

# ENTERING THE BATTLE

*SERIES: FINDING YOUR PLACE IN THE STORY*

**By Danny Hall**

Have you ever asked yourself, “Why does life have to be so hard?” I keep thinking it ought to just get easier at some point. But the truth of it is, no matter what we do, no matter what our circumstances in life are economically, educationally, professionally, or relationally, there’s always something. We are always in a battle.

We try to make progress in our spiritual growth. Sometimes I’m amazed at just how often I’m frustrated by the same old bad habits, the same old struggles. You’d think after all these years I would have gotten beyond some of this, and yet those struggles are still there.

The idea of battle pervades our culture. At the international level there’s always some war going on. Now, of course, we’re in the middle of this war in Iraq, and the so-called war on terror. Regardless of whether we think it’s a good idea or a bad idea, we can’t get away from it.

There are different opinions in our society about how we ought to organize ourselves socially as a nation, what morality ought to look like, what ought to be valued in our society. We go back and forth about how much of that should be legislated, what should be done. Opposing opinions are so heated and intense that the only term that seems adequate to describe that debate is “cultural war.”

Battle is just part of the human experience. From the very beginning of time there has been struggle. That's the nature of the world we live in.

In the book of Ephesians Paul describes what God is doing in history and what our role is. He concludes by reminding us that what he's been talking about happens in a very hostile environment.

We've surveyed the first three chapters of the book, looking at the broad scope of what God is doing. He had created us in his image to be worshipers of him and to be in fellowship with him, but through sin we were alienated from God and the world was ravaged by our sinfulness. Then God in his great mercy reached down to rescue us out of that. He filled us with his Holy Spirit and united us all as one great family from every nation and tribe and tongue and socioeconomic group. And part of God's strategy for rescuing people from the bondage of sin and all of the wreckage that surrounds it is to call out a people for himself who will worship and love him through Jesus Christ, and proclaim his glory to the world.

In the last message (Discovery Paper 4984) Paul talked about the power of the Holy Spirit, who is living and working in us to make the presence of Christ real in our lives and help us to understand the overwhelming, liberating love that Christ has for us. And again, as we are liberated by the love and presence of Christ in our life and the power of the Holy Spirit in us, as the people of God we are to be out in the world declaring the glory of Christ and how others too can be rescued by God's redeeming love.

In subsequent messages Steve Zeisler is going to pick up in chapters 4, 5, and the first part of 6, where Paul gives us specific practical instruction about what it means to live out our faith in certain arenas of life. What will it look like for the people of God to be united as a family, to learn to serve and walk alongside one another? What will it look like for the rescued people of God in their marriages, in their relationships with their children, and so on?

But in order to set the framework for those practical applications, in this message we're going to jump forward and look at the end of the book, Ephesians 6:10-20, which lays out Paul's picture of the battle that we are engaged in when we seek to live out our faith in Christ.

## **Be strong in the Lord**

Verses 10-13:

**Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.**

What we have here is a call to battle, a command for us to enter into it and to stand firm. In fact, four times in this passage he repeats the command to stand.

Some commentators divide the book of Ephesians into three words: sit, walk, and stand. Up until now we've been sitting; we're seated in the heavenly realms with Christ, with all the wonderful, beautiful blessings of our union with him, the exalted Lord of the universe. We have been ushered into that spiritual fellowship with God himself in Christ, and we're sitting with him in all of his power and glory. In the middle of the book, chapters 4, 5, and the first part of 6, we're walking day by day in a manner worthy of our calling. But when he comes to the end and talks about the context in which we live all this out, he says, "Stand." We have entered into a conflict for which we have to be prepared, in which we have to fully engage. We have to be ready to do whatever it takes to stand firm, to not lose ground in a real and cosmic war.

Now, this command to stand firm comes from God himself, who is our leader in this battle. "Be strong in the Lord..." This is not a battle of our choosing, and ultimately this is not a battle about us, although we are both participants and potential victims in it. Ultimately it is a war for the cosmic control of the universe. God created the angels of heaven even before he laid the foundation of this world (Job 38:4-7), then Satan rebelled against God and was cast out, we are told, with a third of the angels of heaven (Revelation 12:3-4). And the cosmic spiritual battle was on. From the moment God created this world and created you and me in his image to fellowship with him, it has been the strategy of Satan to destroy that which God loves, in particular the people made in his image.

Will Satan succeed? Certainly, throughout history there have been many examples of the ways that this battle has taken its toll in individual lives and in whole societies. But this is the Lord's battle. Notice what Paul says: "Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power." This is not a battle that you and I engage in out of our own strength; we would be totally defeated. In those moments when we feel overwhelmed by life, we must remember, as Paul is going to instruct us, that our resources come from God himself. It is his power working in us.

