

Standing Strong in a Time of War

Rich Nathan
August 18 & 19, 2018
When Life is Unfair
Ephesians 6:10-14

During our sabbatical, Marlene and I, along with our granddaughter Naomi, drove down south to visit my mother who is still healthy and going strong at age 91. We always listen to books when we take a long drive, it makes the time fly by as you are absorbed in a story. One of the books we listened to is called *Flags of our Fathers* by James Bradley. It tells the story of the six men captured in that iconic photo by Joe Rosenthal when they were raising the American flag in Iwo Jima on Mount Suribachi.

Slide

Rosenthal's Iwo Jima photo

That photo was turned into the tallest bronze statue in the world.

Slide

Statue photo

It's at Arlington Cemetery.

One of the men who was raising that flag was a guy named Mike Strank.

Slide

Photo of Strank

Mike was born in Czechoslovakia in 1919. His family immigrated to the United States. Mike grew up in Allentown, Pennsylvania – a steel mill town. He was a devout Catholic. He always prayed and he always went to Mass. Mike was a brilliant kid. He didn't know English when he began first grade, but by the end of the year he was so proficient that he skipped the second grade. His relatives said that he never forgot anything. He could open up the newspaper in the evening and read it. The next day he could tell you everything that was in every article.

Mike enlisted in the Marines before Pearl Harbor. He quickly became a sergeant. He was considered to be a Marines Marine. He was ripped – all muscle. Some of his men reminisced about Mike's leadership and said:

Slide

Everybody idolized Mike. He was a born leader, he was a natural leader, and a leader by example. Harlon, Ira, Franklin all loved him. Even the lieutenant, Lt. Pennel [to whom Mike reported], stood somewhat in awe of Mike.

He led by example. He had been there. He was an experienced fighter, he never talked about himself. He had real concern for us, big brother to us. We were young boys and he would reassure us. He would say, "I want to bring as many of you back home to your mothers as possible." He was considered one of the best young leaders in the Pacific.

After their flag raising that was captured in that photo, the battle of Iwo Jima continued for over month. Towards the end of the battle, Mike was sketching out a plan for some of the men in his command. There were enemy snipers. Mike was protected by an outcropping of rock on three sides. The fourth side was open to the sea. There were American battleships right off shore. Mike was hit by a shell fired by an American battleship. Mike Strank was killed by friendly fire.

Millions of young American soldiers made their way back home from the Second World War. They married, had children, grandchildren, they built careers, they experienced romances. Mike Strank, this devout Roman Catholic, who helped raise the flag on Iwo Jima but never came home. Why did this good man along with thousands of other good men die and in Mike's case, because of a mistakenly aimed shell from an American battleship?

Part of the answer, of course, is that Mike was in a war. In war soldiers get killed. Not based upon their characters necessarily or their goodness and badness. In a war there are lots and lots of casualties.

General Sherman, the great Northern General during the Civil War, said this:

Slide

It is only those who have neither fired a shot or heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, more vengeance, more desolation. War is hell.

Last week we explored one partial answer for life's unfairness. As a result of our first parents' sin, shalom – the way things ought to be – was lost. And shalom, people living long productive healthy lives, Jews and Arabs, blacks and whites, Republicans and Democrats, Christians and those from Muslim backgrounds, will live together in harmony in what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called the Beloved Community when the Lord returns.

But this week, I want us to consider another partial, not exhaustive, but partial explanation for life's unfairness: we are in a war. In a war there are casualties, including casualties among those who are good and young and loved by their families.

In war, even Christians are killed. I've called today's talk, "Standing Strong in a Time of War". Let's pray.

Slide Ephesians 6:10-14

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place,

Here's the question: why does Paul go on to add the end of Ephesians 6, which begins:

Slide Ephesians 6:10-11

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.

Slide

The comprehension of life

The reason why the Apostle Paul didn't end his letter to the Ephesians in chapter 6, verse 9, but he went on instead and added verse 10 to the end of the chapter is because he knew that the church would be utterly defeated unless they understood the simple truth that we Christians live our lives in a time of war. We are in a spiritual war that is being carried on across our world in every sphere of life. There is no place – not the church, not your prayer closet, not your devotional life, not your marriage, not your ministry or your small group, there is no place that is untouched by the war. There's a war going on, Paul says. The war is going to impact your children. It will impact your marriage. There is a war over your purity. There is a war concerning your emotions. A war in your relationships. A war against Jesus. A war against the church. A war against you. You, follower of Jesus, have a target on you.

