

Intercultural criticism of spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:10–20)

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The text of Ephesians 6:10–20 reframes the sectors of what we know as 'spiritual warfare' to tackle demons that menace and disturb people's daily life. Reading this text from an African perspective helps to understand the text as well as believers in Africa to efficiently use the proposed weapons.

Contribution: An approach such as an intercultural criticism with the aid of a four-legged stool model in this research proved to be appropriate.

Keywords: Ephesians; warfare; weapons; four-legged stool; syncretism.

Introduction

The practice of deliverance has become of late in African church a vibrant expression of the reality of spiritual warfare. The message we are getting is that a church or a minister is powerful if deliverance happens. The basis of this practice may come from the text of Ephesians 6:10–20 but also on the place given in African beliefs to the powers of darkness. These powers are the enemies of blessings and prosperity. The assumption is that dealing with these powers is critical because 'all people seek good life' (Hiebert, Shaw & Tiéno 1999:133). While people struggle to have the best in their lives, the reality is that they always do not reach where they would want to be, making the war a continuous component of life (Hiebert et al. 1999:133). The belief is that failure comes from evil powers that believers have to fight absolutely.

The text of Ephesians 6:10–20 reframes the sectors of what we know as 'spiritual warfare' to tackle demons that menace and disturb people's daily lives. While this text is crucial, it calls for attention to read it with African eyes, using an exegetical approach aligned with the context in which the text is interpreted. This article discusses the fact that reading Ephesians 6:10–20 from an African perspective helps to understand the reality of spiritual warfare and the significance of suggested weapons in the said context. As stated by Gatumu (2008):

The assumption is that if Paul relied on Jewish and Graeco-Roman cultural resource and tools to explain Christ's supremacy over supernatural powers, this, then, is what African church may need to do. (p. 223)

The suggestion is that reading a biblical text with an intentional African background turns out to be vital for the context in which the text is interpreted.

Methodology

Intercultural criticism concerns a relation between at least two cultures (Loba-Mkole 2013:99): the culture of the original recipients of the text and the culture of the current readers. The task of an interpreter is then to establish the relevance of the biblical text to the present-day readers. In this article, I envisage to use the four-legged stool model as a guideline to study the text of Ephesians 6:10–20.

A stool is a familiar object known in Africa, because of its stability and ability to support weight (Mburu 2019:65). In the same way, the hermeneutical stool will help here to understand Ephesians 6:10–20. Mburu (2019:65) proposes the following four legs of the stool: '(a) parallels to the African context, (b) the theological context, (c) the literary context and (d) the historical context'.

Each leg plays a specific role (Mburu 2019:65–89): The parallels to the African context serve as a guide to identify important points of contact with the biblical text. The theological context helps

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to understand correctly the theological emphases of a given text. It will then serve the interpreter in trying to avoid misinterpretation. The literary context plays a critical role as the focus is on the grammar and the syntax of the text leading to extracting the intended meaning of the text under study. Finally, the historical and the cultural contexts deepen the understanding of the world of the author in an effort to get the meaning of a text in its original context. The legs of a stool, while very important, are not useful if there is no seat placed on them. In our case, the seat is the application of Ephesians 6:10–20.¹

Historical and cultural context

Based on Ephesians 1:1 and 3:1, Paul wrote the epistle during his house arrest in Rome as he was waiting to appear before Caesar (Ac 28:16–31). Pauline authorship of Ephesians, which was largely accepted in the early church, was not challenged until the late 18th and early 19th centuries (O'Brien 1999:4). The poignant factor questioning the Pauline authorship is the absence of the words *εν Εφεσω* (in Ephesus). These words do not appear in the oldest Greek codices such as p⁴⁶, κ* and B*. The non-Pauline authorship relies on the impersonal character of Ephesians, the language style, the relationship between the epistles of Ephesians and Colossians and the theological emphases in Ephesians (O'Brien 1999:5–10). The many arguments given by non-Pauline advocates as discussed by O'Brien have not held up to dismiss the Pauline authorship. O'Brien (1999) makes a succinct conclusion stating:

[T]he Letter to the Ephesians is distinctive among the epistles attributed to Paul. The early and consistent attestation to its apostolic authorship is highly significant, not only because Christians of the first centuries were closer than we are to the situation when it was written, but also because they were careful in weighing and evaluating their founding documents. This uniform testimony to its apostolic authorship should not be easily dismissed. (pp. 45–56)

While scholars have rightly expressed doubt concerning Paul as the author of the epistle to Ephesians, they have not specified who wrote the epistle. Instead, they have shown reservation. I adopt here the traditional view as discussed by O'Brien.

