

# A NEW NAME FOR A VERY OLD WAR

*“Once we have a war there is only one thing to do.  
It must be won. For defeat brings worse things than  
any that can ever happen in war.”*

—ERNEST HEMINGWAY

**ARE YOU FAMILIAR WITH THE TERM** *asymmetric warfare*? The concept has received lots of news coverage in recent years as a result of the war on terrorism. The word *asymmetric* refers to something that is out of balance. In warfare it describes a situation where the combatants are not equal. Asymmetric warfare involves “the use of unconventional tactics to counter the overwhelming conventional military superiority of an adversary.”<sup>1</sup> When two forces are severely mismatched, the weaker force must use unusual methods of warfare in order to have any hope of prevailing in the conflict.

Wars have often involved a vastly superior force against a much weaker one, but most people tend to think of warfare in terms of forces that are roughly equal. Most American wars have been examples of symmetric warfare. In World War II you had

the Allied armies on one side and the German, Italian, and Japanese armies on the other side. They fought traditional battles for territory across the islands of the Pacific and across North Africa and Europe.

In the twenty-first century, a new sort of warfare has come to the forefront. Conventional armies face loosely organized terrorist cells. Here are three clear examples of asymmetric warfare. On October 3, 2000, the USS *Cole*, an American battleship equipped with the latest and most sophisticated technology, went to the harbor of Aden, Yemen, for what was meant to be a routine fuel stop. At 11:18 a.m. two men in a rubber boat approached the ship. They blew a forty-by-forty-foot hole in the side of the ship, killing seventeen American sailors and injuring thirty-nine others. The irony was that this battleship, designed to protect a carrier battle group against all threats, was powerless to stop two men in a rubber boat.

Let's suppose that you are Osama bin Laden, and you wish to strike a blow against what you regard as the visible symbol of corrupt Western capitalism. Let us further suppose that you have a handful of men at your disposal. How will you attack the World Trade Center? You could launch some sort of frontal assault, but a few armed men would never make it very far. It just can't be done. So what do you do? You train the men to commandeer commercial aircraft and fly them into the Twin Towers. And you even plan it so that the attacks are staggered, with the shock of the first tower being hit guaranteeing that the whole world will be watching when the second tower is struck.

When two planes hit the World Trade Center, a third hit the Pentagon, and another crashed into the ground in Pennsylvania, the result was more than Osama bin Laden could have dreamed. Almost three thousand people died that day.

When my wife and I had a three-hour layover in Atlanta, we decided to eat lunch at the airport. Two soldiers wearing Army fatigues sat down at the table next to us. My wife discovered they had been in Iraq and were returning for another tour of duty, so she

asked how it was really going over there. “We’re kicking them all over the place,” one soldier said, “but you’ll never hear that on the news.” He said that 90 percent of the Iraqis are glad the Americans are there, 5 percent don’t care, and the other 5 percent want to kill us. There is no way to stop the 5 percent because they have infiltrated every layer of Iraqi society, including the Iraqi Army we’re trying to train. We have overwhelming superiority in numbers, but our soldiers have to wait until they are shot at before they can fire. He said that our military is fighting people who have infiltrated from Syria and Iran.

His unit is stationed right in the middle of the Sunni Triangle. “These people have been fighting each other for three thousand years. We’re not going to get out of there anytime soon.” It was obvious in talking to the soldiers that they are frustrated because we have to fight on the enemy’s terms. That’s a classic case of asymmetric warfare.

Today’s asymmetric warfare comes in many varieties: hit-and-run attacks, suicide bombings, guerrilla warfare, kidnapping, disinformation, and much more. Terrorists operate in small, loosely organized cells that spread across many nations. Some are “sleeper cells” that spring into action after years of dormancy. Michael Novak says,

*Osama bin Laden has grasped the vulnerabilities of free and open societies today. Their technological networks are very complex, highly integrated, and easy to disrupt with precise acts of violence. Tall buildings like the skyscrapers of New York are manifestly vulnerable. The same is true of great suspension bridges, nuclear power plants, water reservoirs, communications hubs, even the virus-prone internet.<sup>2</sup>*

Novak goes on to say that Osama bin Laden “demonstrated how relatively easy it is for a small, disciplined, highly trained cadre of warriors willing to die in the attempt to wreak horrific damage, and to terrorize entire nations.”

