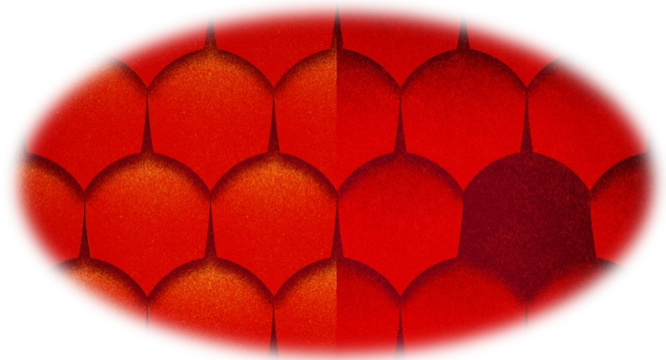


God & me,

ACTUALLY

Smaug is a greedy, fearsome, flying dragon from J.R.R. Tolkien's novel *The Hobbit*. He hoards a vast mound of treasure beneath the Lonely Mountain. This destructive, fire-breathing beast has driven the Dwarves from their homes and taken over their kingdom.

Smaug was bigger than anyone had imagined and covered in impenetrable armor, except for a missing protective plate on his underbelly. Aware of this vulnerability, Smaug deliberately spent years sprawled across his wealth in his underground lair, allowing diamonds and gemstones to embed into his belly, armoring his only weakness. Nevertheless, his vulnerability became his downfall.



We all have a missing 'plate of armor' that makes us susceptible to the accusations of a very real and personal presence of evil who seeks to undermine God's possibilities in our lives. The accuser exploits human weaknesses and vulnerabilities such as fear, pride, temptation, and desire. He manipulates doubt and confusion to destabilize, discourage, and ultimately destroy our relationship with Christ.

Becoming Me and Vulnerability

How we experience each moment—our feelings, thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors—is shaped by the lens of our cumulative life experience, which we call our "grid."

Our grid plays a positive role in our lives, providing us with a *heuristic*—a mental map—that helps our brains decide in a split second what we are facing and make ‘best guesses’ based on our previous experience.

The Complexity of Personhood



As newborns, we begin assigning meaning to our experience of “objects,” such as significant caretakers. Before verbal language skills, we start forming internal mental images that can be positive (nurturing) or negative (frightening). These cognitive maps influence our personality development and can become the source of emotional challenges and relational issues throughout our lives.

Additionally, how we learn to attach to others can impact our relationships into adulthood, affecting how we connect with others—

including God— and respond to intimacy and conflict.

What it Means to Become a Christ-follower

“Okay, so we’re complex beings. What does this have to do with the authentic Christian life?”

Our ever-evolving personhood, healthy or diseased, becomes ‘home’ for God’s indwelling Presence. The Holy Spirit dwells within us when we establish a personal relationship with Christ.

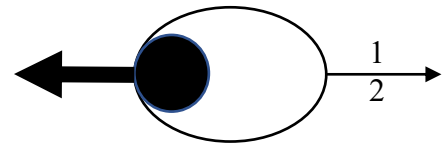
The Holy Spirit makes His home amid all of who we are, which is the byproduct of our lifelong experience of events, circumstances, and people, shaped through the lens of our ever-evolving grid.

The Apostle Paul describes the renovation of this inner person, where our thinking, emotions, conscience, and will are gradually being restored according to the *imago Dei* in which we were created.

Whether aware of it or not, being a Christ-follower is more than just about salvation. It is a journey toward wholeness— a process of being conformed to the image of Jesus.

The Accuser and Me

Enter the accuser, Satan, who is likely familiar with our life development process—personality and habits, temper, inadequacies, fears, doubts, strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures. Our accuser knows only half of our yet-to-be-determined future: *his* vision for our lives.



By understanding our person and past, he targets our ‘missing armor,’ our vulnerabilities, where we are susceptible to his temptations, accusations, counterfeits, and lies.

