

'OUR STRUGGLE IS NOT AGAINST FLESH AND BLOOD'

SERIES: PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN LORD

By Ron Ritchie

My wife and I visited the beautiful city of Edinburgh, Scotland, last fall. On the surface, Edinburgh is a city of well manicured parks. It is home to a famous university. There are lots of old shops tucked into narrow, winding streets. We saw dozens of churches, one which, St. Giles' Cathedral, is still a "working church." St Giles' was at the center of the Scottish Reformation which was led by John Knox (1514-1572). Many of the other churches in the city are now a mere shadow of their former glory and power.

Beneath this exterior, however, Edinburgh is a source of witchcraft of every form: palm readers, fortune tellers, witches and warlocks, superstition, evil spirits and magic. You will also discover a history of empty religious activity which has resulted in generation after generation of people being held in the bondage of fear, superstition and darkness, resulting in wasted lives. A group of Christian teenagers who were witnessing on the main drag warned us not to be fooled by the beauty of the city. Just a few blocks from where we were standing, they said, hundreds of lives being ruined by illegal drugs. Edinburgh, we learned, leads the United Kingdom in drug trafficking. Following that conversation Anne Marie and I were caught in a sports riot on the main streets. After a soccer match had ended, thousands of youths began fighting with each other and the police. The riot began, one youth told us as he stood next to a man whose head was bleeding from a violent blow, because the wrong team won!

There is nothing new under the sun! We will see this today as we resume our studies in the life of the apostle Paul, an instrument of the risen Christ, now in his 18th year of ministry following his conversion on the Damascus Road. The year is 54 A.D. and the apostle is embarked on his third missionary journey. We find him visiting the city of Ephesus, in 54 A.D. Like Edinburgh, Ephesus was also a very beautiful city. It too had many picturesque parks. Its seaport markets and many temples made it the "Vanity Fair" of Asia.

Beneath the surface, however, Ephesus was noted for the practice of vile forms of sexual immorality. Witches and warlocks, fortune tellers, magicians, palm readers and phony Jewish exorcists conspired together to hold Roman citizens, political leaders, merchants, wives and children and Romans slaves, in bondage to fear, superstition and darkness, resulting in wasted lives. On the religious level the Jews had set up a beachhead with local synagogues, but these apparently were having little effect in arresting the evil that was gripping the city.

Paul came to Ephesus with his team of spiritual men and women knowing that the Lord had opened up a door of ministry. Soon he would learn that he had to face many adversaries, but the greater the adversaries the greater the victory he would have over them by the power of the risen Lord. The apostle remained in Ephesus for some three years, supporting himself and the needs of his team by making tents, and preaching and teaching the wonderful news that Jesus was the Messiah to the Jews and the Gentiles alike.

It was at this time that Paul entered a period of intense spiritual warfare. He wanted to return to Jerusalem with the money collected from the Greek churches for the famine relief effort in Judea but his spiritual brothers and sisters warned him by the Holy Spirit not to go. Resisting that Spiritual advice, however, he would go on to Jerusalem in 58 A.D. There he was arrested in the temple. He finally ended up being taken in chains to Rome. From a prison cell in that city four years later he wrote his letter to the Ephesians in which he said,

...be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might...For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. (Eph 6: 10, 12,13)

In our study from Acts 19 today we see that Paul has arrived in Ephesus for the second time. He returns to the synagogue where he was warmly received on his first visit, and there begins teaching and preaching once again the gospel of Jesus Christ. But soon he will begin to experience spiritual warfare within the synagogue and then within the demonically controlled city itself.

"Our struggle is not against flesh and blood..."

Struggling Against Spiritual Pride, Acts 19:9-10

And he entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the multitude, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. And this took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

The apostle takes advantage of this opportunity to speak out in the synagogue over a period of three months and make a spiritual impact on the city of Ephesus. Paul spoke out "boldly," we read. He taught with courage and freedom, confident in the message that he had to share with them. He was "reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God." The apostle presented evidence from the Old Testament for his listeners to examine, ponder and dispute, facts which declared that Jesus was the Messiah. He persuaded them, i.e. winning them over and changing their minds through the influence of reasoning.