THE ENEMY'S GOAL:  
DIVIDE AND DISCOURAGE

In all of this, it helps to remember that the goal of the lesser power is not to utterly defeat the larger power. Instead, the lesser power intends to harass the larger power until, wearied by an opponent he cannot seem to find, the greater power gives up the struggle. Time in that sense is on the side of the lesser power. Few of us have the stomach for a war that never seems to end. If the lesser power can divide and dishearten the greater power, the lesser power can win even though he is badly outnumbered. One writer summarized the matter this way: "The ideal war is one that no one realizes war is being waged, that is mostly invisible, not because its actions are camouflaged, but because they look like something else. War need never be declared again because we are always at war."<sup>3</sup>

"We are always at war." You could hardly find a better statement to describe the Christian life. Satan is the ultimate terrorist who led the first rebellion in the history of the universe. His attempt to unseat God was the first insurgency. Though he never had a chance of succeeding, he continues to fight against God. Think of how the Bible describes him:

**He is a cunning deceiver** (2 Cor. 11:3).

**He is the adversary** (1 Peter 5:8).

**He is the "father of all lies"** (John 8:44).

**He is the slanderer** (Rev. 13:6).

**He is the tempter** (Matt. 4:3).

**He is the destroyer** (Rev. 9:11).

**He is the thief who comes to kill and destroy** (John 10:10).

**He is a murderer** (John 8:44).

**He is the serpent** (Gen. 3:1; Rev. 12:9).

**He is the dragon** (Rev. 12:7).

**He is the “evil one”** (Matt. 13:19).

**He is the “accuser of [the] brothers”** (Rev. 12:10).

**He accuses us day and night before the Lord** (Zech. 3:1).

**He is ruler of the darkness of the world** (Eph. 6:12).

**He blinds the minds of unbelievers** (2 Cor. 4:4).

**He is the prince of the power of the air** (Eph. 2:2).

**He is the prince of this world** (John 12:31).

**He is the god of this world** (2 Cor. 4:4).

**He is the lawless one** (2 Thess. 2:8–9).

**He masquerades as an angel of light** (2 Cor. 11:14).

**He roams the earth looking for someone to devour** (1 Peter 5:8).

**He hatches clever schemes in order to outwit us** (2 Cor. 2:11).

We can see something of his basic nature in the five “I wills” of Isaiah 14:13–14: “*I will* ascend to heaven; *I will* raise my throne above the stars of God; *I will* sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. *I will* ascend above the tops of the clouds; *I will* make myself like the Most High” (italics added).

Satan thought he could lead a rebellion that could dethrone God Himself. Evidently a multitude of angels followed him in his desperate insurgency against the Creator. Not only did he fail utterly; he and his followers were cast out of heaven. Since then he has spearheaded an unending war against God that has spread across the universe. Though originally a creature of unimaginable beauty (“O morning star, son of the dawn,” v. 12), having been cast down to the earth, he became the epitome of darkness itself.

There is no truth in him. There is no goodness in him. There is no reverence in him. There is no kindness in him. There is no love in him. There is no justice in him. He is evil through and through.

He opposes God with every fiber of his being. He hates the right and promotes the wrong. He lies and cheats and deceives. He disguises himself in order to capture his prey. He attacks all of God's children, all the time, everywhere, by all means possible. He stops at nothing to steal, kill, and destroy. He is a master counterfeiter. He is the ultimate terrorist.

He doesn't fight fair.

### T H E   E N E M Y ' S   W E A K N E S S

But there is another side of the story. Though he is far stronger than any human, he is not stronger than God. It is precisely at this point that many Christians go astray, attributing to Satan power that belongs to God alone. He exists only because God allows him to exist. If God willed it, Satan would be destroyed in an instant.

In Job 1 Satan must ask permission to afflict Job. Jesus told Peter in Luke 22:31 that Satan asked (God for permission) to sift him like wheat—a reference to Peter's denial of Christ. That thought may shock you because it is sometimes said that Satan has no authority over the Christian. That's true in one sense, because we know Satan can do nothing without God's express permission. Erwin Lutzer summarizes the truth this way:

*The devil is just as much God's servant in his rebellion as he was God's servant in the days of his sweet obedience. Even today, he cannot act without God's express permission; he can neither tempt, coerce, demonize, nor make so much as a single plan without the consent and approval of God. We can't quote Luther too often: The devil is God's devil!*<sup>4</sup>

He is powerful but not omnipotent. He is smart but not omniscient. He can travel the universe but he is not omnipresent.

Before his rebellion, Satan was the shining epitome of God's creation. Afterward, he was and is the epitome of evil itself. In one foolish moment of unprecedented arrogance, he gave up his position

as God's prime minister to become the leader of the universal forces of darkness.

