

Getting Ready for Battle

It is easy to think that the real battles of life come from flesh and blood, involving what we can see with our eyes. Who has not been so frustrated that smacking someone hasn't become a real temptation? And, if serious conflict is allowed to grow unabated, even killing someone, lusting for immediate resolution to a cauldron of confusing emotions within us becomes an option.

\But, the Bible teaches us something entirely different. The Scriptures remind us that the real battles in life are not of this world; they do not emanate from what we can feel, touch, smell, or see. Listen to the words of the Apostle Paul when he wrote the people of Ephesus, "...Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:10b-12)



**Artistic depiction of
the armor of God**

People who fight their own battles, choosing not to involve God or walk in his strength or love, are left entirely to their own devices when facing adversity. Life can quickly become scary for those relying solely on his or her own cunning, intelligence, or brawn, when facing daily challenges. Such an approach often leaves people scrambling to amass as large a circle of defense as possible, including personal alliances, money and earthly power. Yet, it does not have to be that way. If what the Apostle Paul said to the Ephesians and to us is true, we should do the opposite; drop to our knees in humility, put down our sword of defensiveness, confess our sins, and ask God how we might be used by him in his battle against the evil rulers of this world. After all, there is no greater refuge or place of peace than in the will and loving arms of God.

Last spring, my family and I took a car trip down the Mississippi River, visiting cities we had never seen before, in order to better appreciate the wonderful southern culture of our country. One of our favorite stops was Memphis. We immensely enjoyed visiting the Civil Rights Museum in the heart of the city. As we turned the corner towards the museum, I could not believe my eyes. There at the entrance to the museum was the actual balcony where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot. An entire section of the hotel has now become a part of the museum as a way of remembering that tragic day in 1968. As we got out of the car, and inched closer to this unusual monument, we encountered a plaque in front of the balcony, which contained a quote from Dr. King. My family and I stood in silence, reading the words Dr. King had preached at a local church in Memphis the night before he was

killed. He said to the crowd that evening: "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the Promised Land. And I'm happy, tonight. I am not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

Few people who have lived in recent years have better understood the teachings of Jesus in regard to spiritual battles than Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He was entirely dedicated to the highest of all Christian principles, the command to love our enemies. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. waged a war in the power of Christ against the rulers and principalities of the unseen world, which surrounds us; a world we cannot see with our eyes, yet we are capable of knowing in our hearts. Dr. King's greatest weapon was love. His disciplines were prayer, faith, and courage. He created a movement, which so swept the minds and hearts of America that the segregationists were eventually defeated and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was carried forward. His ministry demonstrated how real change in this world takes place.



**Dr. Martin Luther
King Jr.**

God has a heavenly army that is constantly battling Satan and his army. God wants us to turn to him in trust with our deepest frustrations and fears. He will fight the battles of injustice for us if we let him. God rights whatever is wrong - if only we will exercise faith and allow him to do so. It tears my heart apart whenever I read in the morning newspaper about a distraught individual settling a dispute or argument with another person or group of people, using a gun, knife, or bomb. It seems constant that there is a story about someone who has shot people he or she dislikes, then later takes their own life. There is clearly and alarmingly a disease of violence growing in our country and world involving people unable to settle disputes with words of reason. Satan is having a field day right now throughout our world, luring an increasing number of people into dark and violent temptations. It is crucial now for people who love God to speak up, teach and demonstrate a completely different way of life where battles of justice and righteousness are won through humility, courage, faith and prayer, not violence or rage.

As many of you know, I spend a good deal of my workweek corresponding with Christian colleagues in the Middle East and Arab world. This summer, I was in contact with Christian leaders in Egypt and Syria. Churches in Egypt were burned when President Morsi was removed from power; but Christian leaders in Egypt urged their followers not to strike back in order to arrest the cycle of violence that could have easily ensued with the Brotherhood of Islam. As a result, Egypt is moving forward, inch by inch, towards greater personal freedoms and a more stable government. And, what is happening in Syria is equally remarkable. On Sept. 8,

right before I was to preach in a church outside of Cleveland, someone told me that Pope Francis was calling for a worldwide day of prayer and fasting - in response to all the tension resulting from President Assad's use of chemical weapons in Syria.

I can't remember a time when a worldwide day of prayer and fasting was called. Nor, can I remember a time when Protestants were more eager to join Catholics in such a call to action by a Pope. Many Christians in Syria and the Arab world were asking me to pray and convince my fellow Americans not be drawn militarily into the Syrian conflict. They consider the current American-Russian accord to rid Syria of chemical weapons through a more peaceful negotiation to be a miracle; that prayers were answered in the heavenly realm, the place where real, lasting battles of justice and righteousness are fought and won.



Egyptian boys pray
in burned church

When you find yourself being drawn into earthly battles, which certainly take place most every day, make sure you turn to God in prayer before you begin a potential campaign of anger, retaliation or retribution. God is eager and wanting to do battle for us. He promises that all wrongs will eventually be exposed, evil intents will be opposed, and justice will arrive for those waiting patiently on his grace. Listen to the Apostle Paul who advised followers of Jesus in Rome when they were facing their own battles of persecution in the First Century, "Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, 'I will take revenge; I will pay them back, says the Lord.' Instead, 'If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals of shame on their heads.' Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good." (Romans 12:19-21)