



A few years ago, football player Conrad Dobbler was featured in a popular television commercial. Perhaps you remember it; in a matter of a few seconds, he managed to incite a near-riot among a group of spectators. At his urging, one side would claim, "Less filling." "Tastes great!" the other would retort. As the controversy was about to turn into a fist fight, the camera cut to Dobbler, who was sneaking out through a back exit. Believe it or not, this tongue-in-cheek tactic concocted by Madison Avenue to sell beer illustrates a

WINNING

INVISIBLE BATTLE

vital spiritual lesson: It's important to identify your true enemy. Those fans in the bleachers thought their opponents were those who disagreed with them. In truth, the entire audience had only one enemy: Conrad Dobbler.

Likewise, Christians tend to misplace the blame for the opposition they face. They look to their boss, their job, their neighborhood, the social system, the church, the government, and so on. Any or all of these may be sore spots in need of attention, but they are not the problem.



The whole of the universe is divided into two rival kingdoms. The first is the kingdom of light or righteousness, ruled by God. The other is the kingdom of darkness or evil, commanded by Satan. He is our enemy—our only enemy—and our world is the battleground where his efforts to compete with God are played out.

"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12).

Calvary was the definitive final blow that sealed the devil's fate. When Jesus Christ died on the cross, a cataclysmic thing happened: Satan was soundly and completely defeated. He was beaten beyond hope of recovery and he knows it!

You may ask, "If Satan is defeated, how come I have habits I can't kick? Why are there problems I can't overcome and challenges I can't face? If this guy has been so soundly defeated, why is he so powerful?"

Satan is defeated. But, like a person beaten in life, he doesn't want to go down alone.

During a recent season, the NBA's Dallas Mavericks missed the play-offs by a country mile. They were defeated long before the season ended. Still, during



their final game, they played with a passion for victory. Why? Because dealing a late-season loss to a rival team might affect that team's chances of becoming champions. In other words, "We may not be going to the play-offs, but neither are you!" In the sports world, that's the way the game is played.

Satan's goal is to rob us of our own spiritual "championship bid" and drag us down to his level. If you're saved, he can't drag you into hell, but he can try to render you ineffective and miserable on earth.

Satan knows what Paul knew, that God has "blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places with Christ" (Ephesians 1:3). The devil understands our potential; he knows what God can make of us. And he is committed to seeing to it that we never reach that potential.

No doubt, this leads you to the next logical question: Why does God allow a defeated foe to continue waging war? The answer is fairly simple: God uses these skirmishes to reveal His glory.





Satan is most effective when he works secretly, behind the scenes. Like Conrad Dobbler in the commercial I mentioned earlier, Satan would prefer that others get the credit for his work. In fact, Satan would be perfectly happy to convince you that he does not exist at all.

That's why most of his attacks seem to be coming from other sources, most notably from other people.

Wouldn't your life be wonderful if it wasn't for people? Most of our problems can be traced to one person or another. It may be your mate who is making life miserable. Perhaps it is your children or your coworkers or maybe even that guy who cut you off on the freeway.

Look closer and you're bound to see Satan behind the scenes pulling the strings and pushing the buttons. He uses people to engineer our spiritual downfall by driving wedges between us that shatter our unity and draw our focus away from God.

The Christian life is like wood in a fireplace. Try lighting a single log and you will find out that it won't burn for long. Logs burn best in the presence of other logs. In the same way, our ability to remain spiritually on fire is a function of our relationship with the other "logs," related to how closely we are related to the other logs.



"Be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil" (Ephesians 6:10-11).

The strength we need to successfully do battle with the devil is supplied by God. That may seem obvious. But, judging from the way we treat this truth, it bears repeating.



Many of us tend to swing toward one of two extremes when it comes to the devil. Some overestimate him. They become fearful and timid, lest Satan leap upon them. Remember, "greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). Others underestimate the devil. Yes, Satan is a defeated foe. But even though he is nothing more than a condemned death row inmate awaiting execution, it is not wise to sleep in his cell.

Notice that, in our text, Paul tells us to be strong in the Lord. In our humanity, we haven't the power to overcome angels, even fallen ones like the devil and his legions. (Psalm 8 makes it clear that God created us a little lower than the angels.) The bottom line is this: You can't beat the devil on your own. God Himself is the only one capable of putting the devil in his place and that's exactly what He'll do someday. (That place is described for us in Revelation 20.) In the meantime, the Lord limits Satan's reach. In addition, He empowers us to achieve victory in our day-to-day encounters with darkness.