His rebellion utterly failed. He was decisively defeated at the cross of Christ. And yet he fights on, in a war he is bound to lose.

Having said all of this, one important question remains to be answered: If Christ defeated Satan, why is there so much evil in the world? In the words of a popular Christian book, Satan is alive and well on Planet Earth. He doesn't look very defeated to me. Certainly the devil seems to be having his way. How else can you explain a woman suffocating her own children? Or high school students going on shooting rampages? How do you explain evil in the high places, Satanism on the rise, and a river of pornographic filth flowing over the Internet?

### **He's Out on Bail**

The New Testament presents the truth about the devil in two different ways. On one hand, we are told over and over again that at the cross Satan was defeated as completely as anyone can be defeated. On the other hand, we are warned about the devil who roams about as a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8). And we are told to put on the armor of God so we can stand in the evil day (Eph. 6:10–17). Is this not a contradiction?

I think the answer is no, but we need to do some careful thinking at this point. What happened at the cross was indeed the total defeat of Satan. In legal terms he was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to ultimate, eternal destruction. That sentence has not yet been executed, but there is no way for Satan to escape it. (Lo! His doom is sure.) Until the day when he will be cast into the lake of fire once and for all, he is destroying lives, breaking up homes, and disrupting God's work as much as he can.<sup>5</sup>

If you prefer a military analogy, the cross was D-day in World War II. Once the Allies came ashore in Normandy, the German defeat was certain. Although much fighting ensued, and many soldiers died, the Allies won the war on December 6, 1944. Satan's D-day happened when Christ died on the cross. Since then his defeat

has been certain, his ultimate surrender guaranteed. Meanwhile, he fights on in his desperate battle, a defeated but still dangerous foe.

### **He's Outnumbered**

There is no better picture of Satan's strategy than the modern concept of asymmetric warfare. Though heavily outnumbered by the armies of the Lord, and having lost his personal battle with God, he now uses unconventional warfare to bring down the Lord's people. Satan rarely attacks us head-on, because we are ready for such things. But he comes at us from unusual angles, playing on our minds, slowing us down, throwing one roadblock after another in our way, dividing us from one another and from the Lord, causing us to doubt and then to fear and finally to give in to discouragement.

There are seasons in life for all of us when nothing comes easy. Even the tiniest routines of life don't work as well as they ought to. The dishwasher breaks, the car won't start, our expenses mount up, a project at work misfires, a cherished friend grows distant, our children frustrate us, and our spouse seems impatient and uncaring. In those moments we are facing true asymmetric spiritual warfare because we are being hit in many places at once. As things pile up, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain our spiritual equilibrium.

## THE ENEMY DOESN'T FIGHT FAIR

Most of your spiritual battles will not present you with enormous, life-changing choices, or at least they won't seem that way at the time. Either you get angry or you don't. You stay up late to finish your homework, or you make up a creative excuse. When you visit the department store you pay cash, or you break your promise not to use your credit card. You repeat the unkind story you heard, or you decide to keep it to yourself. You pass by the magazine rack in the airport terminal, or you stop and begin



to browse. You get up early to exercise, or you roll over for another thirty minutes of sleep.

No one will know whether you exercised or not. No one will know (at least not till the end of the month) if you used your credit card. And no one will know (unless you are audited) whether you lied on your tax return. God has ordained that our spiritual progress should be measured not by huge battles won or lost, but by a thousand daily skirmishes no one else knows about.

You wouldn't commit adultery, but you don't mind looking at certain Internet sites. You wouldn't lie, but you do make excuses. You wouldn't steal, but you use your credit card foolishly. You wouldn't deliberately hurt someone, but you do pass along gossip because it seems harmless. The whole point of asymmetric warfare (from Satan's point of view) is to discourage us to the point that we feel hopeless about our own spiritual progress. When that happens, he has won the battle even though all the resources of heaven are on our side.

In thinking about spiritual warfare from this perspective, keep two things in mind:

- (1) Satan's goal is to discourage you so that you feel like giving up, and you quit trusting Christ.
- (2) Satan doesn't fight fair.

He does not observe the traditional rules of warfare. He uses anything and everything that he can to bring us down. This is part of what Paul meant when he spoke about "the devil's schemes" in Ephesians 6:11. The word *schemes* might also be translated as "traps" or "tricks" or "tactics." A Texas politician was asked why a certain candidate had lost an election. "It happened because he forgot the first rule of knife fighting: There are no rules."

