

ENGAGING THE UNSEEN FOE

By Jerry Bridges

Issues: *Prayer is warfare with a defeated but still powerful enemy. When we allow our prayer lives to remain only on the level of immediate or “felt” needs, we risk the great danger of losing the struggle that God is ultimately interested in.*

There’s a chapter in the history of the nation of Israel that I believe graphically illustrates the way we tend to operate as Christians.

Second Kings 3 records the account of Joram, the king of Israel, going into battle against the king of Moab. Joram did not seek God’s help or guidance for the fray; he simply made the decision and then enlisted the alliance of his former countryman, Jehoshaphat (king of Judah). Jehoshaphat didn’t pray either. After gathering up the king of Edom, they all went charging into battle.

In verse 9 we find out that they got into a supply problem: they ran out of water in the middle of the desert. Suddenly they wanted God’s help, and only then did they begin to pray (their method of praying was to seek the prophet). Their *felt need* was the focus of their prayer.

Water for their men and animals was a very important detail for those kings. But they were not out in the desert to drink water: they were there to fight a battle. Notice how God answered when he spoke to the prophet Elisha: “You will see neither wind nor rain, yet this valley will be filled with water, and you, your cattle and your other animals will drink. This is an easy thing in the eyes of the Lord; he will also hand Moab over to you” (verses 17–18). God had not forgotten the objective: to win the battle over the Moabites. The kings, however, had lost sight of why they were out there, because they were preoccupied with their immediate need.

THE TRUE BATTLEGROUND

As Christians, our prayer lives tend to dwell in the realm of water shortages. We seldom operate in the realm of true spiritual warfare. Go to an average prayer meeting, and I guarantee that 75 percent of the prayer requests will be for felt needs: for example, Jim’s neck. Now Jim’s neck needs to be healed, and I hope we are praying about it. But we never seem to get into the battle. As I’ve told students, “The only way that you can get prayed for at our church is to be in the hospital or out of a job.”

One year at Thanksgiving time I flew out to southern California to speak at a mission conference. My goal was to stimulate a vision among students and young military personnel for recruiting laborers for the harvest field. When I arrived at the Los Angeles airport, however, no one was there to meet me.

After wandering around the gate area and the baggage claim for forty-five minutes, I called the conference grounds. No answer. I thought, Well, I’ll get my secretary on this—she knows how to take care of these things. But when I called long distance back to Colorado Springs, no one answered the phone there either! Then I remembered that it was the Friday after Thanksgiving, and the office was closed. There I was, *stuck*.

It was then that I resorted to prayer: “Lord, if there is anyone in this airport looking for me,” I prayed, “help him to find me.” Not having much faith that my prayer was going to be answered, I headed out a nearby door to catch a bus to Pasadena. On my way out, I ran into a familiar-looking man on his way in. He was looking for me.

That was one of the quickest answers to prayer that I have ever experienced. Later on, however, I asked myself this question: “Did I pray as fervently for the real mission for which I was sent to southern California as I did that someone might find me at the airport?” In that airport, I was like Joram and Jehoshaphat, stranded in the desert without water. But the real reason I was there was not to get picked up at the airport, but to have a part in recruiting laborers for the harvest field. Jesus told us to pray that the Lord of the harvest will send forth laborers. That was the real battle.

There are three military terms that I feel illustrate various types of prayer: strategic, tactical, and logistical. *Strategic* refers to the ultimate objective—to defeat the enemy—and the overall plan, or strategy, to bring

him into submission. *Tactical* means the specific battles necessary to achieve the ultimate objective. *Logistical* is simply supplying the physical needs of the army fighting the battle.

I believe that 75 to 80 percent of our prayer is for logistical items. For water in the desert. For someone to find us at the airport. For that sick person in the hospital. For the one who lost his job. All of these things are important, and we should be praying for them. But those kinds of things are almost all we pray about.

I would guess that 15 to 20 percent of our prayer effort is tactical, related to specific engagements with the enemy—the spiritual results of the conference I spoke at, for example. But that conference was only a specific operation; the overall objective was raising up laborers.

Very little of our prayer effort is strategic, or focused on our ultimate objective—the battle that God is really interested in. We need to remember that when we pray, we are entering into spiritual warfare. We are engaging a defeated but still powerful enemy: Satan, our unseen foe.

