

Defending the Free Heart

Do not be far from me, O Lord. Awake, and rise to my defense!

Psalm 35:22–23

On his drive to work early that morning, U.S. Air Corps Lt. Kermit Tyler listened to a local station playing Hawaiian music. He was surprised; the station normally didn't begin broadcasting until 7 a.m. But Tyler knew the station sometimes broadcast ahead of schedule as an aid to incoming squadrons of B-17 bombers, which used the signal as a homing beacon. Unconcerned, Tyler drove on to his assignment—his second day on the job as pursuit officer at the Fort Shafter Information Center, on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, at an installation called Pearl Harbor.

The date was December 7, 1941.

A few minutes after 7 that morning, Tyler received a call from a private working a radar station on Oahu's Opana Point. The private sounded excited. He reported a huge incoming blip on his oscilloscope, the largest he'd ever seen. Tyler remembered the early radio broadcast. He knew that a squadron of B-17s would make a big impression. He was the only officer on duty at the time. There was no one to confer with.

"Don't worry about it," he told the private. "It's okay."

Nearly an hour later, Tyler stepped outside for a short break and a breath of tropical air. He looked to the west. The sky was filling with incoming planes and puffs of smoke. Only then did it begin to dawn on him. The enemy had launched a sneak attack. He had made a terrible mistake.¹

If you have been living with a troubled heart, it's my prayer that our discussion so far has helped you identify the source of that trouble and enabled you to invite the Lord to change your heart. A heart free of guilt, bitterness, and worry, beating in time with the

will of God, is as close to heaven as we can get on this earth. It's where we all want and need to be. If your heart is free, I am thrilled for you. Congratulations!

Along with those congratulations, however, I must add a warning. You see, you are now a target of the enemy, and he is planning a sneak attack even as we speak. The last thing Satan wants is an untroubled believer acting in step with the promptings of the Holy Spirit. The enemy is silent and swift. He will do everything he can to confuse you, to disrupt holy lines of communication, and to assault your position as a warrior for the Lord. If you relax your guard, he will strike a deadly blow.

To stay free and untroubled, you must be alert and fortify your position. You must prepare to defend your heart.

Guard Your Heart Diligently

When someone tells you to do something "above all else," you know it must be important. I used to own a maroon '65 Thunderbird. This T-Bird was a beauty and a personal favorite. My daughter Jennifer was sixteen at the time and had just learned how to drive. She asked one evening if she could take the Thunderbird to meet some friends. The T-Bird was a big vehicle, and we had a small garage. I said yes to Jennifer and asked her to drive safely, then added, "Above all else, be careful when you back out of the driveway. It's a tight space and you've got to watch."

You can guess what happened. Just a few minutes later, Jennifer came into the house, tears running down her cheeks. She had torn the siding off the garage with the T-Bird's big bumper. Somehow, my words of wisdom hadn't penetrated. Now we were both sorry!

Solomon, writing in the book of Proverbs, passes on his wisdom about the Lord and practical living to the next generation. I can imagine him sitting in a place of honor, conversing with a young man, perhaps a teenager like my daughter. If teens back then were anything like teens today, they may not have been that interested in the words of an old man, even if he was a king. I picture this particular young man before Solomon, one ear tuned to the king's words, the rest of his thoughts drifting toward what he's going to

do that evening. But Solomon knows how important this instruction is. He captures the young man's focus by speaking in a loud, firm voice:

“My son, pay attention to what I say; listen closely to my words. Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart; for they are life to those who find them and health to a man's whole body. Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.” (Proverbs 4:20–23)

What does Solomon advise this young man—and all of us—to do above all else? *To guard our hearts.* The heart is the gateway to our emotions and relationships, yet most of us monitor the oil levels in our cars more carefully than we watch over our hearts. It was Thomas Watson who said, “A wandering heart needs a watchful eye.”² We must be diligent in watching over and guarding our hearts.

