

# Overcoming Spiritual Resistance that Brings Transformation

*Increasingly, World Vision personnel in various countries are asking for prayer support because they are finding themselves wrestling with spiritual darkness in the communities they serve. Community transformation is integrally linked to spiritual resistance that must be overcome.*

by John D. Robb

The global prayer effort called "Prayer Through the Window" is focused entirely on the nations of the "10/40 Window." In 1993, more than 270 teams went out to pray on-site in these countries. It was my privilege to lead one of these teams to the country of Bhutan. Since that time, with the help of World Vision, I have worked with national Christian leaders to set up similar prayer initiatives in several other countries. These interdenominational prayer efforts have focused prayer on mission breakthrough in unreached peoples and/or sociopolitical transformation. Thus, I come at this subject from two angles: a concern for the removal of spiritual hindrances which keep unreached people groups from responding to the gospel, (my AD2000 and Beyond Movement hat if you will), as well as a concern for the overthrow of the evil which brings injustice, suffering and exploitation of the poor (my World Vision hat). Increasingly, World Vision personnel in various countries are asking for prayer support because they are finding themselves wrestling with spiritual darkness in the communities they serve. For example, just a few weeks ago in meetings with our staff in Indonesia, the major topic was how to deal effectively with the demonic forces we are encountering.

Since the late 1960s as a student involved in university evangelism and during my field missionary experience which followed, I became convinced that prayer was our major resource in dealing with spiritual resistance. I continue to believe this but also realize acutely that I am still in the process of learning and hope you will take my comments in that light.

Perhaps the most solid conclusion I have reached is that we need to be humbly dependent upon God, admitting we do not understand, so that as trusting, curious children He can lead us by the hand. King Jehoshaphat, when faced by overpowering resistance in the form of an invasion against his people by combined forces of three hostile nations, prayed, "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you" (2 Chr. 20:12). This, it seems to me, is the safest posture for us to take as well.

Resistance to the Church and its missionary endeavor, of course, springs from both human and demonic origins. Theologian Walter Wink's writings demonstrate that the Bible tends to use the same language for human and spiritual authorities or powers as in Ephesians 6.<sup>1</sup> But since the Apostle Paul says very explicitly that we wrestle not against flesh and blood (Eph.6:12), I want to focus on

the spiritual resistance which animates human beings and their institutions to oppose the kingdom of God.

## **The Source of Resistance**

Above all, we must discern the real source of resistance and use spiritual weapons to combat it Jesus said "The kingdom of heaven suffers violence and the violent take it by force" (Matt. 11:12). A number of Biblical scholars think the meaning of this text is that the kingdom has been under attack from violent foes.<sup>2</sup> Human beings and their institutions like King Herod and his soldiers captured and killed John the Baptist. Religious leaders in league with the Roman authorities opposed Jesus and had him executed. But behind these human forces, Jesus saw the one whom he often called "the prince of this world." And in Mark 3:27, speaking of Satan, he said that this "strongman" needs to be "bound" if his goods—presumably those human beings and their institutions held captive—are to be liberated from his control.

How did this strongman become strong enough in our world to put up such great and violent resistance to the kingdom of God? The Genesis story teaches that the first people were given dominion of the earth to

rule as God's vice-regents over all creation (Genesis 1:28). But through deception and disobedience, the serpent usurped our dominion, becoming the veritable ruler of this world. In my opinion, prayer is the way we who have been redeemed from satanic slavery apply the victory of Calvary to take back that dominion in the specific situations and places for which we intercede. This, I believe, is the theological reason why prayer can be used of God to overcome resistance from the evil one. It is not that we are powerful in and of ourselves, but that our prayer invites the almighty Lord into the equation, and thus invited, he as Lord of hosts will put the enemy to flight.