Guarding Your Soul: The Brilliance of the Bible

Here’s a mind-boggling thought: Consider the vast number of possible deficits in the human experience. Now, multiply those possibilities by every unique person, situation, generation, and culture in history. Unfathomable.

While there is no shortage of possible “missing pieces of armor” that make us vulnerable, God offers a clear path to all for guarding our souls. It’s nothing short of brilliant!

The New Testament includes a letter written by the Apostle Paul to several emerging small groups of new Christ-followers scattered throughout the third-largest city in the Roman Empire, a bustling sea port on the western coast of Turkey.

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians consists of six chapters. In the last chapter, he discusses the true nature of their spiritual resistance. In Ephesians 6:10-17, he describes a spiritual war conducted by a supernatural adversary against those who have put their faith in Jesus. Paul characterizes this fight as a battle for the mind, where winning is simply “standing.”

The Apostle details six spiritual capacities (often called “weapons”) for fighting this war. The grammar’s details and nuance give us insight into how this works in first-century Ephesus and 21st-century America, i.e., for all people of all time.

The first three ‘weapons’ are distinct from the second group, as the grammar implies, “having already put on the _____.” We will focus on the first spiritual capacity, the “belt of truth.” Using the metaphor of a Roman soldier, the “belt” refers to the underlying garment or belt that tucks away anything that would trip us up, thus assuring our balance and mobility.

Paul’s letter falls into two sections of three chapters each: *beliefs* and *application*. The discussion about spiritual warfare is found in the *application*. So, if the “truth” is the application, we will discover what it refers to in the letter’s first section, which is about *beliefs*.

And in the first part of Paul’s letter, he repeatedly teaches about two primary beliefs:

1. The truth about God—God’s character.
2. The truth about how God thinks about us—our identity.

“Having already put on the belt of truth” (lit.), which takes place when we devote our lives to Christ, we, therefore, win the battle for the mind when we align our inner lives with what God says is already true about:

1. Who He is (loving).
- and**
2. Who we are (His beloved).

While five additional ‘weapons’ are mentioned, without this foundational “belt of truth” in place, we are indeed defeated.

In summary, amid the ongoing “restoration of our hearts” (Dallas Willard), we can continue to walk in freedom and joy despite our vulnerabilities—“missing armor plates”— as we align our inner lives with the truth of who God is and who we are to Him.

This is the work of Christian spiritual formation.

1. PREPARING TO PARTICIPATE—*Relinquish*

‘Holy Scripture is a . . . fenced-in acreage of words and sentences of many different sorts and kinds, but all of them integral to the work that is being done, working in long, steady rhythms in which we, the readers, participate but don’t control. We meditatively enter this world of words and give obedient and glad assent. We submit our lives to this text that is “endlessly bringing together / heaven and earth...”¹

The fine art of “being ready to be ready” may be the most important spiritual discipline for the 21st century. The choice to wait and be led is countercultural, flying in the face of control, productivity, and efficiency. Right now, stop. Consciously put down what you carry into this encounter with God in Scripture so that your hands are available to take hold of what God wants to give you.

¹ Peterson, Eugene H. *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 40.

2. ABSORBING SCRIPTURE—*Read*

Zechariah 3:1-7

Read this short passage aloud several times, emphasizing the following word in the sentence.

¹ Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. ² The LORD said to Satan, “The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?”

³ Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. ⁴ The angel said to those who were standing before him, “Take off his filthy clothes.”

Then he said to Joshua, “See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you.”

⁵ Then I said, “Put a clean turban on his head.” So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the LORD stood by.

⁶ The angel of the LORD gave this charge to Joshua: ⁷ “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘If you will walk in obedience to me and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you a place among these standing here.’”

3. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?—Think

More about the characters and setting. The details matter here!

- **Joshua the high priest**

Joshua was a descendant of Zadok, making him part of the priestly line.

His family background: Zadok is a significant figure in the Old Testament, primarily known as a high priest during the time of King David and King Solomon. Zadok was a descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses, making him part of the Levitical priesthood. This position was essential for the religious and social life of Israel.