In Acts 19:13-17, we read about some nonbelieving Jewish exorcists who decided to try expelling demons by magically chanting the name of Jesus. "I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches," they'd say. The spirit answered them, "I recognize Jesus and I know about Paul, but who are you?" The spirit leaped on them, thrashed them soundly, and sent them out naked and wounded.

Jesus' name is not a magic formula, though we see it used that way by some preachers and TV personalities.



Paul's strength and ours is the product of an abiding, growing, personal intimacy with the Lord, not some high-sounding chant or incantation.

Our strength is not accumulated or earned. It is supplied by the grace of God, who equips us to live the life to which He has called us.

THE EQUIPMENT FOR BATTLE

"For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses" (2 Corinthians 10:3-4).

Doing battle with Satan requires more than a New Year's resolution and a dose of will power. Spiritual warfare requires spiritual weaponry. Such weapons are described for us in Ephesians 6:13-17.

I can envision Paul in his prison cell, dictating this letter to the Ephesian church. Perhaps he



paused, searching for a proper illustration to help him communicate this vital truth. Suddenly, his gaze fell on the Roman centurion to whom he was chained. Noticing the various components of the guard's uniform, Paul set about to describe six vital pieces of armor considered "standard issue" in God's army.

"Therefore, take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm, therefore, having girded your loins with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace, in additional to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God."



Roman soldiers wore a special belt around their waist. What made it unique was that all the other parts of their armor connected to the belt. That way, when the soldier started running, his armor didn't rattle and shake; it was stabilized by his belt. The belt, then, was the central piece of a soldier's uniform not an accessory as we sometimes view it today.



The application for us is clear. None of the rest of our armor will hold together if we do not begin with a commitment to the truth. In some corners of our society, truth has undergone a change in meaning. In most school systems, for example, truth is a relative concept. There's my truth and your truth...and they don't have to be the same truth. Biblical truth is objective truth. It is based on the absolute authority of a perfect, holy God. Biblical truth is not a matter of what you like or how you feel.

Now, why is truth so important? Because Satan is the father of lies. (See John 8:44.) He is more than just a liar, or even a "gifted" liar. He is the father of lies. He can make lies look, feel, smell, and taste like truth. Without having our waist firmly girded by objective, absolute, biblical truth, we're not likely to be able to see through Satan's illusions.



The Roman soldier wore a breastplate that covered his most vital organ: his heart. After all, an arrow or sword in the heart meant instant death.

When Paul tells us to wear the breastplate of righteousness, he's saying, "cover your heart." Of course, in this context, the heart connotes much more than a blood-pumping muscle. It represents the core of our inner being, the essence of who we are.



The Christian heart is Satan's prime target, for there resides the conscience, our internal standard of right and wrong.

Satan has been all too successful in blurring the dividing line between right and wrong in our society. That's how homosexuality becomes an "alternative lifestyle," how raw greed turns into "upward mobility," and how obscenity passes off as "freedom of expression." Sin is easily rationalized in the absence of conscience. The conscience is not easily neutralized. That's why the first time you do something wrong, you feel extremely uncomfortable. Succeeding offenses, however, become less troublesome until, at last, a new habit has formed.

It reminds me of the story of a young boy who went fishing one day. While hunting for bait, he happened upon a nest of small, red worms. He picked one up, and as he placed it on the hook, the worm bit him. It hurt a lot, but the boy shrugged off the pain and dropped the line in the water. A moment later, he caught a good- sized catfish. Thinking that he had happened upon a tasty new bait, he reached for another worm. Again, he was bitten, but the pain was less intense. He baited his hook, dropped it in the water, and pulled out another fish in a matter of moments. No doubt about it the fish couldn't get enough of those worms.



Some time later, the boy hiked back to the road with a stringer full of fish. A passing motorist saw the boy's catch and stopped to offer him a ride. "How'd you catch so many fish, son?" the man asked. "I found these red worms. They bite, but you get used to it." The man looked at the boy's hand and knew at once what had happened. He rushed to the hospital, but it was too late. The child died on the way. You

see, those worms were really baby rattlesnakes. Each successive bite, though less painful, added more venom to his system until the boy was overcome.

If Satan can neutralize our conscience, we become easy prey for his venom.

So how do we keep a pure heart? By keeping our heart sheltered behind the breastplate of righteousness, hooked securely to our belt of truth.

