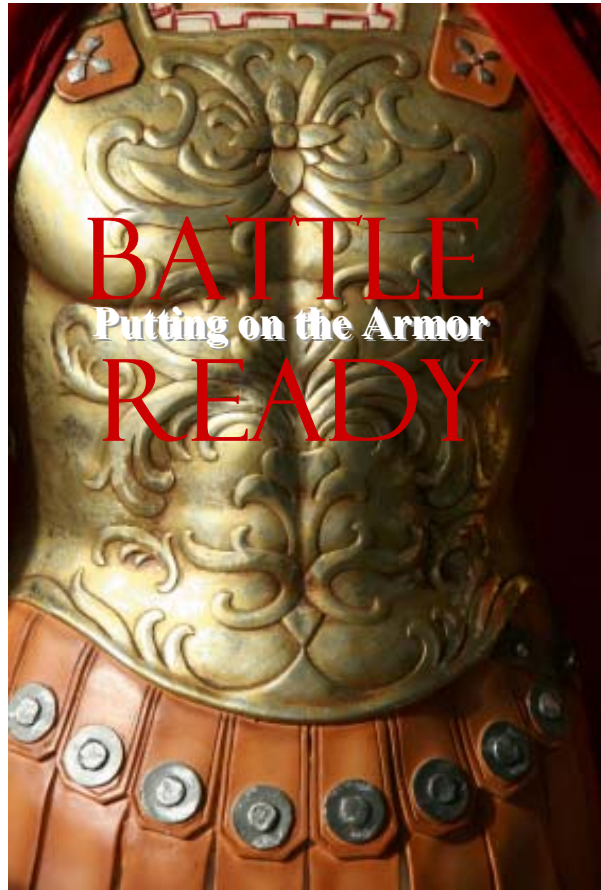


*The Covenant Pulpit*



**"The Triumph of Truth"**

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No one would have guessed that Ben would become the stuff of legends. He was in his mid-thirties, a struggling small-town merchant living on the edge of bankruptcy. He didn't pay much attention to the news that British troops had skirmished with some colonial militia in the out-of-the-way villages of Lexington and Concord.

But when Ben heard that the British had massacred citizens of Boston, he was transformed into a passionate patriot. He rushed to an emergency meeting of the City Council at New Haven and electrified the citizens with fiery words: "Good God, are we Americans asleep and giving up our liberties?" Overnight "Captain Ben" raised a company of citizen soldiers, shamed the reluctant City Council into supplying them with arms and ammunition, and led his men down the road to attack the British at Boston.

On the way, he conceived an audacious idea. If he took Ft. Ticonderoga in neighboring New York, he could capture enough cannon to blast the British out of Boston. After a breathtaking march, Ben's militia caught the British napping and captured Ft. Ticonderoga. Ben's feat electrified a faltering revolution desperately in need of a victory, and he was promoted to colonel.

Then he led his men across the Maine wilderness, scaling rugged mountains, traveling in leaky boats down raging rivers, and pushed his starving men in the freezing weather of November, until they reached Quebec. It was unthinkable that his 650 men could take this Canadian city from the British, but he personally led them over the barricades and into the withering gunfire. A musket ball tore through his leg, leaving him a cripple for life. Ben limped home a bigger-than-life hero.

He then led his troops to a string of victories at Valcour Island, Lake Champaign, and Ridgefield, Connecticut. George Washington proclaimed that Ben was his best officer, and promoted him to the rank of Major General. To this day, military experts say that he was the greatest general on either side in the Revolutionary War. But it was at the Battle of Saratoga that Ben's star shown brightest. The colonials were in retreat, when Ben charged into the cannon fire of the British lines. His horse was shot out from under him, and he was again wounded. But he continued to limp toward the enemy line in an astonishing act of courage. His heroism inspired American troops to surge forward, and victory was snatched from the jaws of defeat.

But there was a dark side to Ben. Lurking beneath the surface of his military genius and battlefield bravery were greed and deception. The public hero was a private thief. After his great victory at Ft. Ticonderoga, Ben lied on his expense report and cheated the government out of \$60,000 in today's money. But military authorities, badly in need of a hero, covered up his theft. After the Battle of Saratoga he was dismissed by General Gates as a cunning cheat and liar. Again, the military brass ignored growing evidence of Ben's deceptions.

George Washington appointed him to be the military governor of Philadelphia. In an effort to impress his new wife, Ben lived beyond his means. Again he was caught embezzling public funds, and faced a court martial. He appealed to General Washington's sympathy with these words: "Having become a cripple in the service of my country, I little expected to meet such ungrateful returns." In a move that still confounds historians, Washington not only countermanded the court martial, but gave Ben command of the most important fortress in the colonial defense system. If that fort ever fell, the Americans would surely lose the war.