Before the exile: Joshua is often identified as the son of Jehozadak, who was among the priests taken into exile in Babylon (1 Chronicles 6:15) when the Babylonians, under King Nebuchadnezzar, destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC. It is believed that Joshua was born in exile.

After the exile: After the return from Babylonian exile, Joshua was appointed as the high priest. His leadership was crucial during the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, alongside Zerubbabel, the governor.

His role as the Spiritual leader: The high priest serves as a mediator between God and the people, offering sacrifices for their sins and maintaining the covenant relationship. He oversees the rituals and sacrifices conducted in the Tabernacle (and later the Temple), particularly on important occasions like Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), when he enters the Holy of Holies to make atonement for the people.

Important fact about his role: The high priest must adhere to strict purity laws, which include avoiding certain impurities and maintaining a holy lifestyle.

- **Angel of the Lord**

With the power to act on God's behalf to rebuke Satan and to forgive and cleanse from sin, the Angel of the Lord is generally seen as a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ.

- **Satan**

Satan constantly accuses us before God—so much so that his actions become his official title: Hebrew, "*ha satan*,"— "the adversary or accuser." It is used here with the definite article to describe a character quality rather than a proper name— "the accuser."

Accusation is Satan's full-time occupation. As Joshua stands before the pre-incarnate Jesus, the adversary is there accusing him. When the apostle John was given a vision of the end times where he saw that Michael and his angels would throw Satan out of heaven:

"...the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them before our God day and night." (Revelation 12:10)

- **Standing at his right side to accuse him**

As high priest, Joshua is the representative for the people of Israel, who have already been accused, convicted, and sentenced to 70 years in exile for spiritual adultery, counterfeit religion, idolatry, injustice, and more. As the representative of the people, Joshua is thoroughly guilty.

“Standing at his right side.” A prosecutor stands in a courtroom before the judge at the right hand of the accused to formally bring charges against him. This is a formal accusation seeking a conviction and punishment.

Key Observations

- As the high priest, the representative of the people, Joshua could not be more guilty, and all parties in the heavenly courtroom know it: the accuser, the angel of the Lord, and Joshua.
- The accuser picks a perfect time in history to level these accusations. He has seen God punish Israel by dismantling their society, destroying their temple, and scattering the people across the Ancient Near East. This is a defining moment in history when God’s plan for a forever family hangs by a thread.
 - God agrees with the accuser that His people (thus, Joshua as their representative) *are* guilty, which is why He sent them into exile in the first place.
- - There is no legal remedy available for acquittal—no application of Old Testament religious laws can appease in this situation. This is understood by all present.
 - There is no synagogue or temple for sacrifices or purification rituals.
 - There is no sacred place such as the Holy of Holies for atonement of the sins of the people.
 - There are no religious implements, vestments, or qualified animals for purification rituals.
- This is a ‘hold your breath’ moment in history when God’s creation hangs in the balance.
- The accuser has misjudged God’s intent for punishing His people. While Satan seeks destruction, God’s goal is restoration. This core commitment to His people is expressed in Ezekiel 33:11—

“Tell them, ‘As sure as I am the living God, I take no pleasure from the death of the wicked. I want the wicked to change their ways and live. Turn your life around! Reverse your evil ways! *Why die, Israel?*’” (Message Translation)

God’s discipline is intended to prompt renewal and redirection, not ruin.

Guilt is a mechanism intended to awaken our need for repentance, leading to redemption. In this way, guilt is a prelude to grace.

Illustration: *Lady the Dog*

There is nothing easy about being a dog in downtown Seattle, a concrete wilderness of curbs and cars, with parking meters to mark your turf.

A land where cats sheltered behind windows smugly ignore, and mail carriers on foot are hard to come by.

Liberation came one fall day when Lady moved to the orchards of Central Washington: a working farm, a leaning barn, and more fields to roam than could properly be done in a month of Sundays.

