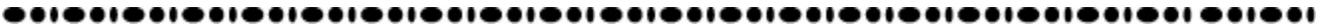


Week Three
Reading

THE BATTLE



THE BATTLE

There's a battle going on.

A battle?

Yes, a battle. Consider two scenes:

Scene #1: The sky is blue. The sun is shining. A child is heard laughing in the park. A dog barks. A couple strolls hand in hand down the street. An older man leafs through the newspaper. A young girl rides her bike. The little league team takes the field.

Scene #2: The sky is dark. The sun is hidden. A child is heard crying in the park. A dog snarls. A couple walks coldly and silently side by side. An older man reads of tragedies in the newspaper. A young girl rides her bike dangerously close to a busy street. The little league team is filled with jealousy and selfish pride.

No doubt we recognize the battles of the second scene. We know dark days. We know struggle. We know of snarling dogs and relationships on ice. We've flipped through newspapers and have been appalled by the tragedies. We know of hardship for both young and old. We know this. We live this.

But there's more to it than that.

What about the blue-sky battles? What about the battles when the sun is shining, children are laughing, and the day seems so tremendously bright? Is there a battle then or has the battle ceased? What's really going on? What do we experience? What do we feel? What do we deal with? What about life on *good* and *normal* days?

Let's consider a day in the life.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Start with the thoughts that greet us in the morning. What's the typical disposition at the beginning of a day? Do we wake with encouraging thoughts, thoughts that strengthen us, thoughts that inspire us? Not typically. Are we alive and inspired, feeling good about ourselves, good about the day before us, and good about our God? Not exactly. Morning challenges are not reserved for those lacking morning passion. Even early risers are greeted by varying degrees of funk: the quiet thought that belittles us, the mild fear of the afternoon meeting, the unaddressed but ever-present wound that looms over our lives. It can be extreme; it can be mild. Either way, the battle greets us in the morning.

Fast-forward to the middle of the day. What's been the experience so far? Did the conversations, information, and circumstances naturally inspire us to love God, to live courageously, to be kind to

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those around us? Did the voice mail and e-mail bring internal peace? Did the external chaos from work, family, or friends usher in healthy thoughts toward the people that surround us? What message did we internalize? What do we carry with us? What rolled off? What stuck with us? Was it major? Was it minor? Either way, the battle continues throughout the day.

Now it's evening. We lie in bed and reflect on our day: the conversation with the friend; the phone call (or lack of phone call) from a family member; the meeting with the co-worker, the boss, the principal, the client; the book we read; the show we watched. It all weighs in. Then there are the whispers, those quiet whispers now increasing in volume as we attempt to drift off to sleep. *Why did I do that? Why did I say that? What was I thinking? If I could only have that day back, that season back, that year back. The money is going to run out. She thinks I'm a fool. I am a fool.*

And that's just a day, maybe even a blue-sky day, which is the critical insight from the two scenes above. There's a battle going on. It's not a physical battle or a political battle. It's a spiritual battle, and it's raging. This spiritual battle presents itself in many ways. Without a doubt, though, this spiritual battle is primarily a battle of deception, which makes those blue-sky days terribly confusing. Circumstantially, life may be going well, but this does not mean the battle is being won. A very thin veil covers reality.

If we are to be transformed and if we are to rise up, we must gain insight, deep insight, into this raging battle. To gain this insight, we must go back to Christ.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

We noted previously Christ's two observations in his conversation with Nicodemus:

Christ did not ask Nicodemus to make changes to his existing person. Christ insisted he become a new person (the new birth).

Christ did not ask Nicodemus to make changes to his existing reality. Christ referenced a new reality (the kingdom of God).

We addressed the new birth. Let's address the kingdom of God.

We don't use "kingdom" language much in our day. We speak of countries or governments. Kingdom language is a bit of a throwback, but careful thought gives enough clarity for discussion. A kingdom is simply the area over which a king reigns. One could argue that God's kingdom is everything. God made it all and is sovereign over all of it. That's true; but when speaking of the kingdom of God, Scripture seems to speak not so much of his universal reign of all things, but the area over which God's reign is celebrated. Which leads to an important distinction from worldly kingdoms.

In the physical world, a kingdom is defined by geographical borders, but even in these physical kingdoms, there can be people within the borders disloyal to the king. Their bodies are inside the kingdom, but their hearts, it could be said, are outside the kingdom. History shows this holds potential for tremendous strife. Christ's plan is profound. His early emphasis on the heart is the beginning of a kingdom. This kingdom will not be just physically loyal. Christ's kingdom starts from the inside and works itself to the outside. He came to bring a kingdom where external conformity without internal loyalty simply will not happen. His kingdom starts with the heart and grows to full presence in eternity. Which is why it's not hard to understand that God's kingdom is happening both today and will happen more completely in eternity. It's happening today in a manner that does not have geographical borders but through the hearts of those who love the King.

