have, my status. Are those going to save me? If I complete a particular task is that going to make me all that there is? We can get caught up in all kinds of stuff. We need to know where our salvation comes from; that the grace of God is what undergirds us, what gives us the strength, and what protects us and leads us to a full understanding of life. We need that helmet.

Then, the sword. We have this image of the sword that cuts through things. What is it described as? The sword of the Spirit, the word of God. This is interesting because the word here is not the logos word; it is actually a communication kind of word. It's the word of God, the way God speaks into our lives. It's God talking to us. It's all those

ways that God does that through our gathering together, our learning together through scripture. It's the way we listen in silence and in prayer. There's all the different ways God speaks into our lives that cut through the deceptions, cut through the façades. It helps us find our way.

What has Paul done? Does he want us to go out looking like Roman soldiers? He's taken all that physical stuff and transformed it into non-physical stuff. He has taken instruments of violence and transformed them into the equipment of peace. You notice at the beginning he's talking about us dealing with rulers and authorities, the devil and spirits. Anything that was non-physical for him was spiritual. We've nuanced that over the last thousand years or so. We recognize all kinds of non-physical forces in our lives: psychological, sociological, economic, philosophical, societal. We recognize all these forces in our lives as well as the spiritual. Paul says we have a way to stand firm in the midst of all those forces if we simply put on a belt of truth—looking to reality and not letting ourselves get fooled into believing one thing or another; not going with the whims of society, but trying to look at what is true and to build those relationships that are right. We have a way to dig in and work for peace and to proclaim it, to have that shield of faith that protects us and allows God to speak into our lives through the Spirit. When we do this, there's a way to contend with all the forces of our lives. That's what Paul has been leading us to in Ephesians – that in God we have a way to deal with our lives, to stand firm, and in standing firm know the wonder of God's grace and the wonder of life, a life that flourishes. So he gives us an image and transforms it into something that's non-physical, and peace produces something that is incredibly important: a way of living in the grace of God.

After he goes through all of this he recognizes that we have all these ways of putting our life together, but in the end there's one thing that we need in order to have ongoing participation. Perhaps any athlete knows that if you have a great coach and you listen to him, you've got a leg up. Paul knows it is prayer, our conversation, our communication, our willingness to be in relation with and talk to God that allows all of this to work together. And when it all works together, we begin to live into the benediction he gives:

*Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Peace be with you. Amen.

Gracious God, how thankful we are for the goodness and grace you have given us. Help us put on the full armor, the nature of our lives together and our faith in you that leads us into the fullness of life, of grace beyond all understanding. Lord, lead us into your peace with love, through faith, by Jesus Christ's work, we pray. Amen.