



The Breastplate of Righteousness

"Put on the whole armor of God."

(Ephesians 6:11)

As Christian soldiers, we must dress for spiritual battle, a battle against the assaults of our adversary, the devil, and all the powers of darkness and wickedness over which he rules. Paul lists all the parts of the Christian's armor: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the preparation of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit (cf. Ephesians 6:13-17). Articles have been written and sermons preached on each part of this armor. This article, as the title indicates, focuses on the breastplate of righteousness.

The breastplate was the largest piece of metal armor that the Roman soldier had. It was often beautifully decorated and shaped to fit the soldier's body. By the end of this article I trust you will agree that the breastplate of righteousness is the most beautiful part of the Christian's armor as well.

Whose righteousness?

What breastplate of righteousness did the apostle Paul wear in his conflict for the gospel? Was it the breastplate of his own goodness? Read Paul's own account of himself:

"Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith."

(Philippians 3:4-9)

Paul accounted all his own righteousness to be as "dung," a very strong word that compares human goodness to refuse which we throw out or flush away. Why would Paul talk this way? The Heidelberg Catechism tells us why:

"But why cannot our good works be the whole or part of our righteousness before God? Because the righteousness which can stand before the judgment seat of God, must be perfect throughout and wholly conformable to the divine law; but even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin." (HC 62)

Only the perfect righteousness of Christ can stand before the throne of God and pass His judgment.

By grace, through faith

Again, the Catechism addresses our great need:

"How art thou righteous before God? Only by true faith in Jesus Christ; that is, although my conscience accuse me, that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, and have never kept any of them, and am still prone always to all evil; yet God without

any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never committed nor had any sin, and had myself accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled for me; if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart." (HC 60)

Beloved, we are declared righteous on the basis of the imputed righteousness, holiness, and obedience of Christ, i.e., God the Father credits to your and my account the perfect righteousness of Christ. But that is not the whole story. Our account, by nature, is debt-ridden and bankrupt. "I am all unrighteousness; false and full of sin I am." We are totally depraved and wholly incapable of any good and prone to all evil. Christ not only credited His perfect righteousness, holiness, and obedience to our account, but He also paid our debt and cleared up our bad account by enduring the wrath of God against our sins. He took our curse upon himself: *"Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things which are written in the Book of Law to do them ... Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree."* (Galatians 3:10, 13) He paid the penalty and endured the punishment for our sins, i.e., death and hell, and made us whole. Paul sums it up beautifully in 1 Corinthians 5:21: *"For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."*

This is also the way that God can be both just and the justifier:

"For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus."

(Romans 3:24-26)

God remained just in that He did not excuse or overlook sin. He could not do that and still remain just and holy. He exacted the highest payment for the sins of His elect, i.e., the suffering and death of His only begotten Son! At the same time He justified His elect, i.e., He made them acceptable and able to stand in His presence by clothing them with the perfect righteousness, holiness and obedience of Christ.

The breastplate of righteousness is the breastplate of Christ's righteousness. Undoubtedly Paul is alluding to the prophet Isaiah who centuries before, prophesied about the Redeemer that would come: *"And he saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor; Therefore his arm brought salvation unto him: and his righteousness, it sustained him. For he put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation upon his head; and he put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, and was clad with zeal as a cloak."* (Isaiah 59:16, 17) The Lord was clothed with righteousness as a breastplate. What did He do with that righteousness? The prophet Isaiah tells us: *"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels."* (Isaiah 61:10) The prophet Zechariah speaks similarly: *"Take away the filthy garments from him. And unto him he said, Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment."* (Zechariah 3:4)

The garments of salvation, a robe of righteousness!

One of the most applicable illustrations of this is Jesus' parable of the Marriage of the King's Son:

"The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son. And sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come. Again, he sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage. But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise: and the remnant took his servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them. But when the king heard thereof, he was wroth: and he sent forth

his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city. Then saith he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy. Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage. So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests. And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment: and he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen."

