

COPING WITH CONFLICT

A Measure of Discipleship

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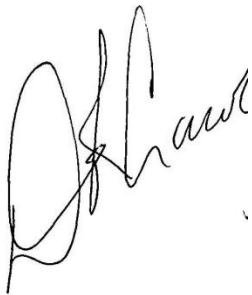
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DEDICATED TO

Friends who became victims of conflict—men and women “of whom the world was not worthy” (Heb. 11:38)



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PREFACE

When the Front Lines Reach Your Front Door

Spiritual conflict! You have likely thought about this subject in terms of something that happens elsewhere—such as on the front lines of missionary service. After all, isn't the heat of the battle always on the front lines? The very fact that you have picked up this book indicates that, at least to some extent, the front lines have reached your front door. Conflict is no longer something for other people in other places. It is here and now, up close and personal, and at just the time when you were trying so hard to grow in your discipleship.

How do you know when you are growing in discipleship? Measurement is not just in the number of hours spent in Bible study, the disciplines involved in your prayer life, the amount of money given to spiritual causes, the miles of missionary journeys you have traveled, or the number of persons to whom you have witnessed, but it is often in the way you respond to conflict. Just as true metal is tested in the fire, so the believer is tested in the conflicts encountered.

Many a believer, successful in the eyes of the world, has failed in the face of conflict and thus negated much of the ministry entrusted to him or her. Conflict that could have propelled them toward God instead drove them away from God.

The challenge is not a minor one, although it is discussed primarily in very small groups and in hushed tones. According to a national survey reported by *Current Thoughts & Trends* (Dec. 16, 2003), two-thirds of pastors said that their congregations had been in conflict during the past two years. More than twenty-five percent of pastors who resigned from a church said they did so because of conflict with their denomination.

Realizing that the only hope we have at successfully coping with conflict comes from the power and wisdom of God, we nevertheless must find creative ways to cope personally with our conflicts. The purpose of this book is to identify potential areas of conflict and then offer Bible-based assistance for resolving conflict with the assistance of divinely offered power and wisdom.

So if the front lines have reached your front door and coping with conflict is a reality in your life as a disciple of Jesus Christ, you've picked up the right book. Read on.

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INTRODUCTION TO PART ONE

Overlooking my inability to carry a tune, God often gives me a song. Such was the case as our aircraft landed at a European airport. I was on my way for a three-week tour of Central and Eastern Europe, working alongside and ministering to missionaries, some of whom served in highly secure areas amidst great personal danger. As I reflected over the past few weeks and the difficulties I had come through to undertake this mission, I began to hum the words of John Newton from “Amazing Grace”: “Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come.”

During a routine physical exam several weeks earlier, I was diagnosed with a medical challenge that required rather strong medication. It was unclear how closely I needed to be monitored at first. While I waited at the drugstore to pick up my prescription, the conflicts began.

First, I wondered why God allowed this to happen at just this time on my calendar. Did God not know how important this upcoming trip was? Could God not have caused the test results to read differently, preventing the need for medication? I knew God did not cause this to happen, but I was *hard pressed* and *troubled* by what God had allowed to happen in my life.

Then came the internal doubt. Should I make the trip? Could I make the trip? Was this God’s way of preventing this assignment? Had I reached a point where stressful travel and challenging assignments should be passed on to someone younger and healthier? I was *perplexed*.

In the days that followed I shared my situation with trusted friends, seeking their advice. Some were kind but stem in suggesting that I was doing too much anyway and needed rest more than travel. Others implied that I was not even the person for the assignment. I felt *persecuted*. It seemed I had more enemies than friends.

Then Satan got into the conflict, as he always does. “Why are you even considering this trip, given your critical medical condition? Stay at home and enjoy yourself. Let someone else do the difficult work. You’ve paid your dues.” So went the demonic attack. In the midst of the battle, I was *knocked down* by the enemy.

Somewhere along the way, I remembered 2 Corinthians 4:7-9:

We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are *hard pressed* on every side, yet not crushed; we are *perplexed*, but not in despair; *persecuted*, but not forsaken; *struck down*, but not destroyed.

In the ancient world, almost everything of value was kept in earthen vessels, jars of clay, common clay pots (see Job 10:9, Isa. 64:8, Lam. 4:2). The jars were valueless except for their contents. The worth of a pot was not in its inherent value but in its intended use. So the importance was that it be clean, empty and available.

According to Jewish ritual laws (Lev. 6:28, 11:33-34, 15:12), it was impossible to render an earthen vessel ritually clean once it became defiled, so it was simply broken and discarded. The pots were easily broken and quickly replaced, or in other words, expendable.

Herein is our own value. The power of the gospel is never dependent upon its container, but comes solely from God. Like the pot, an ordinary vessel can become extraordinary because of its contents and, in the case of our own lives, the contents or “treasure” spoken of here is the presence of God in our lives.

Paul, the writer of these words, is a perfect example of this. We see him with his thorn in the flesh, shipwrecked, beaten with stripes, stoned and left for dead, imprisoned, forsaken by Demas, disappointed by John Mark. Yet he writes, “I endure all things for the sake of the elect” (2 Tim. 2:10).

Furthermore, the Bible is filled with similar illustrations:

- Jacob limping from his wrestling match with an angel
- Job losing almost everything
- Daniel in the lion’s den
- Joseph, a slave in Potiphar’s house
- John the Baptist arrested and placed in prison for proclaiming the truth
- John in exile on Patmos.

Our “treasure in earthen vessels” brings with it some corresponding conflicts. The very nature of an earthen vessel invites conflict. And there are always potential troubles with treasures.

Others have used various categories to define and describe the conflicts. Bud Fray, my retired colleague at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, lists three categories for conflict:

- External—the material world around us
- Internal—the flesh or human nature within us
- Infernal—Satan and his demons around and within us.¹

For the purpose of this book, we will list four categories, admitting at the outset that the last thing we need is a hardening of the categories. So if you don’t like these categories, create others, but be sure you cover the territory.

- God-allowed conflict
- Self-generated conflict
- Human-created conflict
- Satan-caused conflict

Whatever the categories, one of the measures of discipleship is how well one copes with conflict—how well the clay pot remains clean and useful as it contains the very presence of God. At the beginning, let us try to better understand the conflict, and then let us examine how the Lord equips us for the conflict.

¹ Fray, Marion G. (Bud). *It is Enough: A Healthy Inner Life*. Columbus, GA: Brentwood Christian Press, 2000, 94.

Chapter Two

Sell-Generated Conflict

Perplexed, but not in despair

“Your assignment, should you choose to accept it. . . .” That was the beginning of an old television adventure series. The assignment was always so challenging that not only was the actor motivated to accept, but the viewer was captured for the duration of the program.

As a part of our service to God, we are given assignments. It might go something like this: “Your assignment, should you choose to accept it, is to stamp out sin and make everyone godly.” Wow! How perplexing!

Your calling may not have sounded exactly like that, but in essence, that is the ultimate calling, because it is such an integral part of God’s plan for creation.

The problem is that instead of discerning our part of the plan, we assume the whole plan is for us. Many who serve in God’s name are highly motivated, sufficiently challenged, and success- oriented at almost any cost within ethical and legal boundaries. With this high sense of calling comes eventual internal perplexity—self-generated conflict.

Paul understood this well. Anyone who practices ministry with half the commitment of the apostle Paul will soon discover as did Paul that there are problems which seem unsolvable, weariness that comes from overwork, depression when there is no visible result to our efforts. The extent of the perplexity of which Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:8 is hard to capture from the Greek language. The prefix *ex* of the Greek word *exaporoumenoi* is perfective, leading to the idea of “perplexed to the final degree.” It meant “driven to despair” but not yet in despair. It was a Greek play on words that is often lost in translation. It took perplexity to its limit, but not past the limit. Stressed, but not stressed out.

While it does not lead to despair, this perplexity is intensely personal. It is a word picture of a soldier who has grown low on supplies and is almost defeated. Then, at the last moment, he discovers ample supplies. The word paints a picture of an athlete who is almost on his last breath and near defeat. Then, at the last minute, he discovers a second wind, a fresh supply of energy.

Thus we are introduced to the self-generated conflict that comes from inner perplexity. Hopefully the how-to examples that follow will prove helpful as you seek to cope with conflict.

How To Wrestle at Night and Serve in the Day

Having grown up watching Friday night wrestling on television, Jam fascinated with the biblical story of Jacob and Esau (Gen. 28). It is the clearest picture in the Bible of wrestling with God, and one of the most difficult to explain. Nevertheless, it has tremendous meaning.

Jacob was born only seconds after Esau, with his hand on Esau’s heel. Thus his name means “one who takes the place of another.” Esau was a daddy’s boy, being favored by his father Isaac. He was a hunter, an outdoorsman.

Jacob was a mama’s boy, favored by Rebecca. Jacob found it more profitable to sit at home and think than to go out to hunt.

In a very short period of time, Jacob had secured Esau’s birthright. Years later, Jacob bargained with an angel at Bethel. The conversation was one of those “If you will. . . I will” conversations. Still later, he bargained with Laban for Rachel as a wife; then, having been deceived by receiving Rachel’s sister Leah instead, Jacob bargained again for Rachel.

Now Jacob was on the way home after twenty years. He was rich with flocks, herds, two wives plus children, and he was worried about Esau. Sending word ahead, he received a reply: “Esau and four hundred men are coming.” Jacob divided his camp in half and sent one group ahead to persuade Esau to accept him (Gen. 32:22-31). Then he slept, but that night’s sleep included a dream in which Jacob wrestled with an angel.

Let’s look at some things that night wrestling did for Jacob and that it can do for us.

Night wrestling brings back unconfused sin that hinders us from serving in the day. Numbers 32:23 says, “Be sure your sin will find you out.” Fear had replaced Jacob’s memory of God’s previous promises. Sin does that. It haunts us, causing us to dread defeat where we should anticipate victory. The Psalmist wrote, “There they are in great fear where no fear was” (Ps. 53:5). We worry when we should be serving. From the pen of an unknown poet come these words:

*Worry? Why worry? What can worry do?
It never keeps trouble from overtaking you.
It puts a frown upon the face, and sharpness in the tone,
We’re unfit to live with others, and unfit to live alone.
Worry? Why worry? What can worry do?
It never keeps a trouble from overtaking you.*

*Pray? Why pray? What can praying do?
Praying really changes things, arranges life anew.
It puts a smile upon your face, the love note in your tone,
Makes you fit to live with others, and fit to live alone.
Pray? Why pray? What can praying do?
It brings God down from heaven to live and work with you.*

Sin finds you out in time. There is a payday someday. There is a payday in the conscience that eats away like an internal cancer. There is a payday in eternity when we will be asked to give an account of deeds done.

Jacob had successfully got his wives and others across the Jabbok, helped by some mysterious power on the east side, but the wrestling brought back unconfused sin and became a potential barrier to the future.

Night wrestling brings a blessing that frees us for serving in the day. Hosea 12:4 calls the “man” in the dream an “angel.” Jacob called him “God.” Often the battles we fight turn out to be against God. Only in the midst of the conflict do we realize the true opponent. Then, like Jacob, we beg for blessing.

The fourth watch was the darkest hour of the night. The disciples were on the Sea of Galilee at a similar hour when Jesus came walking toward them on the water. Their fear turned to blessing.

Blessing brings courage—courage to struggle on in the dark and to face insecurity alone. As Jacob wrestled, he was renamed “Israel”—a prince with power. Touched with some mark of meaning, some thorn in the flesh, some limp in the hip which would forever serve to remind him of the touch, Jacob learned that the person God names, He sometimes lames. These are holes in

our bodies, hands, feet, through which God continues to pour his grace, heal our hurts, bring blessing from fear. Someone wrote:

*O Lord, we are struggling in the dark
But we see, we see—
We dream in color and imagine
That we are free, free—
You have touched us, O Lord, and it hurts...
You have blessed us, O Lord, and it heals...
As you have given us courage
To struggle in the dark alone,
Give us courage now
To go limping in the daylight together.*

Night wrestling brings a fresh encounter with God motivating for serving in the day. The greatest message of this story is that we can encounter God (Gen. 28:30), even though we often encounter Him in the midst of adversity.

“The sun rose” (Gen. 28:31)—symbolic of a new day. After an encounter with God during the night, the sun always rises. All of Jacob’s worries about Esau were unnecessary. God provided. When they met, they embraced in brotherly love. Why? An encounter with God in the night allowed it to be so.

Jacob never walked straighter than when he limped, never prayed harder than when he wrestled, never served better than when he surrendered.

With Jacob *the crux of the conflict* was whether to follow self-generated, anxiety-filled plans or to follow God’s vision-revealed plans. Even though the wrestling revelation was clear, Satan no doubt got involved by presenting alternative plans. When you wrestle with God in the night, Satan will tempt you to walk with him in the daylight. Satan is even called “son of the morning” (Isa. 14:12). However, our God is not only God of the nighttime, but is the “Bright and Morning Star” (Rev. 2:16).

How To Say ‘No’ When You’ve Surrendered All

Long before modern praise songs, worshipers sang such words as:

- I surrender all, all to Thee my blessed Savior, I surrender all.
- Is your all on the altar of sacrifice laid?
- Jesus paid it all; all to Him I owe.
- All, yes all, I give to Jesus. It belongs to Him.
- Al/for Jesus, al/for Jesus! All my being’s ransomed powers: All my thoughts and words and doings, all my days and all my hours.
- All to thee, I give my all to Thee, all to Thee, Thine only will I be.

Not only did my generation grow up singing these songs, but they heard sermons on surrender and commitment following these hymns. We were called and challenged to give it all up for God, and many of us did.

Every spiritual hero I had was a workaholic. The longer the hours and the more the stress, the greater was the promised blessing. Or so we thought. “I’d rather bum out than rust out,” we were told.

One weekend I came home from college to get my mother to wash my dirty laundry, to persuade my father to give me some extra spending money, and to see my girlfriend—not necessarily in that order. The elderly Director of Missions for our association of churches had heard I was coming in for the weekend and planned for me to preach in one of the small, pastorless churches in the area. When he called to inform me of the assignment, I refused with the excuse that I was very busy. “Boy!” he exclaimed. “Never say no to an opportunity to serve Jesus.” I grew up thinking it was a sin to say “no” to all such opportunities.

Early in my ministry, I was working long days, trying to prove my worth to all those who I thought needed proof. My body wore down. When my throat became so raw that I could no longer speak, I went to the doctor. After one brief look, the doctor sent me home to get whatever I needed for a hospital stay and instructed me to check into the hospital that same day. I clearly remember the strange feeling I had as I drove home from the doctor’s office. It was a feeling of relief. I was finally getting a break. I could relax and let others take care of me. It was in this context that a friend reminded me that the only winner in a rat race is a rat.

I tried to tell myself that this pace was biblical, that to give it all for the church was God’s approved way. But I forgot that the church was the Bride of Christ. The church was not my bride, nor was I Christ’s bride. In fact, there were days I felt more like a Temple Prostitute. Then one day I hit the wall. Have you ever hit the wall? Sure you have. We hit it repeatedly. It’s predictable for type-A personalities, maybe even biblical.

Who is our biblical role model for saying “no”? How about the Lord Himself? Remember when the crowds became large and many brought their iii loved ones to him? The next morning the disciples could not find him. He had withdrawn to a quiet place for prayer. This was His custom. When they finally found Jesus, the disciples said, “Everyone is looking for You” (Mk. 1:37). Their work ethic was a forerunner of ours. If “everyone” is looking, we must respond. Need generates ministry regardless of the hour. Right? Not with Jesus.

Note the reply Jesus gave to His disciples in the face of the need. “Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth” (Mk. 1:38). Having rested and prayed, Jesus changed His pace. Others needed Him also. Saying “no” to one need not only provides rest, but it often allows us to say “yes” to another need. Surrender is not saying “no” to ministry Surrender is saying “no” to what we perceive as important in order to say “yes” to what God says is important.

On still another occasion, “great multitudes came together to hear, and to be healed by Him of their infirmities. So He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed” (Lk. 5:15-16). When the hour for rest and spiritual refreshment came, the time for direct ministry was set aside.

One day the disciples came to such a place. Nothing seemed better beyond this. Jesus said, “Let’s go on” (Mk. 1:32-38). In effect, he said “no!” to the temptation to stay with the crowd.

Jesus said “no” to staying put—instead he said, “Go.” He could have stayed in Capernaum. Life was relatively easy. The people were devoted. There was safety. There was no division—“everyone” was looking for Jesus, but he felt the pull and tug of the distant horizon. Tempting voice always says, this is good, why risk? The status quo is the way to go. We get caught in a merry-go-round existence.

The choice confronts all—the children of Israel in Egypt, the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Jesus refused to be shut in or shut out by anything that would keep the message from the people.

Jesus said “no” to a lack of progress—instead he said “next towns,” “there also.” The Devil’s strategy is to say, “You’re doing fine; stay like you are.” God’s strategy, demonstrated in a valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37) is from dry bones to morgue to army with no mistakes.

Jesus said “no” to an absence of purpose—instead he said, “For this purpose I have come forth.” This speaks of progress versus purpose. A chicken with its head popped off, flopping around on the ground, is making some progress, but no purpose is visible.

We need *a* purpose. We are often misguided, following false hopes. Vision of purpose may come on the mountaintop as well as in the valley. The test is not where it comes but how it is discerned. How do you say “no” when you’ve surrendered all? I have learned *a* few things in my later years. Perhaps these suggestions will prove helpful:

- When someone calls on the telephone and asks if I am available for a certain date, I cover my eyes, look toward the calendar, and say, “I don’t see any way I can assist you on that date.”
- I write family and personal events on the work calendar—and honor them. “I’m so sorry I already have a commitment on that day,” I can legitimately say. I don’t need to explain the commitment; I just honor it.
- I never carry my engagement calendar (or Palm Pilot) with me. This way I can always delay the acceptance of an invitation by saying, “I’ll have to check my calendar. It’s back on the desk in my office.” Time will allow me to come to my senses and realize that I am already overbooked for that week.
- I often let someone else handle my engagements—a secretary a spouse, an agent. Then I can always say, “Thanks for the invitation. Let me check with the person

Who handles my calendar” See above related to coming to your senses.

- I learned that surrendering all is not for one event/engagement. It is for life, and it involves priority, pacing, and balance.

For Jesus *the crux of the conflict* was whether to follow his original, God-called, long-range purpose or be diverted by the temporary, immediate success offered by people. Satan often lures with the temporary visible, personally obtainable plan, when God offers the eternal, invisible, God-obtainable plan. In the service of God, we often experience conflict that is self-generated by our personal work ethic, and Satan encourages it. But God has a better way—withdraw and pray, say “no,” and then go on.

How To Maintain Focus in the Midst of Interruptions

There is at least one thing we all have in common—interruptions. Have you ever had a day when you never got to your “To Do” list, your *Daytimer*, the calendar on your Palm Pilot, because of other interruptions? Some weeks I have about three of those days.

To some extent these interrupting conflicts are self-generated. By nature and calling we want to be available and so we suffer from what some call “the Ministry of Interruptions.” The term itself bothers me because I try to be so organized. How could an interruption be mearth-

igful, much less ministry? But it was meaningful for Jesus. He had an entire day of interruptions. I don't know what he had planned for that day, but look at the interruptions in Mark 5.

Following a leisurely ride across the Sea of Galilee, He was getting out of the boat when "immediately" *Jesus was interrupted by a haunted person* (Mk. 5:1-20). This was a wild man, haunted by some kind of demons. Naked. Scarred. Bleeding. Matted hair. Cursing. Confronting Jesus.

Can you imagine a person like this coming down the aisle during the invitation at your church? "Deacon of the Day, would you come and stand with him as we sing the dosing song? Let's all join hands."

We are surrounded by haunted people. They may not be demon-possessed, but they are possessed by something that haunts them—a memory from the past, a bad experience, a person who harmed them. This crippling memory renders them dysfunctional. Some cry out; others suffer in silence, pretending to be OK, yet deeply haunted.

Here was a wild, demon-possessed man, crying out to Jesus, and Jesus responded by offering him release (Mk. 5:13). "Then the unclean spirits went out and entered into the swine." Was Jesus unfair to pigs? No, the story simply shows the value of human life to Jesus. One human life was more valuable than 2,000 pigs. The pigs were created in the image of pigs, but humans were created in the image of God.

Back in the boat they went, but their momentary quiet, afforded by the boat ride across the sea, was interrupted. "Immediately" upon stepping out of the boat, *Jesus was interrupted by a hurting person* (Mk. 5:21-24). A synagogue leader by the name of Jairus confronted Jesus with another challenge. His daughter was ill and possibly dying. Would Jesus go to her?

There is no pain quite like the pain felt by a parent when their child is hurting. The old phrase, "This hurts me more than it does you," while often laughable from the standpoint of the child, is nevertheless true from the perspective of the parent.

When our daughter was young, she suffered from severe asthma. Many nights she could only sleep sitting up in a chair. I would sit with her in the big green recliner chair. I remember praying one particular night that God would transfer her suffering to me, so she could sleep. Her pain was debilitating. Mine was devastating.

Here was a father pleading with Jesus to come to his hurting daughter. Jesus responded by offering him relief (Mk. 5:24)—"Jesus went with him." When we know Jesus is with us, the pain is lighter.

On his way to attend to the little daughter of Jairus, *Jesus was interrupted by a hopeless person* (Mk. 5:25-34). Distraught, discouraged, she was ill. She had been bleeding uncontrollably for twelve years. She had spent all her money on doctors and was broke and getting worse each day. In her desperate condition she reached out to touch the hem of Jesus' robe in some last-ditch effort to find help.

We live in the midst of helpless people, all looking for some magic cure-all—the lottery for their financial woes, an image of Jesus on a back-door screen for their spiritual challenges, the touch of a faith-healer to cure all their physical ailments. Unable to help themselves, they grasp at any symbol of hope.

During the Thirty Years' War in the seventeenth century, German pastor Paul Gerhardt and his family were forced to flee from their home. One night as they stayed in a small village inn, hopeless, homeless, and afraid, his wife broke down and cried openly in despair. To comfort her, Gerhardt reminded her of Scripture promises about God's provision. Then, going out to the garden to be alone, Gerhardt too broke down and wept. He felt he had come to his darkest hour.

Soon afterward, Gerhardt felt the burden lifted and sensed anew the Lord's presence. Taking his pen, he wrote a hymn that has brought comfort to many.

