



# THE WHOLE ARMOR OF GOD

---

*How Christ's Victory  
Strengthens Us for  
Spiritual Warfare*

IAIN M. DUGUID

## DRESSED FOR BATTLE

Ephesians 6:10-13

Over recent years, there have been many television shows aimed at helping people get properly dressed. Sometimes the premise revolves around watching experts help people to pick the right outfit for a wedding. At other times, someone with a woefully poor fashion sense receives a total makeover with the help of fashion gurus and serious spending. As someone who is no expert in clothing trends, I find such programs fascinating. However, I would like to see follow-up programs six months later. Were the people's lives genuinely transformed by their new fashion insights, or have they reverted to their old habits, redonning saggy spandex and sandals with socks?

Christianity is a religion about helping people become properly dressed, although not in the sartorial sense. Sins against fashion ought not to be held against you in the community of

believers. But Paul advises the Ephesians that there are certain things Christians must put off and others they must put on, just like in the television shows. More specifically, he tells us to put on the Christian armor so that we can be properly equipped to stand up to the assaults that will inevitably come our way in this fallen and spiritually dangerous world.

Life here on earth is hard—often very, very hard. According to the Bible, life is not a picnic but a *battle*, an armed struggle against a powerful adversary. To engage in that battle properly, we need a spiritual makeover in which our flimsy, inadequate natural attire is replaced by suitable armor and weaponry. So Paul concludes this magnificent, gospel-saturated letter, Ephesians, with a final charge to be prepared to engage with the battle of life in the right way.

In this book, we are going to unpack each of the pieces of armor he describes, but first we shall look at three perspectives that orient us to the larger fight: the scale of our need, the vastness of God's provision, and the call to stand.

## THE SCALE OF OUR NEED

Paul spares no effort in describing the seriousness of our opposition. We don't wrestle with flesh and blood but against the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers of this present darkness (Eph. 6:12). If that sounds scary, it is because it is meant to. The devil is a very real, very powerful opponent, far too powerful for us to take on in our own strength. This is a salutary reminder to people in our Western context, who are inclined to ridicule the idea of a literal devil. Many find the idea of a cosmic being whom we can't see, feel, or touch and who promotes evil in this world unthinkable. Of course, the devil in whom they don't believe is, in their minds, often not the biblical figure but a rather ridiculous image

with hooves and horns. Who could seriously believe in that creature? It is convenient for the devil when people don't believe in his existence. Then he can pursue his nefarious schemes unsuspected and undetected.

Yet who doubts the reality of evil in this universe? Almost everyone agrees that some things are not merely tragic but genuinely evil. Gassing millions of Jews in the death camps of Poland is evil. Press-ganging young African children into an army, getting them high on drugs, and then sending them into battle is evil. Trafficking women in the sex industry is evil. Where does all this evil in the world come from? Man's natural inhumanity to man hardly seems a sufficient explanation for evil on this scale. Is it possible that there is another factor, a supernatural spiritual dimension, to all of this moral depravity? If you believe that the universe you see around you is all there is, then you have no rational basis on which to be shocked and outraged at evil. What we call "evil" must then be interpreted simply as an emotional response within us to dangerous things, triggered by evolutionary biology. But the Bible has a richer and deeper explanation for the sad world we find ourselves in, an explanation that allows us to recognize the profound reality of evil and the invisible spiritual forces that lie behind its constant reappearance in different shapes and forms.

The Ephesians to whom Paul was writing were not modern materialists. They were very well aware of the spiritual forces around them, as people in other parts of the world continue to be. Yet even to them, Paul makes a point of highlighting the power of the opposition we face:

We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness. (Eph. 6:12)

Some of the terms that Paul uses here may have been in use in Ephesus as titles for various spiritual beings; Ephesus was a hot-bed of occult interest, as Acts 19:18–19 makes clear.<sup>1</sup> To these people, already convinced of Satan’s reality, Paul strongly underlines the power of the opposition that faced them—the same power that faces us. To use Peter’s language, Satan “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8).

