

PULLING DOWN STRONGHOLDS

by Ray C. Stedman

In Second Corinthians 10 we are attempting to discover just what the Apostle Paul means when he says in Verses 3 and 4,

For though we live in the world we are not carrying on a worldly war, for the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds. {2 Cor 10:3-4 RSV}

The weapons by which the world (or society, if you prefer) seeks to attack the problems that are everywhere present in this world are very plain to us. They are investigations, studies of all kinds, reports from committees, meetings, educational programs, demonstrations, boycotts, strikes, pressure blocs, new legislation, etc. If you are a student of history at all you know that the world is unchanged, in this respect, from Paul's day. These were exactly the same weapons that society used to confront the problems that were present in the Roman Empire when Paul wrote this letter. If you question that, I refer you to Will Durant's great volumes on *The History of Civilization*. You will find that he records exactly the same processes going on then as now.

But, in Second Corinthians, the Apostle Paul repudiates these as proper means for Christians to employ in attacking these strongholds. He sets them aside, not because they are basically wrong, but because they are essentially ineffective: They do not accomplish the task. It is not that some of these means might not ultimately be part of the working out of solutions, but they are not the primary thing. That is what the apostle is saying. They are not the thing upon which one depends for victory in these struggles and battles of life. But, he declares, "the weapons of our warfare are mighty." They are powerful. Literally, this is the word from which we get our word "dynamite." These weapons work. They effectively solve the knotty and difficult problems of life, these running saddle-sores of civilization where evil is entrenched, these *strongholds* of evil.

We saw in our last study that these weapons are revealed to us in various Scriptures. They are essentially four:

First, there is truth, i.e., the revelation of reality, the exposure of things as they really are. In Romans 13:12 this is called "the weapon of light." Turning on the light is a marvelous weapon for helping to dispel the darkness of these areas where entrenched evil is rampant, in our day or any other day. Truth is the first of the weapons.

Then love is linked with truth. Everywhere in Scripture you find these two great forces linked together, truth and love. Paul writes to the Ephesians and exhorts them to "speak the truth in love" {Eph 4:15}, and in the second letter of John we read,

Grace, mercy and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love. {2 Jn 1:3 RSV}

The third weapon is righteousness, i.e., moral rectitude, right behavior, in line with reality. In this same letter, in Chapter 6, the Apostle Paul refers to "The weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left" {2 Cor 6:7b RSV}, by which I take it he means the public life and the private life -- the weapons of righteousness visible from the outside and in the interior life as well. Righteousness, rectitude, right behavior.

Then the fourth of these weapons is faith-prayer, i.e., the life of faith expressed in prayer. You recall how in Ephesians 6 the apostle speaks directly of "the shield of faith with which you can quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one," {cf, Eph 6:16}. In this passage, faith is linked with prayer, "praying always for all saints" {cf, Eph 6:18}, in every situation.

Here are the weapons which the church is to employ. These are what the Christian is to be armed with. Therefore, he fights in a quite different dimension from that of the world, and society in general. Yet that dimension is the key to the solution of these burning, pressing social problems. Whenever the church neglects these weapons it is always weak and irrelevant, useless, shunned and ignored by the world around, as is happening in many places today. Wherever these weapons are taken up, as history confirms, and as the present generation is discovering, there is the loosing of power. The church becomes an irresistible ferment let loose in society, a mighty flood of dauntless force that begins to dissolve these problems and to attack them at their root.

I want to take a closer look at the problems the apostle is describing. He uses in this passage the word *strongholds*; "we have divine power to destroy strongholds." This is the only place in the New Testament that this word in Greek occurs, but it is an easy word to understand because it is made up of root words which literally mean "a place of strength," a place which is essentially and inherently strong. That is, it is a place where evil is entrenched, where it is fortified, protected behind strong defenses. It is not out in the open easily exposed and overthrown, but it is encastled, well defended, a fortress with walls and moats and turrets, difficult to attack.

Do we face situations like that today? Are there situations in your experience as an individual or in society in general, where evil is entrenched like this? Long-standing evil, protected, buttressed and defended by the general attitude of an entire community, or a segment of society, resisting all attempts to overthrow it, persisting in holding thousands in bondage, darkness, misery and despair? Are there places like that? You know there are -- on every side today. These are strongholds which the Christian is to attack.

Having just completed a trip around the world, I could not help but think of India as just such a place, a land of poverty, of wretchedness, of squalor, and darkness almost beyond description. There you can see, publicly and openly, outright cases of demonic possession. Here is a place where error is entrenched; it defies efforts to remove it by usual methods. The gospel has been preached in India for well over a hundred years, but because of the vastness of that land, and because of the entrenched powers of darkness, it has proved a most difficult battle -- light spreads slowly and with great difficulty. I think there is a special reason for that. Some of the things which I saw in Hindu temples reveal why evil is so entrenched in that place.

