

Safe &
Sound

--

Standing
Firm in
Spiritual
Battles

--

David
Powlison

“I don’t think there is a better book on spiritual warfare. It breaks through the confusion and fear that so often attend this topic with practical biblical insight, carefully given by a skilled surgeon of the soul. Every Christian should read this book so they are prepared for the inevitable battles they will face between the ‘already’ of their conversion and the ‘not yet’ of their home-going.”

Paul David Tripp, President of Paul Tripp Ministries; pastor; best-selling author of *New Morning Mercies*

“During his lifetime, David Powlison gave to the church gifts too numerous to mention. His parting gift of this book is no exception. Using Ephesians 6 as a foundation, David makes a compelling case for Christian life and ministry as everyday spiritual warfare empowered by the Divine Warrior himself, our triune God. This is warfare demystified—battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil waged prayerfully and dependently on your knees with Scripture in your hand and your heart.”

Michael R. Emlet, Counselor and Dean of Faculty, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF); author of *CrossTalk: Where Life and Scripture Meet* and *Descriptions and Prescriptions: A Biblical Perspective on Psychiatric Diagnoses and Medications*

“*Safe and Sound* protects you from the worst kind of spiritual warfare where you let Satan ‘get in your head.’ We have the high ground. That’s one of David Powlison’s many rich insights in this thoughtful book on fighting the powers of darkness. Taking spiritual warfare seriously does not mean letting Satan shape the narratives around his power. He’s a defeated enemy, with a fatal wound from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ!”

Paul E. Miller, Director of seeJesus; author of *A Praying Life* and *J-Curve: Dying and Rising with Jesus in Everyday Life*

“David helps us regain the language, perspective, and practice of spiritual warfare from the Scriptures. To counsel is to engage in cosmic battles waged in the normal moments of everyday life. Powlison keeps us grounded by reminding us that we do not wage war according to modern philosophies of naturalism, but with the armor of God and

the Sword of the Spirit. In the midst of his own battles with the ever-present shadows of death, Powlison is transparent and vulnerable as he shepherds us to rest in the peace found in God's Word. Expositionally accurate, theologically practical, and winsomely relevant—you will do well to read, heed, and guard his timely biblical counsel."

T. Dale Johnson, Jr., Executive Director of the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors; Director of Counseling Programs at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; Associate Professor of Biblical Counseling at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

"What a gift David Powlison has given us in this, his final book. His familiar voice does what it has always done—it lovingly joins the dots of spiritual reality to the present reality of life. Hear him well: spiritual warfare is not an occasional oddity, it is the central dilemma of every person's life. This book doesn't just describe our constant battle—to believe, and repent, and love—it also shows us how to fight—right to the end. And no one who loved David, either in person or through his ministry, will read the final chapter without tears in their eyes."

Steve Midgley, Executive Director, Biblical Counselling UK;
Senior Minister, Christ Church Cambridge

"I worked with David for thirty-eight years, so I acknowledge I am biased toward everything he wrote, but this is David at his best: pastoral, connecting dots between Ephesians and Satan's present strategies, opening his own life to us, and opening our eyes to the light of Jesus Christ. More than a book, this is a gift."

Edward T. Welch, Faculty and counselor, CCEF; author of *A Small Book about a Big Problem*

"Honestly I've always had more questions than answers when it comes to spiritual warfare and demonic activity. So I am thankful for this short, Scripture-saturated book that not only provides clear teaching on what spiritual warfare really is, but also presents appropriate strategies for helping people in the midst of spiritual battles against evil—the same strategies we all need for life in this world—the Word and prayer."

Nancy Guthrie, Author and Bible teacher

“This is the best thing I’ve ever read on spiritual warfare. David Powlison’s *Safe and Sound* equipped me to understand spiritual warfare in a way that nothing else has before. Read it and I guarantee you’ll grow in your faith.”

Deepak Reju, Pastor of Biblical Counseling and Family Ministry,
Capitol Hill Baptist Church (Washington, DC); author of *On
Guard* and *She’s Got the Wrong Guy*

SAFE AND SOUND

STANDING FIRM
IN SPIRITUAL BATTLES

David Powlison



WWW.NEWGROWTHPRESS.COM

New Growth Press, Greensboro, NC 27404
www.newgrowthpress.com
Copyright © 2019 by David Powlison

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided by USA copyright law.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*.[®] Copyright © 2000; 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE[®], Copyright © 1960,1962,1963,1968,1971,1972,1973,1975,1977,1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*.[®] NIV.[®] Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.[™] Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide.