Now, Paul has talked a lot about power in this book, as he does in a lot of his writings. He is writing this from a Roman prison, so when he speaks about power, he understands very well what power is about. Caesar was lord of a great empire, and Paul was in Caesar's prison because of his faith. But Paul saw that there was a power greater than Caesar's, greater than any human power. It was the mighty power of God himself, who lives within us, the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is in that power that we are commanded to stand firm.

Paul goes on to describe the nature of this battle. He says our struggle is not against flesh and blood, that is, other human beings, but against "the powers of this dark world...against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." This is a spiritual battle. This is important for us to understand. Our enemy ultimately is not other people. It is Satan himself, behind the scenes, trying to bring down God's wonderful creation, trying to ruin his most precious possession, the people created in his own image. When we engage in this battle, we have to see beyond the human opposition and understand that this battle flows right out of that cosmic war between God and the forces of evil arrayed against him. Paul describes the spiritual forces as rulers, authorities

and powers. These words refer to military ranks. This implies that we are engaging an enemy that is organized, entrenched, and purposeful in our world, with Satan at the top of the heap of demonic forces. This is not a casual conflict, but an orchestrated war in the spiritual realm.

Now here's where it gets into our nitty-gritty, day-by-day experience. When you and I are having trouble in life—it doesn't matter whether it's on the global level in world events, or on the personal level, e.g., we can't figure out why we can't get along with the jerk in the cubicle next to us—it's easy for us to personalize it. "That person is my enemy." But Paul asks us, as he has over and over again in this book, to look beneath the surface of the circumstantial, superficial appearance of things, to understand that this person is caught in this cosmic battle as a prisoner of war, a victim of Satan's schemes, and that the real battle is for his or her rescue.

In verses 14-17 Paul explains this idea of our being prepared for battle. He says God has fully equipped us.

## **The armor of God**

**Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of**

**the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.**

These verses describe spiritual armor that we have been given. There are six pieces of armor, and they're divided grammatically into two sets of three. The first set of three is described as pieces we've already put on. The implication is that we have these pieces on all the time. Let's look at them.

First, we have taken up the belt of truth. The design of Roman armor gave a soldier flexibility and freedom of movement in combat. The belt was the part that gathered up the flowing robes they wore as clothing, keeping them from getting in the way as they fought. It was a foundational garment. When Paul says we have put on the belt of truth, he's talking about the ultimate truth—the truth of the gospel, the truth that has been finally and completely revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Certainly there is an implication of the whole breadth of God's truth, the things that are true about God's nature, his revelation. But ultimately the truth in Jesus Christ is what we've put on.

Now, in our world, having an anchor of truth is very important. We live in a world that says truth is relative, that there is no absolute truth, no one big idea that answers all the questions, no place to drop an anchor, so that we have to create one of our own. Into that Paul says, "No, there is truth, and there is *the* truth, and that truth is Christ." He is the foundational belt.

Next Paul says we have taken up the breastplate of righteousness. The breastplate covered the vital organs. Here I think he's talking about the righteousness of Christ, the justice of God. Paul declares that God is the just Judge of the universe who is going to put all things right, having judged sin in Christ and vindicated himself and his followers through what Christ has done. And because we are in Christ and are righteous before God and vindicated before the world for our faith that Christ is Lord, we declare that God is both just and the justifier, the holy God who can forgive those who come in faith because of what Christ has done. God as the righteous One protects his followers who are righteous in him against all accusations that the enemy would throw at them.

The third type of armor that we already have on all the time is the shoes of the readiness of the gospel of peace. The shoes, of course, were foundational for the good footing a soldier needed to function in warfare. Now, peace is an important concept to Paul. I don't think he's speaking here about a feeling of peacefulness. Paul is talking about the fact that we are at peace with God, and as an extension of that, as he has developed in this book, we are at peace with one another. It is the cessation of hostilities, if you will. The gospel breaks down all barriers between us and God and between us and other people. That is a sure foundation for entering into the battle.

The second set of three pieces of armor comprises those we are told to take up. They are to be appropriated in the battle on a regular basis as we live. First he says we are to take up the shield of faith. Here he is talking about living a life of trust in God. Taking up the shield of faith is basically acting on the basis of the things that are true of us in Christ. In the battle we're attacked on all sides by denials of what God says is true about us, of the truth of the gospel, of the power



of the Spirit living within us. So we walk by faith, and that faith shields us from whatever fiery darts, as Paul describes them here, Satan hurls at us. His attacks tempt us to be discouraged, to get off track, to believe the wrong things, to set wrong priorities. We must trust day by day that God's truth stands firm, that he is our Lord and Savior, that he is the just God of the universe, that he is moving, that we are at peace with him, and that he will prevail.