*Give to the winds thy fears; hope, and be undismayed;
God hears thy sighs and counts thy tears;
God shall lift up thy head.
Through waves and clouds and storms
He gently clears the way.
Wait thou His time,
So shall the night soon end in joyous day.*

It is often in our darkest, in our most hopeless time, that God makes His presence known most clearly. He uses our sufferings and troubles to show us that He is our only source of hope and strength. And when we see this truth, like Pastor Gerhardt we receive new hope.

Here was a hopeless woman, reaching out to Jesus for hope. Jesus responded by offering her healing (Mk. 5:34)—"Daughter, your faith has made you well."

Even as Jesus was dealing with the woman, people ran from the house of Jairus, interrupting Jesus, to say the little girl was dead. Beyond human help, the little girl was completely helpless. Thus, *Jesus was interrupted by a helpless person* (Mk. 5:35-43).

The team of seminary students and I were on our way to attend a home Bible study while serving in the country of El Salvador. When we arrived in the small village of Nuevo Sitio del Nino, we were interrupted by people on the road, who told us Pastor Cesar was very ill and was possibly dying of an aneurysm. They encouraged us to return to the city. Since we had driven a great distance on very bad roads, we asked if we could go to the pastor's house and pray for him. We were led there, where a crowd was already gathered in the front yard. Perhaps because we were Americans, we were allowed into the living room, where the

pastor lay on the couch in obvious pain. We and others prayed, all at the same time, in several languages. Suddenly the pastor jumped off the couch and shouted, "Gloria a Dios! (Praise the Lord!) Why are we all standing here? Let's go preach." We followed him out of the door and to the home Bible study. What a powerful, miraculous moment of God's intervention.

Here in Capernaum was a helpless person, in a death-like coma, with family and friends reaching out to Jesus on her behalf. Jesus responded by offering her food—representative of life. He had no interest in publicity or fame. In fact, "He commanded them strictly that no one should know it" (Mk. 5:43).

To the haunted person, Jesus offered release.
To the hurting person, Jesus offered relief.
To the hopeless person, Jesus offered healing.
To the helpless person, Jesus offered food.

To all, Jesus offered a future—the same offer he makes for you. And by the way, next time your day is marked by interruptions, remember what Jesus did with interruptions. *The crux of the conflict* for Jesus was whether to interpret interruptions as God-given appointments or human distractions. Was this self-generated conflict or something else? Satan consistently tells us to keep to our agenda regardless of the interruptions. God says that some

interruptions are divinely ordained with eternal purposes. When the self-generated conflicts come, we have a divine model to follow from His day of interruptions.

How To Handle Speed Bumps When You're in the Fast Lane

I was speeding along at my usual forty miles per hour in the thirty-mile zone near my house when there before me was a shiny, newly-poured speed bump. It was not there when I went to work that morning. Sometime during the workday the powers that be had placed a slow-down speed bump directly in front of me. With no time to slow down, I hit it hard enough to necessitate a trip to the dentist. The last thing I wanted to do was be slowed down. It was inconvenient. Life is like that.

Speed bumps come in all shapes and sizes. On a recent flight, I heard, "Ladies and gentlemen, this is your Captain. It looks like there is a bit of air traffic congestion ahead of us, so we've been put in a holding pattern. Hopefully, we won't be delayed too long." I wanted to say, "Take your time. None of us desires a traffic jam at 30,000 feet." A high-altitude speed bump.

In the locker room before the big game, players can hear the crowd in a frenzy. The band is playing the school fight song. The coach is in the midst of his pre-game pep talk. "Are we ready? Then let's wait in here a while longer." An athletic speed bump.

At the doctor's office, the doctor finally gives a report. You are cured. There is no sign of a problem. You are free to do what you want, return to normal. Then he says, "Walt." And the next news is not so good. A medical speed bump.

On the job, your supervisor says you're doing great. All the reviews and evaluations are good. However, you're going to have to wait on the salary raise. A work-related speed bump. Life's most difficult command is "wait." It is God's speed bump in the middle of our fast lane. Jesus had to place a speed bump in front of the disciples on one occasion to slow down their self-generated conflicts (Lk. 24:46-49). The experience teaches us several things about speed bumps and how to cope with them when they appear in our fast lane.

God places speed bumps in your fast lane because some things need to happen for you (Lk. 24:46-47). Jesus had to suffer for them, die for them, rise from the grave for them, share a plan for them to proclaim the gospel to all nations; and they were moving too fast to learn. Are you losing sight of what Jesus is doing for you? It's possible with all your personal issues. He may be trying to do something new for you, and you're trying to speed on without Him. Remember your first day of school? Excitement, new clothes, new books, new school supplies, new teacher—the whole world seemed new. That's the way God feels. He wants to do a new thing for you. He told Isaiah, "Behold, I will do a new thing, now it shall spring forth" (Isa. 43:19).

When we are preoccupied with self, we grow disinterested and dissatisfied with Jesus. There is an old B. B. McKinney song that says:

*I am satisfied with Jesus, He has done so much for me,
He has suffered to redeem me, He has died to set me free.
He is with me in my trials, Best of friends of all is He;
I can always count on Jesus, Can He always count on me?
I am satisfied with Jesus,
But the question comes to me
As I think of Calvary,*

Is my Master satisfied with me?

God places speed bumps in your fast lane because some things need to happen through you (Lk. 24:48). What Jesus did for His disciples, He did for the Kingdom. His plan was bigger than they were. When He called them, He was on His way to us. If they had not witnessed to others, you and I would not be here today. The beat goes on. The ripples in the pond continue. When Jesus saved you, he was on his way to someone else. Are you a channel, or a reservoir? Is the Truth flowing through you, or has it backed up in you?

Do others trust you and listen to what you say? Are you so worldly that they see no visible difference between you and them? Are you so heavenly minded that you are no earthly good? Don't move on yet. Wait until the situation is corrected.

I buy most of my vehicles from Jim Ulrich. I met him in the fourteen-year-old Sunday School class on my first Sunday at West End Baptist Church in Houston where my father had just become pastor. From that point on we grew up together. Sports, school, double-dating: he was in our wedding. I trust Jim Ulrich, so I buy my vehicles from him. I have nothing against other car dealers, but I know and trust Jim Ulrich. He's not perfect, but he has never betrayed my trust.

For the most part, we purchase things of value from those we trust. So what happens when trust is destroyed? You can certainly answer that question without more commentary from me.

Allow God to re-establish trust in you if it is missing, and greater trust if trust is already present. It will allow Him to do greater things through you.

God places speed bumps in your fast lane because some things need to happen in you (Lk. 24:49). The disciples had no power. Power comes from the Holy Spirit, who had not yet been revealed. In order for the Holy Spirit to come, Jesus had to go. Had they not waited, they would have been a powerless, impotent church making a mockery out of the message of Jesus.

The power had to come upon them before they were ready to go. They needed a speed bump in their fast lane.

Is the Holy Spirit working in you? If so, others ought to see visible fruit of the Spirit. With all due respect, many believers are basically powerless. They've run out of gas. Someone has turned off their switch. Their solar panels are missing. There's no oil in their lamps. They're playing Trivial Pursuit™ when eternity is on the line. Nothing of spiritual significance is happening in their lives. Because nothing is happening in their lives, nothing is happening through their lives.

The crux of the conflict was that they were speeding along their self-generated schedules rather than waiting on their Lord. We face similar conflicts when we insist on speeding along life's highway at our own speed instead of allowing God to slow us down. Satan does his best to convince us that he who arrives first, wins. But for every speeding disciple there is a God-placed speed bump right in the middle of their roadway.

How To Think Sober When Drunk on New Wine

Two groups watched the same baseball game. One group— young, loud, excited, and sober—sat in the non-alcohol section of the stadium. Across the aisle sat another group—young, loud, excited, and drunk. I was seated behind all of them, enjoying their antics almost as much as

the game. When the two groups were not yelling support for the home team or abuse at the umpires, they were lightheartedly exchanging barbs with one another. As the game progressed, the barbs from the teetotalers remained constant, while the barbs from the consumers grew less rational.

My observation was that the outward difference in the two groups was measured not in excitement level or support of the home team, but in sobriety of thinking. While there were other, more important differences, the sobriety levels seemed striking. One group was drunk on the latest popular campus beverage; the other, drunk on spiritual new wine. One group was slurred in speech and muddled in thinking; the other, clear and sharp.

So how does one think sober when drunk on new wine? Paul speaks of sober, balanced thinking in Romans 12:3 in the context of dealing with a proper relationship with self.

“For I say to you, through the grace given to me. . .” Paul was

- “Saved by grace”—Eph. 2:5,8
- “Justified by grace”—Rom. 1:15
- “Called by grace”—Gal.1:15
- Experienced “sufficient grace”—2 Cor. 12:9

Grace is the utter generosity of God, not based on our worth or merit, and it is given in spite of what we deserve. It is unmerited favor. We sing:

- “*Infinite, inn rvelous, matchless grace*”
- “*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound*”
- “*There is no other word for grace than amazing.*”

We generate our own conflicts when we abuse God’s grace by refusing to think sober thoughts. Paul writes of *the negative side of sober thinking*—“not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think.”

Thinking more highly of oneself than needed is best illustrated in the story of the ant and elephant who crossed a weak, old, unstable bridge together. As they crossed, the bridge creaked, swayed, dipped, and gave every other evidence that it was about to fall. Successfully on the other side, the ant looked up at the elephant and exclaimed, “Man, we really shook that bridge, didn’t we?”

However, most of us do not have the ant’s inflated ego problem. Our conflicts come not from thinking too highly of ourselves, but rather from thinking too lowly. This possibility is evident by the meaning of Paul’s word “sober,” which is “balanced”—not too high, nor too low. Most Christians I know think too lowly of themselves when it comes to spiritual matters. Insecure, unworthy individuals that we are, we have a hard time seeing ourselves as someone of value to the God who “saved a wretch like me.”

We are spiritual Charlie Browns, who in one cartoon strip said, “Sometimes I lie awake at night, and I ask, ‘Where have I gone wrong?’ Then a voice says to me, ‘This is going to take more than one night, Charlie Brown.’”

Paul also writes of *the positive side of sober thinking*—he advises us to “think soberly.” Again the word means balanced, with somber judgment.

From *The Living Bible*, Psalm 139 speaks positively about who we are:

O Lord, You have examined my heart and know everything about me. You know when I sit or stand. When far away you know my every thought. You chart the path ahead of me, and tell me where to stop and rest. Every moment you know where I am. You know what I am going to say before I even say it. You both precede and follow me, and place your hand of blessing on my head.... You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body, and knit them together in my mother's womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! It is amazing to think about. Your workmanship is marvelous—and how well I know it. You were there while I was being formed in utter seclusion! You saw me before I was born and scheduled each day of my life before I began to breathe. Every day was recorded in your Book! How precious it is, Lord, to realize that you are thinking about me constantly! I can't even count how many times a day your thoughts turn toward me. And when I waken in the morning, you are still thinking of me!

Sober thinking tells us we are

- Made in His image
- Equipped with His armor
- Saved by His grace
- Empowered by His Spirit
- Chosen by His Son
- Called according to His will

I was a no one until the One made me a someone.

One day Moses was doing some irrational thinking about the people God had given him to lead. God reminded them that the people were His *segulla* (Ex. 19:5)—Hebrew for special possession.

I am a winner. When asked by a reporter in the Dallas Cowboys' two-a-day football workouts in the heat of August if the players ever get tired, then-coach Tom Landry replied, "You only get fired when you're losing." Sober thinking tells me I am a winner. Self-generated conflict comes when I begin to doubt that truth.

I am one for whom God designed a plan, a blueprint. There is a reason why I'm here. Even though I am a work in progress, sober thinking tells me there is a plan. Self-generated conflict comes when I determine there is no plan and begin to develop one.

Sometimes I confess that I don't know who I am. In these times, I am reminded of the wonderful little verse by Lois Chaney in *God Is No Fool*:

Once, I prayed, who am I?

If only I knew who I was.

If only I knew what I could do.

If only I knew why I was.

If only I knew what to do.

And I prayed more earnestly, who am I?

If only I knew, faith would come.

If only I knew, strength would spread.

If only I knew, I could work and serve and grow.

*And I demanded in prayer, who am I?
And He smiled, and said, "It is enough that I know. Follow Me."²*

Finally, Paul writes of *the reason for sober thinking*—"God has dealt to each one a measure of faith" (Rom. 12:3). When I think soberly about self, I am more usable by God. "Measure" means just enough faith for my needs, to do what God calls me to do. We should quit being jealous of another's faith. If God wants you to construct an ark, He will grant you the measure of faith He granted to Noah. God gives you just enough faith to do what He has planned for you to do.

The crux of the conflict is, will we think soberly, as one who is drunk on new wine, or will we think irrationally, as one who is drunk on alcoholic wine? Satan will do everything within his influence to get us into irrational thinking—about ourselves, about others, and about God, thus creating self-generated conflicts. Any way you look at it, alcohol-induced drunks don't cope with conflict very well. In contrast, God offers new wine for sober thinking—and coping.

How To Play It Where It Lies When You've Been Lied To

The difference between a professional tour golfer and me is— among many other things—trees. They admire them lining the fairways. I play among them. Joyce Kilmer once wrote, "I think that I shall never see a poem as lovely as a tree." Kilmer obviously never played golf, at least not the way I play it. Lying among the trees, I am often tempted to use what we tree-golfers refer to as club foot, kicking the ball back out into the open area when no one else is watching and then lying about my lie. However, there is a term in *golf—playing it where it lies—that* prevents the legal use of club foot. When the rule is violated, self-generated conflict follows—guilty conscience. One must play the ball from the place where it lies—unless, of course, it lies out of bounds or in some natural hazard, both of which I have found on occasion.

Paul understood "lie"—from both perspectives. In Philippians 4:11-13, he wrote: I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Paul had been lied to in earlier situations, especially in financial matters. Thus, while the context of the passage is financial, there is an application to bad lies in other areas of life. And in all of the various states (lies) in which Paul found himself, he had learned to be content.

Let us look first at *learning—related to the lie* (4:11). The word "learning" comes from mystery religions and means "to be initiated to learn secrets. . . to break the code." Literally the word means "I have come to learn." It speaks of entrance into a new condition.

When I was young, I was a member of the Royal Ambassador organization at our church. Because it was a missionary organization, we had a missionary password, a secret code that had to be given before we could get into the weekly chapter meetings and, more importantly to us, the football game following. Our code— DFFPSA—stood for the missionary for whom our chapter was named, Dr. Franklin Fowler, Paraguay, South America. To enter our chapter meeting by way of the secret code was to enter a new condition of learning.

While you can't always control the circumstances of your lie, you can learn from it. You

² Chaney, Lois. *God is No Fool*. Nashville: Abington Press, 1969,124.

can learn about God. He is not so insecure that He has to explain everything to us, as we think we must do with our children. God does not owe us an explanation. God is, however, sovereign—in charge of both the lie and the adjustment to it.

You can also learn something about yourself. The maturity of a Christian can be measured by his interpretation of his circumstances. He determines if he is a victim of or a victor over his lie. Someone said, “Crisis is the result of unmet expectations.” What were your expectations, and how were they unmet? The only school that teaches all of this is God’s school.

We can also look at *the state of the lie* (4:11). The word “state” means circumstances or conditions. In 2 Corinthians 11:23-26, Paul lists a catalog of crises from his life:

- Whipped five times with forty lashes minus one. Forty minus one was thirty-nine, the ultimate number of lashes allowed in Roman punishment. The whip was made of several tails with sharp inserts (11:24).
- Beaten three times with rods. These beatings were applied to the spine with solid unyielding rods (11:25).
- Eight major experiences described without a complete sentence. Stoned in Lystra, shipwrecked (11:25).
- Eight different perils, all involving physical danger and hardship (11:26).
- Agonies of physical and mental exhaustion (11:27).

Paul understood difficult circumstances—tough lies. His travels took him from one difficult lie to another. He was qualified to speak on the subject.

We live in a roller-coaster world. I never did like roller coasters, even though I grew up near Playland Park in Houston (the forerunner of AstroWorld). I like the present roller coasters even less. On a roller coaster, you don’t have time to get used to anything but change. Today, everything is changing. If some thought we were “lost in the 50s tonight,” you haven’t seen anything yet. At the top of an incline, roller coasters promise peace and tranquility. Then they tip over the top and rapid changes occur—especially to your stomach. The “lie” at the top becomes a lie on the way down—and around.

Finally, we can look at being *content with the lie* (4:11). The word “content” appears only here in the New Testament. It comes from the Stoics and literally means “self-sufficient—able to withstand the shock of circumstances—not disturbed by the lie.” “Content” describes the condition in which a person contains himself and is not upset. There is no adequate English word for this state.

Paul used the idea of contentment elsewhere with another one-time word in 2 Corinthians 3:5, “sufficiency in Christ.” Thus we are not to be complacent or apathetic. We have the power to deal with circumstances, yet we use wisdom to let God deal with them on our behalf. So, like Paul, we must do something with the lie (4:13). Paul’s world was closing in on him. This is one of his prison letters, written shortly before his death. So he speaks of doing all things through Christ, who gives the “strength” or who infuses him with strength.

We infuse tea with boiling water by dropping a tea bag in the water. The tea bag, infused with the hot water, becomes something different than a tea bag. It becomes tea. Christ likewise infuses our life with His strength, and we become different, from self-like to Christ-like. We change from powerless under our circumstances to powerful over our circumstances. This is not so much strength we get from Jesus, but His very strength infused into us.

So when the world’s lies give you lemons, make lemonade. When others lie to you and

give you scraps, make a quilt.

The crux of the conflict revolves around the circumstances (lies) of life. Satan says, cheat, take matters into your own hands, lie about it, kick the ball back onto the fairway. God offers the infusion of His own power to enable you to deal with the circumstances of your lie. For every bad lie that produces a self-generated conflict, God offers the truth of His sufficiency in all situations.

What To Do When Self-Generated Conflict Happens in Your Life

1. Clarify the source of the conflict. Is it really self-generated or from some other source?
2. Communicate with God, offering assurance that you intend to remain faithful even as you cope with the conflict.
3. Ask God what lessons you should be learning in the midst of the conflict.
4. Ask God to assist you in not yielding to the temptations of Satan.
5. Claim victory over the conflict even as you are in the process of coping with it.

Discipleship Questions for Reflection and/or Discussion

1. Can you identify any of these six biblical situations with a conflict that you have experienced or are currently experiencing?
2. What other biblical situations do you know where someone experienced self-generated conflict?
3. What additional self-generated conflicts have either you or your friends experienced?
4. Is there additional advice you would give to a friend who is experiencing self-generated conflict?

CHAPTER THREE

Human-Created Conflict

Persecuted, but not forsaken

The two deacons were seated on opposite ends of the first row of the worship center. The geographical distance between them paled in comparison to the spiritual gap. I had been their interim pastor for the past six months, and it was time for THE BUSINESS MEETING.

The church had terminated the former pastor and then recommended giving him a year's salary in appreciation for his ministry among them. The motion was amended to pay him six months' salary and then ask the personnel committee to review his situation. If he had not found a ministry position by then but was actively seeking a position, the church would continue paying the salary for six more months. But if he were already in a ministry position or had ceased to actively seek such a position, the salary would be discontinued. The personnel committee refused to bring a recommendation at the six-month mark, but the meeting must be held. The congregation was evenly divided. The two front-row deacons each clutched a copy of *Robert's Rules of Order*. I was the moderator. By the end of the two-and-a-half-hour meeting, I had succeeded in offending everyone present. No one left happy.

If you had entered "Human Conflict" on the Search feature of your computer, you would likely have seen a brief video clip of this business meeting. It was human-created conflict at its height. How do Christians continually find themselves involved in such human-created conflict? It is not a new problem.

On his first missionary journey, Paul was persecuted by enemies who followed him from city to city; yet God provided resources for his ministry (Acts 13:45-50, 14:19). In 2 Corinthians 5:9, Paul says that we are "persecuted"—pursued as a retreating warrior by his foe. The word is variously translated "abandoned," "cast down," "having many enemies." It is the same Greek verb that was used to describe Jesus' feeling of abandonment and forsakenness on the cross. But here it is an interpersonal word. Paul is feeling this from other persons, not from God. Interpersonal persecution leads to human-created conflict.

It is characteristic of Christians in every age to be persecuted, made fun of, misunderstood, and thus to find themselves in conflict. Jesus predicted such in the Sermon on the Mount when He said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake" (Mt. 5:10-11).

Yet we are "not forsaken," "not abandoned," "never without a Mend," "not destroyed." Sometimes we are at our wit's end, but never at hope's end. While we are often persecuted by men, we are never forsaken by God.

Human-created conflict. How can we cope? Perhaps these five biblical illustrations will prove help.

Cries Heard in Times of Conflict

There are certain events that mark our lives. Some of us remember where we were and how we got news of national and international crises: Pearl Harbor, Kennedy's assassination, the Challenger explosion, Oklahoma City Columbine, the Columbia spacecraft, 9/11, London.

Likewise, we remember the circumstances surrounding the receiving of tragic personal news: the death of a close friend or family member, an accident—human- created conflicts.

Things were never quite the same again. We did not go back to normal but searched for and found a new normal.

On a short flight, the aircraft hit rather heavy turbulence. The flight attendant spilled a tray of drinks. Visibly shaken, she went to the public address system and announced the discontinuation of service, then added, “The time is too short and the turbulence is too severe for business as usual.” That may have been the mindset of the Psalmist when he wrote Psalm 46.

Charles Spurgeon said of this psalm: “Happen what may, the Lord’s people are. . . secure; this is the doctrine of the Psalm, and it might, to help our memories, be called ‘The Song of Holy Confidence.’”

Martin Luther said of this psalm: “We sing this psalm to the praise of God because God is with us and powerfully and miraculously preserves and defends His church and His word against all fanatical spirits, against the gates of Hell, against the implacable hatred of the devil, and against all the assaults of the world, the flesh, and sin.”

Three cries are often heard in times of trouble—all addressed in this psalm.

The cry of “Why is there trouble in my world?” (Ps. 46:1). As difficult as it may seem to believe, these troubling events occur because God loves us. God did not create trouble, but began human creation with man in a perfect garden.

God loves us so much that He refused to make us robots, but created us with a freedom of choice. Sometimes bad, evil choices, are made. Could God stop these choices? Yes, He could just take away everyone’s freedom of choice. But to be fair, He’d have to take away yours as well. To do so would be to violate His creative actions. In order to have freedom of choice, bad, wrong choices must be allowed. God created us to love Him by choice. Love is not genuine if there are no options.

The cry of “What does this trouble mean?” (Ps. 46:8). Don’t misunderstand “the works of God.” In a recent tragic crisis in which lives were unlawfully taken I heard someone say, “It’s just God’s will.” I have a theological term for that. Baloney! You can’t take a violation of God’s law and turn it into God’s will. God said, “You shall not kill.” You want me to believe killing in violation of God’s law represents God’s will? No!

