

“Spiritual Siege Warfare”
2 Corinthians 10:1-11
October 8, 2017
Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service
Pr. Nicoletti

I’m picking up once more with my series on Second Corinthians tonight, as we get to chapter ten of the letter.

There is a significant shift in tone between chapters nine and ten. In fact the shift is so strong that some have supposed that what we have in chapters ten through thirteen must be a completely different letter. They suppose that Paul wrote one letter consisting of Second Corinthians chapters one through nine, and another letter consisting of chapters ten through thirteen, and that some later editor lopped off the end of the first letter, and the beginning of the second letter, and stuck them together, creating what we now call Second Corinthians.

While a number of academics have gone in this direction, there are multiple reasons to reject this view, not least of which being that the canonical letter has arrived to us in this united form, and that there is no manuscript evidence of these chapters ever being separated. I won’t get into the details tonight. I will simply say that it often seems that there is an impulse in the secular academic world to fracture the Bible whenever possible – to see every change in tone, every instance of literary complexity, as evidence of a sloppy cut-and-paste job, rather than an intentional literary or rhetorical choice. There has been some backing away of that tendency in more recent generations, but we should be wary of the impulse to tear asunder what God has joined together. It often says more about the reader than the text.

Moreover, Paul Barnett, whose commentary I have found helpful throughout this series, once again gives us, I think, a much more convincing lens through which to view the shift in tone at this point in the letter. He writes: “It appears that, as the letter draws to its conclusion, Paul’s appeal to the Corinthians becomes more intense emotionally. Like many an orator (and preacher!), he has kept the most urgent and controversial matters until the end and dealt with them passionately so that his last words make their greatest impact on the Corinthians.” [Barnett, 452]

And so we enter that section of the letter tonight.

With that in mind, let’s hear from our text, 2 Corinthians 10:1-11. Paul writes:

I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!—²I beg of you that when I am present I may not have to show boldness with such confidence as I count on showing against some who suspect us of walking according to the flesh. ³For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. ⁴For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. ⁵We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, ⁶being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.

⁷Look at what is before your eyes. If anyone is confident that he is Christ's, let him remind himself that just as he is Christ's, so also are we. ⁸For even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be ashamed. ⁹I do not want to appear to be frightening you with my letters. ¹⁰For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account." ¹¹Let such a person understand that what we say by letter when absent, we do when present.

This is God's Word.

To understand what is going on here, and what Paul is responding to, we need to review a bit of background on Paul's relationship with the Corinthians. We've gone over some of this before, but some of it was over two years ago, when I preached on the earlier portions of 2 Corinthians, so I'll refresh your memories just in case.

From the first chapter of this letter we can reconstruct Paul's interactions with the Corinthians. His last visit to the Corinthian church did *not* go well. There were serious problems, there was opposition to Paul, there was needed discipline that was not taking place, and it was not resolved by the time Paul left. Paul told them that he would visit the church two more times to try to straighten these issues out. While away, he decided instead to send a letter to them, what he calls his "severe letter" (which is now lost to us), and that he would visit them after they had responded to that. By the time he is writing 2 Corinthians, Paul has already sent that "severe letter," it has mostly accomplished what he wanted it to, and now Paul is preparing to visit the Corinthian church again.

But after these interactions, critics have risen up. Opponents of Paul are now critiquing the way he has interacted with the Corinthian church. They say, in verse one, that he is "humble" when present, but "bold" when away. They say, in verses nine and ten, that by letter he is "frightening" and "strong" but when physically present he is "weak" and "of no account."

One commentator puts it like this – he says that they were portraying Paul as "at once a coward and a bully." [Plumber, 275, quoted in Barnett, 461]

When physically present, they said he was a coward – timid, feeble, unable to straighten things out during his visit to the church. And they say that by letter, he was a bully – telling them what to do and coming down harshly. This is the accusation leveled at Paul by some in the Corinthian church.