If my heart tells me to do something that contradicts God's truth, I know that I have a "heart disorder." Remember, only God's truth is absolute; our innermost thoughts and emotions must be brought into line with the Word. In other words, the fact that you feel something doesn't make it real.



PEACE SHOES

No soldier can fight without a sure footing. Proper shoes enable him to move forward in battle.

> The Christian stands firmly on the foundation of peace. When our passage refers to the "gospel of peace," it infers two specific kinds of peace: peace with God and the peace

of God. Peace with God is what

we call "positional" peace, which can be compared to signing a treaty to end a war. Though the treaty signals the end of the fighting, it does not necessarily end the conflict that caused it. In the same way, having peace with God means that, by His grace, we have come into a right relationship with Him. Our personal war against the rule and kingdom of God has ended. Even so, we may still experience the turmoil and inner conflict that characterized our old life.

On the other hand, the peace of God is that inner tranquility and sense of well-being that transcends our circumstances. That's why Paul called it the peace that



"passes understanding" (Philippians 4:7). It makes no worldly sense to be at peace in the midst of chaos, but that is precisely the promise we are offered in Scripture.



First off, notice that the shield of faith is the only piece of armor that is mobile. You can move it around as needed. If your breastplate is hanging loose on one side, you can cover the exposed area with your shield. If you left your belt unbuckled, slide the shield in front of it.



There's only one part of your body a shield won't protect: your back. The last thing you do during a battle is show the enemy your back. We must face our enemy head-on.

As we do, we can depend on the shield of faith God has given us to cover any weaknesses that may remain in the rest of our armor. New Christians who have yet to develop a mature Christian lifestyle should be encouraged by the fact that you have a shield to protect you while you cinch up the loose pieces of armor in your life. Whatever we lack can be "made up" by faith, which is defined as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things



not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Wherever we are deficient, we can depend on God to make up the difference even if that help doesn't seem apparent. After all, faith is the conviction of things not seen.

This armor of faith is designed to deflect "fiery darts" or arrows. Anyone who's ever seen a western movie knows about flaming arrows. Unlike the ordinary arrows, these were not aimed at people. Buildings, wagons, haystacks, and the like were their targets. The intent was to start fires. The strategy made sense: If the enemy can keep you busy dealing with the fire, you'll be less able to defend yourself.

In the same way, Satan bombards us with a barrage of flaming arrows designed to draw our attention away from his frontal assault. One arrow may be aimed at your marriage in the hopes of kindling some tension between you and your spouse. Another takes dead aim at your kids. Your health may be a target as well. Still other arrows land in your workplace, among your circle of friends, or even in your church. If we become consumed with putting out fires, we become easy targets for attack. Ah, but don't forget your shield of faith. It's dependable and mobile. You can easily maneuver it to stand firmly between you and the oncoming volley of arrows.

Your faith will protect you, provided it is the right kind of faith. You could have enormous faith in gifted preachers, talented choirs, or your most zealous Christian friends.



But that kind of faith won't get you anywhere. The intensity of your faith is irrelevant if the object of your faith is erroneous.

On the other hand, if your faith is centered squarely on Jesus Christ, a little bit of faith is all you need. If my faith is genuine, even though Satan may set my world on fire, I will continue to focus on the Lord Jesus Christ, on the new life I have in Him, on the supernatural enabling He has provided to me, and on the authority of His Word. That kind of confidence is like water to a fire. God throws open the hydrant of His grace!

THE HELMET OF SALVATION

The need for a helmet is obvious. You can survive the loss of limbs, certain organs can be repaired or replaced. But no one has survived the loss of the brain.

Without the brain, nothing else works. You can't move, you can't think, you can't speak, you can't react.

Your brain controls your body; it calls the shots. In the same way, your mind (your conscious thoughts



and attitudes) drive your spirit. Is it any wonder why Satan wants access to your mind?

Who has primary access to your mind? If you are feeding your mind with the resources of hell, then the rest of you is likely to pursue hell. If you are feeding your mind with the resources of heaven, then the rest of you is going to pursue heaven. And that is why the Bible says that our minds must be renewed. (See Romans 12:2.) Putting on the helmet of salvation represents our commitment to restrict Satan's access to our mind by allowing God to deliver us from the power of sin by renewing our minds.



The sword is the only offensive weapon listed in our arsenal of faith; all others are designed for defense.

The sword of the Spirit is God's word. It takes God's Word to turn our defense against Satan into a full-scale counterattack.