Of course, adding to the imbalance in this wrestling match is the fact that although our opponents are not flesh and blood, we are. We are not principalities and powers or cosmic rulers but ordinary flawed, fallen, flesh-and-blood mortals. You might think that we have no business engaging in this combat; in the language of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, it is hobbits against orcs, an unequal contest. Yet this is exactly the battle in which we are engaged. Serving in the Lord’s army is not an option reserved for those particularly devoted to God. The choice is not whether you will be a Christian soldier or a Christian civilian but whether you will be a prepared Christian soldier or an unprepared one. And an unprepared soldier of flesh and blood will not be able to stand against the scale of the spiritual forces ranged against him or her.

What is more, this conflict takes place in the midst of “this darkness.” In many respects, the dark world in which we live is Satan’s playground. There are tempting sights, sounds, and tastes in this world that dazzle and allure us into sin. There is much around us that seems desirable and many powerful temptations that find a ready ally in our flesh. Earthly objects are very real to us, while heavenly realities seem ethereal and intangible. Satan also has centuries of experience as a tempter, knowing exactly

---

1. See Clinton E. Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), 14.

which temptations are most likely to draw our individual human nature into sin, whether giving ourselves to a particular form of excess or to a subtle self-exalting pride that flows from a belief in our own righteousness. The powerful combination of the world, the flesh, and the devil is inevitably overwhelming, left to ourselves. This is why Paul doesn't merely say, "Bring the armor of God along with you on the off chance that you might need it." Rather, he says, "You will need it; so put it on."

As a skilled tempter, Satan also knows how to use the difficulty of the combat to his own advantage. As a child, I used to watch the science fiction program *Dr. Who*. Some of the doctor's opponents I particularly remember from those early days were the Cybermen. These terrifying bionic creatures loudly proclaimed, "Resistance is useless," sending me scurrying behind the sofa week after week. In the same way, the devil often seeks to frighten us into submission, shouting at us, "Resistance is useless!" He pretends to even greater power than he has, presenting a particular temptation to us as utterly irresistible. He says to you: "You can't help yourself. It's the way you were made. You need this sin to be happy. What is the point of resisting? You know you are going to lose in the end, so you might as well just give in now."

## **THE SCALE OF GOD'S PROVISION**

To combat this strategy, we need to understand the scale of the provision God has given us. Paul's desire is that we should be able to stand against the schemes of the devil, and to that end he begins by outlining God's far greater power. Even before he introduces the opposition forces, Paul tells us that we are to be strong in God's awesome, magnificent power, a power that is beyond compare. The words Paul uses here in Ephesians 6:10 are

an echo of the same Greek words that he used in 1:19 to describe the power of God that raised up Christ.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the power with which we have been equipped for our struggle against sin and Satan is the very same power that brought Christ back from the dead.

This is not just the power that would be required to raise someone like Lazarus from the dead (see John 11:1–44). Raising the physically dead is no big deal, comparatively speaking. Yet the power of God is great enough to raise *Christ* from the dead, Jesus Christ who was buried in death under the full weight of God’s wrath against sin—the sin of every one of his people throughout all ages, including you and me. This power of God not only raised Jesus Christ back to life but lifted him to the heavenly realms, so that he is now seated at the right hand of the Father in glory. There is real power, far greater even than the terrifying power ranged against us! The one who is in us is greater than the one who is in the world (1 John 4:4).

## SELF-DIRECTED SANCTIFICATION?

That brings us to the call to stand. Paul says, “Be strong in the Lord. . . . Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil” (Eph. 6:10–11). What many of us hear in these words is a call to triumphant action, as if it is completely up to us to take on the devil and withstand his schemes. If we would just put on the whole armor of God, we should therefore constantly be able to stand firm against all of Satan’s schemes. God has done his part perfectly in making the armor available; now it is up to us to choose whether to use it. Meanwhile, God appears helpless in heaven, waiting to see

---

2. The ESV’s “Be strong” and “the strength of his might” represent three Greek words: *endunamoo*, *kratos*, and *ischus*.

