

# Breastplate of Righteousness

Week 4 (Stand in Righteousness) – Ephesians 6:14

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We're continuing in our Armor of God series through Ephesians 6. Today we focus on the breastplate of righteousness. As a reminder, the breastplate was essential armor for the Roman soldier-it protected the vital organs, especially the heart, from the enemy's arrows and blows. Spiritually, it guards our hearts against the primary tactic of our adversary: accusation, condemnation, and shame.

In previous weeks we saw the necessity of the belt of truth to hold everything together and allow us to stand firm. Now we see how the breastplate enables us to remain standing when the accuser attacks. Satan is called "the accuser of our brothers" (Revelation 12:10). One of his chief strategies is to hurl accusations-true and twisted-against God's people to produce guilt, doubt, and distance from the Father. When we suffer from "gospel amnesia," forgetting who we are because of what Christ has done, those accusations land with terrible force.

The good news is that God has provided the breastplate of righteousness. A powerful vision in Zechariah 3 shows us exactly how this armor works in the life of the believer. There we see a righteousness that is **required**, a righteousness that can be **received**, and a righteousness that must be **reflected**. Let's walk through it together.

## 1. Righteousness Required – Do you stand before God in filthy garments?

Our problem is real, deadly, and universal apart from Christ. We stand before a holy God in filthy rags, just like Joshua the high priest in Zechariah's vision. Satan stands at our right hand ready to accuse. Without a perfect righteousness that is not our own, we cannot stand.

- **Our sin problem runs deep.** Adam served as our federal (covenant) head. When he sinned, sin and death passed to all his descendants (Romans 5:12-19). We have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Scripture teaches that if we break even one commandment, we are guilty of breaking all of them (James 2:10). World religions and worldly philosophies lie to us here-they either diminish God's holiness or inflate our own goodness, telling us our good deeds can eventually outweigh our bad. But Isaiah 64:6 is clear: even our righteous acts are like filthy rags before a holy God. We cannot earn the righteousness required to stand before Him.
- **The enemy exploits our guilt.** Satan, the accuser, loves to remind us of our sin, our failures, our inconsistencies, and our past. He wants us to live under condemnation and shame rather than in the freedom and joy of the gospel. Many sincere believers feel the daily weight of accusation and quietly wonder, "Am I truly saved? Does God still accept me?" These accusations are designed to drive us away from God, not toward Him.
- **Without the breastplate, the accusations land.** When we try to stand in our own righteousness or our own performance, we have no defense. The enemy will always find something true to accuse us of. Our only hope is a righteousness that covers us completely-front and back-so that every accusation bounces off the finished work of Christ.

***Application:** The first step in wearing the breastplate is acknowledging your desperate need. You cannot stand before God on your own merit. Confess that reality honestly. The breastplate is not something you earn; it is something you receive because you know you have none of your own.*

## 2. Righteousness Received – Christ clothes the guilty with His perfect righteousness.

This is the glorious center of the gospel and the heart of Zechariah 3 and Ephesians 6:14. Joshua stands in filthy garments with Satan accusing him relentlessly. But the Angel of the Lord-the pre-incarnate Christ-steps in with

divine authority and changes everything.

- **Christ rebukes the accuser on our behalf.** "The Lord said to Satan, 'The Lord rebuke you, O Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you!'" (Zechariah 3:2). Jesus does not argue with the accuser's facts-He simply rebukes him with the authority of the covenant God. For everyone who is in Christ, every accusation is answered by the cross. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). The enemy may accuse, but he cannot condemn those who are clothed in Christ. He is a defeated foe whose final end is the lake of fire.
- **Christ removes the filthy garments and clothes us with pure vestments.** "Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments" (Zechariah 3:4). This is the doctrine of imputation. Second Corinthians 5:21 declares: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Christ's perfect life (active obedience) and sacrificial death (passive obedience) are credited to us the moment we trust in Him by faith alone. This is our **positional righteousness**-our permanent standing before the Father. When God the Father looks at you, He sees the very righteousness of His Son.
- **The breastplate is Christ's righteousness received by faith.** It protects the heart because our acceptance with God is not based on our daily performance but on Christ's finished work. When the accuser whispers (or shouts), "Look at what you did... look at how you're living," the believer who is wearing the breastplate replies by faith: "Look at what Christ has done for me. The Lord rebuke you." This is how we daily "put on" the breastplate-not by trying harder, but by resting in what has already been given.

