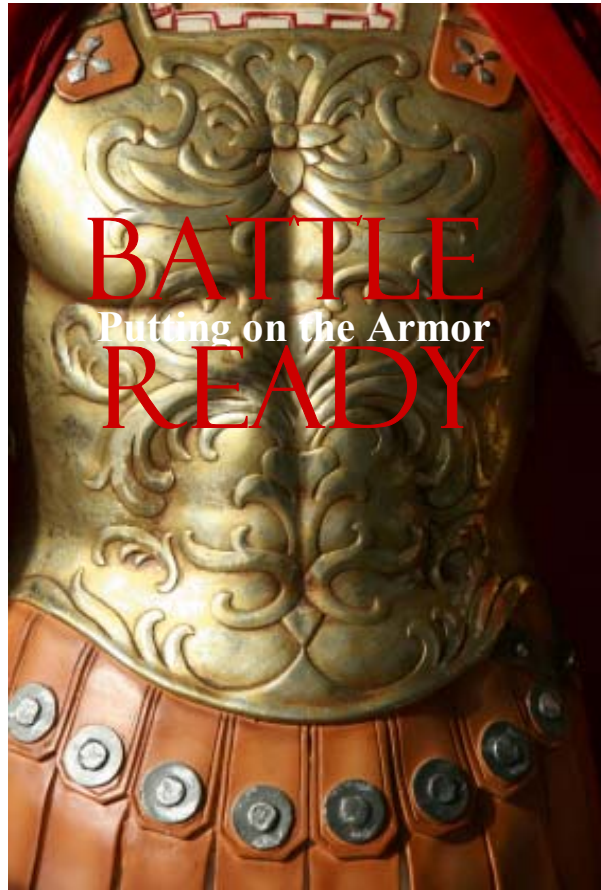


The Covenant Pulpit



"Reconnaissance"

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In 480 BC the world watched in terror as the largest army in history poured across the Hellespont from Asia into Europe. This war machine was fueled by more than 3 million foot soldiers, 80,000 chariots, 50,000 horsemen, thousands of camel-riding Arabs, and ferocious war elephants from India. Thirty-eight-year-old Xerxes, the emperor of Persia and self-proclaimed "King of kings," had spent four years assembling his colossal coalition of almost every nation of the Eastern world to obliterate the tiny nation of Greece.

The Greek historian, Herodotus, wrote that when the Persian hoards marched, the ground shook. Like a plague of locusts, they stripped the earth bare. When they stopped to drink, whole pools of water were dried up and rivers were reduced to a trickle. It took this gargantuan army a whole week just to pass the same point.

It was the mismatch of the ages. Greece was a ragged collection of cities warring against each other. Athens was in a state of malaise. Sparta was in economic shambles. Never was a nation as weak and vulnerable as Greece.

But somehow the Greek cities managed to scrape together a ragtag army of 7,000 soldiers. The Greeks were outnumbered 430 to 1. At the core of their puny force were 300 Spartan warriors. The Greeks took their stand in a narrow pass, twenty yards wide, with the sea on one side and soaring cliffs on the other at the site of hot sulfurous springs called *The Hot Gates* or, in the Greek language, Thermopylae.

Thermopylae has become hallowed in the annals of military history. It is to the Greeks what the Alamo is to Texans. In that narrow pass a heroic handful held back the Persian army for two days. Finally, Xerxes unleashed his crack storm troopers known as the *Immortals*, only to watch the Greeks put them to rout.

But on the third night a Greek traitor showed the Persians a secret trail through the cliffs into Thermopylae. As the dawn broke, the Greek army faced certain annihilation. General Leonidas led his 300 Spartans to a mound where they made their desperate final stand. When their swords were gone, they fought with bare hands and teeth until the last Spartan died. As the end neared, a runner was sent home with a message that has echoed down the corridors of time:

"Stranger, tell the Spartans that we behaved as
they would wish us, and were buried here."

This small band of Spartans died without knowing that they were changing world history. Their desperate stand bought enough time for the Greek cities to bury their differences and raise a great army. Spartan heroism triggered a surge of national pride that spurred their countrymen to

decisive victories at Salamis and Platae. The power of Persia was smashed and the future of civilization shifted from Asia to Europe. Athens was destined to become the most influential city that the world has ever known. Greek culture and democracy would give birth to the modern world. The French philosopher, Michel de Montaigne, said of the battle of Thermopylae,

“There are some defeats whose triumphs rival victories.”

