

# “The Kingdom’s Coming Challenges Us to Persevere”

Ephesians 6:10-17 <sup>1</sup>

Well, we’re now making our way through the “Twelve Days of Christmas” and we’re nearing the end of the holiday season. Christmas has passed, and New Year’s Day is upon us. Work and school schedules will soon return to normal. We’ve enjoyed the special events, the special music, and the festive food, but I suspect that most of us are also glad that the quieter month of January is just around the corner.

And all of this raises the question of whether there’s any continuing relevance to all of the celebrating we’ve been doing. Do the four weeks of Advent make any difference, really? Does this ancient birth have any lasting relevance for what we do now and in the future?

Well, for those who have eyes to see, of course, the baby in the manger is actually the Lord of the Universe, engaged in what was then and remains today largely a covert operation. Bethlehem’s manger is the prelude to the empty tomb, which is the Hinge Point of all of time as we know it. Without the empty tomb, the baby in the manger is . . . well, just another baby.

But with the Empty Tomb, God has already told us how the Great Story ends. God has given us the Divine Strategic Plan, and this plan is that “*At the right time [God] will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth*” (Ephesians 1:10). When that happens, “*every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*” (Philippians 2:10-11). That’s where the universe is headed, and after that come the wonders of the New Creation.

So, as we gather today, more than 2,000 years this side of Bethlehem’s manger, you and I have been given the secret of God’s Purpose. Here we are, somewhere on the timeline between Jesus’ Resurrection and His Return, and the question before us is, “**How shall we now live?**”

I imagine that you know that the seventh *Star Wars* film came out last week, the first new *Star Wars* film in a decade. I well remember seeing the very first one in 1977, and I’ve seen all the films since. Luke Skywalker, one of the central characters in the trilogy, is a person of singular integrity who takes great personal risks in order to undo the terrible evil that threatens to destroy their universe. The *Star Wars* stories are filled with greed, power, violence, and hate, set over against selflessness, faithfulness, courage, and hope.

You and I actually live in times that are rather similar to the situation portrayed in these movies—a time when all of the forces that will eventually collide have been set into motion, a time of battles on many fronts, but a time that is probably still at some distance from the final conflict. In such times, you and I face daily battles with the forces of Darkness, though we may not always recognize them as such.

Whether we understand it or not, and whether we like it or not, the clear witness of the Bible is that you and I live in a world that is at war. We see and hear plenty about war, of course, but it’s critical that we understand that the wars in the news are merely the symptoms and signs of a greater, unseen conflict.

This conflict of which I speak is no parlor game, no idle philosophical meandering. It’s a deadly battle in which you and I are pitted against spiritual forces of evil that would overwhelm us if we were not under God’s protection (Revelation 12:17).

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on December 27, 2015.

The sobering reality we face is that Satan and those who serve him will use any and every means at their disposal to destroy us, or, failing in that, since Christians are under God's protection, to render us useless to the Kingdom of God as it is made tangible through the Church. The Good News of the deeper meaning of Christmas is that it was really an invasion that makes D-Day look like not much at all. The birth of Jesus was an invasion by the Kingdom of God that struck at the very heart of the kingdom of Darkness, with violent repercussions that continue to this very day.<sup>2</sup>

Many Christians, bravely trying to do battle in our own strength, wonder forlornly how the forces of Darkness outsmart and overpower us so often. The answer to our question is that evil is able to overcome us so effectively because we're inclined to use the wrong weapons. Paul warns us that we're battling a spiritual enemy who is humanly invincible, and that we must fight with spiritual weapons—with *God's* weapons—because the battle we face takes place primarily in the realm of the spirit (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

Perhaps the fact that we live in a time of terrorism where many of our human enemies are unrecognizable can help us appreciate what Paul meant when he wrote that "*we are not fighting against people made of flesh and blood, but against the evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against those mighty powers of darkness who rule this world, and against wicked spirits in the heavenly realms*" (Ephesians 6:12).

Even so, while the forces of evil are real, and while we do need to be paying attention to their subversions, you and I don't need to live in a perpetual state of anxiety or alarm, because God's victory is certain. Our armor and protection is God Himself, and we draw daily strength from the Eternal Well of Salvation, who is Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

Earlier this year, Jill and I visited the Antietam battlefield, not far from Frederick. As you probably know, the Battle of Antietam took place on September 17, 1862, lasted for 12 hours, and ranks as the bloodiest day of the Civil War. Altogether, there were 22,717 men dead, wounded, or missing at the end of that one day.

Though the battle was in some ways a "draw," the Union General, George McClellan, was able to foil General Robert E. Lee's bold thrust into Maryland and push the Confederates back across the Potomac for one primary reason: though Lee was by far the more competent General, Union soldiers had found a copy of Lee's battle plan and had delivered it to McClellan before the battle began.<sup>4</sup> McClellan won against superior forces because he knew what they planned to do.