Ephesus was an important religious centre because it was the cult epicentre in antiquity for the Artemis cult (Horsley 1992:12). Ephesus was home to the goddess Artemis' 'most spectacular temple, the preeminent Wonder of the Ancient World' (Glahn 2015:13). The temple dedicated to Artemis seems to be significant for the city of Ephesus in that (Frayer-Griggs 2013):

[O]ne-third of the references to Ephesus in the extant Greek literature from the first century BCE to the fourth century CE, not including incidental references, are in some way related to Artemis. (p. 463)

Artemis received praises, acclamations and honours from different groups such as the Curetes, the boule and demos,

1. I will use the four legs in the following order: Historical and cultural contexts, parallels to the African context, theological context, literary context, and seat: application.

local and provincial elites and local craftsmen (Harrison & Welborn 2018:150).

The city of Ephesus was also the centre of magical practices, and people were really engaged in them (Arnold 1992:149). This religious background is relevant and helps in understanding why the themes in the letter to the Ephesians are dominated by the emphasis on spiritual warfare, principalities and powers. In relation to the magical practices, the assumption is that some of these believers might have expressed fear of evil spirits and cosmic powers with the probability of being tempted to syncretise their past magical beliefs and practices with their new-found faith. There is the possibility that the role of Christianity in relation to these evil powers was not addressed appropriately (O'Brien 1999:54). The point that O'Brien does not think about is that Christians in Ephesus could have their own way to face the reality they were living in without understanding all the spiritual scopes. Hence, the epistle of Ephesians could serve to help them to, probably, come out of the confusion between the magical and normal Christian practices. Arnold (1992) affirms:

[M]any converts were streaming into the churches – converts who were formerly affiliated with the Artemis cult, practised magic, consulted astrologers and participated in various mysteries. Underlying the former beliefs and manner of life of all these converts was a common fear of the demonic powers. (p. 122)

In considering the religious background of Ephesus and the origin of the members in her church, Paul resolved to write to them a section dealing with spiritual warfare.

The problem that Christians in Ephesus were facing resided also in the imperial cult that was so common in the city. The temple dedicated to emperors characterised religious life in Ephesus. The emperor who is mentioned in the dedications of the temple is Domitian. As observed by Friesen, Domitian was not the sole emperor; the temple was dedicated to 'Sebastoi' (Friesen 1993:49). It means that the temple was dedicated to the honourable or dignitaries in the city. Dedicating the temple to 'Sebastoi' suggests that the temple was used as a place to worship them.

The religious background in Ephesus displays the struggle that believers faced. Because they were used to magical practices and the imperial cult, their challenge might have been in how to reconcile, if possible, the two beliefs that they have encountered. Declaring that the Christian fight is not against blood and flesh (Eph 6:12), the author was referring, in part, to the religious practices in Ephesus before Christianity. Behind these religious practices, the author saw a resistance to the Christian practice. Considering that believers could not physically resist to the religious practices, the author directs them to use spiritual weapons.

Parallels to the African context

The background of members in African churches parallels that of members in the church in Ephesus. Before coming to

the Christian faith, Africans were involved in religious practices; there was not a vacuum. It is crucial to understand what spiritual warfare is in the African context. The African worldview gives a considerable place for the spirits. The spiritual world is a reality in Africa. The understanding is that (Ferdinando 2016):

[W]hen suffering is explained largely in terms of the activity of sorcerers, every incident of illness, every accident and adversity lead to mutual suspicion and hostility as people set out to determine who is responsible. (p. 97)

The misfortunes that people are going through put them in a constant battle. The spirits must be fought by all means. For example, among the Kikuyu community in Kenya, all members of the community are involved in fighting the spirits following the plan set by the elders. Once the day of the planned war comes (Kenyatta 1938):

[O]n the evening appointed, war horns (*coro wa ita*, sing.; pl. *macoro ma ita*) are sounded from various centres to signal the starting of the battle against the malicious spirits. On hearing the war horns, men, women and children, armed with sticks, clubs and other weapons, rush from their huts in great excitement. The elders take great care to see that spears, swords and knives are not used in this fight, for it is feared that if the spirits' blood is shed on the land, its uncleanness might spread defilement which might cause great calamity in the community. To avoid misery and suffering, people are asked to use only blunt weapons. (p. 261)

The way the battle was planned is striking. The identification of the types of weapons that members of the community are to use is well established. The consequence of using the wrong weapons is made known to the members.