Next Paul talks about taking up the helmet of salvation. The helmet protects the head, the center of our thought life. Here we need to understand how Paul uses the word "salvation." When I was growing up, what salvation meant to me was that I believed in Jesus, and therefore I was saved. But that's not the way Paul normally uses the word "salvation." I think here he is using it as he usually does to speak of that all-encompassing story of God. He's saying that God has provided salvation from beginning to end. A new heaven and a new earth are coming. There will be a time when God will make everything right, when Christ will truly be revealed as the universal King of kings and Lord of lords. That eternal existence with God in the new heaven and new earth is the sure and complete and final culmination of salvation. So the scope of salvation is really from God's rescue of us out of the bondage of sin through Christ, through his journeying with us in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, to that assured future culmination of his salvation story.

There is nothing more discouraging or debilitating to our spiritual lives day by day than a sense of hopelessness. But the message of salvation is the ultimate source of hope. God wins the day. The end that God has planned will come. Satan will not stop God's purposes. We need not

despair. We can look forward in hope to God's great victory. So with the assurance of that hope we can engage in the battle.

Finally, the last piece of weaponry to take up is the sword of the Spirit. It is often observed that the first five pieces of weaponry are defensive, intended to protect us, whereas the sword is offensive; with it we go out to take ground, to attack the enemy. Note that Paul describes it as the sword of the Spirit. It is not the sword of my ingenuity or clever arguments. It is that which is energized by the Holy Spirit himself, and it's described here as "the word of God." What does Paul mean by that?

There are two words in the New Testament that are translated "word." One is *logos*, which normally means the whole revelation of God, specifically in Christ. The other word is *rhema*, which is the one Paul uses here. It means a lot of different things in different contexts.

Sometimes it means the written word, sometimes it means certain ideas that are communicated. Here I think Paul means what he often means by the phrase "the word of God," and that is the gospel. We proclaim the liberating gospel message that Christ is indeed the Lord, the Redeemer, and he is the One who can rescue people from the bondage of their sinfulness. This is the offensive weapon, if you will, that we take out in the battle to gain new ground, to rescue people who are caught as prisoners of war and victims of this cosmic conflict. This is the way we bring new people into the family of God. Now, certainly the totality of Scripture, the great story of the Old Testament that Paul knew inside and out and had come to understand afresh in Christ, all comes into play. But it points toward that one great triumphant truth: Jesus is Lord. And as we proclaim that in the power of the Holy Spirit, it transforms lives and rescues people.

I've been praying and thinking about this whole idea of the sword of the Spirit, the proclamation of the word of God, the gospel, as that great offensive weapon. There are ironies in the way we do so many things, and there is a great irony in this. And it's even more ironic that I'm mentioning this in the middle of a sermon. As Bible-church evangelicals, we really believe in the expository teaching of the word. But all of a sudden it dawned on me this week that sometimes I have more confidence in my explanation of the word than I have in the word.

One time a few years ago one of the college students was sitting beside me in a worship service. Someone had just read the Scriptures, and when they were finished reading they made a few comments about the passage. He leaned over to me and said, "Do you guys ever just read the Bible without saying something about it?"

I'm not saying that what we do in terms of helping people understand the word of God is not important. Paul was an explainer of the Scriptures. But it is the gospel message itself that has the power to transform lives.

Paul concludes this section with the final preparation for battle.

## **Prayer is crucial**

Verses 18-20:

**And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.**

**With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.**

**Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.**

In these closing words he says over and over again, “Pray. Keep on praying. Take every opportunity to pray about everything. And while you’re praying, pray for me.” Paul understands that our success in the battle is directly related to our communication with the living God himself, who is in charge of the battle. To use the battle analogy, we are on the front lines engaged in this war, trying to gain ground for the glory of Christ, building his kingdom and rescuing lost souls, and we need to be in communication with our General in order to know whether we’re on the right track. Prayer keeps us alert to the issues of the battle that are around us all the time. We need to be reminded of the resources we have and to live in that communion and fellowship with God, to draw from him the strength that we need for the battle.