His message was that Yahweh is King over all the world and King of Israel. The Jews looked forward to the time when Yahweh would deliver them from their enemies, and reign in Zion with his everlasting kingdom, ruling over the nations of the world. They frequently associated their hopes with the reign of an anointed king, called the Messiah who would come from the line of David (Isaiah 9:6) Thus, the Jews were looking for an earthly king and kingdom

When Jesus arrived on the stage of history, however, he said, "the kingdom of God is in your midst" (Luke 17:21). Jesus was speaking of a spiritual, not an earthly kingdom, the kingdom of the hearts of men. This world is under the rule of Satan (Matt. 4:9), but the action of God through Jesus set in process the work of bringing Satan's kingdom to an end and setting his captives free. If therefore the coming of the kingdom already means the hour of judgment is upon wicked men (Matt. 3:10), it is also the hour of deliverance in which men are set free from the demonic powers (Matt 12:28f).

The mystery of the kingdom of God is that God is now at work in the ministry of Jesus, the risen Lord, Savior and Messiah, for the salvation of men and women before the time comes for judgment and the opportunity for repentance is past. Jews and Gentiles alike must enter the kingdom of God by faith in Jesus the Christ, for the kingdom of God is at hand for all.

Ray C. Stedman has written,

Paul spoke of the kingdom of God which had come with the coming of Jesus. This Kingdom was opposed to the rule of Satan, the powers of darkness which reigned in human hearts. Human history is the checkered account of man's struggles to be free from that from which he cannot free himself. It is this rule of darkness, this authority of the kingdom of Satan which the kingdom of God in Christ challenges.

How did the Jews react to this presentation of the gospel by the apostle? Paul gives us the answer in verse 9: "But...some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the multitude..." They became "hardened." During the three-month period of Paul's teaching their unrepentant hearts were slowly becoming hardened.

Secondly, they became "disobedient." Although they had heard the truth of the kingdom of God they walked away in disbelief and refused to obey by placing their faith in Jesus as their spiritual Messiah. And thirdly, "they began speaking evil of the Way." They sought to discredit Paul and his message of hope.

Here we have a picture of the Spiritual warfare between the kingdom of God vs the kingdom of darkness. The Jews chose to allow their hearts to become hardened, resulting in disobedience, and then to lie about the truth of the gospel of the Kingdom of God, whose name is Jesus.

On our recent staff visit to Israel we sensed in Jerusalem this hardness in the hearts of the Jewish people. One Jewish couple we visited had heard the gospel in a variety of ways and yet as we sat and listened to them they continued in their disbelief of the possibility that Jesus was their Messiah. It was a heartbreaking evening.

Paul and his team of disciples responded by leaving the synagogue: "[He] withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. And this took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks."

Paul, together with his disciples, Timothy, Erastus, the twelve Jewish disciples, Aquila and Priscilla, and perhaps some new converts walked out of the synagogue. (The Jews would see this act as apostasy.) They found a hall to rent (the school of Tyrannus) and held classes during the period where the Ephesians usually took a break (between 11 a.m and 4 p.m. each day). I am reminded of our singles ministry which meets at a local restaurant at nine o'clock each Sunday morning. Only the spiritually hungry show up at such an hour. In Ephesus, only the spiritually hungry likewise would bother to come during the time ordinarily given over to rest. Day in and day out, some 720 days, 96 weeks, 24 months, Paul, the chosen instrument of the risen Christ, together with his faithful disciples laid out the Word of God so that Jews and Gentiles alike in the pagan city of Ephesus and the surrounding towns and villages of Asia had the opportunity to hear the Word of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ. And if they would accept by faith that Jesus was the Christ, the Savior, he would save them and set them free from the kingdom of Satan and deliver them into the kingdom of God; out of darkness into the light of Christ.