In Heaven, God’s will is done perfectly and there is no pain, sorrow, or evil, but this is not Heaven. We are in an imperfect place. Here we must choose to do God’s will. We may strive to do that will perfectly and even pray, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” yet still we live in an imperfect environment.

I’ll tell you one of the works of God—tears. The first tears shed in troubled times are God’s. Does God know of tragedy ahead of time? Yes. He is already grieving, weeping, before the crisis comes.

We turn to God in crisis times. We have nowhere else to turn. We turn to God because even though it appears that Evil is writing the script, God is writing the final chapter.

And where is God in the midst of trouble? God is where God always is. . . in the midst of His people, hurting, grieving, weeping and offering comfort, strength, refuge, working things to His good (not our good) (Rom. 8:28). Psalm 46:2 says, “We will not fear.” With God on the side of His children, how irrational it is to fear.

This much we know about God:

- God is still in control when trouble comes. It does not surprise Him.
- Trouble does not happen independently from God. While He may not cause it, He is fully aware of it.
- God will be exalted (Ps. 46:10). I don't know how, but I must be willing to give Him time.

I remind you that the most far-reaching tragedy in history was not your recent trouble but one that happened on a skull-shaped hill outside Jerusalem approximately two thousand years ago. It was so tragic that the sun refused to shine at high noon. The earth quaked. God himself turned aside, and the Son cried out, "My God, why?" How tragic—the Son of God, dead.

Yet on the third day following history's greatest tragedy, God glorified Himself through resurrection!

The cry of "How can I respond to this trouble?" (Ps. 46:10). Release your grief. Trouble creates a variety of emotions—fear, anger, worry, depression, resentment, grief. Face your feelings. Don't repress them. "Pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us" (Ps. 62:8). If you don't talk it out, you'll take it out on yourself or somebody else.

Receive from others. "Bear one another's burdens" (Gal. 6:2). You need others in times of trouble. Their perspective, support, encouragement, presence will be invaluable.

Refuse to be bitter. Trouble will either make you bitter or better. Not both. When trouble makes you bitter, you're just guaranteeing yourself more unhappiness. You can't be bitter and happy at the same time. One translation of Job 21:25 says, "Some people have no happiness at all; they live and die with bitter hearts" (TEV). And the writer of Hebrews says, "Look carefully. . . lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble" (Heb. 12:15).

Remember what's important. Trouble has a way of clarifying values, separating what's of value from what's not.

- Can you lose your job? Yes!
- Can you lose your health? Yes!
- Can you lose relationships? Yes!
- Can you lose God? No! "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5).

Some of you may need to give up those things you cannot keep in order to gain that which you cannot lose.

Rely on the Lord for stability in times of trouble. "Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion which cannot be moved, but abides forever" (Ps. 125:1). Rely on the Lord for direction in times of trouble. "I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jer. 29:11). Rely on the Lord for refuge. "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge" (Ps. 46:11).

An often-heard cry in time of trouble is, "Oh, my God!" It is a cry of confusion, of grieving, of agony, of hurt. It is a deep-seated cry for a connection to the Creator. We are made for a relationship with God. But He waits for us to choose Him. Unfortunately, it takes troubled times before some people seek this relationship. But this I recommend:

- In the midst of limited knowledge, move toward what you know.
- In the midst of uncertainty move toward what is certain.
- In the midst of darkness, move toward the light.

God knows and understands. He offers what you need most. The Lord is our refuge and strength, a very present help in conflict.

The crux of the conflict is what we do in a time of trouble. Satan wants you to curse God. It is all God's fault. God could have prevented it if He really loved you. God says to hang in there. All things will work together for good to those who love God. For every human-created conflict, there is a divine voice saying, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10).

A House Divided

The phone call came late on a Sunday night. "Dr. Crawford, you've got to help us," cried the voice on the other end of the line. "Our pastor resigned tonight, effective immediately," the voice continued, "and in so doing he told off a bunch of the church members and then said he wasn't leaving, but would be present every Sunday sitting on the back row. Everyone is mad at everyone else. We are hopelessly divided. Can you be here Wednesday evening?"

Wow! My kind of invitation! I went and assisted in what little way I could with a human-created conflict of major proportions.

I spoke to that fractured congregation on that Wednesday evening from Matthew 12:22-30. The context of the passage is the casting out of a demon. Some said the demon was of God; others said it was from Satan. Probably some thought it just happened. Jesus states a principle and then He deals with the event. The principle was obviously valuable, but the application was even more so to that group of wounded believers suddenly thrust into a human-created conflict.

The principle—"a house divided . . . cannot stand" (Mt. 12:25). "Jesus knew their thoughts," and thus he understood, better than they, the reasons a "house" becomes divided. This idea is also underlined in Psalm 139:1-2, Jeremiah 17:10, and Matthew 9:4. Only God knows our hearts/thoughts.

In marriage, we get to a point where one says, "I know what you're thinking." We're usually fooling ourselves by thinking that; nevertheless, we believe it. How much more God knows our thoughts. Whereas we might fool each other, there is no fooling God.

"Divided" (Mt. 12:25) means destroyed, ruined, laid waste like a desert wilderness. It implies that what was once together is now separated. The separation represents a human-created conflict. Getting it back together likewise involves human-created conflict. God knew the thoughts that brought about separation, and He also knew what it would take to get them back together before they ceased to "stand." No "house" or kingdom, as other translations render this verse, or family, can stand together without harmony. When one member undoes what the group had done, conflict follows.

The options available when a house is divided. What can you do when the "house" in which you work, serve, worship, fellowship, study, and minister is divided?

For one thing, you can disagree with the group and part company, seeking to find another "house" where you can be at peace and in harmony with others. While this sounds harsh, it is often the best option when human-created conflict creates irreparable division.

You could also stay with the "house" but be a hindrance to unity—fussing, criticizing, and complaining. Unfortunately, many choose this option, causing further division.

Another option is staying together but remaining silent. Internalize your feelings. While there may be some value in this for a season, the long-term health of the group as well as of the individual lies in honest, constructive communication.

Finally, you could stay and become proactive in solving the disagreement, realizing that God alone can build or rebuild. Psalm 127:1 says, “Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.” The key here is to be in constant communication with God and follow only His directions.

Now if you are the “house” leader, your coping with the conflict created by a house-divided will be aided as you seek to “know their thoughts.” This comes with time and ministry. There will likely be two or more sides made up of imperfect individuals. You don’t take any of these sides. You get on the only perfect side—the side that Jesus is on, remembering that “he that is not with me is against Me” (Mt. 12:30). Then you know the others in the group well enough to lead them to follow Him. When the sides of the divided house get on the side of Jesus, the conflict is well on the way to being solved and the “house” on the way to being reunited.

The human support available when a house is divided. What Satan doesn’t seem to understand is that when he succeeds in creating a human conflict and thus dividing a house, other family members arrive for support and encouragement.

“The Forty Wrestlers” were Christian soldiers in one of the legions of the Roman army. War was being waged in the high mountains of Armenia, during a bitter winter. The emperor issued a decree that all soldiers must march past a statue of the emperor and pay homage. Most did, but not the forty wrestlers. Because of their positive reputation, the emperor begged them to obey the order.

“For Rome we will fight on any field and under any sky. In the service of the emperor, if necessary, we will die. But we worship no one save our Master, Jesus Christ,” they cried.

Stripped of their armor, they were driven into sub-zero weather to stand on a frozen lake while other soldiers, waiting around campfires, heard them singing: “Forty wrestlers, wrestling for Thee, O Christ. Claim for Thee the victory and from Thee the crown.”

As one after another soldier died on the ice, the song continued. “Thirty-nine wrestlers, thirty-eight wrestlers, thirty-seven wrestlers. Until only one was left. The final wrestler suddenly turned coward and ran to the campfire. One of the campfire soldiers replaced him and sang out, “One wrestler . . .“ until he was heard no longer. In the morning, forty bodies were found.

When your “house” becomes divided, get on the side of Jesus and then look for the support of fellow believers.

The crux of the conflict lies in which option we choose to follow when a “house” becomes divided. Satan encourages any option that enhances the human conflict and hinders the divine agenda. But for every human-created “house divided,” there is a divine invitation to side with the One who is stronger than any division—the only source of unity

Three Steps and You’re Out

College provided many shocks to my system. Not the least of which was the day my roommate walked into the room and announced, “I just signed you up to fight in the Golden Gloves.” My roommate was a boxer of sorts, and our university had a team entered in the local Golden Gloves boxing tournament. He took the initiative to register for me. Prior to that day, I had never laced on a pair of boxing gloves.

Fortunately, I got my nose busted while sparring before I even entered the Golden Gloves ring for a real fight, and thus I never began my official boxing career. One valuable lesson was obtained, however. I learned if I stayed close to my opponent—hugged him—he could not hurt

me as badly. It was when I pulled away that the opponent could gain space to wind up and hit me hard. Give an opponent enough space, and he'll knock you out.

It is a lesson I would later implement in serving churches. Get close to people and stay close to them. There will be less human-created conflict, and you might even get hurt less. But you don't get many chances.

When one does get "hit"—whether from being too close or being too far away—the Bible offers three steps toward reconciliation. You might call them three steps and you're out. We are looking at human-created conflict arising from one person sinning against another. The three steps are found in Matthew 18:15-20.

Step one is one-on-one—"Go and tell him his fault between you and him alone" (18:15). The actual meaning is to seek an explanation of your brother's conduct and, if he has wronged you, to administer a brotherly reproof. This was required bylaw. Leviticus 19:17 says, "You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him."

Furthermore, this first step was to be done alone and personally so the one in the wrong might have an opportunity to correct his mistake without involving a larger group of people. It is always better to handle a problem privately than broadcast it widely and in turn involve many other persons. Personal confrontation is almost always better than the indirect kind—writing a letter, sending an email, asking someone else to do it for you. These approaches risk misinterpretation and usually lead to further conflict.

Step two is two/three-on-one—"Take with you one or two more" (18:16). Perhaps if the brother in the wrong will not listen to you, he will listen to someone else. The Old Testament gives support to the idea of more than one witness (Dt. 17:6, 19:15). If the matter of conflict does reach step three, there will be more than one witness as to the confrontation. In other words, it ceases to be one person's words against another's words.

The involving of other persons in the confrontation is not meant to imply guilt but to assist in the process of reconciliation. One who has been injured often despises most of all the one who did the injuring. Little can be done between the two to bring reconciliation. The involvement of others is often advised and needed.

Step three is church-on-one—"Tell it to the church" (18:17). If all else fails, the matter of conflict should be taken before the church. This may be a reference to the entire church body or to some group within the church authorized to handle such matters. In the Jewish synagogues of the day, there was a group of elders before whom matters such as this were brought. More than likely the Greek word *ekklesia* refers to the entire church body, especially since "churches" were small in number of "members."

Hopefully in an atmosphere of love, fellowship, and prayer, the conflict can be ultimately solved. The assumption is that the group is one motivated by love and will seek to judge based on justice and fairness.

Step four is out—"Let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector" (18:17). Finally, if nothing works to bring about a resolution of the conflict, the erring brother is to be cast out of the fellowship. To treat one like a "heathen" was to consider him like ones with whom they had no spiritual connections. "Tax collectors" were generally men of no principle, and believers would have no spiritual relationship with them.

Since Jesus often spoke of "heathens" and "tax collectors" with compassion and gentleness, this likely does not refer to what we commonly call excommunication but may be closer to what Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 5:3-5, that in performing these actions, the wayward brother "may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus."

Thus this is not a path of steps to abandon a brother. It is rather a challenge to win him over through reconciliation. It is not a pathway for hopeless people, but rather a journey toward wholeness and spiritual health.

In a church where I was serving as interim pastor a man came forward one Sunday morning and asked to speak to the church. Even though he was a deacon and a member of the pastor search committee, I should have counseled with him first. But hindsight is almost always perfect. As he spoke, he admitted to having an extramarital affair with another member of the church and confessed that this was the reason the pastor search committee was not getting the job done in their search for a new pastor. Unfortunately, the woman involved in the affair was present and did not know the confession was forthcoming, nor did the man's wife or children, or the other members of the pastor search committee. Obviously, neither did I. You can guess the far-reaching results. Better to have followed the biblical steps.

The crux of the conflict is whether to take matters into our own hands when one wrongs us or to follow the biblical steps prescribed by Jesus. Satan tempts us to do it our way—which in reality might be his way. Standing alongside every wayward brother is a forgiving, reconciling Lord, welcoming the prodigal home.

Squeezed into a Mold or Remolded from Within?

Admittedly, a relationship with God is the most important relationship of all. It is addressed by Paul in Romans 12:1, "Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service." Contrary to popular application, there is no period in the original language at the conclusion of verse 1. In fact, verse 2 begins with a conjunction and: "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." There is no period or conclusion at the end of the first verse.

Some would like to stop with verse one, and many have done so. They are so heavenly minded that they are of little earthly good. Verse 2 deals with our relationship with the world. Someone wrote:

To live above with those we love, ah, that will be glory.

To live below with those we know, now that's a different story.

The J. B. Phillips version of the New Testament captures Paul's play on words with the following paraphrase:

Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God remold your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands, and moves toward the goal of true maturity.

There is *the negative side of this human-created conflict*—"Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold." The word "conformed," appearing in most translations, is the Greek word *schema*, meaning the outward scheme of things. Paul advises his readers not to conform outwardly to (be squeezed into the mold of) the world around them—the things of the flesh.

Later, Paul reinforces this idea:

Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against

the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh, and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish (Gal. 5:16-17).

John echoes the thought:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world (1 Jn. 2:15).

Yet we are influenced by many things of the world—Fifth Avenue, Wall Street, Hollywood, television, peer pressure, the Internet. Some believers yield to these pressures and become spiritually inconsistent with little integrity. A three-dollar bill Christian is God's greatest embarrassment. Game players, fakes, mask wearers, phonies—they walk, talk, act, dress, and smell like the world. The outside appears to be in good shape, but the inside is corrupt.

There is *the positive side of human-created conflict*—“Let God remold your minds from within.” The word “remold,” appearing in most translations as “be transformed,” has as its root the Greek word *morphe*—the essential unchanging nature, the inward form. We cannot change that which is on the inside of us, but God can. It takes a miracle, but that is what salvation and transformation are—miracles.

Schema changes; *morphe* does not change. Let me illustrate by saying that I am male. As far as *schema* is concerned, I was a little baby male, a childhood male, a teenage male, a college-age male, a single-adult male, a married male, a father male, a middle-age-crisis male, a grandfather male, and eventually I will be a dead male. However, as far as *morphe* is concerned, I am unchangeably male.

The same word was used for Jesus in Matthew 17:2: “He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light.” The word is likewise used by Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:18: “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being *transformed* into the same image from glory to glory”

“By the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2) means that the transformation is not just of the heart. The writer of Proverbs affirms, “As he thinks in his heart, so is he” (Prov. 23:7).

This idea must be balanced with Paul's concept of being “all things to all people” expressed in 1 Corinthians 9:19-22:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law. . . , that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

We are to be separate, but not weird. Salt affects the taste of food. Food does not affect the taste of salt. Light affects the darkness. Darkness does not affect the light. The leaven affects the lump. The lump does not affect the leaven. The believer is to affect the world. The world is not to affect the believer. So who are you when no one knows who you are? Do you affect, or are you affected by?

Having seen the negative side and the positive side, now think about *the balance of human-created conflict*—“Prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Rom. 12:2). God's will is found in Romans 12:1 and tested in 12:2. How does one prove/find the will of God? Begin by getting involved in the world, doing what you know to be God's

will—worshiping, giving, sharing. The rest will come one step at a time—in God’s time. “Good, acceptable, perfect” means brought to an end, finished, complete.

The crux of the conflict is whether you will allow the worldly influence to shape or mold your life on the outside (conformation) or whether you will allow God to shape or mold your life from within (transformation). In the midst of human-created conflicts, Satan leads the cheering for the worldly influence. God urges you toward inward transformation that effects outward change. The choice is yours.

When All the Parts Are Doing Their Part

If all the parts did their part, the great majority of human-created conflict would cease. That’s the ideal. The reality is that some of the parts do not do their part. They either want to do some other part or do no part at all. When this happens, the whole body suffers in conflict.

Paul addresses this issue in Romans 12:4-6a:

For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them.

Several facts are rather obvious. First, there is *the proper relationship within the body*. There is unity within the body—”one body.” The right hand and the left hand function together as a part of the same body. You may be able to perform certain functions better with one or the other—such as throw a ball or write a note—but even then the two hands are performing as one body. The same is true with eye and hand coordination. When the left hand contains a spoon filled with food and the left elbow bends toward the mouth, the eyes follow it and the mouth opens. Left foot and right foot coordination is yet another example of one body. While we are running, when the right foot hits the ground, the left foot is in the air.

Some years ago I suffered a broken right shoulder. It is amazing what I could do with my left hand, considering I am right-handed. During the rehabilitation time, I began to use a computer. Because my left hand was free from the sling, I started using a left handed computer mouse. I still do so until this day. When the computer technicians come to my office, they always exclaim with some amazement, “You’re left-handed!” “No,” I reply, “just with my mouse.” When one part of the body suffers, not only does the whole body suffer, but other parts of the body come to the rescue.

In addition to unity in the body, there is also diversity—”many members,” “differing gifts.” These members do not have equal but different functions. If a big toe insists on performing the function of an eye, then all it will likely see is the inside of a shoe.

Paul addresses this issue in 2 Corinthians 12:12-17. When it comes to the Body of Christ—the church—a modern paraphrase might look like this:

The body has many parts, not just one part. If a Sunday school teacher says, “I am not a part of the body because I am not a deacon,” does that make that member any less a part of the body? And what would you think if you heard a choir member say, “I am not a part of the body because I am only a singer, and not an usher”? Would this make that member any less a part of the body? Suppose the whole body was a children’s worker—then how

would we have a youth program? Or if your whole body were just one big ministerial staff, who would be led? But that isn't the way God made us.

Yet another analogy might go like this. A command comes to walk across the road to serve God. The feet refuse to do their function. So we crawl on our knees. This process is slower and more painful. Eventually the knees say, "No more. I'm tired."

We now must walk on our hands. This is even slower and more painful. Now look what we have. Where are decisions made? In the head. Where is the head? At the bottom. What's on top? Feet—the very part that refused to cooperate in the first place.

No wonder the Body of Christ is sometimes so dysfunctional.

Since each part of the body is a minority part—there are no majority parts in the body—we must strive toward a balance. This balance is reached when we understand our own gifts and functions and appreciate the gifts and functions of others.

Likewise, there is *the proper connection to the body*—"spiritual gifts." We naturally have some questions about spiritual gifts.

Where do spiritual gifts come from? They come from God and only from God, who gives them according to "grace." We are not to ask God for gifts, but rather accept what is offered to us. When the New Testament twice instructs us to "seek" the gifts, the context of the Scripture is an instruction to the church as a whole, not to any individual.

What is a spiritual gift? A spiritual gift is a special attribute given by God to every believer according to His grace for use within the Body of Christ—God's church.

Who has a spiritual gift? Every believer has a gift or, in all probability multiple gifts. I did not say all church members have gifts. Being a member of a church is no more a guarantee that one is a believer in Jesus Christ as a part of His Body than being a member of the Lion's Club makes one a lion. I am a dues-paying member of the United States Golf Association. I am also a dues-paying member of the BGA—Bad Golfers of America. Play a round of golf with me, and you will not only know that I can't be a model member of both organizations, but you will know into which organization I more naturally fit. Membership does not always include characteristics.

What is the proper view of spiritual gifts? We are to worship the Giver of the gifts, not the gift itself. Every time a group of believers elevates the gifts above the Giver, there is trouble on the horizon. Why should we seek to discover our spiritual gifts? Discovery precedes development, and for the Body to function properly, the gifts must be developed.

Where would one look to find a list of spiritual gifts? There are four lists in the New Testament, plus numerous individual listings:

- Romans 12:6-8
- 1 Corinthians 12:7-11, 28
- Ephesians 4:11-14
- 1 Peter 4:7-11

How does one discover spiritual gifts? Spiritual gifts should not be mistaken for spiritual fruit. One relates to the roles and functions of individual believers—gifts; the other refers to that which should be a natural product of all believers—fruit. Likewise, we should not confuse

spiritual gifts with talents. Playing the piano is a talent. Blessing others through music could be the gift of exhortation. Hitting a baseball two out of every three times at bat is a talent. Assisting others through athletics could be the spiritual gift of helps. Possible gifts should be tested. If God gave it to you, it will build up His Body, and the church and members of the Body will affirm your gift. If you're the only one who thinks you have it, you probably don't.

Finally, there is *the proper ministry within and through the body*. Ephesians 4:11-13 instructs us to "build up the Body." This is to be done within the body as we use our gifts to strengthen each other. A Zulu proverb says, "When a thorn pierces the foot, the whole body must bend over to pull it out." In addition, we are to use our gifts to build up the Body externally by adding others to the body. Not every believer has the gift of the evangelist, but all have the commission to make disciples. This can be done most naturally through the use of spiritual gifts, employing commitment and discipline in the areas where we are not gifted.

The crux of the conflict is whether we understand our part within the Body and faithfully carry out that function, or whether we insist on doing less. Doing less invariably creates human conflicts. Satan capitalizes on human conflict when he keeps us from performing any function within the Body or when he gets us to attempt to perform the function given to another. When the parts do their part, there is harmony. When the parts do less, there is conflict.

What To Do When human-Created Conflict Happens in Your Life

1. Clarify the source of the conflict. Is it really human-created, or from some other source?
2. Communicate with God, offering assurance that you intend to remain faithful even as you cope with the human-created conflict.
3. Ask God what lessons you should be learning in the midst of the conflict.
4. Ask God to assist you in not yielding to the temptations of Satan.
5. Claim victory over the conflict even as you are in the process of coping with it.

Discipleship Questions for Reflection and/or Discussion

1. Can you identify any of these five biblical situations with a conflict that you have experienced or are currently experiencing?
2. What other biblical situations do you know where someone experienced human-created conflict?
3. What additional human-created conflicts have either you or your friends experienced?
4. Is there additional advice you would give to a friend who is experiencing human-created conflict?