It’s instructive to me what Paul asks the Ephesians to pray for: that he will have boldness. When I read that, I am both stunned and encouraged. Paul would be preaching, and a mob would beat the tar out of him, drag him out of the city, and leave him for dead. He would revive, and his friends couldn’t wait to whisk him off to safety, but what did he do? He went back into the city to preach some more! That seems like the definition of boldness, far different from the way I

normally react to tough situations. We think of Paul as being the most fearless communicator of the gospel. Yet here he says, “Please pray for me that I can preach this message fearlessly.”

Behind all the ways that we put Paul up on a pedestal, he was human. To walk into hostile arenas where people were going to oppose him was no picnic for him, either. He talks in 1 Corinthians 2:3 about how he came to the Corinthians in fear and trembling. You see, boldness is not just being stupid enough to walk into any danger. Boldness is looking into a difficult situation, knowing that you’re called to be there, and trusting God in order to go forward and overcome your fear. Paul asks for prayer for that boldness.

In the parallel book of Colossians, which Paul probably wrote about the same time as he wrote Ephesians, in 4:3-4 he also asks for prayer, and there he asks for two additional things. He asks for opportunities to preach the gospel, and then he asks for clarity when he preaches it. That’s another head-scratcher. This is Paul! He wrote Romans! Doesn’t he know what the gospel is? But you see, Paul understands the nature of this battle. He knows that our explanations and announcements of the gospel can be twisted, misheard, and misunderstood, and everything is at stake. It is the most important message in all the world. He doesn’t want to get in the way of that truth. He doesn’t want to articulate it even the least bit unclearly. He just wants to proclaim Christ simply and in the power of the Holy Spirit. So he says, “Please pray that God will help me make the gospel clear.” Paul understands that to be prepared for this battle, we have to bathe our lives in prayer. We have to pray for boldness and clarity and opportunity as we go out to gain new ground for the Lord.

So we are living out the very telling of God's own story, but this part of it is in the middle of a raging battle in which a defeated foe is making a last-gasp effort to take as many people down with him as he can, to destroy the lives of those God loves.

How do we engage in this battle day by day? The Scriptures testify, and we observe in the history of the church, that there are all kinds of ways that Satan works. I do believe that sometimes demons possess people, and certainly they oppress people. But the primary way that Satan affects you and me is by deception, getting us to believe the wrong thing. He has two great weapons at his disposal.

One is the systems of this world, the way societies have developed over time under the evil influence of Satan, without God. There are evil thought patterns in world systems of government and economics. Satan can use those to get us to believe the wrong things about what really makes life work, about what is worthy.

His other weapon is our own flesh, our weakness, our susceptibility to move toward enticing things that are not what God would want, and to contribute to our own destruction.

We often see the triad of the world, the flesh, and Satan in Scripture. One of the lies of the world system that Satan sometimes gets us to buy in to is the safety of fitting in, the comfort or affirmation that we feel when we're a part of whatever the prevailing notion of the moment is, when we're part of the "in" group. Take, for example, the Palm Sunday story. We have the beautiful picture of Jesus entering Jerusalem and people crying out, "Hosanna!" to him.

(Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-44; John 12:12-16.) But I wonder how many of those who joined the throng and shouted Hosannas that day, just five short days later were yelling, “Crucify him!” (Matthew 27:15-25; Mark 15:6-14; Luke 23:13-25; John 18:38-40.) As the popular mood swung, it was no longer “in” to be a Hosanna-shouter; it was much safer to shout, “Crucify him.” And we are all susceptible to that peer pressure.

All of us have different ways that Satan tempts us, lies that he wants us to believe. But I came up with my own top ten ways that Satan battles me. I’ll share them with you.

### **Lies to watch out for**

Number 10: Quality time makes up for quantity. I don’t really have time to pray, but when I pray that thirty-second prayer, I really pray it well. And I don’t have time to really study the Scriptures, but when I read my one verse of devotional, I really think about it. Or when I’m going to spend time with my wife or kids, I give quality time even though with my busy life I don’t have quantity. Well, there’s a little bit of truth there sometimes; we do want the time that we spend to be quality time. But the truth is that our priorities are so mixed up that we want to tell ourselves that we don’t need time to build relationships with God and with others.

Number 9: I can’t really make a difference. What possible effect can my life have? There’s only one of me. Sometimes I get paralyzed by that thought. But the truth is that you’re not just one person. And even if you were, as a believer in Christ, all the mighty power of God that raised

Jesus from the dead is alive and working in your life! But more than that, you're part of God's people, united together in the power of the Holy Spirit. And you can make an enormous difference, both individually in another person's life, and as a member of God's people in our world.