### **The Mightiest Weapon**

Scripture attests over and over again that prayer is the mightiest weapon we have been given for overcoming spiritual resistance. When Moses faced Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt, it was a power encounter he won through a relationship of prayerful dependence on the Lord. Forty-six times in chapters 3 to 14 of Exodus it says that the Lord spoke to Moses. Only eleven times did Moses speak back to the Lord. In other words, he listened to God's instructions and acted upon them. Later on he revealed his understanding of what we might now call "spiritual warfare." At the crossing of the Red Sea he urged the Israelites to "stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today... the Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still" (Ex.14:13-14). Likewise, in the struggle against the Amalekites, Moses took the high ground of intercession, standing on the mountaintop with his arms raised before the Lord. As he kept his arms outstretched, the Israelites prevailed over the Amalekites in the valley below (Ex.17:8-13). At the end of his life he summarized his learning con-

cerning spiritual warfare. He assured Israel that God would be their "shield," "helper" and "glorious sword," and said "it is he who will drive out your enemy before you" (Deut. 33:26-29).

Moses passed down what he had learned to Joshua who time and again prayed for and received guidance from God as to the exact strategy for overcoming Israel's enemies during his conquest of Canaan. It is also important to note that the armies with which Israel fought went forth to war in dependence upon and under the control of false gods. For example, Moloch of the Ammonites and Chemosh of the Moabites were worshiped through human sacrifice, and should definitely be called demons.<sup>3</sup> Thus, there was an element of spiritual warfare even though these battles were fought on the physical plane.

Daniel the prophet mourned and prayed for three weeks before the angel of the Lord broke through the cosmic resistance of the princes of Persia and Greece (Dan.10:2,12-13). This story demonstrates both spiritual resistance and the power of prayer to prevail over it. The angel told Daniel "Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them" (10:12). Walter Wink, commenting on this passage, writes: "Recognizing the role of the Powers in blocking prayer can revolutionize the way we pray. We will be more energized and aggressive".<sup>4</sup>

Jesus' own ministry, characterized by intense conflict with the demonic, was always undergirded by much prayer. This was his *modus operandi* whether he was enduring the temptation in the wilderness, confronting evil spirits in possessed people, or sweating blood at Gethsemane before his triumph over Satan on the cross. The apostles James and Peter

both urge us to "resist" the devil so that he will flee from us. We are to do this in a context of submitting ourselves to God and humbling ourselves before him which is the needed posture and attitude of prayer (Ja. 4:9; 1 Pet. 5:9).

### **Missions is Warfare**

The apostle Paul repeatedly uses warfare terminology to describe his mission and that of God's people. There was no more violent image in Paul's day than an armor-clad Roman soldier. This is the image he uses in Ephesians 6 to describe our battle with the powers. He tells us that we do not wage war as the world does in a fleshly or purely human manner. Rather, the weapons we fight with have "divine power to demolish strongholds." Strongholds are points at which the "strongman" has a grip over a people group or human institution. They may be false political ideologies, such as communism, which mislead people, or false religious beliefs like the Hindu concept of caste which lock people into an oppressive lifestyle. Ethnic stereotyping is an awful stronghold. For example, before the Rwandan genocide Hutu extremists constantly referred to the Tutsi as "cockroaches," dehumanizing them to the point where it was all right to eliminate them.

Paul says, "The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the likeness of God" (2 Cor. 4:4). People everywhere are perishing, being destroyed through the deception of this false god. They are also being turned against each other in senseless, national and ethnic conflicts in which thousands, even millions, die and no one wins except Satan the destroyer. But Paul reminds us that the weapons God has given us are mighty because Jesus has given us

his power for the pulling down of demonic strongholds. After the seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name," he said, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from Heaven." Then he said "I have given you authority (that means the legal right or power) to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you" (Lk. 10:19).