Coming from a background where the spiritual world is real and that the warfare is appropriate to defeat the spirits helps Christians in Africa to understand the biblical teaching about spiritual warfare. There are believers who link any failure to supernatural activity. Difficulties related to education, business, marriage, finance, promotion and joblessness are seen as resulting from supernatural forces. Witchcraft appears to be one of the sources for misfortune. The conviction is that 'Africans believe in mystical powers existing in the universe which cannot be simply explained- psychologically or ignored as mere superstitions or trickery' (Kombo 2003:75). Referring to 'Africans', Kombo may be overstating as he does not indicate if it is about non-Christians or Christian believers. In search of solution, it is not a surprise to see people turning to a certain way to face the challenge that they think comes from the evil spirit. For example, in Kenya during the 2008 drought, which was a time of distress and hardship, the Wakamba 'did not wait on policy makers and governmental officials...they turned to ritualistic customs to invoke power used by their ancestors' (Koster 2011:173). Certainly, not all the Wakamba attended the ritual. However, the truth of the matter is that there are even Christians who might have attended because they do believe in the spiritual powers.

Being aware of the existence of spiritual powers, believers, sometimes, seek help in certain practices such as usage of anointed oil, water and other objects suggested by their religious or spiritual leaders. A number of Christian believers have fallen in this trap. The quest to find way to overcome the devil's attacks and be out of his hood stands for the proof of the awareness concerning spiritual warfare. Ephesians 6:10–20 offers an appropriate way to face the devil. Again, the danger of syncretism remains a reality – as it was in the church in Ephesus. A simple understanding of syncretism resides in the fact that (Ezenweke & Kanu 2012):

[B]asic elements of the gospel are replaced by religious elements from the host culture. It often results from a tendency or attempt to undermine the uniqueness of the gospel as found in the Scriptures or the incarnate Son of God. (p. 75)

Thus, the ground to understand Ephesians 6 from an African perspective is strong because 'the threat posed by the powers of darkness is intuitively understood by African converts, who experience similar fears and insecurities' (Smith 2018:73).

Theological context

In Ephesians, the author puts emphasis on Christology, stressing on the Christocentric importance in salvation. The theological context of Ephesians highlights the work of the cross and the new identity of believers. In addition, it brings a new understanding of Christology, pointing to two important outcomes: God has raised up believers together with the risen Christ, he has also raised them to heaven, with Christ, and God makes believers share in his heavenly existence, where Christ sits at the right hand of God (Hermans 2011:411). O'Brien (1999) summarises that:

[T]he Letter to the Ephesians has a high Christology which appropriately has been described as a 'cosmic Christology'. Christ is portrayed in numerous ways as superior to 'all things'. In particular, his resurrection, exaltation [*sic*] and cosmic lordship are emphatically underscored. (p. 21)

The theological context of the letter to Ephesians is appropriate in addressing the struggle of believers in Ephesus. Underlining the supremacy of Christ and his resurrection encompasses the idea of the victory that believers have, including victory over the powers of darkness. The theological context of the book frames the reality that believers in Ephesus were facing and gives direction to the spiritual warfare, with a focus on Christ.

Referring to the parallels with African context, the letter to Ephesians, and specifically in its Chapter 6, is relevant to believers in Africa. While the issues of demonic attacks, witchcraft and any other practices calling to spiritual warfare are real, the theological context of Ephesians highlights the assurance of victory of Christ. Putting Christ as the source of victory serves as a counter falling in syncretism.

Literary context

The text under study falls in the second part (Chapters 4–6) of Ephesians, which is practical and considers duty (Huges 1990:213). Lincoln (1995:102) qualifies it as a *peroration*, which is a discourse where ‘an author not only attempted to draw to an appropriate conclusion, but also to do so in the most effective way.’ This means that this portion contains what is important to a Christian.