But India is not the only such place by any means. America is full of such strongholds as well. Race prejudice is that kind of a stronghold. Bigotry seizes the minds of people and discrimination against individuals because of the color of their skin colors everything that is done. Often such discrimination is defended in the name of Jesus Christ, despite the clear pronouncements in the Scripture as to the proper attitude of the church in this respect. Here is an entrenched stronghold of error and darkness, and one that the church has long failed to come to grips with.

Materialism is another. I would say that this is the major stronghold of evil in California, as well as in other parts of the United States. Materialism, the love of things. If you read carefully and thoughtfully the passages in the New Testament that deal with the Christian's attitude toward things and the world around, you will discover how terrible a thing materialism is. How the love of things blinds, debases, and blunts the capacity for life. It reduces human beings to nothing but comfortable animals, living for pleasure and for the fleeting moment. It ends in life becoming shallow and superficial, filled with expressions of greed.

Pride, in any human being, is another stronghold of evil. Pride can do amazing things to an individual, as well as to society, and nations. Pride can lock a man or woman up as though he were in a straitjacket; no one can touch him, and he can touch no one else. It can erect a barrier between people who live together under the same roof that is more impassable than the Berlin Wall. I have seen it happen many times. Husbands will not speak to their wives; wives shut their husbands out of their lives. They will not communicate because of an impassable gulf, or chasm, created by pride. Pride remains in control of that individual, and all efforts made through reason or argument to break it down are resisted. You cannot legislate against it, you cannot destroy it that way. Parents are isolated from their children, and children from parents, by gulfs of noncommunication stretching wide between them impassable, impossible to cross.

These are the strongholds Paul is talking about. These are the things that bother us. They are the things that

make our lives wretched and miserable, and create unhappiness and tension. Immorality is a similar problem in our day. Here is a stronghold of evil. Sexual perversion! What a terrible thing it is and what a despairing cry is going up from young people today who are in the grip of perverse practices, and who are looking for help.

I saw this week a letter from a homosexual crying out for help, asking for deliverance. He said he had seriously contemplated suicide many times, for all he could look forward to was a wretched and miserable life. Surely here is an area where the church ought to be speaking, where these "weapons of righteousness" should be turned loose.

Against these strongholds we are not helpless. That is the thing we must understand from this passage. We are not helpless. We are to attack these things, carry the day. This is what Jesus inferred in Matthew 16:

And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock [i.e., Peter's testimony given in Verse 16, 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.'] I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. {cf, Matt 16:18}

"The gates of hell" is not a symbol for a defensive action. It is not a church which is being assaulted by forces from outside. It is true that the Scriptures describe the Christian's struggle as an individual as defensive action (as in Ephesians 6). But when the Scriptures view the entire thrust of the church in its relationship to society, it is never pictured as on the defensive: It is on the offense. The "gates of hell" mean that hell is under attack, the gates of a strong city are being assailed and are under attack. "And," says the Lord Jesus, "my church shall prevail. The gates of hell will not prevail against it, but it shall be able to subdue and break down these strongholds and to release those that are held captive."

That is exactly what the Apostle Paul is saying here. The weapons of our warfare are mighty. I wish I could thunder those words in such a way as to capture your imagination and help you to see how wrong is this terrible attitude of pessimism and despair that exists among Christians these days. Many act as though all we can do is to hang on to what we've got and wait for the Lord to come. It is terrible, it is wrong! It is not what we are called to do. We are called to attack these strongholds, and weapons are placed in our hands -- weapons of might, weapons of dynamite, weapons of power -- that are able to subdue and break down these terrible strongholds of evil.

The Bible is full of examples of this for our encouragement. There are many places in the Old and New Testament alike where these weapons prevail against the entrenched evil that is present in society:

You have an example in the Old Testament in the case of Jonah, where the weapon of truth is used to set a whole city free. Here is a heathen, pagan city, Nineveh, which, in its ignorance and darkness, was doing things that were destroying the life of its people. This is always what error does -- it results in poverty, in degradation, in insanity and demon possession, in the destruction of humanity. Jonah was sent to this pagan city to preach. The biblical account centers largely upon the prophet's personal desire to escape the mission that was given to him. But when he finally fulfills it, what is the result? The truth that Jonah preached about a God who sits over human life, and judges it, and who oftentimes permits catastrophe in order to make human beings wake up and see what is going on that truth delivered this city. Jonah said, "Yet forty days and judgment will follow," {cf, Jonah 3:4}. The result was, from the king right down to the most common person in the city, they all repented. The entire city turned from their evil, faced the facts of life, and the city was spared for over a hundred years. That is the direct thrust of the weapon of truth against a stronghold of evil.

