

The armor of God: Ephesians 6:10-20

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by [Matt Fitzgerald](#) in the [August 11, 2009](#) issue

In one of its collections, the Art Institute of Chicago displays rows of medieval European weaponry—swords, rapiers, maces, daggers, helmets, shields and suits of armor—all encased in glass, every detail lit up by museum lights. The tools of war are both frightening and beautiful, with their intricate etchings and gilded filigrees distracting the viewer from their brutal purpose. On my first visit I was struck by the neat correlation between tools designed for killing and tools designed to thwart killing blows. There is a helmet for every mace, a breastplate for every dagger and a shield for every sword. The pairing suggests defense and aggression sitting side by side in an arrested state. In bizarre neutrality, humanity's murderous intent is checked, blocked and stopped by the quality of its armor.

But we know the truth: our armor always loses because our weapons are consistently one step ahead of our protection. Commenting on this "improvement," poet Richard Eberhart wrote of humanity, ". . . he can kill / As Cain could, but with multitudinous will, / No farther advanced than in his ancient furies." That sorry truth turns the museum's display into an exhibition of human vanity. We can wrap ourselves in wonderful, fine-hammered metal, but every suit of armor has its imperfections, and our warring nature finds and exploits them.

If we cannot be protected from an enemy as obvious as ourselves, can we ever hope to find protection strong enough to thwart the "cosmic powers" that cause us to turn on one another in the first place? The author of Ephesians thinks so, but insists that this new armor is not of our own making. Instead, the belt, breastplate, shoes and shield belong to God. I can try to protect myself in many different ways, spend hour after hour constructing every sort of armor, but my efforts will fall short. The breastplate of ministerial self-righteousness will not protect me. I have learned over the years that a helmet made of bourbon and a sword forged from cynicism are also insufficient, as are prosperity, religious zeal, fitness and even family. None of these

are strong enough to hold back “the cosmic powers of this present darkness” (Eph. 6:12). None can thwart the forces of chaos and disorder that upend even the most righteous of lives.

Yet we are tempted to try to master the tragedy of existence by living well. Perhaps this is why the writer of Ephesians makes a distinction between “the whole armor of God” and our efforts to become godly. The shield is God’s, not ours. It is not for those who have labored in workshops of piety and success to forge their own protection, but for those who have not done so. The armor is a free gift from God, not something we make ourselves.

The first step toward receiving God’s protection, then, is accepting the fact that we cannot safeguard ourselves. Søren Kierkegaard said, “We arrive at the highest pitch of our perfection when we become suited to God through being nothing ourselves.” God gives us God’s strength only when we accept our essential weakness.

In *Parting the Waters*, the first volume of Taylor Branch’s history of the civil rights movement, there is a shocking photo of a lunch counter in Nashville. A white man and a white woman are sitting with an African-American woman. Their backs are turned on an angry mob gathered behind them. Their waiter has just poured a bottle of ketchup over the white man’s head. In the black and white photograph, the ketchup looks like blood as it drips down the man’s jacket. His jaw is clenched, his shoulders braced. He must want nothing more than to turn and attack the jeering crowd, to pick up a sword and wade into battle. But he sits still. On the world’s terms he is weak; armed with nothing but the gospel of peace, he receives every sort of abuse. The difficult thing about Christian armor is that it lets more in than it keeps out.

The eyes of the crowd are insane, lit up by the cosmic powers of that dark time. One man has a sugar jar in his hand and a joyful smile on his face as he pours its contents over the African-American protester’s head. A middle-aged man above him looks on approvingly. But to their right, at the far edge of the photo’s boundary, there is a member of the mob who looks ashamed of this ugly scene. He is a young man with his eyes downcast, his face tormented. He appears to be in pain.

It seems obvious that the young man walked through the doors of that restaurant ready to attack, or at least to cheer on some violence. If one of the protesters had carried anything but God’s weapons, I imagine he would have fought back with pleasure. But his weapons proved no match for the armor of God; indeed, the photo

caught the precise instant when some part of him was killed—not just slain in the spirit but slain by the Spirit, splayed wide open by the power of love. I doubt that those three protesters felt triumphant when they returned to their living quarters to shower and wash off the day's trauma. More often than not, God's victories emerge years later. They are difficult in the moment, and beautiful only in retrospect. But there is great beauty in that photo. The armor of God is shining brightly. Though the flaming arrows rage, grace will win. As Ephesians promises, it always does.