Within days, an embittered Ben, now convinced that the British would win the war, cut a secret deal to turn over his fort to the enemy in return for 20,000 pounds sterling (\$1 million in today's money) and a commission as a general in their army. By now you must remember Ben by his formal name, Benedict Arnold. And the fort, together with its 3,000 defenders, was West Point. Had the Revolutionary War ended at the Battle of Saratoga, Benedict Arnold would be celebrated as one of our greatest military heroes. Instead he is remembered as America's greatest traitor. The very name Benedict Arnold is synonymous with treachery and deception.

Later, when Ben moved to England, he was shunned by British society. A lord in the British Parliament said of him, "Once a traitor always a traitor." Benedict Arnold spent his final lonely years despised by America and England alike, and died without a country. When news of his death reached the United States, newspaper headlines across America referred to him as "Beelzebub, the devil himself."

It is one of the supreme ironies of history that George Washington, the man who was famous for never telling a lie, would be so completely deceived by one of the most consummate liars of all time. Maybe the Dutch humanist, Desiderius Erasmus, was right when he wrote, "Man's mind is so formed that it's far more susceptible to falsehood than the truth." A Bulgarian playwright, Elias Canetti, puts it this way: "The only thing infinite in this world is our capacity for self-deception."

In John 8:44, Jesus describes Satan as "...a liar and the father of lies." The battle for the soul is always fought in the arena of truth versus falsehood. If deception is the devil's first weapon of choice, then truth must be our first line of defense. We must grasp our sixth principle of spiritual warfare:

**We can only defeat the *father of lies* with truth.**

When it comes to putting on the whole armor of God, notice where St. Paul begins in verse fourteen: "Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist." Don't miss this critical aspect of being battle ready: truth is the first thing we put on. It takes precedence over every other piece of armor. Also take note of verse seventeen: "...and take up the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God." Truth is the last piece of armor that we take up. We start with truth and we end with it. Truth is our first line of defense and our only weapon of offense. Truth is the only piece of armor

mentioned twice. It's as if St. Paul is saying that it's twice as important as anything else in winning spiritual battles.

When Pontius Pilate was caught between the lynch mob and Jesus, he had to make a choice between career and conscience. Each of us knows what Pilate felt like that day. As followers of Christ, caught between the pull of this world and the call of our Lord, we must make hard choices. Pilate tried to worm his way out of his dilemma by asking in John 18:38, "What is truth?" In short, he was saying that the truth was too complicated and subjective. No one can know it for sure, or say what it is for someone else.

Truth is up for grabs in our postmodern age. Like Pilate, when faced with hard choices too many people shrug their shoulders and say, "What is truth?" ABC's news program *Primetime* recently ran a program on the crises of cheating in our public schools. Seven out of ten students have cheated in the last year, 50% of them repeatedly. But the real crisis is that most of them don't feel guilty about it. Joe, a high school teen, spoke for most students: "Everyone, from the President of the United States on down, cheats. You can't get ahead in life unless you cheat a little." Last year teachers in a Detroit school provided students with answers to statewide standardized tests. Investigators discovered that they promised their students pizza and money in exchange for cheating on these tests that would be used to rate their school's academic achievement.

In his new book *The Cheating Culture*, David Callahan gives us a breathtaking survey of Americans at every level cutting corners to get ahead, from corporate scandals, doping in sports, plagiarizing by journalists, income tax cheating by citizens, to preachers stealing their sermons off the Internet. From the 53 percent of Americans who will cheat on their spouses in their lifetime to 1200 pastors who resign every month because of moral failures, deception is epidemic in America. Every survey by Pollster George Barna shows that dishonesty is as endemic in the church as in the wider culture.

More than ever, we need to answer the question: "What is truth?" Paul uses this Greek word for truth in verse fourteen: *aletheia*. The word literally means "revealed reality." Paul is reminding us that God has defined truth and made it crystal clear to us in the Scriptures. Jesus said in John 14:6, "I am the way, the *truth*, and the life." Isn't it ironic that Pilate said, "What is truth?" even while truth itself was standing before him in the person of Jesus? And Jesus is standing before us today. He will not go away. Like Pilate, we cannot wash our hands of the truth. We may be as heroic and gifted as Benedict Arnold, but if we allow little deceptions to grow in our lives, we will eventually betray everything of value. It is imperative for us to learn these facts about arming ourselves with truth:

- 1. Satan has many devices, but his only weapon is *deception*.**

We sometimes cower before the Enemy of our soul, thinking that he has a huge arsenal of weapons at his disposal. Nothing could be farther from the

truth. Satan is a one-dimensional fighter with only one weapon at his disposal. Jesus dismisses him with these words in John 8:44,

