

The Battle
Quest Spring 2023
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His name was Rafael, but we called him Champ. Rafael was his father, who played for the Los Angeles Angels in the late 80s after emigrating from the Dominican Republic. As the saying goes, the apple didn't fall far from the tree. From the time we were just boys playing Little League, Champ was a men among boys. He could hit harder and throw faster than any of us, and in our team pictures, he towered above his teammates, and we looked and felt like mere mortals.

Champ and I were never close friends, but we played on the same teams here and there. He was a year older than me, so the age cutoff determined whether we were teammates or not. In high school, not surprisingly, Champ was a quick pick for varsity, even as a sophomore. He had a decent season, and started his junior year strong. College and pro scouts lined the stands, clocking his fastball at 90-92 miles an hour. Then, while trying to slide to second base, he badly injured his knee, ending his junior year.

We were getting ready for varsity tryouts the next season—I knew my chances at making the varsity squad were pretty slim, and had reserved myself to being the ace pitcher on JV. We were warming up one cold afternoon in January, and Champ made a related observation in my direction. Something about wishing me luck on playing JV ball while he enjoyed being scouted at the varsity level. It wasn't the nicest compliment in the world, very much backhanded, and so, as I often do, I let my mouth get me in trouble. I don't remember my exact words, but I said something to the effect of, "Well, at least I'll get to play instead of spending the whole year in a cast." Champ, whose dreams of playing professional ball were nearly dashed the year before, did not take too kindly to my retort. That, or he couldn't hear me.

Because, rather suddenly, he brought his 6'6" Dominican frame into my personal bubble and asked me to repeat it. "What did you say?" I looked down and saw his fists clenched and began to weigh my options. Here I am, 5'8, a buck 50 soaking wet, peering up at the young man who had always towered above me. I could feel his blood boiling, and I could sense the crowd of teammates forming a circle around us. "What did you say?" he asked again.

And I said, "Sorry." I wished him luck on the season ahead, said I would be cheering him on from the Junior Varsity ranks, and quickly found a restroom where I could change my pants.

That was the closest I ever got to a real live fist fight. And to be honest, although that moment happened about 15 years ago, it still haunts me to this day. I replay it in my mind, wondering whether I should have kept my mouth shut to begin with, or wondering whether I should have stood strong, thrown a punch, and then in all likelihood, took a beating.

But I do remember that in that moment, all kinds of calculations began running through my mind. I thought about the sheer size difference, his longer reach, his more athletic build, and

then I thought about my girlfriend at the time and wondered if she would still love me if my face was rearranged. But more than those calculations, I thought about what it would mean to be in a fight. I'm not a big fan of conflict, and I never have been. But there was a larger force within me saying, "Fighting is wrong. Your parents will be disappointed in you. Your coach will be mad. Your youth pastor will be ashamed. It's not worth it. Just back down and be the good little boy you're supposed to be."

Sometimes that voice still kicks in. I can't say I've gotten close to a physical altercation in my adult years, but deep down I still avoid battles I should be fighting, because there's something about a fight that just seems wrong.

What I want to argue today is that as a man, and as a warrior, there are battles that you should be fighting. There are battles that you were created to fight. Deep down, you know this. If you remember back to Week 1, Pierce asked us about our favorite movies and our favorite games to play as a boy. And what we saw in virtually all of those answers is that as young men, we craved the battle. We love the war movies, the superhero films, the games that involved action, conflict, and victory. God has blessed my wife and I with three girls, but when I witness my friends' sons, I remember what it was like to be a little boy. Everything is a weapon. A stick is a sword or a gun. A pillow is a battering ram or shield. Every couch is our trusty steed, every floor is made of lava.

We may have grown up that way, but as soon as we leave the comfort of our homes, the warrior within the boy is told to settle down. Temper your temper. Fit in, play nice, and be a good little boy. Even now, boys are 3-4x more likely to be diagnosed with ADD than little girls. The unspoken, and sometimes spoken, idea in our culture is that the masculine heart is bad, our essence is evil, so we need to cut it out and fall in line. But as men, we were made for a battle. We were designed with the heart of a warrior.

Question Set 1: Have you ever been in a fight?

Now, today's lecture is about fighting battles, about conquering enemies, and about not backing down from the warfare that is all around us. That being said, let's talk a little bit about what our faith has to say about these things.

