

The Contest for Your Future

Eternal Stakes Confronting Present Realities

Have you ever felt overwhelmed confronting the future? How do you make the right choices with so many options ahead? Most of us could certainly use some guidance in figuring out how to navigate.

Each day is a brand-new opportunity to walk with God in the present. We've been reflecting on the two things that always seem to stand in the way of that: our past and our future.

My leg in today's journey of discovery is "The Contest for Your Future." Allow me to remind you, what we're talking about here is very personal, because [it's a matter of YOUR future](#). The slides I'll present are designed to assist you in recalling and retaining whatever God may inspire in your heart that's [relevant to you](#) in your personal journey. So sit back, relax, and enjoy the show! Notes optional.

I wish I could introduce you to my friend Ayatollah. No, not that Ayatollah! This one lives in Raleigh. He grew up in the Big Apple and was bodyguard for 13 years to Muhammad Ali, who gave him his name. Given his unmatched Black Belt skills, he was first employed by Malcolm X and later went on to mingle with the rich and famous over a storied career. Last week I had my first hospice companionship visit with him, and what stories he could tell! He had a stack of dog-eared photos and articles to prove each one. Currently housebound, he was happy to tell me all about it and agreed for me to interview him and share it with you in this presentation.

First, I asked him how he trained to be a bodyguard. He learned early on how to spot approaching trouble a long way off. "[You learn how to read people](#)," he said, "and you can always tell if they're coming to

help or hurt you.” And if the answer was “hurt”, he was at the ready with all the right moves.

Second, I asked him how he trained to be a Black Belt. This was the incredible part. He showed me a YouTube video they’d taken in the neighborhood when he was at the tender, young age of 75 that you wouldn’t believe. There was the obligatory chopping a cinderblock with the side of his hand, but that wasn’t all — the next stunt showed him chopping a cinderblock with his forehead. Ouch! Just how does a person do such a thing?

What he learned from his Japanese master was that when chopping a block, you **don’t focus on the block**, but on the empty space below it. You see your hand moving right through the obstacle like there was nothing there at all — because **your destination is the space underneath**. You see the visible obstacle as if it were invisible, and the air below as if it were material. What a lesson in preparing for the contest!

Preparing for the Contest



Orientation

- Reading the Opposition
 - Help or hurt? Friend or foe?
- Perspective
 - Obstacle or occasion to shine?

Attitude

- Intentionality
 - Serious mindset, serious results
- Objective
 - Christ’s breakthrough is incontestable!
 - With God’s help, see the obstacles as immaterial

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Preparing for the Contest

As we start today's trek onto the road ahead, I'd like us to take stock of two things: orientation and attitude. As we embark, what's our orientation? Which road are we choosing—a path of help or a path of hurt? Once we're on our way, how will we perceive the obstacles on the trail—as roadblocks or as an occasion to shine?

Then there's the matter of my attitude. If I want serious block-chopping results, I've got to have a serious mindset. I'll break through, not by my power, but because of the undergirding weight of the power of God holding me up from underneath. So onward and upward!



Your Identity and Christ's Triumphal Procession

Take a look for a moment at this fine artist's rendition of an ancient [Roman triumphal procession](#).

In the Church Epistles, the Apostle Paul repeatedly evokes this image by way of [an allegory, comparing the victory parade to our victory in Christ](#).

We're going to zero in on this spectacle to paint a vivid picture of the battlefield of the mind and the spoils at stake regarding our future.

[Fully grasping the allegory of the triumphal procession will help us to advance in our quest to live our identity in Christ.](#)

As a result of that new understanding, we will be better able to appreciate all that Christ accomplished for us and how we can personally benefit in our own walks.



Leading Every Thought Captive

Please turn to 2 Corinthians 10. On this slide we see the tables turned in the contest. Now [the captors](#) (representing worldly thoughts) [have become the captives](#) (brought into the obedience of the victorious Christ).

Let's see how Scripture states it.

2 Corinthians 10:3-5:

For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh.

For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have **divine power to destroy strongholds**.