You can see how the weapon of love prevailed in many places in the Scriptures:

There is the story of David and Jonathan, that wonderful story of friendship between two men who were on opposite sides of the political fence. One was the son of the king, and the other was the greatest threat to that king's throne. By all rights these two men should have been at one another's throats, but they were friends. They loved one another with a love "surpassing the love of women," {cf, 2 Sam 1:26}. As a result, when David became king, Jonathan was delighted and did nothing at all to withstand him. The threatened breach between these two families was healed, extending even to Jonathan's son, and his son's sons. What could have been a deadly feud which would have severed a country was healed by love.

In the New Testament there is the little epistle to Philemon: I do not think there is any human document which has done more to free slaves (I mean physical slaves, human slavery) than the letter to Philemon. Yet it hardly mentions the subject at all. It is not a diatribe; it is a love letter. It is addressed to a man whose slave had become a Christian. In the wonderful gracious warmth of that love, born out of that new relationship, the apostle speaks engagingly to this man and gently leads him so skillfully that he changed the world's attitude toward slavery, first in the Roman empire and then in the whole world at large. More slaves have been set free because of that change than any other force that has been loosed among mankind.

Take the weapon of righteousness: What a weapon that is! Read the story of Joseph, when as a young man in his prime, feeling the rising of youthful passion within him, he was approached by the wife of his employer to indulge in moral wrong. Joseph immediately resists. He could have compromised his conscience very easily; he could have said that it was forced upon him, could have justified the situation, but he did not. He said instead, "How can I commit such a sin against my God?" {cf, Gen 39:9}, and he fled, literally gathered his garments up and fled. That righteous act on Joseph's part led him to prison and it did not look like it was profitable at first. But two years later it led him to the throne of Egypt where he became the second ruler of the land.

Read the book of Daniel: Remember those three young Hebrew men who resisted the proclamation of the king to bow down before the great idol erected on the plain. They refused to do so even though threatened with the fiery furnace. They absolutely refused to yield their principles. Because of that, ultimately, the king himself became a believer and issued a proclamation that the God of Daniel must be honored and respected throughout the whole of the kingdom. These things are facts of history, evidence of how these weapons of our warfare can prevail in the midst of human society.

I scarcely need to mention faith: Its exploits are so clearly evident in the Scriptures. There is the story of Gideon, and the story of Hezekiah as he was faced with the armies of the Assyrians surrounding the city of Jerusalem under Sennacherib, the general. Faith in the activity of God present in human history delivered that city in a most remarkable way, and 185,000 Assyrians were slain in one night. These are facts. These are mighty weapons. They are not insignificant matters. They are not trivia: they are mighty forces with which we can attack the strongholds of evil of our day.

This is what the Word of God calls us to. Let us learn what these weapons are, and how to use them, and then deliberately move to the offensive. Stop being so defensive. Refuse to accept the status quo, this attitude of "Nothing can be done." A great deal can be done. Come alive, my friends, you're in the Christian generation! We need to repent of our barrenness, of our blindness, and take up weapons that work. Locate the strongholds around you, and go to work:

- Some of them are in your own families.
- Some of them are found in your relationship to your boss at work.
- Some of them are in your neighborhood,
- Some in your school systems.

Wherever they are, let us move out against them.

I was encouraged this week by a demonstration of a Christian attack upon a stronghold of evil. Many of you know that Lambert Dolphin and Carl Gallivan have written a book called *Sex Through the Looking Glass*, which is a unique approach to the study of sex, based upon certain Scriptures. It has now been published and is available in booklet form. He recently put an ad in the Los Angeles Free Press. In the midst of a series of ads for wife-swapping, homosexual partners, etc., is this ad, headed SUPERSEX! That is designed to attract attention. It goes on,

Keys to true sexuality through personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Pseudo-sex destroys the psyche. Radical fresh look at sex. Free book and counsel. God loves you as you are. Write Dolphin, 265 Lytton. Palo Alto.

Almost the first letter he received was an invitation to appear on the national Joe Pyne television program and be interviewed, and thus to spread the good news about a true and proper approach to sex through the medium of television -- at someone else's cost! That is the way God does things when we begin to move out and attack some of the strongholds around us. Let us be praying for Lambert. I hope he will respond affirmatively to that invitation. He will need our prayers as he attacks one of the most terrible and awful strongholds of evil in our generation. But he seeks to attack it with the weapons of truth, love, righteousness and faith-prayer.

Some of you can move out this way too. We do not need to sit dormant in this day. What a day for action this is! -- but action based upon the facts, action based upon truth. What a thrill it is to see God work in our day, in our generation!

Prayer

Our Father, we are challenged by this word of the Apostle Paul. We look back on history and see the records there they are for all of us to see how this man and his associates changed the world of their day and gained a reputation for being "those who turned the world upside down." They became a dynamic force that has never been equaled in human history. Lord, surely these are times that call for men and women like that again today. We pray that you will cause us to be such. Lord, train us, make us, shape us. Put in our hands -- as you have these weapons of truth and righteousness and love and faith, and teach us how to use them effectively in our day. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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