

Title: Enduring Hope

Subtitle: Finding spiritual strength and hope in difficult times.

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/LggwGrHLcEo>

Today's readings present us with some hard sayings and choices. Some who heard Christ's words were offended, others grumbled, and some chose no longer to follow him. Joshua's challenge to the Israelites is as pertinent to us today as it ever was: ***"Choose you this day whom you will serve. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."***¹ In a pluralistic world, we are challenged to have a clear vision about the way ahead. Will we take our own way, or will we take God's way?

Paul's statements in our New Testament lesson also seem bold and blunt as he calls on Christians ***"to put on the whole armor of God."***²

Each reading leaves us with a choice. If God's kingdom is at hand, will we choose to take hold of it, even if the way is narrow, difficult, and filled with mystery? The patriarchs and apostles never had an easy journey. Nevertheless, they ***"fought a good fight and ...kept the faith."***³ Biblical stories were written, ***"so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope."***⁴

I will never forget the time when the difficulties of ministry as a pastor had taken such a personal toll on me that I needed time away from its unrelenting demands. During that season, which lasted for two years, I started a business called Divine Restorations. I gave it that name because I saw that by working as a handyman and electrical contractor, God would not only use me to restore people's homes, but he would also use it to bring restoration to my own soul.

In one instance, I will never forget working outside on a ladder, when I overheard heard a little girl in the distance singing at the top of her lungs a song from an old Disney movie that came out in the early sixties. The lyrics of the chorus went something like this:

¹ Joshua 24:17

² Ephesians 6:10

³ 2 Timothy 4:7

⁴ Romans 15:5

Cause we have high hopes, we have high hopes, we have high apple pie in the sky hopes. Cause anytime you're feeling bad, any time you are feeling sad, remember that ant, OOps, there goes another rubber tree plant!"⁵

This boisterous little girl didn't seem to have a care in the world as she joyfully sang that song. I am sure she had no idea that she had an audience, but she did, and the message of that song was something I deeply needed. It was lovely and cheerful, and it made me think about hope and its importance in my life. My high hopes about how my ministry for the Lord should turn out had all been blown to smithereens. You see, I had unrealistic expectations that needed adjusting, and when the harsh realities of ministry didn't match those expectations, it created a crisis of faith. It was the kind of crisis that Peter addressed in his first epistle when he wrote, ***"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange was happening to you."***⁶

Paul addresses this fiery ordeal in our New Testament lesson today. Paul had been arrested, beaten, snake-bit, shipwrecked, and left for dead so many times that everyone, including Paul, was surprised he was still alive. This reminds me of a comment one minister made, who quipped, "Lord, if this is how you treat your ministers, I understand why you have so few of them." Even as Paul wrote the words we have in his epistle to the Ephesians, he was ***"an ambassador in chains."***⁷ It was in this place of confinement that Paul had a living illustration from the Roman soldier who was stationed by his side, who was wearing each part of the armor he describes.

In this call to arms, our life in Christ is likened to warfare, and therefore a life of faith brings with it circumstances beyond what humans can control. So the child's song that I heard that day honestly needs some tweaking. We have to be careful about "the high apple pie in the sky hopes," which are unrealistic, which can lead to disillusionment. It was such unrealistic hopes that led the people in our Gospel today to

⁵ Doris Day - High Hopes (Rubber Tree Plant), also made famous by Frank Sinatra

⁶ 1 Peter 4:12

⁷ Ephesians 6:20

turn away when they finally realized that Jesus had not come to be the political leader they wanted. Jesus had bigger things in mind than simply offering them another free meal. He came to offer the bread of heaven that would give them the strength to endure hardships with perseverance.

Therefore, Paul likens the Christian life to warfare for which we must be prepared. In fact, it is so difficult that we will need to ***“be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.”***⁸

The scriptures make it perfectly clear that God’s people have a spiritual enemy, which Paul also describes as ***“the cosmic powers of this present darkness.”***⁹ In this battle, there is no demilitarized zone. We declare this in the liturgy for the presentation and examination of baptismal candidates, where each person is asked if they will *“renounce Satan and all the forces of wickedness that rebel against God?”* And *“Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?”*¹⁰ If such words are used in a believer’s initiation into the Christian life, then this reality is something the church has taken seriously.

Christians, therefore, are to ***“fight the good fight”***¹¹ of faith by ***“Putting on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.”***¹² The word Paul uses for *“schemes”* is the Greek *“methodeia,”*¹³ from which we get the English word for *“method.”* And the primary method he uses is deception, by making things that are harmful look good. That is why in the Garden of Eden, the forbidden fruit was presented as something that ***“looked good for food, and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable to make one wise.”***¹⁴ The devil’s strategies have not changed as he lies in wait to deceive. By the way, the word Paul uses for the devil (*diabolos*) used with the article means *“the slanderer (par excellence),”*¹⁵ and this, of course, is foremost in his activities. He is apt at accusing and slandering everyone, and our

⁸ Ephesians 6:10

⁹ Ephesians 6:12

¹⁰ Book of Common Prayer, The Presentation and Examination of Baptismal Candidates, p. 302

¹¹ 2 Timothy 4:7

¹² Ephesians 6:11

¹³ Strong’s Concordance #3180 *“methodeia”* meaning craft, deceit

¹⁴ Genesis 3:6

¹⁵ Strong’s Concordance #1228 *“diabolos”* meaning slanderous, accusing falsely

modern-day media is so filled with it that many are at their wits end in knowing who and what to believe. We see this every day.

I like the way C.S. Lewis, in the preface to the *Screwtape Letters*, warned against overemphasizing the devil power by making “*two equal and opposite errors*.”¹⁶ The first, he describes as believers who have become obsessed by thoughts of Satan, while others work hard at discounting him and ignoring him as much as possible. Therefore maintaining a balanced perspective takes careful discernment.

Time does not permit me to go into all the details of a Christian’s armor with its Belt, Breastplate, Shoes, Helmet, Shield, and Sword. As a whole, they are metaphors for putting on truth, righteousness, and faith as we apply these virtues in our daily practice.

I have been told that modern-day soldiers are trained in every detail about the equipment each one is issued. A soldier is to know his equipment to such an extent that they are even trained how to dismantle, clean, and re-assemble that equipment in total darkness. We need to be acquainted with our equipment.

The first piece of that equipment is “***the belt of truth buckled around your waist.***”¹⁷ If the soldier’s Belt is too loose, his equipment which is fastened to it, will impede his movements. This means that there are some truths to which we must hold tightly. This should caution us against tossing doubt around as if the truth is just an intellectual toy to be played with. What Jesus said in our Gospel today is very difficult to understand. The Christian faith has mysteries that are hard to define.

In concluding his instructions about spiritual armor, Paul asked for their prayers, “***so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel.***”¹⁸ Paul is not discounting the fact that there are mysteries involved in the high-stakes spiritual battle that we are engaged in. Yet, with all of the things that we don’t quite understand, we can be confident that Jesus has the words of eternal life. So let’s take these admonitions seriously and do all that we can to not only survive but thrive with the high hope that God’s kingdom is at hand. Amen.

¹⁶ Lewis, C.S. *The Screwtape Letters*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1961

¹⁷ Ephesians 6:14

¹⁸ Ephesians 6:19

Reflection Questions

- What teachings of Jesus or Paul do you find hard to accept?
- What makes some of Jesus' teaching difficult to understand and follow?
- What can Christians dressed in the full armor of God expect? (Ephesians 6:13)
- When life gets tough, what has kept you from turning away from Christ?