

Against All Odds

Standing in the Gap

Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Given 11-Aug-07; Tape #842

One of this world's greatest stories of courage in the face of overwhelming odds is the story of The Battle of Thermopylae where the Spartans tried to defend Greece against the invading Persian army under Xerxes I in 480 BC.

Some of you may have read the book, "Gates of Fire," a fictional account of this story by Stephen Kressfield. I thought it was better than some of the movies I have seen about it.

The movie, "The Three Hundred Spartans"—maybe some of you old-timers will remember that one—was one of that last of what came to be known as "the sword and sandal" swashbuckling movies of the 1950s and 1960s, this one being 1962.

Recently there was another one with the title, "300," which was a very violent, bloody film. It probably depicted the blood and violence accurately.

The name of the city and environs was Thermopylae. This literally means "hot gate." There were hot springs there, and so it lent its name to the pass nearby. This was a natural choke point. At that time, to get into central Greece from the north, you had to go through Thermopylae. And this pass was very narrow, maybe only 45 feet (14 meters) between the cliff wall and the sea. It was the perfect place to defend.

If you were to go there and visit this place, today, standing where they took their defense, you would be a couple of miles from the seashore now. The nearby river has silted up over the past 2500 years, and so the shoreline has moved over this period of time.

Again, this was the perfect place for an inferior force to prevent or delay a much larger force from advancing.

Xerxes I was the Persian Emperor at the time. He called himself the king of kings—and he was. He ruled over all the other kings from India back toward Europe at that time. And he brought a huge army and navy into Europe. He was going to conquer the (known) world. And, he knew that if he could get past the Greeks, Europe lay wide open to him.

So, he brought a huge expeditionary force, which may have been the largest military force that has ever been assembled. Herodotus, the Greek historian, says that the combined army and navy of Xerxes I numbered more than five and a half million men, fairly evenly divided between army and navy.

Modern scholars tend to discount this number saying that the land there could not support this number of people, especially regarding fresh water. Greece has a typical dry Mediterranean climate.

Maybe the army of Xerxes I was that big—or maybe not. It is hard to say. But, that is the

number that has come down to us. Modern scholars put the number in that army at least 150,000 in the army alone—it was probably closer to 200,000 with an equal number of them in the navy because their sea power became the determining factor in the end of this battle. It was by sea that Xerxes was supplying his troops with huge "corn" ships—ships full of grain and other foodstuffs that could be delivered to the beach so the men could have access to it.

Of course, coming over land they had the wagons bringing the other provisions that they needed also.

Whatever it may have been, it was a huge contingent of Persians and Medes, with other persons who were under the thumb of the Persians at that time.

Actually that number does not matter. There were only seven thousand Greeks sent to defend Thermopylae, and they were led by three hundred Spartans. That was all who could come from Sparta at that time. And, they were actually King Leonidas' personal troops and guard. These were the ones that he could command by himself without getting permission from the council. So he took them.

Now, the Greek states like Athens, Corinth, Sparta, and the rest, had many, many more soldiers. But, the Olympic Games were scheduled at this same period, and so all the city-states in that confederacy decided that they would rather attend the games than to fight the war. So, they sent token forces to Thermopylae.

Beyond the geography, the Greeks had better armor, better weapons, better fighting skills, and even better tactics than the Persians—at least in this particular battle. Their armor and weapons were bronze, even though the world was already well into the Iron Age. They found their bronze weapons to be superior.

They used long spears, instead of the short spears of the Persians. They also had short swords, which they only used when they had to. The Romans ended up copying this, and did not use their swords as much as we thought they did. The Greeks had armor for their lower legs, and helmets for their heads.

But really, their defense was the large bronze shields that they used, wearing them on their left arms, covering them from their knees to their neck. So, with their helmets, and their greaves on their lower legs, they were pretty well covered. And because they had the long spear, a bit better than twice the size of the Persians, they had a much greater reach.

So, they had better defenses and better offensive weapons as well.

