What does Victory Look Like for Christians in Spiritual Warfare?

Ephesians 6:13-14a

Many years ago when I could run & before kids made it unaffordable, I loved to play racquetball. I learned it in college. I was decent in ability but quite average compared to really good players. So when I would play someone really good, I knew there was no way I could "win" by scoring more points than them. So to make it competitive for me, I would make up a more realistic, but still hard goal – often it was just to get into double figures – to get 10 points or more. If the final score was 10-21, I would get really excited “I did it, I did it! Yes” Sometimes that frustrated the other person because I was so excited about my 10 points when they had clearly smashed me 21-10. I had a different picture of victory than the other person did. What is our picture of victory when we think about spiritual warfare?

We know what victory in sports looks like depending on the sport – for many like baseball, football, soccer, field hockey, lacrosse and weight lifting, it is the person or team that has the MOST points or the highest score. In other sports like golf, cross-country, & running, it is the person or team with the fewest points or lowest time. And in most of our sporting events we also recognize a higher standard than just the score or time, such as integrity, keeping the rules, and even helping someone severely hurt. Scores don’t really matter in those cases – good sportsmanship is even more important – keeping the rules is essential or a winning score doesn’t matter.

But what does victory look like for Christians in spiritual warfare? That may sound like a strange question but it is also a very profoundly important one – especially in our achievement-oriented, individual-focused, comfort-driven American culture.

Two Sundays ago we saw that there is a great spiritual battle going on around us. The devil or satan is a real spiritual being that is much more powerful than any human but has little power compared to our Lord Jesus Christ. The devil is the leader of a group of angels that rebelled against God. We call that group “the demonic” – demons are genuine spiritual beings who constantly oppose God and try to spread evil in this world. Last week, we saw that it is in the ordinary events of life that we are most likely to be impacted by the great spiritual battle going on around us. The devil & the demonic want to render us ineffective for Jesus work by things like enslaving us to sin, keeping us from an abundant life, lessening our devotion to Jesus, making our current concerns more important than serving & witnessing for Jesus, seeking satisfaction in that which can’t satisfy, etc. They are constantly trying to corrupt culture through deception.

Today we want to go one step further and answer the question: What does victory look like for Christians in spiritual warfare? Please listen today with not just your minds, but your hearts as well. We face a natural conflict between our cultural idea of victory (like having parents who do what we want them to do, kids that always behave, marriages without conflict, friends who are always there to fix our problem, promotions, recognition, lots of free time, few stresses, good weather on our vacation, terrific deals at the store, our enemies being completely subdued, and
even our favorite sports team winning the championship—in other words, we see victory in achievement, possessions & feeling like things are going our way at the moment) — we have a natural conflict between our cultural idea of victory and God's clear teaching on what personal victory in the midst of spiritual warfare actually looks like. If we do not understand this, then our unrealistic expectations are going to lead us to think we are losing or a failure, when we actually are very victorious in God's sight. It is going to make us put a lot of effort into that which won't make much long-term difference. We are going to wrongly think that the terrible events (evil days) happening around us are a sign of spiritual defeat, when God is actually going to bring great spiritual victory out of them. We are like the foot soldier in a war, down in the mud and grime of the trenches. They can't tell whether the war is being won or lost by their feelings or by how things currently seem around them. They may be under heavy fire, friends may be hurt, and no let-up is in sight. Yet that may be the breaking point of the war or even close to the enemy surrendering. And vica versa, soldiers can win a quick local victory, see little opposition and have everything seem to go right, only to find out they have lost the war or have been drawn into a trap. We need a bigger perspective than our feelings or our perception of what is happening around us—because just like any foot soldier's perspective is too limited to know what is happening in the bigger war, so we cannot know the bigger perspective from our very limited perspective. This is especially true since God has chosen not to let us even visually see our actual spiritual enemies around us (nor our angelic protectors). If we don't understand what God sees as spiritual victory in our human lives, then we aren't going to be able to have joy in the journey, we will be wasting our time & effort, false expectations will crush us when we are actually winning.

PROPOSITION: Christians are victorious in the midst of spiritual warfare or spiritual attacks by simply standing firm in our faith to Jesus.