Paul denies these charges. We will get to that in a minute. But I think it's worth pausing and reflecting on the charges themselves. Because accusing someone in Paul's position of cowardice, or bullying, or in this case both, is clearly a charge that seemed to the larger Corinthian church like it might be plausible. In fact, that charge doesn't seem too far-fetched to us either. We may not entertain it about Paul, but we'd certainly consider such accusations about others. Why is that?

Well, the charges are plausible, I think, because they are so often true. So often when ministering to others, when discipling them or evangelizing to them, we are tempted in one of these two directions. Or in both.

On the one hand, we are tempted to cowardice. We are tempted to cower from opposition. To run away from conflict. To avoid raising any eyebrows. To not rock the boat too much. We are tempted to be feeble, and timid, and cowardly. We have seen other Christians do it. We have done it ourselves. It's no shock when Christians are tempted to act cowardly in a hostile environment.

On the other hand, we are at other times tempted toward bullying – towards arrogance and brash boldness. We are tempted to try to demolish those we are to minister to rather than to lovingly confront them. We're prone to try to firebomb the opposition, rather than take them captive in order to deliver them to Christ.

And we can see this in a variety of relationships of ministry – whether discipling another Christian or sharing the gospel with a non-Christian.

We see this in churches. Some, on the one hand, shirk back from naming sin as sin, and so in cowardice allow their flock to embrace sin and error. But others, on the other hand, condemn those outside their narrow sect of Christianity with such brashness and venom that there is no concern that any of the people they are talking about will ever enter their doors.

We see these two temptations also in our parenting – the discipling of our children. As Pastor Rayburn pointed out in a recent sermon, we can all too easily see our failures as parents, and particularly as disciplinarians, as we respond to our children's sin in patterns that are too harsh, or too lax, or both – overly lax one minute, and then overly harsh later on, to try to compensate for our earlier failing.

We see it in our relationships with our Christian friends, or those we are discipling, as we are tempted to respond to their sin sometimes with just a cowardly shrug, and other times with uncaring and overly harsh words.

And we see it with our relationships with non-Christians. We can think of those times that would have been perfect for us to share our faith in Christ with them ... but we didn't do it. And we kick ourselves for it afterwards. And we can remember those times we brashly thrust the subject of our faith into a conversation in a way that wasn't at all helpful, leading only to confusion or frustration.

Cowardice or brashness. They are common temptations for us. And they are what the Corinthians here accuse Paul of.

But in his case, Paul tells them that they are wrong. As tempting as these ways of acting are, he insists that he has *not* fallen into either pattern with the Corinthians. Instead of the cowardly retreat, or the brash attempt at annihilation, Paul tells them his approach has been different. He tells them that he has engaged in what we might call “gentle siege warfare” or “spiritual siege warfare.”

Now, I realize that especially that first way of putting it makes it sound like a contradiction – what is “gentle warfare”? Well, we need to figure that out, because that's how Paul describes his ministry. In verse one he says that he is following the “meekness and gentleness of Christ.” And

in verse three through six he says that he is engaged in warfare. So we need to figure out what that means, and I wonder if the middle word might be a key – that it is “gentle SIEGE warfare.”

That Paul is talking about siege warfare becomes apparent in verses four and five. Paul talks about warfare, but when we look at his words closely, we begin to see that he is not talking about open warfare on a battlefield. The battle he describes is one where Paul attacks not camps or lines of soldiers, but “strongholds,” as we read in verse three. It is a battle where Paul must destroy the towers and ramparts that have been “raised up” against his ministry, as we read in verse five. And it is warfare focused not on winning a battle, but on taking captive the residents of the city, as we read also in verse five. As others have pointed out, Paul here gives us not a series of military-themed snapshots, but an elaborate metaphor of siege warfare. [Barnett, 463ff].

Paul says his ministry looks like spiritual, divinely empowered, gentle siege warfare.

What exactly does that mean?

Well, the best way to answer that question may be to take a closer look at the metaphor as Paul develops it.

