

## **Do We Still Need the Armour?**

Have you ever been in the position, when you just think that you've come to grips with the Bible, when you read something that sends you into a tailspin. I'm sure that many of us that grew up in church attending families felt that when someone told us the Bible condemned homosexuals. Thankfully, many of us have worked through that, seeing it for the prejudiced interpretation that it is. Yet, when we think we've reformed our view of God and the scriptures, something else comes along that provokes confusion.

It is good to be challenged, and to rethink the Bible in terms of where we stand. We certainly don't live in 14<sup>th</sup> century England when the first English language translation was made. Neither do we live in Shakespearean England when the world's most loved English version was published. We live in age of much greater enlightenment and understanding, so it's it right that we should review the Bible based on the resources and experience available to us today.

As I started to think about the passage in Ephesians 6, that speaks about armour, my mind immediately went back more than a millennium prior to this writing to one of the most famous Bible stories. It was the story about a handsome, rugged youth, one who both men and women found attractive. He was hired as a valet to a general who was leading an ongoing military conflict against a tribe of physically, unusually large men, that seemed to use their size to bully their neighbours.

The crux of the story is that the Israelites were losing this battle, so this youth offered to take on this giant of a man. He refused to wear the battle armour but went out to face this huge foe with just a sling shot, (and according to most artistic renderings, not much else). We're told with just a few stones he won the victory. Well, talk about stories that get brought up at every family party – people have been talking about this for three thousand years.

We're talking about David; bisexual, adulterous, murdering David. So it comes as something of a shock when you read that God said of David, he was someone after God's own heart (Acts 13:22). Suddenly we're forced to question who God is. The scriptures remind us that God doesn't look on the outward appearance, but on the inside. So we have to believe that God saw something in David that went beyond what we read and see. If we look beyond David's antics and look at his motivation we see someone who tried to be just, passionate and contrite in spirit. David great strength was his reliance on God, and his willing to accept his own vulnerability.

Another story to consider is our gospel reading (Luke 4:24-30), where we see Jesus under threat of violence and death – be careful who you upset in your hometown. These people who had known him growing up, now feel so insulted by him they incite a riot. Yet we read that Jesus passed through the midst of them and went on his way. I'm sure that people got into brawling with each other, while Jesus, seemingly without struggle or retaliation, no body guards, no outward protection, but in the midst of the chaos he just walks away.

To each of these stories there are two sides; on the one hand there are the masses seeking to exert their own strength and power, on the other two people stripped of outside defense and standing in their own inner strength.

Modern day religions are deeply divided within themselves. We see it vividly in Christianity and Islam. We see these religions defining justice (within themselves) in opposing ways. On the one side we see fundamentalist constantly talking in terms of warfare and winning victory in terms of power and might; whereas others talk in terms of peacemaking and equity. One of the challenges of seeking to be a church that is inclusive of all people yet contemporary, is not to be caught up in a warfare based theology just because of its popular culture. It is not appropriate to call something or someone evil simply because they are anti-Christian or anti-American. Evil is the destruction and disrespect of life, and the halting of good. And IMO, sometimes our attempts to destroy perceived evil can be evil itself.

The Ephesians passage is a favorite amongst fundamentalists because it is interpreted as the necessary equipment for spiritual warfare. But, what if you're not a fundamentalist, what if you see your reason for believing to make peace – what do we do with this passage. It is important to realize that Paul is not talking about warfare, but using the analogy of armour to illustrate the importance protecting ourselves in difficult times. He is, in fact, abandoning outward protection in favour of spiritual gifts. So this is not about armour to fight the enemy; this is how to effectively carry out love-justice without being trampled on.

Our goal in life should be to be better people, and by so doing we will inspire others to live better lives. There will always be war because it is human nature to be territorial and to fight; our calling is to transform the world one, by one, by one.

God gives us the strength to be better people, and this is a short list of how we can do it. So I invite you to take a different view of this Ephesian spiritual armour, and view it not as the means of fighting war – spiritual or otherwise, but as a means to make you a better person, stronger person:

1. Have some head protection: Salvation is about protecting your head; retaining the independence of free thinking and not being brainwashed or intimidated by others. One of the great attributes of the human brain is our ability to process and allow thought to grow. Sometimes they need to be kept in check, but having freedom to think also helps our spiritual capacity to grow. It's ok to doubt God provided that we continue to seek God.
2. Protect your heart. Love freely but not carelessly. Loving someone doesn't mean giving your heart to them, it means reaching out to them with a gift from God. Spiritually speaking your heart is the centre of your spiritual life, in the same sense your physical heart is the life supply of your physical body. The spiritual laws for love are to love God with all your heart mind and soul, and love your neighbour as yourself. The heart is what makes faith come alive – it becomes this big explosion of passion as we transition from knowing God with our intellect, to becoming in tune with God, at one with God with our heart. This is why God said of David “he was after God's own heart.” Incidentally, we're

not told in what measure we should love ourselves, but that loving ourselves is the measure to loving others, and as such it is a guard against giving our heart away.

3. Shield yourself from malicious arrows. There are always those who will put us down, some through hatred, some through their own hurt, and some through gossip. These things hurt – like mosquito bites to the heart, and if we have a compromised self esteem they can cause damage. This is why loving ourselves must equate to loving others, so that our own neediness for love doesn't slay us. Churches are often destroyed from the inside, with gossip frequently being a primary cause. Too often we don't think through the implications of what we say and speak out of our own need or hurt, without discerning the needs of others.
4. Realize how lethal your sword can be. Because this scripture associates a sword with the Word of God, it is often the excuse to bash people with the Bible. Yet, James tells us that the tongue is sharper than a two edged sword. What we say is our greatest means of affirmation but is also our greatest means of destruction. The Word of God is not what is written in the pages of the Bible, it is what's written on our heart. Bashing people with Bible quotes can be destructive, whereas speaking out of God's transforming love in our own life can be powerfully liberating.
5. Always have slip-on shoes for quick response. Always be ready to make peacemaking your first priority, so don't get you feet stuck into things that you can't get out of or that restrict your readiness.
6. "Gird" your emotions. I couldn't find any mention of belts in the original Greek and Hebrew word studies. The word is "to gird your loins", your loins being your hips and lower abdomen, the areas that polite company keeps covered, but everyone is curious about. Historically, it was at the loins that garments were tied, hence the use of "belt" in modern translations ... although belts tend to be worn around the waist which is different. The loins were what Paul called the "less seemly parts" the parts we are more vulnerable, parts that less likely to be made public. The centre of emotions was also regarded to be within the loins, and it's this which is probably the connection with this passage. We are strengthened by emotions that are true. The Prokofiev's fable of "Peter and the Wolf" is an allegory of false emotions, feigning drama in order to get attention – after a while no one takes you seriously, and in time of crisis no one comes to your aid. Guard your true emotions so that they may be a powerful gift in reaching out to others.

So do we need armour? Sometimes we do, and God's promise is to be our shield and defender. But, as in the story of David and of Jesus, its not what we wear on the outside, or the people we hang out with, that will protect us, but the integrity and building of our inner strength. This enables us to let go of some of the myths and spiritual superstitions that we cling to. God isn't going to bash us or abandon us because we seek to explore our faith. Life can be better when we can make decisions based on the strength our own comprehension and conviction; when we do so, God stands beside us. That's the reality of God.