

# The Armor of God

BY BOB FOX

**In our fantasies we imagine that the struggle against evil is about running to the front lines, charging into the fray, and setting things right by projecting our own power. It's not. The book of Ephesians calls us to put on God's defensive armor and wield just one weapon, as it were, "the Word of God."**

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*Ephesians 6:10-18*

**Y**ou were not surprised to see political novice Arnold Schwarzenegger elected governor of California, were you? I wasn't. "The Terminator" as leader fits well with our underlying cultural programming. It's the epitome of our obsession with power and rugged individualism to elect a man who offers no carefully nuanced positions, but only Hollywood catch phrases.

Arnold Schwarzenegger's movie characters project power. Typically they are bare-chested with guns in both hands, and always on the offensive. They resonate well with the people of a super power. If our security is threatened, we prefer a first-strike policy to get rid of the bad guys.

Doesn't God want evil to be fully defeated and utterly destroyed? Shouldn't we be God's little action heroes ridding the world of all the bad people and things? Isn't the word of God an offensive weapon to beat people over their heads until they agree with the truth?

In our fantasies as we imagine the struggle against evil, it's about running to the front lines and charging into the fray. It's not, "Put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground" (Ephesians 6:13, NIV<sup>†</sup>). The American way is to grab a howitzer of holiness, a grenade launcher of grace, and an M-16 of mercy as the weapons for God's warriors so that we can be victorious over evil.

### **FACING THE REAL ENEMY**

Certainly evil is a serious presence in our lives. Some people may have the notion that human beings will do the right thing if left to our own devices, but Scripture and common experience tell us that is not so. In the newspaper every day we read about evil happening in our world. We see evil present in our own lives and, disturbingly, in the life of the church.

Evil is insidious and seeps into our lives wherever it can. Like water into a leak-prone basement, evil keeps on probing until it eventually finds a way in.

We prefer to think of evil differently, as embodied in a person; then it is easier to understand and to target. “If only we change *or* eliminate so-and-so,” we say, “the world will be safer and everyone will be happier.” We’ve done this for years, yet the world is not discernibly safer.

Though we’d like to live in a simple and straightforward world, the truth is we are called to “take our stand against the devil’s schemes” (6:11, NIV). Evil is so much more conspiring and sneaky than we can handle. If temptations were not so attractive, we wouldn’t buckle under to them—we’re never tempted to steal the neighbor’s garbage, are we? Evil would be easy to best if it were not so infernally attractive. Ironically, just at that moment when evil does not seem all that bad, it is really insidious.

“For our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (6:12). Evil is not a small matter to be dealt with flippantly; it is a cosmic reality that exists not only in people’s hearts, but in systems and cultures that sit on top of human beings and lead them to behave in malicious ways. This makes evil even more dangerous and powerful—thus, the American soldiers who abused the Iraqi prisoners were not all wicked people, but they were caught up by a cascading system of evil that swept them away from their moorings.

The forces of evil are pushing us toward what John Paul II calls “a culture of death,” where life generally is devalued; most people are cast as members of interest groups to be manipulated, rather than individuals to be loved; and the non-productive ones are shuffled out of sight entirely so that their needs can be ignored. Evil fosters an atmosphere where attractiveness, rather than our common creation by God, determines one’s value. No one cares much about community anymore; each individual’s reality is bounded by self-interest that brackets out the rest of the world.

### **DRAWING THE PROPER WEAPON**

No wonder we think the truly Christian response is to launch an offensive against evil. Yet, if we go on the offensive—setting things right by projecting our own power, judging people, and killing the bad guys—the message of the Gospel is distorted and its power is dulled by our own evil.

Jesus never attempted to take over the political realm to make the world behave. Jesus never raised an army of the elect to slay the oppressors and to bring about justice and righteousness.

Two radically different worldviews stand opposed. One says we should use the world—the power of government and its political systems—to make people choose faith. The other is the ethic of Jesus who

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never led an army, but died on a cross.

Radical evil is defeated, Ephesians tells us, by standing firm. The defeat of evil is already accomplished in the cross, where the Son's willingness to die for humanity results in the salvation of all who would follow him.

We are called, then, not to take up offensive weapons, but to put on the ar-

mor of God. The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of peace, the shield of faith, the helm of salvation: not a single offensive weapon is among them. The only weapon, as it were, is "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God."

Notice that the shield of faith protects disciples from the "flaming arrows of the evil one." Flaming arrows—finally, here is mention of a long-range offensive weapon, one that can be fired from distant hiding places! But isn't a sword (of any kind) a poor match against this sort of attacker? The sword of the Spirit is surely a defensive weapon to be used only when the enemy has gotten too close; it is no help until we can look into the face of our opponent. Put on this defensive armor Ephesians says. Carry only the gospel truth and wield it only at close range.

This scripture passage takes another startling turn at the end. Once we are adequately prepared for battle, we expect that we will be ordered into the fight against evil. Yet when we are fully armed, this is not the time to fight, Ephesians warns, it is time to pray! It is our cultural expectation (probably not shared by the people of Ephesus) that in prayer one bows the head and bends the knee. How does such a warrior, who is fervently praying with hands clasped and body folded into a fetal position, reach for a big metal sword? As one is praying that God will defeat the evil that is at one's door and push back the evil that is already in one's life—what good is such an unwieldy weapon of death anyway? The sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, is what we really need.

**WHEN THINGS ARE UPSIDE DOWN**

A four-year-old elbowed his father one Sunday during the morning worship service in our church. “You know what you get when you turn the cross upside down?” the boy asked, his active mind fixed upon the large cross suspended over the baptistery. Quickly he supplied the answer, “You get a sword!”

When you turn the cross upside down, you get a sword—that uncomfortable truth has plagued the church throughout its history in our ungodly holy wars and military crusading. But when you turn a sword upside down, you get the cross. It is the hope of the world.

Peter drew his big metal sword to cut off the ear of the high priest’s servant in a futile effort to forestall the crucifixion. But Jesus healed the man, turned Peter’s sword upside down, and hung there in suffering obedience.

Put on the armor of God, Ephesians says, and then pray. Pray that the mystery of the gospel, through its powerful ways that we cannot understand, will change the world. In this cosmic struggle between God and the forces of evil, prayer is our ministry and our means in the clash.

It is time we got off of our high horses, stopped believing in our innate goodness and all we suppose we can do, and acknowledge that we can never defeat evil. We are called to pray.

**NOTE**

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