The Battle for Your Soul (Eph. 6:12)

**Introduction:** How long has it been since you’ve been in a fight? I’m not talking about a fistfight or even one that was necessarily physical. The fight I speak of is a struggle between you and someone or something to gain an objective. Based on that definition, you’ve fought today, probably within the last hour.

During the night, you struggled to get some rest. You fought with the sheets to prevent them from coming off the bed, you fought with your pillow to get it just right under your head, and you fought with your wife, not because you were mad, but because she had all the covers. You fought to stay warm or to stay cool. You couldn’t decide which was right.

You fought with the alarm for a little more sleep. Based on the fact you are here, the clock obviously won. And once you surrendered to time, you fought with your body to get out of the bed. It looks like you’ve been struggling all night!

The struggle didn’t end once your feet entered your slippers. You would think a victory won over your flesh would give you some joy, anticipation, and confidence for the day. But you know the battles the next hours hold. The alarm clock is the least of your foes.

The due date for the project looms ever closer. Finding clothes you can still fasten is no easy task. No matter how much overtime you accumulate, your bills seem to get the upper hand every time. That’s part of the stress between you and your spouse. The quietness you share over coffee doesn’t mean last night’s battle is over; it just indicates you haven’t stopped licking your wounds.

This is not the life you wanted. You fight with your spouse, your kids, your boss, your keys, the remote, and your weight. Sometimes it feels like Darwin was right; only the strong will survive. You do some of the fighting in your head. You do most of it with your words. It seems like all you ever do is fight. It wearies you. No wonder you’re so tired, and no wonder you struggle to stay awake.

All of these battles you face are side effects, symptoms, evidence of another much larger battle with eternal consequences. I’m not sure what your reaction to an awareness of this battle will be. It might relieve you as you understand the source of your struggles. It might scare you to discover who’s fighting and what’s at stake. You might not even believe what I have to say. If you’ve never heard this subject before, accepting it will be a struggle. I don’t want to get you riled up unnecessarily, but the more you understand this battle and the better prepared you are, the more apparent your team choice will be.

The battle you face is spiritual. That doesn’t mean you’re fighting ghosts. It means your primary opponent is not someone you can see, and your most effective weapons are not physical. The Bible describes the battle this way:

*“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”* (Eph. 6:12)

I told you it could get scary and that some of you will have to do battle with your doubts. It’s hard enough to believe the reports of a war happening on a different continent. The depth of doubt escalates when we start talking about clashes in another dimension.

Death makes a war real. Though you may have never connected the dots, you see the casualties of this war every day. You won’t find them in the triage at your local hospital. You’ll find the wounded in lawyers’ offices, substance abuse rehab facilities, maximum security prisons, the backseats of cars driven by child welfare workers, and the dumpster behind abortion clinics. You won’t see their pictures on the news at six, but their pain is real nonetheless.

These players on the battlefield are not-so-innocent bystanders in a war raging between the two most powerful entities in the universe – God, and Satan, God’s creation. Soon after God created His messenger, Satan led a rebellion against God over that which is the foundation of every war. Control.

This war is millennia old. The two poorly matched combatants have met countless times with the same result each time. God wins. But because God endures losses in each encounter and because Satan in his insanity still believes he can prevail, Satan and his forces fight on.

Like any general, Satan rarely enters the fray. He chooses instead to send his minions, usually in the form of humans as secret agents, to accomplish his objectives. Hence we have the hiddenness of this war. But there were four times in human history where the stakes were so high that Satan dared not leave the outcome to an underling. On these battlefields, Satan took physical form, and the invisible war entered the dimension of sight.

1. **First Battlefield – *in the garden*** (Gen. 3:1-19)

The first visible battle occurred in an unlikely place under less than prime conditions for Satan. He achieved his most consequential victory anyway. Every subsequent battle came as a result of this one’s outcome. We have been dealing with its fallout ever since.

God created a luscious world and exquisite creatures to possess it. His highest artistic expression came in the form of two humans. God anticipated every need man might have and met it with overwhelming generosity. He gave Adam a fit companion without giving her a covering. To our first parents, God also presented a smorgasbord of delectable food. They had not just a garden but a planet to explore and fill. Both the man and his wife had a bountiful supply of beauty and sustenance.