Number 8: I need to be sure I don't lose myself or my identity. In the last several years this idea has been voiced in western culture. We live in a society that is me-oriented. I've even heard people talk about marriage that way. When we get to chapter 5, Steve is going to take us through those passages where it says to submit ourselves to one another. My goodness, what an awful idea! I might lose myself! But Jesus taught that if we want to save our life, we must be willing to lose it (Matthew 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; John 12:25). If we order everything we do around what's in it for me, or whether I'm going to be fulfilled, we're going to miss the great adventure that God has invited us on.

Number 7: If I don't get into the best schools, my life options will be limited. This is a good Silicon Valley one. We worry that if our children don't get into the Ivy League or Stanford, their lives will be ruined. So crazy things happen. Before a baby is even born, when couples are only expecting, they're signing up their child up for preschool, because if you don't get in the right preschool, you won't go to the right kindergarten, and so on! In a society that defines success in ways that are silly and out of whack with God's priorities, we can get lost in trying to keep up with what the world says is the way to go about things. I think God wants us to determine not to play that game. I'm not saying that a good education isn't important. If you go to Stanford, that can be a good thing. But we can become driven by this idea of success.



Number 6 has two parts. First, God is most pleased with me when I'm doing things for him—going to church, preaching, teaching, studying, participating in a discipleship group. And if I can just do a little bit more for God, God is going to be more pleased with me. But God loves you for who you are, apart from what you do. There's another side to the coin: God loves me, so it doesn't matter what I do. Either way, the focus is on the doing rather than on being in relationship with God. If I truly believe he loves me, it will make a difference in my life, and those works that he has created for me (see 2:10) flow out of relationship with him. So we have to center on that. But I get caught up in one or the other of these extremes many times as Satan tries to trip me up.

Number 5: Entertainment is the same as rest. I actually wrote this list sitting in a Starbucks—a Starbucks in Los Angeles, where I had just driven six hours to go to a baseball game with my son. The next day I drove the six hours back. And by the way, I've gone to another baseball game since I wrote that, which makes two this week. The irony is not lost on me at all. Now, I had great fellowship with my son, and I had a great time with the person I went to the ballgame with on Friday night. It's not that amusement is bad. But it's not the same as rest. When God talks about rest of the soul and the spirit, he's talking about cessation, about removing ourselves from all those things to contemplate him, to be in relationship with him, to draw nurture from him. There's a time of reflection and recovery in his presence that is built into the idea of Sabbath and a true Biblical rest. We have bartered away this restorative quiet of communion with him and have substituted entertainment.

Number 4: There is no devil. All this talk is just mumbo jumbo, fanciful, crazy ideas. The other extreme is, the devil made me do it. We either put too much emphasis on Satan's control of our life, or we ignore him altogether. But the reality is, God through his Spirit gives us the power to choose, to act, to stand firm. We need to recognize that Satan is real, but he's not so powerful that we have no control.

Number 3: My worth is measured by my achievements. We live in a world where everything is about how productive we are. We are addicted to this idea that we're so important that we've got to produce. There's no place for a sense that I am more than just my accomplishments.

Number 2: Knowing a lot about God is the same as knowing God. This is one we have to watch out for at PBC, because we're great students of the Bible, and we learn a lot about God. There's a corollary to this one, too: I can know God without knowing very much about God. These are equal and opposite errors. We can't really know God if we don't know about him, but knowing about him is not the same as knowing him. So we do have to be in God's word, learning from his revelation, talking with each other about who God is and what we're learning, increasing our understanding about him. But in doing so, we need to remember it's always directed toward relationship with him, not just cataloguing knowledge.

Finally, number 1 on my list: If only I had \_\_\_\_\_. You can fill in the blank for yourself: more money, more time, a wife or a husband, a better wife or husband, a better boss.

We live in a consumer-oriented society and we are bombarded by advertising that is dedicated to the proposition that someone out there has exactly what we need. We all understand that, and yet

we're still pulled in. So much of our economic system is based on creating the sense that we are incomplete without something. And if there's a bigger lie in our culture, I don't know what it is. We're always longing for one more thing to fill the hole in our heart. That's the nature of the battle.

Well, your list may be very different. But the good news is that the God of the universe understands that we're in this battle. He has given us his very presence in our lives to strengthen us in the middle of the battle. He has equipped us in his love and power to have real victory. So I encourage you to remember that you have been beautifully called by the God of the universe who is writing his salvation story, to his glory and to the rescue of every person who will come to him. You're caught up in that. You're in a battle, but it's a battle that you will win, through the power of Christ. Joyfully recognize that God is enough to bring you victory!

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Ephesians 6:10-20

Sixth Message

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