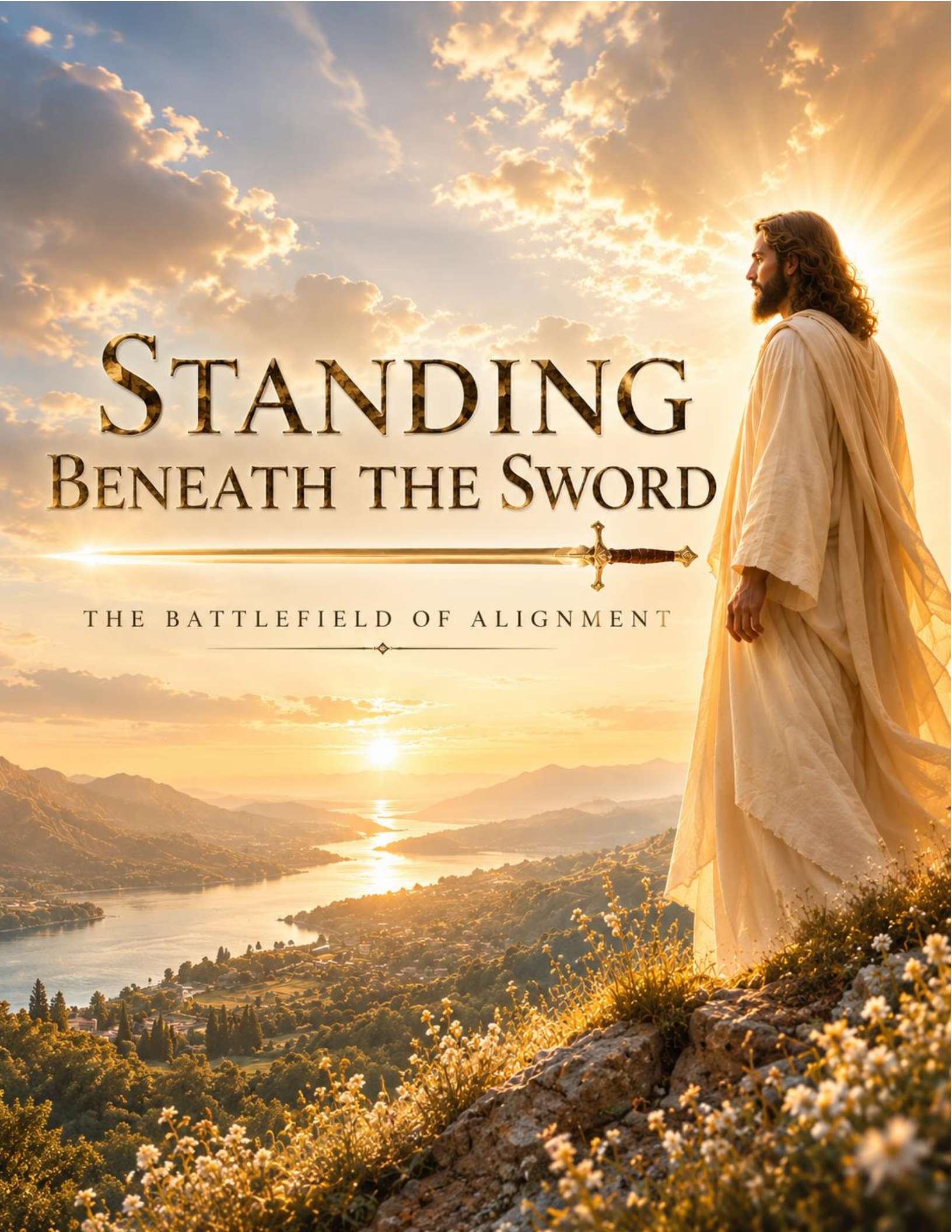




STANDING BENEATH THE SWORD



THE BATTLEFIELD OF ALIGNMENT

Standing Beneath the Sword

The Battlefield of Alignment

Look at the Battlefield

Paul's language in Ephesians 6 leaves little room for pretending that spiritual warfare ended at the cross. He speaks of wrestling, of schemes that must be resisted, of rulers and authorities, of spiritual forces of evil, of flaming arrows that must be extinguished. He tells believers to put on the whole armor of God, to take up the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit, and, having done everything required of them, to stand. The conflict is real enough that Paul expects the people of God to recognize it and remain steadfast within it.

Yet Paul also writes to the Colossians that God has forgiven us, canceled the record that stood against us, and taken it out of the way through the cross. Then he says something remarkable about the very rulers and authorities against whom spiritual conflict continues: Christ has disarmed them and made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them through the cross (Colossians 2:13–15). The powers are real. The conflict is real. And Christ has triumphed.

We need both witnesses before us if we are going to understand the battlefield rightly. If we begin with Ephesians 6 without remembering Colossians 2, warfare can begin to sound as though the outcome still hangs in the balance, as though the people of God must somehow accomplish a victory Christ has not yet secured. But if we speak of Christ's triumph in a way that leaves no place for Ephesians 6, we have to explain why Paul still tells people who belong to the risen Christ to wrestle, resist, take up armor, and stand. Paul does not appear troubled by the tension. Christ has triumphed, and His people still encounter resistance.

That means the cross has not removed the battlefield; it has decisively changed our relationship to it. We are not standing on uncertain ground waiting to see whether Christ will prevail. Before Paul ever tells the Ephesians to walk, stand, resist, or put on armor, he has already told them where they are seated. God has made them alive with Christ, raised them with Him, and seated them with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4–6). Before conduct comes position. Before warfare comes union. Before instruction comes identity.

By the time Paul reaches the armor of God, he is speaking to people whose place in Christ has already been established. His opening command is not to become strong enough for what is coming but to “be strengthened by the Lord and by his vast strength” (Ephesians 6:10 CSB). Even then, the repeated command throughout the passage is striking: stand. Put on the armor so that you may stand. Take up the armor so that you may be able to resist

and, having prepared everything, take your stand. Stand, therefore. The language does not sound like people being sent out to manufacture a victory. It sounds like people being taught not to be displaced from one.

The question of spiritual warfare may need to begin somewhere other than where we have often begun with it. The primary struggle is not obtaining what Christ has not yet secured. We are learning to stand, see, and live from what He has already secured. Christ's victory establishes the ground beneath us, but there are still powers that oppose, schemes that deceive, flaming arrows that must be extinguished, and something within this conflict that requires the people of God to remain standing.

What, then, does warfare look like from this side of a victory Christ has already accomplished?

That question carries particular weight as we have crossed into 5787. As I have pondered zayin and the imagery of the sword associated with it, my attention has returned to the sword as Scripture presents it. I do not want to begin by assuming what the sword means because of its association with zayin and then ask Scripture to confirm it. Zayin has simply opened the doorway. Scripture must govern where that doorway leads.

