

30. The Breastplate of Righteousness

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I am sure that you've seen some of the movies that portray the ancient warriors who wear their breastplates. Breastplate or a.k.a. body armor have gone through many changes throughout their history. It started from thick layers of leather body armor, to a coat of mail, to a metal breastplate for the Roman Empire up to the Medieval period, to modern day soft body armor like this one as well as heavy duty body armor like this one.

The breastplate is very important as you can imagine. As Roman armor, it protected the vital organs of the soldier. It guarded his heart and lungs, among other things. If the breastplate wasn't on properly, one well-placed blow could put you down and it would be all over.

It is the same when it comes to the spiritual breastplate. It is to protect your spiritual heart that is a battleground, not a playground. Our enemy satan is trying his best to capture or discourage our hearts.

A. PUT ON THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Ephesians 6:14b having put on the breastplate of righteousness, Some of you may say, "Wow, where did this apostle Paul come up with such a nice description of the armor like this?" Actually, Paul got it from the Book of Isaiah:

Isaiah 59:17 For He put on righteousness as a breastplate, And a helmet of salvation on His head; He put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, And was clad with zeal as a cloak.

What does apostle Paul mean when he says, "having put on the breastplate of righteousness"? Is he talking about our own righteousness? He certainly is not talking about our own righteousness. Because prophet Isaiah made it very clear:

Isaiah 64:6 But we are all like an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; We all fade as a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, Have taken us away.

This is not our own earned righteousness, or a feeling of righteousness, but a righteousness received by faith in Jesus. It gives us a general sense of confidence, an awareness of our standing and position.

1) Paul's Breastplate of Righteousness

Let's see how the apostle Paul himself used this Breastplate of Righteousness when he was under pressure to be discouraged and defeated. Have you ever thought of the struggles he personally had in this realm? Here was a man who was small in stature and unimpressive in his personal appearance. In fact, there is very good evidence to indicate that his appearance might have been even repulsive to many. The last thing he had was what is called a commanding presence.

His background didn't help him either. Because he had been the most hostile, brutal persecutor of the church they had known. He must constantly have run across families with loved ones whom he had put to death or jailed. He was often reminded by many people that he was not one of the original twelve apostles, that his calling was suspicious that perhaps he really was not an apostle at all. Writing to the Corinthians about these very matters, he says of himself in Chapter 15:

1 Corinthians 15:9 For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

What a ground for discouragement! How easy it would have been for him to say to himself, "What's the use? Here I am working my fingers to the bone, making tents and trying to preach the Gospel to these people, and look at the blessing God has brought them, but they don't care. They hurl insults to my face. Why try anymore?" But that is not what he does.

But in the very next verse Paul says:

1 Corinthians 15:10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.

There he is using the Breastplate of Righteousness. I just love the way he said, "What I am is what Christ has made me. I'm not standing on my righteousness, I'm standing on His, I am accepted by His grace."

I wouldn't be one bit surprised if Paul added what he said in Philippians:

Philippians 4:13 I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

2) Our Breastplate of Righteousness

Let me put this in our situation. Satan would dispatch one of his demons to taunt you and discourage you with your past. He would say, "How can you call yourself Christian, you hypocrite? Look what you've done; look at the mess you've made in your life; of course, not to mention what you did at work yesterday. In addition to that, this morning you yelled at your kids and you had ungodly thoughts before you came to the church. Way to go, Christian. You are not worthy to go to God. You've sinned. He will not listen to your prayers."

In a way, satan is right that we all have sinned. We don't deny it. That is why we need Jesus. And every Christian will continue sinning to the bitter end. The Bible does not teach sinless perfection, but that fact does not constitute a license for choosing to sin. But our gracious Lord has provided His Holy Spirit to enable us to live differently than before we became born-again Christians.

As born-again Christians we may not commit the more blatant sins of committing adultery, murdering someone or stealing other people's belongings, but we still may fall for the more subtle sins of self-righteousness and pride. But when we repent from our sins with the guidance from the Spirit of God, our merciful Lord makes a provision which is given to us in 1 John 2:

1 John 2:1-2 My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. 2 And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.