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So what are the implications? Consider a scenario:

The phone rings. It's a government official. You're asked to take part in a covert operation. You will be taken to a foreign country. The country lives by a different, and even hostile, value system. You will quietly live in this country. Your mission is to live in this land, not by their values, but by the values of your home country. These values will not always be received well. There will be times you will appear out of step, odd, or even be in danger, but you will not be alone. Satellites will monitor your every move. You will have a phone with immediate access to authorities in your home country. Military intervention will always be available just over the horizon. They will guard you carefully and give you regular provision to meet your needs. All they ask is that you live by the values of your home country, no matter the perceived cost.

So Christ's statement to Nicodemus is both bold and profound. Not only must he become a new person, he must live with an entirely new perspective—the perspective of Christ's kingdom. This new perspective is not based upon what he naturally sees around him. Rather, he must have vision for what he does not see but knows to be true. We, too, must gain this vision, the perspective of Christ's kingdom while living in the midst of the kingdoms of this world. To gain this vision, we must gaze through the window offered by Scripture. We don't see all. We don't know all. We know, by experience and by Scripture, that our current experience is one in which we “*know in part*” and “*see but a poor reflection as in a mirror*” (1 Corinthians 13:9, 12). But with that said, Scripture offers glimpses, windows into a spiritual world, and these glimpses offer a new perspective, a new vision, and strength for living lives that are at times out of step with the world around us. These insights are essential for transformational living. One day we will “*see face to face*” and “*know fully*,” but that day is not today (1 Corinthians 13:12). Today, we gaze through Scripture's windows.

One such window is Scripture's final entry, the book of Revelation.

CAST DOWN

Consider a bold statement:

And there was a war in heaven (Revelation 12:7).

This statement is followed by a brief description of a battle in the spiritual realm. The battle raged between God's angels and “*that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him*” (Revelation 12:9). So the enemy was not able to stand but was hurled out of God's presence.

Listen closely to the victory declaration following the battle...

Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down (Revelation 12:10).

The accuser, described as the one who now leads the whole world astray, was cast from God's presence. That's fascinating. Before the time of this battle, the accuser was permitted to go before God and accuse God's people. It is said that these accusations would be heard “*day and night*.” What's most fascinating, though, is that the accusations were tolerated, and then they were not. Why were they once tolerated? Why were they then stopped?

Yes, for a time, God let the accusations stand. The accuser relentlessly belittled God's people. One can only imagine the kind of accusations leveled:

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Did you see what he did? He said he was your follower, and then he did that. Did you hear what she said? She claimed you as her God, and then she said that. And what about that one over there? What a fraud! Wonderful people you have following you. You must be so proud.

And then it stopped. It was tolerated no longer. The accusations went silent, and the enemy was hurled from God's presence. Why? Was God simply tired of the barrage? Was it just, "enough is enough!" Or did something qualitatively change? Had a new day dawned? Was there something that happened that rendered the accusations useless? One would certainly not fault God for getting fed up with the accusations, but consider Scripture's description of the change:

Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ (Revelation 12:10).

Yes, something changed. Christ came.

Why might God have tolerated the accusations? Because, for a time, the accusations were legitimate. There was no grounded response. The enemy could point to the numerous failings and legitimately state: "See! They're failing! You lose! This grand endeavor to establish a faithful following is a failure! They're all failures!" Such accusations would stand. There was no solid response. The people would, in fact, fail their God.

But then something changed. Christ came, and the accusations were powerless. What was the statement we read previously about our standing before God? Because of Christ's death, we read that we will one day stand before God, "free from accusation" (Colossians 1:22). The accusations were leveled and the accusations were tolerated, but now they are not because now Christ's work is known. In another place, in regards to the enemy, Scripture states, "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, God made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Colossians 2:15). The enemy is disarmed and hurled from God's presence. The accusations must stop.

Unless, of course, the accusations are believed to be true, even when they are not. Consider again what we view in the unseen world when we gaze through Scripture's window: "For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down" (Revelation 12:10). So now, the accuser who was once before God cannot legitimately make an accusation before God. The accuser knows this, and has now "been hurled down." What might the accuser do now? Does he sheepishly slink off into the corner waiting for time to come to a close? Not according to Scripture. In this very passage we read, "But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short" (Revelation 12:12).

