

**“The Kevlar Breastplate, Please”**

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

It wasn't easy being a Christian in Ephesus, in the early to mid-50s CE. It was a difficult time because Christians were a religious minority in the Roman Empire. Christians faced harassment, discrimination and suppression; sometimes worse than others, but they were always worried. It [to be a Christian] was literally illegal between the advent of Christianity in the first Century all the way until 313 CE, when Christianity was finally legalized. It wasn't for another 15-20 years before it became the religion of the Roman Empire.

So think about that. We play with these ancient time lines, like they are just a blink of an eye - because it's only about an inch on a page. But between the early 50s CE all the way to 313 is about the length of time between the moment in which we started fighting for our independence as a nation and now. That's the difference between the time Paul was writing and the time it was no longer illegal to be a Christian - such a vast, frightening, amount of time.

In that time Christians, were expected to live and work and do their business in a society that disrespected them, mistrusted them and tried everything to make it impossible for them to retain their faith. For example, if you had a business you would be forced to do business at the Temple because that's where food was sold. When they sacrificed animals a small amount was burned and sent up to the gods, but most of it was sold like to a restaurant or a butcher shop, from the priest to the people.

Well, Christians were not allowed to eat that meat. But if you couldn't eat that meat you couldn't do business, because you couldn't go to the business lunch of the day and do business. So they [Christians] were forced out of business because they were not willing to go to the different cultic temples of that age.

Christians were also considered to be unpatriotic. In that day and age, Domitian was the emperor at the time that the writer of Ephesians was at work. So people would say, “Bring those Christians, make them patriotic, and make them worship the emperor Domitian at the huge temple in Ephesus.” The Christians were saying, “We can't.”

Now everyone else in the Roman Empire, except for the Jews, were polytheistic: they believed in many gods. They worshiped whatever god was there. [They would say,] “Why wouldn't you darn Christians just kneel down and pray to Domitian like the rest of us? It is your patriotic duty. Don't you like your Empire? Don't you respect your leadership? Why won't you worship him [the emperor] like everybody else? You can worship your God, too. Just do your patriotic duty.”

The Christians wouldn't do it. So with two different world views, with two different theological mind sets, they were often abused and on rare occasions even murdered, because they were not patriotic enough as Christians and they wouldn't do business properly. It was difficult to live as a Christian in that time.

So here is the writer (We traditionally give Paul as the writer of Ephesians, but it probably wasn't Paul. It was one of Paul's students that probably wrote this letter.), using militaristic language. In our properly, politically correct society, we cringe at the idea of the breast plate of righteousness, and the sword and the belt and all of the description. But it is actually a wonderful use of metaphor, because the writer of Ephesians was not saying you should fight militarily, they were actually turning the metaphor upside down.

Notice that every part - from the belt to the breast plate and the helmet - were all defensive [pieces of armor]. They were to protect you from the slings and arrows. They were not aggressive weapons to take you on.

The only aggressive offensive weapon that is described in this passage is the sword. It is made very clear that the sword is the Bible: the word of God. That is the only weapon you have. So actually you have the great treatise on peace: when everybody else is fighting in a military style with metal swords, metal helmets, chain link armor and breast plates, they [Christians] were standing there in just robes - naked underneath. Their belt was truth. Their helmet was salvation. Their breast plate was righteousness and their sword was the word of God. They had no weapons. That is why so many were martyred - especially around 150 CE, as it got really tense and troubling.

Christians were called on to treat bullies - to use children's language - in a different way, to be peacemakers while they dealt with them.

Unfortunately this passage has been so misinterpreted, that the minute Christians got the upper hand because of Constantine - legalizing not only Christianity but making it the religion of the empire - too often the Christians turned right around and did exactly what their pagan abusers had done to them.

I could have said to the children this morning, "You know when someone is picking on you, more than likely they are being picked on at home." Most children, who abuse, are being picked on at home, and they are lashing out in their own pain. And, too often, the same thing has happened in the Christian faith. We turned around, as Christians, and we did the Crusades to do to the Jews and the Muslims and the other heretics - using that language of that day - just what pagans had done to us. We got abused, so we were going to be the next generation of abusers.

We go on with the Protestant Reformation. The Protestant Reformation named its enemies and found it was perfectly acceptable to kill Turks and Jews and Christian heretics, according to the language of the day. The ensuing Christian Europeans turned around and colonized, forcing Christianity on people to the point of even creating slavery. Yet, thankfully, those were not the only voices of the Christian faith and the only interpretation of armor.