***Application:** When accusations come-whether from the enemy, your own conscience, or other people-do not argue with the accuser or immediately try to fix everything by your own effort. Run first to the gospel. Stand firmly in the imputed righteousness of Christ. Point every accusation to the cross and the empty tomb. This daily act of faith is what it means to wear the breastplate.*

### 3. Righteousness Reflected – Those clothed in Christ are charged to walk in His ways.

God always works in this order: He chooses a people for Himself, He makes them righteous by imputing Christ's righteousness to them, and then He charges them to live righteously. Getting this order backwards turns the gospel into just another form of works-righteousness. But when we understand grace, the charge to live holy lives becomes our joy and our mission.

- **There is a dangerous and accusing gap.** You have received perfect positional righteousness in Christ. But your practical daily life (your "practical righteousness") often does not yet match that identity. In the gap-unconfessed sin, nursing bitterness, hidden compromise, refusal to forgive, patterns of addiction or impurity-the enemy finds room to shoot fiery darts and renew his accusations: "You're not really righteous. You're a hypocrite. Look at the gap between what you claim and how you live." He wants to widen that gap until you live defeated or doubt your salvation altogether. You give the enemy an inch in that gap, and he will take miles.
- **We are charged to close the gap by the Spirit's power.** After clothing Joshua, the angel "solemnly assured" (charged) him: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, If you will walk in my ways and keep my charge, then you shall rule my house..." (Zechariah 3:7). This charge comes *after* the clothing, not before. As new creations in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17), we are called to put off the old self and put on the new (Ephesians 4:22-24). We pursue holiness and practical righteousness-not to earn our standing with God, but because we already stand in Christ. This is the outworking of imparted righteousness in sanctification. We do this by the Spirit, not by self-effort or bootstrapping.
- **Practical righteousness looks like refusing compromise and living on mission.** We refuse to give the enemy handles through unaddressed sin, hypocrisy, or double living. We confess quickly and walk in the light (1 John 1:7). We forgive as we have been forgiven. We pursue purity in our thoughts, words, relationships, and secret lives. And we live sent: "In that day, declares the Lord of hosts, every one of you will invite his neighbor

to come under his vine and under his fig tree" (Zechariah 3:10). The vine and fig tree in the Old Testament picture security, blessing, and peace under God's reign. Those who have had their filthy rags removed are now sent to invite others still standing in shame and accusation to come and have their clothes changed by Jesus too.

**Application:** *Maturing Christians develop a holy hatred for the gap between their position in Christ and their daily practice. They do not pretend or hide when they stumble. They bring gaps into the light before God and before trusted brothers and sisters who will restore them gently. They depend on Christ not only for initial salvation but for daily power to walk worthy of their calling. Before you resolve to "try harder," pray honestly: "Lord Jesus, the gaps in my life are too big for me to close. Will You close them by Your Spirit? Cause me to hate my sin more and to pursue Your righteousness as a way of life. I cannot do this without You-just as I could not save myself."*

## Close: Where are the gaps?

Where are the gaps in your life right now? Where is the enemy successfully landing accusations because your practical walk is out of step with your position in Christ? Those gaps are precisely where the breastplate needs to be pulled tight. The Tony Evans illustration captures it well: if you give the devil even one acre of your life, he will trample over the rest to get to it. We must not give him an inch.