And Scripture leads us somewhere I believe we need to linger.

Ephesians will eventually tell us to take “the sword of the Spirit—which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:17). We will get there. But if we hurry immediately toward the sword as something placed in our hand, we may miss what Scripture shows us before we ever reach for it. The journey ahead begins with Christ's victory establishing the ground beneath our feet. It will lead us beneath a sword that searches us, into the grace that makes truthful exposure safe, and into the work of the Spirit of Truth who teaches us to recognize what agrees with Christ. We will encounter deception that seeks our agreement, submission that must come before resistance, and armor that preserves us in what God has already supplied. Only then will we return to the sword in the believer's hand.

And when we finally arrive there, Paul's command will still be the same.

Having done all, stand.

From the Gold to the Sword

Recently, in our journey into 5787 we saw Job gave us the language of gold: “When he has tested me, I will emerge as pure gold” (Job 23:10 CSB). We lingered there because testing does not create the gold. It does not place within the rock something that was absent before the pressure came. The testing proves what is there and brings its character into view. What comes forth was present before it could be seen.

That recognition gave us a way of thinking about what becomes visible when what God has established is tested. The gold was already there. It did not become gold because it survived the testing; the testing revealed it as gold. There was something deeply reassuring in that picture because it turned our attention away from the idea that pressure must somehow manufacture in us what God has not yet supplied. What God has formed can endure the testing, and what endures becomes visible.

Now another image comes before us, and it carries us further.

“For the word of God is living and effective and sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating as far as the separation of soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. No creature is hidden from him, but all things are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give an account” (Hebrews 4:12–13 CSB).

The imagery has changed. Job gives us testing and gold coming forth. Hebrews gives us a living and effective Word that penetrates, separates, judges, and exposes. We do not need to make the two passages say the same thing in order to hear something important as they stand beside one another. Testing does not manufacture the gold, and the searching Word does not manufacture what it exposes. Both bring us face-to-face with what is already there.

But Hebrews takes us somewhere the image of gold alone cannot take us. The Word does more than bring something into view. It distinguishes. It reaches into places where things can appear so closely joined that we may not recognize the difference between them—soul and spirit, joints and marrow, thoughts and intentions—and makes distinctions we cannot make merely by looking at the surface. Nothing remains concealed beneath appearance. Nothing is beyond the reach of the One who sees truly.

This tells us something essential about the sword we are following through Scripture. The sword does not manufacture truth. Truth does not become true because the sword has uncovered it. Nor does what is false become false because the sword has exposed it. The sword distinguishes what is actually there.

And before Scripture ever places a sword in our hand, the apostle John sees one somewhere else.

Whose Sword Is It?

John does not see a believer holding the sword of the Spirit. And that changes where we need to position ourselves.

On Patmos, John turns toward the voice speaking to him and sees One standing among the seven golden lampstands. He is clothed in a long robe, His eyes are like a fiery flame, His

voice is like the sound of cascading waters, and His face shines like the sun at full strength. In His right hand are seven stars, and from His mouth comes a sharp, double-edged sword (Revelation 1:12–16). Before the sword ever appears in the hand of a believer, John sees it proceeding from the mouth of Christ.

The image appears again when Jesus speaks to the assembly in Pergamum. He introduces Himself as *“the one who has the sharp, double-edged sword”* (Revelation 2:12 CSB). He knows where they live. He knows that they have held fast to His name, even where Satan’s throne is, and He also knows what they have tolerated among them. His call to repentance comes from the One who sees them truly, and His warning is that He will come and fight against what He has confronted *“with the sword of my mouth”* (Revelation 2:16 CSB).

By Revelation 19, heaven has opened and John sees the Faithful and True One riding forth in righteousness. His eyes are like a fiery flame. He wears many crowns. He is called the Word of God, and the armies of heaven follow Him. Once again, the sharp sword comes from His mouth (Revelation 19:11–15). The sword belongs within the revelation of Christ Himself—His authority, His judgment, His righteousness, His word.

Paul’s language in Ephesians 6 comes to us in a different setting. He is not describing John’s vision of the risen Christ or the judgment scenes of Revelation. He is telling believers how to stand against the schemes of the devil, and among the armor he tells them to take is *“the sword of the Spirit—which is the word of God”* (Ephesians 6:17 CSB). The images need not be made identical for their witness to keep us beneath the same authority. Paul does not call it the believer’s sword. It remains the sword of the Spirit.

The hand receiving the sword does not become its source. We do not determine what is true and then enlist Scripture to support what we have already decided. We do not decide what needs to be exposed, who needs to be corrected, or what deserves to be cut away and then reach for the Word to give divine weight to our conclusions. Christ sees truly. Christ speaks truly. Reality does not bend itself around our interpretations of His Word; our interpretations must come beneath the authority of the One whose Word it is.

The sword we pick up remains His sword.

Long before Paul tells us to take it, we have seen where it comes from. We have heard the voice from whose mouth it proceeds. Christ addresses what He sees among His own people. His name is Faithful and True. The sword can never become an instrument of our own certainty if it is to remain faithful to the One from whom it comes.

If the sword belongs to Him, we must first learn what it is to stand beneath its authority and allow the living Word to search us.

The Living Word Searches Us First

"For the word of God is living and effective and sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating as far as the separation of soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" - Hebrews 4:12 CSB.

The sword we see in the Scriptures does not leave us standing at a safe distance from its edge. Hebrews brings the living Word into places within us that we cannot reach by appearance alone.

Thoughts and intentions are not always the same thing. We can know what we think without fully recognizing what is moving beneath the thought. We can explain a reaction without seeing the fear beneath it, defend a judgment without recognizing the assumptions that formed it, or become certain of an interpretation without realizing how much our own experience has contributed to what we believe we see. The living Word reaches beneath what we can explain about ourselves and discerns what is actually there.

Then Hebrews moves from what the living Word discerns to the One before whom nothing can remain concealed. *"No creature is hidden from him, but all things are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give an account"* (Hebrews 4:13 CSB). The language leaves us nowhere to hide behind appearances, including the appearances we maintain before ourselves. Our thoughts, intentions, interpretations, judgments, fears, and conclusions can all be brought into the light of the One who already sees them truly.

David prayed for this kind of searching: *"Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my concerns. See if there is any offensive way in me; lead me in the everlasting way"* (Psalm 139:23–24 CSB). His prayer is not an attempt to inform God about what might be hidden in his heart. The psalm has already confessed, *"LORD, you have searched me and known me"* (Psalm 139:1 CSB). David is opening himself to God who already knows, asking Him to search, reveal, and lead.

There is humility in such a prayer. It acknowledges that I may not see myself as clearly as God sees me. Something can feel reasonable to me and still need to be searched. A conclusion can seem justified and still need to come beneath the living Word. Even something I have called discernment may contain fear, accusation, woundedness, or an interpretation that does not agree with what is true.

