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Abstract: In this paper, we examine two key NT passages that address spiritual warfare and spiritual growth, showing how they are inextricably linked. In Ephesians 6:10–20, Paul shows believers that in order to stand in their faith, they must stand in God’s full armor, their identity “in Christ.” With each piece, he reveals essential aspects of Christ’s armor, beginning with the belt of truth and ending with requests for prayer for evangelism. Paul seems to organize them in three sets of three pieces of armor. In 1 John 2:12–14, John teaches that the natural outworking of standing in Christ’s armor is growth in three stages. As we compare the 1 John and Ephesians passages, we will see how each piece of armor, and the believer’s understanding of them, is necessarily linked during the three stages of growth. Finally, we conclude with the far-reaching missiological implications.

Key Words: 1 John 2:12–14, Ephesians 6:10–20, three stages of spiritual growth, spiritual warfare, identity in Christ, armor of God, 1 John, Ephesians

Introduction

There are no civilians in God’s army. Our King calls all of his followers to engage in his spiritual war and to grow into maturity in him. All true Christ-followers are thrust into conflict not against “flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12, ESV).¹ However, many believers in the West remain in the first stage of spiritual growth and have little awareness of their vital role in this battle.²

In this chapter, we will show the connection between two NT passages that address spiritual warfare, the mission of God, and the need for spiritual growth. In Ephesians 6:10–20, Paul shows that in order to stand in faith, believers must resist

1. All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise indicated.
2. In the original language, the word *πάλη* can be translated “wrestle,” but also to “fight.” Paul seems to be saying we are not “wrestling” but “waging war” in deadly combat.

in God's full armor, their identity "in Christ." Paul seems to organize the armor into three sets of three pieces. In a parallel passage (1 John 2:12–14), John shows three growth stages as believers learn to stand firm in Christ's armor: Children, Young Warriors, and Mentors. All the weapons of armor need to be worn and used together with growing skill in order to appropriate the victory in Christ. As we compare the 1 John and Ephesians passages, we will see how the pieces of armor in sets of three are correlated with the three stages of spiritual growth.

Growth in believers' lives depends on their ability to stand firm in the strength of the Lord, so they are not pushed down and crushed as they assail the "gates of hell" (Matt 16:18) and the demonic enemies counterattack them.³ Since all believers are combatants (2 Tim 2:2, 7),⁴ no one can remain passive. All must actively choose to use the whole armor and to fight by faith "in the strength of his might" (Eph 6:10). To grow up and "overcome the evil one" in the *missio Dei*, believers need to engage their enemy with Christ's armor consciously put on.⁵

Relying on the Lord's Armored Strength and Growth

Paul speaks of the panoply (τὴν πανοπλίαν) as the Lord's very armor,¹ defining our new identity "in union with Christ," our King. The armor belongs to Jesus himself as Yahweh of the Old Testament, as Paul implies by saying "be strong in the Lord."⁷

3. John Gill writes, "For though they are weak . . . and can do nothing of themselves . . . without Christ; yet since there is strength in him, which is communicable to them, they may expect it from him, and depend upon it; and they may come at, or strengthen themselves in it, and by it, by meditation on it, by prayer for it, by waiting on Christ in his own ways, by exercising faith upon him, and through the Spirit, who strengthens them from him with might in the inward man" ([John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament in Three Volumes* (London: Aaron Ward, 1746). Available online at: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/ephesians-6-10.html>]).

4. Robert Saucy and Neil Anderson write: "Scripture presents the process of Christian growth as far more than a restful passivity." Six paragraphs later after summarizing Scripture passages that reveal the "rigorous process" of the "ongoing battle against evil forces" in spiritual warfare and growth (Phil 3:12–14; 1 Cor 9:24–27; 1 Tim 4:7; Eph 6:10–16; 1 Tim 6:11–12; 2 Tim 2:3; 4:7), they write: "At the cross, Christ won the decisive battle over the powers of sin, but in God's providence and plan, the defeated enemies have not yet been judged. They still wage war against God, and in a real sense the battle ground for the ongoing war between Christ and sin is now in our lives. Our coming to Christ means enlistment in His army to do battle against sin. We are able to enter the fray armed with Christ's victory because we wage war 'in Christ.'" ([Robert L. Saucy and Neil T. Anderson, *The Common Made Holy: Being Conformed to the Image of God* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1997, 310–311]). See also, David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Christian Soldier: An Exposition of Ephesians 6:10–20* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1986, 40–53).