I went to a seminary that was very pacifist. The leading scholar, who really put Duke Divinity School on the map, was vehemently anti-military, anti-war, anti-just about anything that could be seen as conflict. He argued that our faith is a faith of peace, and the call of the Christian is to always avoid war and conflict.

Now, there is certainly some truth in these claims. Jesus said in John 14:27: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." He says in Matthew 5:9: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." 1 Peter 3:11 encourages us to "seek peace and pursue it." Philippians 4:7 promises the Christian the "peace of God, which transcends all understanding."

Paul encourages the church in Colossians 3:15: “Let the peace of God rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.”

And perhaps the most essential teaching of Jesus when it comes to a fight comes from Matthew 5:38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ 39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. 40 And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. 41 If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.

If we take these passages, from the infallible Word of God to heart, you may have the mental image that I have often had of Jesus. Soft hair flowing in the wind, petting a little sheep in one hand with a small baby in the other. Kind eyes, a gentle spirit, the epitome of peace. And that is a fine picture of Jesus. But at the same time, we have to remember that this Jesus who taught peace was the same Jesus who said this in Matthew 10: “Do not supposed that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—36 a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.”

This Jesus, who we rightly call the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, and the Prince of Peace, was the same Jesus who got downright angry. Matthew 21: 12 Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. 13 “It is written,” he said to them, “‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’”

So which is it? The Jesus who says to not repay evil for evil, or the Jesus who promised to bring a sword? I love this idea from **Craig Groeschel: “Sometimes you need to turn a cheek, and sometimes you need to turn a table.”**

In other words, there are some battles that are worth fighting. All throughout the Bible, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, we see language of war. Sometimes against physical, flesh and blood enemies of God, but more often, especially in the New Testament, against a common enemy that cannot be seen. Look how Paul frames our battle in Ephesians:

Ephesians 6: 10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. 11 Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Our struggle, our battle, is not primarily against flesh and blood. It’s against the enemy. And those battles are worth fighting. So please hear me, this lecture is not intended to rile you up so you go out and deck the next guy who gives you a weird look or bow up to that punk in the office who turned you in to HR. You are not a hammer looking for a nail. Physical violence is very, very, very rarely the answer. We are called to fight battles, but we are called, like my mom always told me, to pick our battles. Here’s how the author of Ecclesiastes put it:

Ecclesiastes 3: 1 For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
2 a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
3 a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
...7 a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
8 a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

There is a time to fight, and there is a time for peace. That seems to sum up the teachings of Jesus well. But the main battle we're talking about today is the battle for your heart. Because, realize it or not, you have an enemy. I have an enemy. We can call him Satan, the devil, the adversary, the evil one—whatever you want to call him, he is real. And he's after your heart. The devil wants to tame you, to beat you down, to tell you that you are too weak, too dumb, too pathetic to ever fight a battle worth fighting. This fight is real, and we have a real enemy.

The 19th century French poet **Charles Baudelaire once said this, "The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist."**

But we know that he exists. Scripture is full of references to his existence. His pride caused him to fall from heaven. He wagered with God over Job. He tempted Jesus in the wilderness. He is still alive and active, waging war for your heart and soul. And not only do we know he is real, but we know his tactics. Jesus outlines them for us in John 10:10: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy." This is his battle plan, his strategy, his blueprint for victory. What does he come to steal, kill, and destroy?

First, the enemy comes to steal your focus. He wants you to take your eyes off the prize, what really matters in life. Our adversary knows that a divided mind is an easy mind to conquer. So, he fills our schedules with busy-ness, our homes with strife, and our minds with a thousand other things to think about. I ran across this quote the other day and it's really stuck with me: **John Mark Comer, an author and pastor, said, "Often your strongest desires are not your deepest desires."** The enemy knows that, so he'll distract you, take away your focus from your deepest desires so that you only focus on what feels like it matters now.

As a result, all of our pent-up aggression, the potential energy of the warrior's heart, gets redirected towards other battles. Maybe it's money. We think that the enemy is poverty or not having a big enough house or not having the resources for our children to be in every extracurricular activity. So we fight for the raise, fight for the 401k, fight for more. Or maybe our battle becomes about toys. We see our lives as a competition between ourselves and our neighbors, and the one with the most toys in the ends wins. So we buy the new sports car, the new boat, the RV, the lake house, all to feel like we're worthy and we won a battle. I could go

on—maybe it’s a battle to lower your golf score, to shave a few minutes off your Ironman time, to craft something beautiful with your hands.