If that is not good enough, the Lord assures us with this promise:

Romans 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.

B. HOW DOES GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS COME TO US?

By now some of you may wonder in your heart, "How does God's righteousness come to us? Where did it start? When did God plan this?" I am so glad that you asked.

The Lord our God knew that man would sin against Him because of human 's pride at the Garden of Eden. So in His infinite wisdom and sovereignty , the Lord prepared the divine righteousness transferring plan before the beginning of the creation.

But the actual divine righteousness transfer to humanity happened at the crucifixion of Jesus Christ:

John 19:30 So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit.

The drink of vinegar did not fully quench His thirst, but it did enable Him to utter that shout of triumph, in a loud voice, "It is finished!" In the Greek text, it is "tetelestai".

The word 'tetelestai' is unfamiliar to us, but it was commonly used by various people in everyday life in those days. A servant would use it when reporting to his or her master after one's work is finished. When a priest examined an animal sacrifice and found it faultless, this word would apply. Jesus, of course, is the perfect Lamb of God, without spot or blemish of sin.

Perhaps the most meaningful definition of 'tetelestai' was that used by the merchants: "The debt is paid in full!" When He gave Himself on the cross, Jesus fully met the righteous demands of a holy law of the OT; He paid our debt in full. None of the OT sacrifices could take away men's sins, because these animals' blood only covered sin temporarily. But Jesus, the Lamb of God shed His blood, and that blood can take away the sins of the world.

What was made an end of? Jesus ended our sins and the guilt that accompanies them.

What was paid? He paid the price of our redemption with His perfect atoning sacrifice.

What was performed? Christ imputed His divine righteousness to men's account so that the righteous requirements of the OT law was met. The word 'impute' is a banking term to "transfer one's fund to another person's account". Jesus had to do this because every single human being has been born with sin which means 'born with spiritual bankruptcy.'

What was accomplished? He accomplished the work that the Father gave Him to fulfill.

Jesus Christ finished His work on the cross for you and for me. That was His purpose, His mission. Now our purpose, our mission is to believe in Him.

C. CAUTION

There are two cautions I'd like to make to you regarding putting on the Breastplate of Righteousness."

1) His righteousness, not ours

As I said earlier, don't ever think that our own breastplate of righteousness is good enough to deflect satan's attack. Our own breastplate of righteousness is made out of spiritual styrofoam rather than spiritual titanium metal.

2 Corinthians 5:21 For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Ephesians 4:24 and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.

The Christian's protection is not to be sought in any works of our own but only in what Christ has done for us and in us.

This brings up the next caution to us.

2) No breastplate of experience

Great British theologian and pastor Martin Lloyd-Jones once said, "Thank God for experiences, but do not rely on them. You do not put on the 'breastplate of experiences', rather you put on the 'Breastplate of Righteousness.'"

We are sometimes tempted to say to Satan in pride, "Look at all I've done for the Lord," after we experience a few victories in our lives. But that is shaky ground, though sometimes it feels good. It is shaky because the feeling and experiences and our work is so changeable. But God's righteousness is not. God's Breastplate of Righteousness is our best defense against the sense of spiritual depression and gloom that comes against us.

These two chinks in our armor can be fatal. We may think that we are well protected

D. POSITIONAL AND PRACTICAL RIGHTEOUSNESS

Satan is the accuser. When Satan accuses the Christian, it is the righteousness of Christ that assures the believer of his salvation. But our positional righteousness in Christ which means 'justification', without practical righteousness in the daily life which means 'sanctification', only gives Satan more opportunities to attack us.

Let me put it in this way. You might have a great "Breastplate of Righteousness" that comes from the Lord, but if your daily life is not what it should be as a Christian, you do not have spiritual strength to wear the Breastplate. And this strength only comes from the Holy Spirit who helps us live sanctified living through obeying the Word of God daily.

E. APPLICATIONS

1) Our Breastplate of Righteousness comes from what Christ has done for us on the cross and in us everyday.

2) We need spiritual strength to wear the Breastplate of Righteousness by living sanctified lives.