5. Sinclair B. Ferguson, "The Reformed View" in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, ed. Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 67–68.

6. See the article by Donna R. Reinhard, "Ephesians 6:10–18: A Call to Personal Piety or Another Way of Describing Union with Christ?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 3 (2005): 521–532.

7. Iain Duguid, "Sacred Weapons for Spiritual War: Wearing the Whole Armor of God," *Desiring God* (blog), June 21, 2019, accessed July 10, 2019, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/>

“Lord” (κύριος) is the translation of the Hebrew word YHWH (Yahweh) in the Septuagint, an ancient Greek translation of the OT.⁸ The image of the “belt of truth” comes from Isaiah 11:6–9; the “breastplate” and “helmet” are found together in Isaiah 59:17, showing that they correlate with one another. The “feet” readied with the Gospel are found in Isaiah 52:7. The “shield”, though not directly referenced in Isaiah (see Isa 37:35), is God’s very presence in Genesis 15:1.⁹ Since the panoply belongs to the Lord, we cannot exercise it without first “put[ting] on the Lord Jesus Christ” at salvation (Rom 13:14) and then appropriating all that he is for us in our daily war with Satan and his demons.¹⁰

Second, appropriating the Lord’s armor requires the gift of repentant faith given in Christ through hearing the Gospel in the Spirit’s power (Rom 10:6–17; 1 Tim 1:14; 2 Tim 2:14; 2:25). Faith and its resulting fruit springs out of the gift of the fullness of the Holy Spirit, as the grammatical and logical connections of the whole armor teaching in Ephesians show (Eph 5:18–6:10). Without the fullness of the Spirit (Eph 5:18) of the resurrected Christ (Rom 8:2), it is impossible to fight, grow and stand in the spiritual war. We can see this in the life of Jesus himself. After the Spirit of God anointed him for ministry, he went out into the wilderness, led by the Spirit to battle Satan, thus establishing a paradigm for believers for spiritual warfare (Matt 4:1). In that battle, he depended on the sword of the spoken word from Deuteronomy and relied on the shield of his Father’s absolute faithfulness (Matt 4:4, 7, 10). The same is true for the believers in the book of Acts. After receiving the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, they went into the battle in his fullness, and spoke the words boldly (Acts 4:31). Therefore, a conceptual parallelism exists between being filled with the Spirit with whom believers should be empowered (Eph 5:18–20) and putting on God’s protective armor. Even Paul himself asks for prayer to be filled with boldness to speak as he ought to speak. Such boldness only comes from relying on the indwelling Spirit for resurrection power (Eph 6:19; Rom 8:2).

Third, in Ephesians 6:10–20 the armor summarizes who believers are “in Christ,” who has clothed them with his own identity. Many expositors, on the other hand, believe the armor pieces are essentially aspects of personal purity and righteousness.¹¹ While there is some measure of truth to this, as parallel passages demonstrate (1 Thess 5:8; Rom 13:12), it is important to note that the ability both “to desire and to work his good purpose” (Phil 2:13, author’s translation) flows out of our new status based on our armored identity in Christ. We are able to stand in purity

sacred—weapons—for—spiritual—war. Adapted from Iain Duguid, *The Whole Armor of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019).

8. Passages referencing “the Lord” from the OT, often apply to Jesus in the NT (e.g., Phil 2:10–11; Isa 45:23).

9. Cf. Prov 30:5 “he is a shield”; and Ps 7:10 “My shield is with God.”

10. Christ is the truth (John 14:6; Eph 4:21); He is our righteousness (1 Cor 1:30); Christ is our peace (Eph 2:14) and he is our message (1 Cor 1:23; 2:2); “His faithfulness is a shield” (Ps 91:4).