History's best example of spiritual swordsmanship
is found in Matthew, chapter 4. At the beginning
of His ministry, Jesus spent 40 days in the
wilderness being tempted by Satan. The devil did



his job well, offering temptations many of us would have difficulty passing up. So how did the Son of God manage to maintain His resistance? By quoting Scripture.

"Jesus, You look hungry," the devil observed. "How about turning some stones into bread?" The answer: "It is written..." "Jesus, what do You say about ruling the whole world? Just worship me." And the Lord replied, "It is written..."

Of all the responses Jesus could have chosen, He elected to draw the sword of the Spirit and chop Satan into little pieces. Matthew 4:11 tells us simply, "Then the devil left him."

When it comes to the Word, Satan is a lot like Dracula. You remember those "B" movies, don't you? Each night, old Count Dracula would roam the woods, sucking the lifeblood out of one aspiring starlet after another. Finally, someone would remember the prescription for dealing with vampires. He would fashion a cross out of two pieces of wood. When the Count approached, the hero would hold that cross up in his face, rendering him powerless and vulnerable.

The Word of God has much the same effect on Satan. When is the last time you had a Bible study with the devil? Next time you find yourself facing a temptation, forget about will power. Reach for your sword.



PUTTING ON THE ARMOR

"With all prayer and petition, pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints" (Ephesians 6:18).

God has told us that in order to defeat Satan, we must put on the whole armor. A single belt or a lone breastplate won't do the job.

How do you actually go about putting on all of these spiritual resources? You can't just waltz into a store and pick up a helmet of salvation!

Spiritual resources are appropriated by prayer. Prayer is the comprehensive means by which Christians actualize their spiritual armament. You "get dressed" by prayer.

Have you ever had one of those nightmares where you drive to work, greet everybody on the job, pour a cup of coffee, and suddenly realize you forgot to put on any



clothes? Embarrassing, isn't it? Well, that nightmare comes true every day for people who try to live the Christian life with nothing more than their human resources. Without prayer, you are spiritually nude.

There are many naked warriors in God's army who think they're well-dressed. If your prayer life is anemic, I suggest you check your armor before testing it in battle.

Prayer is not a very complicated concept to define. It is simply communication with God. Yet, it is often a very difficult discipline to develop and maintain. Many people find it tough to get geared up for prayer. Once you start, it becomes a challenge to continue. It's a chore to keep your mind focused while you're praying. Where do you think this difficulty originates? Is prayer really that hard?

I would submit to you that Satan is responsible for turning prayer from a pleasure into a pressure. He knows that if he can short-circuit your prayer life, you have no hope of preparing for battle. That is why the phone or the doorbell or both will ring when you're about to pray. That's why you have difficulty concentrating, finding words, or staying awake.

If Jesus, who knew He was God, knew that He could not function without prayer, how much more should we mortals long to spend time on our knees?

Let's take a brief look at the kind of prayer that makes a difference.



Prayer must be sincere. Prayer has nothing to do with style or flair. The effectiveness of your prayers is not related to the eloquence with which you deliver them.

I can recall a man in our church who had trouble putting two words together without stumbling, especially in prayer. Though he did his best, his constant stammering, lost trains of thought, and mangled English began annoying other members. Eventually some people in the church confronted him. "We don't like the way you pray," they complained. He responded to their complaint simply and directly. "I wasn't talking to you."

The words we choose mean little. Our earnest sincerity means everything.

Prayer must be ongoing. "Pray at all times," Paul told us in our passage. In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, he admonishes us to "pray without ceasing." The kind of constant prayer Paul is recommending does not mean that you live like a monk on a mountaintop, spending 24 hours each day on your knees. In means that you live in a constant state of communication with God. It means that you are aware that the channel is always open between you and your heavenly Father.

Why is this constant contact so vital? Because Satan never sleeps. He is constantly seeking opportunities to attack, and we must be ready, through prayer, to don our armor and do battle.



If you're the kind of person who prays only in the morning or just before bed at night, you leave yourself open to attack the rest of the day.

In Matthew 26, Jesus took Peter, James, and John with Him to the garden of Gethsemane to keep watch while He prayed. He came back later to find them asleep. "Could you not keep watch with me for one hour?" He asked Peter. The subtle implication in Jesus' statement is that a full hour of prayer is not considered a long time. Everybody should have at least that much staying power.

Most of us fizzle out long before 60 minutes pass by. We haven't learned to pray for five minutes, much less an hour or more.

