

Essential Truths III: Working With God

15

Enforcing the Victory

The Bible is a story of conflict, staged in the theater of human history. Principally, this conflict is enacted on the spiritual plane, but it has spilt over into human history in the form of countless wars and persecutions and the devastation of individual lives. Not only that, but the Bible also places your own relationship with God, your walk with him, and your ministry through his power, in the perspective of this spiritual conflict.

In **Ephesians 6:12**, Paul explains the nature of this conflict:

“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.”

This is the nature of the spiritual enemy we face. Paul identifies four levels of enemy activity:

- Rulers (also called “principalities”)
- Authorities (also called “powers”)
- The powers of this dark world (also called “the world-rulers of darkness”)
- Spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms

It is not the purpose of this lesson to explore these demonic hierarchies in any detail. As we shall see in future lessons, where we will examine the principles of spiritual warfare in more detail, we must be careful to avoid the trap of gnostic speculation in these matters.

The Birthright

Taking the Baton

The Great Commission

The Body of Christ

The Ministry of Every Believer

Joining the Work of God

The Tree of Life

The Ministry of Reconciliation

Filled with the Spirit

Ministry to the Body

Sent into the Harvest

Speaking the Word of God

A Lifestyle Gospel

Salt and Light

Enforcing the Victory

Signs and Wonders

A New Kind of Leadership

Establishing a Daily Church

Making Disciples

The New Wine

The Goal of Ministry

What we do need to know are the bare essentials of the conflict. How much, you may ask, should we seek to know about our spiritual enemy? The answer is simple. Enough to fight effectively.

The Bare Essentials

If we were to produce a military training manual for spiritual warfare – a “boot camp” introduction to the subject – it would include seven essential facts:

- Satan is called “the prince of this world” (**John 14:30; 16:11; Luke 4:5-6**)
- The whole world is under Satan’s sway (**1 John 5:19; Ephesians 2:2**)
- Jesus came into the world to destroy Satan’s power (**1 John 3:8**)
- Satan was decisively defeated at the Cross (**Colossians 2:15**)
- Satan’s main weapon is to blind the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the Gospel, which is his undoing (**2 Corinthians 4:4**)
- You, however, have been rescued from Satan’s “dominion of darkness” and have been transferred into the kingdom of God (**Colossians 1:13**)
- Your primary mission as a member of God’s kingdom is to proclaim the Gospel and enforce the victory already won (**Colossians 2:15**)

This last point is an important one. Just recognizing that there is a battle is not enough. You must also recognize the point of victory. That victory is not a future event; it is a past event. The victory over our spiritual enemy was won 2000 years ago on the Cross of Calvary.

The Victory of the Cross

In **Colossians 2:15**, Paul tells us that Christ “disarmed the [principalities and powers], [and] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” Before we can play our part in the battle for people’s lives, we must understand what Jesus has *already* accomplished. If we do not first have a revelation of the finished work of the Cross, we will end up struggling to do what has already been done. Spiritual warfare is not about trying to complete the work of the Cross. Spiritual warfare is enforcing a victory *already* won. We are not fighting *for* victory; we are fighting *from* victory.

Just before Jesus went to the Cross, he made this declaration in **John 12:31**:

“*Now* is the time for judgment on this world; *now* the prince of this world will be driven out.”

The Cross was God’s answer to breaking Satan’s power. And if you are to be effective in ministry, you need to put your full weight behind the momentum of the power of the Cross. So let’s take a moment to recap what we’ve learned from **Module 102** and apply it to the issue of spiritual warfare:

- Ever since Adam, the “old self” – that which stood in opposition to God and made us an enemy of God (**Colossians 1:21**) – has given Satan the right to rule on two levels: over the individual and over the community.
- God’s strategy of dealing with Satan’s authority was the Cross. When Jesus died, God counted his death as the death of the whole of mankind (**2 Corinthians 5:14**). The Cross of Christ effectively broke Satan’s right to rule over individuals and over communities.
- As we minister the Gospel, the Holy Spirit takes the accomplished fact of the Cross and makes it accomplished reality in people’s lives.

Understanding how God dealt with Satan’s authority on these two levels – the individual and the community – is vital to our effectiveness in ministry. The Cross was a death blow to Satan’s claim of rulership on both these levels. Not only did *my* (individual) old self die with Christ on the Cross (**Romans 6:6; Galatians 2:20**); the *whole* world – the corporate “body of sin” – was also crucified in Christ (**Galatians 6:14**). It is this corporate “old self” that is Satan’s basis of authority over your community. It is no wonder, then, that the proclamation of the Gospel is the cutting edge of spiritual warfare – for it undercuts the legal basis for Satan’s dominion over people’s lives.