The accuser, who once leveled accusations before God, now levels accusations toward God's people. God does not tolerate the accusations. The accusations that once held legitimacy are now debunked because of Christ's great work on the cross. The only tactic left is to continue the accusations with those who will listen, those who will entertain them as possibly true, even if they are not. The accusations are based on deception, and the response is abundantly clear. This very passage, this very same window into the unseen world, lets us know how those in the seen world overcome the accuser:

They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death (Revelation 12:11).

Yes, there is a battle going on, and this battle rages. But to overcome this battle is to live faithfully by what has already happened in Christ, no matter the apparent cost.

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THE SECOND IMPERATIVE

As mentioned, seven imperatives for transformation will come through this module. Previously, we discovered the first:

I must recognize the real me.

Our second imperative builds upon this by digging more deeply into a statement addressed in the first module and more rigorously applied here. Simply put, it's this:

I must fight for my life.

Scripture states that the devil “prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). How might he bring destruction? Over and over, again and again, we hear of the enemy’s weapon of choice. This accuser has no legitimate accusations. Rather, “he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). In other places, we read:

He deceived the inhabitants of the earth (Revelation 13:14).

All the nations were led astray (Revelation 18:23).

Satan...will go out to deceive the nations (Revelation 20:7-8).

And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur (Revelation 20:10).

We must not and cannot wade through life with our guards down. The enemy is far too determined and far too crafty. He is a liar and the father of lies. He will lie to us about God. He will lie to us about ourselves. He will lie to us about true life, true living. If we are to not just survive life but thrive in life, we must be a people who fight for our lives.

If we take a passive approach, if we sit back and let life happen to us, we quickly discover that being passive does not inspire us to live well and to love God. The enemy will take full advantage of passive living. Lives will be lulled to sleep with the remote control drooping from the tired hand. Fear will rule. Anxiety will dictate. Escape becomes the solution.

How?

So how does this work? How do we truly fight for our lives? What must we do? How do we engage? This imperative could be easily misapplied. As always, we look to Scripture for clarification.

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

What do we do when one of the enemy’s favored tactics is that of deception? We demolish enemy strongholds. We “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” Yes, there’s more to it than just this. We’ll dig even deeper in subsequent weeks, but for now, let’s zero in on this one essential idea. We must be a people who identify strongholds of deception and bring these pockets of resistance into truth-filled obedience to Christ.

STRONGHOLDS

So what do we mean by a stronghold? Let’s consider a few examples:

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He's thirty-three and genuine in his desire for Christ. One might not know it, though, by the weekend he just lived. He had no intention of stumbling like that. He was alone, tired, and simply wanted rest. But sleep evaded him, and in a matter of hours he found himself, once again, clicking through a website inconsistent with his convictions. With every click he traveled further from the man he wanted to be. Why was he there? What was he doing? He knew he didn't really want this, but he did it anyway, just as he'd done the week before. The week before that was a good week, which seemed irrelevant now. He knew he'd regret this. He knew he'd wake up feeling compromised and frustrated, but *I've already crossed the line*, he thought, *might as well keep going*.

She's twenty-nine and single and a regular volunteer for the church's middle school ministry. She genuinely loves God, and she loves to laugh with those young girls. *If they could see me now*, she thinks, *What would those girls say if they knew this side of me?* She hovered over the toilet and pushed her finger to the back of her throat. The evening's binge erupted from her stomach and splashed before her. She cringed. She'd done it once again. She told herself she wouldn't, but she did it anyway. Why? What was really going on? She had confided in a few people. She'd read websites and even a book on the topic. Yet here she was again. She knew she didn't want to be this way, but night after night, week after week, month after month, it controlled her.

He's forty-four, married, has three kids, is active in his church, and has little to complain about. His career had been stratospheric. For nine years he'd been at the top of his game. Few had scored the deals he'd scored, and many envied his success. An e-mail dinged his inbox. He clicked to find a prospective new client expressing continued interest in his services. Once again, he was on the brink of major dollars. The last paragraph presented the one potential inhibitor. It was the question they always ask, the very question his company had yet to adequately answer. The honest answer would jeopardize the deal. He'd been here before. He'd developed a canned response that, at best, diverted their attention. In truth, though, it was a lie, a bold-faced lie to get the deal. It troubled him every time—sometimes more than others. He had his justifications, but the genuine justification was that he wanted the deal; and, yes, it was the money, but it was more than that. He wanted the little “w” by his name declaring him the winner. He wanted to set the records. He wanted to stand out amongst his peers. *One more time*, he thinks. Click.