Satan doesn't fight fair. He's not going to give you an even break. He is a liar, a deceiver, a diabolical "angel of light" who comes to you in a thousand guises, tempting you to disobey the Lord. And he's a lot smarter than you are. He knows your weak

points better than you do. Because he is invisible, he can attack you any time of the day or night. And because he has hosts of subordinates, he can pick a lot of battles at once.

How can we fight back against the devil as he wages asymmetric warfare against us? Here are four practical suggestions.

### **Adopt a Warfare Mentality**

The idea of Christians standing clothed in full armor has captured the mind and heart of every generation. All mature believers understand that they are called to fight—to put on their armor, to take up their weapons of righteousness, to stand against the fierce assault of evil and, having done all, to stand victorious at the end of the day.

Adopting a warfare mentality means understanding that we are always at war, that a battle is raging all around us, and that we ourselves are frontline soldiers. In the old days soldiers saw the enemy. A common battleground rule was “Don’t fire until you see the whites of their eyes.” But in modern warfare you rarely see the enemy. In the spiritual battle, we fight a foe that is invisible to us, and for that reason it is easy to forget that we are in a battle at all until the attack suddenly comes.

### **Raise the Spiritual Alert Level**

Since 9/11 those of us living in the United States have become very familiar with the color-coded terror alert system. After every threat, the level is raised and then eventually lowered. The problem with the constant raising and lowering is that people stop taking the alerts seriously. They think, *We must be safe since there haven’t been any more major attacks on American soil.* That sort of thinking plays into the hands of the terrorists because it leads eventually to complacency. In a sense, time is on their side. We have to be right every time in order to be safe. The terrorists only have to be right once. Mao Tse-tung remarked that the guerrilla “swims like a fish in the sea of the people.” The suicide bomber seems like just a traveler until he detonates himself.

The same thing is true in the spiritual realm. We're not safe just because we think we are. Anything can become a weapon. Just as a natural gas pipeline can become a weapon of mass destruction, so in the spiritual battle, our careless habits or our relationships can be what Satan uses to take us out.

The ancient Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu wrote a classic treatise called *The Art of War*. In it he advised warriors never to go to battle unless the battle was already won in the mind of the enemy. Overconfidence leads us to many crushing mistakes, something Peter found out the hard way when he denied Christ less than five hours after he had pledged his loyalty (Luke 22:31–34).

Beware of thinking that you have conquered some sin or that you are beyond certain temptations. Red flag! You never know what you might do under pressure. According to J. C. Ryle, the great Anglican theologian, “He who would make great strides in holiness must first consider the greatness of sin.” Anselm of Canterbury famously remarked, “You have not yet considered the gravity of sin.” Scottish Presbyterian Robert Murray McCheyne said it even more pointedly, “I have begun to realize that the seeds of every known sin still linger in my heart.”

This is a point of great spiritual advance. Beware of spiritual presumption. The traditional reading of 1 Corinthians 10:12 offers this warning: “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (NKJV). Here is a more colorful rendering of the same verse: “Don’t be so naive and self-confident. You’re not exempt. You could fall flat on your face as easily as anyone else. Forget about self-confidence; it’s useless. Cultivate God-confidence” (THE MESSAGE).

### **Renounce the Devil and Confess Christ Openly**

Perhaps this is part of what Christ meant when He promised that whoever confesses Him openly, He will acknowledge before the Father in heaven, and whoever denies Him, He will deny before the Father (Matt. 10:32–33). In the early days of the Christian church, baptismal candidates were asked, “Do you renounce the

devil and all his works?” That same question is still asked today in many churches before a believer is baptized. It is entirely biblical, and we should ask it of ourselves on a daily basis. While I do not believe in praying to the devil or “rebuking the devil” verbally (that is better left to the Lord Jesus Christ, in my opinion), I do believe it is entirely proper that when we pray we should renounce the devil and pray for God’s help. Is this not what we mean when we pray, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (Matt. 6:13)?

Michael Green wrote, “It cannot be emphasized too much that the only name which brings fear to Satan is the name of Jesus, and the only place that makes him give way is Calvary. There is power in the blood of Jesus. There is nothing like it in all the world.”<sup>6</sup>

Often we wonder if God will take us back after we have sinned. The answer is yes, He’ll take you back, but you’ll never know until you make that journey on your own. While hosting a question-and-answer program on a national radio broadcast, I took one final call before going off the air. As soon as I heard the man’s voice, I knew he was distraught. He proceeded to tell me a story unlike anything I have ever heard before. “I used to be a Christian but my wife left me for another man. When she told me she was leaving, I got angry and ripped up the Bible in front of her. Then I denied God in the name of the Trinity.” His voice broke and he started weeping. “I know it was wrong to do that, but I don’t think God will ever take me back. What can I do?”