But what really set them apart was that they could lock themselves shield to shield in a wedge shape called the phalanx. It looks a bit like an arrowhead. They would make formation and stack themselves with only enough of a gap between them for their weapons. So they were like a huge armored turtle—which was one of their formations in the phalanx—covered from the ground up into a great mound of shields and spears—bristling spikes for offensive and defensive warfare.

This phalanx was perfect for the environment of Thermopylae. They only had to defend about 45 feet from wall to sea, and they had almost impenetrable armor with their long spears that

could take out an enemy before he could reach them.

So, they were well suited for this particular situation.

The Spartans especially were professional soldiers. They were trained in military life from the age of seven when they would leave their families, and be taught the Spartan way of life by mentors. They were disciplined—especially these 300—and experienced men. In fact, Leonidas would not allow anyone to be a part of the 300 unless he had fathered a living son to carry on his name. So, most of these men were mature men.

Finally, and maybe the most significant quality beyond all the geography, the armor, the weapons, and their tactics like the phalanx, beyond their experience and maturity, is that these 300 were free men. They were there on their own command. They decided themselves to go. They were defending their own land and families, and their Greek way of life—all the things they cherished. They did not have masters behind them whipping them forward. They were doing this because they wanted to be there. They had made the choice.

Not to belabor the point, but Xerxes I, and his however-many men he had, ran into a buzz saw when they tried to attack the Greek forces at Thermopylae. For two days Xerxes sent successive waves of troops—first ten thousand men—and they died. And then he sent in a wave of twenty thousand men—and they died; not all of them, but many of them did. The Greeks just chopped them into pieces, almost literally. Even when Xerxes sent in his vaunted "Immortals"—who were supposed to be the best soldiers that the Persian army had—they died.

And the Greeks, working in shifts as the Persians melted away after a wave, would send in fresh troops to the front, and they would fight the next wave. And when the fighting subsided, and the Persians retreated, the Greeks would again send in fresh troops and bring back the dead and wounded. So, they always had a fresh phalanx at the front to meet the enemy.

It is said that Xerxes, while sitting on a high place nearby on a great chair watching the battle, stood up three times in alarm just on the first day because his men were being slaughtered as he had not seen happen before.

This all might have continued much longer than it did if it had not been for some treachery. For gain, a local Greek named Ephyaltes led a large force of Persian "Immortals" along a mountain path that led behind the Greek positions, and then they could attack from the rear also.

Upon hearing of this betrayal that morning, King Leonidas called a war council, and as far as we know, which is difficult because of time and contradictory stories, sent the rest of the Greek troops home, except for his 300 Spartans, and 700 Thespians (actual Greek men, not actors), and 400 Thebians. Now, these Thebians were thought by King Leonidas to have been sympathetic to the Persian cause, and therefore were kept as hostages.

So basically, there were only about 1,000 Greeks—the 300 Spartans and the 700 Thespians—plus, whatever servants were there for those men.

They were to guard the retreat, and hold off the Persians for as long as they could. But, with the Persians now coming in from both sides, and controlling the heights around them, the 1,000 Greeks lasted only until midday. The Thebians did go over to the other side as soon as the

fighting began again. Those who survived this took a last stand on a small hill, but they were overwhelmed and annihilated by a continuous volley of arrows.

In the two and a half days of fighting, the Greek forces lost a total of 2,400 men including all the Spartans, and King Leonidas too, and all the Thespians.

The Persians lost at least 25,000 men—a more than a 10 to 1 difference!

Besides this (and this is in the movie), there was a great tempest (windstorm) that came up while the Greeks were moving into position before the first day. And thousands of Persian sailors and several ships were lost in this storm.

But the Greeks—and the Spartans especially in their sacrifice—inspired the remainder of the Greeks to come to fight and prepare for the next battle against the Persians.

It was not all a bed of roses after that, the Greeks lost Athens. And, it was only because of a very valiant sea battle that the Greeks were able to hold off the Persians.

But ultimately the Greeks held them off. They won. With just a few thousand Greeks total for that whole war against millions of Persians—the world's greatest Empire at that time.

This could be just a thrilling story of heroism, but it should be very instructive to us as Christians. We too are a tiny force standing against who knows how many wicked spirits arrayed against us. Perhaps you might understand better as little old us standing against the cold, cruel, steam-roller world relentlessly grinding us down. Maybe you see yourself fighting a losing battle against your dreadful and greatly powerful human nature.