As our world marches inexorably toward Armageddon, followers of Jesus Christ are faced with the greatest challenges in the history of Christianity. Global forces of darkness, more awesome than the coalition of Xerxes, rise up to battle us. That ancient fire angel, Lucifer, has amassed a colossal coalition of geo-political terrorism, materialism, humanistic secularism, new age religions, immorality, the corruption of sacred institutions, and the pervasive seduction of the media to wage an unholy *Jihad* against the Kingdom of God.

Here’s the compelling question on which our future hangs: will we put on our spiritual armor, take up the Sword of the Spirit, and fight the battle—even to the point of death? Will we echo the words of those brave Spartans?

“Passerby, tell our Lord that we behaved as he would want us to behave, and are buried here.”

St. Paul gives us our marching orders in Ephesians 6:11: “Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.” How will we tame that roaring lion who seeks to devour us? Here’s the fourth principle for battle ready soldiers:

**To win spiritual battles
you must fight strategically.**

We are to take our stand against “the devil’s schemes.” In 2 Corinthians 2:11 Paul says of Satan, “We are not unaware of his schemes.” In the original Greek language, the word for “schemes” is *methodia*. From it we get our English words *method* or *methodology*. It refers to a set, systematic, or predictable way of doing things.

We think of Satan as an innovative and creative schemer; the grand chess-master of craftiness. But Paul wants us to know that the devil is a predictable plodder. He continues to use the same stale old methods that he has always used. He doesn’t need a new bag of tricks, because most folks still fall for the old ones. He may dress them up in the latest fashion, but his methods remain predictably the same. In his classic little book on demons, *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis writes this little couplet:

“Old error in new dress
is old error nonetheless.”

Here's the good news: we don't have to be great thinkers to outwit Satan. His methods are obvious and predictable. Remember the words of St. Paul: "...we are not unaware of his schemes." Not only does the Bible spell them out, it also gives us tried-and-true strategies to overcome his schemes. Are you ready, brave Spartans, to take your stand? Here are some key strategies:

1. Be alert. Satan's timing is impeccable.

Twice, in verses 11&13, St. Paul says, "Put on the full armor of God." The sense in the original language is that we have to keep putting it on. Paul tells us why in verse thirteen: "...so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground..." Paul doesn't say, "...if the day of evil comes..." but "...when the day of evil comes..." In the end, the issue isn't even *why*, *when* or *how* it comes (it *will* come), but *whether* we will stand our ground. Paul wants us to know that devils, demons, and other dark forces of evil come when we least expect them. Demons have studied our every move. Hell has a book on each of us. The Enemy knows when each of us is most vulnerable, and he specializes in the "sneak" attack. That's why another apostle says in 1 Peter 5:8, "Be self-controlled and alert, for your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." Be alert. Satan's timing is impeccable. You are most vulnerable...

1) When you are weary and weak

That was Jesus' condition the first time Satan attacked him. You can read about it in Matthew 4:1-3:

"Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the son of God, tell these stones to become bread.'"

Jesus was in the rugged wilderness just north of the Dead Sea. It sits in the lowest spot on planet earth, where temperatures soar above 120° in the daytime and drop below freezing at night. Our Lord has hiked across razor sharp rocks and scaled the dizzying heights above the old city of Jericho. He has not eaten for forty days. His body is at the end of its natural reserves. If he doesn't eat soon, he will collapse and die.

It is at the point of our Lord's weariness and weakness that the lion pounces. The Enemy of our soul still operates that way. He slips into the office of the faithful worker who has been bypassed for promotion. Looking up from his cluttered desk, the tired worker's mind is suddenly awash in self-pity. He slithers into the hospital and hisses at the weary sufferer, "No one even visits you. No one cares." Turning over to face the wall, the lonely patient feels abandoned and unloved. Going over to the stadium, he kneels behind the discouraged bench warmer and says, "Face it man, first string is

out of touch. You'll never make it." To the unemployed he says, "No chance." To the divorced he hisses, "No future." To the bereaved he whispers, "No hope." Watch out when you are weary and weak. Satan is lurking in the shadows.

