

Series: Life in Christ

Warfare: The battle for the mind

by Scott Grant

The big three

Sanctification concerns believing the truth and thereby being drawn into a worshipful relationship with the God of truth. It seems simple enough, but it is complicated by three formidable opponents: the flesh, the world and the devil. The goal of each is to take our minds captive so that we neither believe the truth nor worship God.

The combined influence of the world, the flesh and the devil in causing unbelief is comparable to the combined influence of stress, physical strain and germs in causing illness.

Learned independence

The flesh, as we have seen, is our humanity apart from the Spirit of God. Apart from the Spirit, our perception of reality is flawed. So the flesh places confidence not in the sufficiency of Christ's work on the cross but in the sufficiency of heritage and human ability (2 Corinthians 11:16-12:5; Philippians 3:2-6). Thus, the flesh establishes patterns of thought opposed to a dependent relationship with God.

Our flesh has learned to be independent of God. The flesh has trained us to meet our needs apart from God. So we have trained ourselves to seek significance, security and acceptance outside of a relationship with him. In our flesh, then, we have deeply rooted patterns that have been established by literally millions of decisions. These are the seeds we have sown to the flesh (Galatians 6:8). Adam and Eve began establishing their fleshly patterns when they sewed fig leaves together to protect themselves from exposure to each other. They were afraid they would experience relational pain when the other discovered their inadequacies, so they covered themselves.

These patterns vary from person to person, depending on an individual's strengths and weaknesses. One person's flesh may be withdrawn, in order to protect himself from being hurt. Another person's flesh may be outgoing, in order to impress those around her.

These patterns have helped us survive in life, so it often comes as a surprise to us to find out that they are of the flesh. And they have become so ingrained that it doesn't seem as if they are the result of decisions on our part; they seem natural, part of our personalities. And once we find out that they are of the flesh, giving them up seems like dying. We feel naked without them, exposed to a brutal world. But if our minds believe the truth, our lives will follow.

The collective flesh

If an individual's flesh can be described as the patterns he or she has established to keep God at a distance, then the world can be described as the combined fleshly patterns of all people to reject dependence on God. "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and lust of the eyes and boastful pride of life, is not from the Father but is from the world" (1 John 2:16). How this collective lust and pride manifest themselves varies among cultures and churches. The world is highly influential because there is strength in numbers: If everyone seems to be thinking this way, we reason, it must be right.

The American flesh, for example, advances thought patterns that feature individualism, materialism, corporate success and licentiousness. Such concerns compete for our attention with the kingdom of God. Our political and economic systems permit and sometimes reward such behavior and attract such people. It's difficult to

invest in the kingdom of God when the world has us consumed with our own kingdoms.

Not long ago I worked for three months framing pictures for some friends of mine. The pay was minimal, and framing pictures isn't the most prestigious of occupations. The American flesh says what I was doing was menial and unimportant. As I walked around the corner from the frame shop one day, I noticed a friend from high school, a stock broker. I hoped he wouldn't see me, because I didn't want him to know that I was doing such lowly work. In reality, this was noble work. My friends needed dependable help, and my work helped bring beauty to people's lives. But in avoiding my friend, it became evident that I had swallowed the lie of the world.

The collective flesh of one church may sanction materialism. Another church may take pride in its knowledge of the scriptures. Another church may be impressed with its social programs. Yet another may be enthralled with its ability to experience God emotionally.

However the world comes at us, it does so to take our minds away from the truth and a worshipful relationship with God.

Richard Lovelace illustrates: "When men's hearts are not full of God, they become full of the world around like a sponge full of clear water that has been squeezed empty and thrown into a mud puddle. Only the fullness of Christ's life and the transformation of our minds by the renewing action of the Holy Spirit illuminating the whole counsel of God can effectively prevent this conformity to the world. ... If a sponge is first dipped in oil, it can be thrown in muddy water without any danger of absorption."

The power of the lie

Satan is the maestro of the world and the flesh. The world, the collective flesh of humanity, is organized by Satan. He is called "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31). So he indirectly influences the flesh through the world, and he also directly influences the flesh.

The Hebrew word for "Satan" means "enemy." The Greek word for "devil" means "slanderer." These names tell us who he is and what he does. He is our enemy, and he lies.