11. Reinhard, “A Call to Personal Piety,” 522–523.

and righteousness only as we are clothed with the armor of his strength in the midst of the spiritual war. We see this throughout Paul's letters. For example, in Ephesians, he first describes the believers' identity (Eph 1:1–3:21) and then their responsibility to live out who they are in Christ (Eph 4:1–6:24). This phenomenon is often referred to as the "indicative before the imperative." The indicative describes who we are and what Christ has done; the imperative describes how we are to live. Sinclair Ferguson, for example, writes: "Know your new identity and it will determine how you live."¹²

Last, all believers must grow up from being newborn babies who have recently "put on Christ" (cf. Rom 13:14) to full-grown mentors, who have learned to live in Christ's resurrection strength against the demonic powers (Eph 1:19b–21).¹³

John's Growth Stages and Paul's Armor Correlated

Interestingly, both John (1 John 2:13b,14b) and Paul (Eph 6:10–20) use parallel ancient warfare symbolism in the context of growth.¹⁴ In both, new believers grow to be warriors who "are strong . . . and have overcome the evil one" (1 John 2:14b; Eph 6:10). Personal growth in purity and righteousness in both is the essential outworking of practicing warfare as believers know and trust Christ.¹⁵ Furthermore, out of knowing all the riches "in Christ" and full of bold confidence in his Gospel, growing believers will overcome the forces of darkness in active evangelism to disciple all people-groups. In addition, the language of 1 John 2 concerning three stages of spiritual growth echoes that of Paul in Ephesians. For example, John summarizes his discussion of self-deceived members of the community who think they were genuine partners of the light of God (1 John 1:5–7). He indicates that a person enters the first stage of growth when he or she repents of self-deception and moral darkness, which

12. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Devoted to God: Blueprints for Sanctification* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2016), 88: "Know your new identity and it will determine how you live—just as hearing the name your parents gave you causes you to respond in a deep seated and instinctive—and perhaps distinctive—way." Notice also, e.g., 93–94, 213. See also, Sinclair B. Ferguson, "The Reformed View" in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views*, ed. Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 48. Ferguson cites, e.g., Matt 6:32–34; Rom 12:1–2; and Eph 4:20–25.

13. See classically, Matthew Henry: "All Christians are not of the same standing and stature; there are babes in Christ, there are grown men, and old disciples. As these have their peculiar states, so they have their peculiar duties; but there are precepts and a correspondent obedience common to them all, as particularly mutual love and contempt of the world" (Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Unabridged*, Vol 6. Acts to Revelation. Online at: www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc6.iJo.iii.html, accessed July 30, 2019). John MacArthur takes a similar view of three stages of growth. See John MacArthur, *1–3 John*. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 2007), 69–78.

14. John likely read Paul's writings, as Peter certainly read Paul (2 Pet 3:15–16) and vice versa. It is possible that some of the apostles got together and discussed spiritual warfare and other doctrines during the times when their lives overlapped (e.g., Acts 11:30, 12:25; Gal 1:18, 2:1, 9).

15. "Moreover, daily putting on and utilizing the armor is an essential element of the believer's process of becoming like Jesus—the goal of biblical discipleship" (Charles E. Lawless, "Spiritual Warfare and Evangelism," *Clergy Journal* 82, no. 8 (2005): 29–30).

have blinded their eyes (1 John 1:6, 8, 10; 2:4, 9, 11), and fully trusts Christ's sacrifice that satisfies his Father's justice (1 John 2:1–2; 2:12a, 13c).¹⁶ Likewise, Paul discusses blindness, Christ's sacrifice, and the heart regeneration that comes from repentance (Eph 5:1–9). John next exhorts the young men to be strong, to fight, and to overcome the evil one. Paul also encourages the Ephesian house churches to “no longer be children” but to grow up to become mature (Eph 4:13–14).¹⁷

John and Paul, thus, both describe stages of spiritual growth¹⁸ as development from infancy to maturity. John explicitly states that there are three (1 John 2:9–14). As a new Christian grows, he or she eventually becomes a young warrior (1 John 2:13b, 14b). After learning spiritual warfare in this stage, a person progresses to become a seasoned warrior and later a father–mentor in the faith (1 John 2:13a, 14a).¹⁹ The only means to do so is to live (abide) in Christ (1 John 2:6, 14, 24, 27; Gal 2:20; 2 Tim 3:12) with the *full* armor in Christ “put on” and “taken up” (that is, put into practice) as Paul commands (Eph 6:11, 13).²⁰ We strongly emphasize that all pieces of

16. “Propitiation” (ESV, NASB) is better than “sacrifice of atonement” (NIV) in 1 John 2:1–2 and Rom 3:25.