I glanced at the clock and saw that we had about ninety seconds left in the program. This was the kind of call I wished we had a whole hour to discuss. But the seconds were ticking away, and I had to say something quickly. “Sir, I don’t have much time, so let me tell you this one thing. I know God loves you just the way you are, and He will take you back.”

“But I ripped up the Bible in front of my wife.”

“Sir, I know God loves you, and He will take you back.”

“But I denied God in the name of the Trinity.”

“God loves you and He will take you back.” The man wept

openly as I said those words. Now we were down to the last thirty seconds. “We’re almost out of time, so I want you to listen carefully. Your broken heart tells me that God will take you back. The Lord never turns away a broken heart. When this program is over, I want you to get on your knees, put the Bible in front of you, tell the Lord you know the Bible is the Word of God, and ask Him to forgive you. And I want you to renounce your denial of faith. Tell the Lord that you know He is God, and ask the Lord Jesus to forgive you. Ask Him for a fresh start. If you do that, you will not be turned away.”

With that, our time ran out and the program was over. I never heard from the man again. I don’t know if he took my counsel or not. But I am sure I told him the truth. No matter how great our sin may be, if we turn to the Lord, He will abundantly pardon. “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy” (Micah 7:18).

### **Settle In for the Long Haul**

This may be the most important principle of all. Shortly after 9/11, the president told us that the war against terror would not be won easily or quickly. It would take years of determination and the willingness to endure setbacks and further attacks. Perhaps it will never totally be won. There aren’t many final victories in asymmetric warfare.

In the spiritual realm, we are told that our enemies cannot ultimately defeat us. But they can discourage us so much that we put down our weapons and leave the battlefield. Satan is a defeated foe, yet he is also a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8). Because we are joined to Jesus Christ, Satan cannot finally defeat us, and eventually he himself will be vanquished once and for all. But that day has not yet come. Between now and then we will see more battles, more struggles, some bitter defeats, and some stupendous victories. But mostly the spiritual struggle will rage on a thousand fronts at once. Therefore, we must not be surprised at sudden attacks, discouraging

events, personal disappointments, financial setbacks, friends who let us down, or days when nothing seems to go right.

All of this is part and parcel of asymmetric spiritual warfare. That does not mean that everything bad that happens to us is caused by Satan directly. But it is certainly true that Satan uses all the adversities of life to discourage us and to tempt us to turn away from the Lord.

I personally am skeptical of any theory of the spiritual life that promises victory without struggle. If you think about it, victory without struggle is self-contradictory. Victory implies a triumph reached in the face of unrelenting difficulties. Football coaches like to say, “No pain, no gain,” and that is equally true of the spiritual life.

### ONE LITTLE WORD

Martin Luther understood the concept of asymmetric spiritual warfare, even though he probably never heard the term. Think about these famous words from the hymn “A Mighty Fortress”:

*And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,  
We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us:  
The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;  
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,  
One little word shall fell him.*

We are attacked on every side by spiritual forces that strike us in our weak points and come to us in unexpected ways. Though they cannot utterly defeat us, they can wear us down until we feel like giving up. The power of Christ is more than enough to defeat the devil, but victory will not come easily or without a heavy cost.

When faced with temptation, we must take the “way of escape” God provides for us (1 Cor. 10:13 NKJV). We are to flee sinful situations (2 Tim. 2:22), confess Christ openly (Matt. 10:32; Hebrews 10:23; Rev. 12:11), put to death the deeds of the flesh

(Rom. 8:13), yield our bodies to God (Rom. 12:1–2), rely on the power of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:16), and choose the path of costly obedience (Luke 9:57–62).

Luther says that when we face the devil, “one little word” will fell him. Jesus is that “one little word.” The cross proved that our Lord is the victor over the devil for time and eternity. We are in a battle whose outcome has been determined since the beginning of the universe.

From our standpoint we fight against an enemy who attacks without warning. Sometimes we fall under his crushing blows. More often we are hit with dozens of glancing blows one after another. We stumble in the battle, not from direct hits or large mortar fire, but from strategically placed boulders.

But if Jesus has defeated the devil, why does the devil so often defeat us? In order to understand Satan’s strategy of asymmetric warfare, let’s go back to the beginning of the Bible, to a paradise called Eden.

It all began with a talking snake.