Because of the cross of Jesus Christ, the lie is the only weapon left at Satan's disposal. God "disarmed" the evil one when Christ's death "canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us" (Colossians 2:14-15). Christ's death rendered "powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Hebrews 2:14). In dying, Christ suffered God's wrath for our rebellion against him, so that death for us no longer holds forth the prospect of wrath. There isn't a thing Satan can do about our eternal standing. Nothing can "separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39). Satan can take nothing precious, that is, nothing eternal, away from us. But he can still lie. He can persuade us to believe that he can take something precious away from us, or he can convince us to value something that isn't precious. He is "the father of lies" (John 8:44), and has at his command a myriad of "deceitful spirits" (1 Timothy 4:1).

Neil Anderson illustrates: "Imagine that you are standing at one end of a long, narrow street lined on both sides with two-story row houses. At the other end of the street stands Jesus Christ, and your Christian life is the process of walking down that long street of maturity in him. There is absolutely nothing in the street which can keep you from reaching Jesus. So, when you receive Christ, you fix your eyes on him and start walking. But since this world is still under the dominion of Satan, the row houses on either side of you are inhabited by beings who are committed to keeping you from reaching your goal. They have no power or authority to block your path or even slow your step, so they hang out of the windows and call to you, hoping to turn your attention away from your goal and disrupt your progress."

The enemy's goal is to lead us away from "the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:3) and lead us into a complicated and impure devotion to ourselves. Demonic forces are behind "speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God" (2 Corinthians 10:5). The devil wants to convince

us that worship of ourselves, not God, is the path to life.

The Apostle Paul exposes Satan's tactics of deceit in Ephesians 6.

Stand firm

Ephesians 6:10-13:

(10) Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. (11) Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. (12) For our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. (13) Therefore, take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day and, having done everything, to stand firm.

First, Paul says to "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might." This concerns putting on "the full armor of God." The fabric that runs through each piece of armor is truth. The devil lies, and we are protected from his lies by the truth. Thus believers in Christ are able to stand firm against the evil one.

Periodically, ants conduct raids on my house. The little monsters are looking for one thing: sugar. As long as I leave nothing sweet out, as long as I tightly wrap every item that has any sugar in it, the ants leave me alone. A few of them might poke around for a little bit, and if they can't find any sugar, they leave. Therefore, I must be careful to protect every item of sugar. Similarly, we must believe every item of truth. If we believe the truth, the father of lies can't influence us.

Note that no intermediary, no pastor, no exorcist is necessary for us to stand firm. This is something we as believers in Jesus Christ can do. Nevertheless, it is always helpful to have people explain the truth to us, and help us see where we have been deceived. The important thing to remember is that consistent belief in truth on the part of an individual rebuffs the enemy. If a second party "casts out" demons, there is nothing to prevent them from returning, and returning with others, if the individual is not prepared to resist with belief in truth, and "the last state of that man becomes worse than the first" (Luke 11:24-26).

We are able to stand firm against the "schemes" of the devil. The word implies intelligence. The devil, a student of humanity, knows how each individual is vulnerable to each lie.

His allies, like him, are not "flesh and blood." Old Testament battles that the nation of Israel fought foreshadowed the spiritual battles that believers in Christ fight. Even in the Old Testament, Satan lurked as the unseen general, directing the nations of the world that opposed Israel, for "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). Paul takes us behind the battle lines to show us our true enemies. Today, if we're fighting with flesh and blood people, we're fighting the wrong battles. We need not battle with humanists, politicians, relatives and certainly not relatives in the family of God. Because none of these, even the vilest of enemies, is our true enemy, we are free to love them. If we don't love them, if we don't forgive them, then we actually give the true enemy an advantage (2 Corinthians 2:10-11; Matthew 19:21-35).

If I do not wrestle with flesh and blood, that means there is one other person I don't wrestle with: myself. I need not beat up on myself, call myself a failure or condemn myself. Satan has provided me with enough enemies; I don't need to add myself to the list.

Among other descriptions, Satan's foot soldiers are described as "world forces of this darkness." In preferring darkness, they don't want to be exposed. They are like cockroaches, racing for the darkness when exposed by the light. They prefer not to be known so that they can carry out their insidious work undetected. People who deem us a little weird for believing in God pronounce us out of our minds for believing in the existence of demons. Such is the clandestine habits of wicked spiritual forces that their existence is significantly less acknowledged than that of God, though they are just as real.

If demons operate clandestinely, how can we recognize their attacks? The answer is, in most cases it doesn't matter. The source of the lie isn't important as long as I believe the truth. So we don't need to be paranoid

about demons. We need to be truth-conscious, not demon-conscious.

