

XIII — SPIRITUAL WARFARE: THE CHRISTIAN AND DEMONS

The Bible frequently pictures the Christian life as a warfare. The principal antagonists are God and Satan; but men (as creatures created in God's image) and angels (both good and evil) are deeply and actively involved. Christians, as God's children by redemption, are the special objects of Satan's attacks.

Occult practices are as old as Satan's invasion of the Garden of Eden, but a renewed and alarming participation in them is evident in our contemporary, Western world. The spiritual vacuum created by powerless religion has provided fertile ground for such activities to flourish. This trend calls for a fresh look by the church at the spiritual warfare in which we are engaged, whether we want to be or not.

The mention of angels and demons raises a special problem for most Western Christians, however, because spirits are not functional beings in the worldview of the typical Western Christian. While the reality of angels and demons may be affirmed as part of one's theological belief system, they are perceived as being confined largely to a supernatural realm with relatively infrequent contact with people on earth, especially Christian people. As science has provided explanations for many of the phenomena of life, the gap between the "spirit world" and the "real world" has become larger and larger. Significant segments of our society have given up a belief in spirit beings altogether, and the impact of this is seen in the secularization of society and the liberalization of theology.

On the other side of the spectrum are the peoples in the Two-thirds World whom we are commissioned to reach with the gospel and for whom spirits are very functional beings in everyday life. While they may ascribe more activity to spirits than they ought to, their worldview is often nearer to the worldview of the Bible than is ours.

Because of this worldview shift, not only are angels and demons not perceived as very real, neither is the Holy Spirit. Many Christians are more apt to control their emotions and modify their conduct in the presence of important people than in the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Person and work of the Holy Spirit has become a source of great confusion in the church. There is a need to recognize a truly biblical view of the world in which spirits are functional beings. This is critical because Satan, supported by his host of fallen angels, is seeking to "devour" us (1 Pet 5:8); and, if we do not recognize the enemy, we will not resist him effectively.

The Scriptures are unmistakable, however, in their teaching that this war was won decisively on our behalf by Christ at the cross (John 19:30; Col 2:15; Heb 2:14). Provision has been made for the Christian to "extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one" (Eph 6:16). We have authority to "overcome all the power of the enemy" (Luke 10:19). We can be "more than conquerors through Him who loved us" (Rom 8:35-39).

The Scriptures are also clear in their warnings and admonitions to God's people concerning relations with Satan, demons, and occult practices. In Old Testament times, Israel was told clearly that occult practices, practices which look to spiritual sources other than God for knowledge or power, were "detestable" to God (Deut 18:9-13). Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:20 gives insight on idolatry as practiced by the Gentiles when he says that behind the idols are demons.

In his time on earth, Jesus demonstrated how we are to do battle with the enemy, and the New Testament writers all include warnings concerning the attacks of Satan. Paul admonishes us to "take [our] stand against the devil's schemes" (Eph 6:11). Peter commands us to "be self-controlled and alert: because our enemy the devil prowls around looking for someone to devour" (1 Pet 5:8). James tells us to "resist the devil" (Jas 4:7). John cautions us, "Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1).

According to the Gospels, Jesus had much to say about Satan and demons, and a significant proportion of the record of his ministry is an account of his dealings with these enemies. Either Jesus was wrong in his belief in demons, or he was accommodating himself to the wrong views of the people of that day, or he was right. Since he was right, there is no good reason to suppose that Satan and the demons have changed their methods of operation significantly or that the power of God over them has changed. We are still to be on our guard against them and resist them, not ignore them.

Every provision has been made for Christians' protection if they use the armor (Eph 6:10-18) and the weapons (e.g., prayer, the Bible, the blood, praise/worship) available to them. But, if they fail to do so or if they "give the devil a foothold" (Eph 4:27), they are subject to demonic oppression.

The primary tactic of demons in seeking this control is deception. Satan used it on Eve (Gen 3:1-7; 2 Cor 11:3), and he has been using it ever since. Deception is clever lying, and the deceived person is unaware that he is acting on the basis of a lie. God's truth is the primary defense against such deception; hence the need for diligent Bible study. Discernment often comes through other Christians; hence the need for faithful participation in the life of the church.

Satan's ultimate objective is to deprive God of his glory. That, of course, is impossible. No one can add to or subtract from the glory of God. Satan can limit the degree to which God's glory is proclaimed and demonstrated on earth, however, by influencing God's children to live beneath their privileges in Christ and by hindering them in their witness and proclamation. The Christian who is not living all of life to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31) is to that extent fulfilling the purpose of Satan.

Satan's first approach is to create doubt about the character of God or the Word of God just as he did with Eve. He will also try to keep believers from growing in their knowledge of the Word and from living in obedience to it.

He will also try to create a thirst for power in some area of life or for knowledge about the future which causes them to turn to a source other than God or his Word to satisfy this thirst. Sometimes seemingly innocent experimentation or careless participation in questionable activities become openings to the occult.

Sometimes, however, Satan goes beyond that approach to a show of power. He uses attacks on the bodies and minds of people and demonstrations of his power over certain natural forces and objects to produce fear and bondage (Job 1-2). Satan knows that his power has been limited by God (Job 1:10; Luke 22:31; Rev 12:12). He is unable to possess or exercise ownership over a Christian. He is, however, able to attack in other areas; and unless one knows how to resist him, he establishes a "foothold" from which to harass. Because he uses deception so effectively, these footholds are often not recognized or not identified for what they really are.

Demonic footholds are reclaimed by confession, repentance, renunciation (where occult activity may be involved), and cleansing through application of the merits of the blood of Christ. Sometimes demons must be commanded to leave in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Every believer has access to the spiritual power necessary to resist the devil (or demon) and make him flee. Power to resist is not a gift; it is the privilege of every child of God. It is probable, however, that in any congregation there will be only a few who carry on a direct ministry to those who may be experiencing problems in this area.

The congregation, on the other hand, in its expression as the body of Christ, should be prepared to provide encouragement, support, and a base of accountability to those engaged in such ministries. It should also provide a healing community in which those going through deliverance or those rebuilding after deliverance may experience Christian love, receive strength, and find counsel.

The victory of Christ is to be manifest in the life of his people, however, not only in defense against Satan's attacks; it is also to be expressed as a vital element in the proclamation of the gospel to the unreached peoples of the world. The demonstration of spiritual power and authority in confronting demon forces among animistic people groups is an integral part of declaring the message of the kingdom of God and of planting the church where it has not yet been planted. Jesus demonstrated defensive tactics for Christians, as in his wilderness temptation (Luke 4:1-13). He also demonstrated offensive ministry strategy (Luke 4:31-44) and said that the works he did his followers would do also (John 14:12). His final commission was, "As the father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21).

It may therefore be expected that confrontation with demonic forces will be more open and intense in those areas of the world where the church has not yet been planted. However, we should not be misled into thinking that similar open and intense spiritual warfare is not a present reality in the Western world.

Members of our churches are therefore called upon to be diligent, in cultivating Christian disciplines, such as Bible study, prayer, mutual accountability, stewardship, public worship, fasting, and acts of mercy. These disciplines are means of appropriating the "whole armor of God" (Eph 6:10-18 AV) for spiritual defense and mastering the "weapons of our warfare" (2 Cor 10:3-5 AV) for effective ministry.