Dogs have a keen sensitivity to the practical stuff in life, like when to wait for kids to get off a school bus. Somehow, they know.

At just the right time each afternoon, Lady pads down the rutted dirt drive to the sleepy two-lane country road. During her tenure as a dog-to-school-kids, Lady never misses a day. Whether a waist-deep blizzard, withering heat, or horizontal rain, the first kid off the bus is met with a wet pink tongue and a pair of dirty paws.

When it snows, the slope behind the barn becomes a groomed toboggan run. Lady chases the action up and down the hill for hours, breaking only to sip hot chocolate with mini-marshmallows from a metal thermos cup and chew down a peanut butter and jelly sandwich made just for her. She is one of the gang.

As shadows overtake the hill, a recession of soggy kids and sleds empties from the icy wood. Looking like the Queen of Sheba, Lady the Dog is perched proudly atop a wooden sled pulled by her shivering courtesans.

Spring roars in like a lion, bringing six dead chickens to the back door with an angry rancher and his shotgun to the front. Lady has developed a taste for chickens. She was hardwired with a passion for one thing: birds. How does a German Shorthair ignore 800 years of breeding?

Lady's life is in the balance. A county farm agent gives her one last chance: aversion therapy. A dead rooster is wired around her neck until it rots off. This was the only hope for Lady to change.

Within a couple of days, Lady reeks of bloated death. Kids get picked up from the bus stop to avoid the sight and stench. They wait until Lady is away to run between the house and the barn. The loyal dog patiently sits near the porch, staring at the closed front door for days.

A month passes, and Lady, once the center of attention, lies dejected at the corner of the house. Her head fallen, eyes dulled, and spirit broken—a slimy, matted mass of feathers with sinewy patches of gray flesh dangling from the wire around her neck.

On a warm summer evening, the oldest son returns home with a date. She has heard about Lady. As the car crawls up the driveway, her eyes fix on a dark, brooding figure slumped near the house. Stepping from the car, the smell of rotting flesh makes her gag.

Without explanation or comment, she paces across the driveway and over the lawn to the dog in the shadows. Lady lay motionless. Folding to one knee, Lady's eyes flicker up to meet hers. She pauses, takes a measured breath, and then, with her eyes squeezed half shut, plunges her fingers into the rawness, untwisting the wire until the carcass drops to the dirt with a thud.

Stroking Lady's head, she whispers, "You don't need that anymore. You don't need that anymore."

At that moment, Lady was released to walk out of a new way of being, which she forever did.

Old habits die hard. Sometimes, God can only change us when we are ready to change. It is an act of grace when He allows us to come to the end of ourselves. Until we are sick of "what is," we often won't embrace "what can be."

Grace is often God getting us to say "uncle."

God will leave us without maps, a compass, or even a known destination to get us there. Along the way, He lets us tramp through the scattered fragments of our lives in the hope of whittling our self-reliance into submission.

It is the journey from independence to dependence.

4. WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR ME?— Pray

Not, "What does it mean *to* me? but "What does it mean *for* me?"

How would you describe your missing "armor plate"?

How do you experience spiritual vulnerability?

What's your sense of what Jesus is inviting you to notice or be open to?

5. CHOOSING GOD'S INVITATIONS—*Respond*

This is about activating our will and aligning our thinking and feelings with what God is inviting us into. It means we have to change.

What will it mean for you to welcome and receive God's invitations?

How might this challenge you to reconsider how you think about or relate to God?

How might this challenge you to reconsider how you think about or relate to yourself?

TO PONDER

While our brains constantly analyze and make decisions, visual art invites us to ‘shift gears’— to settle in and absorb. Instead of taking action, we present ourselves to be acted upon.



Dream Theater Album Cover (1992)

Images and Words is the second studio album by American progressive rock/power metal band *Dream Theater*, released on July 7, 1992. Larry Freemantle created the distinctive artwork that depicts a girl alongside several themes from the lyrics.

In your time of reflection, what do you notice? What are you drawn to? What invites you?