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**“Suit Up!”**

Ephesians 6:10-17; John 6:59-60, 66-69

Before we begin our consideration of today’s Scriptures, I have an announcement. It concerns the beginning of one of our area’s **most sacred religious observances**. That in case you have been in seclusion lately, I wanted you to know that we are about to enter into that **holy season** of the year known as... **FOOTBALL season**. WAIT! Why are you laughing? You know what they say... many a true word is said in jest. OK, maybe the comparison isn’t fair... For many folks, they are MUCH more devoted to the ‘pursuit of pigskin’ than their ‘pious practices’ of faith. Heck, I’d bet that a lot of my colleagues WISH that their parishioners would be HALF as enthusiastic about their support of the **church** as they were about their support of favorite **football team**...

I was reminded of the passion that people can have for football... not that I NEEDED any... at a civic club’s meeting this past week. The speakers were two of Welsh’s favorite sons: Coach John Richardson, head football coach of the defending 2A state champs Welsh Greyhounds, and Coach Lance Guidry, head coach of the McNeese State University Cowboys, and Welsh HS Alumnus. To say that the crowd was **‘attentive’** and **‘responsive’** would be an understatement... heck, if you folks would pay HALF as much attention to what I say as they did to those coaches, boy I’d be one happy preacher! And it’s not like what they were talking about was a matter of **life** and **death**... it was WAY more important than that... 😊

SERIOUSLY, though, I think that they are both personable, sincere men of good character, who care a lot about the young men entrusted to their care. Coach Guidry asked to speak first... something about having to get back to *practice*, or some *lame* excuse like that... and he began by speaking about the 3 players from Welsh HS. Since QB is a hot topic for most teams (particularly if your name is ‘LSU’), he began with a freshman named Zach Hayes, one of the stars of last year’s Welsh team. Coach Guidry said that because of the veteran players ahead of him, he would most likely NOT be getting any playing time at that position. Perhaps at another one. But that there was a chance that for this opening game on the road, he *might* get

the opportunity to **dress out**. And that particularly for an inexperienced player low on the depth chart, to know that your **coach believed in you** enough to allow you to **suit up** for the first game of the season would be very exciting. Cause there's always that hope that if you are **ready to play**, you just might be given the opportunity to **get in the game...**

Now, I know that one must be careful in the analogies we make between sports and our 'real life' of faith. And yet, one of the most significant ways that people learned from Jesus was in parables... experiences from **everyday life** that helped people relate those to their **spiritual life**. Today's passage from Eph. is one of the more well-known ones relative to being **"strong in the Lord."** Something we ALL are seeking to be! It speaks of the spiritual 'weapons' at our disposal and relates them to articles of clothing commonly used in warfare at that time. But since most of us might have more difficulty relating to 'swords, shields, and armor 'breastplates,' I am going to compare them to more current 'battle gear'... That of a football player. And how we are to 'dress out' in order to be 'ready to play' in this game called 'LIFE'... to hear our name called by a 'coach' who believes in us enough to cry out... **"Suit Up!"**

#### **[Prayer from Eph. 6:19-20]**

Now, in the ancient ways to 'suit up,' it is my understanding that Paul's list of battle gear was in the order it was to be put on: **"belt... breastplate... shoes... shield..."** etc. And even with more modern 'athletic apparel,' we too will consider them in the same order...perhaps seeing the similarity with the manner in which we are to 'layer' our spiritual clothing... as we seek to **"take up the whole armor of God so that we... having done everything... (might) stand firm."** (Eph. 6:13)

First of all, we are to put start with **"the belt of truth."** (6:14) The ancient belt was important to protect one's abdomen, your gut, and to keep your shirt in so that the enemy couldn't pull you down. The modern football belt also helps to protect one's abdominal area by holding pads in place... keep your Jersey from being used to bring you down... and perhaps just as importantly, to keep your pants from falling off! ...Which would be quite humiliating if it occurred during a game!

From a more spiritual aspect, we might consider how important it is to be, at one's core, a person of **character**. One who is **honest, trustworthy**. One who speaks the **TRUTH**. In being

a man/woman of integrity, one is less likely to get 'hit in the gut' by accusations, 'pulled down' by one's enemies, or 'get caught with one's pants down' (figuratively speaking)! For getting caught not being truthful can be quite 'humiliating.' Before anyone will listen to what we may say we believe about God, we must demonstrate the Godly character of honesty and trustworthiness... to put on ***"the belt of truth."***

Next is the ***"breastplate of righteousness."*** (6:14) Now when was the last time you put on a good ol' 'breastplate?' Now, probably **shoulder pads** would be the closest comparison... something you likely have never worn either. (Well, maybe some of you ladies when those were in vogue for women's blouses). But most of us understand how the football variety work: providing that **broad** expanse in the **strongest** part of the upper body to **protect oneself**, and **others**... Also allowing the player to **move forward** in plowing through **obstacles** in **attaining the goal**.