The length of our prayers is proportionate to the depth of our relationship with the Lord. Short prayers suggest a shallow relationship. This same principle works in marriage.



When partners stop communicating, the relationship is in trouble. I've had many wives sit in my office and say, "He doesn't talk to me anymore." The husband will shrug his shoulders and reply, "I don't have anything to say."

You can be sure he had plenty to say during their courtship. Back then, if he found himself without a topic, he'd make one up. Or, he'd spend time telling her how beautiful she was, or how much he loved her. He couldn't let the conversation lag. After all, she probably wouldn't have married him if he acted like the bore he was later to become!

As your relationship with the Lord grows more vital and dynamic, your prayer life will flourish as well. To pray without ceasing will become a natural, effortless expression of who you are.

Prayer must be spiritually empowered. A little boy was trying to lift up a rock while his father looked on. When the rock didn't budge, the father asked, "Have you used all your strength?" The boy said, "Yes, Daddy." Again, the boy strained unsuccessfully against the rock, and again the father asked, "Are you sure you're using all your strength?" The son said, "Look at this sweat. Listen to me grunt. Can't you see that I'm using all my strength?" The father replied, "But you're not using all your strength. I'm standing right here and you haven't asked for my help."



Too often, we grunt and groan our way through life, doing the best we can, only to hear God ask, "Are you using all your strength?" We need to recognize that success is only possible through the empowering of God's Spirit in prayer. This is the beginning of understanding what it means to pray in the Spirit.

Prayer requires that we heed the signs. Since you have probably never seen me drive, take my word for it it is a sight to behold! Among my driving habits is the fact that I don't mind riding on fumes. When the gauge approaches

the "E," I assume that means "Enough to get me where I'm going." Running on empty requires a delicate combination of hope and luck and it doesn't take much to upset that balance.



Many of us live our Christian lives on

fumes. We know that our spiritual tank is empty, but we try to push on anyway. After all, how could God allow a nice person like me to run out of gas while Satan is gaining on me? I received the answer to that question a few weeks ago when my car began sputtering and finally coasted to the side of the road. I prayed, "Jesus, I'm here on the highway and there's not an exit in sight." But, of course, it was too late. No angel was going to show up and put a tiger in my tank. Why? Because I failed to watch the signs. The needle had been sitting on "E" for miles. The small orange lamp lit up to warn me that my fuel was low.



I chose not to heed the signs. I can't turn to God and ask, "Why did You do this to me?" I did it to myself.

Many of us allow our marriages to run out of gas before we consider spiritual refueling. When the relationship is coasting off the highway toward divorce court, it is often too late to start thinking about spending time in prayer, reorganizing priorities, and restructuring the family to match God's blueprint.

The same principle applies to every other area of life. Once you disregard God's purposes and God's guidelines, then you can count on winding up, sooner or later, on the side of some highway. Be watchful; make prayer a dynamic part of it.

Prayer must not be selfish. Since we're examining prayer in the context of putting on our armor, I am obviously not saying that prayer for yourself is inappropriate. We must pray for ourselves, but not exclusively for ourselves. In our text, Paul encouraged diligent prayer for all the saints.

I suggest a hierarchy of prayer that goes something like this: First, pray for yourself. Confess your sins, and make sure your heart is oriented toward the purposes of God. Next, pray for your family. These are the people whom you are most likely to influence, and for whom you are responsible. Move on to your Christian relationships. Pray for your church, your brothers and sisters in Christ who are not part of your nuclear family, but are part of your spiritual family.

Check out the church prayer list. Find out who is sick or in need, and pray. If you hear about a believer who is



struggling or suffering, pray. I have witnessed miraculous healings and other situations in which God supernaturally intervened.



A boy went to the zoo with his dad. As they passed by the lion's den, one of the ferocious creatures let loose with a loud roar. Startled, the child reared back and bumped into his father. He covered his face and began to cry. The father asked, "What's wrong, Son?" The frightened child replied, "Daddy, didn't you see the lion?" "Yes, Son," the father said, "but I also see the cage."

Are you frightened by the lion or comforted by the

cage? The cage of Jesus Christ can confine and control this adversary who has already been judged, condemned, and defeated. What must you do? One, recognize that he is a defeated foe. He has no claim over you if you know Christ. Two, take inventory of the armor God has provided not only to protect you, but to enable you to do battle and win. Finally, put on that armor in prayer. The challenge before us today is to stop letting Satan beat us. How? By fighting with God's strength, not our own.

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