When you tread on snakes and scorpions, you do not do it lightly or with bare feet. You crush them so they will not keep biting or harming other people with their deadly venom. I remember the fury with which I killed a rattlesnake which appeared under the feed trough upon which I had just been sitting in our friend's stable. I cut him up into a dozen pieces to make sure he was really dead! In that situation, I became angrily violent because of the danger to myself and others. Speaking of spiritual warfare, Pastor Jack Hayford affirms, "Prayer is an act of violence."<sup>5</sup> When will we in the mission community as well as in the Church at large get angrily violent enough to take up the spiritual weapons we have been given to really deal with the enemy? We often just treat the symptoms and let the evil one stay around to keep causing havoc.

### **Presence of Evil Spirits**

The degree of resistance to the gospel corresponds to the presence of evil spirits. George Otis' research demonstrates that people groups renew covenants made by their forefathers with the powers of darkness through recurring religious festivals and rituals.<sup>6</sup> Even though Satan has gotten significant control over the world as we have seen, he seems to

need the ongoing compliance of human beings to maintain or intensify his grip. Deborah Glick, a missionary working in Taiwan, describes "occasions when the presence, influence or empowering of evil spirits... is particularly obvious." She writes: "During the time of a festival in honor of a god's birthday, the atmosphere may seem to be particularly heavy or oppressive, especially in the vicinity of the participating temple(s) as incense is burned,

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music played, and spirits are called down to be present or to make their presence known. In other instances *tang-ki* [mediums] may become spirit possessed or under the influence of spirits performing superhuman feats". Her conclusion is: "in all of these cases missionaries and Christian workers... may expect God to demonstrate his power by nullifying satanic power. Thus spirits may fail to manifest themselves at festivals, *tang-ki* may be unable to perform their feats, spells may no longer produce the desired effects and so forth. Missionaries and other Christian workers must be prepared to pray unabashedly either privately or publicly toward this end."<sup>7</sup>

Joy Boese, a missionary friend from Thailand, described the increasing spiritual oppression she felt which was accompanied by inexplicable apathy on the part of the people with

regard to the gospel. "Spirit pillars" had just been erected in her town. She writes, "From our local people I've learned that many cities have a protective and ruling/controlling spirits residing in a recognized pillar. The provincial governor decides to erect a pillar and invites a spirit to come and inhabit that pillar to protect his city or province." She mentions the rising interest in city pillars all over Thailand and, along with this, the occurrence of widespread drought and tremendously increased vices gambling, prostitution and drugs.<sup>8</sup>

Vernon Sterk writes about his missionary experience in a particular Mexican village:

"Since the gospel was first communicated in this village, there has been a great increase in the number of spirits and deities. This has been reflected in both the increased number of saint' images in the local church-shrine and in the amazing multiplication of house talking saints. The resistance to the gospel has corresponded with the increase in these spirits."<sup>9</sup>

This past year a Japanese pastor told me that the majority of new converts to Christ would fall away from the faith unless he and his staff prayed with them personally, severing any pre-conversion connections with specific shrines and temples.<sup>10</sup> Anthropologist David Lewis adds:

"In Japan, which has been regarded as a 'difficult' country for Christian missionary work, there is a need to pay attention to the country's 'spiritual geography,' the foci of demonic power at certain locations and the manner in which there may be interlinkages between them. The 'resistance' to the gospel is not merely cultural but also spiritual. This is also a contributing reason why the Japanese appear to be more receptive to the gospel outside Japan than when they are in their own country."<sup>11</sup>

His conclusion is: "Christians in Japan and those elsewhere who pray for Japan need to avoid wasting valuable spiritual ammunition on inconsequential or phantom targets. There is a need for increased prayer against the spiritual forces of darkness in each area." He, therefore, calls for extending praise marches and prayer walks throughout the country.<sup>12</sup>

### **Spiritual Breakthrough**

The prayers of God's people can overcome demonic resistance, bringing spiritual breakthrough among the unreached as well as social transformation. I have talked with Christian workers all over the world who maintain that the prayer of God's people weakens the occult powers. An Assembly of God pastor in northern Ghana, attending one of my Unreached Peoples Seminars, relayed how a witch doctor had been stubbornly opposing the work of his church, inciting the people against the Christians. However, when the believers united in prayer for that village, the witch doctor lost all his powers and the villagers began to turn to the Lord.<sup>13</sup>