Or, we get obsessed with the outrage fed to us by the news media. Their goal is to get us addicted so that we keep tuning in and they keep getting ad revenue. So, they create an enemy in our minds—the far right, the far left, the Proud Boys or Antifa, Joe Biden or Donald Trump, and in our minds, we fight battles against them. Maybe it’s just me, but I’ve fought some really intense verbal battles in my head with an imaginary enemy from the other side of the political spectrum, and guess what? I always win.

Listen: These battles are not bad. Some of them are worth fighting. I’m not dogging on woodworking or having nice cars or lowering your golf score. But they are not ultimate. They are not what your warrior heart desires most. They are mere skirmishes or dust ups when compared to the war that is going on all around us. The enemy knows that, so he likes to keep us distracted.

Second, the enemy comes to kill your self-esteem. He wants to change your identity away from being a warrior, a fighter, a battle-tested son of God, into being weak, lazy, not good enough. If he can convince you that you’re not worthy of being in the fight, then he knows you will bow out.

I talk to so many young men who just feel defeated. Mark Swayze talked last week about the anxiety and depression epidemic going on with our middle and high school students. I’m scared for the havoc that it will wreak on future generations. And I believe that there are all sorts of causes behind the anxiety and depression—social media, increased pressure to perform, COVID lockdowns—but I can’t help but think it’s also because the enemy knows if he can confuse the identity and self esteem of a boy, that boy will grow up to be a weak man.

Our young men need to be told that they are warriors, but we do too. Not because of anything that we have done, but because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we share in His victory and it becomes our own. Our identity can and should be rooted in His victory, not in the lies the enemy tries to put in our minds.

Finally, the enemy comes to destroy your heart. This is ultimately what he is after. Once your heart has been lost, your body follows, your mind follows, and so does your family. If we feel defeated deep down, we will act defeated. This is the story of Job. Satan was convinced that if he could take everything away from him—his family, his herds, his health, and his wealth—then he would take his heart too. But Job, through all of life’s difficulties thrown at him by the enemy, did not give up his heart. And that’s the heart of a warrior.

I used this quote a few months ago at Loft, but it’s one of my favorites from John Maxwell. He explains the power of never losing heart: “Many of the Psalms were born in difficulty. Most of the Epistles were written in prisons. Most of the greatest thoughts of the greatest thinkers of all time had to pass through the fire. Bunyan wrote Pilgrim’s Progress from jail. Florence

Nightingale, too ill to move from her bed, reorganized the hospitals of England. Semiparalysed and under constant menace of apoplexy, Pasteur was tireless in his attack on disease. During the greater parts of his life. American historian Francis Parkman suffered so acutely that he could not work for more than five minutes at a time. His eyesight was so wretched that he could scrawl only a few gigantic words on a manuscript, but he contrived to write twenty magnificent volumes of history... Bury a person in the snows of Valley Forge, and you have a George Washington. Raise him in abject poverty, and you have an Abraham Lincoln. Strike him down with an infantile paralysis, and he becomes a Franklin D. Roosevelt. Burn him so severely that the doctors say he will never walk again, and you have a Glenn Cunningham, who set the world's one-mile record in 1934. Have him or her born black in a society filled with racial discrimination, and you have a Booker T. Washington, a Marian Anderson, a George Washington Carver, or a Martin Luther King jr. Call him a slow learner...—writing him off as uneducable—and you have an Albert Einstein. “

These are men and women who never lost heart. And that's why they could win the battle.

Question set 2: Where have you felt the enemy's tactics? Season of life when it happened? Do you think about the devil very often? Why or why not?

Ephesians 6: 13 Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. 14 Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, 15 and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. 16 In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

I love the way Paul contextualizes our battle. He uses real, literal warfare imagery and then connects them to our spiritual weapons. He clearly defines our mission in the world as winning a battle. Unfortunately, we have sentimentalized our mission in the world, made church touchy-feely, and can sometimes make faith seem soft. But we are at war. We've defined the enemy's strategies for winning, now let's define our fight.

First, we have someone to protect.

Nehemiah 4:14: “Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.”

As men, our responsibility, our battle, is to protect the people that we love. We're called to protect them physically, but emotionally as well. That includes your wife, your children, your grandchildren, and as they age, your parents. There should never be a time that your family does not feel both physically and emotionally safe around you.