Cover Design: Faceout Books, faceoutstudio.com
Interior Typesetting and eBook: lparnellbookservices.com

ISBN 978-1-948130-73-8 (Print)
ISBN 978-1-948130-83-7 (eBook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019908439

Printed in the United States of America

26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 1 2 3 4 5

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Part 1: What Is Spiritual Warfare?	
Chapter 1. The Reality of Spiritual Warfare	10
Chapter 2. How Paul Envisions Spiritual Warfare	18
Chapter 3. God's Weapons and God's Call	26
Part 2: Counseling in the Reality of Spiritual Warfare	
Chapter 4. Strength and Guidance for Personal Ministry	40
Chapter 5. Fighting the Normal Battles: Anger, Fear, Escapism	47
Chapter 6. The Battle with the Shadow of Death	55
Chapter 7. In Conflict with the Occult	61
Chapter 8. The Battle with Animism	68
Chapter 9. Spiritual Warfare Focuses on the Person	72
Chapter 10. The Last Battle	77
Appendix: Jesus's Mode of Ministry and Ours	85

INTRODUCTION

This is a book about spiritual warfare. You are in a battle. I am in a battle. And every person we counsel is—like us—living in a fog of war, stalked by a deadly predator, and facing a master of deception. When our hearts deceive us and our culture misleads us, Satan’s desires and purposes are at work.

How does that strike you?

If you’re like me, it can be hard to tell in the day-to-day that we are in this war. As with any spiritual reality, it’s easy to forget when you can’t see it with your own eyes. I wrote this book because I want us to be awake and alert to the real battles we face. These are dark days, and this is a book about how to stand up to the powers of darkness—for yourself, for your loved ones, for those you counsel. As we go forward, I am going to be personal. I will share stories with you to show what some battles have looked like in my life. I will share stories from other people’s lives so we can benefit from what they’ve learned about how we are to stand. I will tell stories because this is not a topic

that can stay abstract. The reality of The Great War for our souls is on the table in the Bible from Genesis 3 through Revelation 22. We are real people with a real problem. This is personal for all of us.

So to begin, let me go back to my beginnings.



For the first twenty-five years of my life I was unaware that I was in the middle of a battle with unseen forces. I grew up in a church in Hawaii that didn't believe in the devil and didn't have too much to say about Jesus either. We didn't actually need a savior because we weren't really sinners—at least not big ones. We thought of ourselves as basically good people with a few problems we could solve on our own. And we certainly didn't think or talk about the devil. But that didn't change the reality that I did have enemies: the world around me where we all lived without reference to God, my own desires that were ultimately self-focused, death and the shadow of death, and, over all, the dark lord Satan.

As a teenager I began to have a sense that I wasn't getting the whole picture of what life was about at my church. I could see that there was actual evil in the world. My dad was a Marine in the Pacific in World War II. After the war, we were faced with the threat of total destruction from the nuclear bomb. We had drills at school where we were all hiding under our desks in case a nuclear bomb was dropped. That was the world I was living in. It was a world where the religion that I grew up with seemed completely irrelevant.

By the time I was off to college at Harvard, I had given up any interest in religion. But my world continued to expand. Now my world included a campus in turmoil from student protests.

We protested against social injustice in Cambridge, against Harvard's rules and policies, and against the Vietnam War.

Death became real to me as well. My grandfather died when I was a freshman in college. I watched as he grappled with the meaning of his life in the face of death. He had no answers, and I had no answers to share with him. The next year I studied for a semester in France. One night I was in the backseat of a car when a young man, obviously drunk, stumbled right into our path. I looked him in the eye before the car hit him and he was killed. Once again, I met death and had no answers. What meaning could there be made out of a life that could end so suddenly and senselessly in death?

And there were my desires, thoughts, and intentions. I wanted to have significance, to understand people, to live a life that mattered, to care for others in some way, and have a relationship with a nice girl. To those ends I majored in psychology, brought water and bandages to those who were injured in riots, and practiced serial monogamy. Added to that was what I didn't want. I didn't want to be around Christians. I thought Christians were backward and reactionary. If I knew anyone who claimed to be a Christian, I kept as far away as possible.

I did have unanswered spiritual questions, but they weren't on the front burner of my life. After a few years in college, my worldview began to crack ever so slightly. God broke in through Bob Kramer, a friend I met at Harvard where we were both involved in protests together. He went to Europe for a year to study and ended up at L'Abri, where he met Francis Schaeffer and became a Christian. When he came back to college, it just so happened that we had space in our suite and he moved in with me.