(Matthew 22:2-14)

In this parable we read of invitations being sent out to come to the wedding feast. The King is giving a great banquet in celebration of the marriage of His Son. The invitation is one of special bounty and grace. Then we see the invitations being refused. In spite of the insult, the King graciously sends out the invitations the second time, only this time to have His messengers murdered in further spite. Insulted and grieved, the King's love turns into wrath, and that wrath brings awful destruction! His invitations then go out to the highways and byways: the wedding will be furnished with guests, regardless; there would be a collection of guests representative of all parts of the world.

Briefly, those who refused the King's invitation to the wedding feast were the unbelieving Jews. As a result of their refusal, opportunity is given to the Gentiles, (sinners out on the highways and byways, sinners representative of all who read these lines), opportunity to come to the wedding feast. God's plan will not be foiled. Many hear the invitation but have hardened hearts. But there will be a wedding between the Son and the Bride.

However, there is one man who still insults the King by not wearing the proper wedding garment. Here we see the sin of many so-called Christians in churches today. Outwardly they want to be present but bring discredit on the One who invited them by not wearing the wedding garment. Such, like the person in the parable, have no excuse for not being clothed in the proper wedding apparel, especially when it has been previously provided by the host. Studies from ancient documents have proven that kings were provided with extensive wardrobes from which each invited guest was furnished with a suitable garment, (much like badges or name-cards handed out at conferences or conventions today to identify the constituents). Thus, there was no excuse to refuse the invitation for lack of dress (that you have nothing to wear), or to mingle with the other guests without the proper garments. All is freely provided.

So, the improperly clothed person is spotted by the keenness of the King's glance, in spite, perhaps, of his efforts to hide in the crowd. When he is confronted by the King and questioned, he convicts himself by being speechless. His refusal and insolence, his arrogance and hypocrisy, are deserving of the terrible punishment that is meted out to him.

Now what is so important about wearing the proper wedding garments? As you have perhaps already realized, this parable has the heavenly meaning of the marriage between Christ, the Son, and His bride, the Church. Christians are to be preparing for the wedding feast of Christ and His Church. Of that impending marriage we read:

"Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honor to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of the saints."

(Revelation 19:7, 8)

The Lamb's bride must be clothed in the proper wedding garments. These garments are freely provided by God the Father. What are these garments? Hear again the words of the Isaiah: *"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels."* (61:10)

Christ clothed His bride, the Church, with *fine linen, clean and white*, which is the *righteousness of the saints*. He clothed you with salvation by His atoning death and robed you with His own righteousness, holiness, and obedience so that you stand before Him completely cleansed, without spot and wrinkle.

Another beautiful illustration is the familiar parable of the Prodigal Son. This son is brought to the realization of his miserable condition. He returns to his father (God) with the confession: *"I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight and am no more worthy to be called thy son."* Then we read the amazing response of the father: *"Bring forth the best robe and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet"* (Luke 15:22). The "best robe" can only be the robe of Christ's righteousness!

How soundly this marvelous, wonderful, amazing provision was grasped by hymn writers of the Church in the following familiar words:

*Nothing in my hands I bring,
Simply to thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to thee for dress,
Helpless, look to thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die.
My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly lean on Jesus' Name.
When I shall launch in worlds unseen,
O may I then be found in him;
Dressed in his righteousness alone,
Faultless to stand before the throne.*

Beloved, only the perfect righteousness of Christ can withstand our accuser, the devil. For the Christian, Christ's righteousness is a sure defense against Satan. Put on this breastplate of righteousness. How, you ask? Through the gift of faith which the Holy Spirit works in us: *"For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."* (Romans 10:10); or in the words of the Catechism: *"Why do you say that you are righteous by faith only? Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith, but because only the satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ is my righteousness before God, and I can receive the same and make it my own in no other way than by faith only."* (HC 61)

The breastplate of righteousness: Are you wearing it? Without it you will never be able to stand, neither before your adversary, the devil, nor before your Father in heaven. Having on this breastplate, you will nevermore come into condemnation. Is this not, I ask you, the most beautiful piece of the Christian's armor? It is beautiful even as Christ is beautiful! Amen.

Vernon Pollema

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