This section comes after that of the household where relationships between children and parents and servants and masters are established (6:1–9). The pericope that follows (6:21–24) is the last part of the epistle and concludes the book without bringing any new teaching. The indication is that ‘6:10–20 is both the concluding element of the paraenesis which had begun in 4:1 and the concluding element of the main part of the letter as a whole’ (Lincoln 1990:432). I agree with Lincoln on the point that Ephesians 6:10–20 is the continuation of 4:1 that deals with unity among Christians and lifestyle as children of light.

The ‘powers’ language in this chapter echoes the same language in Chapters 1 and 3 suggesting thus the unity of the epistle. It clearly appears that 6:10–20 gives the means to fulfil the commitment of believers to live their liberty in the resurrected Christ. In considering the book as a whole, I disagree with Lincoln because the epistle does not develop only one theme of spiritual warfare. For this reason, this segment is more of the continuation of the idea of ‘powers’ already developed in Chapters 1, 3 and 4 than a conclusion to the entire epistle.

Formal analysis

Ephesians 6:10–20 can be divided into three parts. The first division is 6:10–13. It indicates the importance of putting on the full armor of God. The reason for putting on the armor resides in the spiritual struggle that believers are facing. The second part is 6:14–17. It describes each part of the armor to be used. Paul uses the Roman military imagery to make the description. In the Roman armory and weapons:

[T]he helmet was designed to protect the head, face and neck without blocking vision or hearing...In the first century A.D., the breastplate was replaced with a jacket made of metal strips held together on the inside by leather straps. It was very flexible but heavy, and soldiers had to help each other put it on...The belt or apron was a soldier’s badge of office...Military sandals were made of leather. Patterns of iron hobnails on the soles were designed to distribute weight and stand up to long marches. A soldier’s shield usually was rectangular and wooden, with a metal cover over the centre handle. It could be used both defensively and offensively. (Jeffers 1999:175)

Africans understand well weapons to use to defend against and to attack their enemies. The traditional weapons are knives, arrows, sticks and spears, to mention just a few. Sometimes, these weapons are poisonous giving no chance to the victim to live. Living in a continuous fear of attacks and of

evil spirits made Africans to develop seen and unseen defensive as well as offensive weapons. Here (Hiebert et al. 1999):

[M]agic, amulets, spirits and medicines are needed by those who attack to prevent their attack from being discovered, and to protect them in battle, and by those attacked, to thwart the attack and save themselves. (p. 144)

From such a background, an African reader of Ephesians 6 has a basis to understand the language of ‘armor’ and ‘powers’ in the text. The third division, which is 6:18–20, underscores the role of prayer as the focal point.

Warfare in Ephesians 6:10–20

The text of Ephesians confirms the reality of warfare and determines who are the enemies (Eph 6:12). The author is specific when he declares that the rulers, the authorities, the unseen worlds, the mighty powers and the evil spirits are the actual enemies. The mention of these enemies sheds light on the fact that the warfare is not physical – flesh and blood – but spiritual. The text suggests that believers might have a misconception about their real enemies. For a spiritual warfare, there is a need of spiritual weapons.

Truth as Belt

The first weapon that they need to put on is the belt of truth (v. 14). The action is expressed by *περιζωσάμενοι*, which is a participle aorist middle of *περιζωννυμι* defined as ‘to put a belt or sash around’ (Arndt et al. 1979:801). This is the first participle of manner describing what believers need to do in order to stand. They are to put on the truth, identified as the belt. Truth is one of the characteristics of God. Paul remarks that truth is very important in helping believers to resist the devil. He has already made this exhortation in 4:25.

Breastplate for Righteousness

The second armor to put on is the breastplate of righteousness (v. 14). The participle that is used is *ἐνδυσάμενοι* from *ἐνδύω* and has the meaning of to put on, to wear. Righteousness is compared to a breastplate. The source of this metaphor is in the LXX of Isaiah 59:17. Wenkel (2007) mentions that:

[T]he direct source of the breastplate metaphor is undoubtedly Isaianic. Paul’s phraseology both in Ephesians 6:14 (*ἐνδυσάμενοι τὸν θώρακα τῆς δικαιοσύνης*) and the LXX of Isaiah 59:17 (*ἐνεδύσατο δικαιοσύνην ὡς θώρακα*) is strikingly similar. (p. 281)

It gets attention that truth and righteousness appear in the same verse. Truth and righteousness occur together because they convey the same value: where there is truth, there must be also righteousness. Truth and righteousness form the foundation of spiritual weapons. It reminds of Jesus’ declaration in John 14:6 where he declares being the truth. It means that believers have to rely on Jesus and His truth. Again, here, reference to righteousness echoes the righteousness of God.