Adam and Eve weren’t just occupants of the Garden; they were its architects. God excitedly waited to see what man would produce. He planted the raw resources and gave humans the authority and the intelligence for expressing their own ingenuity through the development of those resources. Humans had pleasure and purpose. They had it all.

Satan looked down at perfection, but he could not enjoy it. The other angels gazed transfixed with wonder and worship (Job 38:6-7). Satan eyed the beauty with envy. What God had refused Satan, He gave Adam. Control. Satan felt that no mere human had the right to possess what God had denied him.

So even with immeasurable odds against him, Satan attempted to corrupt God’s place, His people, and His plan. A frontal assault on God’s kingdom had not proved successful. But perhaps a more subtle approach would work. Trickery. Doubt. Deception (John 8:44). Temptation. These are Satan’s weapons, and even though Satan by that point had little practice using them, they were powerful enough to accomplish his goal.

Temptation comes in three flavors: the pleasures of the body, the eyes, and the soul (1 John 2:16). God had abundantly supplied Adam’s needs and desires in each of these categories. Satan faced a quandary. How do you tempt the person who has everything? Satan has never been one to back down from a challenge. He found a way. He would tempt Eve with the potential for more and Adam with the possibility of loss (Gen. 3:6).

So Satan entered the serpent, spoke through its voice, and hurt God through His children. Satan took advantage of the one potential problem in paradise. The control God had given was infinitesimally limited. He put a boundary around a single portion of His creation – the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (Gen. 2:16). The tree was beautiful, and so was the barrier (Gen. 1:31). But they became the conduit of ugliness and corruption. Sin now marred God’s work of art.

All Adam and Eve had to do in this battle was to hold their ground (Eph. 6:14). They didn’t need to advance. Satan had taken no territory of God’s for His humans to recover. Why didn’t they laugh in the serpent’s face? The couple in harmony should have answered his accusations of God’s stinginess with affirmations of God’s grace. What would have happened if just one of them had?

I don’t know the answer to a hypothetical possibility, but God tells us a sorrowful reality. Instead of laughing at him, all of God’s humans listened to Satan. And Satan has been laughing ever since. Rejection of his offer on that day would not have guaranteed our ancestors’ victory on another one. Satan is persistent (Luke 4:13). Gaining the victory over him requires constant vigilance (1 Peter 5:8-9).

A victory would have given cause for God’s pride though. His children would have proved they were like Him and that they listened to His instruction. What father wouldn’t be exuberant over that? Satan stole the opportunity for making God smile and gained the world God designed Adam to rule (Gen. 1:28; Eph. 2:2). Satan’s intense pleasure came from defrauding God and His children of theirs (John 10:10). He always offers what he is not able to give in hopes that we will release our grip on what God has provided.

A glad dog enjoyed the favor of his master in the form of the steak in his mouth. He chose not to eat the meat at the place of its offering but walked off with his trophy. His journey took him across a bridge that spanned still water.

When he paused for a moment to ponder the joy of his situation, he noticed reflected in the water a smaller dog with a larger steak. It only took a moment to decide what to do. He barked at the dog in the mirror and successfully caused him to drop the dinner in his mouth. He realized too late what he saw was not there, and what his master had given was gone. Adam knew the embarrassment and loss this dog felt.

Satan thought his cleverness and man’s gullibility had gained him the victory. He heard and believed God’s promise of death for His creation. Even though he tried to convince man that God was a liar, he knew God always did what He said. So imagine his disbelief when instead of taking man’s life as He promised, God spoke of humanity’s future (Gen. 3:16).

“You can’t change the rules of war God! You promised execution for your creation.” Not because of Satan’s cry for fair play, but because of God’s justice, death did come. Though Adam’s death would eventually follow, God’s mercy substituted the immediate death of an innocent animal in Adam’s place (Gen. 3:21).

Satan had succeeded in hurting God through His children. He would succeed yet again. But it was God who would deliver the final defeat (Gen. 3:15). Thankfully, the events of that day did not determine the victor. Though God’s children would yet lose countless encounters, the winner of this war would be determined not by points but by death.