So, the battlefield does not remain entirely outside of us. We can recognize that spiritual forces are real without assuming that our own perception of the conflict is therefore infallible. Before we identify what is false around us, the Scriptures show us that the living Word discerns and separates out what is operating within us. Before we become certain about what another person has agreed with, we can allow God to uncover what has gained our own agreement.

We still need to ask what we are resisting, because Scripture will eventually tell us to resist. But beneath that question another one has begun to emerge: What have I agreed with? What have I received as true about God, about myself, about another person, or about what is happening around me? What interpretation has begun shaping the way I see?

That question could easily turn us inward in ways Hebrews never intends. We could begin examining every thought, questioning every motive, and searching ourselves anxiously for something we have failed to detect. But Hebrews does not leave us alone beneath the searching Word. We are taken directly to Jesus, our great High Priest, and from complete exposure to an extraordinary invitation to come near.



Secure Enough to Be Searched

Hebrews has brought us into complete exposure. Nothing is hidden from God. Everything lies naked and exposed before His eyes, including the thoughts and intentions we have not recognized clearly ourselves. If we stopped reading at Hebrews 4:13, we could easily imagine ourselves left there beneath the gaze of a holy God, fully known and painfully aware that there is nowhere to hide.

But Hebrews does not stop there.

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens—Jesus the Son of God—let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who

has been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. Therefore, let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need” (Hebrews 4:14–16 CSB).

Nothing has changed about what God sees. Everything that was exposed in the preceding verses remains exposed. Hebrews does not cover us again so that we can approach Him, nor does it reassure us that perhaps what the living Word uncovered was not so serious after all. Instead, with everything still open before God, Jesus comes into view as our great High Priest.

He is not unable to sympathize with our weakness. He has entered the reality of human temptation without surrendering Himself to sin. The One through whom we approach God does not stand at a distance from human frailty. Jesus the Son of God has passed through the heavens, and because He is our High Priest, the response to being fully exposed is not to retreat from God but to come nearer.

The throne itself is called a throne of grace.

We are not standing before an unpredictable God, wondering whether something the sword exposes will cause Him to withdraw what Christ has given us. We are standing before the God who already knew us when He gave His Son for us. The searching does not provide Him with information He lacked. It brings us into the truth He already sees.

This is where two very different distortions can take hold. On one side is terror. If I allow God to search me, what will He find? What will He do with what He finds? Will I still be accepted when everything is exposed? Beneath those questions is the fear that our safety depends upon remaining partly concealed, as though grace can hold only while the worst things about us remain undiscovered.

But there is nothing left for God to discover.

“The LORD, you have searched me and known me,” David says before he ever prays, *“Search me, God, and know my heart”* (Psalm 139:1, 23 CSB). His invitation to be searched rests inside a relationship with the God who already knows. The searching changes David’s seeing, not God’s knowledge of David. He can ask God to uncover what he cannot see because the God he invites into those hidden places is already there.

Hebrews gives us even firmer ground beneath that confidence. Christ *“has perfected forever those who are sanctified”* (Hebrews 10:14 CSB). A few verses later, the writer speaks of having *“boldness to enter the sanctuary through the blood of Jesus”* by *“a new and living way”* opened for us through His flesh (Hebrews 10:19–20 CSB). Our confidence to enter does not rest upon having successfully examined ourselves and found nothing objectionable. We enter by the blood of Jesus.

The holy place has not become less holy because we have been invited inside. God has not lowered the threshold of His holiness so that sinful people can approach Him without consequence. Christ has opened the way. We come with a true heart and full assurance of faith because our access rests in what He has accomplished, not in our ability to make ourselves safe enough for His presence.

Romans gives the same confidence another voice: *"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus"* (Romans 8:1 CSB). No condemnation does not mean there is nothing in us that needs to be exposed, corrected, renewed, or brought into obedience to Christ. Hebrews has already refused to let us pretend that. It means that exposure takes place within a reality established by Christ rather than beneath the threat that every uncovered weakness will place our belonging in question.

The opposite distortion is more subtle. Confidence can become careless familiarity. We can speak of access to God as though His holiness no longer matters because Jesus has opened the way. We can turn boldness into presumption and grace into permission to stand casually before the One whom Scripture still calls holy. Yet the gospel gives us no reason to become casual about the presence into which Christ has brought us. The wonder of Hebrews is not that the holy place ceased to be holy. It is that Jesus opened a new and living way for us to enter it.

We do not have to choose between reverence and confidence. We know before whom we stand, and we know through whom we have come. The fear of the Lord does not require terror before an unpredictable God, and confidence does not require us to forget that He is the Holy One. In Christ, we can remain fully open before Him without hiding and fully reverent before Him without running away.

The sword can search us because we are secure enough in Christ to be searched. Our belonging does not depend upon the Word finding nothing that needs to change. We do not have to protect every conclusion, defend every reaction, preserve every interpretation, or justify everything we have believed. When the living Word distinguishes something in us that does not agree with Christ, we are free to let it go.

We can remain beneath the sword.

And when it exposes what we could not see, we do not need to retreat into hiding. We draw near to the throne of grace, where we are fully known and there we receive mercy and find grace for help.

Spirit of Truth

From that place of assurance the question of alignment begins to open beyond what the living Word searches and toward the One Jesus promised would be with us and in us: Spirit of Truth.

Jesus introduces Him this way on the night before the cross. *"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever. He is the Spirit of truth"* (John 14:16–17 CSB). Later in the same conversation, Jesus tells His disciples that the Counselor, Holy Spirit, will teach them all things and remind them of everything He has told them (John 14:26).

Truth is not presented as information His disciples must preserve by their own ability to remember and understand. They will be accompanied by the Spirit who teaches and brings the words of Jesus to remembrance.

Jesus returns to this promise in John 16. *"When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth"* (John 16:13 CSB). He will speak what He hears, declare what is to come, and glorify Jesus. Then Jesus tells us how: *"He will take from what is mine and declare it to you"* (John 16:14 CSB). What belongs to the Son is not left at a distance from the people who belong to Him. Spirit of Truth makes known what He receives from Christ.

Jesus carries the thought even further: *"Everything the Father has is mine. This is why I told you that he takes from what is mine and will declare it to you"* (John 16:15 CSB). This is deeply relational. The Father has given to the Son; the Spirit takes what belongs to the Son and declares it to His people. The Spirit does not draw attention away from Christ in order to establish another reality alongside Him. He glorifies Christ by making known what belongs to Christ.

Paul speaks with similar language when he writes to the Corinthians about what God reveals through the Spirit. *"The Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God"* (1 Corinthians 2:10 CSB). No one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God, and Paul says that we have received the Spirit who comes from God *"so that we may understand what has been freely given to us by God"* (1 Corinthians 2:12 CSB). Again, the Spirit is not creating what God has withheld until we reach sufficient understanding. He enables us to know what God has freely given.

