

Are you ready for school? Are you ready for fall? Are you ready for some football? College football kicked off this weekend. MSU vs. Utah State. Michigan played last night at Notre Dame. Coming off their first ever playoff season, Concordia opened on the road yesterday at Malone University in Canton, Ohio.

Can you imagine someone trying to play football without all of the protective equipment? It just wouldn't work. Players' equipment has improved dramatically over the years. The first leather helmet and padding in the pants was introduced in 1920. Leather padding was sewn into the jersey for shoulder pads. The single face bar wasn't introduced until the 1950s. Equipment has come a long way. The changes in equipment were necessary because players have gotten bigger, faster and stronger.

But what about for Christians? Most of us don't think of Christianity as a contact sport. But we certainly face some tough opposition. Paul describes them this way. **“For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.”** (vs. 6 NLT) A recent Pew Research Center poll states that 29% of Americans have no religious beliefs at all and think religion does more harm than good. Only 29% fall into the highly committed Christian category. That leaves 42% that have either mixed religious views, are somewhat religious or follow the New Age Spirituality. Too many people have been deceived by the anti-Christian, secular view of the world. Maybe that is why very few of us get into faith conversations with other people. Are we afraid of their reaction?

Is that how we should live knowing that Christ has won the victory over sin and death? I don't think so. Neither did the Apostle Paul. That is why he tells us, **“Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil.”** (vss. 10-11 NLT) God wants us to be equipped to live as His people. So He gives us everything that we need to be ready for the battles we face. Paul uses the analogy of the equipment a Roman soldier would have worn in his day to describe the armor God offers to so that we can stand firm in Him.

Paul begins by telling us to put on the “Belt of Truth.” So what is the truth? Many people today claim that truth is relative. So what is true for you may not be true for me. But that doesn't work in either football or in life. Just because a player thinks he caught a ball before going out of bounds, doesn't change the reality that he had stepped over the sideline before making the catch. Just because people claim there are no moral absolutes, that all religions are the same, or that all religions are false doesn't make those claims true. Jesus said, **“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.”** (John 14:6 NLT) The truth is we are all

sinful people. We have all broken God's command and deserve to be punished. The greater truth is that Jesus paid for our sins on the cross. We are forgiven and set free through faith in Jesus Christ. Just as a belt holds up a pair of pants, this truth holds us the Christian faith.

Next Paul tells us to put on the body armor of God's righteousness. There is a big difference between our righteousness and God's. We can't make ourselves right with God. Could you imagine going up against one of the Michigan linebackers only wearing a wind breaker for protection? It wouldn't work. The prophet Isaiah tells us, **"We are all infected and impure with sin. When we display our righteous deeds, they are nothing but filthy rags."** (Isaiah 64:6 NLT) Jesus makes us right with God. Jesus takes away the guilt of our sin. When we put on the righteousness of God, no one can accuse or condemn us because Jesus has already paid the price for our sins. When God the Father looks at us, He sees us through the cross of Christ.

The third piece of God's armor is the shoes of peace that God gives to us in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Facing a strong enemy can create doubt that leads to fear. But the Gospel of Jesus gives us Peace because we know that He has already won the victory. You don't know who is going to win a football game before it is played. But we do know that Jesus has already won the victory for us. **"I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."** (John 16:33 NLT)

Next Paul tells us to hold up the shield of faith. Faith protects us from the attacks that are launched against us. Faith is the gift of God that assures us that we are already forgiven; we are already children of God. Faith is the power that enables us to do the things that God wants us to. Faith is essential. Hebrews 11 tells us about all the things people in Old Testament times did by faith. It defines faith this way, **"Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see."** (Hebrews 11:1 NLT) We can't please God on our own. We need faith.

Then Paul tells us to put on the helmet of salvation. Salvation is the good news that God has found us, rescued us and restored us to a right relationship with Him. We have been saved from a destructive life of self-indulgence and self-delusion. This life is not all about me or about what I want. The world doesn't revolve around me. I can't fool myself into thinking that I can save myself. But I can trust in God's promise that nothing can separate me from His love.

The final piece of God's armor is the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. The Word of God is the Christians playbook. God tells us how to live, warns us of the dangers we face, and gives us the help we need to make the right decision in faith and in life. The Spirit is like our coach, who helps guide and direct us. He points us down the path of faith and is always with us to help us. When we know God's Word, we can use that to stand up against temptation, just as Jesus did. But if we don't know God's Word, we are likely to fall for anything that pretends to be from God or claims to be spiritual.

Paul concludes with one last piece of advice. He wrote, **“Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere.”** (vs.18 NLT) He is telling us to always stay in touch with the Lord. Never break off communication with Him. Jesus promises to always be with us. But are we always with Him? Prayer is direct line to God that we all need when the challenges we face are more than we can handle. We don't have to fight these battles on our own. Proverbs tells us, **“The horse is prepared for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the Lord.”** (Proverbs 21:31 NLT)

Living as God's people is not easy. Sometimes we wonder how we are going to make it. We need true and lasting hope to face the present and the future. That is going to be the focus of our attention during September and October as we focus in on “The Promise of Hope” we have from God.