

**Sermon:** “Onward, Christian Soldiers”  
Ephesians 6:10-20

Some of the newer hymnals exclude the hymn “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Some people consider it is a “moldy oldie” and dislike the military images. However they fail to understand the history of the hymn and the scripture to which it gives reference. The occasion for the writing of this hymn was a children’s festival a century and a half ago involving the British village in which Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould was pastor and a neighboring village.

The children from Rev. Baring-Gould’s village were to march in procession carrying a cross and banner. The students had to walk some distance to the neighboring village. Reverend Baring-Gould dreaded the undertaking, knowing how mischievous children can be and what a long walk it was. The night before this event was to take place he wrote this hymn in less than 15 minutes for them to sing as they walked.

While military metaphors are unpopular in some church circles, these hymn words are taken from today’s scripture lesson urge Christians to put on the whole armor of God. Jesus promised that against the church the gates of hell will not prevail. This is not a promise of safety if we hide inside. It is a call to pick up our banner and march forth with the whole armor of faith, and our one offensive weapon, the sword of the spirit, the Word of God. There is a distinction sometimes drawn between the saints in heaven, who are part of the church triumphant, and the church on earth, which is the church militant, that is, the church active in battle against the powers of evil.

As a child I remember walking through the history museums in Cleveland staring at the suits of armor and weapons from ancient days. There were modeled soldiers standing in full armor, sword at the side. Armored warhorses with metal encased soldiers mounted on their backs were holding up not just the soldier but hundreds and hundreds of pounds of protection.

A soldier does not go out with only some of the armor on: just the helmet or boots or jacket. They put on the whole armor. A baseball player cannot go on the field without a hat on his head or he is sent back to the dugout. A football player who is on the field while the game is going on and takes off his helmet gets penalized. There is a reason for each piece of equipment and a reason for putting it all on. Yet there is so often resistance.

There is a story of the time Edgar Allen Poe was a cadet at West Point. He did not like all the rules and all the training he had to go through. So one day, when all the cadets were supposed to turn out in formation on the parade grounds and march before the generals, Edgar Allan Poe checked his rule book to find out what the dress code was for the occasion. It said that he was supposed to wear white gloves and a white belt. So that is what he put on: white gloves and a white belt and nothing else. And when the military commanders saw him out there on the parade grounds, they promptly threw him out of the school, which is what he wanted anyway.

When this passage was written Paul could have used different metaphors drawing upon the agrarian culture of his day: “Pick up the shovel of the Spirit, don the straw hat of salvation, hold up your trousers with the suspenders of truth, and pull on the overalls of righteousness.” But that would not have the same powerful imagery. Paul was writing when the Roman military was at the peak of its power to a people who understood the superiority of their armor.

Maybe one of the reasons this hymn has lost some popularity is a failure to see the battle between good and evil that rages in the world and thus the failure to show up for duty. Followers of Jesus cannot be like Switzerland; neutral in moral conflicts. C. S. Lewis once said, “There is no neutral ground in the universe: every square inch, every split second is claimed by God, and counterclaimed by Satan.”

Dr. Eugene Brice tells about a survey the Book of the Month Club sent out to its membership. The survey listed a number of recent books and asked beside each title, “Have you read this book?” The editors were fascinated by the reply of one member. “Not personally,” he answered. How else can you read a book, other than personally?

In the battle against evil each one of us needs to be personally involved and to put on the whole armor of God. Church language speaks of “our earthly pilgrimage and warfare,” and there are times when that is a particularly apt phrase. Some years ago the church I was serving had a treasurer who had become angry at everyone. He paid bills and salaries late. He refused to give a financial statement. Finally he wrote to the IRS claiming the church was in violation of federate tax laws.

Even though there was nothing to the charge it had the potential to trigger an audit by the IRS with the possible loss of tax exempt status for the church and could have caused donors to the church to lose their tax deduction. That evoked grave concern amongst the church leaders. Seeking to put this in perspective I said, "At least no one is using real bullets." One man replied, "It's worse. It's the IRS." Fortunately nothing came of his charge, this treasurer was removed from his church office and we moved on, but it did make the point to me that there are times in life it seems we are at war with evil in a way as real and dangerous as any gun battle.

"Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." In the order they are mentioned there is first the belt of truth. This belt for Roman soldiers was so wide and thick that it protected the stomach and lower abdomen and prevented them from being disemboweled. For Christians the belt of truth is what we put on to prevent us from being eviscerated by untruths. It allows us to be strengthened by the truth of our faith in Christ.

Earlier Paul spoke of "putting away falsehood" and having conversation that leaves no "room for the devil." Rumors and gossip can easily divide a church, thus Paul begins by promoting protection of the community's soft underbelly, to do as St. Paul urged Christians to speak the truth in love to one another.