We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and **take every thought captive to obey Christ**,

It's clear from the context that the strongholds we're talking about here are not material fortresses, but rather the notions and ideas that take hold in our minds. **Worldly thoughts can hold a powerful sway** over us, even to the point of seeming impossible to resist. Paul muses about this all-too-human plight in Romans 7.

Romans 7:14,21-23 (WNT):

For we know that the Law is a spiritual thing; but **I am unspiritual--the slave, bought and sold, of sin...**

I find therefore the law of my nature to be that when I desire to do what is right, **evil is lying in ambush for me**.

For in my inmost self all my sympathy is with the Law of God;

but **I discover within me a different Law at war** with the Law of my understanding, and **leading me captive** to the Law which is everywhere at work in my body—the Law of sin.

So here we have the faceoff between the two opposing sides. **Our adversary aims to lead us captive** to the law of sin by lying in ambush. On the other hand, **God has equipped us** with divine power **to lead the opposition captive to Christ** and to destroy those things that previously exercised a strong hold over us. Weymouth puts it this way: **"we carry**

off every thought as if into slavery—into subjection to Christ.” For God would have us to be free.



Identifying the Cast of the Parade

- Victor (The General)
- Allies (The Cohort)
- Enemies (The Captives)
- Celebrants (The Incense-Bearers)

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Identifying the Cast of the Parade

To appreciate these truths on a deeper level, let’s take up the subject of the [cast of characters in the Roman victory parade](#). You’ll see them all in the artwork for Slide 5.

- Astride the chariot at the top, we have [the Victor](#), the triumphant, returning Roman general exalted above the crowd.
- Next to him at top left we have [the Allies](#) in the Roman cohort with their blood-red shields and fierce cockscomb helmets.
- At bottom front we have [the Enemies](#), forced to trudge along in captivity at the head of the procession, heads bowed in subjugation.
- Finally, off to the right waving their incense-burners we have [the Celebrants](#), the Roman citizens joining in celebration.

So that's the complete picture, and what a pageant it is! We would do well to burnish it in our memories so we can draw on its lessons in our personal lives.



Honoring the Victor: Christ

Please turn to Philippians 2. Speaking of the victor, how do you like this for a mind picture of **the captain of our salvation**?

There was an element of adoration in the triumphal procession, lionizing as it did **the triumphantor**, the undisputed master of the nation who had vanquished all its foes. In like manner, we as **followers of the victorious Christ** haste to honor, laud and extol him. As it says in

Philippians 2:9-11:

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him **the name that is above every name**,

so that **at the name of Jesus every knee should bow**, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The victory celebration is all about the king of kings and lord of lords!



Enlisting Your Allies

The Promises of God

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Enlisting Your Allies: The Promises of God

In this picture we see the helmeted soldiers on either side of the triumphant general in his victory chariot. He trusts them as his personal bodyguards and has given them prominent place in the procession to honor their service.

Allegorically speaking, **who are these Allies? The promises of God.** These are the weapons of our warfare that **have divine power to destroy strongholds.**

What are the high towers you're seeking to dismantle in your life? **Enlist the promises of God as your allies** in the spiritual struggle for primacy and you'll see your heart and mind strengthened by the power of God.

The prophet Jeremiah had a message of hope for Israel's future when they were at their lowest point, having been exiled to Babylon.

Jeremiah 29:11-14a:

For I know **the plans I have for you**, declares the LORD, **plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.**

Then you will call upon me and come and **pray to me**, and I will hear you.

You will **seek me and find me**, when you seek me **with all your heart.**

I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and **I will restore your fortunes...**

In like manner, in Hebrews 4 the author offered relief to the people of God if they would only reject their own works and embrace God's grace.

Hebrews 4:10-12:

for whoever has entered God's rest has also **rested from his works** as God did from his.

Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

For **the word of God is living and active**, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and **discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.**

Hebrews 4:12 is a verse we have tended to view in isolation. In the context, it's part of an admonition to stop being so hard-hearted and start trusting in God instead. **Hardening our hearts leads us to rely on ourselves. Entering God's rest involves relying on Him** for the living, active guidance He can reveal to us when our hearts are honest and humble.

