

Embracing Your Spiritual Team

Winning the Real Battle

**Ecclesiastes 4:7-12
October 20, 2002
Bethany Church**

The past month we've discussed winning the real battle in life. We are caught in a struggle that involves things with which we are not familiar, things we normally dismiss. There is a *spiritual dimension* to be discovered. There are *spiritual aims* to be uncovered. There are *spiritual players* to be recognized. There is a *spiritual enemy* to scout. We are in a real battle, a spiritual battle, life-altering battle that is up close and very personal. Each of us is personally contested. Our marriages are contested. Our relationships are contested. Our health is contested. Our wealth is contested. My goal the first four weeks was just to help you see this reality.

I feel that God has been calling me to be something like a naturalist at a state park. We have a great state park system in Minnesota. Believe me. I've been elsewhere. We have a great system. In a state park, there are many things you can enjoy; but there are some things you can only enjoy if your eyes become educated. The greatest assets we have in our state park system are the people who serve as naturalists. It is nice to have good campgrounds and bathrooms, but take a walk with a naturalist and you'll see the park in a way you could not otherwise imagine. The world unfolds for you as you walk with these individuals. To some degree, that has been our journey these last four weeks.

However, I'm overstating the case. A naturalist really knows the environment. I don't. A journey with me will still leave you with gaping holes in your understanding. My task has been to point you to Christ and his perspective. Jesus is the "supernaturalist." You don't see what a naturalist sees until you take the time to journey with her or him. You won't see what a supernaturalist sees unless you do the same. I'm encouraging you to ask Jesus to educate your eyes. He gives us his Spirit to guide us into all truth. That's the role of a naturalist and a supernaturalist. Are you walking with Jesus, and is His Spirit educating your eyes? Are you seeing the world differently? How do you walk with Jesus so that you see what he sees?

In 1 Thessalonians 5 the Apostle Paul describes a people who benefit from Christ's vision. He writes:

You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. (1 Thessalonians 5:5-11)

Paul exhorts the Thessalonian believers to live as children of the day. He contrasts them to people who are clueless about the battle going on, people who are "in the dark" or asleep when it comes to God's unfolding plan. In other words, they are unaware of reality; and as a result, they are acting totally inappropriate. They are getting drunk when it is the time to be armed for battle, when it's time to don faith and love like a protective breastplate and the hope of salvation like a helmet. A war is raging and

people of light are aware of the real battle. How did they get educated so they could see? How did they become enlightened?

First, the Spirit of Christ, who is the light, gave them new eyes. Understand that nocturnal creatures flee the light. It repulses them; however, when the Thessalonians believed in Jesus, he poured his Spirit on them. He filled their hearts with his love. An experience of God's love and forgiveness changes our grip on reality. When your heart has been filled with God's love, when guilt leaves and you're at peace with God, when you've been personally liberated from devastating guilt and fear, you're attracted to the light. You want to see.

Second, the Thessalonian believers saw reality because they gathered and helped each other embrace Jesus and his teaching. By meeting in small groups, they could help each other understand Christ's vision and then carry it to the diverse situations they faced. They were encouraging each other and building one another up.

Do you remember Jesus saying, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst"? In the small group Jesus is experienced and embraced in a unique way. I believe much of his wisdom and love is missed if you don't discuss Jesus and your life in these intimate clusters.

Once I walked into a church building filled with fans drying the floors. Some women had used a faucet in a bathroom when suddenly the handle flew off. The sink became a spectacular geyser. This so startled the women that they nearly called 911. Drenched and standing in a river, they managed finally to get the handle back on the faucet and stop the stream. Later they discovered that if they had looked 18 inches lower, beneath the sink, they would have spotted the cold water shut-off valve. The problem is

that they had no knowledge about these things. Think how differently their experience would have unfolded if someone had been with them who knew about those shut-off valves. The decisions we make, the reactions we have, the actions we take flow from our vision. How many things in our lives explode into huge messes because we lack the vision to respond appropriately? How often would crises be averted if we had a team help us see what's going on and what our options are?

