



WELCOME!

19 “Do you give the horse its strength or clothe its neck with a flowing mane? 20 Do you make it leap like a locust, striking terror with its proud snorting? 21 It paws fiercely, rejoicing in its strength, and charges into the fray. 22 It laughs at fear, afraid of nothing; it does not shy away from the sword. 23 The quiver rattles against its side, along with the flashing spear and lance. 24 In frenzied excitement it eats up the ground; it cannot stand still when the trumpet sounds. 25 At the blast of the trumpet it snorts, ‘Aha!’ It catches the scent of battle from afar, the shout of commanders and the battle cry.”

Job 39:19-25

I don't think there is any doubt that the horse is God's favorite animal. Sure, the lion is right up there, but the way He takes time to describe the attributes of the horse, from its physique to its psyche, tells me something... The warhorse has an “overcoming spirit.” We are calling this series Dark Horse. A dark horse is defined as “an unexpected winner who was thought beforehand to have very little chance of victory” with synonyms like long-shot, underdog, and unlikely prospect. Often, life comes at us fast and we can feel like the odds are stacked against us. Instead of us attacking life, it is attacking us. Instead of us chasing down problems, problems are chasing us down. This series is about becoming an overcomer instead of being overcome.

Are you sick of feeling defeated and fatalistic? Are you over constantly feeling overwhelmed? Is it getting old waking up depressed? Are you sick of that broken record in your head? Do you want freedom from fear and anxiety? Have you ever wondered where the passion went? Do you ever wonder if this is the best it can get?

Have you passively given over to resignation?

For the next 8 weeks we will learn from the horse in Job 39:19-25 how to regain the horse-sense and horsepower that life beats out of us over time. It's time to push back the darkness and wake up each day with the kind of spirit that makes Satan say to his demons, “Oh, crap! They're awake and this doesn't look good for us.” I want to put the enemy on his heels for a change. His time is up. Let's do this!

Jason

Lead Pastor

A word from Impact's discipleship team:

We want to help you take your next step in your relationship with Jesus. We have created various levels of curriculum engagement in order to challenge you towards spiritual growth and to strengthen your understanding of God, the Bible, and faith. We long to see you experience an ever-deepening personal relationship with Jesus, one that causes you to live out your faith with courage. We believe in disciples who make disciples.

4 ways to engage with the Dark Horse series:

- 1. This devotional (part 1 & part 2)-** completed before the weekend message is preached
- 2. The Impact Journal-** Study Scripture passages corresponding to devo/sermon (instructions in journal)
- 3. Attending church on the weekend-** sermon series teaches on the content you've studied all week
- 4. Join a life group to discuss the devotional, journal, and sermon**

Dark Horse — **Week 1**

Mon, January 8 — “Striking Terror with its Proud Snorting” — Under Attack

Read Job 39:19-25

Welcome to the “Dark Horse” series! As the intro stated, throughout this series we will be looking at the attributes and characteristics God uses to describe the horse in Job 39:19-25. The first attribute of the horse and the one we are working through this week is, “**Striking terror with its proud snorting**” (Job 39:20). This will be the catalyst for our devotional and the weekend teaching. Before we fully dive into “striking terror” or rather “attacking,” let’s take a look at some Scripture that speaks on what we are up against in this world.

Read Ephesians 6:10-17

Like it or lump it, we are under attack. Understanding this is half the battle to any fight. As long as you serve the one true God, you will no doubt face attacks from the enemy. Sometimes however, knowing we are under spiritual attack can leave us with the feeling that we are doing something wrong, when in fact, we are usually doing something right. After all, the enemy doesn’t need to attack someone who is not a threat to him or his mission. So, what can we do about being attacked? How do we fight back? Should we be the one’s doing the attacking?

“For our struggle is **not against flesh and blood**, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.” Ephesians 6:12-13

*“Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”
1 Peter 5:8*

1. *What thoughts, emotions, or feelings come to mind when you read these verses?*

2. *What are your thoughts about spiritual warfare? Is it something you are aware of, or do you shy away from even the sound of it?*

3. *What “spiritual attacks” have you experienced recently or in the past?*

4. *Were you able to stand firm against these attacks or did the enemy gain some ground on you? What impacted how you responded in those situations? What could make a difference in the future with how you react to these kinds of threats?*

As we reflect again on the description of the horse which “strikes terror with its proud snorting,” the idea of “striking terror” into someone or something is not a normative stance for Christ followers as we engage with the world, be it in the physical or spiritual realm. “Attacking” isn’t often a word we use to describe *our* actions in our Christian walk, but we need to be ready for this kind of engagement against sin and darkness nonetheless. But, the idea a Christian striking terror or attacking seems at odds with Jesus’ words “turn the other cheek,” right? Many of us (including myself) have grossly misinterpreted these words from the Sermon on the Mount. We aren’t being asked to just fold over anytime there is opposition and allow people to walk all over us. That is assuredly *not* what Jesus is communicating to his followers, but that’s another conversation for another day.

As I contemplate the words “strike terror” or “attack,” I visualize there being a weapon involved. Maybe it’s my affection for *Lord of the Rings* or *Braveheart* or *The Gladiator*, but I picture hand to hand combative fighting like you would see in any of these violently beautiful masterpieces. As followers of Christ, that’s not generally the kind of “attacking” we are called to- we are not participating in the conquest of the Promised Land or a Crusade (even if there are days where some may think so via social media). But as you read earlier, the Bible does speak of battle in warlike terminology- even giving descriptions of armor and weapons.