CHAPTER FOUR

Satan-Caused Conflict

Struck down, but not destroyed

I had taken the group of ten seminary students on a prayer journey to a West African nation, but what they encountered was not covered in our orientation notes. One day, as they were visiting in a small church building with one of the missionaries, a woman entered and asked for assistance. As she explained her situation, she began to moan and groan, then fell to the floor, writhing uncontrollably. The missionary explained to the students that the woman had just encountered a satanic attack and requested their assistance. For almost two hours, the students and the missionary physically held the woman and prayed to God that she would be set free of whatever demonic spirit had affected her. Finally, the woman's body went limp, and within a few moments she began to praise God and thank the students.

While it is very difficult for Western Christians to believe such stories from the “mission field,” the accounts are legion. Every cross-cultural missionary I know—and there are hundreds—has at least one story similar to this one. It seems that the closer believers get to the front lines of the battle with Satan, the more intense the conflict becomes.

Many of the conflicts we encounter are God-allowed or self-generated or human-created. In these conflicts, Satan enters with temptations and even aggressive behavior. He tries to capitalize on situations that he did not initiate but which could easily be swayed in his favor. Many times he succeeds. However, there are other times when the conflict is more direct—a Satan-caused conflict.

Sometimes when we come under attack, we are “struck down” or “cast down.” The language used by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:9 is clearly that of conflict. The verb *katabakkein*, translated into the English phrase “struck down,” can mean laid low by a blow or a weapon. But, as Paul exclaims, we are never “destroyed.” We may be badly beaten, but we are never defeated. We may lose an occasional skirmish, but we never lose the contest. We may be knocked down, but we are never knocked out. While there may be an occasional stress fracture in the earthly vessel, it is forever held together by the power of divine adhesive.

To think about Satan and the direct conflict that he brings into our lives is an awesome experience. We dare not tread too lightly or too intensely here. We must seek a balance. One of the most often quoted statements related to Satan comes from the pen of C. S. Lewis: “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors.”³

So as we continue to try to understand conflict, let's look at some information that may prove helpful about conflicts that are directly caused by Satan.

We Have Met the Enemy and He Looks Harmless

We are not sure how long Adam and Eve lived in a perfect garden-world before they met Satan. He appears first in Genesis 3:1. Prior to that, there was perfect peace and pleasant harmony. Then came deception and temptation, chaos and disorder. While the record in Genesis

³ Lewis, C.S. *The Screwtape Letters*. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1959, 9.

3 leaves many blanks to be filled in, some of these are completed by passages on Satan in Isaiah 14:12-15 (“You are fallen from heaven”) and Ezekiel 28:12-19 (“You were perfect in your ways from the day you were created, till iniquity was found in you”). To believe Scripture is to believe in a personal devil. The author of *The Exorcist*, William Blatty, reportedly said, “It may be difficult to believe in God in this century but one would be a fool not to believe in a personal devil.”

The first reference to evil in the Bible tells us that *Satan is a “serpent”* (Gen. 3:1). In the history of religions, beginning in Genesis 3, the serpent is always a sinister animal.

The scene here was a perfect garden, indwelt by perfect creations of a perfect God. Like everything else the serpent had been created by God. He had been given a name like all other creatures (Gen. 2:19). Not content to live outside the garden, this serpent had crept in. The fact that the serpent had the ability to speak indicates that he was more than just a snake. As yet the first sin had not been committed. It was still a perfect world. However, as a result of the temptations offered to the woman by the serpent, and the yielding to that temptation, sin entered the garden.

In the remaining verses of Genesis 3, we learn the sphere of Satan’s activities, the method of his approach, the form of his temptations, and the certainty of his eventual overthrow and destruction.

The first thing the Bible tells us about the “serpent” is that *Satan is “more cunning than any”* (3:1). Consider the stages of the temptation.

The serpent stirred the woman’s curiosity by speaking to her. Surely the woman had not seen anything like this before. She had to be stunned and intrigued by a snake that talked.

The serpent then raised suspicion about God by asking, “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden’?” This question is designed to make one think, to re-evaluate, to reconsider what had heretofore been assumed. Initially it creates doubt. That is Satan’s subtle plan.

The serpent expands his use of doubt of God to his approach. He raised three points of consideration:

- How can God be good if He places restrictions on you (3:1)?
- God knows you will not die if you eat the fruit but rather know “good and evil” (3:4).
- Actually, rather than dying, you “will be like God” if you eat this fruit (3:5).

Finally, the serpent leads the woman to unbelief and eventually to disobedience. It appears to the woman that the serpent knows God better than she does. This causes her to step out of the circle of trust and obedience, into the circle of distrust and disobedience. Every time since then, when man believes he or Satan knows more than God, conflict has followed.

It is worthy of some notice that the entire temptation was based on creating in the woman a disbelief of the words of God. This still happens today. Satan would love to have you disbelieve all or parts of God’s word—the Bible.

In addition to being called a “serpent” and being described as “cunning,” *Satan was and is able to communicate with human beings.*

We should not be so concerned with what the serpent was as with what it said. Obviously serpents don’t talk, but this was much more than your average garden snake. How do we know the voice of the serpent in the garden was actually the voice of the devil himself? Consider the following passages of Scripture:

- 1 John 8:44—”You are of your father the devil. . . . He was a murderer from *the beginning*, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. *When he speaks a lie, he speaks* from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it.”
- 2 Corinthians 11:3—”I fear, lest somehow, as *the serpent deceived Eve* by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted.
- 1 Timothy 2:14—”Adam was not deceived, but *the woman being deceived, fell* into transgression.”
- Revelation 12:9—”So the great dragon was cast out, *that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan*, who deceives the whole world.”
- Revelation 20:2—”He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan.”

And still the Devil is deceitful and cunning, disguising himself in various ways. You can take the Devil out of your theology, as some have done. You can remove his name from your hymnbook, as some have done. You can banish him from society, as some have done. You know what? He just keeps on with his destructive work.

In conflict, it is an unforgivable and to some extent uncorrectable mistake to underestimate the enemy. Similar to the popular Energizer Bunny of television commercial fame, he takes a licking, but he keeps on ticking. Actually, he just keeps on talking. The communication never stops. The basic image of a little devil on one shoulder and a little angel on the other, both trying to persuade you to do it their way, is not far from the truth.

Contrary to popular opinion, Satan is not simply the “old devil,” as we sometimes refer to him. This depicts an aged, fragile, senile, ready-for-the-old-folks-home image. While he is old in the sense of how long he has been on the earth, he is also young, new, creative, attractive, and vivacious. Back to Genesis 3. When the Devil had done his work, he departed, slithering off into the shadows and leaving the woman alone to contemplate. Finally, she decided that the serpent was correct, and she yielded to the temptation offered. Then the tempted became the temptress, leading her husband into the same dreadful disobedience.

The crux of the conflict is related to the unchanging aspect of Satan. He has thousands of years of experience at what he does. When his experience encounters your inexperience, there is conflict—Satan-caused conflict. However, be not alarmed. Even though Satan has vast experience, God has more. For every satanic conflict that comes your way, God stands ready to strengthen you.

Biblical Descriptions of the Enemy

Throughout the Bible there are numerous names and descriptions for the enemy. Some of these are

- Satan—adversary/opposer—most common name for the enemy. Used 56 times in Scripture. Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 2:18, “Satan hindered us.”
- Devil—slanderer/accuser—Used 35 times in the New Testament. Peter referred to “your adversary the devil” in 1 Peter 5:8.
- Beelzebub is used 7 times.
- Jesus called Satan “the ruler of this world” in John 12:31.

- “The prince of the power of the air” was Paul’s description in Ephesians 2:2.
- “Deceiver” is used in 2 Corinthians 1:3
- “The tempter” is the description used in 1 Thessalonians 3:5.
- “The god of this world” is a term used in 2 Corinthians 4:4.
- “A roaring lion” is a description in 1 Peter 5:8.
- “The accuser of our brethren” is a title in Revelation 12:10.
- I “A beast” is used in Revelation 19:19.

One of the clearest and most descriptive references to Satan comes as Paul describes the enemy thus: “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). It will serve us well to explore this verse in more detail.

Paul begins by describing the intensity of *our involvement with Satan*—“Wrestle.” The word literally means “to throw” or “to swing.” From this image is derived the picture of throwing or swinging an opponent to the ground. The word is both an athletic word and a military term. In the military sense, it portrays two enemies in hand-to-hand combat. They stand face to face until one of them falls.

From Taiwan come stories of the “bed ghost.” Many Taiwanese experience these visitations from Satan in the night. One missionary shared that the presence was so strong that she felt heat radiating to her body from an evil presence in the room, and on another occasion felt pushed down on her bed, almost suffocating. In these and similar instances, Paul’s ancient word “wrestle” takes on modern significance.

Sometimes we are deceived to the point of wrestling with the wrong enemy—“Flesh and blood.” So often we fight against people who may be associated with evil. They are but the visible instruments of the evil one. How much energy do we waste fighting the wrong enemies? They are not the source of evil but the means by which the evil one does his work.

There is here a likely order of demonic hierarchy. The words “principalities and powers” occur together in Ephesians 1:21,3:10, Colossians 1:16, 2:10, and 2:15, so they are probably meant to be together here. It is difficult to know exactly to what this phrase refers, except to the power of Satan. Principalities may refer to the rank and rule of demonic forces. Powers may allude to the power allowed them.

All of these entities owe their very existence to Christ. “For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or *principalities or powers*. All things were created through Him and for Him” (Col. 1:16). Jesus is “the head of all *principality and power*” (Col. 2:10).

Paul further describes the enemy with the phrase “rulers of the darkness of this age.” This world is filled with darkness. Paul may be referring back to 2 Corinthians 4:4, where he wrote of those who are perishing, “whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.”

There follows then a *flirt her description of Satanic forces*—“*spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.*” This may be a summary of the entire list of demonic creatures, rather than a new category.

Some see all of these as people in high places of government, rulers who were persecuting the church. But this negates Paul’s own words, that the real enemy is not “flesh and blood.” People are instruments of the enemy, but they are not the enemy.

Nor do these passages describe several classes of demons, but they include several descriptions of the same enemy. Satan is multi-talented.

Once a boxer was getting beat up in the ring. After each round, he would stagger to his corner, only to hear his trainer say, “He’s never touched you yet.” Several rounds of cuts, bruises, and bleedings later, upon hearing the same words from his trainer, the boxer exclaimed, “Keep an eye on the referee, ‘cause someone in this ring is beating the stuffing out of me.” Satan can hit us from many directions and in many forms.

“High places” or “heavenly places” refers to the battlefield. The phrase is used five times in Ephesians. It is not a reference to a geographical location but to a supernatural one.

Modern warfare has coined a new phrase, “surgical bombing of targets of opportunity” It refers to a long-distance precision attack from either an aircraft or a missile-launching ship. While Satan does on occasion create this type of long-range conflict, the reference here is to hand-to-hand combat.

Remember this conflict is God versus Satan, not you and I versus Satan. We are simply caught up in the crossfire. Thus the real battlefield is in invisible regions of the spirit world.

The crux of the conflict here is a proper identification of the enemy. With whom are we in conflict? Satan tries to convince us that the conflict is not really with him and that the temptations, if followed, are really to our benefit. Any conflict is made more difficult when the enemy is veiled. For every Satan-caused conflict, God offers resisting strength. Identify’ the enemy, and then “resist the Devil” (Gal. 4:7).

The Devil Made Me Do It, But How

Several years ago a popular television comedian, Flip Wilson, coined a famous line, “The devil made me do it.” The line was always used as an excuse for being caught in some activity that was unacceptable, illegal, or undesirable. Indeed the devil does make us do some things. Now that we have some insight into who Satan is, we must consider how he persuades us to do what he wants us to do or how he hinders us from doing what we ought to do.

A good example of Satan’s hindering power is found in 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20. Paul longed to visit the believers in Thessalonica. He reminded his readers that he had been “taken away from you for a short time.” His love for them was expressed in a question-and-answer format—“What is our hope, or joy, or even crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you?” However, Paul’s visit to Thessalonica was not to be—“Satan hindered us.”

How does Satan hinder us? How does the devil make us do it? In his wonderful little book *Fruitful Discipleship*, Edward Thiele writes that the satanic conflict in the New Testament was characterized by various military strategies, some of which are still in use today.

Frontal assault. We are all vulnerable in some places. James writes, “Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed” (Gal. 1:14). Satan knows these places. He tempted Adam and Eve through an attractive proposition offered in opposition to God’s command. Satan’s temptations to Jesus were similar—turn stones to bread for food after forty days of fasting; jump off the temple and angels will attend to you to fulfill Scripture; worship Satan and kingdoms you came to claim will be yours.

Siege or blockade. When we become isolated from other Christians, Satan attempts to encircle us and cut us off further from the strength gained from fellowship. Young people away at college or the military or a job are particularly susceptible to this strategy. As are young couples living away from home for the first time. Removed from our support systems, Satan can more easily have his way with us. He is a “roaring lion,” and lions only attack the ones who wander away from the group. They prowl around, seeking whom they might devour.

Ambush. Satan likes to attack when we least expect it—a sneak attack. In spiritual matters, we least expect Satan to attack when we are on the crest of a successful spiritual wave, proud and relaxed, preoccupied with personal prestige.

Invasion or occupation. This is Satan's attack-and-control method. He uses addictions that did not seem so serious upon initial temptation. Demon possession was an early form of this method. Today we can be possessed with many "demons."

Infiltration. Satan likes to work through people close to us whom we perceive to be on our side. Satan influenced Peter to try to steer Jesus from going to Jerusalem when Jesus said he must go there to die.⁴

Likewise, satanic conflict in the New Testament was characterized by satanic deception. Satan is the master of lies. Here are some of his lies, with Scripture rebuttal.

God is not good. "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

Your body is your own. "Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

Sinful living is beneficial. "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23).

God will forsake you. "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5).

This life is all you have. "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth or rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mt. 6:19-21).

You are what you make of yourself. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

God doesn't love you. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

Evil is to be feared. "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Tim. 1:7).

God doesn't keep His promises. "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish" (2 Pet. 3:9).

There are many paths to God. "Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me'" (Jn. 14:6). "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

The crux of the conflict related to the biblical descriptions of Satan is more than just being able to identify your enemy. It is knowing about the enemy. Why do military leaders develop war plans based on who the enemy is? Why do coaches develop game plans depending on who the opponent is? It is because the offense will be more effective once we understand the defense of the enemy/opponent. Satan does not want you to know about him. God desires that we understand our enemy. So, do you enter the conflict aware or unaware? That is the question. For every aware or unaware question, God offers an answer—His very presence.

Strongholds That Do Not Hold

⁴ Thiele, W. Edwards. *Fruitful Discipleship: A Guide to Personal Spiritual Growth*. New Orleans: Insight Press, 1994, 148-149.

A key Scripture related to Satan-caused conflict is 2 Corinthians 10:3-4—”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” (NASB).

When a lone gunman entered our church in the midst of a youth meeting and killed seven people before taking his own life, we had no human weapons with which to retaliate. Even though there was a police officer in the building, he had no gun with him.

Although a few military veterans tried to get an angle from which to rush the gunman, they could not. We were defenseless from a human standpoint. So what kept the gunman from killing dozens of people? It may have been the stained glass window above the baptistery through which the bright evening sun was shining in blinding light. Every time the gunman came down an aisle and out from under the balcony’s overhanging shadows, he was confronted with this bright light and turned back, cursing. It may also have been the actions of one nineteen-year-old young man who stood to face the gunman and said, “Sir, you don’t need to do this. You just need Jesus.” Within a few seconds, the gunman cursed and killed himself. “The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but are divinely powerful.”

The word “weapons” is plural and is used elsewhere by Paul, such as in Ephesians 6:10-20. The translation of our 2 Corinthians 10 passage in *The New Testament in Modern English* by J. B. Phillips may be helpful:

The truth is, although of course we lead normal human lives, the battle we are fighting is on a spiritual level. The very weapons we use are not those of human warfare but powerful in God’s warfare for the destruction of the enemy’s strongholds. Our battle is to bring down every deceptive fantasy and every imposing defense that men erect against the true knowledge of God. We even fight to capture every thought until it acknowledges the authority of Christ.

Due to the critical nature of these verses, some explanation is needed here. The context has Paul being accused of having a weak physical presence while writing bold letters. He addresses that accusation in 2 Corinthians 10:1. He had also been accused of walking in the flesh, so he addresses that issue in the next verse. Thus Paul is in the midst of responding to accusations when he writes 2 Corinthians 10:3-6. He admits, “we walk in the flesh,” but affirms that “we do not war according to the flesh” (10:3). The word translated war (Greek, *Strateuo*) is perhaps better translated campaign, since Paul is not referring to a military conflict but a spiritual endeavor. He is contrasting “walking in the flesh” with encountering the enemy of the flesh, and he warns that when we encounter the enemy, we need supernatural weapons.

The “strongholds” (Greek, *ochuroma*) of 2 Corinthians 10:4 were fortresses. Paul uses the word metaphorically to represent things in which mere human confidence is imposed. These strongholds could be pulled down or cast down (10:5). In verse 4, the word “pulling down” (Greek, *kathairesis*) is used as a noun and in verse 5 “casting down” (Greek, *kathaireo*) is used as a verb. *Kata* means “down”; *haireo* means “take, cast, demolish.” The “weapons” (Greek, *hoplon*) for accomplishing such an act are plural as used here (10:4) and elsewhere when referring to spiritual warfare. Paul elaborates on these weapons in Ephesians 6:10-20. The key phrase of the passage is not “the pulling down of strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:4) or the “casting down of arguments” (10:5) but “mighty in God” (10:4). You cannot war with Satan in your own strength, and you certainly can’t singlehandedly destroy his strongholds. James appropriately instructs believers: “Submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (4:7).

In other words, victory is ours. Satan's strongholds do not hold. He is a defeated foe—whipped before the fight. Consider these biblical outcomes in our relationship with Satan:

- Romans 8:37—"In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us."
- Colossians 2:15—"Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it."
- James 4:7—"Submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you."
- 1 Peter 3:22—"Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him."
- Revelation 12:10-11—"Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, 'Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.'"

While he was pastor of the Overlake Christian Church in Lakeland, Washington, Bob Moorehead wrote "A Mandate to Satan":

Satan, take note and listen well! Get off my back! You will not conquer me. I'm blood-washed, Spirit-filled, daily delivered, strongly sanctified, Spirit-soaked and Word indwelt. I am linked with sovereign and eternal power and have set my face.

You're a deceiver, but you won't deceive me; you're a liar, murder me; you're a roaring lion, but I'm not devourable; you're extremely subtle, but I'm on to your ways! You parade as an angel of light, but I walk in a brighter light. Your days of deception are over with me. I won't be deceived, detoured, derailed, distorted, distracted, discouraged or disillusioned by your schemes. Your vile influence won't cross the "No Trespassing" sign on the door of my heart. My life is off-limits to you now My doors are all closed to you forever! You won't walk in, crawl in, slither in, sneak in, pry in, jump in, swim in, fly in, drive in or barge into my life. I have a permanent guest that now lives inside and He cannot share my temple with you.

You may lure, lie, linger, lurch, laugh, lunge or leap, but you won't come in. Your days are numbered; your kingdom doomed; your designs are dwindling; your evil eroding; your devilishness dissolving; your deceit decaying; your deception diminishing and your death is dying. Your progress is poisoned, your poison is paralyzed and your penetration is profitless! Your ultimate victory has been canceled and soon your show will be over!

You can't trap me with your wares, soil me with your subtlety, or defeat me with your deception.

He that is in me is greater than you! Now get off my property for the day of your final binding is not far away!⁵

The crux of the conflict is that Satan may tempt, torment, test, and try, but he cannot triumph. He would like to lift up strongholds against us, but he has no strongholds that hold up. Every time Satan causes a conflict, God is there to offer present support and future victory.

⁵ Moorehead, Bob. *Words Aptly Spoken*. Kirkland, WA: Overlake Christian Press, 1995, 113-114.

Ninety Miles an Hour Down a Dead-End Road

There was a recent country music song that spoke of life in a small town and the desire to escape. Since there seemed to be no but you won't lie to me; you're a killer, but you won't real way to escape, the refrain of the song was, "Ninety miles an hour down a dead-end road." It is a good description of Satan. He is a born (or should we say created?) loser. He cannot and will not win. Try as he might, he is headed down a dead-end road.

Perhaps the best-known illustration of Satan-caused conflict in the Old Testament comes from the life of Job, truly one of history's most remarkable men. Job suffered bitter physical, mental, and spiritual anguish, often without a sense of God's presence. In the struggle to understand life, Job came to understand both the sovereignty of God and the limitations of Satan. While he is a formidable enemy, Satan has limitations. Satan could not touch Job. Even though Job lost much—almost everything—"The Lord said to Satan, 'Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not lay a hand on his person'" (Job 1:12).

Satan is limited in authority. Only God is sovereign. This is evident in Satan's relationship with Peter, when Jesus said, "Simon, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat, but I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail" (Lk. 22:31). Satan is limited in knowledge. Only God has all-knowledge. Satan may know more than you, but never more than God.

Satan is limited in power. Only God has all-power. Satan has great power, but not more than God. "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them" (2 Kgs. 6:16). "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 Jn. 4:4).

Finally, Satan is limited in presence. Only God is omnipresent. Satan cannot be everywhere at once. He can only be in one place at a time. Thus he has to depend upon his demons and angels. They have even less authority knowledge, and power than Satan himself. As Satan tempted Job, he was so limited that it was like going ninety miles an hour down a dead-end road.

If Job is the best-known illustration of Satan-caused conflict in the Old Testament, the New Testament's best illustration is Satan's conflict with Jesus before His public ministry began. In Luke 4:1-13, we have three rather intense temptations that originate from Satan and are directed at Jesus. They prove that Satan has temptations.

Immediately following His baptism, Jesus went to the wilderness for a forty-day season of prayer and fasting in preparation for this public ministry. Coming out of that spiritual experience, Jesus was approached by Satan. The writer of Hebrews states that Jesus "was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15).

Here Jesus was tempted in three "points" of life—physical, material, and spiritual. The first temptation was one of a physical nature—"Command this stone to become bread" (Lk. 4:3). One might think that after forty days of fasting Jesus was hungry, and that Satan was tempting Jesus at a point of weakness. However, it may have been a point of strength. After all, if you have fasted for forty days, surely one more day was possible. Nevertheless, Jesus resisted the temptation with an Old Testament quotation, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God" (Lk. 4:4, Dt. 8:3).

Taking Jesus up on a high mountain peak, Satan offered the second temptation, which was of a material nature—"All this authority I will give You, and their glory. . . If you will worship before me, all will be Yours." It is often true of Satan that what he offers is not really his to offer. Nevertheless, Jesus again resisted and quoted an Old Testament verse, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve" (Lk. 4:8, Dt. 6:13).