That year Bob and I started a five-year conversation about Jesus. He was the first person I met who was thoughtful about

his faith. He was able to mount an intellectual defense of Christianity that was very compelling, but the reason our conversation went on for five years is because I didn't want a savior. I didn't want a lord. I wanted to be in charge of my life and my choices. Our friendship endured—I was even his best man at his wedding to Diane—but I didn't change. I still didn't want to be a Christian.

But on August 31, 1975, something different happened. Our conversation started along the same lines with Bob explaining the philosophical and existential reasons for Christianity—which made perfect sense to me. Then Bob stopped making the case for Christianity and simply shared his heart with me. He said, “Diane and I really love you, and we respect you. But what you believe and how you're living . . . you are destroying yourself.”

Bob had earned the right to say this to me, and the Spirit used those words in my life. I immediately came under an intense conviction of sin. My sins flashed before my eyes—attitudes, thoughts, and actions that just a few minutes before I had seen nothing wrong with. Most fundamental of all, it struck me that I had not believed in the love God had for me.

I just sat there. Bob had the guts and the wisdom to be quiet. Finally I said, “How do I become a Christian?” His response was funny because he started to talk apologetics again. I had to stop him and say, “No, no. I don't care about all that. What do I have to do to become a Christian?”

Then Bob shared God's promise of cleansing and a new heart from Ezekiel.

“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new

heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.” (Ezekiel 36:25–26)

This offer of cleansing, renewal, transformation—it was what I wanted and, for the first time, understood that I needed. But then, Satan, who all this time had been in the background of my life as the animating power behind the darkness and lies, spoke openly to me. The only way I can describe it is that I heard an evil voice. It wasn’t my voice; it was a mocking, snarling, accusatory voice that was in direct competition with the promise of a new heart that Bob had just read to me. That voice was saying things like, “You’re too unclean. You’re hopeless. God could never accept you. If you went to Christ, you would pollute him.”

I had a vivid sense of being caught in this battle between two voices, one of which was the voice of promise and hope, and one of which was the voice of darkness and hostility. It was the only time I’ve ever had an experience like that. But I was right on the cusp of leaving the kingdom of darkness, and the king of darkness was not letting me go without a fight.

I said to Bob, “I feel like I’m too bad to come to Christ. And I can’t . . . I just can’t ask God to change me.” Bob said, “You can ask God for help to ask God into your heart. You can ask God for anything, so you could ask him for the strength to ask him to rescue you.” So I did. My prayer was straight out of Luke 18, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (v. 13). I called to the Lord; the evil voice went away. My experience that night was right out of James 4:7–8. I drew near to God in repentance and faith, and the devil fled.

The next morning I woke up in a new universe. The world was full of light and brightness, and I was filled with torrents of joy. The first words that ran through my mind were, “I’m

a Christian. I'm home." I was almost twenty-six, and I had the sense of having been on a hot, dusty road heading to nowhere for twenty-five years. Now I was where I really belonged.

This twenty-four-hour period was the first time I was aware that I was in a battle. I was facing powerful enemies—the world around me that ignored God and made fun of Christians, my desire to be my own savior and lord, and Satan, the animating power of all the lies I believe and the darkness I lived in. But God broke into my life. The Spirit used one friend who was willing to love me and tell me the truth about God, the world, and myself to bring light into my personal darkness.

In personal ministry, you will meet many people who, like me, have no idea that they are in the grip of the dark lord and his lies. When you are counseling people who do not yet know the Lord, then you know that they live within a fog of fundamental deception. They are disoriented to what life is about. They are walking in the dark and do not understand what they are stumbling over (Proverbs 4:19). You know that the deceiver of the whole world does not love his followers. He intends to kill them in the end—and so you must be prepared to offer help.

You will meet and help others who do know Christ. When you are counseling one of the Lord's beloved children, then you know that the devil bears a particular animosity toward this person. The great dragon, "that ancient serpent," is furious with "the woman and her offspring who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (Revelation 12:9, 17). They were his once (Ephesians 2:3; 5:8). But they switched sides, turning from darkness to light, from death to life. But given their troubles and struggles, they have an essential need to know Christ as their refuge, protection, and strength—and so you must be prepared to offer help.

This book is about how to help people. Standing up to evil plunges us into deep, dark waters—the complexity of the human heart, the complexity of cultural influences, the complexity of the enemy. We must learn how to fight well, how to put on Jesus Christ himself, wearing the weapons of light with which he defeats the powers of darkness.