“We’ll meet again,” Satan said as he slithered away. “Next time, we will fight on my turf. Be prepared for more pain God; it is Eve’s Seed that will pay.”

1. **Second Battlefield – *in the wilderness*** (Matt. 4:1-11)

Thousands of years passed between Satan’s first major battle over humanity and his second. Neither God nor Satan was silent during that time. They fought many skirmishes with the prize being man’s allegiance and the victor’s glory.

The momentum often shifted as God’s children responded well or badly to His direction. There were bright spots for God’s army – Ruth, Moses, Joshua, Hannah, and Daniel to name a few. But for anyone keeping score, God’s defeat seemed inevitable. God’s people kept forgetting whose side they were on. As he had done with Adam and Eve, Satan easily convinced humanity that God’s rules were unfair.

Into this desperate situation, the Father sent Jesus, His Champion (John 1:14). Jesus didn’t appear to be much of a threat when He lay in a cattle trough (Luke 2:16). Satan may have felt the same offense Goliath did when he saw young David, Jesus’ ancestor coming toward him (1 Sam. 17:41-44). Not much had changed about the threat level Jesus presented when thirty years later, Satan and God in human form faced each other on the battlefield.

*“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”* (Matt. 4:1)

The circumstances of this encounter were very different from the one in the Garden. Eden had been full of life and beauty; the wilderness was lonely and dry. Eve and Adam entered battle using the energy eating supplied. Jesus, having restrained Himself from food, found strength from a different source (Matt. 4:2; John 4:34). The first humans had each other for moral support. Jesus’ only company was wild animals (Mark 4:13). Eve had influenced Adam toward sin. Perhaps Satan hoped animals who functioned according to instinct would lead Jesus to do the same.

Based solely on the battle’s conditions, Satan’s chances of trouncing God’s Son seemed more secure than their first confrontation. Through varied victories when facing God’s strongest warriors, Satan had honed his skills of enticement and guile. He grew bold. He no longer saw the need to come through a reptile but came as the dragon he was.

The weapons both combatants in this struggle wielded were the same as in previous clashes. Satan’s first volley used the desires of the body: “Turn these stones into bread” (Matt. 4:3). It was a foolish attack.

The previous forty days had proved Jesus appetites did not rule Him. Still, an attack based on physical passion had worked with Jesus’ predecessor and many more people since. Satan almost always starts here. If he can get a foothold in the flesh, the soul will eventually follow.

This was the first of Satan’s three fiercest attacks. Each time, Jesus used truth to repel Satan’s reasoning. The truth He spoke was more than just words in His head. It was the way He viewed His world.

Though you can find the words Jesus said in the Bible, you could also find them *in Him*. The reason He could speak the truth and wield it so well was that He *lived* it (Psalm 1:2-3). He thought the truth rather than thinking *about* the truth. He *was* the Truth (John 14:6).

Because of Jesus’ familiarity with the truth, He knew when it was not being handled correctly (2 Tim. 2:15). Satan removed Jesus from the place of solitude in the wilderness and carried Him to where He could overlook a crowd at the temple (Matt. 4:5). The people there were looking for God and His Messiah. Satan challenged Jesus to prove He was both.

*“‘If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written, “He will command His angels concerning you”; and “On their hands they will bear You up, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”’”* (Matt. 4:6)

Satan spoke the truth. He had spoken true words to Eve too. Satan’s words here were direct quotes from the Bible (Psalm 91:11-12). Jesus accepted the truth of God’s words but not their application to this situation. Jesus knew that whenever Satan speaks accurately, he does so to deceive by perverting the facts. He wanted to manipulate Jesus into playing by his rules. Jesus won by not fighting. "I've got nothing to prove. I’ll not sink to your level.”

Shortly before this encounter, the Father declared His pride in His Son. Jesus, like Adam, had to choose whom He would trust. He knew the cross was coming. Satan’s third temptation showed Jesus a way out.