Neil Anderson: "Our relationship to demonic powers in the spiritual realm is a lot like our relationship to germs in the physical realm. We know that germs are all around us: in the air, in the water, in our food, in other people, even in us. But do you live in constant fear of catching some disease? No - unless you're a hypochondriac. You know enough about wellness to eat the right foods, get enough rest, and keep yourself and your possessions clean. If you happen to catch a cold or get the measles, you simply deal with it and go on with your life."

As he did in verse 11, Paul again in verse 13 instructs us to take up the full armor of God. This is active, not passive. It is not something that we ask God to do for us but something we do because he has commanded us to do it.

And it is something we do now, not during the battle. A soldier doesn't go into battle, then put on his gear. We must take up the armor of God now so that we will "be able to resist in the evil day," when the attacks come. "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7).

Three times in verses 10 through 14 Paul uses the word that is translated "stand firm," and the word translated "resist" in verse 13 is related to that verb. We are standing on ground that has already been won by Christ. And if it has been won by Christ, it can never be taken away. But the lies of the enemy would convince us that nothing has been won for us and that we must take the ground ourselves. If we fall for that line, we'll be constantly fighting to gain something we already have - a losing battle if there ever was one.

Therefore, we must know the ground on which we stand. We can know it by examining the pieces of armor that God has given us, which are listed in the following verses.

The armor

Ephesians 6:14-20:

(14) Stand firm, therefore, having girded your loins with truth and having put on the breastplate of righteousness (15) and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace, (16) in all having taken up the shield of the faith with which you will be able to extinguish the flaming missiles of the evil one. (17) And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (18) With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints, (19) and pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, (20) for which I am an ambassador in chains, that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.

Our first action is to gird our loins with truth. In the imagery of battle, truth corresponds to the belt of a soldier, into which he would tuck his tunic. The one sure way to recognize a lie is through prior knowledge of the truth. Those who lie are effective only insofar as they lie to those who don't know the truth. So in girding our loins with truth, we take in and store up truth. Truth gives us an accurate picture of reality. Satan wishes to redefine reality.

The source of truth is the word of God. Jesus prayed to the Father regarding his disciples, "Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth" (John 17:17). Most importantly, the word accurately describes God. The word describes God as good. Satan, just as he did in Eden, defines God as bad, as one who deprives us of good things and forces bad things upon us. He even attempts to convince us that God's good gifts, such as marriage and food, are bad (1 Timothy 4:1-5). Satan has been successful insofar as we are fearful in this world, for if God is good, we have nothing to fear. And if God is good, we can stop trying to create some kind of good life for ourselves and start giving our lives away; we can be liberated from the self-absorbed hell we have created for ourselves with a little help from our enemies.

So we must know the word, and we must know it well. We must tighten the belt of truth - store up the word, meditate on it, memorize it, ask the Spirit to search our hearts with it.

Second, we are to "put on the breastplate of righteousness." In Christ, we have been declared righteous. Paul goes so far as to say we have been "created in righteousness" (Ephesians 4:24). If we believe this, we will be ready when the enemy, who is called "the accuser of our brethren" (Revelation 12:10), casts aspersions our way.

Satan, who tempts us to sin in the first place, then accuses us with guilt after we have done what he asked. When I lived in Idaho, I took a junior high school boy golfing. On one hole, he swung and missed, and in anger he drew the club back. In the process, he struck the ball, and it traveled about 20 yards - backward. The miss counted for one stroke, actually striking the ball counted for another; so he lost two strokes, not to mention 20 yards. So his first mistake was compounded by his frustration over making that mistake. In a similar manner, we compound sin by feeling guilty about it. But the truth tells us that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). No matter how grave or persistent our sin, in God's eyes we are righteous.

If Satan is successful in convincing us that we are unrighteous, he will then have little difficulty commissioning us to attempt to earn a righteous standing. We'll be trying to perform our way through life, impressing others and exhausting ourselves. We'll attempt to convince ourselves that the performance was good enough, but something inside us won't applaud. But if we believe we are righteous in Christ, that is how we will live.

Third, we are to "shod our feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace." Christ has reconciled us to God and created peace between us and him. God is not, nor will he ever be, angry with us. No sin on our part engenders his anger, for all of it was expressed toward Christ.

Not surprisingly, Satan would have us believe otherwise. He wants us to picture God as angry because of our shortcomings. If we believe the enemy, we'll never draw near to God, for who wants to be in the presence of an angry God intent on punishing us with his wrath? And we'll embark on a mission to pacify ourselves, but we will never find anything but a fragile false peace that is dependent on hostility toward anyone or anything that would pose a threat.