Together, let's stand up to the darkness in the pastoral wisdom of Christ Jesus himself!

Part 1: What Is Spiritual Warfare?



Chapter 1

THE REALITY OF SPIRITUAL WARFARE

Harry and Keisha are a couple in your church. Harry doesn't believe in Satan. He doesn't really believe in God either. In his world everything is up to him. There are no outside spiritual forces, just the choices that he makes. Right now he is choosing to have an affair and to leave Keisha, his wife of ten years. He wants you to give him permission to leave.

Joe meets with you and reports that his wife Laura believes that he has a demon of addiction causing him to drink too much. She often prays over him, casting out his demon. At first, he thought her prayers might have cured his drinking problem. His drinking was more under control. But lately things are pretty much the same. He still drinks too much. He wonders if he does have a demon of addiction and if maybe they just haven't found the right way to pray.

Kaitlin just became a Christian. She grew up in a Christian home where she was taught about Jesus but went her own way. She married and had three children and a year ago put her faith in Jesus. Now her husband Tom is adamantly opposed to her going to church and bringing the kids to church. She doesn't know what to do. She comes to you for guidance.

Stacey sees the devil's handiwork in every problem large and small. Once she cast out a demon from her computer. She was certain that a computer virus was the devil's work. When she describes a bad choice she has made, she always frames it as Satan getting the best of her. She really believes, in her words, "the devil made me do it."



If you were counseling Harry, Joe, Kaitlin, and Stacey, what would you say? Would you talk with them about the spiritual battle they are in and the unseen enemies they face? Or would you be more naturally drawn to talk about matters that are concrete and easier to describe: psychological dynamics, social influences, and physiological givens? How does the uncanny power of darkness fit in with the more accessible factors in a person's life? Is it possible that these seemingly accessible factors are actually far more elusive than we imagine, because they work hand in hand with the weaver of illusions and delusions?

Consider Harry who doesn't believe in God or Satan and yet is in the grip of Satan's lies about who he is actually serving and what brings true happiness. Can we fully understand his choices without some reference to how he is influenced by the lies that come to him from the world around him and his own desires—lies that originate from the dark lord? Or what about

Kaitlin. Can she really understand her husband's hatred of all things Christian without reference to the spiritual battle she is now in?

And then there is Stacey. Is she on to something when she makes the devil the "lead actor"? Would we be right to bring the devil into the conversation early and often, as if Satan's activity is the deepest and most significant explanation for everything that goes bad? Or perhaps Joe's wife, Laura, does well to see him as a "devil of the gaps," an extra factor, applicable only when a problem seems complex, bizarre, and particularly hard to solve.

How *do* we understand the role of the devil in the battles we are in?!

These are hard questions and it is so easy to go in the wrong direction when thinking about the role the Evil One plays in this world. In Part 1 of this book, we will see how Scripture helps us wisely answer these questions. Perhaps the fullest expression of how we are to stand against evil is in Ephesians 6:10–20, the classic passage on our participation in the clash between light and darkness. The engine room of this book will be unpacking that passage and trying on, piece by piece, the equipment God has given us for fighting evil. In Part 2, we will illustrate what spiritual warfare looks like in real life with case studies of people facing different battles.

Let's begin with how the Bible leads us to think about spiritual warfare.

THINKING BIBLICALLY ABOUT SPIRITUAL WARFARE

Did you know that the term *spiritual warfare* never appears in Scripture? It is a pastoral-theological term describing the conflict occurring at the heart of the Christian life. For good, biblical, and practical reasons, Christians have always understood

that we face a three-fold moral enemy: the world, the flesh, and the devil. Over this unholy trinity hangs the specter of our last enemy—the shadow of death and death itself. Scripture teaches that all of these enemies are ruled by Satan, the prince of this world.

Even though the term doesn't appear in Scripture, here are four ways to understand spiritual warfare biblically. I will make comments after each.

First, *spiritual warfare is a metaphor for standing on the Lord's side in the epic struggle between the Lord and his enemies*. Your counselees are taking sides. Your aim as a Christian pastor, counselor, and friend is to protect children of light (Ephesians 5:8) from being wooed back into darkness and to woo the rest of mankind (Ephesians 2:3) out of darkness and into the light.

Second, *spiritual warfare is a moral struggle*. It is a conflict over who you are, what you believe, and how you live. Our sufferings, whatever their form or cause—and Satan's malice is in the mix of causes—provide occasions either to stumble into darkness or to stand in the light. Our warfare is over which it will be. So, for example, Satan instigated the deaths of Job's children, the loss of his wealth, the disease that wracked his body, and his wife's evil counsel. But, ultimately, the spiritual warfare was for the loyalty of Job's soul. He had to make a moral choice: Who will he serve? Who will be his Shepherd?