Whichever way we look at it, whether we are fighting Satan, ourselves, or this society, the good news is that we can win—if we stand, if we fight, and if we give it our all, so long as we do not betray our selves to the enemy.

I Timothy 1:18-19 This charge I commit to you, son Timothy, according to the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck,

II Timothy 2:1-4 You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier.

Paul tells us here to wage the good warfare. We are in a fight. And we have to fight. And we do this because we are hopefully good soldiers of Jesus Christ. He is the One who enlisted us. He is the One who through God's calling drafted us into His army. We are soldiers on the spiritual

battle line.

We are all well aware of this metaphor. This is not something new. How often have we sung the hymn, "Onward Christian Soldiers"? It is a true thing. It is a very biblically based metaphor of the Christian life. We have heard many sermons on the Christian fight, and I do not know if that series is over. (No, my dad just indicated that it is not.)

Anyway, this is an addendum to that, if you will. Maybe this is a sidelight of one particular facet of it.

Notice what Paul says that we need to win this fight. (We are going to be adding these two passages together.) First, he said that we must have faith. That is the first thing that he mentions. We have to believe the doctrines that we have been taught. That is what we need first and foremost. We must believe the doctrines that Christ has taught us through the apostles, and the ministry.

And then, on top of that we have to trust the King—the General—the Captain of our salvation to lead us and help us; trusting Him to supply help throughout all the many battles that we have to fight against whoever that enemy happens to be.

Among the worst things that can happen to an army is for the soldiers on the line to lose confidence in their commander, and his battle plan—they lose morale, they do not fight as hard, they give up, and they die. So, the first thing we need is faith.

And then He says, oddly enough, that we need a good conscience. If it were me, I would not have written good conscience there. But, he did. He was inspired to use the term. It goes together with faith.

While faith involves unwavering belief and trust, good conscience has everything to do with sound practice, and obedience to Christ's doctrine.

Now, we might think of that good conscience as a function of our mind, but Paul is not thinking in that vein. He is thinking of how conscience is built or destroyed in a person. Remember he goes and talks immediately about how some people suffer "shipwreck" because they did not follow their conscience.

A good conscience is built, strengthened, and preserved by doing what is right, and experiencing how living the right way works.

It is like Pavlov's dog. Your conscience is trained by *doing* in obedience to commands, and being rewarded. And so, when we see a way that works, we function, then, automatically according to our conscience. We can override that conscience, but to do that is sin.

To do something against your conscience—and you are also a true Christian with the correct conscience—is bad. That is how they suffered shipwreck these two, Hymenaeus and Alexander, because they did not follow what they had been taught—what had built their conscience to know what is good and right.

So the quickest way to tear down your conscience is through sin and disobedience. That is spiritual shipwreck. You are headed for the bottom.

So, what Paul is emphasizing here, when we put it into the spiritual warfare metaphor is that as good soldiers of Jesus Christ we must obey His orders without hesitation. Not only do we believe what He has taught us in our training; not only do we trust Him for everything in the fight and follow His battle plan, we also obey His orders simply.

The next thing he says that as a good soldier, we must endure hardship—we need endurance. Our enlistment is not for a quick battle, and then to go back into civilian life. It is not for a short war. We are to be career soldiers.

And so, as a career soldier we have to endure hardship for the rest of our lives. We have to be committed to it to the point where we are willing to go and to do whatever the Commander says. We have to continue battling—Satan, self, and society—until we die on the battlefield. There is no end to our enlistment except through death. We are enlisted for life.

This sounds grim and rather hopeless sounding, that we have been enlisted to die. But it is not at all! Paul said in Hebrews 9:27 that it is given for all men once to die. We are going to die anyway. So why not die in the good cause doing the right thing?

And besides that, if we die on the battlefield with Christ, only eternal glory in victory awaits. That is not half bad!

