

"A Steadfast Salvation Reached While Being Shaken"

Ephesians 6:13-17

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Ephesians 6:13-17 (PowerPoint)

Preface

For some time now we have been studying the six pieces of the armor of God that the Lord our God has prepared for us, and this morning, continuing from last week, I would like to think a little further about what it means to "put on the helmet of salvation."

We confirmed that "to put on the helmet of salvation" means "to put on the helmet which is the hope of salvation."

That is to say, it does not end with the experience of salvation that we once underwent in the past, the experience of "having been saved"; rather, there is a "salvation that is reached, a salvation that is attained."

We confirmed that, until we arrive at that "salvation that is reached, that salvation that is attained," there are many trials and temptations, much exhaustion and discouragement, yet to know surely that there is a completion of the salvation that is in Jesus Christ, and to hope while fixing our eyes on arriving there, and within that hope and conviction to keep on wearing the Lord Jesus - this is what it means to "put on the helmet of salvation."

Because living in this world as a Christian contains all too many elements of frustration, failure, and stumbling and falling, putting on the helmet of salvation is indispensable for us.

We also confirmed that to stop putting on the helmet of salvation is the same as having one's head pierced or one's head shot on the battlefield; it is the same as becoming frustrated, failing, falling, and arriving at a critical condition of spiritual unconsciousness in which one says, "That's enough. I've had enough. I quit" - and that what protects us from that is the "helmet of salvation."

Part One

This is the story of a certain Christian. When this person first believed in Jesus, there was nothing but joy; the person was always rejoicing and always laughing.

And that rejoicing appearance itself was, for this person, the proof of being a believer, the mark of being Christian.

When people around this person asked, "You always seem so happy - why can you laugh so joyfully?" the person would answer, "You should believe in Jesus too. There is peace there, and nothing but joy. It makes me wonder whether there could be anything to be depressed about or anything that could be thought of as a difficulty."

However, for better or for worse, this person met a certain pastor, and this person's faith changed from joy and happy feelings into agony and struggle.

But the person said, "That is precisely what I came to see as the fact, the legitimate thing that the Bible speaks of."

I too experienced something like what this person experienced.

From the time I met the same pastor whom this person met, and heard the same pastor's messages and began to hear his lectures, I became able, as a believer, to agonize in security, to struggle in security, and to despair in security.

Also, I became able - I became willing - to look straight at the muddy, murky places of the Bible, stripping away the fairy-tale-like ornamental decoration of my own expectations and ideals, the "Christianity, Christian faith, and the Bible ought to be like this" that I had arbitrarily constructed within myself.

And I became able - I became willing - to face the muddy, murky places within myself in security and with honesty.

From that time on, I feel as though I became able to read the Bible in the true sense.

I think I became able to take as my own concern, to feel, and to seek to see, without averting my eyes from and without hiding the pitch-black, raw human odor depicted in the Bible, and without hiding myself.

And that pastor who created such an occasion for me was the professor of homiletics and pastoral theology at the seminary where I also studied and where Rev. Akemi Kanda is now studying.

What this professor used to say to us seminary students until his mouth turned sour was: "Please, I beg you, do not preach sermons like fairy tales told to children! Does the Bible really say that? Does the Bible really say only such things as that everything goes well no matter what, that one can always be rejoicing, that one can always have a smile? Is it not rather saying the opposite? Does it not say that the life of faith is a succession of far more struggles and agonies than it is a succession of happiness and joy? Why do you not speak of that? Because you do not speak of it, no matter how much time passes you can only preach childish sermons, and only childish hearers are raised up." He spoke sharply with a loving venom that came from his seriousness.

Indeed, the Bible does speak to us.

It speaks of the fact that our life of faith is a succession of struggles, agonies, and trials.

We have confirmed up until last week that this arises because the rulers of this dark world - the devil and the evil spirits - try by any means to hinder the salvation we are trying to reach.

Then why does God leave such struggles, agonies, and trials alone?

The Bible teaches us that it is "because it is precisely through passing through that process that the things necessary for us to arrive at the completion of salvation are built up."