We do not need to try to break the power of principalities over communities. This is a distraction from the primary momentum of the Gospel. The good news is that Satan’s authority (both over individuals and over communities) has *already* been broken at the Cross. The “strong man” has been bound and we are now plundering his goods.

Read Matthew 12:29

Remember that, just because Satan is a defeated enemy, this doesn’t mean that he is not actively seeking to thwart the forward advance of the Gospel. He is still a formidable foe, a “roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (**1 Peter 5:8**). He can still steal, kill and destroy (**John 10:10**), and should never be taken lightly.

In future modules, we will be examining, step by step, the strategies and tactics of evangelism and Gospel proclamation. But in this module, we are laying the groundwork for this practical training – the understanding of how God works and how we are to join him in that work.

As a soldier in the ranks of Christ’s army, you are called to enforce the victory already won on the Cross. You do this in a combination of three ways:

- Through prayer (**Ephesians 6:12-18; 1 Timothy 2:1-2**)
- Through the preaching of the Gospel (**Acts 26:18**)
- Through the display of God’s power over the enemy (**Luke 10:19; 1 Corinthians 2:4; 1 Thessalonians 1:5**)

Taking the Battle to the Enemy

The very first time the word “church” is mentioned in the Bible comes from the mouth of Jesus. And what a description Jesus gives of this soon-to-be-born Church.

Read Matthew 16:18-19

Jesus describes the Church as an irresistible force, undeterred even by the very gates of Hades itself. This verse is part of the charter of the Church’s mission. And as you read this verse, you will note the words that Jesus uses to describe the impact that the Church has upon “the rulers...the authorities...the powers of this dark world and...the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” He says:

“... the gates of Hades will *not* overcome it.”

One of the first concepts that must be overturned, if you are to be effective in your role as a soldier of the Cross, is that of passivity. Many Christians believe in a *passive* overcoming of the world – in other words, no matter what Satan throws against us, we will still stand strong. While this is true (note **Romans 8:37; 1 John 4:4**), this is not the full picture. We are not simply waiting for Satan to attack us; we have been given a mandate to take the offensive into his camp.

When Jesus says that “the gates of Hades will not overcome” the Church, many Christians somehow have the mental picture of Satan picking up the heavy gates of Hades and “gate-bashing” the Church. But this is not the picture Jesus is using. Christ is actually painting a picture of the Church on the offensive, taking the battle right up to the gates of the enemy himself.

In ancient times, an invading army would often surround and lay siege to a city, starving it of food and water. Then they would begin to assault the city gates with large battering rams, until finally the gates would crack and entry would be forced into the city. This is what it means by the phrase “the gates of Hades will not prevail...”

Few Christians realize that our enemy has a siege mentality. He is still a formidable foe, but he has hidden himself in pockets of spiritual resistance that the Bible calls “strongholds” (note **1 Corinthians 10:4**). Although he is still active in the world, he is only as active as these pockets of resistance remain intact. We have been called to take the battle to the gates of Satan’s refuges, enforcing the victory won against him on the Cross.

The Message articulates Jesus’ description of the Church’s fighting style with these words:

“This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out. And that’s not all. You will have complete and free access to God’s kingdom, keys to open any and every door; no more barriers between heaven and earth, earth and heaven. A yes on earth is yes in heaven. A no on earth is no in heaven.”

Spiritual warfare has become an “in” term in many circles. Yet spiritual warfare is simply a recognition of the reality of spiritual conflict – the fact that the Gospel story is not simply about God and people, but that it involves a third party, an implacable enemy, who seeks to hinder the advance of the Gospel on every turn.

As Matthew Henry observes:

“The work of the ministry is a spiritual warfare with spiritual enemies, and for spiritual purposes.”¹

On the Front Line

Read 2 Timothy 2:3-4

Let’s take another look at this verse from different angles, as rendered by various English versions:

New International Version: “Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs – he wants to please his commanding officer.”

Good News Bible: “Take your part in suffering, as a loyal soldier of Christ Jesus. A soldier on active service wants to please his commanding officer and so does not get mixed up in civilian life.”

The Living Bible: “Take your share of suffering as a good soldier of Jesus Christ, just as I do, and as Christ’s soldier do not let yourself become tied up in worldly affairs, for then you cannot satisfy the one who has enlisted you in his army.”

The New Testament in Modern English: “Put up with your share of hardship as a loyal soldier in Christ’s army. Remember...[t]hat no soldier on active service gets himself entangled in business, or he will not please his commanding officer.”

The Message: “When the going gets rough, take it on the chin with the rest of us, the way Jesus did. A soldier on duty doesn’t get caught up in making deals at the marketplace. He concentrates on carrying out orders.”

