

So we've leap-frogged Ephesians 5, and landed smack bang in a most familiar passage, the armour of God. Hands up if you've heard someone preach on this passage before? Exactly, it's familiar. And often that message we hear refers to spiritual warfare. However spiritual warfare is only fourth in the line of things we're up against, according to Paul. Verse 12 talks about rulers, authorities, powers of this dark world and spiritual forces of evil. So whilst spiritual warfare is a reality, and we must equip ourselves for it, I believe there's more to what Paul is on about here.

And to make sure we're all awake, I'm going to share a few interpretations of this passage that you may not have heard before... Just for fun really.

#1 – Armour of God as protection of sexual purity. It's true! Belt of truth over our privates, breastplate to shield our emotions and desires, the shield to defend our heart... It's all there.

#2 – Commentator John Muddiman suggests the passage demonstrates the natural progression through Christian life and development. The belt, which is truth, is the acceptance of the gospel. Then the breastplate of righteousness, which is holy living; the shoes are the gospel of peace, which is a readiness to witness to others; faith as a shield, which means being rooted in Christ; the images of helmet and sword may refer to the final goal of Christian life. Thus the sequence is conversion-holiness-evangelism-endurance-salvation-judgement.

#3 – The Armour of God pyjamas! Check out <http://www.armorofgodpjs.com> - this website not only sells the highly fashionable, salvation guaranteed pjs, but it also has an easy ABC for salvation, not to mention the smoke billowing over the title.

#4 – The Modern Soldier's Armour of God – “Stand therefore, having your waist girded about with the cartridge belt of truth, and having on the flak-jacket of righteousness: and your feet shod with the combat boots of the preparation of the gospel of peace. Above all, taking the air-cover of faith, wherewith you shall be able to quench all the fiery incoming missiles of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the automatic rifle of the Spirit, which is the Word of God: maintaining constant contact with Command Central by praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching with all perseverance and supplication for all your fellow soldiers...”

I love how this picks up Jesus' teaching of non-violence and peace...

Or for those who learn by watching movie montages with embedded bible passages, have a look at this...

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kX63X8cFXIU>

If you remember back to over a month ago when Ian kick-started this series, he spoke about the cultural context for the people of Ephesus. They lived in a large, culturally-diverse city. One thing that was common, though, was Roman occupation and oppression. Roman guards were present in all aspects of life, including market and temple, and the Christians knew the reality of adversity in their attempts to live out their faith.

I believe this is why Paul uses the military images. These things were common for his audience, they understood the symbolism and metaphor at place. Now, arguably, our world is experiencing much more war and oppression than the people of Paul's time, however we're somewhat sheltered from it here in western Sydney. So we must dig deeper into the passage to discover the message for us today. Not all of us possess a battle-strength sword and breastplate, but Ephesians 6 contains a message and a challenge for each of us.

If we start from verse 10, as I did this week, and read through, we find Paul's first instruction, a command before he refers to armour. Verses 11, 13 & 14 focus on the phrase 'take your stand'. "So that you can take you stand," "you may be able to stand your ground," and "stand firm then." Paul's charging his readers to stand against those mentioned in verse 12, and he later offers the images of armour to support us in our stand.

The armour of God is not about getting dressed up and then hiding away. It's defensive, yes, but I believe it is only useful when we have something to fight for – once we have made our stand. Paul's instruction is aimed at equipping and strengthening his readers as they stand.

The Reverend Bill Loader highlights that the nature of the armour is disarming the destructive dynamics and structures which threaten humanity. He offers a fresh insight into Paul's intention; in contrast to the commonly understood purpose as outlined in that last video clip.

As we go through each piece again, see how Paul speaks about the Godly expressions often lost in military zones and societies.

- The belt of truth – truth is so often the first casualty of hate (or politics)
- The breastplate of righteousness – righteousness, goodness & justice should be at the centre, close to the heart
- The feet grounded in peace – not marching, rather spreading the good news. Isaiah 52:7 proclaims "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"
- The shield of faith – this is just as much about faithfulness and trust in God as it is about belief
- The helmet of salvation – has a strong sense of security and hope, for a time without war.
- The sword of the spirit is the active element of the image. It's the weapon to engage in challenging the structures of injustice and fight against the barriers to hope and love.

We are not called to simply endure and resist. Paul shows us that we're equipped to make our stand, in accordance with his first commandment in this passage. Paul is telling to know what we're in for, and to be prepared for it.

So if Paul truly is encouraging each of us to abandon our Christian naiveté, then that raises a different set of questions. If Paul is telling us to no longer lock ourselves in our Christian commune and ignore the realities of the world in which we live, I wonder what that might mean. If we are to stand against the rulers, authorities, powers of this dark world and against spiritual forces, what or who would that be for us today? For Paul's audience, it was obvious. They were oppressed by the Romans, and often shied away from their calling as people of God in their hectic society. For us, we'd need to look around and take it in.

When I look around, I see examples of rulers and authorities who we must resist throughout the world. We see their faces in our newspapers, they are labelled as the axis of evil, or the 'regime.' Even corporations and governments sometimes arouse our suspicion or concern. However, as I thought more about the 'powers' and 'forces,' images came to mind that strike a lot closer to home. Whilst I could come up with a long list of causes we could align with, I decided to, in the spirit of effective learning techniques, come up with a simple ABC.

So the first – the attitude of affluence. We all know the Make Poverty History campaign, however it's long been known that before poverty can be abolished, affluence must be abolished. According to Times Magazine in the UK, the richest tenth owns 85% of the world's assets. Those with assets of \$500,000 could consider themselves to be among the richest 1 per cent in the world. Those with net assets of \$2,200 per adult were in the top half of the wealth distribution.

Mark Sayers says the problem invariably starts with comparison and competition, which is a basic human instinct, however we're comparing ourselves with those who have more, rather than those whom have less.

Second, the behaviour of bullying. Any school yard is a scene demonstrating bullying in its primal stages. However adults are guilty as well, especially when we look at corporations and private enterprise. To get ahead, someone has to lose theirs.

And the 'C' is for the culture of consumption. This is an entire sermon right here, but in short, we're a society wired to consume at every level – food, accessories, relationships, worship? We must step back and look at the impact our lifestyles have on those around us and on our world.

Any of these, the attitude of affluence, the behaviour of bullying, the culture of consumption, require people to stand up and resist. And we may well need support and protection, which is what Paul's on about with the armour image.

But before we go getting carried away with our own private crusades, and before we resign to never changing cultures by ourselves, we must view this passage in light of Paul's overall theme in Ephesians – the same theme we've been exploring the past 5 weeks. Throughout the letter, Paul is urging the Ephesians to come together. The call for unity is embedded in this passage too.

We're not called to stand alone, but rather to stand as a community. It is in our unity we find strength and influence. Take as example the Don't Trade Lives campaign, fresh in our news this week. For 17 months there has been a united campaign encouraging Cadbury Australia, as well as other chocolate companies, to switch to sourcing only Fair Trade chocolate. This week, Cadbury announced that not only are they reverting to their original recipe, but that from Easter 2010, they'll be guaranteeing fair trade sources for their dairy milk chocolate. A great success for a campaign which has seen small efforts from a large collection of people.

To wrap it up, I hope you have heard Paul's challenge this morning. That we may stand together. We will find strength and protection in the gifts of the spirit. We will find solidarity and support from our community who stands beside us. And whatever it is that we stand against, I pray we will resist and work to bring hope and love into the situation, and among the people.

Amen