

## The Whole Armor of God

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers  
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,  
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Ephesians 6:10-20

In this conclusion to Ephesians, the author tells us that we are engaged in a spiritual battle against cosmic forces. And then, using an extended analogy of the armor of a Roman soldier, the author lists a number of resources that God has given us, which we can use in this battle “against the spiritual forces of evil.”

“Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh,” says Ephesians, “but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present evil age, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

Some of you may be more familiar with the King James Version of this passage, which speaks in terms of “principalities and powers.” Either way, the language and imagery in this passage may sound archaic to our modern ears. And upon first hearing it, we may find it difficult to understand its relevance to our contemporary lives.

I was first exposed to the biblical idea of principalities and powers as an undergraduate at Cornell University. I had the privilege of being part of a conversation between a small group of students and the lay theologian, lawyer, and social activist, William Stringfellow. Stringfellow was an Episcopalian who viewed his vocation as a Christian to be a lifelong struggle against the principalities and powers.

What are they? In Stringfellow’s book, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*, he offers a deluge of examples: “The very array of names and titles in biblical usage for the principalities and powers,” he says, “is some indication of the

scope and significance of the subject for human beings. And if some of these seem quaint, transposed into contemporary language they lose quaintness and the principalities become recognizable and all too familiar: they include all institutions, all ideologies, all images, all movements, all causes, all corporations, all bureaucracies, all traditions, all methods and routines, all conglomerates, all races, all nations, all idols. Thus, the Pentagon or the Ford Motor Company or Harvard University or the Hudson Institute or Consolidated Edison or the Diners Club or the Olympics or the Methodist Church or the Teamsters Union are all principalities. So are capitalism, Maoism, humanism, Mormonism, astrology, the Puritan work ethic, science and scientism, white supremacy, patriotism, plus many, many more—sports, sex, any profession or discipline, technology, money, the family—beyond any prospect of full enumeration. The principalities and powers *are* legion.”

As Stringfellow’s list of examples should make clear, principalities and powers are everywhere we turn. They are ubiquitous. They have lives of their own. They compete with each other for survival and dominance. And they make claims upon our human lives, for good or for ill.

Stringfellow continues: “[People] are veritably besieged, on all sides, at every moment simultaneously by these claims and strivings of the various powers, each seeking to dominate, usurp, or take a person’s time, attention, abilities, effort; each grasping at life itself; each demanding idolatrous service and loyalty. In such tumult it becomes very difficult for a human being even to identify the idols which would possess him [or her].”

The earthly images, ideologies, and institutions that Stringfellow identifies as principalities and powers are more than their physical/material manifestations. There is an inner, spiritual dimension to them as well.

Probably the most in depth biblical study of the principalities and powers is the trilogy written by biblical scholar, theologian, and

activist Walter Wink. His definition of the principalities and powers captures both their material and spiritual dimensions: “The ‘principalities and powers’” he writes, “are the inner and outer aspects of any given manifestation of power. As the inner aspect they are the spirituality of institutions, the ‘within’ of corporate structures and systems, the inner essence of outer organizations of power. As the outer aspect they are political systems, appointed officials, the ‘chair’ of an organization, laws—in short, all the tangible manifestations which power takes. Every Power tends to have a visible pole, an outer form—be it a church, a nation, or an economy—and an invisible pole, an inner spirit or driving force that animates, legitimates, and regulates its physical manifestation in the world.”

To give you a little better grasp of the reality of the principalities and powers, I want to turn to John Steinbeck’s novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Set during the Depression and the Dust Bowl in the United States, Steinbeck gives a moving account of how the principalities and powers work. He describes how landowners, or spokesmen for the landowners, had to evict tenant farmers from land their families had worked for generations.

Some of the owner men were kind because they hated what they had to do, and some of them were angry because they hated to be cruel, and some of them were cold because they had long ago found that one could not be an owner unless one were cold. And all of them were *caught in something larger than themselves*. Some of them hated the mathematics that drove them, and some were afraid, and some worshiped the mathematics because it provided a refuge from thought and from feeling. If a bank or finance company owned the land, the owner man said, The Bank—or the Company—needs—wants—insists—must have—*as though the Bank or the Company were a monster, with thought and feeling, which had ensnared them*. These last would take no responsibility for the banks or the companies because

they were men and slaves, while the banks were machines and masters all at the same time. . . .