Moving ahead to verse 15, we see how God sympathizes with our humanity and has provided a savior who knows our pain firsthand.

Hebrews 4:15,16:

For we do not have a **high priest** who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been **tempted as we are, yet without sin**.

Let us then **with confidence draw near to the throne** of grace, that we may receive mercy and **find grace to help in time of need**.

Do you see how the Scriptures are our allies in defeating our foes? The sword of the spirit which is the word of God is at our disposal so we can take on all comers.



Triumphing Over Your Enemies

Worldly Thoughts

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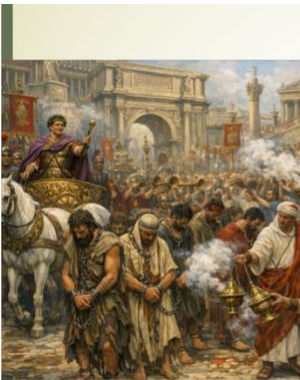
Triumphing Over Your Enemies: Worldly Thoughts

It's a good thing to triumph over your enemies. In no system of ethics is it considered unjustified for a man to defend himself against an attacker. Not everyone wants to help you. There are many who are

looking instead to harm you. If the stakes in the contest are our life, we want to be ready to scope out the situation and be prepared to prevail.

In the contest for our future, *who are our Enemies?* Not the allegorical flesh-and-blood opponents as we see here, but a deeper spiritual truth.

The Enemies in our spiritual contest are *the worldly thoughts* that pleasure us or pressure us and ultimately lead us away from the path of victory. You know the ones I'm talking about. Apprehensions, anticipatory fears of future troubles. Expectations of inadequacy. Worst-case scenarios. Chronic health conditions, persistent financial challenges, insatiable irrational desires. Is there any light at the end of the tunnel? The list goes on and on.



Distinguishing Friend from Foe (Thoughts)

ALLIES	ENEMIES
Enlighten	Deceive
Justify	Accuse
Defend	Attack
Liberate	Capture
Edify	Destroy

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Distinguishing Friend from Foe (Thoughts)

On our way to supremacy over our foes, *half the battle consists in reading the opposition*. How do I know if a particular thought is an enemy? You can smell it a mile away by simply taking this [Friend vs. Foe Survey](#).

The first question to ask is, “What do allies do?”. Then the second question, “What do enemies do?”, shows you by way of contrast who you really want to support. Let’s read each row for emphasis.

Friend vs. Foe Survey

ALLIES	ENEMIES
Enlighten	Deceive
Justify	Accuse
Defend	Attack
Liberate	Capture
Edify	Destroy

This simple exercise will enable you to sort out and *identify worldly thoughts* that would seek to captivate you and *banish them*.

Combating Future-Spoilers

Discouragement "Will I Evers"	• Exchange fear of trouble with peace
Hopelessness "What ifs"	• Take heart, hold fast to God's promises
Stress "What <u>Nows</u> "	• Cast all your care on God
	• Past is not the end
	• Present is not permanent
	• Take the long perspective (eternity)
	• Wait on God, seek His plan for your life

Hebrews 4:16:
Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace,
that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

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Combating Future-Spoilers

Not a bad ploy! But before we move on, I'd like to talk for a moment about what I've labeled "Future-Spoilers." These are **behaviors that cause us to fixate on the future with negative expectations**, and they make us really unhappy! We're all familiar with them, because the things we say and do reveal how we react when we think about them.

First we have **Discouragement**, or the "Will I Evers". You know the drill:

- "Will I ever find a friend or a mate?"
- "Will I ever experience health and strength?"
- "Will I ever get out of debt and prosper?"

Next we have **Hopelessness**, or the "Whatifs". These are the doomsday scenarios:

- "What if the bottom falls out?"
- "What if catastrophe strikes?"
- "What if things never do get better again?"

Finally we have **Stress**, or the "WhatNows", where we reach the point of exasperation.

- "What now? I just can't take it anymore."
- "What now? That person will never change."
- "What now? We're stuck in the same old loop."