The Amplified Bible: “Take [with me] your share of the hardships and suffering [which you are called to endure] as a good (first class) soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier when in service gets entangled in the enterprises of [civilian] life; his aim is to satisfy and please the one who enlisted him.”

Paul’s view of ministry, like Matthew Henry’s, was that it involves “spiritual warfare with spiritual enemies, and for spiritual purposes.” And this view of ministry elicits the imagery of a soldier, equipped for battle (**Ephesians 6:13-17**), fully trained and ready to obey orders, “with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left” (**2 Corinthians 6:7**).

We see this image of a soldier again used in **Philippians 2:25**, where Paul calls Epaphroditus three things:

- Brother
- Fellow-worker
- Fellow-soldier

In many ways, these three descriptions show the balance we must have in ministry, seeing other Christians firstly as brothers and sisters in Christ (a focus on shared relationships), then as fellow-workers (a focus on shared ministry), and finally as fellow-soldiers (a focus on shared warfare).

Holman Bible Dictionary defines “soldier” as:

“A person trained to fight, usually on active military duty.”²

You are a soldier on active military duty. You are not just a recipient of the purpose of God; you have been enlisted *into* the purpose of God. In this sense you are more than just a warrior. A warrior is a lone fighter. By contrast, a soldier fights a cooperative battle, as part of a military unit with a common purpose and under common orders. Part of your training as a soldier is to learn more about what that common purpose is and what those common orders are.

Tearing Down Strongholds

Read 2 Corinthians 10:3-5

Here Paul writes:

“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.”

Now take a look at how the *Amplified Bible* translates these three verses:

“For though we walk [live] in the flesh, we are not carrying on our warfare according to the flesh and using mere human weapons. For the weapons of our warfare are not physical (weapons of flesh and blood), but they are mighty before God for the overthrow and destruction of strongholds, [inasmuch as we] refute arguments and theories and reasonings and every proud and lofty thing that sets itself up against the (true) knowledge of God; and we lead every thought and purpose away captive into the obedience of Christ...”

In this passage, we see how Paul “wage[s] war.” This is what Paul means when he says that his “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.”

Paul used terminology understood well by his readers, terms like “strongholds” (or “military fortresses”) and “weapons.” Immediately, the Corinthian Christians would have imagined a Roman army laying siege to a city, preparing its formidable array of engines of war, such as battering rams and catapults. Paul is not mincing his words when he describes how he will deal with these spiritual strongholds. He shows an aggressive, take-no-prisoners view of this warfare.

Let’s step through these verses and see how Paul approaches the battle. In these verses we see that spiritual warfare involves just two simple steps:

The spiritual stronghold needs to be identified

Identification of a spiritual stronghold is not difficult. Just two skills are needed:

- **Observation:** Wherever there is resistance to the Gospel, you can be sure there is a spiritual stronghold entrenched, whether it be in an individual life, a church, a community or a nation.
- **Discernment:** As you pray for a person or a place, God can open your eyes to the nature of the barriers erected by the enemy against the Gospel.

Through observation and discernment, you will learn to see the obstacles that would hinder the impact of the Gospel. Invariably, they will be what Paul describes as:

- Arguments
- Theories
- Reasonings
- Every proud and lofty thought or purpose that sets itself up against the knowledge of God

In summary, all these descriptions could be condensed down to one word: “lies.” A stronghold is simply a construct of lies and deceit, woven together into the form of philosophies, cultural mindsets and godless thinking.

Here’s a practical exercise for you in learning to observe and discern the strongholds in your community. Just ask yourself this question: What are the most common excuses people give for not accepting the Gospel? Here are some example excuses:

- “I’m too busy!”
- “I don’t believe in religion!”
- “I don’t believe in God!”
- “I’m a good person!”
- “The Church is full of hypocrites!”
- “Will it put food on the table?”

List down the excuses that people give (and you will find that every community has a slightly different list of excuses that the people of that community have in

common). These excuses can be a window in on the mindsets that Satan uses to blind people to a revelation of the Gospel of Christ.

Once a stronghold has been identified, we are ready to move on to the second stage of spiritual warfare: identifying God's *strategy* to deal with that stronghold.

Spiritual weapons need to be directed against the stronghold

One of the easiest traps to fall into is thinking that just because a stronghold has been identified, that no further discernment is needed. Many Christians expend much energy trying to rail against the perceived stronghold, taking a "brute force" approach to the problem.

But note what Paul says in **2 Corinthians 10:3-4**:

"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*."

What Paul is saying is that the weapons we use are not the weapons of this world and the strategies that we use are not the strategies of this world. Both are God-given and, when used properly, they have "divine power to demolish strongholds."