Knowing we are under attack by the enemy, we need to be ready to stand our ground, and in many cases, we actually need to do the attacking. Essential truth to remember however- we *never* do the attacking alone. This is serious business. It is only by the blood and authority of Jesus that the enemy will back down and flee. So, how do we engage the battle and do it well? What does this look like? Can we be taught how to do this? Is it only for the “super apostles” or pastors? These are all good questions (if I do say so myself!) and ones we will answer together this week.

Dark Horse — **Week 1**

Wed, January 10 — “Striking Terror with its Proud Snorting” — Attacking: Part 1

Are you tired of feeling dominated or intimidated by emotions and circumstances that feel dark and oppressive? Do you want to feel dominion for a change, a strength that is not only proactively countering the schemes of the enemy, but foiling them with your fearsome heart? Do you want your “snort” to strike terror in the enemy camp like that of the horse? Do you want to take back ground for the Kingdom of God that causes the devil to say, “Oh crap!” when you get up in the morning??

As Christ followers, we can do all of those things. In our spiritual arsenal we have something that we can use not just to defend ourselves, but to attack the enemy head on! If you don’t believe me, take another look at our passage from yesterday.

Read Ephesians 6:10-17

1. *Which part of the Armor of God is our weapon - something that isn’t just used for defensive protection, but should be used for an offensive attack? (Hint vs17)*

Yep that’s right, the one weapon found in the Armor of God is the **Sword** of the Spirit - God’s Word. It seems odd to call a book, the Bible, a sword. The only way a book could draw blood is from a paper cut, but that’s not what the sword of God’s word is meant for mere paper cuts. No, this sword is meant for defending, fighting, attacking, and killing!

Why do we need a sword as followers of Christ? Aren’t we meant to be full of peace and love? Yep, but often we have to fight for that peace and love. The enemy is relentless in his attack on us - both individually and collectively. There is a spiritual battle raging around us that we frequently don’t even recognize.

2. *In what ways can you use God’s Word as a Sword? Rather, why do you think Paul refers to the Word of God as a “sword?”*

One of the ways God's Word can be effectively used as a Sword to attack the enemy is through the Gospel- Jesus' blood shed for us and his resurrection from death. This Gospel message, found only in the Bible- is the *only* thing that holds power and authority over death, sin, and Satan, and all of our spiritual enemies.

"They (God's people) triumphed over him (the enemy - Satan) by the blood of the Lamb (Gospel) and by the word of their testimony." Revelation 12:11

3. *What are the two things that will defeat the enemy? Why do you think that is?*

Jesus' death and resurrection hold ultimate power over the enemy of our souls. Satan and his kingdom of darkness is conquered and defeated only by the Gospel and by sharing the testimony of what Christ has done for us. You see, nothing will make the enemy say "Oh crap!" more than when we speak out, and live out, the Gospel message to those around us. This is what we are called to do!

"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize." 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Paul attacked life and attacked the enemy. Sure, in this passage he is speaking specifically about his individual race and God-given calling, but isn't our race similar to this? Jesus calls all of us to be His witness, to share His Gospel, and to make disciples. That is what life on this side of heaven is about- to help people know their Author and Creator and Savior. We all live different lives with different vocations, but we are all commissioned to share the love and light of Jesus (give Matthew 28:18-20 & Acts 1:8 a read). The Gospel holds power and authority over the evil one. The Bible isn't just a cool history book or a book of wisdom. No, it is the book that gives us the only hope that we have in this life- Jesus' salvation for us from sin and life eternal with Him. That right there, makes the enemy cower.

4. *How have you used the Gospel and God's Word as a sword lately?*

Dark Horse — **Week 1**

Fri, January 12 — “Striking Terror with its Proud Snorting” — **Attacking Part 2**

I often like to reflect on the macro and micro things of life. Nearly every year, our family makes the 2,000 plus mile trek westward across the US in hopes to explore something new and beautiful while we camp in the great outdoors. I am constantly left speechless by the awe and wonder of the beautiful mountains, wildlife, ocean, and landscapes of the West. As our car speeds across endless highways and we finally begin to see these sites from a distance on the horizon, it's utterly breathtaking. If you've never ventured to the other side of the country and seen it with your own eyes, you just can't fathom the magnitude of our Creator's creativity. Still shot photos and documentaries don't even begin to capture the magnificence of what God has made. Whether it's approaching the massive Rocky Mountain Range, nearing the vast Pacific Ocean, or strolling into a Redwood grove, the macro (seeing the grand scale of it all) is mind-blowing! But as we arrive and enter into these beautiful landscapes, I am equally awestruck by the up-close detail that goes into those huge mountains, the delicate plant-life and undergrowth within the forests, and the small, near microscopic creatures found tide-pooling in the Pacific. The micro is equally as astonishing as the macro! This balance and beauty of the macro and micro is found in a myriad of areas in our own life as well. I visualize both ends of the spectrum in how we use the Sword of the Spirit to attack the enemy.

The Gospel, found only in the Bible, is doing macro (large scale) attacking- like heavy artillery cutting down enemy lines with large sweeping blows. It pushes forward the Kingdom of God while the enemy is left retreating with his tail between his legs. But, there is a micro attack of the Sword, the Bible, as well. This is when we use God's Word in our own personal lives. I view it as more of the individual, hand-to-hand combat that's happening on the battlefield. There is no better illustration of this than Jesus' interaction with Satan as He was tested in the wilderness before starting His ministry.