17. Saucy and Anderson write, “John uses the metaphors of little children, young men, and fathers to describe the process of growing up. Little children are those who have entered into a knowledge of God and have had their sins forgiven. They have overcome the penalty of sin. Fathers, who are more mature, have had a long understanding and knowledge of God. Young men know the word of God, are strong, and are characterized as those who have overcome the evil one . . . How are we going to help fellow believers mature in the faith if they don't know who they are in Christ and are basically ignorant of Satan's schemes? In all the years that we have been helping people find their freedom in Christ, the one common denominator of every person living in defeat was they didn't know who they were as children of God” (Saucy and Anderson, *Common Made Holy*, 50).

18. See, Mark R. Kreitzer, “Spiritual Growth Challenge: Spiritual Warfare and the Christian Walk,” Living Faith Blog, June, 2019, accessed June 9, 2019, <https://blogs.gcu.edu/college-of-theology/spiritual-growth-challenge-spiritual-warfare/>

19. Robert Yarbrough cites three main views on the three terms used. First, he cites I. H. Marshall and Augustine, who teach that the passage “addresses one group,” but rejects it because it does not do “sufficient justice” to the uniqueness of each group. Second, Yarbrough's own view in effect is similar to ours. “Little children . . . are probably the entire readership, conceived of by John as children of God through their reception of the gospel” and the “subsequent [two] terms [are] subordinate.” In other words, all the addressed believers are the “little children” (1 John 2:1; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21) and “little ones” and within that larger group there are two sub-groups, “fathers” and “young men.” Against this, Yarbrough discusses the third view, which we espouse. “This understanding is viable (and allows an analogous reading of 2:14). But it assumes a choppy flow, from the very young to the old and then back to the not so young (or not so old).” Instead of a “choppy flow,” John seems to clearly be using a biological metaphor that, first, challenges all of John's beloved children to grow to become “fathers” (what we term “mentors”), a valuable goal in ancient cultures (e.g., Prov 16:31, 20:29). These wise fathers and mothers are able to robustly disciple younger believers. After impressing upon all believers the goal, John builds upon the biological growth metaphor, which came into his mind with the use of “little children,” and returns to the intermediate growth stage, reminding the younger men (and women) of inevitable warfare in the King's army with its concomitant suffering in the spiritual battle (Robert W Yarbrough, *1–3 John: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008], 113–114).

20. Lloyd-Jones, *The Christian Soldier*, 179–181. Lloyd-Jones emphasizes putting on the whole armor and dislikes emphasizing separate pieces.

armor need to be knowledgably put on and exercised at all times *together* as much as one is capable.

However, from a practical and missiological perspective, and with at least one internal hint of the connections, each of these sets of three pieces connect with the three growth stages in 1 John 2—three pieces of armor for each growth stage. Paul’s first set of three coincides with John’s baby/child stage and ought to be emphasized especially at that time. Paul’s second set of three is analogous to the description of the young warrior. John uses a similar phrase as Paul: “You are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one” versus “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might” (1 John 2:14b; Eph 6:10). The father-mentors of 1 John (2:13a, 14b) need a deep emphasis upon praying in the Spirit together with all of God’s people and asking for a powerful filling of the Spirit to boldly make known the Gospel (Eph 6:19). As believers grow, the Lord takes them through three “cycles,” emphasizing the *same* three truths in each cycle but with ever deepening insight and emphasis.

As we correlate John’s three stages of growth and Paul’s armor passage, first it is important again to see that the whole pericope from Ephesians 6:14–20 is grammatically and conceptually connected to the verb “stand” (Eph 6:14) and that, in turn, with the fullness of the Spirit in Ephesians 5:18. Someone may say that all of this results in six pieces of armor. However, this neglects the grammatical and logical connection between “stand” and the three exhortations on prayer in Ephesians 6:18–20. This link indicates there are three more necessary aspects of our “armor.” Perhaps these could be analogous to a long-distance weapon, something like the spear and javelin that God wields: “Draw the spear and javelin against my pursuers; say to my soul: ‘I am your salvation’” (Ps 35:3). Taking all this into account gives us *nine* weapons as we see in the chart below. These three sets are linked with the three stages of growth in 1 John 2:12–14.