Joseph Scriven wrote a popular hymn around the time of the Civil War. In his first verse of **What a Friend We have in Jesus**, he says, "*O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear.*" Mr. Scriven roots these problems in our lack of prayer; however, how much peace do we forfeit and pain do we bear because we are isolated fighting life's real battles alone?

Jesus taught us that we are not meant to follow Christ alone. Every disciple that followed Christ grew in part because of the interaction of a small group that Jesus led. Every disciple of Christ was sent out to serve with at least one partner. ***No one went out alone. No one grew alone.*** They learned and served through teamwork. How many things are you trying to handle alone? Read the gospels. Every where you turn, Jesus builds people through teams and sends them out in teams. Read the book of Acts. Believers grew through small home groups and then served in teams. Even the apostles followed that pattern.

We don't have to go back that far to see that pattern and witness its power, however. A part of this church's history is a renewal movement that God brought to England in the 1700s. God led a man, named John Wesley, to organize people into small groups so that their vision would be guided by Christ, and no longer manipulated or

darkened by the devil. Wesley said, “*Christianity is not a solitary religion.*” He maintained that it was social through and through. Through the small groups that Wesley organized, all kinds of great and gifted lay people began preaching and launching various ministries together in England and in the American colonies. You know why that is? It’s because Christianity is not an individual game like golf or weight-lifting. It’s a team game like football, soccer, or volleyball. Thus if we are going to win the real battles in life over Satan’s deception and dominion, we are going to have to acquire the vision that only comes in small group interaction and then work as partners together.

United Methodist leader and teacher, George Hunter writes:

Only in the church’s redemptive cells (small groups) do we really know each other, and support each other, and pull for each other, and draw strength from each other, and weep with each other, and rejoice with each other, and hold each other accountable, and identify each others gifts, and experience what it means to be (what the Bible says we are) “members of one another.”

Presbyterian leader, Dr. Bruce Larson is so convinced of that truth that he makes an amazing claim. He says,

It is just as important that you be involved in a small group as it is to believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins.

Why do you think he said that? Perhaps, this is why. Believing the truth that Jesus died for your sins is the food we all need; however, in a small group we unwrap the food from its package and taste it. In the small group you experience love, forgiveness, patience, encouragement, and many gifts of the Spirit. You eat what you believe.

Have you ever heard of the phrase, *divide and conquer*? That is a long known and used battlefield strategy. The concept is to divide the enemy, cut them off, isolate and demoralize them, and then overpower them. Do you suppose that your enemy wants

to divide and conquer? Do you suppose he wants to keep you isolated? Do you suppose the enemy of your soul wants to prevent you from fellowship and teamwork with other believers?

If you are not meeting with a small group of believers, if you are not growing a spiritual vision of your life, if you are not experiencing partnership with other believers in some ministry, you are vulnerable and missing much of God's plan for your life. This has nothing to do with whether you are good or bad, naughty or nice. It has everything to do with the truth that you are living on a battlefield, and spiritual isolation is dangerous.

Solomon wrote:

Two are better than one... If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help... If two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12)

These are physical metaphors for a spiritual reality. Are you facing the messes of relationships and life, indeed, the attacks of the evil one alone? You are not meant to. Pray about joining a small group where Christ, the supernaturalist, can open your eyes. Not all small groups are Bible studies, but they need to be places where someone covers your back in prayer and encourages you. Whether your group recreates, studies the Scripture or performs some ministry task, you must be with believing people where you can be known, find acceptance and experience Christ's vision and power. Would you pray about it? I don't want you to be isolated.

It is my dream that we move from being a church with small groups to being a church of small groups, where everyone is known, accepted, supported and encouraged in

the call each has from God. Will you embrace the acceptance, camaraderie and vision that God has for you in your spiritual team?