Read Luke 4:1-13

1. *What did Jesus do in His response to Satan each time He was tempted?*

There is a theme we see throughout the Bible and it's this: while Satan may be crafty, he is also predictable. He uses similar tactics to try and trick us over and over. In the garden, he delicately manipulated God's words and coaxed Eve into eating the forbidden fruit. Here in the desert with Jesus, he again tried to twist God's Word to make Jesus stumble, fall, and fail. Satan speaks lies and is the “father of lies” and deception. He comes to “steal, kill, and destroy.”

The Word of God can be used as a Sword to refute and cut down the enemy. As we just read, three times Satan tried to tempt Jesus in the wilderness, and three times Jesus responded to Satan by quoting Scripture. This neutralized the attack of the enemy and turned him away. We can do the same for our own lives! I don't think I'm alone in having negative thoughts, entertaining lies of the enemy, and at times, experiencing paralyzing fear. These lies create feelings of panic, anxiety, anger, and doubt. These feelings aren't inherently bad, but reacting to them in a sinful way is. Our feelings may be real, but it doesn't mean they are true.

We can't say the same about the Bible, because the Bible is not only real, but it is also TRUE!!! One more time: Our feelings are real but not always true. The Bible is real and always true. It is the one absolute truth that we can hold onto. Our God cannot sin, He cannot lie, He cannot lack integrity. The point is this... We can use God's Word to speak truth into the lies that we are believing - whether the lies are coming from our flesh, from others, or from the enemy. If we are feeling inadequate, insufficient, like a failure, stupid, or any other negative thought or feeling, we need to look no further than God's Word to tell ourselves the truth of who God says we are. We know these thoughts/feelings are lies because God Word alone tells us who we are, and God's Word is truth.

2. *What lies have you been believing recently?*

3. *Take a few minutes to find verses that speak TRUTH into the lies you are believing. You can use Google, a friend, or a Bible concordance to locate these passages in Scripture. Write down the verses you found below.*

I encourage each of you to continue to find verses that are life breathing and life giving. Write those verses on anything and everything you can, memorize them, speak them to your spouse, children, or friends, talk about them when you lie down and when you get up. Begin to listen to the voice of God and His Word above the voice of the enemy. Attack the day and the enemy before the day and the enemy gets to you. This will not only be life giving for you, but it will give you the latitude to speak life - truly the life of God's Word - into the broken people you interact with each day. Paul recognizes this and reminds his young protégé, Timothy, of the usefulness of the Bible:

"All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." 2 Timothy 3:16-17

4. *Reach out to someone to read and study God's Word with (someone from your Life Group is a good place to start :). Create margin in your schedules to read through Scripture together and to share how God is speaking to you and equipping you through His Word. (The Impact Journal, which correlates with this devotional, would be a great tool to use for this as well!)*

Extra Credit:

Read Ephesians 6:18-20.

5. *What word/action is repeated most in this portion of Scripture? Why do you think that is?*

Dark Horse — **Week 2**

Mon, January 15 — “It Paws Fiercely”

Job 39: 21 - It paws fiercely, rejoicing in its strength, and charges into the fray.

Keep in mind, this entire text is referencing the behavior of a horse. In the original language of this text, which is Hebrew, the first part of this passage says, “*He paws into the **valley**.*” The valley has great significance. John Gill’s commentary describes the valley like this: “Where armies are usually pitched and set in battle, and especially the cavalry, for which the valley is most convenient; and here the horse is impatient of engaging, cannot stand still, but rises up with his fore feet and paws and prances, and, as the word signifies, digs the earth and makes it hollow, by a continual striking upon it.”

I love the picture that this paints. The horse is stationed in the valley, yet there is not even a trace of discouragement or fear. In fact, the horse has immense eagerness to engage what is coming next. He is ready for the battle ahead.

There is something special that happens in the valleys of life if we allow it. The valley feels like a low and scary place. We often don’t know what is coming around the corner and have a sense that there is no way of escape. We long to leave the valley and get to the top of the mountain, yet it is a place of purpose and preparation. Just like the horse was being staged for war in the valley, our hearts are prepared for the road ahead when we walk through valleys in our own life.

The soil in a valley is rich in nutrients. This, combined with the moderate temperature of the lowlands, allows for lush vegetation to grow. This kind of growth *cannot* happen on the mountain top. This is true in our journey through life and hardship as well. In order to grow, we have to embrace the valleys knowing that God is walking each step with us and producing a harvest in the process. The mountain top experiences, where we all long to stand, encourage us and remind us of God’s faithfulness and sovereignty. The vantage point on the mountain allows us to look back into the valley with remembrance to see the fruit and growth that happened there.

Like the horse, we can eagerly anticipate what is coming next without fear of the unknown, even in the valley. This eagerness is possible when we embrace what is happening despite a challenging season of life. In the valley, we are prepared and positioned for what lies ahead!

1. *Describe a valley in your life that you can look back on and see where growth took place in your heart and in your faith. What did God teach you during that time?*
2. *Would you say that you are in a valley, on the mountain, or somewhere in the middle? What is God teaching you in this current season of life?*
3. *Do you feel a sense of eagerness for what is ahead, or do you feel overwhelmed and anxious by the present? Why?*
4. *Read Psalm 23:1-6 with special focus on verse 4. After today's study on the valley, how does this passage strike you differently than before? What encourages or challenges you?*

Dark Horse — **Week 2**

Wed, January 17 — “Rejoicing in its Strength”

Job 39: 21 - It paws fiercely, rejoicing in its strength, and charges into the fray.

