

SPIRITUAL WARFARE

2 CORINTHIANS 10:1-11, 13:1-4

Dwight Moody was the Billy Graham of the 1800s – a gifted evangelist God used to bring thousands of people into a personal relationship with Jesus. He made an interesting comment about the subject I want us to think about today. “When I was converted, I made this mistake: I thought the battle was already mine, the victory already won, the crown already in my grasp. I thought the old things had passed away, that all things had become new, and that my old corrupt nature, the old life, was gone. But I found out, after serving Christ for a few months, that conversion was only like enlisting in the army--that there was a battle on hand.” Let’s talk about spiritual warfare.

Being cruciform – having a cross-shaped life – can have some very unexpected outcomes. That’s the mega theme of Paul’s second letter to the Christians in the great Greek city of Corinth. Being cruciform means to resemble Jesus in our actions and attitudes. Being cross-shaped means to be loving, gracious, merciful, kind, and a servant to others, right? That’s often what we think of first when we think about Jesus and His ministry. But we also learn from Paul’s experience with these first followers of Jesus that being cruciform can mean, at times, going to war. War? Yes, war! The passages in 2 Corinthians we want to reflect on today make that explicitly clear even though it might sound like a contradiction. Let’s read those passages just now and then sort out how they might apply to us today.

From what we just read, we learn Paul anticipated a third visit to Corinth and he had mixed feelings about it. He knew some very thorny issues still had to get sorted out. False teachers were still spouting a heretical brand of Christianity. They had lots of influence among the believers at the Corinthian church. In addition, some of the members of the church were still involved in promiscuous, sinful sexual activity while others still participated in activities at pagan temples that Paul said were a form of idolatry. Paul warned the Corinthians here it might be time to go to war. His enemies needed to be confronted and defeated. Others who had concluded they could live any way they thought best had to be disciplined. So, what can we learn from this portion of God’s Word? How can we apply it to our lives some 2,000 years later? This is what occurs to me. First, there’s a fact we must acknowledge.

THE FACT: I’M IN A WAR

It’s easy to forget that uncomfortable fact. We’re so accustomed to associating our faith in Jesus with everything positive and peaceful, we can simply minimize or overlook the fact it’s not all sunshine and roses. After all, Jesus had a serious, all out, ongoing war, so to speak, with the Jewish religious leaders throughout most of His public ministry. Paul took the fact we’re in a war for granted. “We are human, but we don’t wage war as humans do.” (2 Cor 10:3 NLT) Now, of course, he used war as a metaphor. “We use God’s mighty weapons, not worldly weapons (you use weapons in a war), to knock down the strongholds (you tear down or destroy structures in a war) of human reasoning and to destroy false arguments. We destroy every proud obstacle that keeps people from knowing God. We capture (you often take captives in a war) their

rebellious thoughts and teach them to obey Christ. And after you have become fully obedient, we will punish everyone who remains disobedient (you often punish rebels in a war)." (2 Cor. 10:4-6 NLT) This wasn't about literal swords, spears, or arrows back then any more than it's about literal guns or bombs today. But it's definitely a war. You have entities or forces that are enemies of one another. It's a war because there are battles that are fought. It's a war because there are victories and defeats.

Paul used this metaphor often. To the Ephesians, he wrote, "For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places." (Eph. 6:12 NLT) To his friend Timothy, he wrote, "Fight the good fight for the true faith." (1 Tim. 6:12 NLT) The fact is that for thousands of years of human history there has been an ongoing spiritual war for the eternal souls of human beings. You have no choice about being in this war. You just have a choice on which side you will be on. You can't be a conscientious objector in this war either. In this war there are very real enemies, very real battles, and very real victories and defeats. Every follower of Jesus is a soldier in His army. Part and parcel of being cruciform – of being cross-shaped – is acknowledging there is a war and then fighting in it. We're all in this war and we all have to fight. Here's the question: Do we fight well or do we fight poorly?