I. A surprising picture of victory in spiritual warfare

A. A Christian is victorious when they simply stand firm Ephesians 6:13-14a

So what does victory look like for Christians in spiritual warfare? According to our passage today, if we are still standing in the faith after a spiritual attack, then we are victorious. READ Eph 6:13-14a. Notice the stress on the word “stand”. V 13a, we put on God’s armor so we can “stand our ground” when evil appears to advance. Then, V 13b, after everything — after a long struggle where things may not turn around, in fact everything may seem far worse — spiritual victory is simply to stand. To remain in the faith; to not give up on or deny Jesus; to keep looking for opportunities to share the good news of Jesus — this is “standing”. Then v 14 starts, “Stand firm then” — be resolute, don’t give up, keep trusting Jesus, don’t hide away or flee the battle. Similarly v 11 we’ve seen this same truth in different words. READ v 11. FOUR TIMES in just a couple sentences, God makes it clear that victory to Him, for believers right now, is not some triumphalism or us vanquishing the powers of evil or that everything goes right in our lives.

B. Jesus has already won the victory at the cross

(Colossians 2:15; I John 3:8; Hebrews 2:14-15)
In the middle of a greater spiritual battle going on around us, a core part of our job as humans is simply to “stand”. Part of our difficulty in seeing the power of simple faith or simply standing is that we have a false idea of what God needs us to do in the spiritual battle. We aren’t here to eliminate satan, the demonic or worldly influences all around us. That is for Jesus. We are simply resisting. We are simply standing firm. It is important that we believe the intelligence reports from heaven that say Jesus has already broken the power of satan at the cross. Victory is His. Listen to these 3 verses from 3 different NT authors …

- **Colossians 2:15**: “And having disarmed the powers and authorities (remember those are undefined ranks for evil spiritual beings), He [Jesus] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” If Jesus triumphed over the demonic at the cross, then there is a victory that He has already completed without any help from us.
- **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.” The son of God’s appearing (past tense) is referring to the incarnation – God, specifically the Son of God, coming down to take on a human body in the person of Jesus. Jesus’ coming to earth – His teaching, His mistreatment, His miracles, His death, bodily resurrection and ascension into heaven were all done to destroy the devil’s work. God is not dependent on us to destroy the devil’s work – Jesus is the One who has secured that.
- **Hebrews 2:14—15**: “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” Jesus (again by His coming to this earth and dying on the cross for our sins then proving it by rising bodily from the dead) has broken the power of death the devil had and freed believers from the slavery to the fear of death we were bound in.

Jesus’ death and resurrection not only frees us from the guilt and punishment of our sin, but it is also what broke satan’s power. We may ask, then why is the spiritual war still raging around us? Because there is something bigger going on. We are in the midst of something much bigger and much more significant than we can understand. But we can understand one part – God told us Jesus it is not until Jesus comes back again that the total victory we imagine will happen. It is not until Jesus visibly returns that opposition to Christians will be eliminated, culture will be completely straightened out, and satan & the demonic will be completely bound, not able to influence or deceive any. God has also told us that Jesus is not visibly returning until the full number of those who will surrender to Jesus, do surrender to Jesus so they may be adopted as God’s children, forgiven, freed from slavery to the devil and be able to go to paradise for eternity.

C. Other passages on the victory of standing firm
(I Thessalonians 3:7-8; I Peter 5:9; Galatians 5:1; Philippians 1:27, 4:1; II Thessalonians 2:2, 2:15; I Timothy 6:12; I Corinthians 15:58 – note extended context in each of these)
There are actually quite a number of New Testament verses encouraging us to believe that simply standing firm when evil or satan attacks brings is great victory. There is a joy that comes from knowing fellow Christians remain faithful in times of distress and
persecution. We successfully resist satan by standing firm in our faith. We keep from spiritual bondage by standing firm. Together local Christians stand firm in one Spirit for the faith in the gospel. We aren’t to be unsettled by false claims but stand firm and hold fast to the teachings of the Bible. The fight of faith is a good fight. Or as I Corinthians 15:58 says “Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”

Therefore, our job when spiritually attacked is to simply stand — it is not our job to silence all the critics but to stand in faith; it is not our job to not turn every nation to Christ but to bring the gospel to every people group; it is not our job to rid all immorality from culture but sacrificially live godly lives ourselves & promote godly morals for the good of others. It is not our job to develop a perfect world, but to work towards God honoring goals, especially in joining God in His work. It is very easy to move FROM believing victory is in standing firm when evil attacks to humanly trying to defeat the demonic or completely getting rid of any spot of evil.

II. Other clear signs of victory. We are victorious when ...

Turn to 2 Corinthians 10 — we won’t get there for a few minutes. Let’s see how this “standing firm” is seen in other clear signs of spiritual victory.