The fourth piece of protection is the "shield of the faith." When Paul refers to faith elsewhere in Ephesians, he speaks of faith in Christ. In Ephesians, this means by faith we are "in Christ." Paul uses this phrase 27 times in the first three chapters. An understanding of our position in Christ renders all of Satan's lies ineffective, for all the pieces of equipment concern aspects of being in Christ: The truth is in Christ (Ephesians 4:21); we are righteous in Christ; we have peace with God in Christ; we will spend eternity with God in Christ; we apply the word of God in Christ; we have access to God through prayer in Christ (Ephesians 3:12).

The word Paul uses for shield identifies the piece of equipment as a long, oblong shield that covered the whole person. Thus, the shield covered all other pieces of armor. This may be what Paul means when he says to take up the shield of faith, literally, "in all." There is a connection between the shield of faith, which concerns our position in Christ, and all the other pieces of armor.

So if we understand the implications of being in Christ, we will be able to "extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one." The imagery here is of flaming arrows launched with the intention of starting a destructive fire that spreads out of control. It is a vivid metaphor for Satan's lies, with which he attempts to light fires in our minds by impressing upon us one incendiary thought that ignites a series of destructive thoughts. Therefore, feelings of guilt, impressions of an angry God and questions regarding our salvation run wild.

This wildfire of the mind often concerns fear. "Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). A lion roars in order to paralyze its prey with fear. Fear about the future rages out of control if we don't believe God is good and all-knowing. Fear of being hurt emotionally consumes us if we don't believe that God meets our relational needs. But if we "take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5) and understand the truth of our position in Christ, we will recognize such fears as invalid, having been based on false information.

Fifth, we are to take the "helmet of salvation." Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:8 connects this with the "hope of salvation," which concerns our eternal destiny. The enemy would cause us to question the level of our commitment to God and lead us to doubt our eternal destiny. This causes fear and insecurity. If he is unsuccessful at causing us to doubt our destiny, he'll attempt to convince us to negate its importance, whereupon we will store up treasures on earth, not heaven (Matthew 6:20). We will grasp for every ounce of satisfaction we can find in this world, playing right into the hand of Satan, the ruler of this world.

The sixth piece of gear is the sword of the Spirit, which Paul defines as the word of God. The word is related to the Spirit because it was given by the Spirit and is brought to mind by the Spirit. The word for "word" here is not the more familiar *logos* but *rhema*, which would seem to indicate specific application of the word. The Spirit acts like an internal concordance, accessing the truth in scripture that silences the lie. Jesus was "full of the Holy Spirit" when he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, and he was able to rebuff each of Satan's lies with the corresponding truth (Luke 4:1-12). The sword, which is the specific word, was attached to the belt, which is truth, or the stored word. So the specific word is drawn from the stored word. It can help, when a passage is found that addresses an active lie, to read the section repeatedly and meditate on it.

Finally, Paul says to "pray at all times in the Spirit." This can mean at least two things. First, Paul has just connected the Spirit with the word. So praying in the Spirit means praying in accordance with the truth of God's word, even praying through sections of scripture line by line. Through the word, we learn God's heart, and therefore we can pray more informatively. Second, the Spirit not only can bring to mind the word but specific things and people to pray for. This explains the phenomenon of believers' being burdened to pray for other people for reasons they couldn't identify at the time, only to find out later that their prayers coincided with some crisis or demonic attack.

God has given us the pieces of armor, truth to believe, and through prayer we express our dependence on him. Like the shield of faith, the word "all" is connected with prayer. We are to pray at all times. Faith in Christ concerns all the pieces of armor, and prayer is in addition to all the pieces of armor. It is the only item here that is not assigned a corresponding image in Paul's illustration. Honest prayer is helpful in keeping us humble and dependent. It is our word to God in response to his word to us. It is communication with God, and nothing nourishes a relationship like communication. Prayer is the enjoyment of the relationship that God made possible.

Prayer may be what Satan hates most of all, for it is evidence of our relationship with God, the very thing he would destroy if he could. In fact, his chief goal is to drag us away from a relationship with God and lead us into self-idolization. He will use all the lies at his disposal to keep us from drawing near to God. Every one of his lies would lead us to desperately try to meet our needs or protect ourselves on our own terms, but we can cast all our anxiety upon the Lord, because he cares for us (1 Peter 5:7).

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