Finally, Satan took Jesus to a high pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem and offered a temptation that was spiritual in nature— “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here” (Lk. 4:9). His challenge was followed by a quotation of Scripture from Satan, “For it is written, ‘He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you,’ and, ‘In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone’” (Lk. 4:10-11, Ps. 91:11-12). Proving that Satan is a poor Swordsman compared to Jesus, once again the Lord resisted temptation with an Old Testament quotation, “You shall not tempt the Lord your God” (Lk. 4:12, Dt. 6:16).

All three temptations were ones requiring compromise. That is one of Satan’s most effective methods even to this day. If he can get us to compromise, we are weakened in our faith, those around us are disappointed in the integrity of our witness, and God is not glorified. So how shall we resist? One clue comes from Jesus— memorize, apply, and quote Scripture. It is, after all, the sword of the Spirit, our only offensive weapon in the conflict with Satan.

When the resisting was over and Jesus was once again victorious over Satan, the Scripture says, “The devil. . . departed from Him until an opportune time” (Lk. 4:13). One skirmish does not make a war. One triumph over Satan does not signal total victory. The temptations continue. Likewise must the resistance.

Both the story of Job and the story of Jesus are stories of yielding not to temptation. The hymn text is old (1897) and has long since disappeared from many modern hymnbooks, not to mention overhead transparencies and Power Point images.

Yield not to temptation, for yielding is sin;
Each vict’ry will help you some other to win;
Fight manfully onward, dark passions subdued,
Look ever to Jesus, He’ll carry you through.

It is no sin to be tempted. In fact, temptation is absolutely normal. Yielding to temptation is the sin. Neither Job nor Jesus yielded to the temptations of Satan.

Even though he has limitations and temptations, it is worthy to remind ourselves that Satan has frustrations. What good is it to race ninety miles an hour if the road is a dead-end? How frustrating it must be for Satan to keep going down dead-end roads. But his dead-end roads are only temporary routes to frustrations. Awaiting for Satan is one major, final roadblock, when his limits are all reached, his temptations all spent, and his racing days are over.

The crux of the conflict is that Satan’s conflicts are temporary He cannot succeed. He plans and screams to get us to fall and follow his directions—to yield to his temptations. He offers life in the fast lane. But for every ninety-mile-an-hour ride offered by Satan, God reveals a dead-end. And He offers a detour onto a “Highway of Holiness” (Isa. 35:8).

What To Do When Satan-Caused Conflict Happens in Your Life

1. Clarify the source of the conflict. Is it really Satan-caused or is it from some other source?
2. Communicate with God, offering assurance that you intend to remain faithful even as you cope with the Satan-caused conflict.
3. Ask God what lessons you should be learning in the midst of the conflict.
4. Ask God to assist you in not yielding to the temptations of Satan.
5. Claim victory over the conflict even as you are in the process of coping with it.

Discipleship Questions for Reflection and/or Discussion

1. Can you identify any of these five biblical situations with a Satan-caused conflict that you have experienced or are currently experiencing?
2. What other biblical situations do you know of where someone experienced Satan-caused conflict?
3. What additional Satan-caused conflicts have either you or your friends experienced?
4. Is there additional advice you would give to a friend who is experiencing Satan-caused conflict?

CONCLUSION TO PART ONE

The conflicts encountered—the troubles with a treasure—are overcome by the treasure itself—that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (2 Cor 4:10). In John 16:33, Jesus stated, “You will have tribulation.” Then he added, “But I have overcome (conquered, overpowered, gotten the best of) the world.”

Read the back of the book (Rev. 4:11-13; 19:1-6; 21:1-6). We win! It is not so much who you are, but whose you are; not so much where you are, but why; not so much your circumstances, but what you do with them; not so much your troubles, but your treasure. I love the translation of 2 Corinthians 4:7-10 as rendered in The New Testament in Modern English by J. B. Phillips. With it, we end the first part of this book, having attempted to understand the conflict, and we move onward to the second part of the book, equipping ourselves for the conflict.

This priceless treasure we hold, so to speak, in a common earthenware jar—to show that the splendid power of it belongs to God and not to us. We are handicapped on all sides, but we are never frustrated; we are puzzled, but never in despair. We are persecuted, but we never have to stand it alone: we may be knocked down but we are never knocked out! Every day we experience something of the death of Jesus, so that we may also know the power of the life of Jesus in these bodies of ours. Yes, we who are living are always being exposed to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be plainly seen in our mortal lives.

INTRODUCTION TO PART TWO

Because we contain the very presence of God in our fragile lives, we are always subject to conflict. Our “earthen vessel” is easily cracked, broken, scratched, and defiled. Everything around us is a potential enemy to our clay pot existence. Whether the origin of our conflict is God-allowed, self-generated, human-created, or Satan-caused, this much we know: Satan will try to take advantage of the circumstances. The very reason we “have this treasure in earthen vessels” is that we might be reflectors, enhancers, projectors of the “glory of God.”

Satan loves nothing more than to rob God of glory He gains a little more success in that venture any time he can have a negative effect on the “treasure” we hold in our “earthen vessel.” Therefore, we need to give serious attention to the equipping God has provided for us in the way of spiritual armor.

As Part One of this book heightened our awareness of the conflict, Part Two hopefully will strengthen our equipping for the conflict.

In my younger years one of the most exciting activities at church was the Sword Drill, later called the Bible Drill. At that point in my life I had never heard the term “spiritual warfare” and had no idea that the Sword Drill commands—Attention! Draw Swords! Charge!—were military in nature. Never did it cross my young mind that there was such a thing as Satan-caused conflict.

Lately I have begun to comprehend a key to understanding this increasingly popular subject: namely, that Christians are not primarily warriors by nature but instead are ambassadors on mission. Warriors fight and defend their country. often on foreign soil. Ambassadors represent their King in another kingdom. Warriors are military. Ambassadors are diplomatic. Nevertheless, ambassadors, while representing their King, become engaged in warfare. The apostle Paul, who wrote most of the biblical material on spiritual warfare, was an ambassador, living in a day when military terminology was widely employed. He resided in an empire that was built and preserved by military power. But Paul was not a military man, even though he adopted the military terminology of his day, imploring Timothy to “endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ” (2 Tim. 2:3) and assuring Timothy that he himself had “fought a good fight” (2 Tim. 4:7).

Many warfare references appear in Paul’s letters:

- Romans 13:12—“Put on the armor of light.”
- I 1 Corinthians 9:7—“Who ever goes to war at his own expense?”
- 1 Corinthians 14:8—“If a trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare himself for battle?”
- 1 Corinthians 16:9—“A great and effective door has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.”
- 2 Corinthians 6:7—“by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left.”
- 2 Corinthians 10:3—“For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds.”
- Ephesians 6:11—“Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”

- Ephesians 6:13-17—”Take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”
- Philippians 2:25—”Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier.”
- Colossians 2:15—”Having disarmed principalities and powers. .
- 1 Thessalonians 5:8—”Putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation.”
- 1 Timothy 1:18—”That by them you may wage the good warfare.”

In contrast to these warfare references in Paul’s writings, he refers to himself as an apostle seventeen times; as a servant, slave, or prisoner fourteen times; as a teacher or an exhorter twelve times; as an intercessor thirteen times; as a minister seventeen times; as a missionary five times; and as a preacher or edifier thirty-eight times. Clearly, Paul’s vision of himself was not primarily as a defender under attack but as an ambassador on mission. He was an ambassador who often took on the role of apostle, servant, exhorter, intercessor, minister, missionary, preacher.

When Paul pictured the Christian life as warfare, he portrayed Christians defending the gospel against the enemies of Christ even as they were representing Him as ambassadors. To the church at Corinth he wrote, “We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20). In the passage often described as containing the “weapons of our warfare,” Paul wrote, “I am an ambassador in chains” (Eph. 6:20).

In so identifying himself and his readers, Paul was echoing Old Testament writers. The writer of the Proverbs exclaimed, “A faithful ambassador brings health” (13:17). The prophet Isaiah wrote, “The ambassadors of peace shall weep bitterly” (33:7). Another Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah, wrote: “An ambassador has been sent to the nations. . . Rise up to battle” (49:14).

Many who preach, teach, and write on the subject of spiritual warfare do so from the perspective that we are warriors fighting Satan and striving to win a battle. The following chapters are written instead from the perspective that we are primarily ambassadors who, in the activity of representing our King in another kingdom, get caught in the crossfire of the battle being waged “in heavenly places” and thus are in need of spiritual armor. The warfare is not ours, except that we represent our Lord, who has already claimed ultimate victory. For this reason, I have refrained from using the term “warfare” throughout this book, preferring rather the word “conflict.”

We are not on a seek-and-destroy assignment when it comes to encountering Satan. We are following a command to “make disciples of all the nations” (Mt. 28:19). To the degree that we are effective in following our Great Commission, we will encounter spiritual conflict. It is when we are effectively on mission that we come under attack.

Thus this is another look at spiritual warfare, but from a slightly different perspective—the perspective of coping with conflict, no matter the source.

CHAPTER FIVE

Empowered for the Conflict

Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might

The New Testament church had been birthed and commissioned to make disciples who would go to the very ends of the earth. As soon as she began to fulfill this Great Commission, believers began to encounter spiritual conflict. Consider the following examples:

- Acts 5—Satan attacked the church from within through the prominent family of Ananias and Sapphira.
- Acts 8—God was moved to separate the church in Jerusalem from its Jewish comfort zone through heavy persecution.
- Acts 13—Satan’s representative was humiliated, defeated, and blinded through the ministry of Paul.
- Acts 16—Warfare was fought over the demonized slave girl of Philippi.
- Acts 19—Warfare was waged between the Spirit of God and the evil spirits associated with some Jewish exorcists in Ephesus.

Nor did these encounters with evil end in Acts. Look at what Paul wrote concerning this conflict:

- 1 Corinthians 9:26-27—”Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.”
- 2 Corinthians 10:3-5—”For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.”
- 1 Thessalonians 5:8—”But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation.”
- 1 Timothy 1:18 —”This charge I commit to you, son Timothy, according to the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may wage the good warfare.”
- Timothy 6:12—”Fight the good fight of faith.”
- 2 Timothy 2:3-4—”You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier.”
- 2 Timothy 4:7—”I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

These comments are from Paul, generally considered the most Spirit-filled person in the New Testament other than Jesus. If he were so filled, why were there so many passages about conflict? Here is the reality of his day—and ours. The greater the filling of the Spirit, the more involvement in the mission of God and the more God’s mission expands, the greater the conflict. Other New Testament writers addressed spiritual conflict as well.

- James 4:7—”Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”
- 1 Peter 5:8-9—”Be sober, be vigilant: because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world.”
- Revelation 12:7-11—”And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, ‘Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.’”

All of this reflected the earlier teaching of Jesus as recorded in Luke 14:31-33,

What king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be my disciple.

Today's War News from the Battlefields

My childhood years were lived during the Korean Conflict. Every Saturday morning, some of my friends and I would pay our nine cents and crowd into the nearby theater to watch a morning full of cartoons, cowboy movies, and to-be-continued serial thrillers. Somewhere in every Saturday morning’s offerings was a feature called “Today’s News from the Battlefields.” Since the news was from Korea and few of us knew where that was, we had little interest. It was time well spent for a bathroom or refreshment break.

While yesteryear’s (to borrow a word from an old cowboy movie—”Come along with us to the thrilling days of yesteryear battle news was from faraway places of little interest to ten-year-olds on Saturday mornings, today’s battle news is closer and of much greater interest.

Curtis Vaughan writes, “It is a great mistake to think that in the happy hour of our conversion all trouble and strife cease. In reality, that hour marks the beginning of a lifelong warfare—not a war for our salvation, to be sure, but a war in Christian service.”⁶

Like Paul, we are called to be ambassadors—those who represent a King in another kingdom. The kingdom of this world is not yet the kingdom of our God. Satan is called the “ruler of this world” (On. 12:31). As we represent our God in this earthly kingdom, we encounter Satan. While working on this book, I sent e-mails to several friends and former students presently serving in cross-cultural settings. I asked them if they had experienced any evidences of satanic conflict in recent days.

From a missionary friend in *Mexico* came the story of a spiritual conflict. The missionary wrote:

We have encountered many conflicts in the Spirit over the years. It does not fail when we

⁶ Vaughan, Curtis. *Bible Study Commentary: Ephesians*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977, 125.

are moving furiously in the Lord, also automatically a close friend will turn on us and speak evil or unkindly. It sets us back but we realize that it is Satan attacking us and we get on our knees and cry out to God to protect us and help us to love this one, whom Satan is using to deter the work.

From *Nigeria* came word of a Christian educator whose home was burned in an apparent attempt to kill him. While students from another major religion claimed to be the instigators of the fire, it was clearly interpreted as an attack originating in the mind of Satan.

From *Haiti* came a report that a witch doctor was giving missionaries much trouble and hindering the advance of the gospel. Even though she sent her children to the Christian school, she admitted that she loved her demonic powers more than she loved God.

From *Kazakhstan* came word of another witch doctor placing demonic curses on anyone who would not give her money, which usually meant a Christian. Every time a Christian would get near her home, she would yell at them to leave. After many attempts by a local pastor to share God's word, she finally listened to the gospel, trusted God, and changed masters.

From a former student who is now a missionary in *Brazil* came a story of a demon-possessed woman who continually disrupted the open-air evangelistic meetings. After intense prayer, she ceased to be disruptive. She was neither on drugs or alcohol, nor was she mentally ill. Often she acted normal. At other times she seemed to be possessed.

From *Taiwan* came a report from a missionary who often felt that an evil spirit was in the room at night while she was attempting to sleep. She wrote, "I felt the hate and evil so much I thought I was going to die. All I could do was appeal to Jesus. Every time I did so, the evil spirit left immediately."

From a church planter in *Canada* came the account of a woman believed by many to be demon-possessed. Since she was married to a church member, she often attended church functions. Once during a Bible study, she appeared in all-black clothing. After a few moments she left. The church planter said there seemed to be a sudden gloom over the group. Since her presence had caused him to lose his place in his notes, he looked again at his Bible. All he saw was a blank page. After a momentary setback, he called on someone else to read. As they read, the print reappeared in his Bible.

While serving as interim pastor in a *Houston* church, I experienced a disruption during a Sunday morning sermon. As I was concluding my sermon, two young men stood in the middle of the center section, about halfway back. Each was dressed in black. Turning their backs on each other, they walked toward the aisles on either side of their section, climbing over people as they went. When they reached the two aisles, they started toward the front of the worship center, marching in military style. Arriving at the first row simultaneously, they turned and walked toward me, then abruptly clicked the heels of their black boots and turned away, departing the worship center through side doors. Later, as the invitation time ended and people were seated, these two young men returned to the worship center through the same side doors and repeated their steps, complete with clicking of the heels, until they were seated again in their original seats. I discovered they were devil worshipers and had been visiting some of the youth activities. They had been observed prayer walking (praying to Satan, obviously) around the church facilities. Their purpose was to disrupt activities and divert the focus of those present.

As reports of these incidents intensify Ephesians 6:10-20 will help prepare us for the coming attacks. Half of Ephesians is about grace; half is about relationships. This passage on conflict follows a teaching on the family—one of Satan's primary targets. Spiritual conflict is not about our salvation. We are not fighting to be saved or to inherit heaven. Spiritual conflict is

about service and ministry. Therefore; we must give attention to our empowering. Earlier in this letter, Paul discussed the wonderful privileges and blessings of the one who follows Jesus. He wrote about his own calling and fellowship with other believers. He wrote about relationships—husbands and wives, parents and children, servants and masters. All of these involve degrees of difficulty and, if they are done well, invite serious opposition. Thus Paul closes this letter with a discussion of the conflict.

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplications for all the saints— and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak (Eph. 6:10-20).

The essence of equipping comes with a realization that, as disciples seeking to serve God, we live on the front lines of the battlefield. Satan will attack every attempt to advance the gospel. Awareness must lead to equipping.

A Personal Power Outage and Its Correction

Before we go further, a brief personal parenthesis may be helpful. I come to this subject of spiritual conflict out of experience, beginning at the age of fifteen. As an active high school athlete and a hyper-active church youth group member, I was on my way to a church-sponsored youth activity when the car I was in was hit by a speeding driver who was heavily under the influence of alcohol. My neck was broken at the second vertebra, and I spent the next nine months in a hospital bed, learning, among other things, how to pray. Little did I know this was only a prelude to later mission— and conflict.

It was out of this experience that I understood God's call on my life to vocational ministry to be on mission with a divine purpose. It was also out of this experience that a foundation was laid for understanding and withstanding later spiritual conflict. In the midst of the 1999 shooting crisis at Wedgwood Baptist Church in Fort Worth—my home church—I experienced an amazing revelation. I had been commissioned by the church to write a book on the shooting and its aftermath. As I was interviewing other people who were present the night of the shooting, I became aware of two things:

- Many of those present were describing the scene as one of spiritual attack. Some used the term “spiritual warfare.” After more than one hundred interviews, I concluded that they were correct. Whatever else happened that night, there was spiritual warfare going on.
- Many others who were present seemed to be in denial of the tragic events.

One of the counselors explained why people were having such a hard time accepting the facts. He said that the human mind is like a computer. When you ask your office computer to search for a file, it hums and hums, and if there is no file, it tells you so. When we asked our minds to compute a violent shooting in our church that took seven precious lives and traumatized hundreds of others, there was no file for it. So our minds just hummed and hummed and kept rejecting our request for understanding.

With this analogy, I realized that my broken-neck experience at age fifteen had prepared a file in my mind that would later help me to understand some of the crises in my life, such as the shooting at our church, and many others.

Allow me to describe some of the others.

On a trip to the former Soviet Union, I was on a Russian-built Aeroflot airliner that lost power at 30,000 feet in the air. While the problem was mechanical and was corrected in a matter of a few seconds, I felt it was as if Satan were using the experience to gently remind me that I was on his turf.

Then came a trip to West Africa to speak at the mission meetings in The Gambia and Burkina Faso. Ten days before departing, I was at the 18th hole of the Colonial Golf Tournament in Fort Worth. Seated four rows up, I jumped off the side of the bleachers, and my foot caught in the metal construction, causing me to fall headfirst to the concrete below. Extending my right hand to break the fall, I sustained a broken and dislocated right shoulder, a torn rotator cuff, nerve damage in my right arm and facial cuts. I received permission to make the trip to West Africa only because my doctor had no idea what it would be like to ride on African roads in a Mitsubishi pickup with no shock absorbers. But I made it with my right arm in a sling. You might say that trip was made on a sling and a prayer. Did Satan cause me to fall off the bleachers? I don't know, but if not, I do know he got involved shortly thereafter.

I was on a return trip from Senegal, West Africa, via Brussels, Belgium, and became so ill I had to sit on the back seat of the airplane near the restroom for the duration of the ten-hour return flight to Texas. Need I say more? It was like Satan saying, "You tried to encourage people who are working in my territory I'll get even with you."

As a part of the fiftieth anniversary of Southern Baptist work in Guatemala, I took eight student-preachers to that country to preach in evangelistic crusades. On the night before my return flight to the U.S., I became very ill and wasn't sure I could even make the flight back. I was sick throughout the flight and the remainder of the day. I lost eleven pounds in twenty-four hours and almost became dehydrated. Again, it was like Satan paying me back for facilitating evangelistic ministry where he was strong.

During a major prayer journey to China, India, and the Islamic world, I developed stomach problems toward the end of the three-week trip. Satan? Possibly.

Prior to the first half of a six-month sabbatical leave to China I was discovered to have a rare form of skin cancer, morphia basal cell carcinoma, which required four surgeries in thirty-six days. These were completed within days of my departure for Hong Kong. In fact, a few days before my departure, while I was leading a Prayer Conference in a Nashville, Tennessee church, a local doctor removed the final stitches from my nose. Was this Satan trying to block a ministry that would not only encourage missionaries in China but result in a prayer-walking orientation manual that would be translated and used in many parts of the world? Probably so.

On a prayer journey to Japan, I began to suffer from what was later diagnosed as degenerative disk problems in my lower back. Satan loves to get involved in back problems. While prayer walking in Macau, I experienced debilitating swelling in a joint of my left foot.

Fortunately, a missionary pharmacist was able to provide me with some anti-inflammatory medication. Was Satan trying to divert my focus from ministry? I think so.

During a prayer journey to Costa Rica, I experienced pain in my neck and left shoulder. Upon my return to Fort Worth, it was diagnosed as a degenerative disk problem in my neck. Satan really can be a pain in the neck.

On my prayer journey to Hong Kong, I experienced dizzy spells in the intense heat and high humidity. Was Satan using the weather conditions to discourage me? Maybe. During a six-month sabbatical leave to Germany, I incurred a hernia, experienced floaters and flashes in my right eye which were initially attributed to a detached or torn retina, and I observed a recurrence of what was feared to be the earlier skin cancer. Satan? Likely.

Less than two weeks before departure for Kosovo, I injured my lower back. The next ten days included an emergency room visit, a doctor's office call, a stemmed shot, and various drugs. The doctor recommended that I not make the trip due to the back-to-back flight segments of several hours' duration and the condition of the roads in Kosovo. The missionaries concurred that this was the best decision. Did Satan use a back problem to block this trip? I believe he did. Three weeks before we were to leave on a trip to Italy to lead conferences on prayer and spiritual conflict, my wife was admitted to the hospital with symptoms of a heart attack. After several tests, the problem was diagnosed as acid reflux, but in the process she became dehydrated and suffered an internal infection. The timing was such that it made us wonder if Satan were using the episode to discourage the trip to Italy.

While I cannot prove beyond a doubt that Satan was involved in any of these circumstances, I do know that while I was attempting to serve God as a faithful disciple, I experienced the kinds of attacks Satan excels in—diverting attention, distorting focus, weakening witness.

In every case, the ministry assignment continued, either with me or without me. The one personal cancellation was due only to doctors' orders, and then only after a brief but intense argument on my part.

Charles Kettering was an inventor: electric cash register, electric auto ignition, spark plugs, Freon, leaded gasoline, safety glass, four-wheel brakes, automatic transmission. At his death, he was holder or co-holder of more than 140 patents. On one occasion he said, "No one would ever have crossed the ocean if he could have gotten off the ship in a storm."

We must not let Satan think he can stop us. There are easily available corrections for our personal power outages.

The essence of equipping as evident from these personal testimonies is that there is a direct relationship between serving God and coming under satanic attack. The more effective you are in service, the more conflict you encounter. Therefore, you must be divinely equipped.

Plugging into the Correct Power Source, Correctly

Because we are encamped in enemy territory, we need empowering. We have lost the home-field advantage. We are strangers in a foreign land. We are players on the opponent's field. In the words of the old spiritual, "This world is not my home. I'm just a-passing through."