In some respects, you and I are in a situation similar to what General McClellan faced that day. On our own, we are no match for our spiritual adversaries. But we have not only been given Satan's battle plan, we have God's own Spirit within to strengthen us and to guide us in every engagement, every day, and we also know how the whole thing ends. It is in such times and situations as these that ***the Kingdom's coming challenges us to persevere.***

Yes, at the moment we live in a season of renewed global terror, but God has not left us without guidance for such times. Paul's instructions at the end of Ephesians, while not providing a "quick fix" to these troubles, do guide us toward a life of spiritual victory that draws strength from Jesus Himself.

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<sup>2</sup> John Eldridge, *Remember the Dragon: Christmas is an Invasion*, newsletter@e.faithgateway.com, 12.19.15.

<sup>3</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, "Ephesians," *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 338.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Bailey and David Kennedy, *The American Pageant*, ninth edition (D.C. Heath, 1991), pp. 456-457.

As you may remember, in Ephesians 6 Paul uses the weaponry of a Roman foot soldier as an example of how to be prepared for spiritual battle, perhaps because he was chained to such a soldier as he wrote. While these images seem antiquated to us, we're more familiar than we want to be with police in full riot gear, which functions in almost exactly the same way.

Please turn with me to Ephesians 6:10 and let's look again at Paul's instructions. The first thing Paul says is to remind us that our strength comes from "*the Lord's mighty power*" (v. 10),<sup>5</sup> and Paul warns us to "*put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies and tricks of the Devil*" (v. 11). You and I engage the spiritual battles of life not simply on our own, but as soldiers of the King, as representatives of Heaven, and God provides us with all the equipment we need.

Verse 13 gives us our tactical objective, which is to hold our position, to still be standing firm at the end of the battles God allows us to face. Verse 14 begins Paul's description of our equipment. There are six pieces of equipment, for which I'll use modern equivalents: (1) an equipment belt; (2) Kevlar body armor; (3) combat boots; (4) a riot shield; (5) a combat helmet; and (6) a riot gun.

1. **Equipment Belt.** First, as in much of our ordinary clothing, the belt "holds it all together." The *equipment belt* organizes and holds much of the soldier's gear, and Paul says that in spiritual warfare, this belt is Truth. Jesus told us that **God's Word is truth**, and He also said that *He Himself is Truth* (John 17:17; 14:6). "Truth" means something that corresponds to the way things actually *are*, and in spiritual matters we only know that correspondence as God reveals it to us—through God's written Word, the Bible, and through the Living Word, our Savior.

Putting on "the equipment belt of spiritual warfare" involves studying God's Word, not as a last-minute effort on Sunday morning, but as carefully as we might read an investment prospectus or the manual for a complex piece of equipment. But no matter how much we may study, "the sturdy belt of truth" is of no real help unless Truth actually characterizes our daily lives.

Do the people who live and work with you know for sure that you are a person of unwavering truthfulness, neither overstating nor understating, and always speaking the truth in love? If not, what would need to change in order for that to become true about you?

2. **Body Armor.** The second piece of equipment is *Kevlar body armor*. Body armor protects vital organs from injury—especially the heart. Paul says that **righteousness is the armor** that protects the heart, and biblical righteousness has to do with faithfulness to covenant relationships.

Jerry Kirk is the founder of the National Coalition for the Protection of Children & Families, and he travels a lot in his work. Here's his account of one skirmish with the Enemy that had to do with his "heart":

"On one trip, I was channel-surfing to find the World Series. Along the way, I came across a movie featuring half-nude women. I kept going until I found the baseball game. Ten minutes later, though, I flipped back to the movie, then quickly back to the World Series. I did that four or five times before I shut off the TV.

"I was unnerved by the power of the temptation, especially since I've given my life to combating pornography. As I asked for forgiveness, God reminded me, 'Jerry, I'm not

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<sup>5</sup> This echoes Zechariah's affirmation that "*It is not by force nor by strength, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty*" (Zechariah 4:6).

surprised by your sin. I've known all along that you were a sinner. I've known all along that you were weak. You need to understand how weak you are, and *that I alone can make you strong.*"<sup>6</sup>

Adultery is one of the many ways in which we can sin against our covenant relationships, and Jesus was very clear that adultery is an inclination of the mind long before it is an action of the body (Matthew 5:28). And whether we're married or not, lust is more available to us now than perhaps ever before in history. It's available on TV, on our computers, and even on our phones. So does righteousness characterize what you read, what you view on the Internet, what you watch at the movies and on cable, what you do when you're out of town?