As followers of the 'only righteous God,' you and I are to 'suit up' with the character of 'righteousness.' To act in accordance with God's law, and His will for our lives. To do what is **RIGHT** in God's eyes. As we 'shoulder' the burden of living for Jesus, putting on His righteousness, we protect ourselves, and others... moving forward through the obstacles of life in fulfillment of Paul's words to the Philippians: ***"I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."*** (Phil. 3:14)

In 'pressing on toward that goal,' we must also have the right 'footwear.' Paul writes that ***"as shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace."*** (Eph. 6:15) As the athlete must have the right type of SHOE to handle various field conditions, from muddy soil to slippery artificial turf, In order to best negotiate the 'field' before us, we too must have the right shoes. Ones that will help us to **handle** various **conditions**, give us **stability, protection**... to get a 'grip' in order to make quick **adjustments**, alleviate **pressure** and avoid **pursuit**. We need to wear the 'shoes' of **PRAYER**.

David wrote that ***"My mind and my body may grow weak, but God is my strength; he is all I ever need."*** (Psalm 73:26) And further, that ***"As soon as I pray you answer me; you encourage me by giving me strength."*** (Psalm 138:3) From the muddy slop to the slippery slopes of our lives, **PRAYER** always gives us strength to get a 'grip.'

Paul goes on to say that ***“with all of these (aka, ‘in all circumstances’) take up the shield of faith,”*** in order to defend oneself against attacks by the disruptive forces of evil. Not too many ‘shields’ on a football field. But plenty of ways to be attacked. Not just from the outside, but from the **inside**. Attacks on the **heart** and **spirit**. Doubt of one’s ability, and strength to overcome an opponent. Doubts that must be overcome by **TRUST**. **Trust** in one’s **teammates**. **Trust** in one’s **coaches**. **Trust** in one’s **ability** to persevere against a strong foe, using the skills that have been taught. What we might also call **FAITH**... **faith** in what we have **learned**. **Faith** in one **another**. **Faith** in our **leaders**. Faith in our **God**.

A football uniform would not be complete with a **helmet**. That crucial item that protects players from serious injury...or death. Of course, these days there has been much concern about whether or not they are truly doing the job of protection well enough. No such concern with our **salvation**. Through Jesus Christ, we are assured of protection from death. We should never let the fear of death ‘get inside of our head.’ Jesus is our ‘chin strap’... our ‘face mask’... our ***“helmet of salvation.”***

And finally, Paul speaks of the importance of ***“the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.”*** (6:17 This would be the only part of the ancient equipment used as an **offensive weapon**, rather than **defensive**. The ready football analogy for this element of our Christian ‘arsenal’ would be our **‘playbook.’** That list of **various ways** we can thwart our **opponent’s efforts** to **defeat** us, particularly aimed at **attacking** the **enemy’s weaknesses**. For optimum success, the **whole team** must be **knowledgeable**, **closely familiar**, and **executing** the **game plan**. To be **‘on the same page’**...

But I would also add the **BALL** itself as representative of God’s Word. **Without which you cannot be successful**. Must **guard** it, **protect** it. In **moving forward**, **you can’t go anywhere without it**. In order to not be fooled/deceived, one must **‘keep your eye on the ball.’** The same goes for THIS ‘ball.’ **[Bible]** **Vitally important** for our ‘success.’ **Guard** it. **Protect** it. **Keep your eye** on it... to not be deceived by the enemy, Coach Saban... er, Satan. 😊

Just as a football player must utilize many different elements in his preparation for entering the football arena, so too must we be prepared for our entering the ‘arena’ of life. **Truth**. **Righteousness**. **Prayer**. **Trust**. **Salvation**. **God’s Word**. And despite all of our

preparation, we will yet experience failures... disappointments... defeat. The question is NOT 'will we get knocked down'... but rather, 'will we get back up?'

In the talk by the two football coaches I mentioned at the beginning, a question was raised about a player who had transferred in from another school with a 'checkered' past...one who had **fallen**. Many questions had been raised about whether or not it was wise to take a chance on a kid with such a risky background. Coach Richardson commented that it's always easier just to cut loose kids who have problems. But what is easier is not necessarily best. Especially for the young man. And that if he got rid of all the kids he had some problem with, "he wouldn't have a whole lot left."

I think that God can look at us the same way. We all have our problems. It would be easier to just 'cut us loose.' But if He did, he wouldn't have a whole lot left.' But what is **easy** to do is not necessarily the **right** thing to do. We too can want to take the easy way out. Like those early followers we can complain '***This teaching is difficult...Who can accept it?***' Causing Jesus to say to US, '***Do you also wish to go away?***' And may we be like Peter... who despite all the ways he himself would fail his Lord, would have the insight, the wisdom, the FAITH, to say, "***Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.***"

'To whom can WE go' that will have better words for us? NO ONE. Who else can *guarantee* us victory? NO ONE! NO ONE has a better 'game plan' for our lives than our 'coaching staff'... **Father, Son, and Holy Spirit**. Convinced of that... let us with joy listen to their command... "**Suit up!**"

#### CHARGE:

In speaking today about so many football terms, I thought I'd leave you with these words from the Psalms that seem to relate: "***I was pushed back and about to fall, but the LORD helped me. The LORD is my strength and my defense. He has become my salvation.***" (Ps. 118:13-14)

As much enjoyment as we get out of this coming sports season, let us never forget:

**"Football may be FUN... but our FAITH will never FAIL!"**