The fourth thing Paul says is that a soldier under Christ must be dedicated and focused. We could also say 'devoted to his duty.' A soldier cannot afford to be distracted—not by any means! Whether you are on guard duty, or on the battle line, distractions can be deadly. Besides, our spiritual enemies are strong enough, and subtle enough—all of them; not just Satan, but the world and our human nature too! They are all strong enough, and subtle enough to take advantage of any and all lapses in our attention or commitment. They will exploit any gap in the line. They are primed to attack when we show even the least weakness.

So, if we are not focused on the fight, if we do not have our heads in the game, if we are not watching every side, high and low, then our position will be undoubtedly overrun. That is what they do. They attack. They assault. They test our defenses constantly.

How ready are you? How dedicated are you to the fight? How focused are you? How devoted are you to the Commander and His plan?

This may seem to be old fashioned, but it is not. I mean old fashioned in terms of being soldiers on an ancient battlefield with swords, and spears, and shields. It is not.

Ezekiel 22:23-31 And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Son of man, say to her [Israel]: 'You are a land that is not cleansed or rained on in the day of indignation.' The conspiracy of her prophets in her midst is like a roaring lion tearing the prey [where have we heard that before? I Peter 5:8]; they have devoured people; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows in her midst. Her priests have violated My law and profaned My holy things; they have not distinguished between the holy and unholy, nor have they made known the difference between the unclean and the clean;

and they have hidden their eyes from My Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them [is this sounding familiar?]. Her princes in her midst are like wolves tearing the prey, to shed blood, to destroy people, and to get dishonest gain. Her prophets plastered them with untempered mortar, seeing false visions, and divining lies for them, saying, 'Thus says the Lord God,' when the Lord had not spoken. The people of the land have used oppressions, committed robbery, and mistreated the poor and needy; and they wrongfully oppress the stranger. So I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one. Therefore I have poured out My indignation on them; I have consumed them with the fire of My wrath; and I have recompensed their deeds on their own heads," says the Lord God.

It is as if I have read to you a newspaper article of today's news from the scripture above. This is what is happening in the land of Israel today. We might put it into different words, and phrase things a bit differently, but that is basically what is happening out there in the world. The culture is a mess; people do not know or help one another anymore. Instead, they oppress one another.

The preachers lie. Our leaders are in it only for their personal gain. Nobody is in it for the sake of the land, the people, or God.

Of course, there in that section in verse 26, nobody practices the truth, nobody seems to know what is right or wrong anymore. It is not being taught in great measure anymore.

So, we live in a time of similar corruption as in Ezekiel's day. And God is again looking for the few who will stand with Him at the spiritual Thermopylae, who will defy the forces of evil, turn them back, and work for good.

This is not old fashioned, even though it is put into ancient terminology, weaponry, and such. God has used these things in His Word to teach us some very important spiritual lessons about what we need to do as Christian soldiers.

This starts when we counsel for baptism. The instructions regarding this metaphor begins at baptism.

Luke 14:25-33 Now great multitudes went with Him [Jesus]. And He turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it—lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish [This is the

easy to remember part].' Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple".

Like I said, we discuss this when counseling for baptism. These are Jesus' own stated qualifications for discipleship. And He means them! We tend to emphasize counting the cost, and in particular, the first illustration in building the tower. However, for our purposes today, the second illustration (verses 31-32) is most appropriate. The question that Christ proposes without saying is, "How far are you willing to take the Christian fight?"

King Leonidas of Sparta was in such a situation. "How far are you willing to take this fight?" He had spies—intelligence—that told him that the Persian armies were vast. They could be seen in their march across Macedonia. How can you hide that many people? Other nations to the north had already fallen. Refugees had streamed down into southern Greece. It was known that Xerxes' army was huge.

So King Leonidas had a choice. He could send emissaries to Xerxes to sue for peace, and make the best terms that he could for himself, and for Sparta. Or, despite being outnumbered by many times—at least 7000 to 200,000—almost 30 times!—he could chose the field of battle himself, and resolve to defend it with his last ounce of strength and courage. Those were his choices. In other words, does he choose easy capitulation to a numerically superior force, which would end in his and his people's slavery; or does he opt for the less likely and quite grueling, and probably fatal, defense of all that he cherishes while remaining free?