A doctor and his wife, who have devoted themselves to evangelism and church planting in the vast Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, describe what a difference prayer has made in overcoming resistance in Hindu villages. Before beginning the work of evangelism they and their team members first pause at the outskirts of the target village to exert the authority of Jesus in prayer, binding any forces of the enemy that would seek to hinder the proclamation of the gospel. They often find a new receptivity and willingness to embrace the gospel, and have seen increasing numbers of Hindus turn to Christ.<sup>14</sup>

In view of the fact that the prayers of believers make such a difference, how then should we pray?

### **Praying Unitedly**

First of all it is important that we pray unitedly if resistance is to be overcome. Jesus promised us in Matthew 18 that if two of us agreed as touching *anything* it would be done by our Father in heaven. The difficulty is in getting Christians to agree. It has been said, where there are two Christians there are three opinions! In the book of Acts major expansions of the church and spiritual breakthroughs followed the believers praying in "one accord." According to the writings of J. Edwin Orr and David Bryant, united prayer has preceded every great revival in the history of the church.<sup>15</sup> During our international prayer initiatives, we have found that reconciliation is a critical first step if believers are to pray in unity. In Bosnia, one month before the war ended, local Christians from Serb, Croat and Muslim backgrounds first repented to one another, identifying with the sins of their peoples. It was then that they were able to pray effectively for peace and the healing of their land.

Unity in prayer is also essential for spiritual breakthrough in a resistant unreached people. Missionary efforts for fifty years failed to make any dent upon the Bateke people of the Congo. It was only when Christian workers prayed unitedly and authoritatively against the spirit of the river which had enslaved this people with fear that sudden breakthrough came. Within weeks they saw dramatic response to the gospel with 3,000 coming to the Lord, followed rapidly by another 5,000!<sup>16</sup>

In the summer of 1992, a group of occultists aggressively opposed the mass evangelism efforts some Russian friends and I were carrying out in the city of Saratov. They tore down the advertising posters and sought to create a diversion by holding a competing meeting on extrasensory perception. During our morning worship

service 200 believers united their prayers against the spirits of darkness who were controlling these human enemies. That evening, in spite of all the earlier opposition, between 6,000 and 7,000 people made public commitments to Jesus Christ, an impact that was far beyond all we could have asked or thought!

### **Praying Specifically**

Secondly, we need to gather information and insights from documentary study, conferring with local Christian leaders, even interviewing members of the people group we are concerned to reach. All of this helps us know how to pray accurately. What is the nature of the grip the forces of darkness have on this people group or city? This will involve a look at culture, history, religion, economics and politics.

When we pray unitedly and with specific information in our hands, we wreak spiritual violence on the enemy, a violence that will bring liberation to his captives because it brings the almighty God into the equation, enabling true holistic transformation to occur. We are just at the beginning of exploring the potential power of united prayer. Theologian Walter Wink states, "History belongs to the intercessors, who believe the future into being". German pastor Ingolf Schmidt affirms, "All over the world the Church is called to cast out demons. Not only out of individuals but also of whole nations and peoples. God wants the Church to rule, to bind principalities and powers with authority, and to determine the politics of nations."

### **Praying Holistically**

Third, every dimension of a people's existence is important and all these dimensions political, economic, social, cultural, and spiritual are

interconnected. In 1995, in the city of Cali, Colombia, the believers focused their prayers on the entrenched structural evil of their society. The infamous Cali drug cartel had used obscene amounts of money to buy over both government officials and police and had killed everyone who stood in their way, making Cali the most violent city in the world. A series of all night prayer vigils attended by tens of thousands of local believers did what nothing else could do. Shortly thereafter all the cartel leaders were either dead or behind bars and an anti-corruption investigation began resulting in the dismissal of hundreds of corrupt police officers and the imprisonment of cartel-linked politicians.<sup>17</sup>