2) When you are alone

Jesus was alone in the wilderness when the tempter came. Lions never charge into the mass of the herd. They circle around the edges, looking for the solitary straggler. Check the Scriptures and you will find that Satan most often attacks people when they are alone.

Gordon MacDonald was a mega church pastor, a bestselling author, and the new president of World Vision. The Evangelical world was shocked when he confessed to adulterous affairs. He lost his ministry and descended into the dark night of his soul. He later discussed his adultery in a book entitled *Reordering Your Private World*. In it he said that, as he became a religious superstar, he felt indestructible. He became increasingly unaccountable to others and withdrew into a private world. He went on trips alone and kept secrets from his wife. In his private world he felt free to sin because he thought that no one would find out.

The older I get, the more accountability I need because I am more adept at deceiving myself and others. More than ever, I insist on being surrounded by honest and forthright people that I can't con, and who will courageously confront me when I am out of line.

Watch out when you are alone, and no one is looking. You are most susceptible on the road, and far from home. Satan feasts on Christians who think they can go it alone without church, or small group, or committed friends who hold them accountable. Defensive people, who refuse to listen to the advice of others, or chafe at criticism, or refuse to admit they are wrong, are highly vulnerable. That's why James 5:16 says, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." Listen to Hebrews 10:25: "Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, and let us encourage one another."

3) After spiritual highs

Matthew 4:2 says that Satan came after Jesus had been fasting. Jesus had fasted for 40 days in the wilderness to get close to his heavenly Father. He spent more than a month in the deepest spiritual intimacy. But watch out for spiritual highs. Proverbs 16:18 says, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." The Puritan, Thomas Watson wrote, "Where God erects a cathedral the devil builds a chapel. He waits for us in the shadows of the holiest places."

Our lowest lows often come after our highest highs. Elijah called down fire from heaven and defeated the prophets of Baal. But a day later he plunged into suicidal despair after he received a death threat from Queen Jezebel. David brought the Ark of the Covenant into the city and danced before the Lord. A few days later he committed adultery with Bathsheba. Peter confessed that Jesus was the Son of God, and our Lord praised him for his spiritual insight. A few minutes later Jesus had to say to that same apostle, "Get behind me Satan!" Don't relax after spiritual victories. We are never more vulnerable to a fall than when we are on high places.

4) When we are at ease

Do you remember when "the day of evil" caught David by surprise? We read about it in 2 Samuel 11:1-3:

"In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men and the whole Israelite army...but David remained in Jerusalem. One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing..."

David was in his mid-fifties. He had been fighting wars for 30 years. His throne was finally secure. There were no more worlds to conquer. So he sent his army out to fight for him. Life was easy and he was bored. When he saw Bathsheba, it didn't matter that she was married to another man. When Dan Rather asked President Bill Clinton why he had gotten involved with an affair with his intern, he replied, "I did it because I could." King David would have said the same thing to Dan Rather.

Somewhere along the line, David had lost the will to say no to his lusts. He was a he-man with a *she*-weakness. He had been adding women to his harem for years. As a result, he grew morally weaker with each compromise of his character. Easy living ate away at his self-discipline. Beware of ease. Satan pounces on those who have become soft. We live in an age of soft Christians. Those who neglect spiritual discipline are easy pickings for Satan and his associates. More than ever, we need to spend an hour a day in prayer. We must rediscover fasting. We can't afford to neglect the study and memorizing of the Bible. We need to turn off our television sets and read great books that stretch our minds. We need to expend our energies in worthy pursuits, and say no to pleasures that dissipate our lives. Most of all we need to say "no" to the little compromises that erode our character.

5) When life is out of order

God created his universe with a set order. When we violate the order of things, "the day of evil" is crouching in the bushes. You see this in the Garden of Eden. As we learned last week, God had set Lucifer's place in the

divine order. We learned in Ezekiel 28:12-14 that he was put in Eden as a “guardian cherub” to protect Adam and Eve. Instead he rebelled that he, the highest archangel in heaven, should be a ministering servant to the puny creatures God had created out of the dust of the earth. He lusted after higher places, even the throne of God. Instead of protecting Adam and Eve, he deceived and manipulated them as part of his plot to overthrow God.