He had to choose between freedom or slavery. He had to choose between surrender or fight; to save his life or lose his life. This was his choice.

Xerxes did send emissaries to convince him to surrender. He said, "Look, Leonidas! Look at my army. I have the whole strength of the entirety of the Medes and Persians at my back. Why don't you give in?"

Do you know King Leonidas' reported answer? According to Plutarch, "If you knew what is good in life, you would abstain from wishing for foreign things [meaning conquest and riches]. For me, it is better to die for Greece than to be monarch over my compatriots."

Leonidas understood this principle. He chose to live free, or die. This is also the motto of one of our states. Live free, or die.

Here is another section where Jesus says what it takes to be one of His disciples.

Luke 9:23-26 Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost? For whoever is

ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father's, and of the holy angels.

If you will notice, verse 24 is the principle behind Luke 14: 31-32, the king who had ten thousand considering the army coming at him with twenty thousand. Jesus says to choose this, "For whoever desires to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it." This is the answer. This is the principle.

Jesus says that we have to be willing to commit our ten thousand—all of our forces to stand against the twenty thousand and be willing to die.

Making a quick peace with the enemy—Satan, this world, or your self—will enslave us to it, and ultimately take our eternal life away from us. Resisting to the end will mean our physical death, but it means that we will be rewarded with salvation and eternal life. That is the Christian paradox of self-sacrifice. We become living sacrifices to live.

We have gone over this many times, so it is not anything new. This is also a military metaphor.

Romans 12:1-2 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service [think military service]. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

If we look at it this way, verse 2 explains verse 1. We give our lives to God, which Paul said is our reasonable service. Why is it reasonable? We enlisted in Christ's army, so it is our duty; it is what is expected of us. When a soldier is enlisted into any army, it is with the purpose that he is going to fight, and he is willing to die. That is what soldiers do.

It is not that they are to become some part of a crazed suicide squad. That is not what it means at all. But, part of the service of a soldier in Christ's army is to be willing to give his life in sacrifice for the cause. And, being a living sacrifice entails not allowing ourselves to imitate and submit to this world's way of doing things, but to cooperate with God in transforming ourselves into the image of Christ.

So, when we are living sacrifices, and we do not do what the world does, or what Satan wants us to do, or what our human nature is screaming for us to do, we instead do what Christ wants us to do—what God wants us to do—which is to conform unto Him; to be transformed; to be changed. What He wants us to do as soldiers is to train to be the kind of soldier that Jesus Christ is. He is the model. He is the perfect soldier. He is the perfect Christian soldier.

And He wants us all to be just like Him. Paul calls this process in verse 2, "the renewing of your mind."

Continuing to follow the military metaphor on this, this means that we once took orders in

another army, from some other captain. It was not a winning army because its ways and orders did not work, and its strategies were broken. There was something wrong with it.

But, now we have been drafted, and enlisted into Christ's army; no longer do we strategize the way we did in the previous army. We do not march the way the previous army marches. We do not camp the way that the old army camps. And we certainly do not fight the way that the previous army fights. We must learn an entirely new approach to everything.

Mr. Armstrong said that it was unlearning all the rot that was poured into our minds from our earliest days, and relearning—renewing, making new—our way of life so that it matches God's way as exemplified by Jesus Christ.

So, we have to forget the "G. I. manual" we got when we were born. We have to learn an entirely new manual, and it is right there in your lap—your Bible—which shows you the way to fight the Christian fight. And of course, there is the personal communication with The Commander-in-Chief Himself, and the training that He puts us through to instill this into our minds and make it so that we will not have to think about it, but we just do what He says.

Now, Paul says that we do this so that we may prove what is good. That is the important part. Proving something usually takes a lot of time, research, and effort—blood, toil, sweat, and tears to borrow from Churchill. It is not always easy to prove something. The point is that this renewing of our mind entails a great deal of self-sacrifice through years of experience.

A soldier is made, not born. There are some who seem better equipped for it; however, most must be taught. That is why they go through boot camp. That is why they are constantly going in and out of training. They have to learn it. The training is long and hard, and dirty. There are a lot of injuries that happen in training. There are a lot of sore muscles. There are many attempts to do things we have not done before, and would never do unless there was the sergeant shouting in your ear that it has to be done, or you do not pass.