The first thing that should strike us is that siege warfare is *not* quick and easy. It’s long-term.

Such would be evident in the ministry of Paul. His dealings with the Corinthians were not a flash in the pan. They were long term. He had been working with them over the long-haul – with visits and with letters. This comes out a bit in our text. He stops for a moment in verse seven and tells them to look around themselves – look at what is right before their eyes. And as they gathered to hear this letter, the thing that would be right before their eyes was the Christian congregation in Corinth. The congregation that Paul was instrumental in establishing. His ministry to them was long-term. Evidence for that was right before them.

Which makes the metaphor of siege warfare so appropriate. Siege warfare was usually a long-term commitment. It wasn’t over quickly. The siege of Carthage in the second century BC took around two-and-a-half years.

The siege of Jerusalem in 70 AD had not yet happened when Paul wrote, but considering that siege still gives us a sense of what Roman siege warfare was like in Paul’s time period – an example of the kind of warfare Paul seems to have in mind. When the Romans besieged Jerusalem, they set up for the long haul. Desmond Seward, in his book *Jerusalem’s Traitor*, describes the legionary camps the Romans built for a siege. They were long-term camps: “as much a fortified town as a camping ground,” he says. They included two broad main streets with a number of smaller roads on a grid. They had specific areas designated for sleeping, for eating, for washing, and for drills. There were “ovens, storage depots, drains, rubbish pits, [...] latrines, [...] a wagon park, horse lines, [...] a smithy,” and sometimes wooden towers and stone walls. Seward comments on the siege of Jerusalem about what it was like for the Jews when the Romans began to set up camp. He writes: “Watching from the ramparts of Jerusalem, the defenders were horrified when they saw the besiegers starting to erect what looked like three small cities” around Jerusalem. [Seward, 163-164]

When the Romans carried out siege warfare, they brought to it a patient long-term perspective. Paul saw his ministry the same way. He was aimed at the long-term, not the immediate results.

Do we approach ministry that way? And what would it look like if we did?

I think it looks like the church that is thinking about not only what their numbers or their health are looking like right now, or even next year, but in ten years, and twenty years, and in the next generation, and the generation after that.

It is the Christian parent who does not give in to despair at the end of a difficult day, or week, or month, with the children, and also does not give in to over-confidence at the end of a good day or week, but who patiently keeps their vision set on the long-term goal of raising faithful and loving Christian children over the years and decades ahead.

It's the Christian who patiently bears with the failings of their Christian friend once more, or who patiently bears with their non-Christian friend's resistance to Christ or mockery of the gospel yet again, and doesn't give up, but stays by their side.

Is that us? Have we set up camp beside those whom we hope to love and serve and minister to? Or are we hoping for results from a drive-by ministry? Paul didn't think he could do that. We should be wary of thinking we can see results faster than he did.

So gentle siege warfare patiently sets its eyes on the long-term.

Paul goes on ...

In verse four: "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds"

Now Paul here is saying of course that his weapons are not physical, and they are not according to the sinful patterns of this world, but they are divinely powered by the Holy Spirit. But while making that point, he also continues his siege metaphor to tell us more about *how* those spiritual weapons work.

And what he says is that they are spiritual weapons designed for destroying strongholds. They are like the weapons used to break a fortress in a siege.

And one of the chief weapons used by the Romans at that time to crack open a stronghold was the battering ram.

