

# Unarmored

August 25, 2024

Psalm 34:15-22  
Ephesians 6:10-20

It was a hymn tune first, with lyrics that included “Oh Brothers” (and in the next verse “Oh Sisters”) “will you meet me on Cannan’s happy shore?” It was one of those sung in the camp meeting worship services of early 19<sup>th</sup> century American settlements in the West.

With the arrival of the Civil War, however, the tune found a new set of lyrics. “John Brown’s body lies a moldering in the grave; his soul’s a marching on.” It became a marching anthem for soldiers of the Union Army, who took inspiration from the intense anti-slavery activist John Brown, who had been executed after a frustrated attempt to seize guns to outfit an uprising among enslaved African Americans in 1859.

Julia Ward Howe heard the song during a review of Union troops in Washington, DC. A companion, the Rev. James Freeman Clarke, suggested that she come up with a new set of words – and she did. “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” became a marching anthem for the Union armies as they moved to battles throughout the 87 year old nation.

The Civil War is still, today, the deadliest conflict in the history of the United States of America. “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” played a role in inspiring hundreds of thousands to kill or be killed.

I get... anxious... about military imagery in hymns, theology, and yes, in Scripture. Human beings are gifted at transforming military metaphors into actual assaults. For that matter, they transform other symbols for use in armed conflict. Famously, the Emperor Constantine put two superimposed Greek letters on his shield before he went to battle against Maxentius in 312 with the Imperial throne at stake. The letters were Chi and Rho – which look like an X and a P to our eyes – the first two letters of “Christ” in Greek.

Constantine won. Maxentius died. We don’t know how many others died with him. Constantine legalized Christianity in the next year, ending nearly three hundred years of intermittent persecution. Unfortunately, it would also strengthen the notion of a warrior Christ, one who would give military victory, and incidentally label all those opposing Rome, or France, or Spain, or England (or take your pick) as evildoers to be cut off from remembrance on the earth.

The Apostle’s metaphor of the Whole Armor of God has been used to endorse the holy wars, the inquisitions, the crusades that have taken so many lives and grieved their purported Divine endorser. I have no doubt it would also grieve the Apostle.

Sarah Henrich writes at Working Preacher:

Yes, it is dangerous indeed to classify those with whom one disagrees as agents of the devil. We have three protections against making Ephesians 6 a warrant for warfare or oppression:

- first, this metaphor was written for minority persons;
- second, flesh and blood opponents are not those against whom one contends;
- finally, the very nature of the armor makes clear that the message here is a survival strategy for persons of faith in a hostile world, not a strategy for aggression.

Take a good look at this Whole Armor of God. It's not intended for a battle against human beings. Imagine going into a conflict equipped only with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and the Spirit. The people who came with real armor and real weapons are going to hurt you. To put it into poetry:

I'm grateful that the struggle is not with  
the powers of blood and flesh. Not if  
I'm to rely upon these items  
for protection of my vital spark.

What happens to the righteous? Why,  
they suffer, as do those who speak of peace.  
A shield of faith is powerless against  
an arrow, or a club, or fist.

Should I entrust my head to its  
salvation? The logic doesn't work for me.  
I wish I thought an offense of the Spirit,  
of the Word, protected anyone, but... no.

And worst of all, to recommend  
I gird my waist with Truth, as if  
the truth has ever carried any weight  
when cut so easily by lies.

Those virtues will not help you very much in a human conflict, let's face it. Certainly not in physical combat. They're not always very helpful in negotiation or debate. More than one party to a lawsuit has found that truth and righteousness falter under the pressure of greed and lies.

And peace may be the most fragile thing of all. It vanishes as soon as violence or coercion take place.

Why, then, did the Apostle advise us to enter these encounters essentially unprotected, unarmored?

It's because there is no substitute for virtue.

Remember that these virtues are not about interactions with people – though I note that we should be using them in interactions with people – they are primarily about resisting the influence of spiritual forces. In our tradition at this time we don't give a lot of attention to the idea of spiritual forces other than God. We don't explain mental illness or distress with possession by demons. We don't explain the power of greed as resulting from demonic influence. We don't understand our own temptations as coming from anyone other than ourselves.

Many of our ancestors, physical and spiritual, did. They employed these virtues of truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and the Spirit to resist the temptations around them, temptations to selfishness, to the abuse of power, to the abandonment of their relationship with Christ. In that context, these virtues had the ability to help.

As I say, we don't think that way about temptation. For us, it comes from within.

Does it matter?

Whether temptation is an external force or an internal collision with desire, these same virtues have the capacity to help us resist. When we search for the truth about this thing we've come to desire, perhaps we'll learn not only that it's not all it claims to be, but that it won't make us happy anyway. I keep wondering whether, before the 2007-2008 financial crisis, if more people had spent more time understanding the truth about the financial instruments being traded, if they would have calmed things down. If more of them had been able to check their greed at the door, would things have changed?

I think so.

It's not just the obvious temptations of sex and greed. As Katie Hines-Shah writes at The Christian Century, "'Spiritual forces of evil' are present in mundane human life. Racism, sexism, homophobia, greed, destruction of the environment, lack of concern for human life, failure to do the good that is within us—these are forces of evil, from the classroom to the boardroom. Faithful Christians need to gird themselves against them."

Let's face it, the world has taught us racism, sexism, homophobia, greed, disregard for the environment. We see these things sometimes subtly and sometimes dramatically, from the offhand racial microaggression to the open and casual dumping of toxic waste. We have been taught to value human life, but to value the lives of ourselves, our families, our communities higher than others. And that makes a difference. It permits us to tolerate or even support evil.

What have we learned about doing good? That it's the thing to do? Sometimes – but not always, right? Sometimes it would be futile, so we shouldn't. Sometimes it would promote bad habits in someone else, so we shouldn't. Sometimes it would put us at risk, so we shouldn't.

All of those can be difficult questions... but can't we do the good that is within us more often than we do?

I sincerely wish that truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and the Holy Spirit offered real protection in the real world. They don't. They offer us protection only in the world of the spirit, which is a strange place with strange rules. The sad truth is that we confront the evils of this world basically unarmored against their physical manifestations. The sad truth is that we frequently fail to understand the ways in which these virtues protect us against injuries to our souls.

Take on, then, this Whole Armor of God with eyes wide open. Know that you will still face the challenges of life, and that you will still face challenges to the soul. Those virtues may not help you much in the world.

But those virtues are the best there are to protect you against spiritual harms. Those virtues will guard your soul.

Amen.

*by Eric Anderson*