*“Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory; and he said to Him, ‘All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me.’”* (Matt. 4:8-9)

Satan pledged Jesus something no trainer would promise. Gain without pain. Though it looks ludicrous on its merits, this was Satan’s most passionate attack and his final negotiation for an end to hostilities. Territory for appreciation. People to worship Jesus if Jesus would worship Satan. “I’m willing to give up my domain if you will give me some of yours. Let’s compromise. Join me.”

We wonder what would have happened had God’s first two humans refused Satan’s lure. Of far greater consequence would have been Jesus’ acceptance of the terms of His surrender. Adam’s failure contaminated humanity; Jesus’ sin would have corrupted divinity and given Satan the ultimate victory. Even if this had not resulted in the annihilation of the universe, it would have ended all hope for a Savior.

Hallelujah! Jesus *never* submitted to Satan’s version of the truth, not in this battle or in any of the skirmishes that would follow (Luke 4:13; Heb. 4:15). Since Jesus defeated Satan in all of our failed arenas, He alone was qualified to fight death. He would face His greatest opponent in our place …and win an eternal victory.

1. **Third Battlefield – *at the cross*** (John 19:17-30)

Temptation never takes a vacation, and Satan never rests (Job 1:7). In Jesus’ weakest moment, He was still strong enough to vanquish Satan (Matt. 4:11). Satan and Jesus continued to scuffle throughout Jesus’ ministry. Piece by piece, Satan started to lose territory. Every time a demon-inhabited person tried to thwart Jesus’ mission or message, Jesus repossessed that soul for the Kingdom. Satan was not deterred or discouraged. He continued his onslaught on Jesus and His followers (Luke 22:31).

Some people aren’t strong enough to handle the tenacity of temptation (Judg. 16:16-17). Others turned the constant attack into endless triumph (Gen. 39:10). Jesus was in the second category. You now know the three recorded temptations Jesus faced. The Bible also says Satan tempted Jesus *throughout* His time in the wilderness (Mark 1:13) and that Satan continued his barrage against Jesus’ defenses later (Luke 4:13).

Jesus was always in Satan’s sights. Satan knew the pivotal point in the war was coming. The previous two battles had been defensive. God and His forces could put a check in the win column simply by holding their ground. Where Adam failed, Jesus succeeded.

The upcoming battle and its preliminaries were offensive. Jesus was intent on retaking the territory Satan had gained (Luke 19:10). He healed the sick, gave peace to the troubled, and raised the dead. Most important of all, He preached the good news that exposed Satan’s lies and released Satan’s grip on God’s children (Matt. 11:5). Jesus worked diligently to nurture the seeds before Satan could snatch them away (Mark 4:15).

Neither combatant focused his attack on the other directly. Jesus’ present goal was not Satan’s defeat but people’s release. To Jesus, the Good Shepherd, every person had value. They were His objective. Jesus worked to steal the heart of the people from their present master by loving them, teaching them, and meeting them where they were (2 Sam. 15:3-6).

No losses were acceptable to Him. Collateral damage was not an option either. If anyone must die to gain victory, Jesus volunteered to be the sacrificial Lamb. Jesus loved people (John 15:13). Satan viewed them only as a tool.

Satan had seen early success through guerilla tactics, so he went back to secretly using God’s creation against Him. His primary confederates were the religious leaders. The Pharisees thought the battle was between them and Jesus. They vehemently denied they were working for Satan, but their envy of Jesus made them willing participants in the evil one’s scheme (Matt. 27:18). To Satan, people are little-valued pawns on the chess board whose only purpose was to draw out the King.

Peter served as an unwitting accomplice in Satan’s attack. He thought he was doing right. He rebuked Jesus’ sacrificial plan and assaulted the guard who came to arrest His Lord (Matt. 16:23; Matt. 26:51-52). Jesus recognized the enemy’s thought patterns inside Peter and harshly scolded him for his actions. Peter’s confusion and humiliation made him easy prey for the enemy.

Satan and the Pharisees found an unlikely ally in Judas Iscariot. Judas had served food to 5000, heard Jesus’ voice calm the seas, seen Jesus raise the dead, and Judas had presumably cast out evil spirits (Luke 10:17). None of that was enough to rid his demon of greed. Satan is skilled at finding any crack in the veneer through which he can enter a life (John 13:27; Luke 22:3). This flaw presented an opening for the Pharisees and their master to finally crush Jesus (Matt. 26:14-16).