Comparison of Paul and John Summarized

	Truth	Protection	Evangelism
Children	Belt of truth	Breastplate of Righteousness	Feet shod with the Gospel of peace
Warriors	Shield of faithfulness	Helmet of salvation	Sword of the spoken Gospel–word
Mentors	Praying in the Spirit	Pray together for all the saints	Prayer for bold evangelism

In summary, baby Christians need to learn to know and rely on the Father (1 John 2:12, 13c). This includes a childlike trust in his flawless and inerrant truth (“belt of truth”; see Pss 12:6; 18:30). Second, they need to know they have been declared righteous in Christ, have peace with the Father (Rom 5:1–2), and can never come under any accusation or condemnation (Rom 8:1, 33–34; “breastplate of righteousness”). Out of this experiential knowledge, baby Christians evangelize (“feet prepared with the Gospel of peace,” author’s translation). As they mature into young warriors, the three pieces of armor repeat themselves at a deeper level. By girding themselves with God’s truth, they grow in greater trust in the absolute faithfulness of our Father’s promises and character (“shield of his faithfulness,” author’s translation). Next, believers develop an ever-deepening understanding of God’s saving righteousness which rebuilds their thought life (“helmet of salvation”). And finally, they increasingly move forward in evangelism, “boldly to proclaim the mystery of the Gospel” (Eph 6:19) (“sword of the Spirit”). Mentors repeat the same cycle a third time with an emphasis on prevailing prayer and action in evangelism.

Armor and Growth Linkages Explained

In order for Christ-followers to mature, “building [themselves] up in [their] most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit” (Jude 20), they first need to know how to appropriate the weapons God provides. Paul carefully addresses each piece of the armor, both defensive and offensive, so they would be able to practice using them before entering combat. This preparation should happen in the infant and late childhood stage of growth.

Christ-Followers as “Children”

The initial “putting on” of Christ’s whole armor means that a new-born believer has become a “new person,” because he or she is regenerated. Believers are initially united with Christ through the outpoured Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13). They have died with him, been raised with him, are now seated in the heavenly places hidden with Christ in God and will come with him in glory (Col 3:1–4). In their new elevated status of grace, they are seated with him, sharing his authority over all the demonic rulers and principalities (Eph 1:19b–23; 2:4–6; Rom 5:1–2). They realize that the spiritual battle is not a battle between two people within them—the old and the new man—but with the internal flesh and external Satanic forces.²¹ Their armor “in

21. See John Murray, “The Dynamic of the Biblical Ethic,” in *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics*, with a Foreword by J. I. Packer (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957/2001), 202–228; Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 25–28; Ferguson, *Devoted to God*, 82: “When I was united to Jesus Christ I was transferred from Adam-Land to Christ-Land, from the Adam Family to the Christ Family. By God’s grace my past forgiven. But there is more to it than that: I died out of an entire world order—the Adamic order—and was

Christ,” therefore, is a completely renewed identity. The “old person” they once were has forever died and been “put off” (Col 3:3, 9; Eph 4:22–24).²² The new creation, the new person, has come “in Christ” and “in the strength” of his armor; old things have passed away forever (2 Cor 5:17).

“Now you have been washed,” Paul summarizes, “you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor 6:11). Certainly, young believers are not yet glorified and sinless; that awaits the resurrection at the last day. However, in their new identity in Christ, they are no longer idolaters, occult practitioners, hate-filled people, who practice fighting and fits of rage (Gal 5:20; 1 Cor 6:9–10; Titus 3:3).²³ Paul even warned “that those who [habitually] do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal 5:21; Eph 5:5; 1 Cor 6:10). John agrees: A new life is always evidenced by active growth. Anyone who says he is in the light, but lives in darkness, is a liar (1 John 1:6–7, 10).

This first stage, then, addresses everyone’s existential need for a good and wise Father and provides the first piece of armor. John says, “You have come to know the Father” (1 John 2:14, author’s translation). As new Christians come to know the Father’s kind yet firm voice of truth in the flawless Word (Heb 3:7; Pss 12:6; 18:30), they grow to trust his grace and justice, along with what he says about their new identity. This absolute confidence enables them to stand against Satan’s proven and deceptive strategy to malign the Father’s character and to cast doubt on his Word’s necessity and inerrant authority. He was a liar from the beginning (John 8:44).²⁴ Without the “belt of truth,” which holds the “sword of the Spirit,” all the other pieces are useless and growth in grace is stunted (2 Pet 3:18).

