

Strong and Fully Armed

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Introduction

A recurring metaphor in the New Testament likens the church to a spiritual army and its members to soldiers (Phi. 2:25; 1 The. 5:8; 1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 2:3–4; 4:7; et al.). God's people are engaged in spiritual combat (2 Cor. 10:4; 1 Tim. 1:18). Paul gives us the most concentrated description of the *soldier-army-battle figure* in Ephesians 6:10–18. His opening exhortation is so powerful that it takes on the character of a command: "Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of his might" (v. 10). This context is so familiar to so many that some may have overlooked and neglected the great practical force of it. It is surely worth revisiting.

The Responsibility to Arm Ourselves

Because Satan is such a formidable foe, the battles are so fierce at times, and as fleshly creatures we are so weak, we must be well armed. The armament which the Lord supplies is sufficient, both for protection and for attack. Twice in Ephesians 6, Christian soldiers are urged to utilize the "whole armor of God" (vv. 11, 13). *Whole armor* is from *panoplian* (the source of our word *panoply*)—"the complete equipment used by heavily armed infantry" (*Vine's*). Soldiers with no (or even defective) armor or weaponry will certainly become casualties. No wonder our foe is able to overcome so many in the Lord's army, either by slaying them or causing them to surrender—they are only poorly equipped, at best, for combat.

All who enter God's service do so by voluntary enlistment, not by being drafted. Hence, these volunteers are to "**put on**" and "**take up**" the whole armor that God provides. We do so only through our own diligent effort, and we must never rest from this activity. Only as we continue to equip ourselves as fully as possible will Paul's promise prove operative:

There hath no temptation taken you but such as man can bear: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation make also the way of escape that ye may be able to endure it (1 Cor. 10:13).

The Armor Provided

The armor we are to take up and put on is specified in Ephesians 6:14–17a:

Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; withal taking up the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation... (Eph. 6:14–17a).

The girdle of truth

This equipment emphasizes the necessity of knowing the Truth so fully that it surrounds us like a protective belt. The Holy Spirit will no more directly infuse us with righteousness (i.e., moral rectitude) than He will directly fill us with spiritual knowledge. The more we “buckle on” the Truth, the greater the strength we will have for the daily fray: “Thy word have **I laid up in my heart**, that I might not sin against thee” (Psa. 119:11, emph. DM).

The Holy Spirit has not directly supplied men with additional Truth for almost 2,000 years (1 Cor. 13:8–11). The doctrine that He still does so, even if only to the extent of an “illumination” of the Word already revealed, is not from Jesus Christ, but from John Calvin and his variegated spiritual progeny. The only ones who have ever received knowledge of God’s will without diligent effort on their part are those few persons whom He has inspired down through the ages. All of the rest of have had to **put forth the effort** necessary to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18a). Knowledge of God’s Word is something that **we must supply for ourselves** in order to be fruitful, able to see, and avoid falling (2 Pet. 1:5–10).

The following simple exercises will help gird one with the Truth: (1) Read the Bible every day (follow a daily Bible reading schedule). (2) Attend every Bible class and worship assembly (Sundays, Wednesday nights, Gospel meetings, lectureships, etc.). (3) Buy—and read—good books to help you study and understand the Bible. (4) Subscribe to—and read—at least one reliable Gospel magazine (such as *Contending for the Faith, Defender*).

The breastplate of righteousness

This piece of armament concerns the practical application of being girded with the Truth. As with each piece of armor, Paul enjoins us to “**put on**” this breastplate. The Holy Spirit will no more directly infuse us with righteousness (i.e., moral rectitude) than He will directly fill us with spiritual knowledge. The Roman soldier’s breastplate in the first century was comparable to the body armor of modern soldiers and law enforcement officers. As it protected and protects their vital organs, so the spiritual “breastplate” protects the Christian soldier’s vitals. The standard and source of righteousness for God’s soldiers is the Word of God: “Let my tongue sing of thy word; For all thy commandments are righteousness” (Psa. 119:172).

We must not only **know** the Truth—we must **live** it. One who knows the Word of God but who does not live by it is a hypocrite. The pretender will eventually be found out and will fail in the daily conflict with Satan. In fact, the hypocrite has already failed. There are few things uglier and more harmful to our righteous cause than a person who claims to belong to the Lord’s

Army, but who in reality betrays that cause by immorality and/or false doctrine. Contrariwise, a life of righteousness that flows from a heart filled with God's Word is both beautiful to behold and exceedingly powerful. If we "hunger and thirst after righteousness," we will be filled (Mat. 5:6). We must "follow after righteousness" (1 Tim. 6:11) even if we are "persecuted for righteousness' sake" (Mat. 5:10). Without this essential breastplate, Satan's arrows will slay us.

The "shoes" of the preparation of the Gospel of peace

This spiritual "footwear" enables us to march and to stand and fight. Roman soldiers were not expected to march or fight barefooted, for such would have greatly handicapped them. These "Gospel boots" complement the girdle of Truth discussed earlier. **We must "shod" our own "feet"** with this Gospel preparation, rather than expecting the Holy Spirit to do it for us directly or immediately. Paul emphasizes the necessity of God's Word for spiritual survival and victory. Many Christian soldiers are facing the foe "barefooted" because they have made little or no Gospel preparation.