We build stealth bombers, huge aircraft carriers, and global missile defense systems, and we raise huge standing armies. We hire police forces and security guards. We install security locks, security lights, and buy guns by the thousands. We work hard to protect our personal information from identity theft. You're guarding your *body*, and you're guarding your *identity*, but are you taking seriously the need to guard your *heart*?

3. **Combat Boots.** The third piece of equipment is *combat boots*. It's well known among military folk that an army is no stronger than the feet of its soldiers. All military leaders know this, and the troops know it, too. Effective soldiers *have* the proper foot gear, *wear* the proper foot gear, and they *take care* of it.

Paul tells us that our combat boots are actually "***the peace that comes from the Good News***" (v. 15). So how does *that* work? Well, good shoes enable us to journey to places where we otherwise could not. So does God's peace in our hearts.

Armies need good shoes. Athletes need good shoes. Adventurers need good shoes. And only the peace that comes from God's forgiveness, purpose, power, and spiritual protection could have sent my friend Mark Wakefield to Guatemala to work with runaway boys. Only God's peace could have sent my friends Gennady and Mina Podgaisky to the Ukraine to work with street children. And that same peace sends you and me into places where "only God would go" so that men and women without Christ may become sisters and brothers in Christ.

4. **Riot Shield.** The fourth piece of our gear is a *riot shield*. Such shields deflect things that are thrown or shot at us, and Paul reminds us that Satan is going to throw things at us all day long, every day. **The spiritual shield that protects us is Faith.** The Bible says that faith is "*the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see*" (Hebrews 11:1).

Many of the battles you and I must fight along life's way have to do with apparent conflicts between what God's Word tells us and what seems to be happening to us and around us. In the frightening chaos of a terror-filled world, faith shields us from doubt and enables us to trust that God will keep His promises. As Hebrews puts it, "*You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised*" (10:36). "*Put on the full armor of God,*" Paul wrote, "*so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand*" (Ephesians 6:13).

5. **Combat Helmet.** The fifth piece of gear is a *combat helmet*, which is obviously intended to protect our heads, our brains, our minds. Paul says that **this helmet is salvation.** The Bible says that our salvation transforms us into new persons *by changing the way we think*. And, as a result of this change, you and I can know what God wants us to do, and we can discover how good and pleasing and perfect God's will really is (Romans 12:2).

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<sup>6</sup> *Men of Integrity*, Vol. 1, no. 1.

Wars can only be won with accurate information, so warring forces almost always try to confuse and to deceive the forces on the other side. There are large organizations in our own neighborhood that are dedicated to this very task.

Our spiritual Enemy makes abundant use of deception, trying to gain control of our minds. And in spiritual matters as well as more mundane circumstances, “**evil rarely looks evil until it accomplishes its goal**; it gains entrance by appearing attractive, desirable, and perfectly legitimate. It is a baited and camouflaged trap.”<sup>7</sup> My friends, it’s only as we allow God to transform our minds with the helmet of salvation that we can see and hear things as they truly are (John 9:39). This battle isn’t about *virtual* reality. It’s about *eternal* reality. Keep your helmet on.

**6. Riot Gun.** Our final piece of battle gear, a *riot gun*, is also our only offensive weapon. Paul called it “*the sword of the Spirit*,” and he said that **this weapon is the Word of God**. We’ve already seen that Truth, our equipment belt, has to do with the Word of God. Now Paul reminds us that this Word has power not only for protection, but also for overcoming all the strategies of the Enemy. As God said through the prophets, “*Is not my Word like fire, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?*” (Jeremiah 23:29). “*My Word will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it*” (Isaiah 55:11). **The Bible has this power because it is True.**

A riot gun usually uses projectiles that are intended to hurt, but not to kill. A riot gun is intended to quell a riot or a revolt; God’s Word engages the spiritual warfare within us so that we will stand firm in the power and wisdom of God. The Word of God is “*full of living power*” (Hebrews 4:12). God’s Word works through us to engage persons who are serving the forces of Darkness and to help them see how they are being duped and destroyed, so that God’s love can save them and set them free!

So, then, when all is said and done, how shall we live in a New Year? I suggest to you that **the Kingdom’s coming challenges us to persevere in truth, in righteousness, in peace, in faith, in salvation, and in the Word of God**. These are disciplines that must be practiced every day. They are not emergency equipment for occasional use. Soldiers train and maintain their readiness, not at the last minute, but every single day.

And if, in this New Year, you and I maintain these daily disciplines of the Spirit, we will be able to live day by day with the confidence of which Paul wrote: “*If God is for us, who can ever be against us? . . . Can anything ever separate us from Christ’s love? . . . Death can’t, and life can’t. The angels can’t, and the demons can’t. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell can’t keep God’s love away. . . . Nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Romans 8:31, 35, 38-39).

Thanks be to God for this magnificent Gift!

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<sup>7</sup> Snodgrass, p. 339.