There are four primary aspects of this kind of warfare that are crucial to our success: first, understanding our enemy; second, identifying and learning to use the weapons with which to fight him; third, understanding the nature of our struggle with him; and fourth, focusing on the right objective in our attempts to defeat him.

UNDERSTANDING OUR ENEMY

In Ephesians 6:12, Paul says that 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.” Our warfare is with the devil and all of his evil angels. They are the spiritual forces Paul refers to in this passage.

The New Testament tells us four facts about the devil that we need to know in order to combat him. First, he is the ruler, with evil angels under him, of a kingdom in which all of the unsaved are held. When Paul wrote to the Ephesian believers that they were formerly dead in their sins, he was saying the same about us. We used to *live* in our sins when we followed “the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient” (Ephesians 2:1–2). We all used to follow the devil because we were all in his kingdom, under his dominion. When God commissioned Paul, he sent him to turn the Gentiles, the unsaved, “from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18).

Not only does Satan hold the unsaved under his reign, but he also blinds the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel (2 Corinthians 4:4). That’s why witnessing often seems like pouring water off a duck’s back. Our speech comes across like a foreign language; the unbeliever just can’t understand.

When we witness to someone, we are launching an attack upon Satan’s kingdom. We cannot win this attack by our own power, because that person is under Satan’s dominion, and he is blinded by him. Jesus said that we cannot enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions until we first bind that strong man (Matthew 12:29). The strong man is the devil, and we bind him through prayer. That’s why we must enter into battle *in prayer* before we engage the unsaved in a witnessing situation.

The third fact that the Bible tells us about Satan is that he wars against believers, even though we have been delivered from his dominion into the kingdom of God. First Peter 5:8 says that he prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. The roaring lion is intended to symbolize the ferociousness of Satan.

When he attacks us in order to ruin us, however, he masquerades as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). In Scripture, light stands for either truth or moral purity. When Paul says that Satan masquerades as an angel of light, he means that Satan tries to convince us that his false teaching is the truth. When he tempted Jesus in the desert, saying, “Cast yourself down because it is written, ‘He will hold you up,’” Satan twisted the truth.

Second Timothy 2:22–26 tells us that Satan’s masquerade can be so deceptive that he actually takes believers captive to do his will. This is not demon-possession, but rather a diversion of our minds into false teaching, unimportant or peripheral issues, temptations, discouragement, and doubts about the truth of God’s word.

I vividly remember an event that occurred to me while going through an intense spiritual battle. I was looking at a particular promise in Scripture, when Satan planted this thought in my mind: “It isn’t true, is it?” That was just as clear in my mind as if he had spoken in a voice. He was seeking to make me captive to do his will by attacking my mind with false teaching.

We are at war with an enemy who has thousands of years of experience. Satan attacked Eve in the Garden of Eden, and he has been attacking God’s people ever since. He knows his strategy, and he is not locked up in logistics.

But Scripture gives us a fourth (and the most important) fact about Satan: he is a defeated foe. Colossians 2:15 tells us that Jesus Christ disarmed the powers and authorities and “made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the Cross.” This is the reason James can tell us, “Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). Satan has lost the big war. He is now engaged in guerilla warfare against us, and we can defeat him in this day-to-day struggle.

USING THE RIGHT WEAPONS

In 2 Corinthians 10:3–5, Paul gives us a clue to the kind of weapon we need to battle Satan:

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. The war we are engaged in is for the minds and souls of people. Our weapons are not physical, nor are they those of human logic and cleverness. They are divine.

When you are engaged in battle and the objective is a person’s mind, what are you going to use? The truth. Satan masquerades as an angel of truth, but we combat him with the real truth—the word of God. Paul tells us in Ephesians 6 to put on the full armor of God, so that we may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. The list of armor is primarily defensive: helmet, breastplate, belt, sandals, shield and so forth.

