

## Spiritual Warfare Is Real!

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. - Ephesians 6:12

Spiritual warfare is real! The devil and his demons spirits are not myths or fantasies. These are real beings that hate the human race and therefore roam about seeking whom they might destroy and devour. That's why it is vitally important to know how to best protect yourself against their attacks!

Most of the attacks the devil wages against you will occur in your mind. He knows that your mind is the central control center for your life; therefore, if he can take control of one small area of your mind, he can begin to expand outward into other weak areas that need to be strengthened by the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. By poisoning your mind with unbelief and lying strongholds, the devil can then manipulate not only your mind, but also your emotions and your body. There is no doubt about it - the mind is the strategic center where the battle is won or lost in spiritual warfare!

The devil wants to get access into your life - and if he finds that access, you may be headed for quite a conflict! You can see why it is so important that you keep every door shut; then the enemy won't be able to find any entrance through which he can begin to wage warfare against you.

However, the devil will often put up quite a fight even when he doesn't find an entrance into our lives. That's why we need to know exactly what the Bible says about spiritual warfare.

In Ephesians 6:12, Paul told us, "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." I want to especially draw your attention to the word "wrestle" in this verse, for this word is the key to understanding how intense spiritual warfare can become!

The word "wrestle" is from the old Greek word *pale*, which refers to struggling, wrestling, or hand-to-hand combat. However, the word *pale* is also the Greek word from which the Greeks derived their name for the *Palastra* - a huge palace of combat sports that was situated in the center of most larger, ancient cities.

The *Palastra* was a huge building that outwardly looked like a palace but was dedicated to the cultivation of athletic skills. Every morning, afternoon, and night, the most committed, determined, and daring athletes of the day could be found in this fabulous building, working out and training for their respective sports. Three kinds of athletes primarily worked out at the *Palastra*: boxers, wrestlers, and pankratists.

Let me tell you a little about how these sports functioned in the first century when Paul wrote this verse, because it forms the backdrop to the word "wrestle" in Ephesians 6:12. The first and most feared combat sport was boxing. But the boxers from the first century were not like our boxers today. Their sport was extremely violent - so violent that they were not permitted to box without wearing helmets. Without the protection of helmets, their heads would have been crushed! In fact, this sport was so severe that few boxers ever lived to retire from their profession. Most of them died in the ring. Of all the sports, the ancients viewed boxing as the most hazardous and deadly.

In this brutal and barbaric sport, the ancient boxers wore gloves ribbed with steel and spiked with nails. At times the steel wrapped around their gloves was serrated, like the blade of a hunting knife, in order to make deep gashes in the opponent's skin. In addition to this, they used extremely heavy gloves that made every punch more damaging. It is quite usual to find artwork from the time of the ancient Greeks that includes boxers whose faces, ears, and noses are totally deformed from being struck by these dangerous gloves.

Making this sport even more dangerous was the fact that there were no rules - except that a boxer couldn't clench his opponent's fist. That was the only rule of the game! There were no "rounds" like there are in boxing today. The fight just went on and on until one of the two surrendered or died in the ring.

Next, there were wrestlers! Wrestling was also a deadly sport in the first century. In fact, most wrestlers chose to fight to the death rather than walk out of the ring in humiliation and defeat. As you see, it was an ugly, bloody sport. In order to make an opponent surrender, it was quite normal to strangle him into submission. Choking was another acceptable practice in wrestling. Like boxing, wrestling was an extremely violent and bloody sport that tolerated every imaginable tactic: breaking fingers, breaking ribs by a waist lock, gashing the face, gouging out the eyes, and so on. Wrestling was a bitter struggle to the very end.

The third combat sport was pankration, from the Greek words pan and kratos. The word pan means all, and kratos is from the word kratos, which means power. When these two words were put together, they formed the word pankration, which means all powerful. These fighters were the fiercest, toughest, and most committed of all! In this sport, they were permitted to kick, punch, bite, gouge, strike, break fingers, break legs, and to do any other horrible thing you could imagine. There was no part of the human body that was off limits. They could do anything they wanted to any part of their competitor's body, for there were basically no rules.

An early inscription from a father to his sons who participated in pankration says this: "If you should hear your son has died, you can believe it. But if you hear he has been defeated and chose to retire, do not believe it!" Why? Because like the other combat sports, pankration was

extremely violent. While participating in this sport, more professional pankratists died than surrendered or were simply defeated.

I realize that these are very graphic images, but they are also very important images, for they are all contained in the word "wrestle" that Paul uses in Ephesians 6:12. In the day when Paul wrote this letter, everyone who saw the Greek word *pale* ("wrestle") saw all these images in their minds. You can see, then, that this was a powerful, pungent word for Paul to use when he started to describe our conflict with unseen, demonic powers that Satan has marshaled together to try to destroy us. By using the word "wrestle" from the Greek word *pale*, Paul was telling every reader (and us) that spiritual warfare can be a bitter struggle and an intense conflict.

This first phrase in Ephesians 6:12 really carries this idea:

"For our wrestling - that is, our intense struggle, fierce combat, contest, challenge, and ongoing conflict - is not really with flesh and blood, but with...."

Then Paul goes on to describe the different levels of demonic powers that exist in Satan's kingdom. As we look at what Paul said, I want you to see that this conflict can be fierce! I don't mean to alarm you, but you need to know that the devil is serious in his attempts to destroy you - and if you haven't prepared yourself spiritually to thwart such attacks, you may find yourself in a real quandary.

You see, our adversary is real. There are foul forces of darkness that work covertly behind most disasters and many moral failures. However, these demonic spirits can't do anything unless our flesh cooperates with them! They may come to tempt, to seduce, to deceive, and to assault the mind - but unless they find a partner to listen or cooperate with them, their evil attempts are futile and powerless.

Therefore, the greatest key to winning every battle the devil wages against you is to keep your mind dominated by the Word of God. As you do that, your flesh will be kept under the control of the Holy Spirit, which will block the majority of the enemy's attacks against your mind! This is why Peter urges us to "...gird up the loins of your mind..." (1 Peter 1:13).

Remember, the devil knows that if he can take control of one small area of your mind, he can begin to expand outward into other weak areas of your life. Therefore, don't you think it's time for you to start reading your Bible and filling your mind with God's thoughts? There is no better mental protection against the enemy's strategies than to fill your brain with God's Word! It will strengthen you and keep your mind free from unbelief and lying strongholds.

So take God's Word deep into your mind, and stop the devil from finding access into your life. Do everything you can to shut every door. Don't give the enemy any entrance through which he can begin to wage warfare against you!