A. A person becomes a Christian

We are victorious when a person genuinely becomes a Christian. Acts 26:18: “[Jesus] am sending you to them [unbelieving Jews & Gentiles] to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” Every time a person becomes a Christian it is one less person in satan’s grasp and one more in Jesus’ Kingdom. There is a battle going on right now for the souls of men & women, boys & girls. Anytime a person turns fully to Jesus — repenting of their sin, believing Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty of their sin rising bodily from the dead and willingly surrendering to go God’s way in the Bible rather than our way — there is great victory — each time a person is regenerated by the Holy Spirit there is great rejoicing by all the angels in heaven! So we stand firm in believing that ALL need to hear the gospel message of Jesus; that there is no other way to salvation; that God wants us to share this good news with everyone and be willing to sacrifice to be part of that effort. When the days are evil, take advantage of every opportunity to share about Jesus. We stand firm in our faith.

B. Brought safely to heaven

We are also victorious when we are brought safely to heaven. These are the words that the apostle Paul wrote in his last letter when he was badly mistreated, soon to be killed and had been deserted by many. “The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.” (2 Timothy 4:18). Paul stood firm in his faith that God would bring him
safely to heaven. Neither impending death, nor opposition by others, nor bad outward situations nor breakdowns in human relationships were signs of spiritual defeat — victory is given to all of Jesus’ true believers — not by the strength of our belief but simply that we stand in it. We hold on to our assurance that our human death will move us to the most lasting, joyful, significant & meaningful life forever with Jesus.

C. We die for Jesus

We are victorious if we die for Jesus. Much of the book of Revelation focuses on the rise of the future antichrist who is controlled by satan himself. Along with the false prophet and an alliance of 10 powerful nations, they create a one world government that mercilessly kills and destroys anyone or anything that follows Jesus or the true God. As we saw last week in Revelation 12:11, “They (believers in Jesus) triumphed over him [the devil or satan] ... (how? because) they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.” One of the key ways the followers of Jesus overcome the most terrible evil is by dying for Jesus. Now you can only die for Jesus once, but we can regularly stand firm for Jesus in our daily lives as our key passage in Ephesians 6 says repeatedly. We need to get back to believing that dying for Jesus is always victory & something we should honor!

A Greek architect was brought in to design one of the coliseums for one of the Roman emperors. The architect was promised great honor and fame. Years later when this magnificent structure was completed, the emperor staged an incredible celebration. The place was packed and the architect sat in the most honored place next to the emperor. At the end of the emperor’s triumphant speech, he cried out “we celebrate this man’s triumph by slaying these Christians” – the entertainment for all was feeding Christians to the lions. The architect immediately jumped up and yelled “I am also a Christian”. The guards immediately grabbed him and he was thrown into the arena where his body was ripped to pieces by the lions. Who won? Who was victorious? The architect because he did not love his life more than God’s truth.

While we may never be called on to physically die for Jesus - which is the ultimate standing firm for Jesus - we are all called to stand for Jesus in everyday life when challenged.

D. The devil flees from us

We are victorious when we resist the devil & he flees from us. James 4:7 says “Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” Isn’t this what Jesus did at the beginning of His ministry? He was specifically led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted directly by satan for 40 days. Did Jesus arm wrestle satan? No. Did they trade off seeing who could do the biggest miracles? No. Did they have a debate scored by judges? No. Did Jesus try to kill or imprison satan for all the evil he had done? No. Jesus simply held His ground. He stood firm and then the devil left Him. This leaving wasn’t for good – he left Jesus until a more opportune time. Submission to the Lord and resisting the devil in faith – standing firm – will make satan pull back. There will be a lull in the commotion
around. Yet it is often in those times that many Christians end up feeling defeated, dejected or anxious about future attacks or greater evil around them in the future so they want to run away. Their emotions catch up to them. Don’t judge your spirituality by feelings – don’t judge what God is doing by just what you see around you. Don’t dwell on false pictures of triumphalism where we defeat satan and the demonic by our actions, words or strategies. It is spiritual victory to simple “stand” – “stand firm in faith” – “Stand firm in Jesus”.

E. What are not signs of victory

(Physical property; political power, lack of problems, feeling victorious)

We are spiritually triumphant in this world when we simply stand firm in our faith, when we see someone come to genuine personal faith in Jesus, when we persevere in our faith to the end which God enables, when we die for Jesus and when we simply resist the devil, demonic and evil. Notice what isn’t in this list of spiritual victory.