Furthermore, new-born believers need to know the “breastplate of righteousness,” that their “sins are forgiven,” once for all, based upon Christ’s merit alone (1 John 2:12). They have been declared righteous in Christ and can never again be declared guilty (Rom 8:1, 33–34). The Father’s just wrath is forever satisfied (1 John 2:2). They are fully graced — “accepted in the beloved” (Eph 1:6 KJV). Instead, Satan and his demons accuse and condemn believers for their sins (Rev 12:10), tempting them to seek their own righteousness (Phil 3:9; Rom 10:3), to do fleshly works for human praise, and to boast in themselves rather than in the Lord (Isa 59:6; 64:6; Matt 6:1; Eph 2:9; Rom 3:27; 1 Cor 1:30–31). On the other hand, God never again motivates by guilt but only by grief and sorrow leading to repentance

thus delivered from a fallen and condemned race under sin’s reign, through union with the Christ who died to sin and was raised to new life.” Cf. Ferguson, “The Reformed View,” 59–60.

22. This is paralleled in Ephesians 4 where Paul says new believers were taught the content of the faith, which states a rebel must once and for all put off the old Adam and once and for all put on the second Adam, Christ.

23. In their new lifestyle in Christ, they are also no longer blasphemers, persecutors, or violent people (1 Tim 1:13) nor adulterers, fornicators, homosexual offenders, drunkards, slanderers or swindlers (1 Cor 6:10).

24. Cf. the serpent in Genesis 3:1, “Did God actually say?”

(2 Cor 7:10; Heb 10:1–3). This “breastplate” is the very “righteousness of God” in Christ through faith (2 Cor 5:21; Rom 5:1), which is always “working through love” (Gal 5:6; 2 Pet 1:3–7; Jas 2; Eph 2:10). Believers’ identity, as justified ones in Christ’s obedience (Rom 5:19–20), results in loving and just interpersonal relationships (Eph 5:21–6:9; Rom 13:1–8; 1 Pet 5:8; Heb 12:4).

Finally, Paul speaks of “feet prepared with the Gospel of peace” (author’s translation), echoing Isaiah 52:7. Christ is the “Prince of Peace” (Isa 9:6), who ran with beautiful feet to proclaim good news to Zion: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace . . . who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” In that context, the Lord commands all peoples to “Turn to me and be saved . . . for I am God, and there is no other” (Isa 45:22). Paul likewise emphasizes that the idolatrous peoples (τὰ ἔθνη) have now been brought near through the blood of the cross (Eph 2:11, 13). Therefore, the Lord begins to build into new believers a passion to disciple all tribes, peoples, and nations of earth (Matt 28:18–20). Out of their new experiential knowledge of the Father, baby Christians joyfully evangelize with Christ’s “prepared feet” (Eph 6:15). Satan’s counterattack is to hi-jack Christ’s light and peace through fear and anxiety so that believers lose all motivation to trust God and share his Gospel.

Christ-Followers as Young Warriors

As children mature into young warriors, the first pieces of armor repeat themselves at a deeper level. Children needed to experience the Father’s unconditional welcoming love “poured into in [their] . . . hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Rom 5:5) in order to overcome the demonic forces they face (Eph 2:1–2). However, in this second cycle, God’s once and for all forgiveness and the constant practice of believers’ girding themselves with God’s truth (“belt”) moves warriors into deeper trust in the absolute faithfulness of God’s promises and character (“taking up the shield of his faithfulness,” author’s translation). Because this whole pericope deals with Christ’s armor, not the believers’, the shield must be his faithfulness instead of their faith, as the OT allusion demonstrates. Their confidence, then, is in Christ’s proven faithfulness. Warriors take refuge from the enemy’s blazing arrows by standing and holding out their protective leather shields soaked in water. These flaming shafts attack God’s faithful character and infallible promises of protection. Without the Lord’s quenching shield, the arrows assail the minds and emotions of Christ’s people, tempting them instead to take cover in their own shields of fleshly truth, schemes, and resources (Ps 118:8–9; Prov 3:5–6). Such self-made shields offer no protection and burn up when hit.