So in the face of these future-obsessed behaviors of Discouragement, Hopelessness and Stress, I've offered a list of some means to combat them which is captured on the right-hand side of **SLIDE 10**.

- Exchange fear of trouble with **peace**
- Take heart, hold fast to God's **promises**
- Cast all your care on God
- Past is not the end

- Present is not permanent
- Take the [long perspective](#) (eternity)
- [Wait on God](#), seek His plan for your life

You may have the opportunity to talk about this topic with others later as you mingle, so I would encourage you to think about what has helped you in combating future-spoilers in your own life, and be ready to share it!



Identifying with the Victor

Everyone loves a parade, and it's time to get back to ours.

Our subject in this section is [the Victor](#), the central figure in the parade. The entire retinue behind him is following in his steps, because they identify with him as their [hero, champion and guardian](#), the guarantor of their safety and security.

If we are to find and live our identity in Christ, we must first **identify with him as our fearless leader**. No one can take his place, and no one's going to talk us out of it. We're ready to put our lives on the line for him, because he gave his life for us. He has taken out our enemies and marches boldly ahead of us into a glorious future.

We will prosper and have good success when we **step into his identity as our very own by means of God's gift of salvation**.



Stepping into the Place He Took for Us

- Step 1: Blessing (Matt. 3:16,17)
 - God blessed His Son
- Step 2: Substitution (Is. 53:6)
 - God attributed Christ's blessing to us
 - Christ took our place in punishment
 - We took his place in atonement
- Step 3: Identification (Eph. 2:4-6)
 - We step into the place Christ took for us
 - Victory over death
 - Victory in life
 - Victory for all time



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Stepping into the Place He Took for Us

The biblical doctrine of **identification** can be broken down into **three steps: Blessing, Substitution, and Identification**. The progression is easy to follow:

Step 1: Blessing

- **God blessed His Son**

Step 2: Substitution

- Through **Substitution**, God **attributed Christ's blessing to us**
 - **Christ took our place** in punishment
 - **We took his place** in atonement

Step 3: Identification

- Through **Identification**, we **step into the place Christ took for us**
 - **Victory over death**
 - **Victory in life**
 - **Victory for all time**

Let's pause for a moment and review some of the **scriptural underpinnings of our identification**.

Step 1: Blessing

We'll start with the record of Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3, where God announced from heaven His **blessing of Christ**.

Matthew 3:16,17:

And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him;

and behold, a voice from heaven said, **"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."**

God wanted the world to know that His Son was beloved to Him, and that he pleased God greatly. When we take God's Son as lord in our lives and believe that God Himself was the One Who raised him from the dead for our salvation, that greatly pleases God and **He attributes the same blessing to us**.

Step 2: Substitution

Isaiah foretold of [Christ's substitution for us](#) in chapter 53 when he revealed that “the LORD has [laid on him](#) the iniquity of us all.”

Isaiah 53:6:

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

In the Gospel of John, John the Baptist confirmed that [Jesus was himself our substitute, taking upon him our punishment](#).

John 1:29:

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

Christ took away our sin because God first laid it on him as the perfect sacrifice for us.

Step 3: Identification

Ephesians 2 declares that our [identification with Christ](#) does not end with his [triumph on the cross](#) but continues to include the further victories of his [resurrection and ascension](#).

Ephesians 2:4-6:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,

even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—


and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,

So we see that we were made alive together with Christ, raised up together with him and seated together with him in the heavenly

places. This is why we can identify with him in every aspect of our lives.

Identifying with Him by Following in His Steps

- Christ Died, We Died with Him
 - Price paid in full
 - Offense extinguished
- Christ Arose, We Arose with Him
 - Death defeated
 - New life secured
- Christ Ascended, We Ascended with Him
 - Salvation forever settled in heaven



Psalms 119:89 For ever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven.

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Identifying with Him by Following in His Steps

So we follow in his steps. When Christ died, we died with him; when he arose, we arose with him; and when he ascended, we ascended with him. That is the essence of our identification.

