

PUTTING ON THE ARMOR OF GOD Ephesians 6: 10-20

Today, in a world with sinister powers evident, we name the one who has been the personification of evil over the ages—the devil, as Paul names that power—or as a “world with devils filled” (plural) as Martin Luther put it. Paul saw the power of the devil being carried out by an egotistical, self-serving, power-hungry mad man—Rome’s Emperor Nero. Specifically, when Paul was in Ephesus, biblical commentators have called him the devil incarnate. He was cruel and barbaric, having his own mother poisoned and holding countless executions of those he saw as a threat. Ephesus was part of his Roman Empire when Paul visited there, recorded in Acts 19. Paul found a city filled with magical spells that were supposed to promote healing, people claimed to be possessed by demons, and a cult of worship to a false goddess, as Ephesians bowed down and cried out to that goddess: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” The devil, or devils, were rampant in the Roman Empire. It was in that time of spiritual warfare that Paul wrote his masterfully descriptive words about putting on the whole armor of God. Where is the devil present today? Some say in the virus; some say in Washington D.C. or in the halls of state governments. Some say the devil was in those who carried out the 9/11 attacks. Some say the devil is alive and well in Russia; others say in terrorist groups—foreign or domestic; others say the devil is in the souls of depraved men who have murdered their partner with no remorse, or in the soul of women who ended the life of their own child. There is egregious evil in the world, not just now, but in Paul’s day too. We have our ways of teaching Christians to stand up against such evil. Paul used the analogy of the armor Roman guards wore, and he claimed it for Christ. “Gospel Armor.” The term stuck. In our day, we may have other ways to describe the spiritual readiness people need. Even Hollywood has dabbled in the fight of good over evil.

Since 1977, When George Lucas released his first “Star Wars” film, people across the globe became familiar with “The Force.” Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi told his protégé, Luke Skywalker to “Use the Force,” but tying down what George Lucas meant by the Force is challenging. It was not a force field of impenetrable strength, nor did it allow a character to fly. In our world, people would love to have power, or armor, to face experiences of terror and days of anxiety. Through the ages, people have sought a spiritual power connection, not just for offense, but also for defense. Years ago, the legendary St. Patrick is said to have put words together that became a legendary prayer. There is a long version of his prayer to God, but the shorter and more familiar version is this:

I bind myself to Thee today, in the strong name of the Trinity, by invocation of the same, the Three in One and One in Three....Christ be with me; Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me. Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

Notice how he envisioned Christ completely with him, surrounding him, and with the power of God present. Again through the ages, Christians have called on the power of God to protect them in their times of need. And there are times, like the description that Paul used in his letter to the Ephesians, when we are encouraged to put on the “armor” of God. Paul was brilliant in taking what was used against others by the emperor and claiming that armor in defense of Christian righteousness. The Romans warriors in his day all dressed in armor for protection. You have seen pictures or props depicting the armor. In Paul’s day, the Roman army could be brutal in its attempts to keep the *Pax Romana*, which was “the Peace of Rome;” forced peace! When Paul was transported to prison, he was chained to a Roman guard. Paul was in prison when he wrote the letter to the Ephesians, and his description in chapter 6 referred to the very armor his guard wore! Armor was