We do not begin by learning how to identify everything that is false. We begin with Spirit of Truth making Christ known. Our attention is drawn first toward what is true, toward what belongs to Christ, toward what the Father has given, and toward what Holy Spirit is teaching us to recognize.

The finished work of Christ is part of that reality, but John's language allows us to say something larger than victory alone. Spirit of Truth takes what belongs to Christ and makes it known to us. His life, His words, His righteousness, His peace, His relationship with the Father, all that has been given to us in Him—none of it originates in our perception of it. Our seeing does not establish the reality. Holy Spirit brings us into truthful recognition of what is already found in Christ.

Christ establishes. Spirit of Truth brings us into agreement with what Christ has established.

That agreement is more than learning to repeat the right words. Paul speaks of having *"the mind of Christ"* (1 Corinthians 2:16 CSB). Jesus speaks of the Spirit guiding, teaching, reminding, hearing, declaring, and glorifying. There is a work of God taking place within His people by which what is true in Christ increasingly governs how we see, understand, respond, and live.

The battlefield of agreement begins here—not with deception, but with truth. Before Scripture asks us to test the spirits, it gives us Spirit of Truth. Before we consider the voices that may seek to distort our perception, we are brought into relationship with the One who continually directs our attention to Christ.

We learn to recognize what is false by becoming increasingly familiar with what is true.

Spirit of Truth and Spirit of Error

John gives us language for the contrast we have now reached.

"We are from God. Anyone who knows God listens to us; anyone who is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of deception" (1 John 4:6 CSB).

The Spirit of Truth is not the only influence Scripture asks us to recognize. There is also a spirit of error, and John takes its presence seriously enough to tell believers, *"Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they are from God"* (1 John 4:1 CSB).

John is writing in the midst of a very particular conflict over the truth concerning Jesus Christ. Some who had been among the community had gone out from them, and false prophets were speaking in ways that did not confess Jesus Christ come in the flesh. John does not leave truth floating in the realm of spiritual impressions. The distinction between truth and error is inseparable from the Person to whom the testimony points.

Jesus had spoken of a similar conflict during His confrontation with those who opposed Him in John 8. *"If God were your Father, you would love me, because I came from God and I*

am here" (John 8:42 CSB). As the exchange continues, Jesus speaks of the devil as one who "does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him," and as *"a liar and the father of lies"* (John 8:44 CSB). The conflict reaches into what is heard, believed, and received. Jesus is standing before them speaking the truth He has heard from God, yet they refuse His word.

Spiritual influence is not something we can simply remove from our understanding of truth and deception. Scripture does not reduce the conflict to faulty reasoning, emotional difficulty, or the ordinary limitations of human understanding. There are spiritual powers opposed to God, and deception belongs to their activity. Jesus speaks of the devil lying. John speaks of false prophets going out into the world and tells believers to test the spirits. Paul will later remind us that our struggle is not against flesh and blood.

Scripture does not require us to find a spirit behind every mistaken thought. Human beings can misunderstand. We can respond from fear, immaturity, woundedness, habit, desire, or simple lack of wisdom. We can make careless decisions and reach wrong conclusions. James can speak about temptation arising as a person is drawn away and enticed by his own desire (James 1:14), while other passages speak openly about the activity of the devil. Scripture is able to take both seriously without forcing every human struggle into the same explanation.

We need that freedom if we are going to remain beneath the searching living Word ourselves. Otherwise, discernment can become a way of seeing the source of everything troubling as outside ourselves. A reaction becomes an attack. A disagreement becomes evidence of spiritual opposition. Another person's error becomes proof of the spirit influencing them. Soon we are very skilled at identifying what we believe is operating everywhere except within our own interpretations.

The enemy is spiritual, but the effects of deception often reach us through what we perceive, how we interpret what we perceive, and what we finally receive as true. A lie does not have to overpower a person in order to influence the way that person lives. It can be heard, entertained, believed, repeated, defended, and eventually lived from. Somewhere along the way, perception begins to shape agreement.

John does not respond to this reality by teaching believers to become preoccupied with the spirit of error. He has already given them another ground: *"You are from God, little children, and you have conquered them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world"* (1 John 4:4 CSB). Discernment takes place from within belonging. The people being told to test the spirits are already people in whom God dwells.

Spirit of Truth keeps bringing us toward Christ. The spirit of error pulls away from the truth revealed in Him. Between those two witnesses lies a battlefield that can reach deeply into

perception, interpretation, and agreement without turning every thought into a spiritual attack or every mistake into evidence of demonic influence.

And sometimes what seeks our agreement does not sound obviously false. Sometimes it speaks the language of Scripture itself.

“It Is Written” — Truth Under Pressure

Before Jesus enters the wilderness, the Father has already spoken. Jesus comes up from the waters of baptism, the heavens open, and Spirit of God descends upon Him like a dove. Then the voice from heaven declares, *“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased”* (Matthew 3:17 CSB). Sonship is not waiting to be established in the wilderness. The Father has spoken before the testing begins.

Matthew moves immediately from that declaration into the wilderness. Jesus is led by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil, and after forty days and forty nights of fasting, another voice speaks: *“If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread”* (Matthew 4:3 CSB). The words reach directly toward what the Father has just declared. Jesus is the Son, but the tempter places sonship inside another frame: *If you are the Son, then prove it this way. If you are the Son, use what is available to you to answer your hunger.*

Jesus does not need to prove what the Father has already spoken. He answers from Deuteronomy: *“It is written: Man must not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God”* (Matthew 4:4; Deuteronomy 8:3 CSB). His hunger is real. Bread is not evil. Yet neither hunger nor the possibility of bread is allowed to redefine what it means for the Son to live in dependence upon His Father. Jesus remains within what God has spoken.

Then the temptation becomes more difficult to recognize because the tempter changes his approach. He takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and says, *“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.”* This time the challenge does not come with an obvious contradiction of Scripture. The devil quotes it: *“For it is written: He will give his angels orders concerning you, and they will support you with their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone”* (Matthew 4:6 CSB).

Now “it is written” is being spoken on both sides of the encounter.

The presence of Scripture in the conversation does not settle the question of truth. Words from the Psalms can be quoted accurately and still be placed inside an invitation the Father has not given. A promise of God’s protection can be turned into a demand that God prove Himself. Jesus answers with Scripture again, this time from Deuteronomy 6:16: *“It is also written: Do not test the Lord your God”* (Matthew 4:7 CSB). One passage is not being used to

cancel another. Jesus refuses an interpretation of Scripture that would make presumption look like faith.