how it all turns out. When this wrong understanding holds sway, Christians get sorted into one of two camps. Some choose to be radical disciples of Jesus and live an epic life by putting on that armor. Others, by their neglect, become those “loser” Christians who are regularly tripped up by the devil’s schemes, falling into sin daily, leaving God perpetually disappointed. In reality, many of us find ourselves daily in the second category: we are often unwilling and unable even to think clearly about the armor, let alone put it on. If sanctification were as simple as some suggest (“Just try harder to put on the armor!”), we would not fail and fall in the Christian life nearly as much as we do. Not for nothing does the Heidelberg Catechism remind us that even the holiest men (and women) make only “small beginnings” on the road to obedience in this life.<sup>3</sup>

An inevitable result of this self-focused perspective on our spiritual growth is that we become proud of ourselves and judgmental of others if we think that we are doing well in our struggle against sin and Satan. After all, *we* chose to put on God’s armor while they made poor choices. Alternatively, we feel utterly crushed if we are all too aware of our frequent failures and compromises with the world, the flesh, and the devil. Perhaps we find ourselves riding an emotional roller coaster between those two extremes: ecstatic and happy when we succeed in our battles against sin but depressed and anxious when we all too often fail.

In reality, God’s awesome power is not something we can choose to tap into, as if we were in charge of the process; rather, it is something inevitably at work within all those whom God has chosen and called according to his purpose. At the beginning of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul reminds us that God predestined

---

3. Heidelberg Catechism, answer 114.



us before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight, according to the good pleasure of his will, so that we should be for the praise of his glorious grace (Eph. 1:4–6). God hasn't left it up to us to decide whether that purpose will succeed! No, his mighty power is at work for every believer in Christ to accomplish his ultimate purpose of presenting us to himself holy and blameless, to the praise of his glory. As Paul said in Philip-  
pians 2:13, it is *God* who is at work in us, both to will and to work for his good purpose.

That mighty power of God is at work for our spiritual growth in two distinct ways. First, it was demonstrated outside us in the once-for-all work of Christ in resisting sin and Satan in our place; and, second, it is demonstrated inside us through the ongoing, progressive work of the Spirit, renewing our hearts and minds. In both these ways, God is sovereign over the whole process of sanctifying his church from start to finish. There will be nothing in which any of us can boast on that last day.

## THE ARMOR OF GOD IS GOD'S ARMOR

Let's unpack that idea in connection with God's armor. Our sanctification rests first and foremost on the finished work of Christ in our place. As we shall see, the armor of God is quite literally God's armor—armor designed for and worn by God first and foremost. The armor God gives us to defend and protect us against Satan's onslaught is the armor that he has already worn in the decisive battle on our behalf. We fight and stand firm against Satan only in the strength that comes from the victory that Christ has already won for us.

That is why each of the various pieces of armor points us to Christ. The belt of truth is the belt that girds the messianic king

in Isaiah 11:5. The breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation come from the divine warrior's arsenal in Isaiah 59:17. The feet shod with gospel readiness are the feet of those who proclaim the arrival of Messiah's kingdom in Isaiah 52:7. God himself is the shield of faith, as he describes himself in Genesis 15. The sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, is the weapon wielded by the promised servant of the Lord in Isaiah 49:2.

What God clothes us with is nothing less than his own armor, the same armor that Christ has already worn on our behalf in his lifelong struggle with the mortal enemy of our souls, Satan himself. Unlike armchair generals who watch the fighting from a safe distance, Jesus has himself worn the armor and won the victory. You are called to wear the armor of God not because that's what Jesus would do if he found himself in a similar situation; you are called to wear God's armor because that is what Jesus has already done, wearing God's armor all the way to the cross. He stood firm against Satan's schemes throughout his earthly life and ministry. Each of those specific temptations to which we have given in this week—lust, gossip, anger, pride, self-exaltation, lying, coveting—are temptations he faced and stared down in your place. What is more, Jesus laid his life down for you in winning the victory that lets loose God's sanctifying Spirit in your life. Because of his victorious life, death, and resurrection, the same power that raised Christ up from the dead is now at work inside you and me through the ongoing work of the Spirit, raising us from spiritual death to new life. However, that ongoing work of the Spirit in your life is ultimately no more under our control than God's first work of regenerating us.<sup>4</sup> In