created mostly for defensive stances rather than offensive ones; it was made to protect and defend. As Paul describes it, our task is to put on the *spiritual* armor or the “gospel armor” of Christ as we seek to fight against the evils that permeate our world. Paul decided Christians needed tools to carry out the spiritual warfare they faced. We still need those tools. Paul used armor as a metaphor for the Christian spiritual protection. Paul is not a literalist, but he *is* a wordsmith. Paul calls himself a prisoner (3:1) and an “ambassador in chains.” As he does on other occasions, he turns a weakness (being a prisoner) into a fulfillment of God’s purpose. He does not ask for Christians to physically fight other people “our struggle is not against enemies made of blood and flesh, but rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this present darkness; against spiritual forces of evil.” (6:12) The armor, therefore, is to withstand the wiles of the devil. (6:11). Soldiers of an empire fight against flesh and blood. What kind of armor does a *spiritual soldier* need? Paul says we will need the *whole* armor of God, never forgetting to don *every single* piece. Actual knights have little protection if they fail to put on all their pieces. Football players cannot provide strong defense without pads protecting muscles and bones. Like a knight, or an athlete, or a first responder, we cannot forget our equipment before we go into the world. Paul first said: “Fasten the belt of truth around your waist.” Lawrence W. Farris has written this: “Truth is the most basic virtue, but in a world of spin, purposeful deception, and deceit, it becomes even more precious and crucial. The dark powers are led, at least metaphorically, by the ‘father of lies’ (John 8: 44), and truth is spoken in the name of the One who is ‘the way, the truth, and the life.’ The temptation is to take up the methods of the enemy, to let noble ends justify ignoble means, to fight fire with fire. [But Christ had a different message.] The fire of evil is fought not with fire, but with the waters of baptism; the lies of the Evil One are resisted with God’s truth.” So *first, we need to put on the belt of truth.* Truth in an age of spin, lies, and deception must win the day. *Second, we need the breastplate*

of righteousness to protect the heart of the believer. If our heart is taken over by a corrupter—whether an enticing woman, a charming but corrupt man, or a wolf in sheep’s clothing, we have nothing left with which to balance our judgments. Our decisions will need rational, linear, arguments *guided by* hearts and grace. Each day we need to put on righteousness, that is, the ability to make right decisions. So first: the belt of truth. We cannot make headway in the world if we cannot distinguish truth from lies. Second, the breastplate of righteousness: use your heart and your brain as the deciding factor for actions. *Third put on your spiritual shoes each day.* Spiritual shoes give you the protection to not only stand longer, but also walk farther and to run faster for Christ. We have a gospel to share and the gospel goes nowhere fast without messengers! We are the messengers of the good news of salvation—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. “Paul misquotes Isaiah 52:10 when he declared: “How beautiful are the feet of those that preach the gospel of peace.” Beautiful feet? No! Beautiful sounds of feet running to bring the gospel, messengers of the gospel, running to tell the news! Here’s how Isaiah originally said it in chapter 52:verse 7: “How beautiful *upon the mountains* are the feet of those who bring good news.” It is the sound of running feet! If such good news does not get shared, people have no place to turn except to the bad or untruthful news around them. *Fourth, arm yourself with the shield of faith.* In ages past, actual shields provided considerable protection against enemies! Personal faith, joined with the faith of thousands around us, reminds us that there is strength in numbers. A shield of faith, when held arm in arm with other Christians, can keep your faith from buckling. *Fifth, Paul called for a helmet of salvation, to protect what we have learned.* Without our minds to process what is around us and help us avoid the vortex of conspiracy theories, people under stress may fall prey to the evil one. When they do, they start imitating people filled with darkness instead of *imitating Christ.* A hymn like “Take Thou our Minds, dear Lord,” is not a plea for God to *take* our minds away; it is a plea to

remold our minds, guide our feet, and form our words. Again, the images are often metaphorical and not literal. Christ needs us to *not* relinquish our mind to the devil, or devils. Instead, have the mind of Christ.

Finally, at long last we are given but one offensive weapon: the sword. Sword is such an oddly spelled word for its pronunciation, isn't it? SWORD! But this odd spelling includes the letters w-o-r-d. *The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God.* This is our weapon (the Bible) and, rightly interpreted, God's *Word* is our weapon, interpreted by Christian minds and guided by God's Holy Spirit. That Word judges *and instructs* both the believing community and those it seeks to rescue from evil. So this is what we need to put on each and every day: *The belt of truth; the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of God's Word.*

Here is what we will sing in a few minutes today: "Stand up, stand up for Jesus, stand in his strength alone; the arm of flesh will fail you, ye dare not trust your own. Put on the gospel armor, each piece put on with prayer. Where duty calls, or danger, be never wanting there."

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