

Standing, with the armour of God
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Read: Ephesians 6: 10-20

*Lord our God you have given your word to be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Help us to receive your truth in faith and love, that we may follow your will and live for your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.***

This is a pretty memorable passage from Ephesians, with the idea of the armour of God being great for the imagination, and pretty good for inspiring cardboard armour building by kids. It raises some questions about Spiritual Powers that we might initially have varied feelings about, but, that said, this text has particular value for us today while we are in some senses 'under siege' in our homes, and while the news in recent times has been full of the disastrous Western withdrawal from Afghanistan; the frightening reality of climate change being documented by the IPCC and witnessed in many parts of the world; and, of course, the difficulties of controlling COVID.

It's important to first be aware of what we're battling against. We all feel the impact of what's in the news. I trust that you're all sensible about where you get your news, and how much news you take in. But when the writer of this passage talks about a Spiritual Battle, we know something about it, because in the face of so many facts and events we still, as a society and as individuals, have two ways of falling.

Some take the path of wilful blindness. This is the path that says "she'll be right, mate", we don't need to take action – the climate, or covid, aren't really so bad; it'll all be alright so we can just do what we've always done, and it'll be fine. That's one way of falling.

The other way of falling is the path of fatalism: thinking that we're on a path to disaster, if not already there, and nothing we can do will help at all.

Let me be clear: it is not at all unreasonable to feel depressed or anxious about the state of the world. It is extremely distressing, especially when so many people work hard for real causes only to have them undermined by other people's or government's lack of action or foolish action. But for us, the question is: will we simply fall to despair or close our eyes to what is happening? That is what we are battling. And this text is not about rallying people for another fruitless fight: the key word that it ultimately holds for us is that we *stand*.

We stand, holding our integrity, standing only in God's strength when our own strength is spent. This text tells us a bit about where God's strength comes.

So let's look at the elements of the Ephesians 6 armour. There are six elements: four that we "take up" or "put on", and two that we receive...

The first one is a really important one, but which takes a certain amount of discernment. It's the belt of truth. Not the belt of conspiracy theories! How do you discern what is true? Well, in these COVID days, let's be clear that governments and health systems are working hard, and the risks are very large. If you think that lockdowns are just a method for the government to control our lives, you have to ask: to what end? No-one locks down an economy without a very good reason. This doesn't mean that governments shouldn't be accountable: quite the contrary, we need anti-corruption commissions because when there is money involved, corruption happens; and decisions must always be held up to scrutiny. But on covid, at this point, it's the conspiracy theories that really can't be trusted. Don't go out on those limbs.

The second element of armour is the breastplate of righteousness. Righteousness is all about doing the right thing by God and by others. Funnily enough, doing the right thing by others at the moment includes getting vaccinated if you can. Even if you don't want to get vaccinated for yourself, it has an impact for transmission to other people, so it's one way of doing a right thing for others if you're able to – it's a choice I'd encourage you to make. A focus on doing the right thing by others can also help us to get 'out of ourselves', when we're feeling under siege. Sending someone a gift, or making a call, or knitting a climate scarf, or writing to a member of parliament, or whatever other actions can be done safely are good for us as well as good for others. Act for justice, live with compassion- wear the breastplate of righteousness.

The next element is shoes for our feet. It may help to know some context. The prophet Isaiah gives us the words: "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion "Your God reigns"." This is why Ephesians works around in a slightly clumsy way to say: As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. It's assumed that proclaiming peace involves going out, reaching out; and it's assumed that for any kind of reaching out you need to prepare with whatever will make you ready. Whether that's some more Biblical study, or learning to understand your own personality, or praying with others, in a small prayer group, or listening to Christian books or music, or whatever. Prepare on your inside before going running on the outside.

So, so far we've got: truth, doing the right thing by others and being prepared to proclaim the gospel of peace – the peace and promise of God. Which leads to the fourth element, the shield of faith.

Throughout the apostle Paul's writing, Paul often refers to Jesus(') faith. There's always a translation problem, because he could mean the faith *of* Jesus or faith *in* Jesus. I think here we should read this as taking up the faith *of* Jesus. Jesus had faith in God the Father that carried him through every storm and every trial. That is the sort of faith that we want - and it's not about being super-heroes, but about trusting in, and leaning on, Jesus' faith. If he could trust God, then let's trust God with him.

So those are four elements of armour for us to take up: belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, shoes of being prepared to proclaim peace, and the shield of faith.

The word that introduces the next elements is a different word for “take”, which we could translate it as “receive”. And that’s important, because our strength in all of this does not come from us.

And so we receive the helmet of salvation: It protects our head: it’s about receiving the knowledge that you are the beloved of God. And that that is an unshakeable truth. You are God’s child, God’s beloved; God delights in you. Know that, and everything else – every other element of protection – is secure. That’s why it can be called the helmet of salvation.

And finally we receive the sword of the Spirit, which is God’s word – God’s word of peace and reconciliation, of justice and of love. And that is the power of God. It’s not about hitting people with Bibles, since when this line in Ephesians was written the Bible didn’t yet exist in this form; it’s about those actual gospel words, in our words, by the Spirit of God, about God’s peace and justice and love.

The author of Ephesians, who identifies as Paul, writes that though he is in chains, though he is shut in, under siege, yet he proclaims the gospel mystery that God’s love doesn’t stop because of any cross, or chains, or bars. While we can’t control or overturn everything in the world, we can recognise the two powers that assail or tempt us spiritually: one the one hand, avoidant denial, and on the other, fatalism. And in this spiritual battle we are advised to hold on to the truth, as a belt around us; to wear over our heart and lungs the breastplate of doing the right thing by others in kindness and care; to prepare ourselves (our feet) for sharing God’s peace; and to trust in Jesus’ faith as we do. We can do that having received the knowledge of being beloved of God; and the freedom to share it.

The battle is real, and we may certainly feel defeated at times. It is not our own strength, but God’s, that gets us through; and that is the strength in which, gathered for worship, we stand.

To the glory of God.