Notice what are NOT signs of victory.

- **Physical property** – Spiritual victory is not how many countries in the world call themselves Christians, how many ministries there are, or how much property Christian churches have. God’s kingdom is not of this world.
- **Political power** – Spiritual victory is not how many moral laws can be passed, how many Christians are in leadership or what particular political party is in power
- **Lack of problems** – Spiritual victory is not when we all have good paying jobs, lots of vacation time, nice neighbors and no crime. God’s definition of spiritual victory is not the lack of problems – that is our promise for heaven!
- **Feeling victorious** – Spiritual victory is not measured by our feeling, that is to be victorious we must feel victorious. It is very common for me to hear someone say after a time of testing that they feel like failures or they could have done better when every indication from what we have shared today is that they were quite victorious! We must see spiritual victory from the eyes of faith or we will bring endless, unnecessary and self-defeating discouragement into our lives.

F. Taking every thought captive to Christ

II Corinthians 10:3-5

Now let’s take one last clear sign of spiritual victory here in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5. We are victorious when we take every thought captive to Christ. READ v 3-5. The situation Paul is writing from is definitely not triumphant. There were some in the Corinthian church who were saying Paul didn’t have much spiritual power from God and was quite feeble in terms of his natural abilities – he doesn’t speak well, his rhetoric is bad, he doesn’t look like much and he can’t even raise enough money so he can be full-time. In simple terms, Paul would have never qualified for a current radio or TV ministry. Paul will answer this over the next 3 chapters, but he starts out saying what I have been trying to say about the spiritual battle around us.

READ v 3. “For though we live in the world” – the word “live” here does not just refer to our presence in the world but it is a stronger word referring to where we conduct our day-to-day business, dealings and life. Spiritual victory doesn’t come by
withdrawing oneself. Yet, we also “do not wage war as the world does.” While Christians do most of their life activities in the world, the world does not dictate our agenda nor provide the tools for spiritual victory. READ v 4. The weapons the world uses are human force, human abilities and human thinking to get what we want, when we want and how we want. God has given us divine weapons – divine power that can even demolish the strongest of the strong. The power God gives us through God’s armor – truth, righteousness, readiness to share the good news of Jesus, faith, our salvation by grace alone through Christ alone, the word of God and prayer – may not impress the world around us but it can demolish even the toughest stronghold of the demonic.

So what are those strongholds and where is the spiritual fight? READ v 5. The strongholds are thoughts, arguments and pretensions that are opposite God & His ways. (Pretensions are where you claim something is more valuable or powerful than it really is – like you’ll be happy if you get more money or you’ll be satisfied in life if only certain things would happen.) Victory comes when we take every thought captive to Christ. This is in our life, our thinking, our mind.

Let’s say some lustful or selfish or mean thought comes into your mind. A bad thought is NOT defeat, it may be a temptation from the demonic, instigation of the world or a rising up of your old nature. What do you do with that thought – that is a daily battle we face! What we do with that thought is a key spiritual battle for every one of us. If I reject the lustful, selfish or mean thought, admitting it isn’t right and pointing out it won’t lead to the happiness it claims – if I give that thought to Jesus and ask His strength to help me go the other direction – great victory has happened. It is easy to think that spiritual victory comes when we can change a law that is immoral, but the bigger battle and the bigger victories are fought in our minds. We are not going to see and fully enjoy all the benefits of being in God’s Kingdom until after Jesus returns to set the world right. That is when there will be no more pain, sickness, or death. That is where righteousness, justice and love will abound! The fullness of all we look forward to is yet ahead.

Neither American triumphalism nor stoic endurance is Biblical victory. Both rely on false ideas of spiritual victory. You can become the most knowledgable Christian in the world – able to answer any question brought up by a skeptic – but that alone won’t come close to toppling the stronghold of the demonic in that skeptic’s life. But praying for that person, sharing the gospel of Jesus with that person, being grateful to God, living righteously & differently in this world – it is those actions the Holy Spirit can multiple to shatter their false presumptions and demolish their arguments until finally they surrender to follow Jesus alone in faith. Only spiritual weapons can do this. Don’t let unnecessary discouragement remain in your life because you wrongly expect victory to look like us crushing satan for God or us turning all evil around for God. No, we just stand for Jesus, righteousness, justice and let God bring the victory.