It is just as Jesus preached, "The one who endures to the end will be saved" (Matthew 24:13); and as the psalmist confessed, "It was good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn Your statutes" (Psalm 119:71); and as the apostle Paul said, "We even rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces proven character,

and proven character produces hope" (Romans 5:3-4).

Part Two

From my study in the parsonage, the rice plants spreading across the whole paddy field and the many kinds of trees, beginning with the cherry trees planted along the bank of the Sakura River, come well into my sight every day; and there is something that both the rice plants and the trees do in the same way almost every day.

It is to sway.

It is the figure of being made to sway.

Blown by the wind, they sway.

At times of typhoons they sway so much that one thinks they might break, and sometimes they do break.

But I discover that it is through that swaying, that being made to sway, that both the rice plants and the trees are growing.

I am made to notice that it is by swaying, by being made to sway, that both the rice plants and the trees are spreading their roots.

Since rice is an annual plant, its growth ends within one year; but we know that the lifespan of a tree is so long that we human beings cannot really comprehend it.

Every day, every week, every year, over the course of many years, the tree swaying and being shaken sends its roots down deep.

And at last it grows into a tree that will not fall no matter how much it is shaken.

It is not the tree that has never swayed at all that is a sturdy and strong tree; rather, the tree that has sent its roots down deep while swaying and being shaken becomes a sturdy and strong tree.

As I have been meditating on "putting on the helmet which is the hope of salvation," I was made to think that our life, the life of us believers, is the same.

It seems to me that we, while swaying and while being shaken, send our roots down more deeply into the Lord Jesus, into God the Father, into the Holy Spirit.

From my study I see, many times a day, airplanes trying to land at Narita Airport; and the airplane flies toward its destination while being shaken in the sky.

Ships too voyage across the great ocean while being rocked by the waves.

When we speak of swaying, of being shaken, it may seem as though it were a failure, but to sway and to be shaken is not a failure.

Nor does it mean that we have lost sight of the way.

Even if we sway, even if we are shaken, it is all right so long as we do not lose sight of the direction in which we ought to go.

Even if we sway, even if we are shaken, if we hold firmly to Jesus - if, as in

Romans chapter 13 which we looked at last week, we keep on wearing the Lord Jesus Christ and keep on putting on the armor of light - we will not lose sight of the road we ought to walk.

Part Three

And when I consider it further, it seems to me that swaying has two faces.

When swaying works negatively, we fall into anxiety, we feel fear, and we become discouraged.

Even our faith is shaken and made unsteady.

But when swaying works positively, it seems to me that it awakens us.

It works so as to bring down our arrogance and pride, and it seems to me that we learn the fact that we cannot live without God the Father, Jesus the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

When we let swaying work positively, we come to choose without hesitation to become humble ourselves before others do, and we lower ourselves before the presence of God and go out to the place of prayer.

When a strong wind blows, a merely rigid tree - which is different from a sturdy one - breaks; but a tree that knows how to sway does not break.

It seems to me that our life too, and our faith too, are just so.

A person who knows swaying acknowledges reality rather than making the environment or the circumstances into an excuse.

And within that reality, the person sends roots down into the Lord God, into the Lord Jesus.

More than half of the 150 Psalms, which are placed right in the very middle of the Bible, were written by the person called David; and when we look at David's psalms, we can see that David was a person who spent many days swaying and being shaken in the course of his life.

There was a time when, though a king of a nation, he was pursued as a traitor and lived days in which his life was unjustly sought over a long period.

There was also a time when his son Absalom rose in rebellion, and he was dragged down from the throne and driven out into the wilderness.

There was also a time when he committed the lowest of sins as a human being, and within that deep sense of guilt he sank so low that it seemed he might never be able to stand up again.

There were also times when, in loneliness and desolation, he passed the night again and again.

However, the point at which I think this David is amazing is not that he did not sway or was not shaken, but that when he swayed, when he was shaken, he prayed to God until he collapsed in prayer.

He prays.

David prayed like this.

