

### Riding for the Lord (Armor Provided!)

I started riding motorcycle about, oh, ten years ago. (I had ridden a bit way back in college—a very small Suzuki 90, that I had no business taking on I 135 from Newton to Wichita and back. Its top speed was 50 mph.) This time, with the help of a friend, I bought my present bike on Craig’s List. A 1978 Kawasaki KZ 650, bored out to 720. Let’s just say it has no problem on I 135.

Upon buying the bike, I immediately set out to buy the gear I would need. A friend of mine gave me this helmet. I like the color; it goes with my daypack. And I like that the visor opens up for fresh air when riding more slowly around town. I found this jacket at the DAV thrift store in Wichita. I was advised by friends to get the thickest, heaviest leather jacket I could find. Which also makes it kind of hot in the summer. I have to ride with the zipper down and as many buttons unbuttoned as I safely can. To go with it, I bought a pair of black leather gloves. (You know, it must be one of “Murphy’s Laws” that you will always lose just one of your gloves. Making the other one useless. Oh well!)

Then of course you need shoes. Boots, everyone told me. Leather boots. Black leather boots. I checked the army surplus, but just couldn’t pull the trigger (so to speak) on anything they had. I finally found these at Cabela’s. They’re hiking boots, but they give good protection.

Then just a couple of years ago, another friend of mine found this jacket on E-bay. It has padding—you could say, “armor”—at various crucial points. And, it’s made out of mesh, so it is much more comfortable to ride in during these summer months.

One thing I learned early on in this mid-life re-entry into motorcycle riding, is it’s important to have the proper, protective clothing. It’s important to have armor. Just in case.

Armor was a common sight in first-century Ephesus. It was part of the Roman Empire. And so Roman soldiers were everywhere. In full armor. And of course, fully “armed,” with dagger, and sword, and spear. So the Apostle Paul had a great metaphor at his fingertips. And he pulled it out at just the right time. *“Finally,”* he wrote at the very end of his letter, *“be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God.”*

Let’s face it. Being a follower of Christ in first-century Ephesus was dangerous. Paul himself was writing from prison. Granted, he had not yet been pierced with a Roman soldier’s spear or stabbed with a sword or had his head cut off with an axe (which presumably is how he eventually died). But he had suffered almost everything else. He had been beaten with rods, mercilessly lashed with a “Cat o’ Nine Tails,” stoned, very nearly to death. He could have used some armor.

Why is following Christ so dangerous? Because Christ said some things and did some things that made people very mad. Mad enough to kill him. Because Christ broke some rules, challenged some mores, questioned some values. And in a supposedly well-ordered and well-regulated society, you just don’t do that. You don’t talk about the “gospel of peace” in a society well-regulated by war. You don’t talk about the supposedly “good news” of peace that simplistically thinks it can bring enemies together, Jew with Gentile, for example; Greek with

Roman. Such a society doesn't need peace; it needs the sword! You know, to "keep" the peace. When they have no idea what true peace, the gospel of peace, truly is.

Is following Christ today dangerous? That depends. It depends on how seriously we take him. Everything he said, and did, how he lived, how he died. Christ was crucified by the Roman state and their well armored and armed soldiers. Because he made them angry. He made them afraid. He challenged their values. He was starting to turn everything they knew and loved upside down.

Our 16<sup>th</sup> century Anabaptist forebears took Christ very seriously. And man, was it dangerous. Thousands of them paid for it with their lives. Just like Jesus.

Our world wants to make following Jesus safe. They want us to tone things down—way down. Following Jesus is all about your personal salvation, they say. It has nothing to do with how you live—and certainly doesn't require you to live dangerously.

But Paul knew better. He had met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. And Christ had said to him (or rather about him, to Ananias, "*I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name*" [Acts 9:17]). Sure enough, Paul had suffered for Jesus' name. Horrendously. And so in his letter to the believers in Ephesus, he wrote this, saving it until the very end. If you're going to ride with me—if you're going to take Jesus seriously, and try to follow him—you're going to need armor, *the "whole armor of God."*

Except . . . you're not really talking about armor, are you Paul? You're not talking about actual steel-forged breast plates, and helmets, and shields. And you're certainly not talking about actual swords, manufactured for one purpose, namely to kill people.

No, I'm not, Paul said. "*For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, 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.*" In other words, sure, individuals of flesh and blood do wield the sword and spear, using them to thrust and to hack. But it is the commands of the cosmic powers of darkness that blood and flesh follow.

No amount of steel-forged armor is going to save your life. Because once they decide to take it, one way or another, they will. The armor you and I need is "*the whole armor of God, [why?] so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.*" Wait a minute. It sounds like Paul expects them to be killed for their faith. As he has correctly concluded that he himself will.

And then he expands on his holy, God-breathed metaphor of armor. "*Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.*" There it is. At the end of each day, that's what it comes down to. ***The gospel of peace.***

But Paul is not quite done. "*With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one . . . [perhaps some of you have had flaming arrows shot at you at some point?] . . . Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword . . . the sword, Paul? we interrupt. You want us to buy and actually carry a sword? No! Paul clarifies. *The sword of the Spirit . . . which is the word of God.*"*

And then Paul adds one "final" reminder. "*Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication . . . keep alert, and always persevere in supplication.* And please, he adds. *Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel [which four verses earlier he had call the "gospel of peace," here acknowledging that it is a mystery, and not everybody is going to understand it]—for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.*"

Speak, yes. We also must speak. But first, pray. Yes, we must pray. For apostles like Paul. For prophets. For ourselves. I invite you to pray with me now . . .

Lord God, thank you for the Apostle Paul. For his courage and conviction. For boldly proclaiming the gospel of peace, even when it could get you beaten, or pierced, or shot. Give us even a small measure of his courage. That we too may boldly speak and act out the mystery of the gospel. That we may ride with you, and for you. Regardless of the consequences.

Amen.