Many of us have the mindset that if we acknowledge our strengths, it will lead us to a place of pride. Yet this passage describes the horse as not just *acknowledging* its strength, but *rejoicing* in it!

There is something powerful when you meet a person who knows who they are, a person who is not insecure about boldly embracing their strengths. For a believer, this is a humble confidence that is rooted in the understanding that God is the one who gives us our unique strengths and that they are given with His purposes in mind.

With this perspective, it becomes a conversation about stewardship. Stewardship of our God-given gifts, talents, and abilities. Imagine standing before the Lord at the end of your life and giving an account for all the strengths that He created you with. If you were too afraid or too insecure to rejoice in your strengths, you won't have utilized them to their fullest extent to advance the Kingdom of God. However, when we know who we are and what strengths God has given us, we are able to make the most of our short time here on earth for His glory and His Kingdom movement.

POWERFUL IMPACT COMES FROM OUR STRENGTHS WHEN THEY ARE:

Submitted to Christ for His glory and not our own

He must become greater; I must become less. John 3:30

- Our motive must always be to make Christ known and to build His Kingdom rather than our own.

Done with an attitude of humility and thanksgiving

The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me. Psalm 28:7

I can do all this through him who gives me strength. Philippians 4:13

- We must remember the one who gives us strength. As we do, it fills us with a sense of gratitude and humility as we acknowledge that this strength is not something we can manufacture ourselves.

Used to serve others and not ourselves

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others. Philippians 2:3-4

- As long as we keep our focus on others above ourselves, we will use our strengths to benefit them rather than promoting ourselves.

Do not shrink back from your strengths out of fear that you may make others feel insecure. Do not make yourself “small” in an attempt to avoid a prideful attitude. Keep your strengths submitted to Christ with a humble heart. Maintain the priority of serving

others with your gifts and abilities. Not only will your heart stay pure, but you will inspire others to do the same and this will bring God all the more glory!

What strengths has God created you with? (If it is difficult for you to identify these in yourself, ask someone who knows you well what strengths they see in you.)

1. *What keeps you from rejoicing in your strengths (fear of becoming prideful, making others feel insecure, or something else entirely)?*
2. *How do you embrace your strengths while staying humble in heart?*
3. *Consider the three bullet points on the previous page regarding the impact of our strengths on the world around us. Which one is the most challenging for you and why? Write the corresponding verse on a slip of paper and carry it in your pocket over the next few days as a reminder to use your strength for others and for God's glory.*

Dark Horse — Week 2

Fri, January 19 — “Charges Into the Fray”

Job 39: 21 - It paws fiercely, rejoicing in its strength, and charges into the fray.

In the last portion of this verse we see the horse charging the fray. In Hebrew this phrase reads, “*he gallops into the clash of arms*.” Talk about boldness and courage!

John Gill’s commentary says the horse meets the armed men “without any fear or dread of them.” Matthew Poole’s commentary describes this as the horse approaching battle “with great readiness and undaunted courage.”

We can learn a lot about approaching the battles of life from the behavior of a horse. Readiness is key!

Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings. 1 Peter 5:8-9

This passage offers practical advice to come against the enemy with confidence:

Readiness

Be alert and of sober mind.

Direction

Resist Satan and evil and stand firm in the faith.

Awareness

The enemy is always looking for someone to destroy.

Encouragement

You are not alone. Believers all around the world are getting attacked alongside you.

A powerful image comes to mind as we picture the courage of a horse advancing into battle. The horse is fully aware of the enemy’s presence, yet there is no timidity in its approach. It charges the enemy with power and confidence.

The horse portrays courage with no trace of fear. There is an important distinction between fear and being scared. Being scared happens in a moment. Even horses get spooked. Fear, on the other hand, is crippling and paralyzing. It consumes our minds and limits our ability to fully live. We must allow God to set us free from fear and replace it with a spirit of power (2 Timothy 1:7).

In 2 Chronicles we see God show up in a terrifying situation where His people were surrounded by a large army:

He said: "Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the Lord says to you: 'Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's...You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord will give you, Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the Lord will be with you...' After consulting the people, Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the Lord and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying: "Give thanks to the Lord, for his love endures forever." As they began to sing and praise, the Lord set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated. — 2 Chronicles 20:15,17,21-22

God is with us and fights our battles for us. This truth is what empowers us to worship in the middle of the battle with courage and boldness.

You are not alone. God is with you. You have a family of believers who are with you. Stand firm, resist the enemy, and allow God to fight on your behalf as you worship Him.

1. ***Which of the four pieces of advice from 1 Peter 5:8-9 (previous page) is the most encouraging to you and why? Which is the hardest to embrace and why?***
2. ***Describe a battle that you can look back on and see how God fought on your behalf.***
3. ***In what areas of your life does fear tend to creep in? When have you experienced fear that consumes your thoughts?***
4. ***How can you prepare your heart and mind so that you will be ready for future battles?***

Dark Horse — **Week 3**

Mon, January 22 – Into the Fray: Made for this – cultivating spiritual sensitivity.