Some have pictured Christians as safe and secure inside the camp, but the camp is located in enemy territory. The watchmen on the wall dare not fail, or the camp will come under siege. One of the more successful professional football teams revealed a few years ago that they factored into their profile of draft-eligible players a category entitled "Playing Hurt." Their

observation was that all professional football players get hurt from time to time. The great ones play even when they are hurt. These then were the higher-rated draft possibilities. In the spiritual sense you can, and often must, play hurt when you are plugged into the proper power source.

Abraham had received a call and a promise from God. In the words of John Newton in the song “Amazing Grace,” Abraham had come through “many dangers, toils, and snares.” Even though all human odds were against God keeping the promise, Abraham remained faithful, pressing, praying through, and playing hurt. Paul reminds us that Abraham “with respect to the promise of God. . . did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God” (Rom. 4:20, NASB).

In service to God, you sometimes have to play hurt. Often you have to serve when you are not personally strong. In times like these, we need empowering. According to the old hymn lyrics, “The arm of flesh will fail you. Ye dare not trust your own.” Martin Luther was correct in the words of his hymn “Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing.” So where is the power source, and how do we plug into it correctly?

Paul’s words in Ephesians 6:10-20 will help us answer these questions: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might.”

The word “strong” is an emphatic one meaning the imparting of power into another. It is also used in Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (NRSV). Here the word, “strong” is a command in the passive voice, meaning to be constantly empowered with strength from a source outside the self. It means to be clothed by another with a mantle of strength.

When you cut a channel from the river to the pond, the abundant waters of the river quickly fill the pond. Likewise, when we create a channel between our lives and the power sources of God’s strength, we become infused with might.

What do the following items have in common: refrigerator, computer, television set, microwave oven? They all look both desirable and functional when seen in a catalog or in a store. However, they are useless apart from a power source. Likewise, our lives may offer much promise, but apart from God’s power source we are virtually worthless. The armor of God, whether defensive or offensive, is worthless apart from God’s power. He is the one source of inexhaustible power from which we may draw strength.

Describing Jesus with words like “power” and “might” must have been the wildest paradox the Romans had ever heard. To the mind of the Romans, the Lord of the Christians was anything but strong. He was

- A man of gentleness
- A man who did not push himself on another, and thus exhibited greater power
- A man who turned the other cheek when smitten
- A man who, when reviled, reviled not again.

To speak of “strength” and “the Lord” in the same phrase must have sounded to the Romans like speaking of a square circle. Had Paul written to his readers encouraging them to be meek in the Lord, or to be patient in the Lord, or to be peaceable in the Lord, the Romans would have understood. But “be strong in the Lord” was a stretch. It was because His strength came from a different source than did their strength. Likewise, our strength comes not from within but from an outside source. We should claim all the strength Christ has to offer us.

Any believer would have cause to waver as he looks at the seemingly overbearing enemy

standing before us were it not for the fact that he does not stand in his own strength but in the strength available “in the Lord.”

In recent years, Linda Lee Johnson has written appropriate lyrics:

Be strong in the Lord, and be of good courage;
Your mighty Defender is always the same.
Mount up with wings, as the eagle ascending;
Vict’ry is sure when you call on His name.

So put on the armor the Lord has provided;
And place your defense in His unfailing care.
Trust Him, for He will be with you in battle,
Lighting your path to avoid every snare.

Be strong in the Lord, and be of good courage;
Your mighty Commander will vanquish the foe.
Fear not the battle, for the vict’ry is always His;
He will protect you wherever you go.

Be strong, be strong, be strong in the Lord;
And be of good courage, for He is your guide.
Be strong, be strong, be strong in the Lord;
And rejoice for the vict’ry is yours.⁷

The essence of equipping is necessary because we are powerless alone. Satan makes every effort to sap us of strength. However, there is a power source that, if properly accessed, will offer an endless supply of divine power.

A Powerful Play on Mighty Words

We who major in the use of words, both in our writing and in our speaking, stand in awe of Paul, who writes “in the strength of His might.” It is a powerful play on mighty words, describing the energy and its source that empowers us.

When I was young, an evangelist came to our church for a revival meeting. All week he reminded us that on Friday night he would share a personal testimony of when he was a little boy. Since this man, C. Oscar Johnson, was the largest man I had ever seen at that point in my life, I couldn’t envision him as ever being a little boy. So I was present on Friday night with great anticipation.

Dr. Johnson shared an experience from his childhood that I will never forget. One day some of the bullies in his school told him they were planning to beat him up. Furthermore, they planned to carry out their threat the next afternoon as he walked over the bridge on his way home from school. Oscar knew that what they threatened to do, they would do.

That night Oscar was unusually quiet at the dinner table. So much so that his father pressed for what was troubling him. When Oscar explained the dilemma, his father assured him

⁷ *"Be Strong in the Lord."* Words by Linda Lee Johnson. Copyright 197, Hope Publishing Company, Carol Stream, IL. All rights reserved. Used by permission,

that he would be working in a field near the bridge the next afternoon and would be there to meet him at the bridge and walk with him the remainder of the way to their home.

The next day the bullies took every opportunity to remind Oscar of their threat. It was all he could do to remain silent. Nearing the bridge on his walk home, Oscar saw his father coming across the field. Taking his father's hand, Oscar walked across the bridge and looked into the bushes where the bullies were hiding. Safely across the bridge, Oscar turned again toward the bullies and said, "Yah, yah, yah! Little Oscar's father is with him, and you can't hurt him."

Walking safely within the empowerment of the Father—in the "strength of His might"—we can turn to Satan and say, "Yah, yah, yah! I'm with my Father, and you can't hurt me."

"In the strength of His might" is used earlier by Paul in Ephesians 1:19 to describe the power of God exerted in the raising of Jesus from the grave; the apostle prays that his converts may know "what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of 1-us mighty power." The first noun is used in the New Testament only to describe supernatural power. It denotes power as an active force, meaning the power is exercised, as in the picture of a weightlifter as he lifts weights.

The latter word is more passive in meaning. It speaks of being strengthened, receiving strength, demonstrating power received. This picture is the same weightlifter dressed in a tight muscle T-shirt, implying through toned muscles that he has received power.

Both active and potentially passive power, equally needed in this kingdom conflict, have their source in the Father. The Spirit of God empowers us with the power of God. It is the same resurrection power spoken of in Ephesians 1:19 that Paul now offers to his readers.

Biblical examples of God's strength and might are numerous.

After he had taken over the leadership from Moses, Joshua found himself in a major conflict. Standing before the fortified city of Jericho, no doubt wondering if he could take it, Joshua saw a mighty warrior with drawn sword. When Joshua inquired as to the man's identity, the soldier said, "As commander of the army of the Lord I have now come" (Josh. 5:14). God used Joshua to capture Jericho through "the power of His might."

A major attack was being waged on the Israelites by the king of Syria (2 Kings 6:11-17). Elisha was called in to give advice. There stood Elisha, God's prophet, surrounded by soldiers and chariots and horses. Surely he must have been terrified. Elisha prophesied and prayed, and God protected His people through "the power of His might."

Following the temptation experience in the wilderness, Jesus was ministered to by angels (Mt. 4:11). Likewise in the Garden of Gethsemane, angels sent from the Father ministered to Jesus (Lk. 22:34). How did Jesus endure these experiences? He endured through "the power of His might."

In Acts 18, Paul was having great difficulty in Corinth. Persecution had broken out, and Paul was in danger for his own life. In the midst of discouragement, God spoke in the night by way of a vision. Paul remained in Corinth another eighteen months. How? He remained through "the power of his might."

Finally, as Paul stood on trial for his life and no man stood with him, he prayed and concluded, "The Lord stood with me and strengthened me" (2 Tim. 4:17). How did Paul stand so strong in the face of death? He stood strong through "the power of His might."

How often I have found myself in the midst of Satan's territory with a feeling of powerlessness. My thoughts seemed shallow. My prayers seemed empty. My words seemed futile. Then there came a rush of power—almost physically experienced. A new clarity of thought. A fresh creativity in prayer. A bold confidence in verbal expression. What caused the

change? Nothing less than an infusion of spiritual power that allowed me to continue—”in the strength of His might.” For some reason I, who was not “strong in the Lord,” became “strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.” And the whole world seemed brighter. What a difference an infusion of divine strength makes on an otherwise powerless human being.

A little girl was once asked how she faced the devil. She replied that since Jesus was in her heart, every time Satan knocked at the heart, she just asked Jesus to answer the door. She was unknowingly basing her belief on the truth found in Ephesians 6:10, “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might.” This same truth was earlier expressed in 2 Chronicles 20:15, “Do not be afraid nor dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours, but God’s.” The essence of equipping is to gain both active and passive strength from the power and might of the Lord. Even though Satan will try his best to deplete your strength and short-circuit your power, he is powerless compared to the Lord.

What To Do To Be Empowered for the Conflict

1. Acknowledge that the conflict is real and that you are personally involved in it.
2. Recognize power outages in your life and seek to correct them.
3. Be sure you are plugged into the proper power source.
4. Access spiritual strength from God’s mighty power.

Discipleship Questions for Reflection and/or Discussion

1. What evidences do you find that inform you that you or your friends are personally involved in spiritual conflict?
2. What power outages do you discern in your life or in the lives of friends?
3. What steps would you need to take to plug back into the proper power source? What about steps needed for friends?
4. How would you go about accessing spiritual strength from God’s mighty power or suggest that friends go about it?

CHAPTER SIX

Positioned for the Conflict

Stand against the wiles of the devil

During Operation Desert Storm, I was serving as interim pastor in Lawton, Oklahoma, home of the Fort Sill Army Post. Checking into my motel on Saturday, I would often watch a Lawton television station to get updated on the local news before putting the finishing touches on my Sunday morning sermon. Live interviews were a frequent occurrence because there were many human interest stories among the reservists being processed through Fort Sill before going to the desert. In the course of interviewing soldiers, a television reporter asked a recently called-up reservist about his feelings on the war. His response was, “I didn’t sign up to fight. I signed up for the benefits.” While it represented a minority response among the many interviews conducted, it did not play well in a military town. Nor does such an attitude play well in spiritual arenas.

Similarly, during the more recent Operation Iraqi Freedom, one called-up reservist shared related feelings when he stated, “This is not what I had in mind when I signed up for occasional money-making weekends away from home.”

The benefits of the Christian life are many, but as a conflict rages around us, one must do more than count the benefits. One must position himself or herself and prepare for conflict. Although the Christian life includes conflict and the New Testament speaks of warfare, we are not so much warriors as ambassadors. Paul saw himself as “an ambassador in chains” and called his readers “ambassadors for Christ.” We represent our King in a kingdom where Satan is described as “the god of this world.” As we fulfill our mission of being a disciple and making other disciples, we get caught in the crossfire of the battle fought in “heavenly places.” So Paul encourages us to “be strong in the Lord and in the power (active) of His might (passive).” Having addressed our empowering, we must now consider our positioning.

In Ephesians 6:11, Paul identifies our position: “Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”

Conflict as Seen Through the Eyes of Paul

Since Paul’s father was a Roman citizen, he had appealed his case to the court of the emperor, saying, “I was born a citizen” (Acts 22:28). Thus Paul was a prisoner of the emperor. During his time in prison, he had developed relationships with many of the elite Praetorian Guard, a group that guarded prisoners of the emperor. “It has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ,” he wrote (Phil. 1:13).

In other places Paul refers to being a prisoner:

- “Though I have done nothing against our people..., yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans” (Acts 28:17).
- “I rather appeal to you—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ” (Phile. 9).

Beyond being a “prisoner,” Paul was a prisoner “in chains.” The Greek word here is *halusis*, which was also used in other passages:

- “For the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain” (Acts 28:20).
- “I am an ambassador in chains” (Eph. 6:20).

The halusis was a short length of chain securing the wrist of the prisoner to the wrist of the guard. While it made escape impossible, it nevertheless allowed for some freedom of movement.

The simple fact that Paul was in chains would not of itself have made any positive impact for the gospel, but the fact that his chains were “in Christ” made all the difference. Rather than being known and treated as a common criminal, guilty of some disgraceful crime, Paul became known among the guards as a prisoner for the sake of his faith. So with a prison cell for a pulpit, a few Roman guards for a congregation, and a set of chains for a clerical robe (or Sunday suit and tie), Paul proclaimed the gospel.

Can you imagine what it must have been like for a Roman soldier to be handcuffed to the apostle Paul for four hours? Which of the two was the real prisoner? Paul thought of himself as an ambassador in chains, duly commissioned to speak boldly about the Lord to whoever came near him. He was a chained ambassador, but he was an ambassador nevertheless. He wore his chains as decorations of honor—a badge of office and privilege.

Nor was his ultimate congregation limited to a few guards. The phrase “and to all the rest” may well refer not to other Roman guards, but to the public beyond, who would hear Paul’s words and witness via these chained congregants. Far from closing doors, Paul’s imprisonment opened new doors through which he himself might never go. Never underestimate the size of your audience. If you share well, your words go far beyond your lips. Listen to Paul’s companion Luke as he shares his insight into this experience: “Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him” (Acts. 28 :30-31).

According to Roman law, a citizen could enjoy certain freedoms of personal liberty until he was brought to trial. The freedom afforded to Paul was even beyond the normal freedom offered to prisoners. Such freedom allowed Paul to write letters. Most scholars agree that from this imprisonment Paul wrote Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon. Not only did Paul’s freedom to share with and through Roman guards advance the gospel, but the circulation of Paul’s letters proved invaluable to the early church and even to this day.

In addition, Paul “received all who came to him” (Acts. 28:30). Who came to him? We can gain insight into these visitors by looking elsewhere in the New Testament:

- Luke and Aristarchus—2 Timothy 4:11
- Timothy—Philippians 1:1, Colossians 1:1, Philemon 1
- Tychicus—Ephesians 6:21
- Epaphroditus—Philippians 4:18
- Mark—Colossians 4:10

Through Roman guards, through letters, and finally through faithful friends, Paul’s influence and contributions continued, even though his missionary journeys had ended. One door closed; three doors opened. God’s mathematics, often misunderstood by the world, always yield

the correct bottom line.

For two years this house arrest continued. Paul was watched and sometimes chained to Roman soldiers, night and day. His only variety was the changing of the guard, which occurred approximately every four hours. These Roman guards were all dressed alike, in their Roman armor.

Have you ever noticed how similar military types look? When our son James graduated from Marine Boot Camp, we were in attendance. Twelve weeks earlier we had waved good-bye to him and a bunch of his new buddies as they boarded an airplane for San Diego, California. On that day, they were all shapes and sizes. But on graduation day, as the graduates marched onto the tarmac, not even mothers could identify their own sons. Everyone looked the same—like a United States Marine.

I imagine that the Roman soldiers who guarded Paul all began to look alike. But Paul memorized the uniqueness and importance of each piece of their armor. He listened to their talk of battle. He applied it to the Christian life, especially the Christian's conflict with evil, and he wrote about it.

The book of Acts ends with an adverb, *akolutos*, meaning “unhinderedly.” This strange ending has caused some to think the book of Acts is incomplete. Rather, the unusual ending underscores the purpose of the book. Acts was written to record the historical expansion of Christianity through national, racial, and religious barriers, without yielding to the hindrances. And so the advance of the gospel would continue, beyond the historical record of Acts, “unhinderedly.”

The essence of equipping is to evaluate the conflict, make the best of the circumstances, and leave the results up to God. Satan will try to make you a victim of the circumstances. God wants you to be the victor over the circumstances, just as Paul overcame and ministered within his circumstances.

God's Resources and Our Responsibility

Taylor, English missionary to China for more than fifty years and the father of faith-based missions reportedly said, “God's work, done God's way, will not lack God's supply.” Adequate armor can only come from God. Inadequate armor comes from phony philosophers, amateur theologians, well-meaning televangelists, New Age groping gurus, and fatalistic futurists.

Every piece of God's resources—armor worn by a Roman soldier—is included in Paul's description except the pieces used to protect the shins from the knees to the ankles, the spear, and the small shield used in face-to-face combat. Since the soldiers Paul met were on guard duty in Rome, they would have had no need for these pieces.

In *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan notes that the armor given to Christian in the House Beautiful was complete, but intentionally included no protection for his back, so that in his encounters with Apollyon he could not retreat. He had to stand firm and face his foe. Likewise, God provides no armor for our backs.

God has supplied sufficient armor. It is our responsibility to pick it up and put it on—”Put on the whole armor of God” (Eph. 6:11). “Put on” is the verb form that means you do something for yourself—in this case, arm yourself. The imperative mood calls for urgent action. It is a command to act. God provides the armor necessary for the conflict. We must pick it up and put it on.

“Take up,” used in verse 13, is the more common military term for arming oneself. This command suggests that all of the armor needed for the conflict lies at our disposal, provided by God. But we must pick it up and put it on. Once the conflict begins, it will be too late to arm oneself.

Imagine a Roman officer giving armor to a soldier, but the soldier chooses to go into battle without putting on his armor. It is worthless unless it is put on, as worthless as a gun in a gun rack. Only when the gun is removed does it provide worth. *God’s resources are as worthless as a bulletproof vest in the trunk of a police car during a gunfight.*

The sun was just coming up. The motorcycle officer moved smoothly through the quiet Los Angeles suburb on his way to work. As he neared an intersection, a red pickup truck sped past without even slowing for the stop sign. The officer turned on his flashing lights and radioed the station that he was in pursuit of the red vehicle.

As his motorcycle pulled up behind the slowing truck, the officer was thinking, “This fellow is probably late for work.” Unknown to the officer, the driver of the pickup had just robbed an all-night grocery store. On the seat beside the driver was the paper bag with the money and the gun he had used. The driver was thinking, “The cops know already.” He was scared. His hand rested on the gun.

The truck pulled to the side of the road and stopped. The officer parked his motorcycle and approached the driver. He was relaxed. “Good morning, sir. May I see your. . .?” He didn’t even finish his sentence. The driver stuck his arm out of the truck window and fired his weapon. The gun barrel was just two inches from the officer. The bullet hit the officer in the center of his chest. He was knocked to the ground seven feet away.

For a few moments all was quiet. Then, to the horror of the gunman, the officer slowly stood to his feet. The driver couldn’t believe it. “This guy must be Clark Kent,” he thought. In shock, the policeman slowly began to brush the dirt from his uniform. After two or three seconds, the officer regained his wits, pulled his service revolver, and fired two rounds into the side of the truck. The first round went through the open window and destroyed the windshield. The second round went through the side of the door and ripped into the driver’s leg. “Don’t shoot me!” screamed the terrified robber, throwing the gun and the bag of money out the window.

The officer’s life had been spared because he was wearing a bulletproof vest. These vests are incredibly strong even though they are only about three-eighths of an inch thick. They are made of dozens of layers of an extremely tough fiber called Kevlar.

A few months after the preceding incident, another officer, Ray Hicks, and his partner were attempting to serve a search warrant on a well-known drug dealer in the city of Inglewood, California. As his partner knocked, Hicks yelled out “Police!” and started to kick down the door. From inside the shabby apartment, four shots rang out, and four slugs exploded through the door. One found its mark. The point of impact was almost exactly where the motorcycle officer had been hit just a few weeks before—squarely in the center of the chest.

Later, his partner recalled that Hicks said quietly, “I’m hit,” and slowly sank to the floor. The coroner reported that Hicks probably lived less than a minute after being shot. The bullet had ruptured an artery; blood to the brain had been cut off instantly.

Police Officer Ray Hicks was 27 years old. He left a wife, three children, and a bulletproof vest in the trunk of his car, parked thirty feet from where he fell.

Every police officer in Los Angeles believes in bulletproof vests. They work! I doubt you could find a policeman anywhere who doesn’t believe vests save lives.

But that is not enough. An officer must do more than believe in vests. He must take his

belief to the point of personal commitment. He must be willing to wear the vest, and wear it at all times. Even when it is hot. Even when it is uncomfortable.⁸

In the midst of the conflict, unaware of when and where the enemy might attack, the Christian should be responsible for seeking all of the armor that has been provided for him, undervaluing nothing and omitting nothing. Once discovered, the armor must be “put on.”

The essence of equipping is to actually take advantage of all of the spiritual armor made available for you by God. Satan will attempt to catch you unarmed or inadequately armed. God has provided everything you need to be properly positioned against Satan.

Aisles of Files of Wiles

I once had a colleague who saved everything. His wastebasket was always empty. In the days before computer files, this colleague saved thousands of pages of paper in metal file cabinets that lined his office. We affectionately named his office “Aisle of Files.” With Satan’s multitude of strategies—”wiles”—this section of the book might be called “Aisles of Files of Wiles.”

As we represent Jesus Christ in our lives and by our witness, we will come under satanic attack. There will be temptations, diversions, and distortions. “The wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:11) refers to the many, many methods of Satan—aisles and aisles of them. Against all of his methods, strategies and plans, we must stand, never turning our backs.

The Greek word for “wiles” refers to a deliberate plan or system and is translated earlier in Ephesians 4:14 as—”craftiness.” The construction of the Greek sentence in Ephesians 6:11 is that of an infinitive expressing purpose. With purpose, the Christian is to arm himself against the “wiles” of the devil. Various translations of Ephesians 6:11 render the word “wiles” as:

- schemes—NASB and NW
- tactics—HCSB
- devices—NEB
- methods—Phillips
- evil tricks—TEV

Whatever it is called, we know that Satan not only plans his attacks but capitalizes on circumstances caused by others, thereby creating conflict.

There will be *internal* “wiles.” The contrast between what we do and what we desire to do is obvious even at an early stage of spiritual development. Our intentions are good. Our actions often do not match.

Paul understood this internal conflict. “For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice” (Rom. 7:19).

One of the ways Satan tries to break through our armor is temptation. Experiencing temptation is normal. We are made with both needs and desires. If we didn’t need to eat, some of us would starve, but that’s no excuse for overeating. If we didn’t need sleep, some would stay up all night, but that’s no excuse for laziness. If you are never tempted, don’t brag about it; see a doctor.

Some have destroyed marriages for a few minutes of yielding to temptation. Others have

⁸ Story by Bob Vernon, Deputy Chief (retired) Los Angeles Police Department. Reprinted from *Illustration Digest*, Winslow Arkansas: A Publishing, April, 1992.

destroyed relationships by yielding to untruth or acting with a lack of integrity. Still others have destroyed their bodies by yielding to the temptation to put the wrong things into their bodies or failing to take care of the body.

In all of these internal conflicts, Satan has plans—”wiles”—to get the best of us.

