

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³ Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. ¹⁹ Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

The full armour of God

The passage at the end of Ephesians six is probably one of Paul's greatest hits — because instead of his normal densely intellectual writing, he gives us a nice simple image on which to hang his ideas. Put on the full armour of God! But then we realise that these images are so familiarly Bunyanesque that while some of the allegory has stuck the real meaning has sort of slid away, so that we have not really learnt from it. So, let's try again!

Paul has, so far in his letter to the Christians at Ephesus, spoken about redemption, and then about redemption lived out — through mutual submission. So he concludes by observing that this redeemed life comes under attack — the devil does not want this to spread.

Paul speaks about the devil and spiritual powers as if they definitely exist. That might cause some people problems. I don't propose we talk now about whether the devil is real or the personification of the problem of evil. The effect is the same. If you read the Screwtape Letters, by CS Lewis you will find the observations of a senior devil to a junior devil are true, whether you believe Uncle Screwtape might exist or not.

However, let's talk first about the many things that distract us from, or undermine us in the pursuit of living the good life through Christian faith, and then how the armour of God can protect us.

So, if I were Uncle Screwtape I would want to make you, the Christians, ineffective by a range of means. I would want you to stop praying. I would tell you the Bible was too difficult to read. I would tell you that you're useless, and you can do nothing. I would point to your neighbour and say 'look at them! Look at their shiny new car! Look at their shiny new kitchen. Yours isn't that great. *You're* not that great. You will be better if you have that new thing. You will feel more confident with *that*, and you're not that much without it. I would stir up trouble in your life to distract you. I would get others to lie about you, or your people, tempting you to anger, tempting you to fight back. I would sidetrack you onto a good thing, to distract you from the best thing, and I would get you focused on an unrealistic best to make you give up on an actual good. I would lie to you that religion causes more wars than any other cause, and I would lie that science disproves your faith, and that you are ridiculous. And I would get you doing stuff that is subtly wrong, because everyone else is doing it, so you don't even notice what you're up to.

You may already identify with some of these 'stratagems' and think, 'yes, this is true — this does make the practice of my faith harder.' And you may, if you think carefully, think of other things that undermine your faith.

How does the armour of God help us?

Well, firstly, let's remember that the armour is the armour of *God*, not the armour of your own making. It is God's protection for you. But also *you need to consciously put it on*. You must be deliberate in protecting yourself, so that you can be effective and happy.

We start with the belt of truth. Except that we don't. The image is better translated as girding your loins — securing your undergarments in place with a girdle before anything else. And what's the point of that image exactly? It is that truth — *integrity* — is the thing you put on first, that is closest to your skin. Be honest with God, yourself and others, do what you say and say what you do. That's first — closest to your skin.

Next comes the breastplate of righteousness. The devil gets in most successfully when you give him something he can work with — anger, materialism, envy. So don't allow it. Be deliberate in *doing the right thing*. Be generous, be kind, pay your taxes, give to charity, love your neighbour, be patient in traffic, be slow to judge, do what you can to make the world better.

Thirdly our feet are shod with the gospel of peace. Think of a rugby player. They have studs on their boots so that in the scrum they can stand firm and not slide backwards. Even better, they can collectively push forward. And how do we stand firm? With the gospel of peace. Paul had been a man of conflict — a persecutor. On the Damascus road he found Christ, not in conflict but in grace. For Paul the good news is *peace with Christ, peace with the Christians, peace with the gentiles, peace with himself*. And he wants this for you. Your firm foundation is the gospel. If you believe Christ rose from the dead and God forgives you, then all of who you are is founded on Christ's new life. This doesn't shift or change. The ground doesn't move from under you. You stand firm.

Fourth, the shield of faith. A Roman shield was a huge rectangle that covered almost all of you. Roman soldiers could band together and use their shields to make a 'tortoise', covering all sides. And the shield is faith in God. Trust in God. Not money, not your fists, not fences and locks. Belief that whatever happens, God is big enough to deal with this. God doesn't need you to protect him, you need God to protect you. The devil doesn't want you to believe that God is interested in your prayers, in your wellbeing, in what you love or long for. Hold onto your faith and you will resist so much, and have a much quieter life because of it!

Fifth is the helmet of salvation. Now isn't this interesting — we so often see salvation as the hope that when we die we go to heaven, not hell. But Paul says take it now! *Now* you know you have salvation, *now* you have the assurance of God, *now* you can protect your head for your thoughts and your eyes to see clearly. *Now* you can live with absolute hope. And this expectation of salvation protects us from all the devil's wiles of short-termism. If we look through the eyes of eternity, we can withstand the temptations of impatience and the pressing need for the now, in the face of a long term better. In salvation, you can keep your head, while about you are losing theirs.

Finally, the sword of the Spirit. Watch any sword fight, be it fencing or the three musketeers, and you remember that swords are defensive as well as attacking. The Spirit gives us the words to defend ourselves — words born of the Word of God. Think of Jesus's resisting the devil's temptations. For each temptation there was deep knowledge of the law by which to defend himself.

Finally finally — not a piece of armour, Paul simply urges prayer. Just pray. Pray for me, pray for you, pray in the Spirit, pray all day. I'm so bad at hearing this advice, and yet when I do...

In summary, Paul suggests we should be deliberate about taking on God's protection through living with integrity, doing good, standing firm on the gospel, having real faith, being positive about our salvation, using God's word — and prayer.

If we live this way, Uncle Screwtape and all the other devils will have little to use to get at us. We will be more united, we will be happier, we will be more effective. And we will have a much quieter life.

Amen.

SDG.