. . . the owner men explained the workings and the thinkings of the monster that was stronger than they were. A man can hold land if he can just eat and pay taxes; he can do that.

Yes, he can do that until his crops fail one day and he has to borrow money from the bank.

But—you see, a bank or a company can't do that, because those creatures don't breathe air, don't eat side-meat. They breathe profits; they eat the interest on money. If they don't get it, they die the way you die without air, without side-meat. It is a sad thing, but it is so. It is just so.

The landowners finally tell the tenant farmers that they will have to get off the land, and when the farmers protest, the owners reply:

We know that—all that. It's not us, it's the bank. A bank isn't like a man. Or an owner with fifty thousand acres, he isn't a man either. That's the monster.

Sure, cried the tenant men, but it's our land. We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it's no good, it's still ours. That's what makes it ours—being born on it, working it, dying on it. That makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it.

We're sorry. It's not us. It's the monster. The bank isn't like a man.

Yes, but the bank is only made of men.

No, you're wrong there—quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it.

Like Steinbeck's Bank, principalities and powers are bigger than any one human being, have spirits and lives all their own, and seem beyond our control. They are "creatures"—"monsters" as Steinbeck characterizes the Bank. They are what the letter to the Ephesians says we must stand up to and struggle against.

To do so, God gives us "the strength of Christ's power" and "the whole armor of God" with which to wage peace instead of war. God gives us an arsenal of spiritual weapons with which to resist the principalities and powers: "the belt of truth," "the breastplate of righteousness," "the gospel of peace," "the shield of faith," "the helmet of salvation," and "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

What does such resistance look like in practice? One example comes from the small Huguenot village of Le Chambon, located in the southern French Alps not far from Lyon. The Protestant pastor of the village was the Rev. André Trocmé, who was deeply committed to nonviolence. On Sunday mornings, he would preach the Sermon on the Mount, love of God and love of neighbor, reverence for life, and the necessity of resisting evil with good.

During World War II, the day after France surrendered to the Nazis, Trocmé preached a sermon to his flock in which he proclaimed: "The responsibility of Christians is to resist the violence that will be brought to bear on their consciences through the weapons of the spirit."

Subsequently, the people of Le Chambon began to hide Jews in their homes and farmhouses, and they arranged for these Jewish refugees (many of them children) to reach the safe haven of Switzerland. In doing so, they risked their lives. Occasionally, the Gestapo raided the town. Leaders were arrested and imprisoned and some were later killed. But in spite of the repression, the resistance in Le Chambon continued. By the end of the war, the villagers of Le Chambon had saved some five thousand Jews who were fleeing the Nazis.

It is a miracle that Le Chambon survived through the war. In the last months of German occupation, the dreaded Tartar Legion commanded by SS Colonel Metzger was poised to destroy the village and its inhabitants. But a second German officer, Major Schmebling, dissuaded Metzger from attacking. Years after the war, Schmebling told Trocmé of the fateful conversation: “Colonel Metzger was a hard one, and he kept insisting that we move in on le Chambon. But I kept telling him to wait. . . . I told Metzger that *this kind of resistance had nothing to do with violence, nothing to do with anything we could destroy with violence*. With all my personal and military power I opposed sending his legion into Le Chambon.” The village of Le Chambon was spared.

The Christian villagers of Le Chambon found strength in Christ and in Christ’s power. They put on the whole armor of God, which enabled them to stand firm against the systemic evil of Nazi Germany. They used the weapons of the spirit to resist the violence of Hitler’s brutal regime.

Wherever there is evil, wherever there is systemic injustice or oppression—whether it be racism, sexism, hunger, poverty, domestic violence, unbridled nationalism, sex trafficking, genocide, you name it—God gives us “the strength of Christ’s power” and “the whole armor of God” with which to resist. God gives us truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and God’s word with which to stand up against the principalities and powers. God gives us these tools to do battle with monsters. They may not sound like much, but they are more powerful than we know. Thanks be to God. Amen.