

You couldn't call it a war or a battle, or even much of a struggle, really. It was more like total domination. The people lived their lives under the heavy hand of their overlords, but it had been so long that it just seemed like that's the way life was supposed to be.

The common people lived in the valley down below, but up there, on the hill at the head of that valley, stood a dark and ominous castle. It was there to remind the people that the tyrants inside it were totally untouchable and in complete control. From that sinister stronghold, their oppressors gave their commands and levied their taxes. They sent out their armies to control and abuse. They won every battle, squelched every uprising, and did their best to remove even the hope that there could be an escape from their power.

The people suffered. Their oppressors bent their will to their own. They tricked and deceived them – lured them into traps with false promises. They terrorized them with threats and threw in a random act of violence every once in a while to keep them subdued and wondering.

Who were these people? Who were these cruel overlords? How could this continue? Such injustice and abuse! But perhaps you know the answer already. Perhaps you see the tyranny of your greatest enemies in your life. Perhaps you feel the draw of empty promises or have been burned in the past. Maybe you've been affected by the violent anger of the ones who want to destroy your hope. Yes, you were those people, oppressed and afflicted, and the rulers over you, looking so untouchable and unassailable behind their high walls, were Satan, sin, and death.

Satan ruled over you. He whispered in your ear and told you lies – lies about what would make you happy, lies about what you really need in life, lies about what your priorities should be. And he made it sound so good! You know what I'm talking about. He says, "You deserve to get more from this relationship," and we agree, never thinking about the love we could be giving. He says, "*This* substance or thrill or sense of control will fill the hole you feel in your life," and it almost works for a time, until we get used to it and need something more. He says, "You can do it on your own. You don't need anyone's help," and we repeat that to ourselves to make us feel strong, but end up only feeling alone.

Sin ruled over you. Even worse, it ruled in you. Even your best attempts to resist – to fight back, to struggle for good – were eventually turned inward toward yourself: "What's in it for me? How could that benefit me?" Every choice it infected. Every action it affected. Every thought it poisoned. It worked together with Satan and his lies, and laughed every time you stumbled and fell, deeper and deeper into the trap it set for you.

And the looming shadow of death ruled over you. Around every corner, it was there – a darkness you could sense, just out of sight. The sense of the unknown. The fear of uncertainty. When will it come? When will it cast its shadow over my life? When will it take my friend, my loved one? When will it scar me and leave me to pick up the pieces? When will it finally come and tighten its hold on me?

From their sinister stronghold, Satan, sin, and death exercised their power over us – unchecked and unopposed, they oppressed and enslaved us. And yet there were whispers – whispers of another kingdom, where darkness and fear did not reign, where every citizen had freedom and

hope that could never die. But they were whispers to us, and nothing more. This kingdom could not be ours, because we are flesh and blood – born under the power of Satan, sin, and death – and such **“flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.”**

But the ruler of that kingdom knew about the conditions we were under. He knew that we were lost without hope, but as he looked at the state we were in, his heart was stirred with a love that we cannot begin to understand. The King of God’s kingdom loved the slaves of Satan, sin, and death so much that he wanted to make them his own people and give them the freedom and peace and hope that they longed for so much.

And so that King came up with a plan to make it so. And this was a plan that was right in line with the other plans he had made. In the past, some of his people had faced another city with high walls that looked totally impregnable. And the plan he gave them then was not an ambush, not a siege, not a full out assault – it was to march circles around the city while blowing trumpets. For a week, those people marched in silence, with only the sound of trumpets blowing, but on the seventh day, they gave a shout – just the sound of their voices – and those walls came tumbling down.

The people of that King knew that his plans to save them were designed to show his total love for them, his willingness to fight the entire battle for them and give them the victory for free. And his new plan would do the same. The King set down his crown and put on the filthy clothing of the people ruled by Satan, sin, and death, and he joined them. He became one of the oppressed to save the oppressed.