Paul did not just teach the Ephesians (when he was not making tents to support himself). Some few years later when he called the Ephesian elders to meet him at Miletus on his trip back to Jerusalem, he said to them:

"You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house.....for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.." (Acts 20:18-20; 27).

Earlier, during the second missionary journey, Paul wanted to take the gospel to Asia but was forbidden to do so by the Holy Spirit (Acts 16:6). But now it had become possible for hearers and receivers of the Word to have the gospel go where Paul was earlier forbidden to go. Some of the cities are among the seven cities mentioned in Revelation, for the cities surrounding Ephesus were Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.

Though the apostle does not mention this here, we know from others of his writings that this was a time of many struggles. To the Corinthians he wrote:

In danger every hour, I die daily, I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus. (1 Cor.15:30-32)

For we do not want you to be unaware brethren of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead. (2 Cor. 1: 8-9)

The school of Tyrannus brings to mind Peninsula Bible Church, for God has clearly called this fellowship and its leadership to a preaching, teaching and discipling ministry year in and year out. The joy and the pain is that so many over the years come here and become spiritually equipped, then they leave to preach, teach and disciple all over Asia and the world.

So Paul and his disciples went into the synagogue to freely offer the Jews the good news of their risen Messiah Jesus. But it was not long before Paul realized that a spiritual battle was in full swing: The struggle was not against flesh and blood but against the spiritual pride of the Jewish leadership which resulted in a rejection of the gospel of Jesus the Christ.

Within the two year period Paul and his disciples became involved in,

Struggling Against Evil Spirits, Acts 19:11-20

And God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out. But also some of the Jewish exorcists, who went from place to place, attempted to name over those who had the evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, "I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches." And seven sons of one Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. And the evil spirit answered and said to them, "I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them and subdued both of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. And this became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified. Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices. And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of all; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing,

In contrast with all the phony "faith healers" throughout the centuries, here stands a true "faith healer." Paul, a chosen instrument of the risen Christ, loved these dear Ephesians who had been caught up in a society ruled by Satan and his demons, witches and warlocks.

Writing about this era in his book, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Michael Green says,

The whole world and its enveloping atmosphere were filled with devils; not merely idolatry, but every phase and form of life was ruled by them. They sat on thrones, they hovered round cradles. The earth was literally a hell, though it was and continued to be a creation of God. To encounter this hell and all its devils Christians had command of weapons which were invincible.

The apostle was continuing the healing ministry of Jesus in the Age of the Spirit, and the source of the healing was God. The healings were performed through Paul, who never asked for them to happen. They were "extraordinary miracles" which did not occur by chance but were supernatural in nature. The healing powers were transferred to the handkerchiefs and aprons used in the apostle's work of tentmaking. We recall from the gospel account that something similar had occurred during Jesus' ministry when the woman who touched his garment was healed (Luke 8:44).

God was willing to meet these Ephesians wherever they were if they were willing to reach out in faith towards his Son Jesus in the midst of their bondage, superstition and magic. He was willing to heal them physically in order to get their attention, so that they could be healed spiritually through hearing and responding in faith to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The risen Lord through Paul attacked the very stronghold of Satan and demonstrated that there was no power in superstition, magic or demoniacs. The only true power is in God as expressed through his servant. This

demonstration of power also confirmed the apostle's position and gospel.

But in the midst of this wonderful time of spiritual victories over disease and demons, the archenemy, Satan, was not asleep. This time he used false religious exorcists who sought to counterfeit the ministry of Paul. These men traveled around like our modern gypsy fortune tellers, working in sorcery, casting spells, etc.