There are other beautiful examples: (I'm going to slaughter the pronunciation because I had one year of French where I fooled around in French Club more than paid attention to the teacher.) But Christians in France in the village of Le Chambon sur Lignon - in that little village, during World War II - Jewish children were fleeing. The numbers vary anywhere from 800-5000, but this little village hid a vast number of kids. They [the villagers] hid

these little Jewish children in occupied Nazi land, in the woods, in the floor boards of their homes. At risk of certain death to themselves, they took care of these children. They fed them, they hid them and they allowed them to survive. The children were Jewish in an age when a lot of Christians thought Jews were horrible, who were not worthy of protection or anything else, because they really were not supposed to be saved - because if you didn't believe in Jesus, you were not going to heaven - so I guess it's alright to abuse or murder them in this world, because they weren't going to get to the next anyway.

That wasn't what this village of Christian people in occupied France felt. They knew that their role was to be peace makers - to love thy neighbor. They took those children in, when the Nazis were trying to kill them. At the risk of their own lives, as I said, [the villagers] protected, fed and saved them.

You wonder, don't you? If you or I were put in similar circumstances or situations, it could be our own lives. I can hear myself saying, "I'd help these kids, but they are not mine and if the Nazis go after my family, I would never be able to forgive myself if they killed my daughter. I have to make a choice, and I'm choosing my daughter over these children."

Thank goodness there are some people who are more faithful than I probably would have been; who chose to see thy neighbor as every bit as important as their blood family; to take them in and protect them. They trusted, because we have the children's remembrances. You can go on YouTube and hear the stories of these now 70-some year old people, who were children in World War 11, talking about what they learned from the people who took care of them - about their [the protectors'] faithfulness and their praying to God. About how they trusted that God would protect them, because they were doing the best they could, to help and fulfill what God intended for their lives: to protect those children.

There are moments in each one of our lives when we are faced with difficult decisions where it would be easier to not notice, or take a blind eye, than it would be to actually respond. You pray in those moments that you will have the courage and faith to do it.

I had one of those [moments]. I was serving in a church in Indiana and was asked to be on a not-for-profit board for a homeless shelter. I said, "Sure." I knew some of the people that were involved in the next community and I thought it would be great. They were doing wonderful ministry there.

Whenever I go on a board the first thing I do is say, "Show me your financials." Now, I don't know how to read a financial and I can barely add. I have never figured out fractions. But, I want to see them [the financials]. Then I always ask questions, because then they have to explain it to me - like I am a 6-year-old. That's about the equivalent of my math experience. Then I learn from them.

In this instance, they couldn't explain anything. This board had been a board for 30-some years and they couldn't explain any of the financials to me. Well, that was a red flag. So I started going through the financials. I worked on them - and am brand new to this board. Everybody is asking, "Why is this guy sticking his nose into our business? Why did we ask him to be on the board?"

Come to find out, the CEO had been taking money. On one occasion, he wasn't stealing in the literal or legal sense, but he would go on these homeless study gatherings, where other homeless directors would meet, and he stayed in downtown Indianapolis in the penthouse for \$300 a night. This was in the mid-1990s. Now that would be \$500-600 a night. I was going, "Really?" They got mad at me for bringing it up.

They had to fire him because there were financial improprieties. I finally said, "Do you want the newspapers to see this? Do you think you will ever get another penny of funding?" I kind of slowly resigned because it just didn't feel right, because they were not mad enough. They were more concerned about how they would look, than responding to what was appropriate.

Most of us have stories like that in our work and with our families. At that moment when you could keep your mouth shut and life would be a whole lot easier, but an injustice would continue to go on. This is a day where we celebrate those whistle-blowers; those people who struggle; who could have turned the other way and life would have been a lot simpler. But, you did what you had to do. Maybe you performed an intervention on a family member who was dealing with substance abuse. It would have been a whole lot easier to go back to your house and ignore it, and let them do what they were going to do - but God didn't want you to. God wanted you to care for them, so they could have a life.

That is what this passage is telling us. Whatever your hard situation is, God put you in that moment. God stuck me on that board without any clue as to what was going to happen, because God needed me to ask some questions. In that moment, my stupidity was my greatest gift. My lack of mathematical skills was my blessing. And perhaps yours is whatever hard thing you don't want to do. Most of the time when you are trying to talk yourself out of doing something, that's the very moment you need to do it. If you are trying hard to talk yourself out of something, it's because God is needling you until you do it.

You pray every day that when you are in the middle of it - and it's hard and you are second guessing yourself and you are worried - you ask God to put on your belt of truth, your helmet of salvation, your breast plate of righteousness. When you are making an action you constantly pray that you are using the sword - which is the word of God - to guide your decision-making. When you do that, even if you mess it up, it's about the intention of doing right. It doesn't matter if it ends well, poorly, or otherwise, because God will fix it. It's not about you. You are just the conduit. You are the tool. It is the helmet; the breast plate. It's the belt; it's you and it's me. We are just the avenue for God to work righteousness.

I pray for you if you are not having one of those moments right now. God bless you and enjoy it. The moment is going to come. Are you ready? Is your faith strong and your prayer - life adequate to face your challenge, so you don't ignore it or turn away, but can trust God to carry you safely through?

May God bless you with strength and peace, in Jesus' name. Amen