In verse 17, however, Paul says, “Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the *word of God*.” There are two Greek words that are translated, “the word of God.” One of them is *logos*, referring to Scripture in general. The other is a word that focuses on a specific passage of Scripture. In this verse, Paul is referring to the specific word of God—individual passages of the Bible that are brought to bear on individual battles. Just as Jesus answered Satan with specific passages of Scripture from the Old Testament when he was tempted in the desert, so we fight Satan with specific passages of Scripture that apply to the situation at hand.

Our first weapon in battling our foe is the word of truth. In verse 18 of Ephesians 6, Paul gives us our second: “And pray in the Spirit.” The second weapon is prayer. Whether we are evangelizing the lost, discipling believers, or trying to restore a lapsed brother or sister, the weapons are always the same: the word of truth accompanied by prayer in the Spirit. We need the Spirit of God to open our minds and release us from Satan’s captivity.

The battle for the souls of men and women is really not won in the witnessing encounter or the discipling meeting, but in prayer, before we ever get into those situations. Our actions are of course necessary, but it is futile to fight without paving the way by prayer against the devil.

THE NATURE OF OUR STRUGGLE

We are at war against a powerful, unseen foe. And our weapons are the word of God and prayer. In order to use these weapons successfully,

we need to have an adequate understanding of the kind of warfare we are engaged in.

Several times, Paul uses a word related to prayer that means to struggle or to agonize. It is the word from which we get our word *agony*. The same word is translated “fight” in 1 Timothy 6:12—“Fight the good fight of faith.” Paul also uses this word in Colossians 1:28–29: “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present every one perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, *struggling* [or *agonizing*] with all his energy, which so powerfully works within me.” Here Paul is talking about our first weapon, the word of truth. But in chapter two, verse 1 of his letter to the people at Colossae he continues, “I want you to know how much I am *struggling* for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally.” In Colossians 1:29 Paul means, “I agonize in the ministry of the word.” In Colossians 2:1 he means, “I agonize in the ministry of prayer.” Both indicate intense fighting. Paul wasn’t just praying about those in the hospital and the unemployed. He was in the heat of the battle.

In Colossians 4:12, Paul commends Epaphras for the same kind of struggling: “Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always *wrestling* [always agonizing, always waging war] in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.” Epaphras had his eye on the battle. He wanted these people to grow up in Christ and stand firm in the will of God. He wasn’t just concerned about their logistical or felt needs. He was concerned about the spiritual aspects of their lives. And he waged war in prayer.

Are you in the battle? Have you agonized in prayer lately? Or are you still preoccupied with the material things of your life, as Joram was for the need of water, losing sight of the real battle and the real enemy?

FOCUSING ON THE RIGHT OBJECTIVE

Once we’ve faced the enemy, armed ourselves with the right weapons, and prepared ourselves for the rigors of battle, we can still jeopardize our success by losing sight of God’s ultimate objective in this spiritual warfare.

What is God’s objective? “For God so loved the world.” God so loved people that he gave his only begotten son. Christ died for them. This is God’s objective: *people*; not being found at the airport, or even having a great mission conference. Those are logistical and tactical operations.

In Genesis 12:3, God promised Abraham, “All people on earth will be blessed through you.” This hasn’t happened yet. Our job is to engage the enemy in warfare, to see that it does happen. God’s plan is going to be fulfilled, but he has ordained that this plan be carried out through prayer.

There are 4½ billion men, women, and children on this earth right now. Most of them have never received the gospel. Have you prayed God’s promises into fulfillment for any of those people lately? Are you engaging Satan in battle through prayer? Are you asking God to bind the strong man, and claiming Christ’s victory on the Cross?

Jesus said that the harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few. He told us to pray that the Lord of the harvest would raise up laborers. The battle is not with unemployment and sickness and transportation arrangements. Those are necessary logistical items, and I am not saying that we shouldn’t pray for those things. God is aware of our friend in the hospital, or the man or woman out of a job. But I think that his attitude toward them is embodied in what he said to Joram: “This is an easy thing in the eyes of the Lord.” They are logistical details. He will also hand the enemy over to us.

My challenge to you is this: keep praying for your friend in the hospital, and keep praying for your friend who needs work. But remember that these are light things in the eyes of the Lord. Ask God to get you into the heat of the real battle. Ask him to equip you to engage the unseen foe, and then take your prayer life into the war for God’s ultimate objective. And expect him to hand Moab over to you.

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