God designed the order of the family. Adam was ordained to be the head of the family, and called to protect Eve. But Lucifer bypassed the chain-of-command and went directly to the woman. He seduced her into becoming the spiritual leader in her family. But the man’s sin was worse. He should have stepped between Lucifer and the woman. That would have been leadership. He should have rebuked his wife and crushed the head of the Serpent. That would have been authentic manhood. Instead he became a passive husband and let the future of his family go down the tubes.

There are lots of Eves in Christian homes today: wives who chip away at their husband’s authority by nagging, complaining, manipulating, and taking charge when they should be encouraging their husbands. There are lots of Adams who are asleep at the wheel. They are content to perfect their golf games while their wives are attending Bible studies. They spend more time in front of the television than on their knees in prayer for their family.

We live in a culture where children run the home, parents side with their kids against the teachers at school, we disrespect and degrade the leaders of our sacred institutions, men marry men and women wed women, we engage in sex outside of marriage, or live together in violation of God’s plan for marriage. When God’s order is reversed, the Garden of Eden becomes a patch of thistles and thorns, and Satan emerges as the victor. More than ever, battle ready warriors are going to have to return to biblical morality in an age when everything goes.

6) When we are proud

Few are more vulnerable to Satan’s wiles than the spiritually-proud. Pious folk are the devil’s favorite meat. St. Paul tucks away a little warning in Galatians 6:1: “Brothers, if someone is caught in sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you may be tempted.” Beware of looking down your nose at sinners. Watch out for a judgmental and intolerant spirit. Be alert for that “I’m-glad-I’m-not-like-him-or-her” or the “There-but-for-the-grace-of-God-go-I” spirit of haughtiness that seeps into the complacent soul. Be careful when you begin to feel anger towards those who have disappointed you. Beware if you are seething in bitterness toward someone who has wronged you.

St. Paul says two things to the Galatians: 1) *Restore* sinners rather than condemn them; and 2) do it with *gentle* humility. Are you festering in anger

toward someone who has disappointed you with their sins? “Watch out!” says Paul. “You are setting yourself up for a *temptation* of your own.”

Our primary strategy is *alertness*. Benjamin Franklin wrote, “Eternal vigilance is the price of our liberty.” In John 8:32 Jesus said, “Know the truth and it will set you free.” St. Peter says, “Be self-controlled and alert...” If you are, the devil will not catch you unaware.

2. Know the Word and use it as your weapon.

Satan is first and foremost a *liar* and *deceiver*. Every part of the spiritual armor in Ephesians Six is meant to defend us from the devil’s attacks. But, according to Ephesians 6:17&18 we only have two offensive weapons: “the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God” and “prayer.” In the Garden, Lucifer perverted the Word of God and Eve swallowed his deception. Adam knew the Word, but he stood by idly with his sword sheathed and unused.

The second Adam, our Lord Jesus, was not so cavalier. Look at Matthew Four. Three times in the Wilderness Temptation Satan twisted God’s Word the same way he did with Eve. But here’s the difference: three times—in verses 2,7&10—Jesus replied, “It is written...” He pulled out his sword: parry, thrust, slice, cut, and *touché*. There was no half-hearted swinging in thin air. No clumsy hacking. It was sure, quick thrusts, straight to the heart.

Because they didn’t fight back with the Word of God, Adam and Eve allowed Satan to turn their garden into a wilderness. But Jesus came to a wilderness and turned it back into a garden by obeying his Father’s Word. What about you? Do you know it? Have you memorized it? Is it hidden in your heart? Is it your weapon of choice? Do you know how to use it? Can you say confidently, “God said it; I believe it; I live it; and that settles it.” Remember the lament of Hosea 4:6: “My people are destroyed for the lack of knowledge.” We live in an age when most Christians are functionally illiterate when it comes to the Bible. If you want to be battle ready, you need to commit yourself to become a student of God’s Word. It will require far more than listening to a sermon once a week.

While the Persians marched across the Hellespont and into Europe, the Greeks ignored the impending danger. Greek cities continued to squabble with each other instead of joining together to prepare for their defense. Greek businessmen focused on making money, and people went to their feasts and played their games. Meanwhile the enemy moved inexorably closer. Had it not been for a brave band of Spartans who were battle-ready, Greece would have fallen. We live in such an age. But if a few brave Spartans will stand again as a company of committed saints, we will defeat Satan and all his schemes.