According to the Bible in many places, there is a spiritual being named Satan who rules over a kingdom of wicked angels, a kingdom of demons. And according to the Bible, Satan, along with his demons, exercises so much power over the nations that he could legitimately be called "The ruler of this world" or "the ruler of the kingdom of the air".

Slide Ephesians 2:1-2

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.

Satan has a very simple rule for his kingdom:

Slide

Satan hates everything that God loves.

The Bible tells us that Jesus, through his death and resurrection, won a decisive victory over Satan, but the battle still continues. Until Jesus returns and makes his enemies his footstool, there are spiritual powers which are at work opposing God and opposing God's people.

Without understanding that we are in a war, we cannot in any way hope to comprehend why life in this world is the way that it is. Simply put,

Slide

We can't understand the world without understanding warfare

When you read an article or hear news about some horrific murder of a family or violence against a child or slaughter that's taking place in some part of the world, what explanation comes to your mind regarding terrible evil in our world? Typically, our society tells us one of two stories in providing an explanation. One story that's told is the biological story – that the killers were suffering some kind of physical defect, perhaps a chemical imbalance in the brain or a genetic defect. There's something wrong with evil people's biology. The second story that our society provides is a psychological story. The family that these evil people were raised in was terribly dysfunctional. They themselves suffered violence at a young age or never had anyone check their bad impulses.

Both of these stories – the biological and the psychological story – have great truth in them and they help as explanatory lenses through which we can better understand our world. But rarely in today's secular society, even among those of us who are Christians, do we ever hear the story of spiritual warfare.

Rarely, when we read these things or hear these things or experience these things do we say, you know there's a spiritual component to this terrible tragedy. There's a war going on. And these victims may be casualties of the war. We cannot understand the world's sufferings unless we see ourselves as people who are living in the middle of a war. War is hell, as General Sherman said.

Another way to put it is: life is a ride on a battleship. We don't spend our lives on a cruise ship. Our lives are described in the Bible more like a day in the trenches as opposed to a day at the spa.

Not only can't we understand the attack on the world without understanding warfare,

Slide

We can't understand the attack on Jesus without understanding warfare

There was a war going on on Christmas morning. There was a clash of the kingdoms. The kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan were smashing into each other. God was invading Satan's usurped rule over this world. Satan knew his kingdom was under assault. That's why he inspired Herod the King to murder all the baby boys in Bethlehem. He knew the true King was coming to reclaim what was rightfully his.

Why did God enter this world? Why did God become a man? Here is what we read in 1 John 3:8:

SLIDE 1 John 3:8

The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.

But we don't understand that in a comprehensive way that Jesus was healing or doing deliverances, unless we see that Jesus was setting up his kingdom over against Satan's kingdom. Jesus was plundering the house of the strong man named Satan.

Why did Jesus die? Certainly, he died as a sacrifice for our sins, to pay our debts. He died in our place as a substitute. He died to propitiate, to satisfy, to appease the wrath of God against sin. But we do not understand the death of Christ in a comprehensive way unless we set it against the backdrop of spiritual warfare. Why did Christ die? He died to overthrow the kingdom of Satan. Here is what we read in Colossians 2:13-15:

Slide Colossians 2:13-15

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Not only can't we understand the attack on the world without understanding warfare, and not only can't we understand the attack on Jesus without understanding warfare,

Slide

We can't understand the attack on the church without understanding warfare

So many folks look at their situation and say, "Christianity doesn't work for me. The TV evangelist that I listen to urged me to become a Christian and told me that if I became a Christian, all my troubles would be over. That my future would be bright. That because I was one of the King's kids now, I would prosper, my business would succeed, I would have money to pay off my debts, my kids would turn around, my marriage would be

great; I'd live my best life ever – but my life hasn't turned out that way. I've got all of these problems, all of these trials, all of these difficulties. It sometimes seems that things have gotten worse since I became a Christian. The fire is actually hotter than it was before. I feel like I'm being attacked like I've never been attacked before. I'm not sure if this Christianity thing is really all it is cracked up to be.”

For those of you who are Christians, and I know that not all of you are, but for those of you who have decided to embrace Christ as your Lord and turn control of your life over to him – not all of you have decided to trust in Christ to forgive your sins and to place your future in his hands – but for those of you who have, do you know that you are in a war and that there is a relentless attack by the enemy not only on Jesus, but on Jesus' people? All that God loves, Satan hates.