The final temptation brings authority and worship into the open. The devil shows Jesus the kingdoms of the world and their splendor and offers them to Him in exchange for worship. Jesus answers from Deuteronomy again: “*Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him*” (Matthew 4:10; Deuteronomy 6:13 CSB). Authority cannot be received at the price of allegiance to another. No promised outcome, however great, can make worship of anyone but God acceptable.

Across the wilderness encounter, the pressure moves through hunger, sonship, protection, authority, and worship. The temptations are not merely invitations to do obviously wicked things. Bread answers a legitimate physical need. God’s protection is a biblical promise. The kingdoms themselves will ultimately belong to Christ. What is offered repeatedly is another way of understanding how the Son should relate to what is true—another interpretation of provision, another expression of trust, another path toward authority.

Jesus remains with His Father.

Luke tells us that He entered the wilderness “*full of the Holy Spirit*” and was led by the Spirit there (Luke 4:1 CSB). The same Spirit of Truth we have been considering is not absent when truth comes under pressure. Jesus does not meet deception by becoming fascinated with the deceiver. He remains aligned with God. His answer returns to what God has spoken without surrendering the meaning of God’s Word to the interpretation being offered by the tempter.

The wilderness does not allow us to imagine spiritual warfare as a simple contest between a Bible verse and an obvious lie. The tempter knows how to say, “*It is written.*” Scripture can be present while its purpose is being distorted. Biblical language can be used to invite presumption, justify a desired outcome, or give apparent authority to a conclusion God has not spoken.

The battle is sometimes between truth and the misuse of truth. Jesus does not merely know what is written. He remains aligned with the Father whose Word it is.

Test the Spirits

“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they are from God” (1 John 4:1 CSB).

John does not assume that everything presenting itself as spiritual should therefore be received as true. Prophets are speaking. Claims are being made. Spiritual influence is real.

The people of God are expected to discern what they are hearing rather than surrender their agreement simply because something carries spiritual language or authority.

John immediately brings that testing to Jesus Christ. *“Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God”* (1 John 4:2–3 CSB). In the particular conflict John is addressing, the confession concerning Jesus exposes the difference between truth and error. The test is not whether something sounds profound, carries supernatural power, confirms what we hope to hear, or agrees with conclusions we have already reached. The testimony must answer to the truth of Christ.

Paul gives the Thessalonians a similar responsibility without teaching them to withdraw from spiritual activity. *“Don’t stifle the Spirit. Don’t despise prophecies, but test all things. Hold on to what is good. Stay away from every kind of evil”* (1 Thessalonians 5:19–22 CSB). Paul does not protect believers from deception by telling them to reject prophecy, and he does not protect the work of the Spirit by telling them to receive everything without examination. They are to remain open and discerning at the same time.

There is a maturity in that posture that neither gullibility nor suspicion can produce. Gullibility receives too easily because something sounds spiritual. Suspicion rejects too easily because something is unfamiliar, uncomfortable, or difficult to understand. Neither requires genuine discernment. One avoids testing by believing too quickly; the other avoids testing by deciding too quickly.

We can also mistake familiarity for truth. Something may agree perfectly with what we have always believed and still need to be tested. Something may challenge an interpretation we have carried for years without therefore being false. If the searching Word has already taught us that our own thoughts and intentions can be exposed before God, then our existing conclusions cannot become the final measure by which everything else is judged. We remain beneath the living Word even while we test what we hear.

Jesus has already told us where Spirit of Truth directs our attention. *“He will glorify me, because he will take from what is mine and declare it to you”* (John 16:14 CSB). Holy Spirit does not cultivate fascination with Himself or lead us into truth detached from the Son. He glorifies Christ. He takes what belongs to Christ and makes it known. The more familiar we become with His witness, the more discernment becomes recognition rather than suspicion.

This keeps testing relational rather than merely analytical. We are not assembling a technique for detecting error or learning to approach every spiritual claim looking for what might be wrong with it. We are learning Christ. We are hearing His words, beholding His

character, submitting our interpretations to His authority, and receiving the witness of Spirit of Truth who makes Him known.

Discernment is not learning to suspect everything. It is learning to recognize what agrees with the truth revealed in Christ.

And because Christ remains the governing witness, discernment cannot be reduced to whether something feels peaceful, sounds biblical, comes from someone we trust, or confirms what we already believe.

We test without becoming cynical. We remain open without becoming gullible. We listen without surrendering judgment, and we judge without assuming that our first interpretation must be right.

The sword has already searched us before we begin testing what is around us. The people who test the spirits are still people standing beneath the authority of Christ, dependent upon Spirit of Truth to make Him known.

The Counterfeit Cut

The sword has given us an image of distinction. Hebrews speaks of the living Word penetrating and dividing, discerning thoughts and intentions that might otherwise remain hidden from us. There is a separation that serves truth because it reveals what is actually there. But not every division is the work of truth. Deception also separates, and Genesis brings us back to the first place Scripture shows us how subtly that can happen.

The serpent enters the garden with a question: *“Did God really say, ‘You can’t eat from any tree in the garden’?”* (Genesis 3:1 CSB). God had not said that. He had generously given the man every tree in the garden for food with one exception (Genesis 2:16–17). Yet the serpent begins by placing the prohibition where the abundance had been. The conversation now starts with what God has withheld rather than what He has given.

The woman answers with what God had commanded, but the serpent offers another interpretation. *“No! You will certainly not die,”* he tells her. *“In fact, God knows that when you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil”* (Genesis 3:4–5 CSB). God’s words are no longer allowed to interpret God’s intention. Another story about Him has been introduced. The command of God is reframed as restriction. The goodness of God is brought under suspicion. The fruit is made to appear desirable, wise, and necessary.

Nothing about the tree has changed. Nothing about God has changed. What changes is the way the woman sees what is before her. The tree she had been commanded not to eat from is now seen as *“good for food and delightful to look at,”* and desirable for obtaining wisdom (Genesis 3:6 CSB). The serpent has offered an interpretation in which disobedience can

begin to look reasonable because God's command has been detached from confidence in God's goodness.

Deception works by presenting an alternative reality until the false seems reasonable, the distorted seems wise, and the lie feels safer than the truth. Its power is in its ability to make misalignment feel justified. Once God is perceived as withholding something necessary, reaching for what He has forbidden can begin to feel less like rebellion and more like taking hold of something one should have been given.

Jesus identifies the source of this distortion when He speaks of the devil in John 8. *"He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he tells a lie, he speaks from his own nature, because he is a liar and the father of lies"* (John 8:44 CSB). The lie does more than introduce inaccurate information. In the garden, it fractures trust between humanity and God before the fruit is ever taken. Suspicion enters where trust had been. God is no longer simply the One whose word defines what is good; His motives have become something to question.

Paul later returns to Eve when he writes to the Corinthians: *"But I fear that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your minds may be seduced from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ"* (2 Corinthians 11:3 CSB). His concern is relational. Deception threatens devotion to Christ. Something can enter the way we think that gradually moves us from the simplicity of trust and allegiance toward another understanding of Jesus, another gospel, another spirit.

