

“UNDRESSING (DECONSTRUCTING) THE ROMAN SOLDIER”

Ephesians 6: 10-20

In Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* (4th-5th Century BCE) one of the keys to success and triumph includes knowing not only the strengths and weaknesses of one's enemy-- but also the strengths and weaknesses of oneself. Minus the destructive vice of violence, such knowledge (of oneself and of one’s enemies) can be helpful.

There is often the sense that we are up against some obstacle, rival or struggle. In fact, life is full of struggle-- be it, conflict against another or struggles against less defined forces.

One way to view Ephesians 6: 10-20 is how do we *withstand, resist, and overcome* the struggles in life that threaten our spiritual well being; how do we guard ourselves against nefarious forces of harm, greed, and selfishness?

To this end, Ephesians 6 offers a metaphor of taking up armor against that which threatens to harm and turn one away from love and good. I can imagine the apostle Paul (or someone well versed in Pauline theology) imprisoned in Roman prisons observing the armor and weaponry of the Roman soldiers and prison guards that were keeping watch over prisoners; perhaps, the thought crossed Paul’s mind, “how can one resist and fight back against such military might?”

At the time, it was for sure that the Roman empire could not be out countered with military might or weaponry; if one were to oppose the Roman empire than they had to be quite imaginative. To take up arms against the Roman empire was certain death. Empire has to be resisted by more creative means and imagination. For the first century Christians, resistance to the oppressive powers that he was of a spiritual force and not a physical power-- their victory and triumph was a matter of heart, soul and mind and not by physical retaliation or militant violence-- the non-violent peace preacher and maker Jesus was their role model.

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹ Put on the whole **armour** of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the **devil** [adversary].

The armour of God is in many ways a 180-degree reversal of the armour and force used by oppressors of others-- especially that of empires. What is empire? Empires are systems of human oppression, and what is tricky about empire systems is that it often co-opts the language and symbols of liberty and prosperity. There was the Egyptian empire that enslaved the Hebrews; there were the Assyrian and Babylonian empires that spread across the known world of their times; there was the Roman empire, where one in five humans by the end of the second century C.E. were subject to or oppressed by. And there are the current empires of the world that mobilize with military and missiles. God’s ways are not empire ways; and the spiritual armour of God is counter to the weapons and oppression of physical might.

¹² For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the **heavenly places**.

The term “heavenly places” is unique to the letter of Ephesians. It seems to mean a present spiritual reality hidden within the physical reality we live among. It’s tantamount to the “thin places” described in Celtic spirituality where the beauty and wisdom of the unseen spiritual world leaks through to this physical reality. It’s the tangent point of where heaven and earth meet in the here and now.

While we live in the physical here and now, there are hints and whispers of the heavenly places that physical oppression and struggle cannot harm.

¹³ Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the **belt of truth** around your waist, and put on the **breastplate of righteousness**.

In the Roman soldier's armor, the belt was a key piece that held everything together... It's hard to fight well when your britches are sagging!

But the key emphasis is on truth (*aletheia*). I was thinking about truth this past week and it dawned on me that truth is that which I cannot change. Truth is not a polemical or political virtue; truth is simply a vision of reality-- but for the first century Christians there was a spiritual reality that is more important than the physical reality of empire.

I might aspire to tell the truth or preach the truth to others, but hearing and embracing the truth for myself is sometimes a tricky endeavor-- our physical senses often betray us. Our estimation of truth is often finite and limited. Embracing truth requires humility.

¹⁵ As **shoes** for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel **of peace**. ¹⁶ With all of these, take the **shield of faith**, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

The Roman soldier's footwear included nails on the sole serving like spiked cleats so as to maintain footing in conflict. The author of Ephesians links firm spiritual footing with the task of peace (*eirene*) making. In Christianity, we are not looking for advantages over one another, rather, we are seeking to live at peace and in harmony with one another;

We are not trying to defeat others,
We are trying to love one another.

We are not trying to beat others in the game of life,
We are trying to at all times encourage others.

The breastplate of righteousness is not self-righteousness; it's a sense of integrity of just and fair living in relationship with others. Righteousness as an attitude is moral congruence in one's inner being. Righteousness is consistency of moral character-- which politically and otherwise, often seems to be in short supply.

The shield of faith-- "The term 'believe' is from the Greek verb *pisteuō* or noun *pistis*, which is translated into English as 'believe,' 'faith,' or 'trust.'" (Bob Utley). Faith is not only a shield for our well-being, like the Roman soldiers shielding one another, the faith of Christians can be used (deployed) to shield one another-- guard one another's dignity.

¹⁷ Take the **helmet of salvation**, and **the sword of the Spirit**, which is the word of God.

Salvation has to do with wholeness and wellbeing; it's also the idea of liberation from struggle, and cure for lamentation. Salvation is our healthy, loving and selfless connection to the living God and to one another.

The sword of the Spirit (word of God) is the one offensive weapon listed in the armor metaphor. It's not merely scripture, it's also the proclaimed will of God for peace and love to reign supreme here and now.

When we speak words of love, we wield the sword of the spirit;

When we cry out for justice and mercy, we unsheathe the sword of the spirit;

When we speak up for the underdog, the marginalized, we are rightly using the sword of the Spirit.

The sword of the spirit is the conviction of your heart to do right, good and fairness by others.

And finally, pray:

18 **Pray** in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.¹⁹ Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel,²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Prayer is the awareness that we and all others are deeply loved by God; prayer is also the invitation to the ways of love and mercy to be fully present here and now. Amen.