You have to learn to be proficient with your armor and weapons. We are fighting with weapons and armor we never had before. We do not know how they work, so they have to be tested and tried over years. We have to drill with our comrades so that we can fight in unison, so that we can be a phalanx like the 300 Spartans used so that we are both defended by our brothers, as well as being able to move in offense when needed to.

We have to become accustomed to our General's orders so that we can anticipate His commands and move with speed and determination when the time comes.

There are a lot of things we must learn. We must unlearn a great deal, and then we have to learn a great deal. And these are happening at the same time. It is a great strain. It is not easy. But, that is all part of being a soldier. This is what made the Spartans so formidable. They were thoroughly immersed in their own military culture. From the age of seven they learned it night and day. They were never away from it.

And, there was an interesting scene in that movie 300—I would like to interject here that I am not recommending this movie. It is very violent, very bloody. There are some sexual parts, too, so I am not recommending it. But, parts of it are very interesting.

They come upon a company of Arcadians as they are nearing Thermopylae. And these Arcadians laugh at them and say, "You brought only 300 men? What do you mean? We expected all of Sparta to be here." And Leonidas just looks at them and asks, "Tell me, Arcadian, what do you do?" And he answers, "I'm a potter." And he asks another Arcadian, "What do you do?" And the second answers, "I'm a sculptor." And he looks at a third one, and he answers, "I'm a blacksmith." Then he turns to his own Spartans, and he asks them, "And, what do you do?" And they answer with a resounding war whoop.

They were the "marines." They were soldiers, and that is *all* that they were. They were thoroughly immersed in their soldiering. They were grizzled, experienced warriors. They were accustomed to their armor, weapons, tactics, and to their leaders. They fought as a group—a phalanx—not as isolated men.

Those same Arcadians come on the scene again later on, and Leonidas lets them fight. He said they are pretty good brawlers. They will do their part.

But, the fighting was really done by the professional soldiers who obeyed their orders implicitly, and were willing to die right where they stood, never giving up an inch of ground, because that was the Spartan way.

In fact, there was another scene where there is a conversation, and the guy expresses a wish, a hope, that the Persians were excellent soldiers. He wanted to die the perfect death—fighting on the battlefield. To them that was glory. And, they were fighting for physical things.

How much more should we have these same principles in us who are fighting for spiritual glory—for God Himself.

This next section is the, "Whole Armor of God" section. All who hear me probably knew that I would get to this next section of scripture sooner or later.

Ephesians 6:10-11 Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

Please do not limit this just to Satan's attacks. The principles that I have been bringing out today are effective against all enemies of God, and ours.

Ephesians 6:12-13 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

I want you to notice that immediately Paul tells us that we do not have to fight this long battle alone. We do not even have to fight with our own strength and skill. We are to put on the armor of God, but we are to be strong in the Lord, and the power of His might. We are puny flesh and blood weaklings when it comes to our enemies. Jesus said ten thousand against twenty

thousand—it is more like one against twenty thousand.

But we get a boost. We have each other. And even more important than that, we have our Captain who holds all the power of the universe. No one can defeat Him. And, He is willing to offer us His power and His might so that we can stand even against Satan the Devil, who is, indeed, very powerful.

But, we have a Captain who is invincible. And, He is willing to give us the power that we need. So, we are assured victory if we stick with Him, if we stick with His plan all the way to the end, if we are found standing there in the gap by His side in the phalanx.

But notice that our job is to take up the *whole* armor of God. This is very similar in form (in my mind at least) to the apostle's teaching the *whole* counsel of God. The emphasis is on "the whole"—not just a piece or two, but all of it.

Think of the Greeks standing there in their line, how good could they have fought if they did not have their greaves? Or their helmet? Or they lost the strength to pick up their shield? Or their spear was broken?

Some have said that the Greeks lost at Thermopylae even with the forces coming from front and rear, only because their spears were broken. Of course, volley after volley of arrows made their work complete. If they lost any of their weaponry or armor, they became vulnerable with a weakness to be exploited.