Shoes on the feet

The third armor is the readiness to proclaim the gospel of peace, referred to as shoes to be put on the feet (15). The participle used here is *ὑποδησόμενοι* from *ὑποδew* 'tie/bind beneath, put on' (Arndt et al. 1979:1037). Shoes must be tied to the feet in a way they are not loose and cannot be easily removed. In reference to the gospel, it is the readiness to proclaim the gospel of peace, which is Jesus Christ. The author already spoke about peace between Jews and Gentiles (2:17). He comes back to the idea of peace that believers have to preach. The use of this metaphor proves that the author was familiar with the text of Isaiah 52:7 (Moritz 1996:196).

Shield of faith

Then, Paul exhorts his readers to take the fourth armor: the shield of faith (v. 16) and adds its importance as helpful to extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil. Considering that faith, which is compared to shield, equips believers to quench the flaming arrows of the enemy shows the gravity of the attack. The Roman shield was protecting someone from the javelins and arrows of his enemy since all of his body was covered by it (Huges 1990:234). It echoes the use of the image of shield in the Old Testament to express the protection of God to His people (Gn 15:1; Ps 5:2; 18:2, 30, 35; 28:7, etc.) (O'Brien 1999:479). In the same way, faith in Jesus is sufficient to protect believers against the attack of the devil.

Helmet of salvation

The fifth armor is the helmet of salvation (v. 17). This metaphor also comes from Isaiah 59:17 where the story of God is the salvation of His people (Bruce 1984:409). The idea from this metaphor is that even though believers may face the attack of the enemy they do not have to fear as their victory is certain because of the salvation that they got in Jesus Christ.

The sword of the Spirit

The sixth and the last armor recommended by the author to his readers is the sword of the Spirit (v. 17). In the Roman army, the sword was a very effective stabbing weapon (Jeffers 1999:175–176). Reference to the efficiency of the word of God is found in Isaiah 11:4 (Jeffers 1999:175–176). The phrase *τοῦ πνεύματος* can be a genitive of source meaning that the sword comes from the Spirit or a subjective genitive identifying the sword as provided by the Spirit. This idea is supported by Patzia who sees the Spirit as the giver of the sword (Patzia 1990:290).

Prayer

Ephesians 6:18–20 concerns prayer and is the focal point. In the preceding verses (14–17), the author has described the weapons that believers need to put on so that they can resist the attack of the devil. In verse 17, believers are asked to take the helmet of salvation and the sword of Spirit. Now the author describes what believers have to do continually; they have to pray – *προσευχόμενοι*. They are requested to make this prayer in Spirit and all time. In Spirit, *ἐν πνεύματι*

is the dative of sphere. It gives the dimension in which the prayers are made. Two participles are used to express what believers have to do: *ἀγρυπνοῦντες* (be alert) and *προσκαρτερήσει* (persevere). These participles (*προσευχόμενοι* and *ἀγρυπνοῦντες*) express that praying and being alerted are the means that lead to put on the whole armor of God. While praying, believers must persevere and continue to make petitions to God. In their prayer, they do not need to be selfish but should think about others that the author calls 'all saints'.

In verse 19, Paul requests that his readers pray for him, suggesting that Paul is one of the saints. The author is specific when he asks for prayer. He is concerned with his ministry, even though he is still in prison. He has passion for the Gospel to the point that he needs prayer. Asking for prayer demonstrates his conviction that there is power in prayer. Prayer is presented here as a key to revealing the appropriate message of the mystery of the gospel. The apostle reminds the motive of his imprisonment. It is because of the gospel that he suffers. It is so amazing to see that Paul does not ask prayer for his release. He is so much concerned with his mission and needs prayer for that. O'Brien is of the same point of view declaring that 'Instead of expressing feelings of self-pity or resentment, or of requesting prayer for his release from prison, he reveals his mission' (1999:489). As the struggle is spiritual, Paul recommends spiritual weapons that are able to help believers to resist the attack of the devil.

