

Skirmishes

Hebrews 4:15 (NIV)

¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.

In war, the big battles are the ones that are remembered, that ones that carry weight. They are the turning points of history. The Battle of Gettysburg turned the tide of the Civil War for the North. The D-Day invasion gave the Allied Forces a foothold in France to begin advancing and overwhelming the German forces to secure victory in Europe. History remembers these pivotal battles.

At the same time, though, every war has fighting that isn't even worthy of the term "battle." These are called skirmishes. Skirmishes are defined as being minor fights that are often deemed incidental to the larger movements of war. They're usually just a handful of people, firing some shots, attacking their respective enemies, but nothing is decided by it. In the broad scheme of things, it doesn't seem like skirmishes matter.

Have you ever heard of the swamp skirmishes outside Charleston, South Carolina during the American Revolutionary War? By 1781, the war in the North had been fought to a stalemate. The British thought that they could win by solidifying their hold on the "loyalist" South before marching north from there. But patriot militia led by "Swamp Fox" Francis Marion fought the British in a series of skirmishes in the swamps along the Cooper River. They disrupted British supply lines of food, ammunition, and reinforcements. They forced the British in the South to back off from the inland invasions and ultimately left General Cornwallis shorthanded at Yorktown, Virginia, where his surrender virtually ended the American Revolutionary War. These swamp skirmishes contributed significantly to the eventual victory of the Americans over the British.

Skirmishes are not just a part of physical wars but also spiritual ones. One such skirmish happened as Jesus proclaimed himself to be the Bread of Life. Because of his teaching, many disciples turned away and left Jesus. It was a fight of a few people, not this massive spiritual battle for the world, but it was still a fight for their souls.

We take part in similar spiritual skirmishes every day. The alarm goes off in the morning, and we don't want to get up and so we are fighting the impulse to stay in bed all day instead of getting up and serving other people in our various callings. During the day at work, there's the temptation to give the minimum effort, to take extra breaks even though you know you are getting paid to get things done. Or to push off homework yet another day thinking that it really doesn't matter if you do this or not. As I assess my health, I begin to think that there is no hope for me, that I worry about what tomorrow will bring. Late at night, when I know I should just go to bed, instead I have the urge to go to that website that I know I shouldn't go to. From the moment we wake up until the moment we lay our heads down on the pillow – sometimes even in our dreams – we are engaged in skirmishes for our souls, fighting temptations left and right.

Dereliction of duty. Minimum effort at work or school. Worrying about my health. Struggling with addictive websites – these skirmishes are not inconsequential. With each test that God gives us, the devil is right there too using it to tempt us to do what is wrong, to commit evil. Even one skirmish lost means total defeat, as James wrote: "Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." (James 2:10) This is not a game of Risk, if you've ever played that board game. In Risk, you just mass up your armies and try to plow through the opposing forces, losing your armies again and again, just hoping that you roll the dice well enough and have enough expendable armies that you take all the territories to win the game. In Risk, you expect to lose some of the battles, some of the skirmishes. In our spiritual life, even one lost skirmish means the same defeat and consequence that the devil suffered: eternal torment in the prison of hell. Every skirmish is a war for your soul.

Jesus skirmished with the devil. You heard about that on the first Sunday in Lent. God the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted, to fight one on one with the devil, to skirmish. The devil said to Jesus, "Turn these stones into bread." Jesus said "no." First skirmish ended; Jesus won. The devil said, "Thrown yourself off this high point of the temple because God will send his angels to rescue you." Jesus said "no." Second skirmish ended; Jesus won again. The devil said, "Bow down and worship me, and I will give you all the kingdoms of the world." Jesus said "no." Third skirmish ended; Jesus won again. This time the devil departed from him.

We know those three skirmishes between Jesus and the devil, but there were so many more. The devil had only left Jesus to return at a more opportune time, a time when maybe Jesus would be weaker, a time maybe when he thought he could win a skirmish against Jesus. But Jesus fought skirmish after skirmish. Daily, he was tempted to disobey Mary and Joseph, his earthly parents. Day

after day, he skirmished against the idea of using his divine power to make his life easier. Day after day, he was tempted to lose his temper with his disciples who just didn't get it or exploding with wrath against those who opposed him and mocked him and tried to trap him. Day after day, he fought off the depression caused by the people who wouldn't believe in him, who turned away from him.

But every single skirmish ended with the same result: Jesus won. When you start adding up all the results of Jesus' skirmishes, they make the total difference. Jesus was fighting a war of attrition, a war which is won when you win every single skirmish. The end result is what the author to the Hebrew Christians wrote: "We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin." (verse 15)

Jesus knows what it is to skirmish with the devil, just like what we do. He knows how hard it is to fight day in and day out against temptation. The difference is that Jesus won. We have lost too many spiritual skirmishes to count, but Jesus' continuous skirmish victories have won the war for our souls. Because he was tempted in every way that we are and yet did not sin, he has defeated the devil. His victory is our victory.

But the skirmishes are not over. We still fight against the devil and his temptations every day. As in any skirmish, we need the right weapons to effectively fight our enemies. If you fighting high in the sky, generally speaking a tank isn't going to do you a whole lot of good. If you are fighting at sea, a large infantry troop without any boats isn't going to win the day. You need the right weapons for the skirmish. And Jesus has given us the right weapons.

Whenever Jesus skirmished with the devil, he used the Word of God, the sword of the Spirit. But he didn't just use one Bible passage over and over again. He gave us his Word, filled with exactly what we need to combat and win our spiritual skirmishes. The Bible is almost like a Swiss Army knife – one weapon, but multi-faceted for a variety of purposes. You pull out each Bible passage for a different purpose. Passages such as "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16) and "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it." (1 Corinthians 10:13) lay out the battle plan and the way to victory. It's all through God, through his life, his sacrifice, his strength. You pull out "The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold" (Psalm 18:2) and it puts you in God's unbreakable bunker on which all bombardments of temptation shatter. You pull out "Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4) which sustains you while the devil tries to lay siege to your soul while bunkered in the Rock and Refuge that is our Lord. You remember "Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20) which sends in the reinforcement of Jesus to be with you while you skirmish with the devil. Jesus' cry "It is finished" (John 19:30) along with the truth that "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1) are our battle cries of absolute and total victory in every skirmish with the devil.

We continue to skirmish with the devil day in and day out, but the Son of God has gone forth into war. He skirmished with the devil. He won every skirmish in this spiritual war of attrition. "We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin." (verse 15) Every skirmish against the devil has been won for us by Jesus. In the spiritual war for our souls, we have won by Christ's victory. Amen.