Judas left Jesus’ presence and faded into the darkness (John 13:30). He led the temple guard to another garden unaware that Jesus had already won. Jesus had faced His own battle – “not My will but Yours be done.” This battle, like many, was won not through aggression but through submission (Prov. 15:1).

Jesus was strong enough to hold His ground. He did in the wilderness, and He did in His garden. Jesus didn’t need Peter’s sword to defend Him. He had the sword that came out of His mouth (Heb. 4:12; Rev. 1:16; Rev. 19:21). When the temple guard came to arrest Him, they fell back at His words, “I AM” (John 18:5-6). Jesus was truly the One for whom they were searching.

All men are searching for Jesus. Pilate was looking for truth and didn’t know Truth was standing before him (John 18:38). The Roman guards anticipated torturous pleasure. They did not realize the One they hammered with nails had come there willingly to release them from Hell (Luke 23:34). Criminals hung beside Jesus and stood at His feet. Each was confused about what would satisfy. Almost too late, some realized their searching would only end when they looked to the Man on the cross (Luke 23:42-43).

Jesus didn’t appear to be much of a Savior. How could He save them when He couldn’t save Himself (Matt. 27:42)? What His audience did not understand is the foe Jesus faced that day was not the Jewish leaders, the Roman government, the people who shouted “Crucify Him,” or even Satan. He had already triumphed over sin and Satan by standing His ground. Now He came to defeat man’s true enemy, death by submitting to it and placing His body *in* the ground.

The cross and the grave are the clearest examples that God’s way of thinking is not ours (Isaiah 55:8). Instead of standing up for His rights as God (Phil. 2:6), Jesus was quiet before His accusers (Isaiah 53:7). His silence shouted into the darkness. And when my Savior did speak, forgiveness and love flowed from His struggling lungs. After gathering strength for the victory shout, God’s Son used His last breath to express His trust in His Father (Luke 23:46). By all appearances, Jesus lost.

Appearances are often deceiving. By losing, Jesus won. By winning, Satan suffered humiliating defeat (Matt. 16:25). Satan saw Jesus’ incarnation as his one chance for victory. As a man, Jesus was vulnerable. The Eternal One could end.

I don’t think Satan knew *what* would happen if Jesus died, but he was willing to take the risk. Too late, he discovered the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of His creation. Victory comes by letting go not by holding on.

Not until Jesus’ resurrection three days later did all Jesus’ enemies understand their defeat. The Father and the people both worked toward the same goal. Each wanted Jesus to die. While the people hoped to get rid of Him, the Father knew death was the conduit to Jesus’ exaltation as King (Phil. 2:9-11). Jesus gained this triumph through His submission, not to sin, Satan, or the masses – but to His Father. Jesus waged a subtle offensive, but Lambs always accomplish their objective through sacrifice (John 1:29).

1. **Fourth Battlefield – *at the end*** (Rev. 20:1-3)

When the defining battle was over, Jesus left earth to take His throne and His crown. As He rose from man’s sight, the angels repeated Jesus’ promise. He would return to claim the territory His obedience won (John 14:1-3; Acts 1:11).

Jesus could see the future as if it were today. We have that same capacity thanks to the prophets and their writings. They tell of a battle yet future fought between a vanquished foe and a victorious King. Some of the fiercest fighting in history precedes it as Satan, the Dragon struggles to maintain his hold on territory he easily gained.

As in previous encounters, both warriors assemble a team (Rev. 13:1, 11). Satan’s powerful cohorts are mortal. They can die. Though the reality of death is his side’s weakness, Satan uses death to accomplish his mission – to steal men’s souls before they submit to Jesus’ authority (Rev. 6:8; 9:18). Satan prepares them for their final rebellion against the Ancient of Days by deceiving them into assembling for battle one last time (Rev. 19:19).

Even this period’s darkness and deception are powerless to overcome Jesus’ light and His message (John 1:5). The testifiers to God’s wrath and His mercy enjoy God’s protection (Rev. 7:3; 11:5). Jesus, who defeated death, makes His messengers immune to its effects (Rev. 1:18; 20:14). They refused submission to Satan’s authority; now death, Satan’s weapon has no power over them (1 Cor. 15:55).