There will also be *external* “wiles.” There is an overabundance of evil in this world, and we are affected by it daily. It is the eradication of this evil that motivates missionary activity evangelism strategies, church starting efforts, and benevolent programs, but the evil cannot be completely eradicated until Jesus returns. We can only stand against it, believing that God is at work behind the scenes. But in standing we are affected by it.

When the cancer on my nose seemed to threaten my six-month sabbatical leave to China, God said to go; Satan said to stay. Because I listened to God, a prayer-walking guide was developed that has now been translated into many, many languages, for the glory of God. God won. Satan lost. Non-believers were confused. Why would I not just stay at home and rest and heal? It is always that way. Faith always looks foolish to those who have none.

The world chuckled over the crucifixion of Jesus, while God was turning that middle cross into a throne of glory and its occupant into the Judge of this world.

The world shouts with glee as flames consume another Christian or lions tear apart another bold believer. This was the case in A.D. 197 during Roman persecution of Christians. So devastating was this persecution that Tertullian, an early church leader born in North Africa, wrote a letter to the Roman governor. He refuted false charges being made against Christians and the Christian faith, arguing that Christians were in fact loyal subjects of the empire.

The writings of Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus, commonly known as Tertullianus, were published in a volume entitled *The Apology*. From this work comes the often-used misquote, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.”

While true, the actual quote was, “The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.”

Indeed “the wiles of the devil” has continually produced more believers, more churches, more missionary endeavors, and greater advance of the gospel than possibly could have been predicted by casual observers.

Yet Satan still works through his “wiles,” and we must be equipped with spiritual armor in order to “stand” against them.

In the little East Texas church where I served as pastor during my seminary student days, we often sang words seldom heard but often needed these days. Until recently I knew nothing of the background of the author. Her name is listed in the hymnbooks only as “Mrs. C. H. Morris.” Research found that her name was actually Lelia Morris, a Methodist hymn writer around the turn of the twentieth century. In 1913 her eyesight failed, so her son erected a twenty-eight-foot blackboard with staff lines for her, so she could continue to write her music. In spite of this challenge—this “wile” of the devil—Lelia Morris wrote:

*The fight is on, O Christian soldier,
And face to face in stern array
With armor gleaming and colors streaming,
The right and wrong engage today.*

*The fight is on but be not weary.
Be strong and in His might hold fast.*

*If God be for us, His banner o'er us,
We'll sing the victor's song at last.*

The essence of equipping is to stand against the “wiles of the devil,” resisting him even though his strategies are clever and crafty. He will scheme and plot to discourage and divert you from your desire to be a faithful disciple and maker of disciples, but he is a loser.

Standing and Withstanding

We have considered Paul’s view of spiritual armor as well as our responsibility to “put on” such armor. Now Paul instructs us four times to “stand” and “withstand” the enemy:

Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. . . . Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore. . . (Eph. 6:11-14a).

We stand and withstand in the presence of the enemy. The Greek word for “stand” is a military term that describes the attitude of a soldier while facing his enemy. It is a word often used in Scripture.

- Romans 5:2—Paul speaks of “this grace in which we stand.”
- 1 Corinthians 15:1—Paul refers to the gospel “in which you stand.”
- 1 Corinthians 16:13—We are challenged to “stand fast in the faith.”
- Galatians 5:1—Paul writes, “Stand fast. . . in the liberty by which Christ has made us free.”
- Philippians 1:27—We are to “stand fast in one spirit.”
- Philippians 4:1—Paul encourages us to “stand fast in the Lord.”
- Colossians 4:12—Paul wants his readers to “stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.”
- 2 Thessalonians 2:15—Paul admonishes readers to “stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught.”

We often sing:

- *“Standing on the promises”*
- *“Stand up, stand, up for Jesus, you soldiers of the cross.”*
- *“We are standing on holy ground.”*

“Withstand” means “to successfully resist, to stand against.”

The term “evil day” is not a reference to a particular day, but to any day that is evil enough for Satan to attack. It is also used to refer to the day of temptation.

In the long-buried ancient city of Pompeii, they will show you the remains of a Roman soldier—a rusty helmet and breastplate and a few human bones in a little stone sentry-box found just by the city gate. Most residents were able to flee the city before the volcano hot lava arrived. Yet every other bit of human remains discovered in the city were found in cellars where they hid, or on the streets under the shower of volcanic mud and ashes where they fell, as they ran for their

lives. So it seems this Roman soldier, with all of the city fleeing around him and the danger of death approaching, simply stood his post and died there. We have a similar order—to stand. In the days of the Spanish Inquisition, the tormentors found that the very worst punishment was to put a man into a cell where the ceiling was not high enough for him to stand at full height. It broke the spirit quickly. Likewise, if we do not stand, we risk personal discouragement and ultimate failure.

We are to “stand” resistant. Every time Jesus directly encountered Satan, He quoted Scripture. He led from His strength, and Satan fled.

Paul had a “thorn in the flesh” given to him “as a messenger of Satan to torment” (2 Cor. 12:7). Paul did not go on the attack against Satan. He did not rebuke him, bind him, debate him, battle him, or even speak to him. He prayed and asked God to remove the thorn. He was given sufficient grace.

Paul was hindered by Satan when he tried to visit Thessalonica (1 Thes. 2:18). He did not try to break Satan’s strongholds or cast him down. Rather, he focused on Jesus and on his fellow believers (2:19-20).

You are not to command Satan; you are to resist him. I have been on prayer teams where individuals issued commands to Satan. Why would you want to talk to Satan, demanding that he refrain from some activity or remove himself from some place, when you have access to One infinitely more powerful and authoritative than Satan? Don’t talk to Satan; talk to God about Satan. Don’t look for a demon behind every bush. Look for evidence of God all around you. Don’t press the enemy; praise the victor.

James writes, “Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). So how do we resist Satan?

Resist Satan by staying close to God through prayer and Bible study. Three hundred graduates of a theological seminary were surveyed. All of them admitted to some sexual sin. None of them reported having a consistent private Bible study/prayer time. While having such time is no guarantee against sin, failure to grow spiritually makes us extremely vulnerable to temptation.

Resist Satan by resisting temptation. While we cannot always control the temptations, we can control our response to them. Consider the children of Israel at the Red Sea. Some were tempted to return, some to run into the sea, some to run to the mountains. Moses said, “Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians, whom you see today, you shall see again no more forever” (Ex. 14:13). Because they stood, they were later able to “go forward” (Ex. 14:15).

Resist Satan by refusing to let him gain territory in your life. Paul wrote, “Make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts” (Rom. 13:14). I often sin during mealtime. I love to visit all-you-can-eat buffets. When I do, I try to practice good stewardship. Whatever I’ve paid for the meal, I feel that I ought to eat twice as much to be a good steward of the financial investment. Then I go to the dessert bar and sin some more. I successfully convince myself that all-you-can-eat buffets are not sinful in themselves. After all, they do include all the food groups. And I doubt if the owner or manager would agree to my paying half price and eating only half of all I can eat. The sin is my abuse.

So I have learned how to cope with the temptation of the all-you-can-eat buffet. Stay outside. I have never gained a pound at an all-you-can-eat buffet parking lot. If I make no provision for the sin of overeating, I will likely not overeat.

Resist Satan by being creative. Satan is ever creative. We must find new ways to win the victory over temptation. If we give up and give in, we lose out. We don't lose our salvation, but certainly the joy of our salvation eludes us. Rudyard Kipling wrote:

*It was not in the open fight, we threw away the sword,
But in the lonely watching in the darkness by the ford.*

Ultimately, we "stand" victorious. "Having done all" refers to the end of the conflict; otherwise Paul repeats himself. When everything that can be done is done, we stand in victorious possession of the battlefield, holding the ground gained until further instructions from the Commander-in-Chief. We are not on the ground, injured or tired. We are standing victorious when Jesus comes again. Thomas Brooks said, "There are only war veterans in heaven."

In the filming of the classic chariot race scene in the movie Ben Hur, Charlton Heston was having great difficulty staying in the chariot. He said, "I can't stand in the chariot and win the race." Director Cecil B. DeMille replied, "It's your job to stand. It's my job to win the race."

The truth is that the race has already been won; the victory has already been claimed. Satan may do his best, but he is a defeated foe.

This was the final message of the Rev. Dudley Tyng to the Philadelphia YMCA Noon Prayer Meeting during the Prayer Revival of 1858. He was killed in a farm-related accident that same week. The following Sunday, the hymn writer George Duffield, Jr., preached on Ephesians 6:14 and wrote these verses as his conclusion and benediction for his friend:

*Stand up, stand up for Jesus, ye soldiers of the cross;
Left high his royal banner, it must not suffer loss:
From vict'ry unto vict'ry his army shall he lead,
Till ev'ry foe is vanquished, and Christ is Lord indeed.*

*Stand up, stand up for Jesus, the trumpet call obey;
Forth to the mighty conflict, in this his glorious day:
Ye who are men now serve him against unnumbered foes;
Let courage rise with danger, and strength to strength oppose.*

*Stand up, stand up for Jesus, stand in his strength alone;
The arm of flesh will fail you, ye dare not trust your own:
Put on the gospel armor, each piece put on with pray'r;
Where duty calls, or danger, be never wanting there.*

*Stand up, stand up for Jesus, the strife will not be long;
This day the noise of battle, the next the victor's song:
To him who overcometh a crown of life shall be;
He, with the King of glory, shall reign eternally.*

So, stand while

- the fearful are running away
- the casual are just standing around

- the lazy are reclining on beds of ease
- the stubborn are sitting on their hands
- the defeated are slouched in defeat
- the depressed are drooped in despair
- the apathetic are disinterested in it all

Stand because

- You are made in the image of God.
- You've been redeemed by the Son of God.
- You've been empowered by the spirit of God.
- You're a child of the King.
- You're called to a higher calling.
- Your reservation in heaven is secure.

Stand tall, proud, prepared, privileged, victorious.

The essence of equipping is that it allows us to stand resistant and victorious against Satan. All of his methods and strategies will ultimately fail as we faithfully stand and withstand.

What To Do To Be Empowered for the Conflict

1. Accept the challenge presented by the circumstances of your conflict.
2. Recognize God's limitless resources and take responsibility to access them.
3. Identify the "wiles of the devil" and resist them.
4. Stand and withstand all of Satan's onslaughts against you.

Discipleship Questions for Reflection and /or Discussion

1. How do you view the circumstances of your conflict or that of a friend?
2. Can you identify specific resources God is making available to you or to a friend?
3. What "wiles" or strategies is Satan using on you or on a friend?
4. What does it mean for you or a friend to "stand" and "withstand" against Satan?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Armed for the Conflict

Take up the whole armor of God

We have been empowered for encounters with the enemy and positioned for the conflict. We must now consider being equipped with spiritual armor.

The Bible often speaks of equipping:

- Isaiah 11:4-5—”With righteousness He shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; He shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of His lips He shall slay the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of His loins, and faithfulness the belt of His waist.”
- Isaiah 59:17—”He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on His head; He put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, and was clad with zeal as a cloak.”
- 2 Corinthians 6:7—”By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left.”
- 1 Thessalonians 5:8—”Let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation.”

Spiritual conflict is a reality. The truth is that God never intended for us to do battle with Satan without armor. In Ephesians 6, Paul paints an external word picture of the internal attributes.

The order in which Paul lists the spiritual armor is the same order in which a Roman soldier donned his physical armor.

Various authors separate the armor into interesting categories.

- Some say all six pieces of armor are defensive, including the sword, which is used to defend against attack.
- Others say there are five pieces of defensive armor and one offensive weapon, the sword, which is used to attack the enemy.
- Some include prayer and even proclamation as pieces of the armor, while others do not.
- One says the belt and breastplate are foundational, the shoes and helmet are attached, and the shield and sword are movable.

We will look at the first three pieces of armor, those items a soldier put on. Then, we will look at the last three pieces of armor, those a soldier picked up. We will then consider prayer and proclamation as activities to be carried out beyond the equipping process.

If your faith consists of doing what comes naturally, feeling a few warm, fuzzy thoughts, pondering an occasional noble religious sentiment, you won't be needing this armor. Otherwise, read on!

Some Christians like to “pray on their armor” every morning. I prefer never to take it off at night. Satan can do a world of damage during the night watches, especially if he finds us without our armor. You say that Roman soldiers didn't sleep in their armor. But they did if the

enemy was at the gate. If the enemy isn't bothering you, perhaps you don't need this armor after all. But if you do, here are three pieces of armor to affirm daily, yet not remove nightly.

The Belt That Holds Everything Together—Truthfully

By description, this was a leather, cloth, or metal belt that held all else together. The belt was crucial for the sword. Imagine a soldier reaching for his sword and it not being there.

I grew up watching Zorro on TV. When he got into a real bind, which he did approximately three times per program, he would reach for his sword and cut a Z on someone's forehead or chest. What if Zorro reached for his sword and it was not there? A soldier must have confidence that the belt will hold the sword in place.

Tapered to be wider in the back, the belt offered support for the back to help keep a soldier from growing weary in the midst of the battle.

Gathering the robe and tucking it into the belt set a soldier free for movement. "The truth shall set you free" (Jn. 8:32). Others may grope about in lies, but Christians can move about more freely and quickly because they know the truth and it has set them free.

Our business in making disciples is to set people free from the bondage of sin. Truth will do that, because it set us free as well. Truth always wins. That's why I would rather side with the minority who base their lives on truth than with the majority who live in falsehood. It gives us a sense of support, lest we grow weary in the conflict.

In addition to a gathering place for the robe and a support for the back, the belt protected the "loins" (Kf17), the lower half of the body, from injury. In an interesting parallel passage, Peter says to "gird up the loins of your mind" (1 Pet. 1:13). This is a reference to the intellect or understanding. Therefore, the thoughts, intentions, desires, and motives are included along with the necessity of protecting them.

Concerning man, the writer of Proverbs reminds us that "as he thinks in his heart, so is he" (23:7). In the mind, all virtue is first formed and all vice is first shaped. Every act is twice performed—once in the mind, once in the acting out of the mind's thoughts. The second performance is but a child of the first.

An old Latin proverb says, "Unless the vessel be clean, whatever you put into it turns sour." The mind must be protected with the "belt of truth;" otherwise, even the good ideas that come our way will turn bad.

Many would lead us astray in our thinking, away from the truth. Post-modernism says that there are no absolutes, but that statement is itself an absolute. They say that truth is relative, but God's truth is unchanging. It is not relative. Not everyone agrees with that.

The prayer was not eloquent. In it, I had referred to a quote that bothered the speaker of the evening. The occasion was the graduation ceremony at the University of Texas, and it was the Baptists' year to pray. So, as the Baptist campus minister, it was my turn. As we marched in, dressed in our academic colors, looking for all the world like a funeral procession of peacocks, I was attracted to the words inscribed in marble over the doors to the main building. We would sit just under that inscription during the ceremony, facing the students and guests seated on the lawn. The quote was from the Bible: "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (Jn. 8:32, KJV). I found it fitting to call attention to that quote in my invocation. I had a feeling that very few eyes were closed anyway. Then I thanked God for sending Jesus Christ—the truth—to set us free.

The commencement speaker was president of a southwestern university noted for its academic standing and was, no doubt, an extremely well-educated man. I could tell that by his colors, since the colors on an academic robe represent various levels of achievement as well as signify disciplines of study. In his speech, just as most of the audience were falling asleep, this president turned to where I sat on the platform and said, "I must correct the Reverend Mr. Crawford's prayer of a few moments ago. Truth is relative! It is not embodied in any one person." I sat there and smiled. I knew two things: the Bible had told me he was mistaken, and I had the benediction in which to make a rebuttal. In my benediction I simply thanked God for being the truth at the conclusion of graduation just as he was at the beginning. Truth is not relative. It finds its best expression in the Person of Jesus Christ and suits us well as our first piece of armor.

So we sometimes sing the old German melody with the hymn text of Basil Manly, Jr.:

*Soldiers of Christ, in truth arrayed,
A world in ruins needs your aid.*

Here, the essence of equipping is that truth which holds all else together, offers support, and protects the mind. These results are targets Satan loves to hit and does so with amazing frequency. As you seek to be an effective disciple and maker of disciples, gird up with truth.

Dressed in His Righteousness

This piece of armor protected the vital organs, such as the lungs, the throat, and the heart—the latter of which they considered the center of emotions. It was made of small metal plates overlapping each other like shield upon shield and wrapping, to some extent, around the back, but not necessarily protecting the back. It was actually more like a coat or a vest put on backward, rather than just a breastplate.

Righteousness protects the Christian. *Here, righteousness is understood in both of its New Testament meanings.* It is the righteousness that God imputes to the non-believer when he comes to believe in Christ. Thus when Satan attacks me by bringing up my pre-Christian sins, I simply refer him to God's imputed righteousness.

It is also the believer's personal, God-given righteousness, which results in moral uprightness and integrity. Paul reminds us that he does not possess his own righteousness (Phil. 3:9). When Satan attacks me with up-to-date temptations that challenge my uprightness and integrity, I simply refer him to the personal righteousness I possess in Christ.

Without righteousness the Christian is as vulnerable as is the opposition, but with righteousness we are protected. The Psalmist wrote, "I have been young, and now I am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken" (Ps. 37:25).

A man once accused Plato of crimes. Plato's response was, "We must live in such a way as to prove that his accusations are a lie." Or, the paraphrase I offer seminary students, "So live, that when rumors are surrounding you, no one will believe them."

Have we not seen images on our televisions of people, perhaps patriotic souls, who have wrapped themselves in their country's flag to make some point? Here Paul is offering a similar image of *wrapping righteousness around us* as a "flag" or a coat.

What a picture—a leprous sinner wearing the robe of Christ’s righteousness. How can it be? It is because

- In my wrongness, Christ died to make me right.
- In my disobedience, Christ died to make me obedient.
- In my prodigal wanderings, Christ lives to bring me back home to the Father.
- In my daily sinfulness, Christ lives to forgive and restore.

No wonder this piece of armor has lent itself to so much church music.

- Count Zinzendorf
“Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness”
Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress.
Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head.

- Edward Mote
“The Solid Rock”

When He shall come with trumpet sound,
O may I then in Him be found,
Dressed in His righteousness alone,
Faultless to stand before the throne.

The essence of equipping here is clothing yourself in both imputed and moral righteousness, without which you are extremely vulnerable to Satan’s attacks. He loves to challenge our integrity and moral uprightness. So, dress up in righteousness.

Gospel Shoes of Peace That Don’t Fall to Pieces

My shoes, which wear out every few months, pale in comparison to God’s shoes. In Deuteronomy 29:5 we read, “I have led you forty years in the wilderness. Your clothes have not worn out on you, and your sandals have not worn out on your feet.” How long can you wear a pair of shoes? God’s shoes are adequate and eternal.

Here we have hobnail sandals, with spikes similar to modern track shoes or golf shoes. They were designed to keep the feet securely planted during hand-to-hand combat, no matter how sloping or slippery the ground the soldier stood on. Consisting essentially of thick soles with straps, they were designed by Alexander the Great for quickness in battle. Some were made of leather, others of felt or cloth or even wood. A few were ornamented with lines of gold, silver, or silk, occasionally embroidered with jewels. They were often bound with iron, as described in the Old Testament, “Your sandals shall be iron and bronze” (Dt. 33:25).

Roads back then were bad, often built of large, sharp, uneven rocks. Briars and thorns were numerous. Stinging insects of various shapes and sizes were everywhere. Protection of the feet was of utmost importance.

A cruel method of warfare was to plant sharp, unseen sticks in the ground. It was the forerunner of land mines. So Paul writes, “Having shod your feet”—better translated, “binding the sandals under your feet.”

Who can overestimate the importance of good shoes and their effect on the entire body? Some have applied these gospel shoes to the idea of a Christian’s being quick to carry the gospel to others, and so he must (“How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace”—Rom. 10:15). This is the very purpose of the ambassador; it is what gets Satan’s attention and causes us to have to stand against him.

However, the primary emphasis is on *defense in the midst of the conflict*, to stand firm against the enemy. “Readiness” (NIV), or “preparation” (used in other translations), refers to being ready/prepared to take a stand and stand firm against the enemy, rather than being ready/prepared to advance the gospel.

Are you ready? Not if you have one foot in the world and the other in church. You’ll surely slip and not stand. Paul writes, “Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12). Peter adds, “Beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked” (2 Pet. 3:17).

Satan is always lurking. False teachers are everywhere. Nothing matters to Satan as long as he can get to us. Thus, we must know what we believe. One TV preacher said, “Just trust Jesus, and everything will be OK.” Some faithful saints would testify otherwise. I’m not OK. You’re not OK. It’s not OK. In fact we are standing against that which is not OK.

Martin Luther, facing twelve centuries of corruption in the Roman Catholic Church, said, “Here I stand. I can do no other.”

These are not just shoes, but shoes of “*peace, worn in the midst of conflict.*” Christian soldiers have a peace that passes understanding which holds us secure in difficult times. Paul implies that, since you now possess God’s peace, fight to defend it. There is a threefold peace:

- *Peace with God, wherein there is no doubting of our salvation.* “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). Without assurance, you are a casualty waiting to happen.
- *Peace with self, which enables us to concentrate on the battle, not on self* “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God, and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ” (Phil. 4:6-7).
- *Peace with others, without which jealousy will destroy your focus.* “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men” (Rom. 12:18).

Good shoes assist in defense. With adequate traction, one is allowed to stand in the midst of the battle. Nothing is more important in the Christian life than balance. The enemy loves to get us off balance. How can we be so relaxed under pressure? It is from an inner peace that passes understanding, just as hobnailed shoes allow one to relax in the midst of activity.

The essence of equipping related to the shoes is to have an adequate grasp on peace—with God, with others, and with self—that enables you to stand firm in defense against the attacks of the enemy.

A Parenthesis in the Armor

There is a division at the beginning of verse 16. “Above all” does not mean “more important than,” but “in addition to.” The first three pieces of armor were described for us to “have.” The second three pieces are described for us to “take.” The first three pieces are attached. The second three are taken up and set down. The first three pieces are passive. The second three are active.

If you insist on “praying on your armor daily,” you can pray on these three pieces while affirming the previous three which should never have been removed. When the enemy is nearby, the soldier might sleep with his shield, his helmet, and his sword close at hand.

A Dartboard in the Shape of a Shield

In every family’s photo album is a picture of a child dressed in his or her parents’ clothing, dreaming of the day when adult clothes will fit. It is a humorous, yet somewhat pathetic scene. There is a similar picture in the Old Testament of David being dressed in Saul’s armor as he prepares to face Goliath. They believed it was the only way to resist and fight the enemy. The world says that this is the way and dresses us in its armor. Since God never intended his followers to stand ill-equipped or unequipped before Satan, He inspired Paul to give us a description of spiritual armor in Ephesians 6. We have seen the belt, the breast plate, and the shoes. Now we look at the shield, a picture that on the surface looks as humorous as a child in adult clothes.