The heart is the “wellspring of life.” What flows from its spring will determine the story of our lives. It is the source of what we need to survive and thrive. We must keep that source from deadly contamination. If we don't, our wellspring will spew out manipulation, deception, and seduction. Just as a town's citizens rely on a pure water supply to stay healthy, so do we rely on pure hearts to experience joyful, healthy lives.

John Eldredge has written, “[God's command] doesn't say guard your heart because it's criminal; it says guard your heart because it is the wellspring of your life, because it is a *treasure*, because everything else depends on it.”³ All you have done to free your heart will be lost if you fail to guard your heart.

Sparks of Evil

Author Dallas Willard has written, “When our heart comes to new life in God, the old programs are still running contrary to our new heart.”⁴ Bad habits die hard. We may have to consciously turn away from our usual past tendencies to keep a pure and free heart. You can be sure that Satan will move quickly to test you. Be ready!

Willard has also written, “There remains in us a spark of evil that can be fanned into a flame if we are not watchful. We are still recovering sinners!” No matter how long we’ve been a Christian and how close we are to God, we are still human. We are always capable of sin. Even a faint ember can be fanned into a roaring forest fire under the right conditions. We must be careful.

Let’s get practical. What does it mean to guard your heart? What are the weak spots that our enemy will seek to attack? In Scripture, Jesus specifically uses the word *guard* in His teaching on five danger areas. Here is a look at each one.

- **False teaching:** “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matthew 16:6). Jesus wasn’t talking about baking here, but about some of the common beliefs and practices of the time. The Pharisees were legalists, so committed to following the rules that they often missed the spirit of the Lord’s laws. The Sadducees, meanwhile, interpreted God’s laws so liberally that they denied fundamentals such as the resurrection and the existence of angels. Today, either extreme is still dangerous.
- **Greed:** “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed” (Luke 12:15). We live in a world that encourages a greedy attitude. Advertisements on television, in magazines, and on the Internet bombard us with messages telling us to buy, buy, buy. *I need more*, we think. *I deserve more*. *I need a new wardrobe*. *A better car*. *A bigger house*. *I need what he’s got*. Whenever your thoughts drift in this direction, you’re letting down your guard.
- **Deception:** “For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect—if that were possible. So be on your guard” (Mark 13:22–23). When someone presents a statement to you as truth, whether it’s a matter of Scripture or anything else, examine it with a critical eye. Does it ring true? Does it square with the Word of God? We are a gullible people. Be wary of the enemy’s attempts at deception.
- **Spiritual slackness:** “Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come” (Mark 13:33). There may be moments when we sense that our

usefulness to the Lord has ended or that Christ's return is imminent. We can use either as an excuse to stop growing in faith and to ease up on guarding our hearts. We may decide we don't need to pray as often, read our Bibles, or go to church. But only the Lord knows what the future holds, when our time on earth will end, when Christ will return, and what purposes He still has for us. Our job is to remain spiritually strong, to keep growing in faith, and to stay obedient to the Lord's will.

- **Destructive actions and attitudes:** “Be on guard, so that your hearts will not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life” (Luke 21:34 NASB). The enemy will throw all manner of obstacles in your path. He'll attempt to remove Christian friends from your life. He'll tempt you with drink, drugs, illicit sex, dishonest means to money, or whatever vice most appeals to you. He'll send disease and other hardships your way in hopes of making you anxious. If you're not careful, you will respond with damaging actions and attitudes that will again ensnare your heart. You must remember who has the power and who you belong to.

A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Which of these danger areas are you most susceptible to? Are there others where Satan has a good chance to “break” you? Take a few minutes right now to look at the target—you—from the enemy's point of view. What strategy is he most likely considering? Where are you most vulnerable to a sneak attack?

Years ago, a pastor and longtime friend of mine developed a problem with alcohol. It started out with a single glass of wine on Sunday nights to help George relax after a full weekend of ministry. Little by little, the amount of alcohol increased until it became a serious issue. The Lord, by His grace, enabled George to deal with his problem at a heart level, and he has been free of alcohol dependence for several years.