Psalm 61:2 (PowerPoint)

"When my heart grows faint" - that is, at the very lowest point, at the worst time, when there is no joy at all, when no hope at all is felt, when there is no prospect at all - David called upon God.

He offered up a prayer that was very much a case of "turning to God in time of trouble," and that is entirely fine.

It is the prayer of a person swaying and being shaken.

It is the prayer prayed when his heart had grown faint.

"To the rock that is higher than I" - that is, it is the prayer, "Please lead me to the presence of God," a prayer that sends roots down into God and spreads roots into God.

And David also confesses this.

Psalm 62:1 (PowerPoint)

In a situation of violent swaying and shaking, the way in which the soul can be silent and settled is to look up to God alone and to wait upon God alone.

The way in which, though the outside is swaying, the inner person can be quiet and calm in God, is to wait upon God alone, to spread roots into God, to send roots down into God.

And he sings thus.

Psalm 62:2 (PowerPoint)

Even though the outer person may be swaying violently, the inner person can confess, "I shall not be shaken."

And there is an act of "putting on the helmet of salvation" that the inner person can do even when the heart has grown faint.

Psalm 62:5 (PowerPoint)

While striking his breast, while admonishing his own soul, he speaks to his own soul about what the inner person can do.

"My soul, be silent and wait upon God alone. For my hope comes from God."

I think that this is the figure of one who, though swaying, is not shaken - the figure of letting swaying work positively.

I think it is the figure of a praying believer who keeps on putting on the helmet which is the hope of salvation.

Part Four

When I meet an elderly Christians who are admirable, I find that I feel the same thing without exception.

It is quietness.

Although in their life they must have swayed and been shaken any number of times, I feel a firm and unwavering quietness.

It is not that there was no pain; there is no way there was none.

They may be being shaken even now.

Nor is it that there are no wounds.

Rather, I think they are people who have experienced a great many winds and waves.

And yet, from their appearance I sometimes feel that within those people there is, without exception, a deep quietness.

That quietness is not resignation.

For their eyes are shining.

Nor is it enlightenment.

It is different from the shine in the eyes of one who boasts of his own experience or career.

It is faith.

It is trust in God.

To look up to the Lord God, who is far greater than the swaying that is present now and the problem that is present now - that is the quietness at the center of that person.

And it is a quietness that knows the power of prayer.

It is a quietness of one who knows the grace of having prayer in the time of swaying make him lower the hand with which he tries to manage things by his own strength, and of being grasped by the hand of God.

It is a quietness of one who knows that the most dangerous thing when we sway, when we are shaken, is not the swaying and the being shaken, but forgetting prayer.

When we lose prayer, swaying becomes terror for us.

But if we pray, swaying becomes a passage that brings us still nearer to the throne of God's grace.

Just as Jesus stilled the raging sea, the Lord God sometimes answers the prayers we offer up in the time of swaying by the method of stilling the waves and the wind; but on the other hand, there are times when, ahead of the waves and wind around us, He stills our souls first.

For myself, I think the latter is far more frequent - but how is it for you?

Even if the situation does not change immediately, God gives peace within us.

Conclusion

God never scolds us when we sway.

Rather, He upholds us.

Psalm 55:22 (PowerPoint)

God will never cast away us who sway and are shaken.

Even when we are swaying, even when we are being shaken, He upholds us.

He is the One who upholds us.

Therefore, there is no need to be downhearted in the days of swaying.

The days of swaying, the days of being shaken, are days of sending down roots.

They are days of praying.

The days of swaying are days of meeting God more deeply.

To sway and to be shaken is not the failure or the end of things.

To sway and to be shaken is the gate that leads into a still deeper faith.

And I think that to keep sending roots down into God in the midst of days of swaying and being shaken is to keep putting on the helmet which is the hope of salvation, and is the way that attains salvation and leads to the salvation that is reached.

We, while swaying, reach a steadfast salvation.

Along that road, I desire that we may walk without ever forgetting that the Lord Jesus, God the Father, and God the Holy Spirit are surely with us.

Let us pray.

Benediction: Psalm 62:1