Warriors, however, have adequately trained for and practiced warfare “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph

6:12). Their enemies constantly bombard them with tempting thoughts to turn away from implicitly trusting the Father's Word and instead to yield to various lusts of the flesh and the mind (Jas 1:13–15; 4:1–3; Eph 2:3). Only when they surrender to these temptations, such as letting the sun go down on their anger without repentance and seeking reconciliation, do they give “the devil [accuser] an opportunity” (Eph 4:26–27).²⁵ As a norm, however, warriors have learned to daily repent as they listen to the voice of the Father's Spirit speaking daily through the Word of Christ (Prov 8:34). They have practiced memorizing and meditating on the Father's instruction day and night (1 John 2:14b; Ps 1:2b). John thus indicates that warriors are now “strong,” “the [memorized] word abides in them” and they have fought and “overcome the evil one” (1 John 2:14b) in both their spiritual growth and spreading the Good News.

Next, the “helmet of salvation” (warrior stage) and “breastplate of righteousness” (baby stage) are used in direct poetic parallelism in Isaiah 59:17, showing that they are conceptually synonymous. The helmet symbolizes warriors' deepening expectation (the “hope of salvation” in 1 Thess 5:8) of the glory of God (Rom 5:2, 11; 1 Pet 1:3–4) and a growing sense of security in his unconditional love in Christ' righteousness (Rom 5:1, 5–11; 8:28–39). This helmet of hope, as the anchor of their soul, will never make believers ashamed (Heb 6:19; Rom 5:5) but instead rebuilds their emotions and thought life (2 Cor 10:5; Phil 4:8). Hope provides exalting joy and strength to persevere through the inevitable sufferings of the warrior stage (Rom 5:3–5) because it gives a certain expectation of complete salvation, experienced in final form at the resurrection (e.g., Acts 23:6; 24:15; Gal 5:5; Phil 3:11; 1 Cor 15:32; Heb 11:35).

The third weapon in this second cycle, the sword of the spoken word (ῥῆμα) of God, parallels the “feet” that are prepared and ready to evangelize with the Good News of peace in the first cycle. The term “word of God” is often used to mean the Gospel-word (see Acts 6:7; 11:1; 2 Cor 2:17; 4:2; Col 1:25; 1 Pet 1:23; 1 Thess 2:13) and should be taken in the same way here. All believers, and especially young warriors, learn to wield this sword that is hidden in their hearts and ready on their lips (Prov 22:18; Pss 1:2; 119:99). Only then can they speak boldly on all occasions for Christ. This weapon is “powerful, living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb 4:12). It is also useful defense against the sword thrusts of the enemy. Satan's strategies attempt to persuade children and emerging warriors to be ashamed of God, his Good News (Rom 1:16), and not to trust the power of the Gospel. Those who believe Satan replace the Lord's sword with their own weapon, holding to a form of

25. Clinton Arnold writes, “Paul uses spatial language to refer to the devil securing inhabitable space in the life of a believer when he warns, ‘Do not give the devil a foothold’ (Eph 4:27). This directly contradicts the view that the two cannot coexist in the same body.” ([Clinton T. Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 82]). See Edward F. Murphy, *The Handbook for Spiritual Warfare* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2003), 522, “Demonic powers gain entrance only through sin areas in a person's life. Sin areas give demons something to hold on to . . . The Apostle Paul refers to them as . . . ‘footholds’ . . . in the believer's life (Eph 4:27).”

spirituality devoid of power (2 Tim 3:5), while proclaiming “cleverly devised myths” (2 Pet 1:16), no longer for God’s glory (John 5:44).²⁶ Such a counterfeit sword cannot win souls for Christ (Matt 4:7, 10).