Next is the breastplate of righteousness. The breastplate protects the heart, the heart being symbolically the seat of the emotions and affection. The new covenant with God is to be written not on stone but upon our hearts. The breastplate of righteousness keeps safe our covenant with God.

The Roman boot enabled not only solid footing on the battlefield but also enabled the legions to move quickly over Roman roads so they could keep the peace. Paul's image of feet made "ready to proclaim the gospel of peace" indicates that the community of faith, too, must be able to move effectively in delivering the good news of Christ. It also recalls the words of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah 52:8 who said "Beautiful upon the mountain are the feet of those who bring good news."

The shield of faith is critical to Christian individuals and community, just as a battle shield was to the Roman legions. One of the standard battle tactics of the ancient world was to fire flaming arrows into the ranks of the enemy,

a move designed to get individual soldiers to drop their shields long enough to put out the fire, thus exposing them and their fellow soldiers to attack. Roman shields were made of heavy wood with a leather covering that could be soaked in water before battle to extinguish these flaming arrows.

Paul's image of faith being such a shield conveys the importance of cohesion between members of the community in the face of spiritual attack. When the flaming arrows of the enemy hit the shield soaked in faith, the arrows sputter out and the Christian soldier is saved.

The helmet of salvation protects the head, the center of reason, which needs constant protection. It is essential for soldiers to have protective head gear to keep their thinking at its best.

Finally there is the sword. The Roman sword was used for close-in fighting once the javelin had been thrown. After the battle began, a soldier had to know how to best use this weapon. The same is true when it comes to an assault by sin and temptation. Scripture is an essential weapon in our defense against evil.

The sword is the only weapon in this arsenal that can be considered an offensive weapon. The way we can counter attack against evil is with Scripture, with the good news Jesus brought. I know that the notion of the church militant is hard to comprehend and may seem to conflict with the words of Jesus about turning the other cheek, but that depends on how you understand them.

There is a time to actively resist evil. But do not resist evil on its own terms by striking back. If someone calls you crude names you do not have to respond in kind. If someone starts rumors about you do not respond with rumors about them. If someone cuts you off in the rotary because they actually believe the left lane is where you go to make a right turn, don't return the favor by turning left in front of them from the right lane. Do not continue the cycle of evil or increase it out of some notion you will win.

Turning the other cheek is a way of saying that you are not intimidated and you are still going to stand strong for the right no matter what you are hit with. Our power is not measured by tons of explosives but in the overwhelming power of love, the power of forgiveness and mercy, the power of sacrifice and service.

After putting on all this armor what are we to do? Pray. Prayer is where we receive these godly weapons. None of these weapons is of our creation. They are all a gift from God so we have to go to God to get them. They are not something we can create or we would end up with the belt of my opinion, the breastplate of self-righteousness, the shoes of escape and the sword of harsh words. We go to God in prayer because only from God can we get what equips us for spiritual warfare.

Putting on the whole armor of God does not mean following Jesus will be without difficulty. It does mean that when trouble comes we will be prepared. A man was coming out of church one day, and the preacher was standing at the door as he always was to shake hands. He grabbed the man by the hand and pulled him aside. The pastor said to him, "You need to join the Army of the Lord!" The man quickly replied, "I'm already in the Army of the Lord, Pastor." The pastor asked, "How come I don't see you except at Christmas and Easter?" He whispered back, "I'm in the secret service."

We cannot depend on Christian superheroes to defend us against evil. There are many fanciful tales of valiant soldiers fighting epic battles. There are heroes like Rambo and Jack Bower. But only on TV and in movies does a soldier decide to go fight alone. For a Roman soldier, "putting on the whole armor" meant more than just his own battle gear. It meant being part of a unit and counting on his comrades in arms. While the soldier's individual armor and weaponry might protect him in a one-on-one fight, it was designed to be most effective when part of a whole legion of soldiers.

The tribes who faced the Romans would have been awed at the sight of a nearly impenetrable wall of shields with spears facing them. If the Romans maintained that formation, they were nearly impossible to defeat, but if the ranks could be broken and the legion separated, the vulnerability of individual soldiers would be exposed. It is like the wording of Benjamin Franklin at the signing of the Declaration of Independence, "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately."

Scripture speaks of how Christians are to arm themselves against the evils of our time. We cannot fight any enemy partially armed. We can't pray but not read the Bible. We can't study the Bible but not pledge. We can't pledge but not volunteer. We can't volunteer but not worship. We can't worship but not pray. We do not want to be court marshaled Christians but

part of the church militant, fully prepared for spiritual warfare and ready at the last to be part of the church triumphant.

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The Federated Church of Hyannis

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