Imagine Satan’s frustration as he bombards Jesus’ friends with his greatest assault only to suffer humiliation as they continue to quote John 3:16. And though millions of those who follow Jesus’ leadership will have to experience death, it becomes a doorway to Heaven, not an end (John 11:25; Rev. 12:11). Death is no longer something to fear; it’s a friend.

Satan’s overall goal of stealing God’s glory is at this point still in play, but as time progresses, he sees his chances of achieving this goal quickly slipping away. God’s aim of expelling Satan and his forces from God’s creation and His creatures advances. God expels Satan first from Heaven (Rev. 12:9) and then from the earth (Rev. 20:2-3). At the cost of His Son, the Father takes back the rest of the territory His creatures had lost.

I know it’s been almost 2000 years since Jesus left the place of His birth, and a thousand more years may still pass till He comes. His delay is no reason to doubt His return. The same Jesus who successfully predicted He would arise from the dead also said He will descend from the sky. It is then the glorious King will rightfully rule His kingdom.

**Conclusion:** I can hear a question you may be asking: “What does this epic struggle have to do with me?” Satan’s conflict with God is the original cause of your battles, and you are the subject of their war. You are the prize both of them seek.

God loves you and longs to bless you with His presence and His gifts. Satan’s only interest in you is preventing God from having His way. You decide who gets what he wants. As a follower of Jesus, come out of the reserves and join in the fight. As a pre-Christian, come out of the darkness and walk in the light.

If you choose Satan, there’s nothing to do or to change. You were born as a part of his forces. Because of your relation to Adam, Satan has first claim on your life. Be careful. Every choice has inherent risks. Count every cost before you decide. Those who fall for Satan’s deception will be paying war reparations for the rest of their lives.

A vote for Jesus has its own dangers. Defecting from the domain of your birth in favor of enlistment into God’s army will incur Satan’s wrath and bring his attack. You don’t need to fear. Remember that the One Who commands you took Satan’s most potent attack and transformed momentary humiliation into eternal hallelujahs.

Be wary of Satan’s deception. He’s used this weapon in every strike. He’ll attempt to persuade you no war is occurring by keeping you comfortable and by keeping the noise of battle in the distance. Don’t believe his lie.

Let every fight you have with your spouse, your kids, or your neighbor awaken you to the onslaught happening in the space right around you. Let every rumor of war between nations and every road rage incident spoken of on the six-o’clock news prompt you to drop to your knees and pray for those under attack. That’s where your real fight begins.

Satan doesn’t want you in this battle. He’ll keep you out of the conflict by saying you have nothing to offer that could help in this fight. But Satan’s most fearful deception is when he alleges we are on Jesus’ side when in fact, we are not (Matt. 7:22-23).

Though your decision is personal, whichever way you go, you cannot prevent the consequences of your choice from reaching into the lives of those around you. This is not a battle in which the universe is at stake. This war is about people. You, your neighbor, your daughter, your boss, and the stranger.

For those on that list who aren’t Christians, they’re not fighting Satan; he already has them. Their fate is in *your* hands. Stop fighting *against* God, and fight *beside* Him for those you and He both love!

Your God-given freewill allows you to choose. No one will force you to make up your mind.

*God could, but He won’t; Satan would, but he can’t. It’s up to you.*

As you draw your conclusion, keep this in mind. Jesus died on a cruel cross to pay for man’s sin. Then He rose from the grave. One day He’ll come down through the clouds back to the place of His humiliation. Why so much trouble? Why not just create a new universe to replace the one Satan contaminated? Because you live in *this* universe, and you are the object of His love.

The war, its danger, and its tears will vanish one day. In their place, Jesus will provide a great home. Its walls are high and thick, and its foundation is twelve layers of beautiful stone. Angelic guards will faithfully stand at gates that remain perpetually open. Guards, walls, and gates in this world are designed to protect us from harm. But there, they will only serve as reminders of what Jesus rescued us from and reflectors of the glory that has only begun.