The last few weeks have underlined the terrible war that is going on in the church. Not just attacks against the church from outside the church, but attacks against the church from the inside of the church, from evil and darkness inside the church. Just this week, a grand jury report revealed that bishops and other leaders in the Roman Catholic Church in Pennsylvania covered up child sexual abuse by more than 300 priests over the course of 70 years. A priest raped a seven year-old girl as she recovered in the hospital from a tonsillectomy.

And, of course, evil is not confined to the Roman Catholic Church. There are many stories of molestation taking place in the evangelical wing of the church. Just a few weeks ago, the entire leadership team of one of America's great evangelical megachurches, Willow Creek, stepped down because of their handling of multiple charges of unwanted sexual advances, and the entirely inappropriate and suggestive comments to numerous woman by the church's former senior pastor. And all of this was kept secret for years by people on the church's staff. Do you understand, friends, that there is a war against the church? Satan hates everything that God loves.

Do you know that the enemy can even stir up other Christians – people within the church – to attack you and to slander you, even when you've done nothing wrong? I want to read to you a letter from a friend of Marlene and mine. Her name is Wanda. Here's what she wrote:

Slide

I have been a believer since childhood. I have always strived to live my life in a way that honors God and reflects the heart of Jesus. A few years back, I found myself in an extremely difficult situation at work. For 8 years I performed my lower level job happily. While I have served and held leadership positions in the church, I had no aspirations to move up the track to management at my job. One day, however, I felt like the Lord impressed on me that He planned for me to be in management. I knew it was the Lord because it was such a stark change in my mind.

A while later I was led to take a couple steps that were bold and out of my reserved nature and I, surprisingly, was awarded a management position skipping a few of the typical steps on that path.

As a result of this (unearned) position, jealousy, and some unwise superiors, I was placed in a department where I was greatly resented. Suddenly I became the center of what felt like a spiritual assault. For several years I was the topic of massive gossip and accusation. In a job where departments throughout the city were very connected, word of my reputation was spread throughout the city. At least a couple people reported completely fabricated lies about me to my superiors. They were told that I treat people like trash. A coup was planned where my superiors were to be on site and my staff set traps to make me look incompetent and get fired. (God didn't allow that to happen.) People wouldn't speak to me. One person would take my supplies and hide them. At one point after I had an injury and was hobbling around moving dozens of heavy boxes, a church going man stood a few yards away whistling hymns without offering to help.

Sadly enough many of those on the accusing, graceless, and gossiping end were fellow believers. (Though there were a couple Christians who spoke truth and defended me.) All through this extremely painful and humiliating time, my faith was my anchor in the storm. Knowing scripture was my life jacket. By God's grace, I chose to bless my co-workers by giving them verbal recognition when it was warranted, by helping them however possible when they had the opportunity to advance in position, by blessing them with birthday celebrations or Christmas gifts and by showing compassion when they were hurting. I prayed constantly for wisdom and help. And I cried ALOT!

My church friends and husband were invaluable to me. They were so encouraging and supportive, listened to me process, and prayed faithfully for me. I may have lost my mind without them!

Thank God, the storm has subsided. New people have come. I don't know why God led me through the experience but I knew He had called me there and had a purpose. I now walk with a little limp but God used it to teach me how to be a better leader.

I've said throughout this series that we often can't, in any particular instance, understand why something happens. And we would be wrong to attribute any accident or premature death or evil simply to the work of the evil one. We're not behind the scenes. Job didn't understand that it was Satan who was stirring things up against him. On occasion, the Lord will give revelation through spiritual gifts – give a dream or a prophetic word. It shows us that what we're going through is not just flesh and blood. Through this series I've said that our goal is not just to answer the question "Why is life unfair?" if anyone could. My goal is to help provide us with handholds so we don't lose our faith when we go through really hard times.

We particularly need these handholds during uncertain times in life. What the Apostle Paul calls, "the day of evil".

Slide Ephesians 6:13

¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

There are particular times that Paul calls "the day of evil". Unless you know how to find strength in the Lord, you will fail. You will collapse. Your faith will give way. Not every

day in our lives is the same. Not every season is the same. There are times in life when everything is smooth sailing and you just experience increase upon increase. There are other times when there is so much coming against you or against your family or your marriage or your workplace or your health or your finances that unless you know how to stand strong, you will implode.

Paul tells us to stand.