Identifying a stronghold is not enough. God's strategy for dealing with that stronghold must also be identified. This is where **John 5:19** is put into practice. Do you remember the ministry principle found in **John 5:19**?

God has his ways of dealing with a stronghold of lies and that is with the truth of the Gospel – but it is a *targeted* truth. For every stronghold of deceit that the enemy would erect, the Gospel itself holds the key of truth. As you wait on the Lord, the Holy Spirit will reveal this targeted truth and through prayer and proclamation, this Gospel strategy will begin to make inroads into your community.

As you move forward in the ministry that God has given you, you need to beware of two equally disempowering extremes:

- ➡ Ignoring spiritual strongholds
- ➡ Looking for *every* spiritual stronghold

There is always a danger that a Christian can become so focused on spiritual strongholds that he loses sight of the bigger picture of ministry. There is nothing that Satan likes better than when we focus on him. He loves the attention and he knows that loss of focus on the Lord will weaken the discernment and spiritual authority of a Christian.

As you study the book of Acts and read Paul's letters, you find that Paul seems little concerned with the strongholds that infested the cities he preached in. He was much more concerned with the strongholds that infested the churches he established, for he knew that if undealt with, these strongholds would disrupt church life and hinder the church's mission.

There is no doubt that Paul “wrestled” with principalities and powers, but whether those strongholds were identified in a city or in the church of that city, Paul’s response was always the same. He preached the Gospel!

- **Acts 14:3** – “So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, *speaking boldly for the Lord.*”
- **Acts 14:6-7** – “But they...fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe...where they *continued to preach the good news.*”
- **Acts 14:21** – “They *preached the good news* in that city and won a large number of disciples...”
- **Acts 15:35** – “But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others *taught and preached the word of the Lord.*”
- **Acts 17:2-3** – “As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days *he reasoned with them from the Scriptures*, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead.”
- **Acts 17:16-17** – “While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. *So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.*”

There is no doubt that Paul engaged in spiritual warfare through prayer, but that prayer was subservient to his primary mission, which was to preach the Gospel. In Athens, for example, he was greatly distressed by the city’s idolatry (which were obvious strongholds in the city), yet we note his response: “So he reasoned in the synagogue...as well as in the marketplace day by day.” *That* was how Paul dealt with the strongholds in Athens! His strategy was a Gospel strategy!

This is absolutely vital to understand. If you get off in a corner with the idea that you will fight the enemy, tear down spiritual strongholds through prayer, and then expect the dominion of darkness to diminish in your community, you will be sorely disappointed. For sure, you may see temporary results – a reduction in the crime rate, for example, or an increase in practical expressions of church unity. After all, there is divine authority in prayer.

But the gains in territory will prove short-lived if that’s *all* you do. It is only as the Gospel is preached and people’s lives are realigned with the will of God that the strongholds of a city or a nation will come crumbling down.

This is an extremely important principle. Like Paul, you wrestle not with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers. But also like Paul, the way you wrestle with them is in the forward momentum of preaching the Gospel. All your prayer and intercession must act as a support to this primary strategy. Like Paul, your strategy must be a Gospel strategy.

Binding and Loosing

Read Matthew 16:19

Once a stronghold is identified, the authority that Jesus has given the Church to bind and to loose comes into effect. When you bind (restrict the power and activity of Satan) and loose (set free that which has been bound by Satan), you are exercising authority that comes from God's throne. In the original Greek, **Matthew 16:19** has the following undertones:

“Whatever you bind on earth will have *already* been bound in heaven. Whatever you loose on earth will have *already* been loosed in heaven.”

The directives flow from God's throne to us, not the other way around. We enforce God's will “on earth as it is in heaven” (**Matthew 6:10**).

When Jesus returns, the structure of Satan's kingdom will be totally dismantled (**Isaiah 24:21-22; Revelation 20:2-3**). Until then, God's purpose is that “now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms” (**Ephesians 3:10**). In your community, God plans to “crush Satan under your feet” (**Romans 16:20**).

Psalms 149:6-9 explains what enforcing the victory of the Cross is all about:

“May the praise of God be in their mouths and a double-edged sword in their hands, to inflict vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples, to bind their kings with fetters, their nobles with shackles of iron, *to carry out the sentence written against them*. This is the glory of all his saints. Praise the Lord.”

As you share the Gospel – both in ministry to believers and to non-believers – you are engaged in a no-holds-barred struggle with demonic forces that would seek to hinder your mission. But as you fight, remember that you are not trying to gain victory over your enemy. You already have the victory in Christ. All you are now doing is carrying out the sentence written against Satan. The strong man has been bound and you are now plundering his goods!

¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible*, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.1, Deluxe Edition.

³ *Holman Bible Dictionary*, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.1, Deluxe Edition.

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