Synthesis

As I have shown, Ephesians 6:10–20 deals with spiritual warfare. The author first commands believers to stand and specifies that this must be in God and in his mighty power (v. 10). He presents God to be the secure source for them. Then believers are called to put on the full armor of God. The armor that comes from God is able to help them to stand against the devil's schemes (v. 10). The reason for putting on the armor of God is informed by the reality of the spiritual battle (v. 12). Using the Roman military imagery, Paul describes each of the armor that believers have to use. Considering the nature of the weapons that God provides, their victory is certain. The salvation offered by God is a sign of victory. Therefore, even though the struggle is there, they do not have to fear because God who saved them has provided for the necessary armor to help resist against the devil.

The author presents prayer as the focal point in the spiritual war (vv. 18–20). It is a means by which believers have to get the whole armor. They are recommended to pray for the saints and Paul requests prayer for himself because he has conviction that prayer is able to help him in fulfilling his mission of preaching the gospel. All the weapons that Paul mentions are familiar to Africans. With their background, Christians in Africa may not struggle to understand the reality of the warfare and the weapons that the author recommends.

Seat

The last stage in the four-legged stool model is the seat or application. Spiritual warfare is true for Christians of any time in certain contexts. It has not changed nowadays. The devil has multiplied his manners of attacking Christians. Many African countries are exposed to conflicts and wars. There are internal as well as external wars. Believers in war prone areas are not spared from the effect of hostility. While those conflicts are carnal, the text of Ephesians 6:10–20 suggests that believers do not have to confront the enemies physically. Beyond the carnal conflict and opposition, there is the spiritual dimension to take into consideration. Sometimes, Christians are discouraged to see the kind of struggle they are going through. Nevertheless, the positive thing to know is that God has showed who the enemy is and has provided with everything needed for protection and fight. Most importantly, Jesus has already won the victory so that a believer can live this life each day victoriously. Considering the extent of the spiritual warfare, Christians are called to stand.

African audience is similar to the audience of Paul because all of them have an awareness of war and spiritual forces. The familiarity of Africans with weapons used during attack – defensive as well as offensive – puts believers in a position to understand and apply Ephesians 6 in their daily spiritual life. It does not surprise when during a tribal conflict, for example, the parties may practise occultism with the idea of winning the battle. Thus, some church members find themselves in practising syncretism because of certain conditions imposed on them. This practice is similar to that of magic that Paul's audience was familiar with and the danger of syncretism was real.

Believers in Africa are today more conscious concerning the reality of the existence of spiritual warfare. The tendency of members is more oriented to 'deliverance' with some specific demons such as the demon of 'diversion', 'round about', 'delay', etc. This parallel is genuine to the situation in my passage because Paul attracts the attention of his audience on the certainty of the spiritual war. Unfortunately, there are practices that are not in accordance to the directives given in Ephesians 6. Though the warfare is spiritual, the tendency is to rely on physical objects like anointing oil, anointing water and handkerchief to mention just a few. Understanding the importance of weapons and their use from an African background, believers will be aware and intentionally know how to use appropriate spiritual weapons as suggested by the scripture. The church should not ignore the existence of the spiritual warfare and the provision given by God to resist the attack. The armor is divine, meaning that the victory is certain. Seeing members of the church taking conscious of the existence of spiritual warfare and the readiness to stand against the wiles of the devil using the armor as provided by God are critical.

Conclusion

Ephesians 6:10–20 addresses the reality of spiritual warfare and presents appropriate weapons to use. The Roman

armory serves as a metaphor to the weapons that believers are to use. Christians are conversant with the text of Ephesians when it comes to spiritual warfare. In this article, I demonstrated that reading this text from the African perspective helps the reader to understand the reality of the spiritual warfare and the importance of using appropriate weapons.

Establishing the parallels between the context of the text of Ephesians and the African context revealed that the weapons recommended in the text and their usage are not new in Africa. The metaphor that the author uses highlights critical African values such as truth, righteousness and peace. The mention of shield, helmet and sword and their understanding from African angle in relation to spiritual warfare contributes greatly to apply Ephesians 6:10–20 in a daily Christian life. With Jesus at the centre, the weapons become more efficient to bring victory. However, believers have to make good use of them.

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