Slide

The commandment to stand

In interpreting the scriptures, one of the first things we need to do in our own scripture study is to underline in a package all the repeated words and phrases that the author uses. Because very often an interpretative key to the text concerns repeated words or phrases. When we read this text, we find the word “stand” mentioned four times in five verses.

Slide Ephesians 6:11

¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.

Slide Ephesians 6:13

¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

Slide Ephesians 6:14

¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place,

So Paul is communicating to us that standing, taking a stand, standing firm is an essential part of living the Christian life in this current time of war. What does it mean to stand? I’ll give you four rules of standing that I’m going to state in the form of commandments. The first commandment of standing is:

Slide

Thou shalt not retreat

You know, the world is full of people who retreat in the face of opposition. And when I think about retreating, I think about the number of escape hatches that the world offers us. If work is challenging, quit. If you have a conflict in your church, leave. If your marriage doesn’t work out, there is always the escape hatch of divorce. And so many people enter marriage with that in their minds. There’s always the possibility of retreat. They don’t enter marriage saying, “Well, I am going to be taking a stand. I know that opposition will come. I know that marriage is hard. I know that I might go through

some problems, but I am committed to taking a stand for my marriage and work on our problems and continue to fight to keep this marriage going. I will fight. I will fight.”

No. There is always that thing in the back of the mind that says, “Well, you know, if this doesn’t work out, I can always leave.”

Covenant relationships were the way people historically did their personal relationships. Covenant relationship is not about weighing costs and benefits. In a covenant relationship we say, “I am unconditionally committed to you and to this relationship even if the price of the relationship gets really, really high and the benefits get really, really low.” A classic example of a covenant relationship, of course, is marriage, expressed by the traditional vows:

Slide

For better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish until death us do part.

Even if you get dementia, even if you lose your looks, even if you go through long-term depression, or there is someone way more attractive than you that I meet at my job, or I discover over time that we’re very, very different people with personalities that don’t quite click. Nevertheless, I’ve entered a covenant with you so I am not weighing out the price or the benefits because I’m not going to. I’m in a marriage.

Friend, is there anything in your life where you say, “come what may, I will not retreat! I will not escape! I will stand my ground – with my marriage or with my commitment to the church or with my relationship with God”?

And one of the ways that the enemy gets Christians to retreat is by exaggerating the number of people who, in fact, do retreat.

Which leads to the second rule:

Slide

Thou shalt not exaggerate failure

The enemy comes along when we are feeling pressured and what he says to us is, “Listen, virtually everyone else in your situation has fled. You know, you are about the only one who is really trying to hold the ground.

We hear the voice, “Give up! You are all alone in your convictions. Every person who is as unhappy as you are in their marriage, gets divorced. Listen, you can find all kinds of friends around you, even in the church, who have jumped ship. Why should you be the only one who stays married especially being as unhappy as you? Even some Christian leaders have gotten divorced and they seem to be doing OK.”

Single people, you've heard the voice: "Every teenager has sex. No 20-something, no 30-something, no 40-50-year olds, whether you are heterosexual or gay, no one can be sexually abstinent as a single. It is impossible. You are all alone. Why hold out?" That's what the enemy said to the Prophet Elijah 2900 years ago. You are all alone in your fight against the idolatry of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. No one is left. All the other prophets have been killed. Give up! Everyone else has. Why hold on?

And to strengthen our resolve so that we don't retreat, the Lord speaks to us the way he spoke to the prophet Elijah and said, "You are not alone. There are many, many people out on the field with you who are similarly taking a stand. Don't retreat. Fear not. You don't have to."

For years, I heard the statistic that 80% of unmarried Christians who label themselves as evangelicals had sex before marriage. 80% - four out of five. But there's been a recent massive survey of evangelicals and what was found was if we go beyond the label and we start asking about behaviors like if you go to church monthly, do you read your Bible, do you regularly pray, and you look at people's actual behaviors and you say, "I don't care what your label is or what you say about yourself, what are you actually doing?" The recent survey said that 56% of unmarried evangelicals have never been sexually active. Another 19% said they did mess up at some point in the past, but they are no longer sexually active and were committed to remain pure until marriage. 75% of unmarried self-identified evangelicals come along and turn stats on their head. You say, "Well, nobody succeeds why should you bother?"

Slide

- Thou shalt not retreat.
- Thou shalt not exaggerate failure.

And here's the third thing:

Slide

Thou shalt not compromise

Joyce Meyer, the Christian teacher said:

Slide

Compromise means to go just a little bit below what you know is right. It is just a little bit, but it is the little foxes that spoil the vine.