Christ-Followers as Mentors

Once these lessons are learned, a seasoned warrior progresses to the final mentor stage of growth. This stage involves building upon the first two layers of armor and recapitulating these truths with an even deeper emphasis. The mentor has learned to take up the javelin, praying God’s faithful truth and promises “in the Spirit” (Eph 6:18a), to prepare the ground ahead for the Gospel-word to spiritually conquer. Being filled with the word of truth and praying the promises “in the [fullness of the] Spirit” gives the same result, as Paul reveals in parallel passages (Eph 5:18–20; Col 3:16–17). Mentors have learned to pray together “at all times,” interceding according to the truth for protection for all the saints, who are engaged in the spiritual war.²⁷ Corporate prayer for all believers is similar to the “turtle formation” used by the Roman army when a whole platoon surrounded themselves with shields that looked like a tortoise from a distance.²⁸ Such intercessory prayer correlates with the protective breastplate and helmet of the first two cycles, guarding Christ’s army in mission against the enemy’s flaming arrows. Last, Paul also asks for prayer for himself, as all believers and especially mentors should, in order to use his “readied feet” and the “sword of the [spoken] word” to proclaim the Gospel boldly (Eph 6:19).

Mentors, then, are characterized by a strong understanding of their identity in Christ and have learned to fight victoriously “to overcome the evil one.” John says that they have come to intimately know Jesus, “who is from the beginning” (1 John 2:14a; see, 1 John 1:1; John 1:1). The Lord has comforted and encouraged them through suffering caused by sin and by years of warfare, enabling them to teach and disciple others (2 Cor 1:3–7; 12:6–10; Matt 28:18–20). They also have developed perseverance through being “utterly burdened beyond [their] strength.” This happens so that they might “rely not on [themselves] but on God who raises the dead” (2 Cor 1:8–9). Through constant practice they have trained themselves to distinguish good

26. Ferguson, “The Reformed View,” 68.

27. Paul implies this when he writes, “[you all (plural)] keep alert [ἀγρυπνοῦντες] with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints” (Eph 6:18).

28. In their comments on Ephesians 6:16, Neil T. Anderson and Robert L. Saucy write the following in *God’s Power at Work in You: Unleashing the Fullness of God’s Power* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2001), 252: “The Roman soldiers in the New Testament era used a huge, door-shaped body shield that could provide much individual protection. But even more protection was offered when the soldiers came together as a compact unit and held these shields side by side or above them. If they stood apart and held their shields individually, their sides were exposed, but when they brought their shields together they were fully protected.” This is termed the “testudo formation.”

from evil and “solid food [meat]” from “milk,” because they are no longer infants (Heb 5:13–14). Consequently, mentors intimately know and experience the reality of their new identity in union with Christ in his death, resurrection, and ascension along with his present reign over all demonic authorities (Eph 1:19–21; 2:6; Col 3:1–4).

Paul and John’s Challenge for Christ-Followers Today

In the context of these two warfare passages, Paul and John express concern that Satan and his demons would seduce believers away²⁹ from walking and resting in our Father’s truth in the strength of the Lord’s armor, their identity in Christ (2 Cor 11:3; 1 Tim 4:1–7; 1 John 4:1–7). Paul especially desires that they rest in the sufficiency of God’s grace in Christ in the midst of the war (2 Cor 12:7–10). Both apostles realized that the true battle is not with “flesh and blood” (Eph 6:11) but against the inner spirit of believers, which God wants to heal and renew daily (Eph 4:23).³⁰ The older, outer man is decaying but the new, inner man is being refreshed day by day (2 Cor 4:16) only through the ministry of the Word and Spirit by faith.

The Apostles, thus, challenge all contemporary Christ-followers to learn spiritual warfare as they grow from the baby to mentor stage. Unfortunately, the second stage is greatly neglected in modern evangelicalism, keeping many believers bound in the baby stage and preventing them from maturing into mentors. This keeps most Christians from teaching and counseling those who are in the first and second stages with the Father’s comfort, as they share their combat experience of overcoming the evil one by the power of his Word and Spirit (1 John 2:14b).

Finally, in order for Christ-followers to accomplish God’s Great Commission goal to fill the earth with his glory (Isa 11:9; Hab 2:14), they must stand firm by faith in their new armored identity in Christ, grow up into maturity through the three stages described by John, and move out together to spread the Good News of peace.

29. Neil Anderson, *The Bondage Breaker: Overcoming Negative Thoughts, Irrational Feelings, Habitual Sins* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2019) 64–66 mentions Satan inciting David to take a census (1 Chr 1:21), Judas Iscariot (John 13:2), and Ananias (Acts 5:3) as other examples of direct demonic input into human minds. He also cites Martin Luther and David Powlison as a classic and a modern example of those who teach the same.

30. See the classic book, John Bunyan, *The Holy War* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1985).