Desmond Seward describes the Roman battering ram like this – he writes that it “was a huge baulk of timber like the mast of a ship, its end fitted with a massive piece of iron in the shape of a ram's head, which was slung by ropes from scaffolding on wheels. Repeatedly pulled back by a team of men, then hurled forward, the iron head could demolish most sorts of masonry.” [Seward, 87]

When the attack with the battering rams began on Jerusalem during the Roman siege, Seward writes: “Suddenly, the tremendous thudding of the rams against the walls echoed throughout the city, terrifying everybody within.” [Seward, 172]

These battering rams were powerful. After they broke through the first wall, the Romans began pounding on the second wall of Jerusalem with their battering rams. We are told that the blows from the battering rams were so powerful that they shook not only the stone wall itself, but also buildings that stood some distance behind it, frightening even the military leaders of the Jewish zealots. [Seward, 174] Yet despite their power, Josephus tells us that, to break through the second wall of Jerusalem, the Romans hammered away at the masonry of the wall with their biggest battering ram for *days*. It wasn’t a matter of minutes, as seen in some movies. It was days of pounding away. Thud. Thud. Thud. Tens, and then hundreds, and then thousands of times.

This is the picture Paul is evoking of his ministry. Not just patience, but also persistence. Willingness to do the same thing again, and again, and again – thud, thud, thud – in order to break down a stronghold.

This the approach of the church that is willing to do the same things again and again as they gather: praying, and confessing, and hearing from God’s word, and being fed at his table. It is the church that is willing to come back to the same Biblical truths again and again from the pulpit, not in a lazy repetitive way, but in a way where they *know* these truths must be applied persistently, like a “thud, thud, thud,” to break down the strongholds in their hearts.

This is the parent who is willing to go through the same correction with their children again and again, not merely disciplining them, but also instructing them – to say for the thousandth time: “Our words must be both loving and true. Was what you said loving and true? What do you need to do differently next time?” Again, and again, every time like a “thud” on the strongholds of their hearts.

This is the friend who is willing to once more remind their fellow Christian that in Christ they really are forgiven, and to walk through with them once more what repentance should look like. Or it’s the friend who is willing once more to explain to their non-Christian friend why they live their lives and view their lives differently than they do. It’s the thud, thud, thud, of proclaiming the gospel to someone in normal, ordinary, everyday life.

In the end, Paul is telling us that that is what takes down strongholds.

Are we willing to do that work? Are we willing to accept divinely empowered gifts that don’t take down strongholds with a flash and a bang, but that work through persistence? Spiritual weapons that we must lay hold of and apply again, and again, and again, with a persistent thud, hundreds or thousands of times, before we begin to see the masonry of someone’s heart begin to crack?

Paul tells us first that his spiritual siege warfare is *patient*. He tells us here that it is *persistent*. He goes on ...

In verse five to add the next element – he writes “We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God.”

Some of Paul’s imagery here is lost in translation. Paul Barnett points out that the word translated “destroy” here is a compound word in the Greek meaning “pull down.” In other words, Paul is saying “we *pull down* arguments and every *high* opinion *lifted up* against the knowledge of God.” What the Corinthians have erected against fuller knowledge of God, Paul knows he must pull down as part of his spiritual siege warfare. [Barnett, 465]

This would seem to be pointing us to a thoroughness that is important in siege warfare. The besieging army must not just break into the strongholds, but often they must tear them down too, so that they cannot be re-occupied by those who are besieged.

In the siege of Jerusalem, when the Romans broke through the second wall, they did not knock down a bigger section of the wall at first, or any of the buildings near the wall, as would be their normal policy, but merely entered the second wall, and hoped to negotiate a surrender from the zealots. In response, the zealots regrouped and attacked from the remaining houses and ramparts. The Romans temporarily were driven out. Four days later when they breached the second wall a second time, they did not make the same mistake: they tore down a larger section of the wall that was set up, preventing the zealots from returning to it. [Seward, 176-178]

Paul, similarly, was not satisfied with merely having a breakthrough with those he ministered to. He knew that ministry required follow-through. He knew his work was not done until he had not only broken through a stronghold in those he ministered to, but had also torn down *everything* they had erected in their hearts, and minds, and lives against the knowledge of Christ.

Are we so thorough with those we minister to, whether our fellow-church members, our children, or our friends? How often have we stepped back from a struggle in their lives because we see a little progress, and we assume that everything must be okay, when really there is far more work to be done in ministering to and loving them? How often have we been surprised because someone we knew seemed to have a positive breakthrough, but then they quickly went back to their old ways, and despite that momentary breach, the things they had once raised up against the knowledge of Christ seem to remain intact? And what would it look like for us to follow through with them instead?