We have already seen the same cunning in the wilderness. The tempter can quote Scripture. He can take words that are true and place them inside a false invitation. *"He will give his angels orders concerning you"* remains Scripture, but the promise of God's protection is being used to invite the Son to test His Father (Matthew 4:5–7). Truth has not ceased to be true. It has been severed from the obedience and trust within which it is rightly heard.

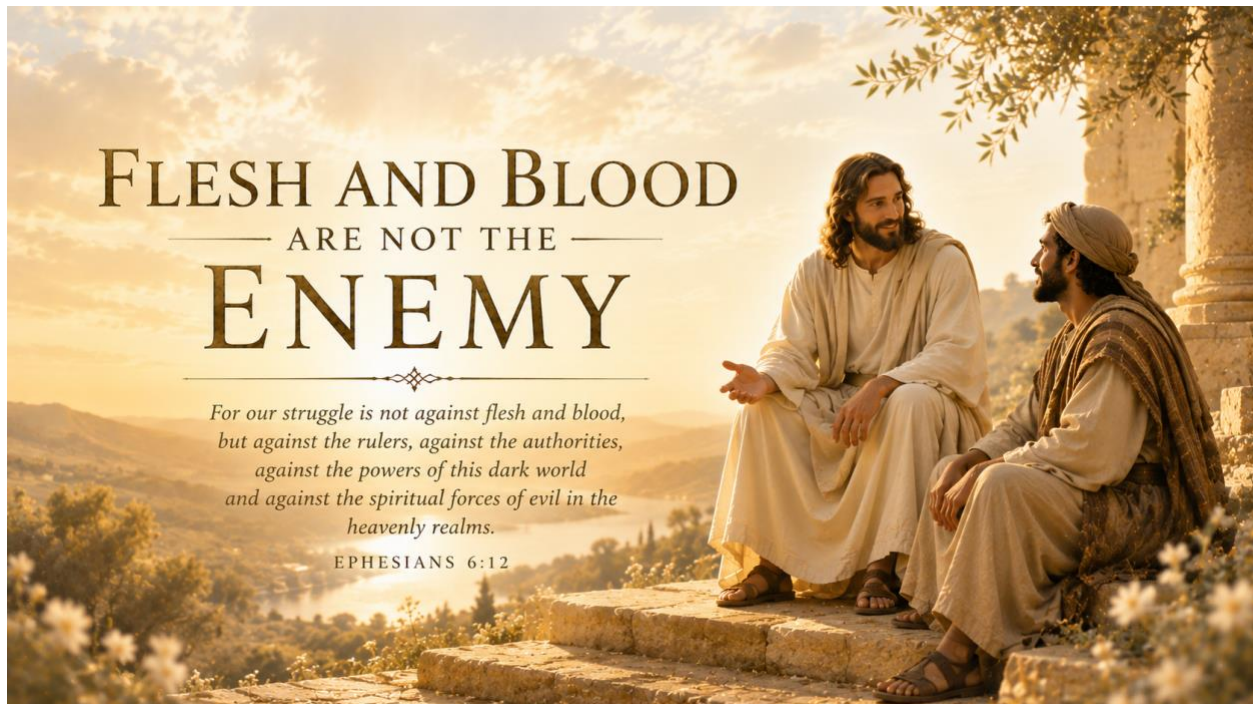
A counterfeit cut can work in the opposite direction as well. It can separate what God has joined and join what God has distinguished. It can separate truth from the character of God, promise from obedience, discernment from love, righteousness from mercy, or identity from Christ. And it can join together things Scripture does not join—fear with wisdom, accusation with discernment, control with protection, retaliation with justice.

Eventually the false division can reach how we view others. If deception can persuade us to interpret another person primarily through suspicion, fear, accusation, or offense, the person can begin to appear as the enemy. What we call discernment can then become permission to accuse, withdraw love, or wield truth against flesh and blood. The sword that belongs to Christ has been replaced by a counterfeit cut, even while our language may still sound spiritual.

Truth does distinguish. Jesus Himself confronts, exposes, corrects, and calls people to repentance. Scripture never asks us to preserve unity by refusing to recognize what is false, destructive, or contrary to Christ. The absence of division is not the measure of truth any more than the presence of division is.

Not every division is evidence that the sword of truth has been operating. We must learn the difference between the cut that clarifies and the cut that fractures.

And nowhere does that distinction become more necessary than when another human being begins to look like the enemy.



Flesh and Blood Are Not the Enemy

Paul draws a boundary around spiritual warfare that we cannot afford to cross. *"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against evil, spiritual forces in the heavens"* (Ephesians 6:12 CSB). He does not deny the reality of conflict. He names a conflict deeper than the human beings standing in front of us.

People can do terrible things to one another. They can lie, manipulate, betray, abuse authority, exploit weakness, distort truth, and deliberately cause harm. Scripture never requires us to call evil good in order to prove that we understand spiritual warfare. Human beings remain responsible for what they do, and recognizing that flesh and blood are not

the enemy does not require us to remain in harmful circumstances, abandon necessary boundaries, or surrender the wisdom that protects what has been entrusted to us.

Yet Paul will not allow the person who has harmed us to become the spiritual enemy. The distinction holds even when another person's actions have become a place through which deception, accusation, control, or destruction is being expressed. Flesh and blood remain flesh and blood. The sword of the Spirit was never placed in our hand so that another human being could become its target.

The surrounding chapters of Ephesians make that difficult to escape. Before Paul speaks of rulers, authorities, armor, and the sword, he has already told these believers how to live with one another. *"Therefore, putting away lying, speak the truth, each one to his neighbor, because we are members of one another"* (Ephesians 4:25 CSB). Anger is not to be given room to become sin. Corrupt speech is to give way to words that build up and give grace. Bitterness, wrath, anger, shouting, slander, and malice are to be put away, while kindness, compassion, and forgiveness are to mark the people who have been forgiven in Christ (Ephesians 4:26–32).

Paul can speak about giving the devil an opportunity in the middle of those instructions without turning the people involved into the devil. Anger matters. Falsehood matters. Slander matters. The way believers treat one another matters. Spiritual opposition is real, and human responsibility remains real, but Paul refuses to collapse the two into each other.

His language in 2 Corinthians 10 keeps the conflict from becoming fleshly in another way. *"Although we live in the flesh, we do not wage war according to the flesh, since the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but are powerful through God for the demolition of strongholds"* (2 Corinthians 10:3–4 CSB). Paul continues by speaking of arguments and every proud thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and of taking thoughts captive to obey Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5).