Jack Handey is a comedian. He's told the story of a bully who demanded his lunch money every day when he was a child. Because Handey was smaller than the bully, he simply gave the bully his money. "Then I decided to fight back," Handey says. "I started taking karate lessons, but the instructor wanted \$5 a lesson. That was a lot of money. I found that it was cheaper to pay the bully, so I gave up karate." Funny! But many Christians, unfortunately, have the same attitude about spiritual warfare, about that cosmic bully, Satan, and about the temptations he sends our way. It's easier just to avoid the conflict and pay the bully than it is to learn how to fight him.

But Paul's approach to the fact of spiritual warfare is instructive. Pursue peace, but be ready for war. Always remember our primary task is to build people up, not to take people out. Paul saw himself as a major general in God's army, but the last thing he ever wanted to do was to go to war with anyone else. "I may seem to be boasting too much about the authority given to us by the Lord. But our authority builds you up; it doesn't tear you down." (2 Cor. 10:8 NLT) There was nothing combative about Paul. He didn't pick fights. He didn't look for trouble. God had called Him be a builder, not a destroyer. His primary task was to love people into God's Kingdom, to encourage them, and to build up fellow believers. That should be true of you and me, too.

Pursue peace, but be ready for war. That means if it's inevitable and necessary, take action. It's clear here Paul wanted the Corinthians to clean house spiritually before he came again to Corinth so he wouldn't have to do it. The last thing he wanted to do on his next visit to Corinth was to be "the heavy," but he was willing to do it if necessary. He certainly understood there comes a time when a difficulty must be faced and no longer avoided. He reminds me of a good parent who has to discipline his or her child. You've been slow to get angry, you still want to be compassionate and kind, but there

comes that moment when you realize indulging your child any further is going to damage him or her. So, you lower the boom. You take action precisely because you do love and care about your child. So, we must accept an undeniable fact. We're in a very real spiritual war. Now, every war has a battlefield where you fight the war. What's the battlefield when it comes to spiritual warfare? Paul gave an interesting answer.

THE BATTLEFIELD: MY MIND.

"We use God's mighty weapons, not worldly weapons, to knock down the strongholds of human reasoning and to destroy false arguments. We destroy every proud obstacle that keeps people from knowing God. We capture their rebellious thoughts and teach them to obey Christ." (2 Cor. 10:4-5 NLT) What was Paul talking about? Before we surrendered our lives to Jesus, our minds manufactured all kinds of arguments against God's authority in our lives. Our mind provided "reasons" to pridefully rebel against God and reject His standards for life and living. Our mind produced a kind of human "wisdom" that claimed we didn't really need God, or we could make a God in our own image, or from our own imagination. It included any and all thoughts and attitudes that keep us from knowing, serving, and loving the one, true God as we should.

The Bible says the human mind is the great battlefield in spiritual warfare. There may well be other battlefields in this spiritual war we're fighting in, but we tend to overlook the very important one that's right between our own two ears! Satan blinds people's minds. "Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don't understand this message about the glory of Christ." (2 Cor. 4:4 NLT) Satan hardens people's minds. "But the people's minds were hardened... the same veil covers their minds so they cannot understand the truth." (2 Cor. 3:18 NLT) Satan holds people's minds hostage and the end result is what happens in a war: death. "Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things.... So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death." (Rom. 8:5-6 NLT)

A young teenager raised in a non-Christian home put this faith in Jesus. Soon thereafter, he told his mother that he'd become a Christian. Alarmed, she thought he'd joined some kind of cult. "They've brainwashed you!" she said. He was ready with the right answer. "If you'd seen what was in my brain, you'd realize it needed washing!" Of course, he hadn't been brainwashed. If anything, it's our surrounding culture that brainwashes us, persuading us in a thousand subtle ways that this present world is the only one there is. This is seldom questioned. It's easier to go with the flow. That's what happens in brainwashing. The good news about Jesus administers a sharp jolt, shines a bright light, and kick-starts your brain into working properly for the first time.