And so Paul shows us that his spiritual siege warfare, his ministry, is *patient*, it is *persistent*, it *includes thorough follow-through*, and next we see what its goal is.

In the second half of verse five, Paul continues, saying he and those ministering beside him “take every thought captive to obey Christ.”

Paul, in context, does not seem to be talking primarily about his own thoughts. He seems to be talking about those he ministers to. Commentators point out that the Greek translated here as “every thought” can also mean “every mind” [Barnett, 465; Hodge, 236], or “every human design.” [Martin, 306] Paul is not here focusing on his own thoughts, but the minds and thoughts of the people he ministers to. And whichever the emphasis is put on, the overall picture Paul is bringing

up is that he is taking those he ministers to – the people, their minds, their thoughts – he is taking them captive. Why? So he can bring them as prisoners to be subjects to Christ. Barnett points out that Paul is evoking a picture with himself “as a military general who takes fortified rebels captive and brings them into submissive obedience to” the conquering king, who is Christ.

The thing to see is that Paul is not capturing people and minds and thoughts to make them his own. He is capturing them to make them Christ’s. He is merely the servant. And the first thing he does with a new prisoner is bring them to Christ, the true king.

I think we can often get a bit mixed up and act as if *we* are the king who should get obedience.

We can be tempted in our churches to want to see people convert and grow and develop in the faith for the sake of our church, rather than for the sake of Christ and his broader kingdom.

With our children, we can very easily make their obedience and character and faithfulness ultimately about their loyalty and allegiance and service to us, rather than to Jesus.

And when we minister to others we can get far too caught up on how our success will reflect on us.

Paul holds no prisoners for himself. Paul collects no devotees. He has no order of servants who pledge to obey him. Paul brings all whom he has success with to Jesus, the true king, and makes them Christ’s.

Finally, we get to the last stage Paul lays out of his siege warfare. We see this in verses six and eight.

In verse six Paul describes the division of those who are captured. Some upon capture willingly obey the king. Others continue in rebellion. It is worth pausing to note that. Even after the stronghold is broken, after the ramparts are torn down, still some will persist in disobedience. Paul says that they will face judgment and punishment, judgment we must say will ultimately be meted out by Christ. But that group is not the focus of what Paul goes on to say.

Paul goes on to address what will be done to those who, upon capture, come to greater obedience to the king. They are of course his prisoners. They did, of course, at one point stand against him. What will be done with them? Will they be degraded and mistreated as so many prisoners of the Romans were?

Well, no. Of course not. Paul tells us the ultimate purpose of all this, his ultimate mission in all this, in verse eight. There he tells them of the authority he has been given in Christ’s army, that it is authority, he says, “which the Lord gave me for building you up and not for destroying you.” *Paul’s warfare is for building people up in Christ.* That is always the goal.

Paul was therefore not a coward, as some in Corinth claimed, when he refused to crush or ruthlessly attack those who rebelled against him. Destruction was simply not one of his objectives. So he did not try to obliterate his opponents when they opposed him.

At the same time, neither was he going to let their rebellion continue. He was focused on long-term goals. He was *going to* batter down their defenses. He was *going to* tear down the barriers they had set up, and he was *going to* re-capture their thoughts and minds to bring them to Christ the king again. That was the goal of his severe letter. Not to bully them into obedience to Paul, but to capture them into obedience to Christ.

Where do you need to consider the picture Paul sets before us, in your life? What relationship do you need to apply this to?

Where have you been far too prone to cowardly or lazy inaction on the one hand, or frustrated anger or bullying on the other?

Where do you keep hoping for a quick fix when you really need to set up camp next to someone for the long haul, to minister the gospel to them with a persistent thud of a battering ram, to follow-through when you make a little progress, and to ultimately point them to Jesus and not yourself, in order to build them up in him?