---

4. See Westminster Confession of Faith 16.3: "[Christians'] ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ. And that they must be enabled thereunto, beside the graces they have already received, there is required an actual

John 3, Jesus compares the process of becoming a Christian to birth. Just as a baby doesn't have control over the time and circumstances of her birth, so God chose when to regenerate you and bring you to faith in Christ. Even after a child is born, she cannot choose to grow or not to grow. She may wish to be taller or shorter, but wishing won't make it so. In the same way, we are not in control of the process of our spiritual growth. The God who has started a good work in us *will* bring it to completion on the day of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:6). Even though we are not passive but are to fight with all our might, our sanctification is ultimately God's work from beginning to end.

That perspective is enormously encouraging in our daily struggle with sin and Satan. We often imagine we are fighting alone in our struggles against sin. Not at all. Your victory over sin belongs to Jesus, not you. Jesus's struggle was the decisive one, not yours. His victory on the cross purchased your complete sanctification, your ultimate holiness before God. His Spirit is at work within you growing you at the rate that he intends toward his goal of your complete purity. Your sanctification is where he plans for it to be.

That doesn't mean that we'll never have to struggle with sin, of course. Quite the reverse: Paul clearly expects us to be engaged in a daily life-and-death struggle with Satan in all of his awesome power. The imagery of armor and battle shows us that the fight against sin must involve blood, sweat, and tears. Philippians 2:12–13 tells us to work out our own salvation *because* God is at work in us. But Christ's victory over sin at the cross means that your struggle against sin is never hopeless. God will ultimately sanctify you—he has promised to do so. On that last day, you

---

influence of the same Holy Spirit, to work in them to will and to do, of his good pleasure." Compare the similar emphasis in the Canons of the Synod of Dordt 5.4.

will rise to new life in Christ and stand in God's presence, made perfect forever. Sin and Satan shall not have ultimate dominion over you.

This means that in the midst of the pain of the frustrating daily struggle against sin and Satan, you can plead with God to continue to advance that process here and now. It gives you hope to keep on trying, even in areas of your life where sin continually seems to have the upper hand. It means that when you are seeing real advance in your life, you will know that it is nothing you have accomplished. God's Holy Spirit deserves the glory, not you.

## THE GLORY OF OUR WEAKNESS

Indeed, in pursuit of glory, the Spirit often turns us over to ourselves to show us just how weak we really are. You can see this in the life of King Hezekiah. He had walked with God for many years and seen much of God's goodness to him. But in 2 Chronicles 32:21, we are told that God left Hezekiah to himself, to uncover what was in his heart. The result was his greatest sin, proudly showing the Babylonians around his treasures in an effort to persuade them that he could be a good ally against the Assyrians. This explains the puzzling nature of our struggle. We often assume that since God is holy and hates sin, his primary goal is that we should always stand strong in our battle against sin. However, the Spirit has no interest in turning us into independent creatures who can stand in our own strength.<sup>5</sup> Rather, he wants us to see clearly the reality that we have no power within ourselves to take up God's armor and stand, unless God himself empowers us to do that. We are called to "be strong in the Lord" (Eph. 6:10), not to be strong in ourselves. Left to ourselves, we will certainly

---

5. On this, see John Newton, "The Advantages of Remaining Sin," in *Select Letters of John Newton* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2011), 150–55.

fall to the schemes of the devil. As the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it:

The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth oftentimes leave, for a season, his own children to manifold temptations, and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and, to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends.<sup>6</sup>