Your mind and mine is the intellectual center of our being. That's the real battlefield. Spiritual warfare is about making our deepest thoughts and attitudes captive to Jesus through His power. When we submit to the Lordship of Jesus in our lives, we begin to get liberated from how Satan has held our minds in bondage. When we pledge allegiance to Jesus, our minds get taken over and transformation begins. He begins to

change how we think and installs new paradigms in our minds. The Bible puts it like this. “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God re-mold your minds from within.” (Rom. 12:2 JBP) The end result is so much better than its alternative. “Those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit.... But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace.” (Rom. 8:5-6 NLT) You’re cruciform when you’re allowing the Holy Spirit to transform your mind – to win on the spiritual battlefield of how you think and what you think. Yes, every war has a battlefield. But every war also has weapons. Paul said something interesting here about the weapons we’re supposed to use.

THE WEAPONS: GOD’S ARMOR

“We are human, but we don’t wage war as humans do. We use God’s mighty weapons, not worldly weapons.” (2 Cor. 10:3-4 NLT) I wish Paul had explained what he meant by “worldly weapons” specifically. But we can assume he meant anything that resembles putting your trust and confidence in yourself rather than in God. Like using manipulation and lying to get your way rather than relying on the truth. Like showing pride or being domineering in order to influence people so you get the outcome you want to see. Whatever Paul meant by “worldly weapons” it likely involved under-handed, ungodly ways to gain a victory over people who oppose you for some reason. Fortunately, we do know what Paul meant by God’s mighty weapons. We find that information in another letter Paul wrote named Ephesians. (Ephesians 6:10-18)

This list of weapons is called the armor of God by Paul. “Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.” (Eph 6:10 NLT) It’s not always recognized as a spiritual weapon, but I suggest to you that God’s power and victory is both our first and single greatest weapon. God has already defeated Satan and his kingdom in the most decisive battle ever fought in this great war. That battle was fought and won at the cross and the empty tomb. When Jesus died and rose again, all the powers of darkness and evil suffered a defeat from which they will never recover. As a result, you and I are called to engage in this daily battle from a place of victory not for victory. Yes, there are very real spiritual battles still to be fought and an ongoing spiritual war to be fully won. But, make no mistake, the outcome is not in doubt. We fight from victory not for victory!

Here's a second weapon. “Stand your ground, putting on the belt of truth....” (Eph 6:14 NLT) God’s truth. It protects our minds and hearts. We need to be protected against Satan’s persistent lies – lies about God, lies about you, lies about others, lies about life, and lies about what matters and what’s truly important. Here’s a third weapon. “Stand your ground, putting on the belt of truth and the body armor of God’s righteousness.” (Eph 6:14 NLT) God’s acceptance of me. It might be called the “breastplate of righteousness” in your Bible. You are accepted by God and in God because of the shed blood of Jesus on the cross. He paid the penalty for your sin fully and finally then and there. When you put your faith in Jesus and what He did for you, God accepted you as His child forever. The world tells you God ought to condemn you. Satan tells you God ought to condemn you. Your conscience tells you God ought to condemn you. Satan is always trying to remind you that you’re unworthy of God’s grace and love. Well, of

course, you are! We all are! But it's not about our worthiness, but instead the worthiness of Jesus' to take our place. That's God's righteousness.

A pastor and two family members were finishing their meal at a café. The waitress brought their check, smiled, and said: "Somebody in the restaurant paid for your meal. You're all set." And then she walked away. That pastor said he had the strangest feeling sitting there. The feeling was helplessness. There was nothing he could do. It had been taken care of. To insist on paying would have been pointless. All he could do was trust what she said was actually true and then live in that—which meant getting up and leaving the restaurant. His acceptance of what she said gave him a choice: to live like it was true or to create his own reality in which the bill wasn't paid. When it comes to spiritual warfare, a powerful weapon is the knowledge we don't owe anything because Jesus paid our debt. It's trust that something is already true about us and something has already been done. It's trusting grace pays the bill.

Here's a fourth weapon. "For shoes, put on the peace that comes from the Good News so that you will be fully prepared." (Eph 6:15 NLT) A little obscure, to be sure. Paul is talking about the foundation of God's salvation message itself. What you put on your feet is like the foundation or the basis of your life. You and I need to wake up every day standing in the truth of what God has done for us. Are you discouraged today? Anxious? Tempted? Consciously and prayerfully remind yourself, if God is for us, who can ever be against us? Here's a fifth weapon. "In addition to all of these, hold up the shield of faith to stop the fiery arrows of the devil." (Eph 6:16 NLT) My faith in God's protection and plan is a weapon. A shield is made and meant to get dented, battered and hammered on. Your faith in Jesus is going to get tested by life. Satan is going to fire his arrows at you – disappointment, broken relationships, chronic illness, doubts, failures – that's just some of them. Keep holding on to Jesus and what He has done for you and what He says about you. God can use your faith as a shield to protect you from the arrows and blows intended to destroy you.

