

My Hounds are Bred out of the Spartan Kind

For centuries the warriors of ancient Sparta had the rest of the Greeks - and the world in general - wetting their togas. These hardened warriors turned the hoplite troop from a minuteman militia to a professional class of hardcore fighting men.

A key component of Spartan armor was the *aspis* or shield. As a man marched off to battle, his wife presented his shield with the warm words *he tan e epi tas*, which being interpreted is "Come back with it or come back on it." Not the kind of thing to stitch onto a sampler, but then Spartan women didn't go in for needle point anyway. In fact, a Spartan who returned from the field without his *aspis* bought an automatic death-sentence. You could ditch anything else – helmet, chest protector, shin guards – but not your buckler.

The logic makes sense. Other items of the panoply protected the individual soldier. But the Greek hoplites fought in phalanx, a tight-packed formation which presented a solid shield-wall to the advancing enemy. A fighter's *aspis* protected not only himself, but the man to his left. It also formed a brick in the dam which held back the flood of opposing forces. Let the enemy punch a hole at one point in the phalanx and he could pour through, dividing your forces and routing your entire army like Jackson rolling up the Yankee lines at Chancellorsville.

All of this leads us to Ephesians 6 and Paul's famous metaphor of the spiritual armor. Granted, Paul's paradigm was the legionnaire, not the hoplite, but the Romans did with military tactics what they did with everything else: imitate and improve. Roman soldiers did not engage in single combat like a medieval broadsword battle or a Renaissance fencing match. They trudged straight ahead in lockstep formation, a moving barricade of solid shields.

In this light, it is interesting that Paul makes faith the shield in the believer's battle-rattle. Abandonment of any other item doubtless imperils my personal spiritual health, but abandonment of (literally) "the shield of the faith," a coward's sprint from the very combat of belief, leaves those around me at increased risk.

Perhaps our whole problem with Paul's imagery is our inveterate American insistence on individualism. "An Army of One" makes a stirring slogan, but armies win wars because the "one" in question consists of many who act in unity. Spartans called themselves "*homoioi*," or "the ones who are

alike." The name reminded them that conquest comes through community. We carry our faith forward together, and no one acts – for good or ill – in isolation.

One more word about the shield may be in order. One fought with it as well as behind it. In *Till We Have Faces*, C. S. Lewis imagines an ancient drill instructor teaching a pupil the ropes. "Understand from the outset," says the old master sergeant, "your shield is a weapon, not a wall. You're fighting with it every bit as much as your sword." In other words, a battlefield presents no hiding places, no safe havens. If you want to hide, stay out of the skirmish in the first place. If you enter the fray, plan on facing danger.

In a day of individualist spirituality and DIY religion, Christians do well to learn the lessons of the shield: we bear it on behalf of others, and we take the fight to the foe. Our shields are shaped like crosses, and our spouse says as we receive them, "With this or on this." There is no other way to come to Christ on the great and final day than carrying our cross, and it is the favored few who arrive being carried on it.

Forward, March!
Doug