“...He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”

Jesus wants us to know that Satan is a compulsive liar. He is deceptive at his very core. Jesus says, “When he lies he speaks his native language...” Until the archangel Lucifer began to lie to himself, there had never been a deceptive thought in history. When he first whispered rebellion in the ears of the angels, it was the first lie ever uttered in heaven. When he opened his mouth to tempt Adam and Eve, it was the first lie ever spoken on earth. No wonder Jesus calls him “...the father of lies.” By Lucifer, deceit came into the universe. He is the author of every lie, including little white lies, exaggerations, excuses, tall tales, misrepresentations, bald-faced lies, false reports, empty promises or slander that you and I have ever uttered.

It is impossible for Satan to speak the truth. God *alone* holds the exclusive patent on truth. And nothing of God can ever belong to Satan. Everything that is holy is off limits to the devil, including the truth. Even when he uses the Bible, it is impossible for him to quote it accurately. Mark this down as an absolute truth: Satan cannot handle the truth. He will run from it the way Dracula runs from the cross.

The only weapon he has left is deception. He is called the *accuser*. But when he accuses or condemns you, he can only tell lies about you. He is called the *tempter*. But no matter how appealing his temptation, it is wrapped in a package of lies. Every device he brings against us—every disappointment, every negative thought, every appeal to our carnal lusts, every promise that life will be easier if we disobey God’s commandments, every call to compromise or give in to peer pressure, and every temptation to take a moral shortcut—is at its heart a lie.

That doesn’t make the battle any easier, but it becomes far less complicated. We simply have to know the truth, love the truth, receive the truth, commit to the truth, memorize the truth, speak the truth, live out the truth, and filter every appeal to our senses and feelings in our emotions through the truth. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are our *certain* truth in an *uncertain* age. It is a belt that protects us where we are most vulnerable, and a sword that will send the enemies of our soul into flight. Let me repeat this triumphant fact: the enemy cannot handle the truth. He *will* flee in the face of it.

## **2. We are *most* vulnerable to deception.**

That’s the reason we have to *first* put on truth. In 1 Timothy 2:14, St. Paul says of Eve, “...the woman was deceived...” So was the man. It is a mark of God’s poetic justice that falling prey to the devil’s lies, deception, would be at the very core of sinful humanity’s nature. Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart

is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" We were all born with deceit. David said to God in his great Psalm of confession, "Surely you desire truth in our inmost parts" (Psa. 51:6), but he had to admit how utterly difficult it is to be truthful: "Surely I was sinful from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." (Psa. 51:5)

Erasmus was right: "Man's mind is far more susceptible to falsehood than the truth." The truth is: every molecule in our body and soul is tainted with sin and deception. The deceit we are born with is simply perfected with deceptive subtlety as we grow older. When we are born again, we are *declared* righteous by God's grace, but the deceitful heart that beats within our breast is still beyond total cure until our bodies are one day glorified in heaven. The great danger for disciples of Jesus is that we simply come up with religious jargon and rationalizations to cloak our old deceptions.

Benedict Arnold was a church-going Anglican. His name is etched in stone on the hallowed walls of Westminster Abby. When he first started lying on his expense reports, he rationalized that he deserved a payback for serving his country so well. When he was discovered, he argued with George Washington that being crippled in freedom's fight should give him a free pass for cheating. When he sold out his country, his excuse was that nobody appreciated his sacrifices. No matter how bravely we fight for the right cause, if we let deception creep in, we will betray everything—even the Kingdom of God. Like Benedict Arnold, all of us are vulnerable to the "father of lies" even when we compromise the smallest of truths.

### **3. You have to put on the belt of truth.**

In the original Greek language St. Paul speaks with imperative force when he says in verse 14, "Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist." The first thing I do every day is to commit myself to learning, memorizing, speaking, discerning, standing on, walking in, and living out the truth as defined by the Bible. What does Paul mean by the belt of truth?

#### **1) Protect your innards: put *truth* over *feelings*.**

The belt was more like a thick leather girdle about a foot wide. It was designed to cover the whole lower abdomen of a Roman legionnaire. In ancient combat there were four vulnerable spots on the body. These "killing zones" included a mortal blow to the head, a fatal stab to the heart or lungs, a slashing of the vital organs in the lower abdomen, or a blow to the lower leg that would cause a soldier to fall to the ground helpless. Roman soldiers were given the best body armor in the ancient world: a helmet for the head, a breastplate for the heart and lungs, hobnailed sandals to stand when the ground got bloody with blood and guts, and a thick leather girdle to protect stomach, intestines, liver, and guts. That is what Paul is talking about when he speaks about "...the belt of truth..."