That's a much bigger project than we usually want in our churches, or our homes, or our relationships. But it's the kind of ministry Paul endorses here. More than that, it is the kind of ministry that Paul says receives its power not from us, but from God. Because ultimately only God can bring down the walls of the heart that is set against him.

Paul gives us this picture – he gives us this metaphor for his ministry. But we need to notice *where* he gets it. We need to notice that he did not come up with this approach to ministry himself.

Paul begins verse one of this section by telling them that he is entreating them not on his own, not by his own philosophy of ministry, but by the meekness and gentleness of Christ. Paul is, as he has elsewhere told the Corinthians, imitating Christ in his ministry. His approach comes not from himself, but from a consideration of the character and the ministry of Christ. It is an attempt to follow in Christ's footprints.

And as we think about it, isn't this pattern we have just considered exactly how Christ deals with us? Isn't it by this pattern that we have come to know and grow in Christ?

Because Christ has encamped by our side for the long haul. Just as he bound himself to the patriarchs, in spite of their shortcomings and failings, just as he made his dwelling place among the wandering Israelites, despite their rebellion and faithlessness, so now he has set up his camp beside us for the long haul. He has promised to be with us always, to the very end of the age, and he has patiently remained with us despite all the reasons we have given him to move on.

And Christ has relentlessly pursued us. He has found the strongholds of sin in our lives and he has persistently knocked against their walls. He has worn us down when we resisted him in our rebellion. He has proved to be more persistent than the walls we have put up. David Foster Wallace once commented that “‘acceptance’ is usually more a matter of fatigue than anything else.” [Wallace, 204]. As Christians, as we look back, I think much of the important growth in our lives

has come as Christ persistently battered the walls in our hearts, and finally through fatigue those walls buckled, and we bowed to his lordship in that area of our lives. Even those moments that seemed at the time like a sudden revelation, more often than not, were not *really* a sudden flash out of nowhere, but more like a sudden crumbling of a rampart after days, or months, or years of blows from Christ's battering ram.

And as we look at what has resulted from those upheavals, we see that Christ did what he did not to destroy us (though we often resisted him as if that is what he did have in mind) – but to build us up. He came not to oppress us, but to liberate us. He came to free us from a tyrant and make us his servants – servants of the one whose service is perfect freedom.

Christ works through this kind of spiritual siege warfare. He works that way in our hearts. He works that way in our lives. He works that way in our churches and relationships.

And he works that way in the world at large. It is interesting to think how often people in this world have drawn the same conclusions about Christ as the Corinthians drew about Paul. He is weak and ineffective and his time will soon be over. Or, he is an oppressor who wants to bully those around him.

But Christ is our meek and gentle warrior king. He has been laying siege to this world from the moment it rebelled against him. From Abel to Noah. From Abraham to the people of Israel. From the Apostles to the Church today. Christ has had his people, and he has been besieging this world.

He WILL destroy every last stronghold. He WILL throw down every high opinion lifted up against the knowledge of him. He has already lovingly taken us captive, and he is not done taking captives yet.

Let us do our part then to join him in his siege warfare – both among ourselves, as we drive each other closer to Christ, and with those outside, as we seek to bring them to know him.

Let us boldly trust that he is the power behind every such interaction, and that though we may be the ones pulling back the battering ram and throwing it against the walls of others' hearts, with every thud that hits, it is ultimately Christ who is knocking.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Barnett, Paul. *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*. NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997.

Hodge, Charles. *An Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*. Thornapple Commentaries. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1859, reprinted 1980.

Martin, Ralph P. *2 Corinthians*. WBC. Waco, TX: World Books, 1986.

Seward, Desmond. *Jerusalem's Traitor: Josephus, Masada, and the Fall of Judea*. Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Press, 2009.

Wallace, David Foster. *Infinite Jest*. New York, NY: Little, Brown, 1996.