Weapon number six. "Put on salvation as your helmet...." (Eph 6:17 NLT) This brings us back to the battlefield of the mind. Maintain a mental perspective that's godly and consistently. It's a powerful weapon. The devil's favorite target is the human mind. If Satan can get you thinking incorrect thoughts about God, about yourself, about how to be right with God, about life, he's got you right where he wants you. What you think about God is the most important thing about you. Weapon number seven. "Take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." (Eph 6:17 NLT) If you are going to think rightly about God, you will need to increase your knowledge of God's Word. Get into this book often and regularly. Marinate in it. Study it with others in a Bible class, a triad, or a small group. It will protect and preserve you when you're in the thick of life's battles. Weapon number eight. "Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere." (Eph 6:18 NLT) Prevailing and persistent prayer is a great weapon. Prayer is like all the hooks, the straps and the buckles that holds all that spiritual armor together. It's through our prayers that God's will gets done here on Earth even as it is Heaven. Prayer reminds us of our absolute dependence on God. Persistent prayer makes us sensitive and alert

to the devil's attacks. Prevailing prayer releases the power of God into our lives and into our church.

Let me mention a ninth weapon suggested back in 2 Corinthians. "Now I, Paul, appeal to you with the gentleness and kindness of Christ.... Although he was crucified in weakness, he now lives by the power of God. We, too, are weak, just as Christ was, but when we deal with you we will be alive with him and will have God's power." (2 Cor. 10:1, 13:3-4 NLT) Ironically, humility and gentleness or Jesus' kind of "weakness" - are powerful weapons in spiritual warfare. Jesus became weak, so to speak, at the cross, but by it God conquered Satan completely and forever. Greco-Roman culture despised humility. Because they were still more Corinthian than Christian, Paul's enemies regarded humility as a weakness not a strength. Paul's defense? He was just being like Jesus whose humility and gentleness - His "weakness" - was made powerful in the hands of God. There's at least nine weapons we can use every day as we fight in Jesus' army. There's probably more, but nine is a good start!

Maybe you grew up in a church where missionaries would occasionally come and tell amazing, exotic stories about the mission field. Years ago, a young missionary couple told a story of what happened to them at a steamy jungle mission station. One day, an enormous snake—much longer than a man—slithered its way right through their front door and into the kitchen of their simple home. Terrified, they ran outside and searched frantically for someone who might know what to do. A machete-wielding neighbor came to the rescue. He calmly marched into their house and decapitated the snake with one clean chop. The neighbor reemerged triumphant and assured the missionaries that the reptile had been defeated. But there was a catch, he warned. It was going to take a while for the snake to realize it was dead.

A snake's neurology and blood flow are such that it can take considerable time for it to stop moving even after decapitation. For the next several hours, the missionaries were forced to wait outside while the snake thrashed about, smashing furniture and flailing against walls and windows, wreaking havoc until its body finally understood that it no longer had a head. Sweating in the heat, they felt frustrated, a little sick, but also grateful that the snake's rampage wouldn't last forever. And at some point in their waiting they had a mutual epiphany. Satan is a lot like that big old snake. He's already been defeated. He just doesn't know it yet. In the meantime, he's going to do a whole lot of damage. But never forget he's a goner. That's an accurate picture of the universe right now. We're in this time Satan is thrashing about. The temptation is to despair. We have to remember it won't last forever. At the cross and the empty tomb, Jesus has already crushed the serpent's head.

Are you cruciform? Do you have a cross-shaped life? If so, you will not take the fact of spiritual warfare for granted. By God's grace and in the Holy Spirit's power, you will fight. You will realize the greatest battlefield is the one between your ears. Your mind! You're inviting the Holy Spirit to transform it. And you are learning how to use the mighty weapons God puts at your disposal.