We have to take up the whole armor of God. It is a charge and exhortation to be complete in our spiritual preparations. Do not leave any step out. Do not skip over any part of your training. Do not think that anything is unnecessary or unimportant. We need to be prepared to use every bit of that armor. And it will all come in handy at some point.

So, he goes on to mention what are the main pieces of that spiritual armor.

Truth is buckled around our waist. Righteousness is putting the truth into practice. Always stand firm in the gospel. We must have faith, hope, and communion with God. We must be watchful and persevere. We must care for one another.

Paul mentions all of these things down through verse 18.

Therefore, we can and must withstand all attacks; and then to stand. We are to repel all assaults just like the men at Thermopylae when Xerxes sent ten thousand, and then twenty thousand, and more against them in wave after wave.

And having beaten off the enemy, we are to hold that ground—our position—at all costs because Satan, like Xerxes, is certain to renew the attack either right away, or first thing the next morning. We have to always be at the ready. We do not know when the next attack is going to come! We do not know at what strength it will come either. It might be the same, or it might be stepped up. And more than likely, if their last attack failed (we hope) their next will be stronger.

And so, we must stand. We have to withstand, and also stand because another attack is coming. Do we not know from our own experiences that breathing spaces between trials are few and far between? We withstand one attack, and then the order comes down, "Stand! They're coming

again! Don't give up this ground! We have fought them off once, we must do it again!"

I want to show you, now, another example—an ironic spiritual (and physical) Thermopylae in the story of Esther.

We know the story. Haman, the Agagite, an Amalekite, had become the king's chief minister. The irony of this is that this Persian king, Ahasurus, was none other than Xerxes I. It was the same king who just a few years before witnessed the Spartan defense at Thermopylae. He was able to win in Greece through treachery, but he was not able to win at home.

Haman proposed to Xerxes that he should be allowed to annihilate all the Jews in the Persian Empire. And, this was all the Jews in the known world in the Persian Empire. And the king said, "Okay Haman, whatever you think is good." Xerxes did not have much on the ball that day, I do not think. He just gave Haman the signet ring, and gave the go ahead.

So the decree was signed. And if you remember, in the laws of the Medes and the Persians, no law signed and sealed with the king's seal could be rescinded.

Since there were no alternatives, since this decree would go forward, since the Jews would have to die, because the king ordered it through Haman—Mordecai would have to ask Esther to beg Xerxes to help them. Mordecai, who by the way his name in Persian is Marduk Ai, a Persian god; and Esther is their form is Ishtar.

Esther 4:10-11 Then Esther spoke to Hathach, and gave him a command for Mordecai [they could not meet, so they had a go-between]: All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that any man or woman who goes into the inner court to the king, who has not been called, he has but one law: put all to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter, that he may live. Yet I myself have not been called to go in to the king these thirty days."

What she is saying is, "I cannot go to the king. Everybody knows that if you go to the king, and he does not hold out the golden scepter, you die. And he has not called for me. I have had not opportunity to say anything to him. Mordecai, you are asking me to sacrifice my life to just have the king's ear."

Esther 4:12-14a So they told Mordecai Esther's words. And Mordecai told them to answer Esther: "Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king's palace any more than all the other Jews. For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. . . .

Mordecai was very clear, and very certain. He was a faithful man that God would send deliverance. Notice what he says next:

Esther 4:14b-16 Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai: "Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me; neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast likewise. And so I will go to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish!"

And she did. She went to the king. And, it worked.

She considered, as we have been going through this, in this time between verse 10 and verse 16, she considered the forces arrayed against her, and decided that she was willing to sacrifice herself for the good that it would bring her people, saving them from sure annihilation.

She, like the Spartans, stood in the gap despite the overwhelming odds that she would die in the attempt. And her actions produced salvation. It was a physical deliverance of a physical people. But the principle and example is there.

Ultimately, we have the perfect sacrificial example of Jesus Christ. He gave Himself for the salvation of all men, whoever would believe.

Are we willing to stand with Him, shield to shield, in the gap?