In ancient literature, the lower innards are the place of emotion. The Old Testament often uses the phrase, "bowels of mercy." If an ancient Hebrew were to sing a love song to his girlfriend it might go like this: "I love you with all my liver..." or "I give my pancreas to you." A Valentine's Card might read, "Would you be my big intestine?" We still use that area of the body to describe our deepest emotions: "I have a gut feeling about that," or "I can't stomach him," or "I hate her guts!" Doctors tell us that irritable bowel syndrome or other intestinal disorders are affected by our emotions: anxiety, depression, and guilt. From the lower parts of our body come the sexual stirrings and lusts that get us in so much trouble.

Paul is reminding us that our spiritual warfare is often a battle between emotions and truth. Abbie Hoffman coined the hippie credo that still drives our generation: "If it feels good do it." I read a bit of advice from a *Dear Abby* column the other day: "You have to trust the feelings of your heart." I thought of Jeremiah's words: "The heart is deceitful above all things..." We live in a world where the question is "How do you feel?" not "What do you think?" In an age of political correctness run amok, the highest good is not to hurt anyone's feelings. The truth is becoming increasingly inconvenient. To put on the "belt of truth" is to go counter-culture. It is to say, "I will never allow feelings, emotions, or desires to take precedence over God's revealed truth. Truth trumps everything, even pleasure and peace."

## **2) Use the Logos as a protection against error.**

When I was a high school guy with raging hormones, I used to take Kathy up to a secluded place "to look at the view." My intentions were less than honorable. But I couldn't get to first base with Kathy because she was a godly Christian girl. As soon as I parked the car, she would whip a little King James Version of the Bible out of her purse and say, "Before we look at the view, let's turn to Exodus 20 and look at the Ten Commandments." The Bible became a girdle for her chastity, and a sword of the spirit against my ungodly advances. When Satan rose up in me, the Truth rose up in her. She lived by the words of King David in Psalm 119:11: "I have hidden your Word in my heart that I might not sin against you." Yet almost every study shows that Christians today are functionally illiterate. Seventeen-year-old Kathy knew her Bible. But a recent study was conducted in which Evangelical teens were played ten little jingles from beer ads. The average church kid could name eight out of the ten beers. But when asked to name the Ten Commandments, they could only name four. God could be speaking of postmodern America when he predicts in Amos 8:11, "'Behold the days will come,' says the Lord God, 'that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.'" God himself cries out in Hosea 4:6, "For my people are destroyed for the lack of knowledge." More than ever, we need to learn God's Word. More than that, we need to memorize it. Even more, we need to live it out no matter what it costs. That's what it means to "...buckle on the belt of truth."

### 3) Make use of the *rhema* by praying for supernatural insights.

*Logos* is Greek for the *word*. It speaks Jesus who is the truth. It also refers to God's Word completed in our Holy Bible. The Scriptures are sure and certain, our final authority for all matters of faith and practice. Jude 3 calls it "the faith that was once and for all entrusted to the saints." But we also need to know another Greek word: *rhema*. It has to do with truth that speaks to our spirit apart from the Bible. It can never contradict the Bible, and must always be tested by the Bible. That's why the Apostle writes in 1 John 4:1, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." How do you test the spirits? You use the *certain* and *completed* Bible. But there are times when we need more than a Bible. I'm talking about discernment; to be able to know whether your children are telling a lie, to be able to sense whether it is the right time to make a move, to know whether that other person is the right one to marry, to be able to peek behind a person's mask—seeing beneath the surface with spiritual eyes.

In Matthew 16:13 Jesus asked his disciples to tell him who he was. They all knew their Bibles, but every one of them came up with a wrong answer. Yet Peter got a *rhema* truth at that moment. He said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Listen to Jesus' response in Matthew 16:17: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by your Father in heaven." The Holy Spirit brought an immediate revelation of truth to Peter. Peter had the same experience a couple of years later in Acts Five. Ananias, and his wife Sapphira, lied about an offering they had brought to the church. You could have memorized your Bible and not known that they were lying. But the Holy Spirit knew and revealed that truth to Peter. Every morning, as I put on my belt of truth, I pray that the Holy Spirit will reveal truth like that to me. As a pastor, husband, father, friend, counselor, and leader, I am called to protect and nurture others. In uncertain times, we are desperate for the *Logos* of written truth and the *rhema* of discerning truth.

When I think of Benedict Arnold, I remember that couplet written by Sir Walter Scott: "Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive." Our culture and church is tangled in webs of deceit. More than ever, we need the truth to cut through the tangle of deception, first in our own heart, then in our relationships, and finally in the way we live. All heaven stands on tiptoe, waiting for you to commit your life to the truth so that Christ may be pre-eminent and victorious in all things.