These people attempted to name over those who had the evil spirits. If an exorcist knew the name of a more powerful spirit than the one who had taken residence in the person possessed, by speaking that name he could overpower the evil spirit and make him depart. Thus they resorted to using the names Paul and Jesus. This was a new magic charm, having the form of godliness but without the power of God.

The people who were doing this were the seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish Chief Priest, Judaism having been captured by Satan. These men confronted one demoniac using the new magic charm, the names of Jesus and Paul. The demon responded, "I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" Then the demonic man "leaped on them and subdued both of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of the house naked and wounded.

Notice that Paul spent no time trying to stop these phonies. He continued to teach and preach, trusting the Lord to guard his ministry. Meanwhile the Lord dealt with the phonies by turning the demons against the phoney exorcists. "A house divided against itself cannot stand," Scripture declares.

This amazing event became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus. The result was that fear fell upon them. The power resident in the risen Lord was greater than the power of demons and the power of magic. Thus the black arts were laid bare in their powerlessness. People no longer feared demons but they feared the Lord, whose name was being "magnified." Another result was that the church was purified. Many believers began confessing and disclosing their practices. They had confessed Jesus as Lord and Savior but kept holding on to some of the old practices of visiting mediums and fortune tellers, playing tarot cards, visiting spiritual psychic readers and palmists. Some of them either had their own businesses or they went as customers, but now they were willing to rid themselves of these habits.

I am amazed today by the numbers of believers who are still doing the same thing, still consulting the same sorcerers who are operating under new names like, the New Age movement, the Human Potential movement, and Channeling. Many Christians are being drawn into the latest craze, buying a piece of crystal which they place in their home or office, or wear about their neck, hoping for power or healing.

In the midst of the new believers being led by the Holy Spirit were some who practiced magic. As a result of this demonic backfire they were willing to burn their books in the sight of all. Many businesses closed down over this and many jobs were lost.

What a model for ministry in our own hopeless society! Godly men were available to the risen Lord in an evil day, for evil days provide great opportunities for ministry. Paul, the chosen instrument of the risen Christ, walked into the stronghold of Satan realizing that "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood (Jewish leaders at the synagogue and demonic demonstrations by the people of Ephesus) but against the rulers , against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places."

We today are living in the Bay Area of San Francisco. On the surface the Bay Area is known around the world as one of the most beautiful and desirous places to live. There are great opportunities here for employment, culture, sports and religion. This area caters to the conservatives on the right and to the liberals on the left. We have groupings of all the cults, New Agers and Satanism. We have great national and local parks, beautiful buildings great bridges, medical centers, local colleges and famous universities at our doorstep. Underneath the surface, however, we personally know or have read about the hundreds of individuals, children and the aged alike, who are being held in the bondage of Satan. There are drugs in epidemic proportions; sexual immorality on the broadest scale; human relationships out of control: divorce, wife and child abuse. The churches which we see on almost every corner seem helpless in the face of all this evil because they are using the wrong weapons to combat these spiritual forces of the evil one.

What hope can we offer these people. What can we do for them? Let us remember the words of Paul,

We do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. (Cor. 10:3-4)

Which weapons did Paul use to attack Satan's fortress in Ephesus? First, he was available. We need to live a life of faith, realizing the power and presence of the risen Lord, and then walk into every new day believing that our Lord wants to defeat the strongholds of Satan through us. And in our availability we need to pray that we will have eyes to see the enemy in his many disguises, the courage to confront him, and the strength to stand firm against him

Second, Paul taught the truth in the power of God (11 Cor 6:7). We must take time to study the Word of God and then to teach that truth, reasoning and persuading with that truth day in and day out, trusting the Lord's promise that His word will not come back empty. Truth is a powerful spiritual weapon

And third, Paul loved these Ephesians. We must become aware of the spiritual, emotional and physical needs of the community and ask God for the wisdom to find the time as individuals, as families or as a church to participate in a way that will bring healing to the lives of men and women, boys and girls who even now are held in spiritual bondage by Satan and are living wasted lives as a result.

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