Elsewhere in Scripture, the book of James focuses on the moral struggle within the heart. James zeroes in on two drives of the human heart: "I am" and "I want" (James 3:13—4:12). He takes the example of interpersonal conflict and shows how the self-exalting "I am god" leads to "I want my way." And, "No matter the cost to others, it's my will that needs to be done." James emphasizes how Satan interacts with our own hearts, what James calls "the flesh." Satan's lies and distortions are part

of the mix, but repentance and humility before God will cause him to flee (James 4:7). His searching indictment of the human heart ends with the call to submit to God, resist the devil, and humble your heart.

Third, *spiritual warfare is a synonym for the struggles of the Christian life*. There are no special insights or special techniques that kick in just because Satan's fingerprints are on something that is happening. It's all one war—and his mark is on every struggle that is wrong and dark.

Fourth, *spiritual warfare is a battle for lordship*. At its core, it's the battle for who you will serve. In whose image are you being made? Will you resemble the good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep? Or will you grow more and more like Satan, the liar and destroyer? This is a battle that encompasses all of life. Not just for a few odd or bizarre moments, but in every moment of every day we are in a battle for who we will serve.

In summary, Scripture treats spiritual warfare as a normal, everyday part of the Christian life, and so we should as well. It's not about spooky special effects. It's about how we think, feel, live, desire, and act in the presence of our enemies. The ultimate question that runs through everyone's life and through the whole Bible is: Who will be your shepherd? Will you be shepherded by your good heavenly Father or by *the* liar and murderer—Satan?

Christians are often confused about what role Satan actually does play in the world and in our own lives in particular. But God's Word gives clarity and direction. So let's look more closely at our enemy and what he is up to.

THE REALITY OF SATAN

The Bible never ignores Satan and the forces of evil arrayed against God's people. The Evil One is not the primary actor, but he does not only appear when something unusually strange or evil is going on. The real devil is utterly normal, and his role is fully integrated into daily life. Mundane evil is the devil's business.

At the same time, Scripture never puts Satan and his activities front and center. God puts people and our relationship to him and each other front and center. Then, just often enough, so you don't forget, he lifts the curtain and says, "By the way—" and gives you a glimpse of what's happening backstage.

Jesus gives us one of the clearest descriptions of who Satan is and what he is doing in John 8 as he speaks to the religious leaders who have rejected him.

"Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies." (John 8:43-44)

This passage encapsulates the core aspects of Satan's identity and purposes and works and motivations and intentions. Satan is intentionally evil, and he is up to no good. He has desires he wants us to follow. He is a father. He raises children. He disciplines his children in evil. Jesus points out that this is nothing new. He traces Satan's lies all the way back to Genesis 3 where the serpent's lies led to death for the human race.

When the apostle John discusses the interplay of flesh, world, and devil throughout his first letter, he sums up the problem in one pithy sentence: “The whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). John is not being spooky or seeing a devil behind every bush. As we’ve seen, human life is defined by the struggle between light and darkness, good and evil, true and false, life and death. The devil sums up all that is dark, evil, false, and deadly.

Similarly, the apostle Paul discusses the same interplay of evils throughout his writing, and most pointedly in Ephesians 2:1–3:

You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Peter takes up Jesus’s theme of Satan as murderer in 1 Peter where he describes the work of Satan as oriented around the experiences of suffering and oppression from outside forces. The issue of moral likeness is also there, but the context is how to remain faithful as you are faced with his murderous threats and intentions. Peter is emphasizing how Satan is in the world as a roaring lion seeking to devour God’s people and destroy their faith by brute force (1 Peter 5:8).

Taking all of these passages together, we see that the devil plays an underlying, behind-the-scenes role in the everyday problems of sin, misery, and death. But, again, the Bible does not lead us to make the liar and murderer the focus of ministry.

People and their relationship with God are the focus. So, do speak of the devil, but don't talk too much. The way you pay attention to Satan is analogous to how you pay attention to other influencing factors: bodily problems, personal history, cultural and peer influences, situational stressors, and sufferings. They are in the mix, but the person as a moral responder always comes front and center.

We will now go deeper with Ephesians. In his letter, Paul emphasizes Satan's work in the world through schemes and lies and gives us direction on how to stand against Satan's lies. As we will see, this is not just a defensive posture. This is a call to active resistance.