Bring every gap-every area of compromise, every unconfessed sin, every place where accusation finds a foothold-straight to Jesus this very moment. He who rebuked Satan for Joshua the high priest rebukes the accuser for you. He who commanded the filthy garments to be removed and clothed Joshua with pure vestments has done the same for you. And He who charged Joshua to walk in His ways now gives you His own Spirit to empower you to reflect that same righteousness in your everyday life.

Run to Jesus. Stand in His righteousness. Reflect His righteousness by the power of His Spirit. And go invite others who are still standing in filthy rags and under accusation to come and have their clothes changed by the same merciful Savior. This has been God's pattern for His people from the very beginning: chosen by grace, made righteous by the imputation of Christ's perfect obedience, and now sent into the world as image-bearers who display His glory and invite others into the blessing of the vine and fig tree.

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## Title: Breastplate of Righteousness – Stand in Righteousness

### Points:

- 1. Righteousness Required** – We stand before a holy God in filthy garments. Our sin (federal headship of Adam + personal transgression) leaves us justly condemned. The enemy exploits this with accusation. Without Christ's righteousness, we cannot stand.
- 2. Righteousness Received** - In Zechariah 3, Christ (the Angel of the Lord) rebukes the accuser and clothes the guilty with pure vestments. This is imputation: Christ's perfect righteousness is credited to us by faith alone (2 Cor. 5:21). This is our positional righteousness and the breastplate that deflects every accusation. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."
- 3. Righteousness Reflected** – Those who have received positional righteousness are charged to live it out (practical righteousness). We close the gap between who we are in Christ and how we live by the Spirit's power, refusing compromise that gives the enemy handles, and living on mission to invite others to have their clothes changed too.

## For Further Study: Reformed Resources on the Breastplate of Righteousness & Imputed Righteousness

These resources come from historic and contemporary Reformed sources and are excellent for deeper personal or small-group study:

- **William Gurnall** - *The Christian in Complete Armour* (Banner of Truth, full or abridged editions). The classic Puritan exposition of Ephesians 6. Gurnall's lengthy treatment of the breastplate masterfully connects imputed righteousness (justification) with practical holiness (sanctification) as the Christian's defense against the accuser.
- **D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones** - Sermon on Ephesians 6:14, "The Breastplate of Righteousness" (MLJ Trust, available free at mljtrust.org). Outstanding Reformed expository preaching that clearly distinguishes imputed and imparted righteousness and shows how the breastplate protects the believer's heart and assurance.
- **John Piper** - "Guard Your Heart from Evil: Wearing the Breastplate of Righteousness" (DesiringGod.org, April 2024) and the "Look at the Book" video series on Ephesians 6:14-17 (especially parts on the breastplate). Piper connects the armor to Isaiah 59 (God's own warrior attire) and emphasizes both the gift of righteousness and the call to pursue it.
- **Alistair Begg** - "The Breastplate of Righteousness" (Truth For Life, truthforlife.org). Clear, pastoral exposition stressing that the righteousness which guards our hearts is imputed by grace through faith, not earned by performance.
- **Reformed Free Publishing Association (RFPA)** - "To Teach Them War (18): God's armor for us: the breastplate" in *The Standard Bearer* (rfpa.org or sb.rfpa.org). Helpful article emphasizing that the breastplate is the imputed righteousness of Christ that changes our status before God.
- **Commentaries (Reformed-leaning)**: Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Baker Academic); Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Pillar New Testament Commentary). Both provide careful, theologically rich exegesis of the armor passage.
- **On the Doctrine of Imputation**: John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ* (Crossway); James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (Banner of Truth reprint of the 1867 classic). Essential reading for understanding the biblical and Reformed doctrine that undergirds the breastplate.

Additional Ligonier Ministries resources on justification, imputation, and spiritual warfare are available at [ligonier.org](http://ligonier.org) (search "breastplate" or "Ephesians 6"). These are consistently excellent for Reformed teaching on these themes.