Did you catch what the confession is saying? The confession says that the righteous and holy God *often* leaves his own children in the grip of manifold temptations, experiencing the corruption of their own hearts, for his own holy purposes. He desires above all that we would grow in humility and dependence upon his grace. The confession accurately describes our experience. We learn the depravity of our own sinful nature, the vast superiority of Satan's skill, our constant need of Christ's perfect sacrifice, and the ongoing power of the Holy Spirit within us most often through our experience of our own sin and failure rather than during our few moments of spiritual triumph. As John Newton would say, we don't learn of the depth of the corruption of our nature simply by being told it; we learn it through bitter experience as we struggle with sins that seem as natural as breathing—and as hard to give up.<sup>7</sup>

Nothing teaches us the power of Satan or our utter dependence upon God more than our constant spiritual failures. If I

---

6. Westminster Confession of Faith 5.5.

7. See John Newton, "The Advantages of Remaining Sin," 153.

make repeated resolutions to give up a certain sin, and I fast and pray and still find myself giving in to it, what else can I conclude but that I am indeed the weakest of Christians? When I resolve over and over not to say the unkind and prideful words that repeatedly spring into my mind, but still find myself hurting people and exalting myself regularly, what shall I say except, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24).

Nothing gives us more passion for the righteousness of Christ than a specific and growing awareness of our own brokenness. When I am strong and living the Christian life well, I may be fond of the gospel as a concept, but when I see more clearly the ongoing depth of my sinfulness, then I cling to the gospel like a drowning man to a life belt. Nothing gives us a greater desire for the completion of the Spirit’s work on the last day, and our full deliverance from the battle against this body of death, than those times when the conflict with remaining sin in our lives is at its fiercest.

Those who are not yet believers in Christ are often comfortable with their sin; for them, there really is no struggle. But when God begins to work, people start to see the ugliness of their own heart, and they begin to sense their need of a redeemer—someone to rescue them from themselves. Jesus is precisely that Redeemer, who both fights the battle in their place and then engages the battle inside and alongside them through the powerful work of his Holy Spirit.

Life is a battle for Christians; Jesus told his disciples to take up their cross (Matt. 16:24), not to take up their armchair. We are engaged in conflict against an enemy whose strength and skill far outmatch our own. But it is a battle that we have been equipped to fight in the sure knowledge that we’ve been enlisted on the

winning side. We take up our cross because our Savior first took up his. We wear God's armor because Jesus wore it first. In the final analysis, standing our ground simply means clinging desperately to Jesus Christ as our only hope of salvation. In that attitude of dependent trust is true victory. For all of his power and wiles, Satan has no ability to snatch away those who are trusting in Christ, for they are the children of God, and their Father will not let them go. They have been entrusted by the Father into the safe keeping of the Son and are indwelt by the Spirit himself.

Everything you need for your salvation has been accomplished for you by Jesus Christ, and he himself is now working in you by his Spirit to work out that salvation. Sometimes God will demonstrate his power in you by enabling you to stand strong against Satan's devices; at other times, his purpose is graciously to allow you to fall to teach you equally important lessons about your own weakness and the glorious sufficiency of his grace to save and sustain the weakest of the weak. Either way, the glory will all be his on the last day.

So "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might"; take your stand against the devil, protected by the armor that God has provided. Fight the good fight with all your might. Wrestle with all the energy that the Spirit gives you. But in the midst of that standing, fighting, and wrestling, don't forget to rest in the finished victory of Christ and the assurance that the Spirit's perfect sanctifying work in your life is what counts.

## **FOR FURTHER REFLECTION**

1. Do you believe that life is a battle? How have you experienced that reality recently?

2. Do you take seriously the reality of Satan's role in the conflict?  
How does that impact the way you approach difficult situations?
  
3. Does Satan more effectively tempt you by showing you the seductive attractiveness of sin or by threatening to overpower you?  
How have you experienced these different modes of temptation?
  
4. Why does it matter that the power God has equipped us with is the same power that raised Christ from the dead?
  
5. What difference does it make to the sanctification process if we really believe that it is God's work from beginning to end? Why is it important that Jesus wore spiritual armor first?