We do not need to make *"stronghold"* carry more than Paul gives us here. His own language is enough to bring arguments, knowledge, thoughts, and obedience into the field of conflict. A way of thinking can become deeply established. Disappointment can begin interpreting the character of God for us. Fear can make visible circumstances appear more authoritative than what God has spoken. An accusation repeated and rehearsed long enough can become so familiar that we stop recognizing it as accusation and begin receiving it as truth. These are places where the living Word must be allowed to search, distinguish, and bring our thoughts again into obedience to Christ.

But once another person becomes the object around whom all those interpretations gather, the battlefield can quietly shift beneath our feet. We begin fighting the person rather than recognizing what is happening within our own thoughts, responses, and agreements. We

may rehearse their failures until accusation feels like discernment. We may use Scripture primarily to establish their guilt rather than allowing the Word to search us. We may become so certain that we understand what is spiritually operating through them that we no longer notice what anger, fear, bitterness, or self-protection is doing within us.

One of deception's most destructive achievements is persuading us to fight a spiritual battle on a human battlefield.

Paul neither gives us permission to ignore evil behavior, nor permission to make flesh and blood the enemy. Those truths can remain together. We can speak truth about what happened. We can hold people responsible for their choices. We can establish boundaries, leave destructive circumstances, seek justice where justice is required, and refuse participation in what is harmful without turning another person into the spiritual enemy against whom we wage war.

That changes the way we hold the sword. If Scripture becomes ammunition for defeating another person, exposing them, humiliating them, or proving our spiritual interpretation of them, we have moved away from the reality of Christ's accomplished work. In doing so, we have forgotten that before the sword was placed anywhere near our hand, it proceeded from Christ's mouth. We have forgotten what it felt like to stand beneath the living Word and allow our own thoughts and intentions to be exposed.

When we allow flesh and blood to become the target of our sword, we need to come beneath the living sword again. And perhaps this is where resistance begins—not with what we stand against, but with the One to whom we remain yielded.

Submission Before Resistance

James gives us an instruction that is easy to hurry past: *"Therefore, submit to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you"* (James 4:7–8 CSB). Submission comes before resistance. Drawing near to God remains part of the same movement. James does not picture resistance as an independent act of spiritual strength, but as something that takes place within a life yielded to God.

The verses immediately preceding that command bring humility into the picture. *"God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble"* (James 4:6 CSB). The person preparing to resist the devil is first called to come beneath God's authority. There is no room here for the kind of spiritual confidence that assumes our perceptions are beyond correction, our motives beyond searching, or our conclusions beyond question. We have already stood beneath the living Word and discovered that even what seems clear to us can be brought into His light.

Submission is not passivity. It is agreement with God that becomes willing obedience. We yield our understanding to His truth, our judgments to His wisdom, our desires to His will, and our responses to His authority. What the Word exposes, we do not have to defend. What Spirit of Truth makes known, we are free to receive. What does not agree with Christ can be released rather than protected simply because it has become familiar to us.

Hebrews 4 remains with us here. We came beneath the living Word that penetrates and discerns, and when everything was exposed, we were invited to draw near to the throne of grace. We did not submit ourselves to God under threat of rejection. We came openly because Jesus is our great High Priest. The surrender that follows is therefore not the frightened submission of someone trying to remain accepted; it is the yielded response of someone whose access has already been opened through Christ.

Peter brings humility, dependence, and resistance together in much the same way. *“Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your cares on him, because he cares about you”* (1 Peter 5:6–7 CSB). Only then does he warn, *“Be sober-minded, be alert. Your adversary the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for anyone he can devour. Resist him, firm in the faith”* (1 Peter 5:8–9 CSB).

Peter does not tell anxious people to turn their anxiety into spiritual vigilance. He tells them to cast their cares upon God because He cares for them. Fear does not have to become the ground from which resistance proceeds. The mighty hand beneath which they humble themselves belongs to the God who cares for them, and they resist the adversary from there—firm in the faith.

This keeps resistance from becoming accusation, presumption, or self-protection dressed in spiritual language. We do not need to resist everything that makes us uncomfortable. We do not need to identify an enemy behind every difficulty. We do not need to defend an interpretation merely because we have become convinced of it. Submission leaves us open to correction even while we stand firmly against what does not agree with Christ.

Standing beneath the sword was never a preliminary exercise that we complete before moving on to the real work of warfare. We stay there. The living Word that searched us before we recognized deception continues to search us while we resist it. Spirit of Truth who brought us into recognition continues to govern our discernment. The authority under which we first bowed remains the authority under which we stand.

We resist from a place submission, not instead of submission.

The Armor Preserves Alignment

When we return to Ephesians 6, Paul's opening words sound different after everything we have followed: *"Finally, be strengthened by the Lord and by his vast strength"* (Ephesians 6:10 CSB). He does not begin by directing believers toward their own capacity to withstand spiritual opposition. The strength is located in union before it is expressed in resistance. They are strengthened in the Lord, and from there Paul tells them to put on the full armor of God.

Even the armor does not originate with them. Long before Paul writes to Ephesus, Isaiah has already shown us the LORD clothed for battle. When truth has stumbled in the public square and justice cannot enter, the LORD sees that there is no justice. Then Isaiah says, *"He put on righteousness as body armor, and a helmet of salvation on his head"* (Isaiah 59:17 CSB). The righteousness and salvation that appear in Paul's armor have already appeared upon God Himself.

Isaiah gives us other pieces of the language as well. *"Righteousness will be a belt around his hips; faithfulness will be a belt around his waist"* (Isaiah 11:5 CSB). And when Isaiah announces the coming of good news, he cries, *"How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the herald, who proclaims peace, who brings news of good things, who proclaims salvation"* (Isaiah 52:7 CSB). Righteousness, faithfulness, peace, good news, and salvation were already part of God's revelation long before Paul gathered this imagery around believers standing against spiritual opposition.

So when Paul tells us to fasten truth around our waist, put on the breastplate of righteousness, fit our feet with the readiness of the gospel of peace, take up the shield of faith, and receive the helmet of salvation, he is not inventing a collection of spiritual techniques. These words carry the story of God with them. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation belong first to the reality God has revealed and supplied.

Paul uses similar language with the Thessalonians: *"But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled and put on the armor of faith and love, and a helmet of the hope of salvation"* (1 Thessalonians 5:8 CSB). The imagery is not identical to Ephesians, nor does it need to be. Armor gives Paul a way of speaking about people clothed in realities that belong to the life God has given them. Faith and love, truth and righteousness, gospel peace and the hope of salvation are not produced by the moment of conflict.

That keeps the armor from becoming something we frantically assemble when we sense spiritual opposition. We do not suddenly manufacture righteousness because the battle has intensified. We do not create salvation when accusation comes. We do not invent peace when circumstances become threatening or produce truth because deception has appeared. We remain clothed in what God has already supplied.