Read Job 39:19-25

I read once that predator babies are born “unfinished,” unable to see or function on their own, entirely under the protection of a mother armed with teeth and claws. In contrast, prey animals, like horses, are born fully “finished,” with hair, open eyes, and well-functioning legs capable of running with their herd within hours. Instincts fully functioning and nerves on high alert, they are quite literally “born ready” to survive. Fight or flight. When mature, even the strongest horses will choose flight over fight in most situations. One does not need to own horses for long to realize that the entire British cavalry could have been systematically undone by one well-placed plastic bag.

This lies in stark contrast to the passage in Job. Strength, fearlessness, charging into the fray... is this the same animal? Yes! And the symbolism is brilliant! While a horse in the wild seems hardwired to flee, watch what happens in the hands of the Master.

The Lipizzaner Stallions of the Spanish Riding School of Vienna are some of the most well-known horses in the world. The foals, born black or brown, are the quintessential dark horses, turning white gradually over their first few years of life. They spend these precious first years in the pasture, running free with their herd, learning how to be horses. They build muscles and stamina in the freedom of the wild, becoming exactly what God designed them to be. When they are three to four years old, they begin their formal training. When the selected stallions arrive at the school, they will spend the next ten plus years perfecting intricate moves, leaps, and jumps.

The Levade, Capriole and Piaffe are movements natural to horses. These moves are ones the horses know from their youth, moves they have practiced in play, moves meant for survival in the wild. Only now, the horses must learn control and restraint, to listen to a voice other than their own. The training is extraordinary. Young horses are paired with seasoned riders, new riders paired with expertly trained horses, each learning from the other. Mastery takes a lifetime. The subtle touch of the rein, the slight tension of the rider's leg, the gentle pressure of the rider's heel, a shift of weight unseen by most but keenly understood by both horse and rider. Always, the two operating as one. It is this connection between horse and rider that empowers the horse to overcome its instinct to flee and instead charge into the fray of battle.

There's a lesson or two here... like the horse, we were made for this. The phrase "charges into the fray" suggests a bold and proactive approach to facing challenges, the idea of not shying away from the spiritual battles we may encounter. Rather, we are called to actively engage in the challenges and struggles that arise in our spiritual journey, to charge forward with courage and determination, trusting in the strength that comes from our faith in God.

Cultivating spiritual sensitivity is the first step. According to the Dictionary of Bible Themes, “*Spiritual sensitivity is the ability to perceive and respond to the call of God or the spiritual demands of the moment.*” It is learning to hear His voice, to know His will, and to discern His cues above the outside pressures of conflict.

The Bible addresses the concept of spiritual sensitivity in various ways, encouraging believers to cultivate a deep and receptive relationship with God, characterized by prayer, listening, humility, dependence on the Holy Spirit, and a commitment to aligning one's life with biblical principles.

- Prayer and Communication with God - The Bible emphasizes the importance of prayer and communication with God. Philippians 4:6-7 encourages believers to present their requests to God with thanksgiving, and the promise is that God's peace, which transcends understanding, will guard their hearts and minds.
- Listening to God - The Scriptures underscore the significance of listening to God. In 1 Kings 19:11-12, Elijah encounters God not in the powerful wind, earthquake, or fire, but in a gentle whisper. This suggests the need for believers to be attuned to God's still, small voice.
- Cultivating a Humble and Contrite Spirit - Psalm 51:17 speaks about the Lord not despising a broken and contrite heart. Cultivating spiritual sensitivity involves recognizing one's dependence on God and maintaining a humble and contrite spirit.
- Walking in the Spirit - Galatians 5:16 encourages believers to walk in the Spirit, implying a continual reliance on the Holy Spirit for guidance, discernment, and sensitivity to spiritual matters.
- Renewing the Mind - Romans 12:2 advises believers not to conform to the pattern of this world but to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. This renewal involves aligning one's thoughts with God's truth and principles.

By staying attuned to God's leading and being aware of the spiritual battles, believers can navigate challenges with wisdom and confidence in the strength of their faith.

1. *When do you find it easiest to hear God's prompting? What distractions do you notice most?*

2. *Read Isaiah 57:15. When God comes to the contrite, he revives the spirit. He breathes new life into the heart. What part of your heart yearns to be revived?*

3. *Which of the above principles do you need to work on the most? How will you do that this week?*

Dark Horse — **Week 3**

Wed, January 24 - Into the Fray: In the hands of the Master – discernment.

God created the horse as a magnificent bundle of nerves. The horse has the fastest reaction time of any domesticated species. Their senses combine to provide them the capability to respond to any threat at any time. They have an almost 360-degree view of their surroundings. They hear noises humans miss. They can interpret their surroundings based on changes in smell and read human emotions, as well as the intentions of predators from hundreds of yards away. Using some sanctified imagination, I wonder if a conversation between God and the horse might go something like this:

God: *(intently watching the horse)*

Horse: *my nerves are tingling. I feel twitchy, like electricity in the air. What is it?*

God: *Those are your instincts. I gave them to you to empower you.*

Horse: *Something is out there. I saw something move! Did you see that? What is it? Is it friend or foe?*

God: *Yes. Your eyes are extraordinary. You can see nearly 360*, with greater visual acuity than man, better depth perception than man, and night vision.*

Horse: *(quivering at the sounds all around): So many sounds! The clanking armor, the battle cries, I cannot tell where they come from.*

God: *Listen to my voice. I will never leave you or forsake you.*

Horse: *(ears flicker in response to an unseen cue): I hear you.*

Horse: *(sniffing and snorting): There's something different in the air. Something has changed. Excitement? Danger?*

God: *The world is an ever-changing place. The battle is real, but I am here. I have your best interest at heart. Do not fear. I have overcome the world.*

Horse: *(breathing deep): I trust you.*

So how do we train a fear-based, peace-loving, and extraordinarily sensitive animal to carry us across a battlefield into enemy fire? How can we best teach him to overcome his fears? How can we help him have faith in his physical and mental abilities to see his way through situations where his first reaction is to run the other way? And how do these same questions apply to our own spiritual discernment? Keeping with the war horse imagery, it all comes down to the relationship between horse and rider.