George now knows his vulnerability to alcohol and understands that Satan knows it too. That's why today he will not drink even one glass of wine, including on social occasions. George also realizes that he is most vulnerable to the enemy's attacks when he

is alone and spiritually and emotionally depleted. Now, when George travels, he has another man join him who supports him in prayer and who George can share openly with and be accountable to. He is very aware that there remains in him a spark of evil that can easily be fanned into a flame.

The better you know the strengths and weaknesses of your personality and temperament, the better you can plan an effective defense and guard your heart. Awareness of your enemy and yourself is a powerful weapon. As Scripture says, “Take heed, and guard your life diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your [mind and] heart all the days of your life” (Deuteronomy 4:9 AMP).

There’s a reason why I use so much war imagery when discussing these issues: we are at war with the forces of darkness. To win this spiritual conflict, we must get ready. We must dress for battle.

The Armor of God

The apostle Paul’s letter to the Ephesians makes clear what we are up against and how we can best prepare to defeat the enemy:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. 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. 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. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows

of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.” (Ephesians 6:10–18)

Can you hear the call to arms and smell the smoke of battle? In this war, there are no conscientious objectors, draft dodgers, or spiritual pacifists. Like it or not, you are in the fight. Your heart is already under attack. That’s why you’d better prepare yourself by adorning the proper armor.

The Belt of Truth

What does Paul mean when he says, “Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist” (v. 14)? As a Roman citizen, Paul was familiar with the attire of a Roman soldier. The belt or girdle was six to eight inches wide and was fastened around the waist. It was the foundation of a soldier’s battle dress because everything else was attached to it. If the belt was not in place, the armor was not secure.

The belt of truth is a symbol for the “word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15; James 1:18; Psalm 119:42–43) and the “Spirit of truth” (John 14:17; 16:13). It is God’s Word found in Scripture that is inspired by the Holy Spirit. We can depend on God to reveal what is right, good, and just through His Word. Truth exposes Satan’s deceiving ways and his evil intentions. When your faith is solid and your knowledge of and obedience to the Word is complete, Satan will not be able to move you.

The Breastplate of Righteousness

Paul also exhorts us to “Stand firm...with the breastplate of righteousness in place” (v. 14). A Roman soldier’s breastplate was made of bronze and backed with a tough piece of hide. It was like a knight’s coat of mail, covering the soldier’s front and back from the neck to the thighs. It protected the vital organs, where a wound could be fatal.

When Paul says to put on the breastplate of righteousness, he is telling us to remember that God declares us righteous. He takes away our sin and through His grace gives us His righteousness. It does not depend on our actions. Instead, “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Romans 3:22). When the enemy attacks us with accusations designed to push us back into guilt, depression, despair, and destruction, we can protect our hearts by consistently acknowledging the gift and power of God’s righteousness.

The Shoes of Peace

You might be surprised at the third vital piece of equipment on Paul’s list: shoes. He says, “Stand firm... with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace” (v. 15).

The shoes of a Roman soldier were actually open-toed leather boots, with a heavily studded sole tied by straps to the ankles and shins. These were not tennis shoes. They were made of hardy material, designed for any road or weather condition. Most important, they provided good traction. When a soldier was assaulted, he didn’t want his feet sliding in the dirt. An enemy would try to knock him off his feet. In hand-to-hand combat, sure footing was essential.

Our enemy also tries to knock us off our feet. His tactic is to encourage us to slip into worry. If he can keep us focused on problems with our spouse, our kids, our health, the bills, or our job, we will eventually lose our balance and leave our hearts open to more devastating blows. Our sure footing comes from the “gospel of peace”—our acceptance of what God has done for us. As Jesus said, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace” (John 16:33).

The Shield of Faith

What else do we need as we dress for battle? Paul’s next instruction is to “take up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one” (v. 16). A Roman soldier’s shield was impressive, four feet tall and two-and-a-half-feet

wide. It consisted of two layers of laminated wood, covered first with linen and then with hide, and bound on top and bottom with iron. An iron ornament decorated the front. A man could put his entire body behind his shield and safely allow it to absorb the tips of javelins and arrows.

