Superheroes are identified by their particular powerful armor and weaponry. In DC comics, we think of Wonder Woman’s lasso, the Green Lantern’s ring, or Batman’s suit, cape, and gadgets. In the Marvel comics, we think of Captain America’s shield, Thor’s hammer, and Iron Man’s iron suit. Every one of the contemporary movies based on those comic books features a dramatic moment—accompanied by swelling music and intense close-ups—when the hero lifts, embraces, or dons that magical item and, in so doing, reveals his or her identity and power. This pattern of dramatic armor-dressing actually comes from Greek and Roman epic poetry: in the *Iliad*, Homer takes a great deal of time describing how Achilles intentionally picks up his weaponry, how he carefully puts on his armor, and how the blacksmith-god Hephaestus had made them. In the *Aeneid*, Virgil does the same with Aeneas, whose shield is also forged by the gods. If it is true that the clothes make the man, then heroes and superheroes are made by their armor and weaponry.

In today’s Epistle, when St. Paul exhorts the Christians in Ephesus to “put on the whole armor of God (Eph. 6:11),” we might think that each individual Christian is supposed to become a powerful spiritual superhero who fights spiritual evil with spiritual tools that each one of us must learn how to master. Clad in magical armor, engaged in a battle with social injustice or personal vice, we might think that, in the words of David Bowie, “we can be heroes, just for one day.” It is true that St. Paul’s audience is Greek and would know all about the *Iliad*; it is true that Ephesus is not far from the actual site of the legendary Troy; and it is true that Paul is classically educated and would be familiar with Greek and Roman epic stories and symbols. However, as familiar as St. Paul is with contemporary pagan culture, he is fundamentally Jewish. He identity is rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, from which the Epistle’s martial imagery actually comes; unsurprisingly, it carries a very different message than the classic pagan epics.

Discussing “the whole armor of God” that we are to put on, St. Paul lists five elements. He tells us to “Fasten the belt of truth around your waist,” “Put on the breastplate of righteousness,” “Take the shield of faith,” “the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:14-17).” The purpose of these things is “to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one (6:16)” and “to proclaim the gospel of peace (6:15)” so that we “may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm (6:14)”) Here is the problem: if we understand this armor and these weapons to be tools that we take up by ourselves and put on by ourselves to “quench,” “preach,” and “stand” by ourselves, we are doomed to failure and disappointment. A Gospel of heroic self-reliance, self-protection, and self-improvement is a false gospel; it is devoid of our fundamental and total need for God. If we know anything about ourselves, we know that we cannot do anything good, much less heroic, for our society or for ourselves on our own. St. Paul knew this, too. He was the one who wrote, “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do (Romans 7:19).” Even when we discern a good thing that we want to do, and even when we set out to do it, we continually find ourselves so consistently tripping over our ego needs, our emotional neuroses, our physical weakness, and our overall self-centeredness that we always sabotage our efforts to do or to be good. And if we don’t understand this about ourselves, then we are even more lost in ourselves.

When St. Paul wrote about putting on the armor of God, he was actually quoting from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah as he preached about the Messiah, the long-anticipated, God-promised Savior of the world. Speaking of the Messiah, Isaiah says, “Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins (Isa. 11:5).” In other words, the “belt of truth” that Paul describes is a part of the Messiah’s spiritual armor; not ours. Foreseeing a time when truth would be absent, justice would be corrupt, and no one could or would stand up for them, Isaiah says that the Messiah would “put on righteousness like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head […] and come to Zion as Redeemer (Isa. 59:17, 20).” The breastplate of righteousness and helmet of salvation that St. Paul describes are parts of the armor of God that the Messiah would wear—not us—as He works to restore truth and justice. Therefore, the armor of God is not something that we put on to fight our own battles on our own; it is what God has put on Christ, the Messiah of the world. When St. Paul exhorts us to put on the armor of God, he is actually describing our need to put on Christ: to be wrapped, enclosed, and defended by the Holy One who is our only hero, champion, and Redeemer. The question, then, is how do we put on Christ, who is our armor? Is this just another way of saying that we need to do something on our own to enter His life and protection?

St. Athanasius, in the 4th century, said that in Christ “God became Man so that Man might have union with God.” At His Incarnation, when God the Son of God entered into His own creation,--when in the Person of Jesus He lived, died on the Cross, rose again from the dead, and ascended into Heaven, --when He sent us His Holy Spirit to dwell in us at Pentecost and at our baptism, God bound Himself to us forever. He dressed Himself in our human nature so that He could dress us in His Divine nature; He took a human name so that He might name us as His own. As St. Paul wrote to the Galatians: “All who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes (Gal. 3:27).” At our Baptism, when we were united with Him, His truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, and everything else that belongs to Him became ours through Him.

We will still and always face trials in this world, but as St. Paul proclaimed: “In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us (Romans 8:37.)” When we remember Whose we are, we realize who we are: not superheroes, but children--children of God. Spiritual armor and weaponry are not things we work to master; being one with Christ, we are already fully equipped. The armor of God is actually our baptismal gown.