Horse and Rider

The horse in the passage is portrayed as unafraid in the face of battle. Known for his keen awareness of his surroundings, his senses flood with the sights, sounds, and smells of battle. He is on high alert. A well-known training theory among horsemen states that leadership can only be bestowed by those who are being served, that leadership must be earned by the trainer. A horseman or horsewoman needs to prove that he or she is a good and fair leader, demonstrating their commitment to put the welfare of their partners, the herd, in front of their own. The trainer works with the natural abilities of the horse to form an unbreakable bond between horse and rider. Only when the horse fully trusts his rider will he allow himself to submit to his master's leadership. Likewise, spiritual training instills a sense of trust in God's guidance during life's challenges.

Discernment plays a crucial role in helping believers distinguish between God's leading and our own desires. Believers grow in discernment by developing a heightened spiritual awareness, being aware of the influences, temptations, and opportunities present in our daily lives. Our discernment grows as we become ever more sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, cultivating a

listening heart through prayer and meditation on Scripture. We increase our sensitivity to our Master's voice as we learn to recognize the gentle promptings and guidance of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives.

Distraction or direction

Critical to our success is the ability to discern between distractions and direction. Just as horses can be easily distracted by external stimuli such as noises, movements, or other animals, believers can also face distractions in the form of worldly temptations, societal pressures, and competing priorities. Such distractions can come in various forms, including materialism, busyness, or unhealthy relationships. These threaten to steer believers away from God’s intended direction. Through prayer, seeking God’s will through His Word, and relying on the Holy Spirit for guidance, believers stay connected to the “Rider.” These disciplines serve as a training ground, helping us become more attuned to God’s voice and less susceptible to worldly distractions. These disciplines require a lifetime to master.

The significance of intentional focus on God's Will through a surrendered and prayerful attitude, honing our attention on God's Word, and consistently seeking His direction cannot be overstated. Just as the horse needs to maintain focus on the rider's cues to stay the course, so too do we need to focus on God's guidance to avoid being led astray.

1. *We can often learn as much from our failures as we do our successes. Think back on a time when you found it difficult to distinguish between distraction and direction. In what way did God reveal the truth and set your feet on the correct path?*
2. *Horses in battle often faced uncertain and chaotic situations. Believers likewise, encounter uncertainties in life. Read Psalm 77:11-12 and reflect on the ways these verses encourage us to trust God amid uncertainty.*

Dark Horse — **Week 3**

Fri, January 26 – Into the Fray: Submission to the Master's Hand

The imagery of the war horse willingly charging into battle underscores the importance of submission to the master's hand. In the spiritual context, discernment involves recognizing God as the Master and submitting to His will. Spiritual training includes learning to surrender personal desires and ambitions to align with God's greater plan, fostering a deeper and more intimate relationship with Him.

Just as the horse reflects the glory of God's creation, believers, through discernment and spiritual training, can reflect the glory of God in their lives. Developing discernment allows individuals to make choices that honor God, and spiritual training helps believers grow in character and likeness to Christ.

Training for spiritual battle involves intentional and purposeful efforts to equip oneself for the challenges and conflicts encountered in the Christian journey. The Bible often uses metaphors of warfare to describe the spiritual struggles believers face, emphasizing the need for preparation, vigilance, and reliance on God's strength.

1. Consider these key aspects of training for spiritual battle and mark any that may need extra attention in your life:

- *Understanding the Battlefield:* Gain a deep understanding of the spiritual battlefield. Recognize that spiritual warfare is not against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces (Ephesians 6:12). Understand the nature of the spiritual challenges faced in various aspects of life.
- *Know Your Weapons:* Familiarize yourself with the spiritual weapons provided in Ephesians 6:10-18, such as the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit (the Word of God). Learn how to effectively use these tools in different situations.
- *Immerse Yourself in Scripture:* Regularly study and meditate on the Bible. The Word of God is a powerful weapon in spiritual warfare. Psalm 119:11 says, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." Knowing and internalizing God's Word strengthens your spiritual foundation.
- *Develop a Life of Prayer:* Cultivate a strong and consistent prayer life. Prayer is a direct line of communication with God, and it fosters intimacy and dependence on Him. Seek guidance, strength, and protection through prayer (Ephesians 6:18).
- *Seek the Holy Spirit's Guidance:* Invite the Holy Spirit to be your guide and counselor. The Holy Spirit empowers believers, provides discernment, and helps navigate spiritual challenges. Develop sensitivity to His leading (John 16:13).
- *Practice Obedience and Righteous Living:* Live a life of obedience and righteousness. Sin can create vulnerabilities in spiritual warfare. Strive for holiness, repentance, and a lifestyle that aligns with God's commands (1 Peter 1:16).
- *Build Strong Community Connections:* Surround yourself with a supportive Christian community. In times of spiritual battle, having fellow believers for encouragement, accountability, and prayer is crucial (Ecclesiastes 4:12).
- *Stay Alert and Discerning:* Be vigilant and discerning about the spiritual climate around you. Develop spiritual discernment to recognize the tactics of the enemy and discern God's leading in different situations (1 Peter 5:8).