You don't need to completely lie, just shade the truth. Hide embarrassing facts. Don't cheat a lot, cheat a little. You don't have to cut all the corners, just cut some of them.

CS Lewis, my favorite Christian author wrote this in his wonderful book about spiritual warfare titled [The Screwtape Letters](#).

Slide

Cover photo of [The Screwtape Letters](#) by CS Lewis

If you are looking for one book on spiritual warfare, I would encourage you to read [The Screwtape Letters](#). Here is what Lewis said:

Slide

Indeed, the safest road to Hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts...Your affectionate uncle, Screwtape.

People who take a stand, don't compromise.

Taking a stand means that there are certain principles that you will not compromise. That there are some things that you have a conviction about and you hold firm to. Satan is always offering a compromise.

"You don't have to retreat, Rich, perhaps we can meet half way. Don't stand your ground totally, but maybe we can meet half-way."

I see this aspect to spiritual warfare all the time as women and some men are picking a marital partner. Satan comes along and says, "I know that one of your desires is that your partner in marriage be a Christian. But you know, you are not getting any younger and this person that you are in love with is a very nice person. And so, let's erase that conviction that you used to have, that your number one priority in picking a person for marriage would be someone who was radically in love with Jesus Christ. Let's erase that from the number one position. Let's compromise and say the person I marry needs to be a moral person or at least have a good job and be a good listener! Hey, there aren't that many folks out there like that. And, again, remember the biological clock is ticking, ticking, ticking."

"Just bow the knee to me," Satan says, "Just bow a little bit because God won't give you what you want without my help. You need my help. Satan says your Father in heaven is not a good provider. You can't trust him to do good by you. You need my help. If you really want to do well, just bow a little bit to me." That was the temptation offered to Jesus. Satan said, "Just bow the knee and worship me. No big deal. I will give you all the keys to the kingdom of the world." You need one foot in the world and one foot in the kingdom.

Those who stay strong say, “No. I am going to trust God to provide for me without your help, thank you Satan. I don’t need to tip my cap to you at all. And I will not bow even a little. And I will not violate my convictions.”

And so I ask you where is it, at what point, will you say, and at what point have you said, “I am standing here. I will not compromise. I take my stand in the middle of the field. This far, no further.”

There’s got to be some point, brothers and sisters, where you say, “I’m not going to compromise. I don’t care if I lose my job, I will not lie just because my boss tells me to.” Or “I don’t care if I can get a job by lying on my resume, I’m not going to do it.” Or “I’m unhappily married and there’s someone attractive at my work or the church or the gym who is attracted to me, but it’s unthinkable that as a follower of Jesus I would ever have an affair. I’m not that person. I don’t want to be that person.”

What does it mean to stand?

Slide

- Thou shalt not retreat.
- Thou shalt not exaggerate failure.
- Thou shalt not compromise.

And finally,

Slide

Thou shalt not stand alone

You know, in America we love to celebrate the lone hero, the single person who rushes across the battlefield and heroically takes out an entire enemy company machine gun nest. But wars are never won by a single person. It’s won by vast armies, groups of people working in harmony against a violent enemy.

King David, in the Old Testament, had his mighty men. Paul traveled with a company of assistants. Jesus spread the kingdom with his 12 disciples. Brothers and sisters, you cannot stand in a time of war if you try to stand alone. Isolation and aloneness will kill you. Your faith will collapse. Those of you who are living in the day of evil, you need the church. You need small group support. You need brothers and sisters wrapping around you, helping you, strengthening you.

As the Apostle Paul says, “After you have done everything, you can stand.”

Let’s pray. We’re going to be having a Membership class on September 16 and I’m asking those of you who have never joined the church to make a commitment today

that on Sunday, September 16 at 2:30pm that you'll come to our membership class. You can say, "I'm not going to stand alone anymore."

Standing Strong in a Time of War

Rich Nathan
August 18 & 19, 2018
When Life is Unfair
Ephesians 6:10-14

- I. The comprehension of life
 - A. We can't understand the attack on the world without understanding warfare
 - B. We can't understand the attack on Jesus without understanding warfare
 - C. We can't understand the attack on the church without understanding warfare

- II. The commandment to stand
 - A. Thou shalt not retreat
 - B. Thou shalt not exaggerate failure
 - C. Thou shalt not compromise
 - D. Thou shalt not stand alone