One of the enemy's most dangerous weapons, however, was the fiery dart. He dipped this small arrow in pitch, set it on fire, and launched it at the soldiers. To counteract the fire from these darts, Roman soldiers soaked their shields in water. In battle, a soldier's shield might be covered with these small arrows, steam rising from each as the water extinguished the fire.

We also must contend with an assortment of flaming arrows. Satan launches repeated volleys of fire-tipped weapons: rumors and lies, material and sexual temptations, dissatisfaction and conflicts with Christian brothers and sisters. Unless we have a stout shield of faith, those weapons will find their mark. Faith itself is not our protection. Rather, our shield is the *object* of our faith: God's person (Genesis 15:1; Psalm 84:11), promises (1 Kings 8:56; Romans 4:20), and providence (Romans 8:28). That is armor no flaming arrow can penetrate.

The Helmet of Salvation

Our battle dress will not be complete unless we don the "helmet of salvation" (v. 17). A Roman soldier's helmet had a wide metal band to protect the forehead and plates for the cheeks. It extended down several inches in back to protect the neck. Hammers or axes were virtually the only weapons that could penetrate this remarkable defense.

Physically and spiritually, the head is one of our most vulnerable areas. If the devil can influence our mind with his lies, he can begin to control and destroy the whole person. He will attempt to give us a *divided* mind (James 1:8; Joshua 24:14–15), a *deceived* mind (2 Corinthians 11:3), a *doubtful* mind (Luke 12:24, Romans 8:32), and a *discouraged* mind (Psalm 38:8). Yet when we put our trust in the assurance of our salvation, our minds are protected. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned" (John

5:24). As pastor and author Charles Stanley has written, “I may feel the impact of [the enemy’s] attacks, but nothing can penetrate this helmet. I choose to stop every impure and negative thought at the door of my mind. And with the helmet of salvation those thoughts will get no further.”⁵

The Sword of the Spirit

Up to now, every piece of battle dress listed by Paul has provided a means of defense against the enemy. Now Paul gives us one more tool before sending us off to war. This time, it is an offensive weapon: “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (v. 17).

A *machaira* is the Greek term for this short sword, which had a blade about two feet long and was sharp on both edges and pointed on the end. It was designed especially for hand-to-hand combat. A trained legionnaire could thrust and cut from any position so he was never caught off balance.

How do we use this weapon in our own fight against the enemy? By speaking the Word of God out loud. The Greek translation of “word” in this passage is *rhema*, which refers to the spoken word. It is a specific statement from the Word of God that counters a specific attack or temptation from the enemy. We can put it to best use, however, only when we are regularly immersing ourselves in Scripture. As we’ve already discussed, the devil loves the surprise attack. If our heart is free, he wants it back, and he won’t give us time to look for our Bibles. To win this battle for our hearts, we must be ready to fight, with the sword of the Spirit—the Word of God—in hand.

The Fight for Freedom

When a group of angry and idealistic citizens in the American colonies decided to throw off the oppressive shackles of their English rulers in the 1700s, they soon learned that freedom was a condition to be cherished—and that it came at a price. During the Revolutionary War, many men and women gave their lives so that a new nation could be

born. Today, freedom is no less valuable, and no less costly. Men and women around the world continue to make the ultimate sacrifice so that others may enjoy the fruits of a life of freedom. The fight continues.

So too does the battle for your heart. If you are a Christian, you are already assured of the ultimate victory—salvation and eternity with our Lord. But the enemy will not rest in his efforts to make your present life as miserable and ineffective as possible. He wants to recapture your heart. Don't let him do it! We've just explored how to defend your heart and how to "dress" for battle. Now we'll take a look at another vital step toward keeping your heart free.

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A Thought to Remember

Most of us monitor the oil level in our cars more carefully than we watch our hearts.

A Verse to Review

"Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." Proverbs 4:23

A Question for Reflection

What specifically are you doing to guard your heart?