- *Embrace a Lifestyle of Worship:* Engage in regular worship and praise. Worship invites the presence of God, and a heart filled with worship is less susceptible to the attacks of the enemy (Psalm 22:3).
- *Prepare for Endurance:* Understand that spiritual battles may require endurance. Develop resilience and perseverance, trusting that God's strength will sustain you through trials (James 1:12).
- *Train for Spiritual Fitness:* Approach spiritual training as a continuous process. Regularly assess your spiritual health, identify areas of growth, and seek opportunities for spiritual development.

Faith in the Face of Uncertainty - Horses in battle often faced uncertain and chaotic situations. Believers likewise encounter uncertainties in life. Trusting God's guidance requires faith that goes beyond circumstances. Like horses trusting their riders amid chaos, trusting God involves a steadfast faith that He is in control and working for their good.

2. *What specific spiritual disciplines, attitudes, or actions can help you maintain a steadfast trust in God's control and goodness when faced with unclear paths or chaotic situations?*

Steadfastness amid Adversity - Horses need to remain steadfast in the face of adversity during battle. Similarly, believers can trust God's guidance to stand firm in their faith amidst challenges. Trusting God doesn't guarantee a life free of challenges, but it provides the strength to endure and overcome with God's help.

3. *How can believers actively cultivate a spirit of perseverance and endurance in their faith journey?*

The Assurance of Victory with God - Horses in battle were often associated with victory. Regardless of the battles they face, believers can trust God's guidance with the assurance that ultimate victory is in God's hands. Trusting God means resting in the assurance that He is working all things for His glory and the good of those who love Him.

4. *How does embracing the assurance of ultimate victory with God impact the way believers face challenges in their lives?*

Dark Horse — **Week 4**

Mon, January 29 - Wisdom for Fearless Living

It's already week 4 of our Dark Horse series and we have mined pure gold out of these verses in Job! We have learned about attacking life, leaning into our strengths, and moving toward the mess. This week, we are going to look at fearless living. Take a moment before you read the passage to invite God into your space and ask for fresh eyes to see what additional insights you can draw from the illustration of the horse.

Read Job 39:19-25

19 *"Do you give the horse its strength
or clothe its neck with a flowing mane?
20 Do you make it leap like a locust,
striking terror with its proud snorting?
21 It paws fiercely, rejoicing in its strength,
and charges into the fray.
22 It laughs at fear, afraid of nothing;
it does not shy away from the sword.
23 The quiver rattles against its side,
along with the flashing spear and lance.
24 In frenzied excitement it eats up the ground;
it cannot stand still when the trumpet sounds.
25 At the blast of the trumpet it snorts, 'Aha!'
It catches the scent of battle from afar,
the shout of commanders and the battle cry.*

1. *Why might the horse **not** be afraid? Write a few ideas.*

Read Job 39:13-18

13 *"The wings of the ostrich flap joyfully,
though they cannot compare
with the wings and feathers of the stork.
14 She lays her eggs on the ground
and lets them warm in the sand,
15 unmindful that a foot may crush them,
that some wild animal may trample them.
16 She treats her young harshly, as if they were
not hers;
she cares not that her labor was in vain,
17 for God did not endow her with wisdom
or give her a share of good sense.
18 Yet when she spreads her feathers to run,
she laughs at horse and rider.*

2. *What similarities and differences do you see between the horse and the ostrich? What additional insights do you get about why the horse might not be afraid?*

I notice that both the ostrich and the horse are fearless, and even laugh about it! But what is the difference?

*“For God did not endow her [the ostrich] with **wisdom** or give her a share of good sense” (v17). The ostrich does not fear the destruction of her eggs because she isn’t even aware of the danger they are in (v15). She is oblivious, naive, unmindful; lacking wisdom and good sense. It’s not all her fault, as the Lord has withheld wisdom from her, but the consequence is clear: a life lived without wisdom is a life under threat; unstable and unpredictable; prone to false confidence and unprepared to handle the dangers ahead.*

What about the horse? The horse is prepared, with a quiver, spear and lance at its side (v23). He doesn’t happen upon a battleground, he expects it. He knows what the sound of the trumpet means and how to react. He recognizes the voice of the commander. He is wise, focused, and prepared.

Wisdom can drive us into true fearless living. Fearless living isn’t safe. It isn’t free of trouble or trial. But, the hope of wisdom is that God is **with us** in it. Wisdom is understanding the power and purpose of God in all things. Wisdom is understanding that God is near in every circumstance. Wisdom is knowing that even if the worst case scenario happens, He is still good.

Read James 1:2–8

3. *How do we gain wisdom, and where does it come from?*

4. *What are the conditions for gaining wisdom?*

We have to ask for wisdom and be completely focused on Him.

“I [Jesus] have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation and distress and suffering, but be courageous [be confident, be undaunted, be filled with joy]; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33 AMP)

5. *Where do we find our peace?*

6. *As Christians, are we exempt from hard things?*

7. *What do we hope in?*

“...perfect love drives out fear...the one who fears is not made perfect in love.” 1 John 4:18

Dark Horse - **Week 4**

Wed, January 31 - Fearless in the Fire

Today, I want to look at some examples of people recorded in Scripture who, armed with wisdom, walked fearlessly toward danger. These stories use extreme circumstances to teach us how powerful God is, how His wisdom influences our response to life, and about His enduring presence in the fires when they come. We'll end the day with some reflection to apply these truths.