Paul is not referring to a small round shield, but a large shield the size of a door, made of alternating layers of bronze and ox hide, which were fireproof. In fact, the Greek word for shield is the same Greek word translated “door.”

The small shield was carried when no fierce battle was raging, but when the battle was on, soldiers carried the large shields. The reason for shields of this size was the enemy’s arrows—“fiery darts”—dipped in pitch or some other combustible material and set afire. It was one of the most devastating weapons of ancient warfare. These were the predecessors of today’s incendiary bombs. The Psalmist refers to the making of “arrows into fiery shafts” (Ps. 7:13) and “sharp arrows of the warrior, with coals of the broom tree” (Ps. 120:4).

Herodotus mentions the fact that in ancient warfare, it was customary to fix pieces of tow (broken fibers of plant stalks reduced to the substance needed for spinning) to the arrows, dip them in pitch, set them afire, and send them on their way, at random, toward the enemy.

By the way, Paul believed in a personal devil, even indicating that the “fiery darts” originated from “the wicked one.” Do you? Paul’s thinking was affirmed by Peter, who wrote, “Do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you” (1 Pet. 4:12), and by John, who tells us, “The whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one” (1 Jn. 5:19).

Beyond Scripture, John Bunyan in *Pilgrim’s Progress* makes use of the satanic image in a graphic description of Christian with Apollyon.

Martin Luther saw Satan as so real that one day, while working at his desk in Wartburg Castle in Eisenach, Germany, he threw the inkpot at Satan. The stain remained on the wall for years. I’ve been there, and the guides point to the stain—or perhaps to the place where the original stain has been enhanced for tourists.

Paul conceives of Satan as the one who fires burning arrows at Christians while Christians defend themselves with faith. This is the air attack preceding the ground attack of face-to-face combat. It is designed to soften the enemy. But no matter how intense Satan’s

temptations may become, faith will cause them to fall to the ground like broken arrows, spent and ineffective.

Faith in God is a comprehensive protection against all of the flaming temptations that Satan may hurl at us.

- The arrow of pride, which gives birth to self-love and self-advancement to the detriment of the group.
- The arrow of envy leading to jealousy, which destroys families as well as fraternal relationships. The story of Cinderella and her jealous stepsisters has never needed a commentary to explain its meaning.
- The arrow of evil passion, which arouses every degrading desire of human nature and causes disease, misery sorrow, and even premature death.
- The arrow of doubt, which leads believers into uncertainty and distracts the mind from truth.

The solution is unflinching, unfaltering, unflappable faith— faith that includes what you believe and how you live. Faith never stops with the intellectual but always includes the practical. James reminds us, “Faith without works is dead” (Jas. 2:20).” Peter urges us to “resist him, steadfast in the faith” (1 Pet. 5:9). John exhorts us that faith “is the victory that has overcome the world” (1 Jn. 5:4).

There is a fine line between faith and foolishness, and often you cannot completely distinguish the difference until after the fact. What the believer sees as faith, the non-believer sees as foolishness.

Faith has always looked foolish to those without it. That’s why they laughed at Abraham, Noah, David (“The Lord God is a shield,” Ps. 84:11), and Paul (“We are fools for Christ’s sake,” 1 Cor. 4:10).

But faith protects. It brings God in between us and the enemy, just as the shield is placed between the soldier and the arrow.

The corporate advantage was seen as soldiers marched shield to shield so that no dart could penetrate the ranks. If one soldier dropped his shield, a fiery dart could get behind the lines and wreak devastating, widespread damage. The circumstances of our times call for believers to close the ranks.

The essence of equipping related to the door-sized shield was to have adequate faith-protection against the fiery darts of Satan. As we stand together shield to shield, we resist Satan’s attack upon the Body of Christ, the church.

Leading with Your Head While Wearing the Right Helmet

The phrase “leading with your head” refers to thinking ahead and calculating the possibilities before taking action. It is often used in contrast to leading with your heart, which refers to leading with emotions rather than reason. While not neglecting the importance of emotions, Paul here wants to be sure that his readers understand the importance of protecting the head.

The helmet protected the head and the mind. It was made of leather or perhaps of metal, and resembled a dose-fitting skullcap. Most included plates to protect the cheeks, a band for the forehead, and a collar-like projection to protect the back of the neck. Such a helmet, when closed, exposed little other than the eyes, nose, and mouth.

Here Paul describes it as the “helmet of salvation,” while in another place he refers to it as “a helmet, the hope of salvation” (1 Thes. 5:8). Rather than being a contradiction, this fits Paul’s theology that salvation is past, present, and future—we were saved, we are being saved, we shall be saved—justification, sanctification, glorification. Thus it is both a helmet of present-tense salvation and a helmet of the future hope of salvation.

The term “of salvation” seems somewhat strange, since we normally think of salvation as related to the heart, not the head. Yet Paul wrote in Romans, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2).

The head entered the conversation between God and Satan concerning Job. God finally relented and allowed Satan to tempt Job. Satan took Job’s camels, sheep, other livestock, even his children, yet Job did not curse God. Another conversation between God and Satan allowed Satan to maintain that Job was faithful because he was not allowed to be touched personally. At that point, “The Lord said to Satan, ‘Behold, he is in your hand, but spare his life’” (Job 2:6). But the same Hebrew word translated “life” is also translated “mind” or “reason.” As long as Job had his right mind, his ability to reason, he would not forsake God in spite of Satan’s attack.

Is Satan playing mind games with you, as he did with Job? Remember your salvation. You were instructed to “take” it as a gift—the gift of salvation. The Greek word here is different from either of the ones used earlier to mean “take up.” All other armor is to be picked up or put on, but the helmet of salvation is to be taken as one would “take” a gift. Indeed, salvation is “the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8).

Interestingly enough, even the Lord wears this helmet—doesn’t need it, but wears it. Jesus didn’t need baptism either, but submitted to it as an example. Isaiah 59:17 says, “For He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on His head.” If Jesus, who did not need this armor, saw fit nevertheless to wear it, how much more should we be equipped with it?

The essence of equipping here is the assurance of past and present salvation as well as the hope of future salvation because it secures our stance against satanic attack. He may play with our minds, but he can no more win us over than he could win over Job.

A Sword That Assists Both Ways—Offensively and Defensively

Now we come to the only piece of offensive armor, the only offensive piece needed. The sword has always been a formidable weapon of warfare. The earliest swords were made of flint. Then came the bronze swords, followed by the Egyptian swords of iron, and the still-later steel swords. Some were two-edged, with the points turned outward, so as to tear a man to pieces when the sword was removed from his body.

There is a possible misinterpretation here. The phrase “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” leads some to believe the Spirit is the word of God. Nowhere in the Bible is this true. Correctly, the phrase reads, “Take the sword which the Spirit Himself provides for you.”

The comparison of the sword to speech was frequently made in the Old Testament:

- “Whose teeth are spears and arrows, and their tongue a sharp sword” (Ps. 57:4).
- “Who sharpen their tongue like a sword” (Ps. 64:3).

- “He has made My mouth like a sharp sword” (Isa. 49:2).

Literally, the “word” means “the thing said” and refers to the utterances of God, which include but are not limited to the Bible. When Paul wrote this letter, much of the Bible was not yet written or assembled. God was, in fact, still speaking in the time Paul wrote this. Some believe this was a reference to the word of God being preached. While that is also a possibility, the primary application of this phrase is to Scripture. We sing:

*Standing on the promises of Christ the Lord,
Bound to Him eternally by love's strong cord,
Overcoming daily with the Spirit's sword,
Standing on the promises of God.*

In Scripture three contrasts are used:

- “Sword of the Spirit” was probably used in contrast to the famous Damascus steel of the day. Soldiers would brag of their sword that it was a “sword of Damascus.” Paul says to use a “sword of the Spirit.”
- While leaders of other world religions have taught that their religion advances with the use of a physical sword, Paul is teaching that the Christian faith moves forward with the sword of the Spirit.
- The book of Revelation pictures Jesus destroying His enemies by a sword in His mouth (Rev. 19:15,21). This implies that His victory and ours shall be won by the sword of the Spirit.

The bottom line is that we are not to fight Satan alone, in our own strength, ideas, or power. We are to fight him with the word that the very Spirit of God has produced.

It is one thing to know the contents of the Bible; it is an altogether different thing to know how to use it correctly. This is best illustrated in the temptation experience of Jesus. Three times Satan comes at Jesus with temptation (Lk. 4). Just as Jesus used the word as a threefold defense during His temptation experience in the wilderness, so must we be ready to use the word, both in our defense of the gospel and in our offense against Satan, even to the point that Satan leaves Jesus alone—“for a season.” James said that if you resist him, he will flee from you.

Practically speaking then, there are *six things we can do with our sword -Bible. We can*

Hear the Bible

- Romans 10:17—“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”
- Revelation 1:3—“Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy.”

Read the Bible

- 1 Peter 2:2—“As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby.”

- 1 Timothy 4:13, NASB—”Give attention to the public reading of Scripture.”

Study the Bible

- 2 Timothy 2:15, KJV—”Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”
- Acts 17:11—”They received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily.”
- John 5:39—”You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me.”

Meditate on the Bible

- 1 Timothy 4:15—”Meditate on these things.”
- Luke 2:19—”Mary kept all these things and pondered [meditated on] them in her heart.”

Memorize the Bible

- Psalm 119:11—”Your word have I hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.”

Apply the Bible

- James 1:22—”Be doers of the word, and not hearers only.”
- Matthew 7:24—”Whoever hears these words of Mine and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who builds his house on a rock.”

A final observation is in order. Paul describes no armor for the back. Nor did the Roman soldier have any such armor. There was for the Roman soldier, and for the Christian soldier, no occasion for retreat, for turning back. So in the words of Charles Wesley,

*Soldiers of Christ, arise,
And put your armor on,
Strong in the strength which God supplies
Through His eternal Son.*

The essence of equipping finally includes the offensive weapon, the word of God, which is to be heard, read, studied, meditated upon, memorized, and applied. When used properly, in combination with the five pieces of defensive armor, there is no need for armor protecting the back.

Beyond Armor—Prayer and Proclamation

Having explored the six pieces of spiritual armor, we now come to Paul’s personal requests. Apparently these are not additional pieces of armor because no part of the body is mentioned.

As the chief warrior in spiritual conflict, Paul asks for the intercessory prayer of his readers, especially as he proclaims the Gospel. This is a natural request, captured in the hymn writer’s line: “Put on the Gospel armor, each piece put on with prayer”

Long before modern warfare, Paul understood that two targets must be destroyed if an army wished to win a battle. In every recent war, the winning side has attacked the enemy's ability to communicate and their ability to attack their offense.

When Satan goes on the attack against Christians, he first attacks our prayer life (communication) and our ability to proclaim the gospel (offense). So Paul is absolutely correct in first asking for the intercessory prayer support of his readers and then discussing the proclamation of the gospel.

Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints—and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak (Eph. 6:18-20).

Prayer. In the midst of the conflict, occasions arise when we must set aside the Sword and communicate with the Commander-in-chief. Thus Paul writes of “praying always.”

This constant communication follows the model of Jesus, who instructed His disciples in Gethsemane, during His most intense spiritual struggle, to “watch and pray lest you enter into temptation” (Mk. 14:38).

Remember John Bunyan's account in *Pilgrim's Progress*? In the middle of the Valley of the Shadow of Death, Christian discovers a place he believes to be “the mouth of hell.” Bunyan writes:

And ever and anon the flame and smoke would come out in such abundance with sparks and hideous noises (things that cared not for Christian's sword, as did Apollyon before) that he was forced to put up his sword, and betake himself to another weapon, called *all prayer*.⁹

Bunyan continued to write that when Christian wielded this mighty weapon of prayer, the demons of Hell “gave back, and came no farther.”¹⁰

In his companion letter to the church at Colosse, Paul wrote similar words: “. . . praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains” (Col. 4:3).

Paul's statement, “with all prayer,” is an all-inclusive phrase that includes the act of worship. He uses the same order—“prayer and supplication”—elsewhere. “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication . . . , let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6).

“Supplications” is a narrower word than “prayer.” We supplicate for things. We petition for self. We intercede for others. However, the lines that divide these words are often fuzzy, and occasionally there is an overlap of meanings, as is the case here. Paul is asking for “supplication” for “all the saints.” When the battle rages, more people are affected than just those in the midst of the fighting.

This supplication was to “persevere,” the direct opposite of growing tired and giving up in the conflict. So Paul's prayer request indicates prayer should be

- Continual—“praying always”

⁹ Bunyan, John. *The Complete Works of John Bunyan: Pilgrim's Progress*. Philadelphia: Bradley, Garrison & Co., 1873, 119.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 119.

- Intense—”with all perseverance”
- Comprehensive—”for all the saints”

Praying “in the Spirit” allows the Holy Spirit to take over your prayer agenda. In this kind of praying, the Spirit impresses upon your mind items for which and persons for whom you had not previously planned to include in your prayer. Yielding to this prompting of the Spirit allows us to pray in sync with the Father’s will.

As we pray, we are doing so in the line of great prayer warriors of the past.

- Abraham took 318 trained servants and conquered a coalition of kings through prayer (Gen. 14).
- Gideon reduced his army from 32,000 to 300 and delivered Israel from slavery through prayer.
- Joshua defeated Jericho against great odds through prayer (Josh. 6).
- Jesus battled Satan in Gethsemane through prayer.
- Paul engaged Satan from prison with prayer.
- John confronted Satan from Patmos with prayer.

A more recent prayer warrior has been identified by Hudson Taylor. During the days of the China Inland Mission, one station attracted much attention. Both the number of spiritual converts and their spiritual development far exceeded the results of the other mission stations. The consecration of the missionaries at the other stations was just as great; their work ethic, just as intense. Then Hudson Taylor visited England. At the close of one speaking engagement, a man came to him and introduced himself. As they talked, it became apparent that the man knew a great deal about this particular station. When asked about it by Taylor, the man replied, “The missionary there and I are old college friends. He sends me names of enquirers and converts, and I daily take these names to God in prayer.” At last, the secret was discovered—an intercessor, praying daily, for specific requests—and a mission station experiencing exceptional results.

Paul requests that his readers—namely, the church at Ephesus—pray “for all the saints”—other Christians for whom this letter was written.

So how does prayer relate to spiritual conflict? In their book *Power House: A Step-by-Step Guide to Building a Church That Prays*, Glen Martin and Dian Ginter offer a step-by-step path that leads prayer into spiritual conflict.

1. Introduction is the level of prayer where a believer first begins to realize that it is possible to personally talk with God about matters of concern.
2. Initiation takes place as the believer reaches out beyond himself and broadens self-centered praying to include a wider scope of requests, such as family and close friends.
3. Imitation is when the believer becomes more aware of how others are praying and begins to learn from them.
4. Intercession is implemented when the believer has more of a burden that drives toward prayer for others.
5. Investigation causes faith to increase as the believer begins to believe in a God who can and will do what is requested in prayer.

6. Invasion is when the believer operates on a level of prayer that “attacks the gates of the enemy.” At this point, the term “spiritual warfare” is often heard and used.¹¹

Remember Jehoshaphat in the Old Testament? The enemy was bearing down upon him, and the children of Israel were in serious trouble. They were greatly outnumbered and overpowered. No one seemed to know what to do. That is, until this command came to them: “Do not be afraid nor dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours, but God’s” (2 Chron. 20:15).

As the conflict rages, our assignment is to intercede to God for each other—and especially for those who are caught in the crossfire of the conflict’s front lines.

Proclamation. Paul requested prayer from his readers. The object of the prayer was for bold utterance (proclamation) of the Gospel. He well understood that evangelism is simply collecting the spoils of victories won in prayer. One should never talk to people about God until they have talked to God about the people. Thus, in proper order, Paul writes of prayer, and then of proclamation.

When Paul mentioned the word “utterance,” he was a prisoner, but he did not ask for prayer for release. He was a sick man, but did not ask for prayer for healing. He asked prayer for his verbal witness—his proclamation.

Satan dislikes few things more than the verbal proclamation of the gospel. Yet we have many excuses for not proclaiming the gospel:

- “My life is my witness.” Only if non-believers know who you are. Otherwise, your life witness is not much of a threat to Satan.
- “I am a faithful church member” Satan doesn’t worry much about church attendance. Your neighbors have come to expect that of you. But when we begin aggressively to try to persuade Satan’s folks to move their membership into God’s kingdom, Satan gets upset.
- “I’m not a good speaker.” We forget that Paul was not a polished speaker. Some at Corinth had taunted him, saying “his bodily presence is weak and his speech is contemptible” (2 Cor. 10:10). He was overshadowed in oratory by Apollos, so he asks for help in his proclamation.

In Colossians 4:3, Paul asked specifically for his readers to pray that “God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains.”

Then Paul asks for “boldness” in his presentation of the gospel. In Acts 4:13, 29, and 31, the same word is translated “clarity” Those who are bold are often misunderstood. Those who are clear often lack zeal. This word calls for a blend of boldness and clarity.

That which Paul wished to proclaim was “the mystery of the gospel.” Paul lived in a day when secret codes were popular for tight knit organizations. In some cases, revealing the code was punishable by death. So he captures the curiosity of his readers by mentioning a “mystery.” In Romans, Paul had referred to “the mystery, kept secret since the world began but now made manifest” (Rom. 16:25-26). The gospel mystery was that God in Christ had provided redemption for all persons. God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself (2 Cor. 5:19).

¹¹ Martin, Glean, and Dian Ginter. *Power House: A Step – by – Step Guide to Building a Church That Prays.* Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994, 97-107.

Paul identifies himself as an “ambassador.” An ambassador is one who represents his King in another kingdom. Words written many years ago by E. T. Cassell are appropriate here:

*I am a stranger here, within a foreign land;
My home is far away, upon a golden strand;
Ambassador to be of realms beyond the sea,
I'm here on business for my King.*

*This is the message that I bring,
A message angels fain would sing:
“O be ye reconciled.” Thus saith my God and King,
“O be ye reconciled to God.”*

As ambassadors, not secret agents, we should pray that in our witnessing

- We would be delivered from a spirit of compromise.
- We would not be guided by a spirit of diplomacy or expediency
- We would be delivered from a spirit of fear.
- We would put the truth first and speak it with boldness.
- We would blend our boldness with a spirit of love, mercy and compassion.

In a battle gone bad, the general asked the private to sound the retreat. The private replied, “I don’t know that tune, sir.”

After several exchanges, the private confessed, “Napoleon never taught me that tune.” “Then play something!” shouted the angry General.

The young soldier sounded the “Charge,” and soldiers all over the battlefield summoned new energy and turned the tide of the battle.

Let us not be content with puffing on or praying on our armor while ignoring Paul’s admonition to pray and proclaim. Ever so often, someone needs to sound the “Charge.”

The essence of equipping is to add prayer and proclamation to all of the spiritual armor available to you. As Satan attacks the gaps in your armor, you can counterattack with persevering prayer and bold proclamation, thus advancing the gospel.

That To Do To Be Empowered for the Conflict

1. Gird up with truth that holds all else together, offers support, and protects the mind.
2. Get dressed in righteousness.
3. Put on gospel shoes that do not wear out in the midst of the conflict.
4. Take up your shield to quench the fiery darts of Satan.
5. Take salvation and cover your head with it.
6. Draw swords.
7. Charge forward with prayer and proclamation.

Discipleship Questions for Reflection and/or Discussion

1. What does it mean for you or a friend to put on truth?
2. How would you or a friend look dressed in God's righteousness?
3. If you or a friend wore gospel shoes, what would this mean to you?
4. How much faith would you or a friend need to actually take up the shield of faith?
5. If salvation were a helmet for you or a friend, what would this mean?
6. How could you or a friend more effectively use the sword of the Spirit, the Bible?
7. What could you or a friend do tomorrow to more effectively pray and proclaim?

CONCLUSION TO PART TWO

The more the conflict with the invisible for the invisible takes possession of a person, the more the conflict for the visible with the visible must be let go. It may be seen as either a necessity or a privilege—either you may or you must. Whichever the case, the two conflicts are incompatible and inconsistent with each other. The eagerness for the spiritual, which eventually brings with it spiritual conflict, and the contentment with the temporal cannot live together. The faithful disciple chooses the conflict, for the privilege of representing his or her Lord. It is often difficult, but always rewarding. So stop telling God how big your conflict is, and start telling your conflict how big God is.

Someday our last skirmish with Satan will be ended. We will have

- Exhausted our empowering
- Surrendered our position
- Worn out our armor
- Removed our belt and breastplate
- Set aside our shoes and shield
- Laid down our helmet and sword
- Voiced our last prayer
- Uttered our last proclamation

When that last conflict has been concluded, there awaits a crown.

*Ne'er think the battle won, nor lay your armor down.
The work of faith will not be done, till you obtain the crown.*

The chaplain's flag had flown on his jeep during World War II. Its presence draped over his casket was more than symbolic. For more than sixty-five years of vocational ministry, Edwin Crawford was a faithful disciple. Still speaking in churches six weeks before his cancer-induced death, he fought the good fight all the way to the end. He finished his course. So full and complete was his life that on the day of his death, all he had to do was die. Like the faithful servant in the parable of Jesus, he heard his "well done, good and faithful servant" (Mt. 25:21), not because it was a routine heavenly welcome, but because he was a good and faithful servant who had done well. And there awaited him a crown. . . along with crowns for you and for me—when the conflict is over.

As we receive our crowns, the words of Janet Paschal could be sung for us, even as they were sung at my father's funeral.

*His back is bent and weary
His voice is tired and low
His sword is worn from battle
And his steps have gotten slow*

*But he used to walk on water
Or it seemed that way to me
I know he moved some mountains
And never left his knees.*

*He faced the winds of sorrow
But his heart knew no retreat
He walked in narrow places
Knowing Christ knew no defeat
But now his steps turn homeward
So much closer to the prize
He's sounding kind of homesick
And there's a longing in his eyes.*

*Strike up the band
Assemble the choir
Another soldier's coming home
Another warrior hears the call
He's waited for so long
He'll battle no more
But he's won his wars
Make sure heaven's table
Has room for one more
Sing a welcome song
Another soldier's coming home.¹²*

¹² Paschal, Janet. "Another Soldier's Coming Home." Maplesong Music. BMM Music (ASCAP), 1997. Used by permission.