Paul's repeated command tells us what this armor enables. *"Put on the full armor of God so that you can stand against the schemes of the devil"* (Ephesians 6:11 CSB). Then again, *"Take up the full armor of God, so that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having prepared everything, to take your stand. Stand, therefore"* (Ephesians 6:13–14 CSB). The language is remarkably steady. Stand. Resist. Stand. Paul does not tell believers to go out and create the victory.

Standing is not the language of trying to create a victory that does not yet exist. Our standing begins with Christ having already disarmed the rulers and authorities and triumphed over them through the cross. The armor belongs on people standing on that ground. Spiritual opposition seeks to move us out from under what is true, but Paul clothes us in realities that continually return us to what God has established.

Truth holds us where deception would move us into another interpretation. Righteousness keeps our standing from resting upon accusation or our own performance. Gospel peace keeps our feet within the good news of what God has done in Christ. Faith continues to trust the One whose word has been spoken even when flaming arrows suggest another reality. Salvation guards a life that belongs to God and has been secured through Christ. We need not force every piece into a rigid formula to recognize that the armor preserves alignment with what God has already established. These are realities long before they become strategies.

We stand clothed in truth. We stand in righteousness. Our feet remain prepared by the gospel of peace. We hold faith before what would set our perception on fire. We receive salvation as the covering of a life that belongs to Christ. The battle does not determine whether these things are true; the battle presses upon whether we will remain within them. And then, after everything Paul has told us to put on and take up, one piece remains.

Take the Sword of the Spirit

Only now do we return to Paul's words: *"Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit—which is the word of God"* (Ephesians 6:17 CSB). The sword has finally reached the believer's hand, but we do not arrive here eager for a weapon.

He calls it the sword of the Spirit. The hand receiving it does not change its ownership. Spirit of Truth still glorifies Christ, still takes what belongs to Christ and declares it to us, still guides us into truth (John 16:13–15). The Word entrusted to us remains under the authority of the One who speaks it and the Spirit whose sword it is. Jesus showed us what that looks like under pressure. Scripture in His mouth remained joined to trust, obedience, worship, and allegiance to the Father.

The sword does not establish truth. Truth already stands. The Word does not make God faithful; God is faithful. The Word does not make Christ victorious; Christ is victorious. Scripture does not become powerful because we speak it forcefully enough, nor does reality become true because we have found a verse with which to declare it.

We receive the Word as something that already carries an authority beyond our own. We speak what God has spoken because we have come beneath what God has spoken. We resist deception with truth because we ourselves remain answerable to truth. We refuse an interpretation that contradicts Christ because Spirit of Truth continues to make Christ known to us.

There is a humility built into holding the sword this way. We cannot wield Scripture faithfully while exempting ourselves from its edge. We cannot use the Word to expose another person while refusing its searching work within us. We cannot call something deception simply because it opposes our interpretation or call something truth merely because we can attach a verse to it. The sword we hold is still capable of searching the heart of the person holding it.

Taking the sword does not mean leaving submission behind. We remain beneath Christ's authority even as His Word is entrusted to us. The posture we learned before the throne of grace remains the posture from which we speak, discern, resist, and stand. Our confidence has never rested in our ability to handle the sword perfectly, but in the One whose Word it is. The sword in our hand remains His sword.

Paul does not send us forward in pursuit of someone to strike. The sword is held by people clothed in truth, righteousness, gospel peace, faith, and salvation, standing against what would move them from the reality established in Christ. And the command that has surrounded the entire passage is waiting for us once more.

Stand.

And Having Done All — Stand

“Put on the full armor of God so that you can stand against the schemes of the devil” (Ephesians 6:11 CSB).

Then, after naming the struggle that is not against flesh and blood, he says it again: *“Take up the full armor of God, so that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having prepared everything, to take your stand. Stand, therefore”* (Ephesians 6:13–14 CSB). Stand. Take your stand. Stand, therefore. The repetition carries the weight of the passage.

There is something remarkably settled about that language. Paul has not described an insignificant conflict. There are schemes, rulers and authorities, cosmic powers of darkness,

spiritual forces of evil, an evil day, and flaming arrows. Yet the people clothed in the armor of God are not pictured frantically trying to secure an outcome. They are being prepared to remain standing.

Steadfastness is possible because Christ has already *“disarmed the rulers and authorities and disgraced them publicly; he triumphed over them in him”* (Colossians 2:15 CSB). The cross has established the ground from which Paul can tell believers to stand. We do not stand in order to make Christ victorious. We stand because His victory has already defined the reality in which they live.

The serpent sought to move Eve from trust in God’s goodness into suspicion. The tempter sought to move Jesus from the Father’s word into another interpretation of sonship, provision, protection, and authority. Accusation seeks to displace us from what God has spoken. Fear presses us to receive what circumstances appear to be saying as more authoritative than what is true in Christ. Deception keeps offering another place from which to interpret reality. Standing refuses that displacement.

Paul says something similar at the end of his long declaration concerning resurrection and victory: *“But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the Lord’s work, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain”* (1 Corinthians 15:57–58 CSB). Victory through Jesus Christ gives rise to steadfastness. *Immovable* is not the posture of someone who has never felt pressure. It describes someone for whom pressure has not been allowed to determine the ground upon which they stand.

Hebrews gives that steadfastness the language of an unshakable kingdom. God promises the shaking of what can be shaken “so that what is not shaken might remain.” Then comes the response: *“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful. By it, we may serve God acceptably, with reverence and awe”* (Hebrews 12:27–28 CSB). What cannot be shaken does not become unshakable because the shaking has arrived. The shaking reveals what remains.

We have heard that language before. The gold did not become gold because it survived the testing. The testing revealed what was there. Truth did not become truth because the sword distinguished it. The sword exposed and discerned what was there. Now pressure does not manufacture the reality in which we stand. It presses upon our willingness to remain within what Christ has already established.

Paul speaks of that ground in Romans: *“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have also obtained access through him by faith into this grace in which we stand”* (Romans 5:1–2 CSB). We stand in grace. Our place

before God has been opened through Jesus Christ. The battlefield does not move us outside that reality and require us to find our way back through successful warfare.

Standing is what alignment looks like when it is placed under pressure.

Truth has become more than something we affirm; we remain in it when another interpretation is offered. Righteousness has become more than something we know belongs to us in Christ; we refuse accusation as the ground from which we see ourselves. Gospel peace holds our feet when fear would move them. Faith continues to trust. Salvation continues to name whose we are. And the sword of the Spirit remains in the hand of someone who is still beneath the authority of Christ.

We stand with the sword of the Spirit in hand, but we have never stopped standing beneath its authority.

The culmination of warfare is not frantic activity. It is steadfastness. Christ's victory establishes the ground; His Word searches and distinguishes; Spirit of Truth brings us into agreement with what He has established; and when deception, accusation, fear, or pressure would move us somewhere else, we remain.