Preparation implies purpose, forethought, planning, effort, and readiness. To be prepared in the Gospel demands earnest, constant, and diligent study. When we contemplate how few soldier-saints have any serious hunger and thirst for Biblical knowledge, we should not be surprised that so many fall, retreat, or surrender under fire.

The shield of faith

This spiritual gear is necessary to fend off the constant attacks of temptation (i.e., "fiery darts") Satan aims at us. We must have a thorough trust and a firm faith in our Commander-in-Chief to win the spiritual battles we face: "Ye that fear Jehovah, trust in Jehovah: He is their help and their shield" (Psa. 115:11). "This is the victory that hath overcome the world, even our faith" (1 John 5:4b).

Faith brings us right back to God's Word—the fundamental source of our faith: "So belief ["faith," KJV] cometh of hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). The connection between strong faith and the Word of God is undeniable. We would not know what or who to believe in spiritual matters had the Holy Spirit not revealed "all the truth" (John 16:13; 1 Cor. 2:6–10). Note, however, that the faith that shields us from the devil's thrusts is not a mere mental acceptance of some facts, but a living, active, obedient principle. The Christian soldier cannot withstand Satan by sitting idly and merely mouthing, "I believe in Jesus." Such is a dead and barren "faith" (Jam. 2:17, 20, 26). Just as Jesus withstood Satan's temptations with *It is written*, so can we when we immerse ourselves in the Bible, which has the answer to every error and temptation the devil may invent.

The helmet of salvation

Salvation is the great blessing that we must ever bear in mind. The subject of *salvation* relates both to the present and the future. One who believes and is baptized is “saved” in the sense that the guilt of his past sins has been erased (Mark. 16:16). However, all such yet await the coming of the Christ Who “shall appear a second time...unto salvation” (Heb. 9:28). We have great confidence in our present salvation, which is as certain as the Son of God who promised it to those who “trust and obey” Him. However, in this element of our spiritual equipment, Paul may have had in mind our eternal salvation, our great ultimate hope. In a closely parallel statement he specifies this very thing: “But let us, since we are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for a helmet, the hope of salvation” (1 The. 5:8). As the Word of God is the source of our **faith**, so it is of our **salvation**: “And that from a babe thou hast known the sacred writings which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15).

Each one must **take** this “helmet” and **place** it on **himself**. Again, it is John Calvin, rather than Jesus Christ, who teaches that unregenerate men are so depraved by Adam’s sin that they cannot understand, believe, and obey the saving Gospel without the Holy Spirit’s direct intervention. God has made His grace available through the Christ (Tit. 2:11), and we are responsible for the salvation of our own souls (Acts 2:40–41).

The sword of the Spirit

We have but one spiritual weapon—the “**sword of the Spirit**,” which Paul identifies as the Word of God. We observed earlier that every piece of our defensive armor relates to the Word of God, either directly or indirectly. We should therefore not be surprised that one all-sufficient weapon—the Bible—serves our offensive needs in spiritual combat. God’s Word is a living and active agent that is sharper than any literal double-edged sword (Heb. 4:12).

Ignorance of the Truth among many of the rank and file “troops” and not a few of the “officers” may be the principal cause of so many spiritual casualties on the daily battlefield. How can one withstand Satan’s assaults that end in sin and spiritual death (Jam. 1:12–15) when his armor is paper-thin and his sword is gapped or dull? The strength of the Lord’s soldier exists in direct proportion to his or her knowledge and correct application of His Word.

Furthermore, the conquest of hundreds of congregations by liberals could never have occurred without a woeful lack of Biblical knowledge among elderships and those in the pews. This sad condition reminds me of Paul’s description of his fellow-Jews:

For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God (Rom. 10:2–3).

People who do not know the Truth cannot detect, much less refute, error. Not knowing God's Word (and through it the means of distinguishing between things authorized and unauthorized) has made "sitting ducks" of tens of thousands of the rank and file of the Lord's people. They were (and are) thereby ripe for any innovation religious traitors can dream up or mimic from the enemy.

The same can be said for the apostasy seen on the campuses of most of the schools begun by dedicated disciples of past generations. Naïve, overly trusting, Biblically ignorant parents have sent (and continue to send) their even more ignorant offspring to sit for four years at the feet of men and women who in many cases despise the church of the New Testament and the ideal of its restoration and conservation. Hence, ironically, the very institutions founded to educate and strengthen, thus better preparing spiritual soldiers to face and defeat the enemy, have now been prostituted to equip and train fighters in Satan's ranks.

Conclusion

Earlier in the Ephesian letter Paul told them of his prayer that God would grant, "according to the riches of his glory, that ye may be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inward man" (3:16). Paul used the same root word for *strengthened* in this verse that he did for *strength* in 6:10. In 3:16, He spoke of our need to allow the Holy Spirit to strengthen us, without telling us the means He would use. In 6:10 Paul orders us to attain this strength and then tells us how to do so in verses 11–17.

Note two salient points: (1) The Word of God is the source of our spiritual strength and it is **fully sufficient** to this end, both for defensive and offensive purposes. (2) The Holy Spirit does the strengthening, but **He does so through His Word**, through agency rather than not. We must "take up" and "put on" each piece of spiritual armor and the spiritual sword.

Notwithstanding the teaching of some brethren, those wait in vain who suppose that the Holy Spirit will directly invest them with the armor or weaponry needed to meet the foe. God has made all of the armament readily available and attainable, but it is our responsibility to acquire it. We do this by our constant growth in the knowledge and application of the Word of God.

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