I mentioned early that I don't love conflict, and I don't, but I remember the first time I saw a little boy hit my little girl. It was at a Chick-fil-A playground of all places, which should be the second holiest place on the planet behind church, and as I ate my number one, I peered into the playground and saw a boy, about four years old, shove my 2 year old daughter. And the wrath of God sprung up inside me. Did I retaliate against the boy? Eh, I thought about it. But you better believe I went and stood up for my daughter.

As fathers, that part comes naturally to us. I remember the first time I went to my 6th grade girlfriend Lauren's house. That's right, 6th grade—I was an early bloomer. My mom drove me out to her house in the country, walked me to the door, met her parents, and I prepared for a romantic night of watching a PG-13 movie and maybe if I got lucky, holding her hand. I walked in and started to take a seat on the couch, and her father stopped me. Excitedly, he said he wanted to show me something. He walked me through the kitchen and into his converted garage that was his man cave. And when I say man cave, I meant it. Neon beer signs, big screen TV, but what really stood out was all the dead animals. White tail, ducks, dove, a bobcat or two, axis, audad, you name it, he had killed it. Then he took me around the corner to his gun safe. Still to this day I have not seen a collection like it. Every caliber, every size, and enough ammo to win a war against a small nation. He smiled from ear to ear, and said, "What do you think?"

Even as a 6th grader, I was intuitive enough to read between the lines of what he was saying—mess with my daughter, and I'll clear out a spot for you on this wall.

We're pretty good at the physical protection side, but what our families need as much, if not more, from us, is that they are emotionally safe with us. They need to feel that we will listen without judgment, offer advice without condemnation. That is a battle worth fighting, so that our sons and daughters don't have the same father wound that many of us grew up with. It's a way of pushing back the darkness, pushing back against the enemy's schemes to steal the hearts of our family.

Second, we have a kingdom to advance. And hear me clearly: It's not your kingdom. It's the Kingdom of God. Jesus taught us to pray for the kingdom in the Lord's Prayer. We say, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." It's a great prayer, but we have a role to play in building the kingdom.

Jesus sends his twelve apostles out in Luke 9 with instructions for battle: Luke 9:1-2: And he called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, 2 and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.

Jesus sent His disciples on a mission, out to a battle, and that mission and battle continues today. It's not passive—it requires men and women to set aside their own personal agendas and be sold out to the cause of building and advancing the kingdom.

Can you imagine what we could do for the Kingdom of God if we took up the pent up aggression that we have and channeled it for Kingdom work? Instead of taking it out on our

subordinates, a golf ball, by yelling at a screen or punching a bag, that we spent our energy and resources rescuing those enslaved in human trafficking? Or to feed those who are hungry? Or to help heal those who are dying of preventable illnesses? Or to build churches and homes for those who don't have it?

That's a war worth fighting, and its spoils last for all eternity.

Finally, we have a battle to win. Look what King David writes in Psalm 144:

Psalm 144:1-2: Blessed be the Lord, my rock,
 who trains my hands for war,
 and my fingers for battle;
2 he is my steadfast love and my fortress,
 my stronghold and my deliverer,
my shield and he in whom I take refuge,
 who subdues peoples under me.

The battles of this great war can take many forms. Maybe it's a habit that you need to break. Maybe it's a relationship that you need to mend. Maybe it's a debt that needs to be repaid. Maybe it's a temptation to conquer. Maybe it's pursuing your wife like you first did when you started dating. It's a battle worth fighting, and a war worth winning.

Because here's what we know about this cosmic battle of war and evil: God wins in the end. Every single time. I love re-reading scripture, and I try to read the Bible cover to cover every year. It seems like every time I read a passage, God is speaking something new to me, almost like the words and the stories have changed to speak to my heart. But you know what never changes? How the story ends. Revelation is always the same, and in the end, we know that God wins. Jesus conquers. The battle is over, and goodness and love have won. The Christian faith is not dualistic, it's not just a cosmic battle between good and evil; the end is already written.

So what does that mean for our battle, for our war? It means that we're on the winning side, no matter what. What matters, then, is whether we will suit up for battle, take up our swords, and join the winning team.

We'll close with this encouragement from Peter:

1 Peter 5:8-9: 8 Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. 9 Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.