From the beginning, it was clear that something was different about him. He lived in the valley ruled by the tyrants in the dark castle, but he himself was not ruled by them. The overlords took notice and tried to beat him into submission. They hit him with their best shot: Satan threw every temptation at him. “This must be painful and unpleasant, to live in the filth and hardship of this valley. Go escape it. Save yourself – these people never did anything to deserve you anyways.” But every temptation failed, and the King kept following his plan.

Sin tried to ensnare him: It tried to make him stumble. “Make it about you,” it said. “Think of the power you could wield if you joined forces with us. Think how much more enjoyable all this could be. Give in and go after the easy pleasures.” But the King crushed sin beneath his boot and kept on following his plan.

Then the shadow of death rolled out against him. “You have resisted Satan and sin, but you will not escape me,” it said. “No human being is immune to my poison. No living thing can escape my clutches. You may be a beacon of hope for these people, but I will snuff you out and silence you in the grave, and they will return to the gloomy dominion of Satan, sin, and death once more.” So death gave the King its best shot – threw all its fury and power against him – and the King died.

The people watched in silence as Satan, sin, and death celebrated their victory. Sin and Satan were bruised and broken, but death, it seemed, had prevailed. Three days they watched and wondered what this might mean. But on the third day, while their overlords were still gloating

and celebrating, the sinister stronghold on the hill began to shake. In fact, the whole valley began to shake! As the towers and parapets and high walls crumbled around Satan, sin, and death, the King who had been dead rose again, alive. Satan's temptations and lies had failed – sin had been crushed and the guilt of your sin had been paid for – and now, finally, the darkness of death was swallowed up in the glorious light of life. King Jesus won the victory!

And now he gives that victory to the new citizens of his kingdom. He establishes his own Mighty Fortress, within which he promises safety and peace and hope and joy for everyone who stays connected to him. Who is Satan, now that King Jesus has given you the victory? Only a liar whose lies are made obvious by the truth of God's Word. When he tells you that you're worthless, Jesus shows you that you were worth the sacrifice of his life. When he tells you that you're too broken to love, Jesus tells you that he came as a doctor for sick and broken souls, to make them clean and new and whole.

What is sin, now that Jesus gives you the victory? **"The power of sin is the law"** – every command and standard that we fail to meet. But now that Jesus has resisted sin and fulfilled the law for us, no failure on our part can take away the perfection he gives us. No sin of ours can take us out of his hand.

And what is death, now that Jesus gives you the victory? **"The sting of death is sin,"** and Jesus has done away with sin's power. Since sin does not – cannot – condemn you anymore, death has no sting. It cannot hurt you. For a believer in Jesus, as a resident of your Mighty Fortress, death has become only the gateway into eternal life. The Apostle Paul's taunt becomes ours: **"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"** Death has no victory over the people of God, because Jesus won the victory and has given it to us.

Now, since that victory is ours, we have nothing to fear in this life or the next. As long as we stay connected to our Savior King, Satan, sin, and even death cannot harm us. They roam this world looking for someone who has strayed too far from our Mighty Fortress God to attack and lead off as their own. They can still pose a danger if we remove ourselves from him. but for those who maintain their connection to Jesus, the victory is won!

That doesn't mean that we will have no problems in this life. The victory Jesus won wasn't over financial issues and different opinions and stress. His victory crushed the power of Satan, sin, and death over our eternity. Here and now, we still feel their effects from time to time, but we also know that that is only a temporary thing.

But in our reading, Paul gives us just an idea of what it will be like to experience total victory: he says that **"We will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet,"** that announces the final coming of our Savior King. **"The trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed."** Paul didn't know how else to say it – he didn't know what it will feel like or look like to be totally free from the effects of sin and death – he could only say that it would be a change: totally different from anything you or I have ever experienced. We can't fit it into our minds now, but on that day we will taste total and final victory. Thanks be to God! The Victory Is Won – for you and for me, for eternity. Amen.