Strongholds come in various shapes and sizes, but we get the idea. These are pockets of resistance strengthened by a bundling of deceptions. What are the lies that lead to pornography, eating disorders, or dishonesty in our work? Or, in a more subtle way, what are the lies that generate anxiety, fear, and restlessness? What keeps us from pausing? What lies generate sleepless nights? Why would we compromise our integrity, purity, or commitments? Why do we overwork and overeat? Are these decisions as simple as the actions, or do we believe things that are simply not true? If it is as simple as the external actions, surely we could change these actions with a couple of New Year's resolutions. But it doesn't seem to work that way. New Year's resolutions consistently sound like last year's resolutions. Strongholds have a tendency to show up again and again.

But what if we got after the lies? What if we unpacked what was really going on and held these deceptions up to the light of Scripture? Consider the lies that fuel sexual deviation. Surely physical impulses play a significant role, but there's more to it than that. There's the lie that says we're missing out. There's the lie that says unbridled sexual expression generates a more satisfying life. Or how about the lie that screams from the lives of those we *think* are living the good life by the way they play their weekend nights. And one more: There's the lie that says, *“If I don't do this, I'll lose this person, and this person is good for me.”* Deception after deception, brick upon brick, the stronghold is fortified.

How about eating disorders? What bundle of deceptions cement these strongholds? Is it just about the food? Or is something deeper going on? Is that food being used for food's sake? Or is that food being used to anesthetize the pain of some form of insecurity? The food tickles the pain, but is only followed

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by fear of fat grams and calories, which only strengthens the original insecurity. Relief from the vicious cycle is sought through purging the food, but this, too, strengthens the original insecurity and brings it right back to where it all started. Here, as well, deception builds upon deception, brick is laid upon brick, and the stronghold is fortified for yet another day.

And what about dishonesty, lies, and deception? Is it just about providing for one's self or one's family? Or, as with other categories, is something deeper going on? How much are our decisions influenced by the way we define our worthiness? Is worth defined by always winning, always beating the competition, or always getting the deal? Does losing the deal bring normal degrees of disappointment or is this self-defining? How much influence does Dad's definition of worth and value still hold sway over our lives? Dad may or may not even be living, but what did he celebrate? Did Dad celebrate honesty at all cost, or did Dad celebrate victory at all cost? Is this just about the deal, or is this about pleasing an unpleasable parent? Or maybe it's not Dad. Maybe it's the voice that says, "*She won't love me for my looks, but she'll love me for my success.*" Getting the deal will gain us something, but what do we lose in the process? As with other categories, brick is laid upon brick and a stronghold is fortified through the complexity of multiple deceptions.

BREAKING OUT

How do we break out? How do we live from our new hearts, our new selves? How do we get to the place where this week is better than last week and next week looks better still? Much can and will be said about this, but without question, we can and must be a people who fight for our lives by swinging the sword of truth. In doing so we "*demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ*" (2 Corinthians 10:5).

So, back to that blue-sky day. How might it be different? How might we engage the day actively rather than waiting for the day to engage us? What if we entered the day entrusted to God and with sword and shield in hand? Attacks will come, as they always do, but what if we're ready? A co-worker or friend leaves us feeling belittled. The belittlement could send us spiraling toward escapist behavior, or we could fight for our lives and swing the sword of truth: "*I am fearfully and wonderfully made*" (Psalm 139:14). Moving past that we encounter an opportunity, a great opportunity, one we want to take but is daunting and leaves us feeling small. We could cower in fear, or we could raise the shield of faith and swing the sword of truth: "*So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand*" (Isaiah 41:10). Maybe we're then beckoned by a temptation. It's the all-too-familiar magnetic draw to a quick fix and a feel-good moment. We crave that buzz to at least momentarily escape the challenges of life. The pull is strong and is accompanied with the lie of hopelessness. Caving feels inevitable. What must we do? We must stand firm with the belt of truth buckled round our waist, "*God is faithful; he will not let me be tempted beyond what I can bear*" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

NEXT STEPS

Our first two imperatives are simple to understand but easily set aside.

Recognize the real me? Sounds wise, we think.

Then we turn the page and move on with our lives.

"Fight for my life? Yes, I can see that."

And we put down the notebook and turn on the TV.

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The experience that follows leads to genuine implementation in our daily lives. We will consider the strongholds, we will bring these before God, and we will affirm what we know to be true by God's grace. If we are to live out of our new hearts, we must not approach life naively. We must engage the battle. We must fight for our lives.

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