Read Daniel 1 (NIV if available)

1. *Who are the “four young men” referenced in (v17)? What had God given them and how much more of it did they get than everyone else (v20)?*

While God may *give* wisdom (abundantly!) without our asking, remember from Monday (James 1), God has also given us permission to *ask* for wisdom. Daniel chapter 2 starts with an account of King Nebuchadnezzar having a dream and then getting angry when none of the “wise men” could interpret it.

Read Daniel 2:10-13

2. *Led by fear, how might Daniel have responded when men came to execute him?*

Read Daniel 2:14-16

3. *How did Daniel actually respond (v14)?*

Read Daniel 2:17-20

Three really important things happen here. Do you see it?

Daniel and his friends asked for _____ (v18)

God _____ (v19)

Daniel responded by _____ (v19-20)

Read Daniel 2:20-23 (aloud if you can)

Chapter 2 concludes with Daniel interpreting King Nebuchadnezzar's dream, King Neby praising God (v47), and Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego all being elevated into leadership roles.

In chapter 3, King Nebuchadnezzar proceeds to build a gold image and have his officials tell everyone that if they don't bow down and worship it at the sound of the instruments, they will be thrown into a blazing furnace. Some men tell Neby that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego aren't following orders, and Neby is furious.

Read Daniel 3:13-18

4. *What did these three men believe about God amidst the threat of impending doom (v17)?*

Read Daniel 3:19-23

5. *Led by fear, how might the men have responded to this moment? How did they actually go into the fire?*

Read Daniel 3:24-30

6. *Who was with the men in the fire (v25)?*
7. *Being fearlessly devoted to God and His commands, born out of wisdom in who He is, how did Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego exit the fire (v26-27)?*
8. *How did King Nebuchadnezzar respond (v28-30)?*

Depending on your season of life, choose one of the two prompts below for reflection (use separate paper):

A: Reflect on a past season where God granted you wisdom and understanding such that you pushed back fear and walked through the valley before you, saw God with you, and emerged having non-believers recognize a difference in the way you endured. Prepare to share, elevating the work of God in praise.

B: Reflect on your current season, surrounded by darkness and tempted to fear. Spend time meeting with God. Cry out to Him with your fears. Ask for wisdom to see His presence and invite Him to walk with you. Prepare to share, inviting friends in, like Daniel did, to petition on your behalf for wisdom that pushes out fear.

"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know Him better." Ephesians 1:17

Dark Horse - **Week 4**

Fri, February 2 - Diligence and Preparation

So, we usually aren't being threatened by execution or a fiery furnace, but we all have our own shadowy dugouts and dark valleys to contend with. Times when the nearness of God makes all the difference; when transforming our mind through wisdom has the power to shape our felt experience, if not the entire outcome.

A few years ago, a seismic shift happened in my life. Overwhelming, debilitating fear was my first response. For a few months, I spiraled. But eventually, practical knowledge started to soak the parched wasteland of the landscape around me. It gave me stability, and just enough level-headedness, to start thinking about what else I knew, specifically about God. How He works, who He is, what He has done in the past, His influence on my life. I realized I had been prepared for this season because of the diligence in which I had sought to know Him before this time. One day, fear vanished. My circumstances didn't change, they even got worse for a time. But fear never returned. Praise God!

Today I want to look at a poem in Scripture that illustrates a wife of great character who does not fear and even laughs at the future. She is diligent and prepared, like the horse.

Read Proverbs 31:10-31

"When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet." (v21)

1. ***Think about yourself and those you live with or care for. What can you do now (spiritually) to prepare for hard times that might be ahead?***

"She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come." (v25)

2. ***Looking ahead, what is something you fear? It could be something that is happening, will happen, or something that might not happen, but still weighs on you.***

3. ***Can you imagine being so unafraid of that thing that you can "laugh" at the fear? Ask God for wisdom on how to prepare for this future situation today. Confess your fear to God and others. Begin to push back the darkness right now.***

“She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.” (v26)

Maybe it’s not a specific situation that grips you in fear. Maybe it’s fear of man’s opinion, judgment, or criticism that keeps you from pursuing the life God has called you to. Maybe it is fear that you aren’t good enough, strong enough, or qualified enough. Maybe you’re gripped by the “what if’s”.

Read Psalm 27:1-6

4. *Record all of the things this passage says about who God is or what He will do. Record all of the things David says he will be or do (i.e. what is true of you/what can you do) in the face of fear.*

God is / God will

I am / I will

We can dwell with God, store up wisdom and insight, and cultivate an intimate relationship during good times. Then we draw from this during times of trouble. However, it is not only in times of trouble that we may hesitate. Many of us may hesitate to step into God’s calling to persevere with endurance the path marked out for us. Jackie Hill Perry says, “faith in the nearness of God creates the resilience needed to keep leading, loving, giving, evangelizing, serving, praying for, and preaching to.” It is God’s **nearness**, revealed to us in **wisdom**, that drives out fear. It gives us the faith to take the next step toward the mess or into the next challenge.

Read Isaiah 41:8-16

5. *What encouragement can you take from these verses to apply to your current or future fears?*

6. *In light of your study this week, summarize your “next steps” toward fearless living.*

“For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.” — 2 Timothy 1:7

Notes

This image shows a full page of blank white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, providing a template for writing or drawing. There are no margins, text, or other markings present.