- Having **died with him**, we recognize in our hearts that Christ has **paid the price in full** and has **extinguished the offense**.
- Having **risen with him**, we recognize in our hearts that Christ has **defeated death** and has **secured a new life** for us.
- Having **ascended with him**, we recognize in our hearts that the **salvation** Christ won for us is **forever settled in heaven**.

Psalms 119:89:

For ever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven.

The Final Reckoning

Leading Worldly Thoughts Captive

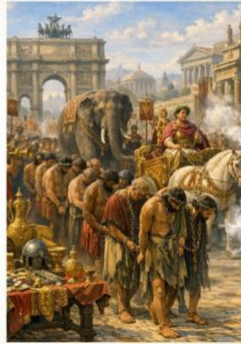
2 Corinthians 10:5b (TPJ):

... We **capture like prisoners of war, every thought** and insist that it bow in obedience to the Anointed One.

Capturing the Captors

Colossians 2:15 (TPJ):

Then Jesus made a public spectacle of all the powers and principalities of darkness, stripping away from them every weapon and all their spiritual authority and power to accuse us. And by the power of the cross, Jesus led them around as prisoners in a procession of triumph. **He was not their prisoner; they were his!**



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The Final Reckoning

The triumphal procession was not just a celebration. It was also designed to lead to a final reckoning for the captors, and that is where the contest for your future wraps up.

Two Scriptures from the Passion Translation encapsulate and will greatly aid us in digesting these truths.

Leading Worldly Thoughts Captive

2 Corinthians 10:5b:

... We **capture, like prisoners of war, every thought** and insist that it bow in obedience to the Anointed One.

Capturing the Captors

Colossians 2:15:

Then Jesus made a public spectacle of all the powers and principalities of darkness, stripping away from them every weapon and all their spiritual authority and power to accuse us. And by the power of the cross, Jesus led them around as prisoners in a procession of triumph. **He was not their prisoner; they were his!**

Celebrating the Author of Victory

Praising God, Spreading Christ's Fragrance

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Celebrating the Author of Victory

Praising God, Spreading Christ's Fragrance

We have taken a close look at how to [honor and identify with Christ the victor](#). But what about the [honor due the author behind the victory, God](#)? In the allegory, that is where the incense comes in.

The Romans used incense to thank their pagan god Jupiter for the victory and to exalt the triumphant general as a god in his own right.

In contrast, the Apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 2 of the significance of [incense in the procession to praise God](#).

2 Corinthians 2:14-16 (TPT):

God always makes his grace visible in Christ, who includes us as partners of his endless triumph. Through our lives he spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of God everywhere we go.

We have become the unmistakable aroma *of the victory* of the Anointed One to God — a perfume of life to those being saved and the odor of death to those who are perishing.

The unbelievers smell a deadly stench that leads to death, but believers smell the life-giving aroma that leads to abundant life. And who of us can rise to this challenge?

We praise God in spreading about the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ. Like the sweet smoke ascending from a sacrificial offering, the burning of incense honors the God Who provided the sacrifice which led to our ultimate victory.

Leaning into the Future with God in Christ

- Engage • Take initiative to act, but take a break from works
- Engage God • In all you take on, do it together with God
- Follow in Christ's Steps • Step into your God-given identity revealed in Christ
- Walk in Love and Respect • Love and honor God, Christ, and your fellow man



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Leaning into the Future with God in Christ

So where do we stand personally in the contest for our future?

In this last slide on [Leaning into the Future with God in Christ](#), a relay race underscores the importance of teamwork in the contest.

We're all interested in a life unencumbered by either the past or the future, and to do that we'll need God's help as well as each other's. Here are some things worth concentrating on as you sprint into the future with God in Christ.

Engage

- Take the initiative to act, but take a break from works

Engage God

- In all you take on, do it together with God

Follow in Christ's Steps

- Step into your God-given identity revealed in Christ

Walk in Love and Respect

- Love and honor God, Christ, and your fellow man

The victory has already been won, so take off from the starting blocks confident in the knowledge that God has you covered behind, before, above and below. [Take heart and enjoy your newfound identity in Christ. It's His gift to you!](#)

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! Amen!