In India, when Pastor Arthur Paul and his wife moved into a Hindu slum area of Bangalore, they were first greeted with a hail of stones. They persisted in much prayer for the community, then began to reach out to the people, caring for little girls who would have been sold into prostitution and praying for the terminally ill. Deeds of love and mercy plus miracles of healing and deliverance demonstrated the reality of Jesus. There and elsewhere in the state of Karnataka they have so far baptized over 5,000, the great majority from a Hindu background. According to Pastor Paul, more than anything else it was prayer that brought the breakthrough.<sup>19</sup> In the same way we need to pray holistically for the needs of individuals and their communities

### ***Praising God and Proclaiming His Word***

It was at the decisive moment when Judah's singers of praise began to sing "give thanks to the Lord for his love endures forever" that the Lord set ambushes against their enemies (2

Chr. 20:21-23). The invading armies were thrown into confusion and put to flight. The apostle Paul indicates that it is through the Church that the manifold wisdom of God is proclaimed to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms (Eph. 3:10). Praise and the proclamation of the Word of God are powerful tools to do this. In our prayer initiatives we have found that worship and praise to God, as well as proclaiming passages of his

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word, are an essential part of changing the spiritual atmosphere where there is difficulty or resistance. During a prayer seminar in Bangkok in April 1995, a member of our team led in proclaiming Moses' words to Pharaoh, "Let my people go." We proclaimed this word in the face of the division which was keeping God's people in that city from coming together to pray in unity. Several months later, more than 500 Christians from across the denominational spectrum, including those who had been at odds, gathered to pray together for the first time. One of the prayer leaders attributed it to the April seminar in which the participants had made this proclamation.

### ***Keeping the Central Focus***

We must hold to the central focus of the kingdom of God—bringing people to Christ. As Tom White puts it, "Power encounter like any other aspect of ministry is not to become a preoccupation. There is a danger of a

holy crusade to rid the world of evil strongholds. If the vision of the heart of God aching for the lost is blurred by a commando operation to storm the gates of hell, we miss the point of the Great Commission".<sup>19</sup> The whole point of this kind of praying is to bring liberation to those groups of people whose minds are still blinded by the god of this world, who are hindered from understanding and responding to the gospel (2 Cor. 4:4).

Therefore, like Jesus, we need to keep focused on individual and social redemption and transformation.

### ***Mixed Results***

We also need to face the fact that sometimes resistance will not be overcome or that we will have mixed results. Pharaoh still hardened his heart against the prayers and words

of Moses. The Sanhedrin, for the most part, rejected Jesus and crucified him. The apostle Paul was stoned, whipped and ultimately beheaded. We can sometimes be guilty of bringing a success mentality to prayer along with a materialistic, technological way of thinking which assumes we can just pull a lever and get a particular result. In Colombia, even while marvelous breakthroughs have been occurring in answer to united prayer, over 200 pastors have lost their lives during the same two year period due to attacks by guerrillas and paramilitary forces.<sup>20</sup> Backlash from an utterly fierce and ruthless foe is to be expected. In Matthew 24, Jesus warned us about persecutions that his people will experience, and from which we sometimes may not be delivered.

Although we may have more understanding now, there is still a profound air of mystery surrounding prayer and how God uses our praying and spiritual warfare to transform our

world. Walter Wink wisely affirms: "Prayer is not magic; it does not always work; it is not something we do, but a response to what God is already doing within us and the world. Our prayers are the necessary opening that allows God to act without violating our freedom. Prayer is the ultimate act of partnership with God."<sup>21</sup>

### End Notes

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John Robb

*John D. Robb is the Unreached Peoples Program Director with the Missions Advanced Research and Communications Center (MARC) of World Vision*

*International. Before coming to MARC he served as a field missionary with the Overseas Missionary Fellowship in Malaysia. Robb currently serves as International Coordinator of the Unreached Peoples Resource Network for the AD 2000 and Beyond Movement. He is married to Lori and has three children.*

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