

## The Reality of Spiritual Warfare (Eph. 6.10-12)

### Introductory Questions

- When we think about “spiritual warfare,” what sort of things come to mind?
- Is it possible to over-emphasize this topic? Is it also possible to under-emphasize? If so, how?
 

“There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.” (C.S. Lewis, preface to *The Screwtape Letters*)
- To which danger are churches in the Reformational and Presbyterian tradition most prone?
- How then should we understand “the cosmic powers over this present darkness...” (Eph. 6.12)?

### The Reality of the Spiritual Realm<sup>1</sup>

- The word ‘angel(s)’ occurs 295x, ‘cherub(im)’ occurs 94x, plus ‘archangel’ (2x) and ‘seraphim’ (2x).
- The word ‘demon(s)’ occurs 81x. Specific references to the devil occur at least 110x:
  - ‘devil’ (33x) + ‘dragon’ (13x) + ‘Satan’ (53x) + ‘Beelzebul’ (7x) = 106x.
  - “the tempter” (Mat. 4.3, 1 Th. 3.5) + “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2.2) + “the accuser of our brothers” (Rev. 12.10) = 4x.
- Other references to angelic beings:
  - In Daniel:
    - 2 references to a demonic being known as the “prince of Persia” (10.13, 20),
    - 2 references to an angelic messenger named “Gabriel” (8.16, 9.21),
    - 3 references to the angel “Michael” who has special care for Israel (10.13, 21; 12.1).
    - Note: Gabriel/Michael each mentioned 2x in the NT (Lk. 1.19, 26; Jud 9; Rev. 12.7)
  - In the Epistles, a cluster of terms repeatedly refer to angelic hierarchies:<sup>2</sup>
    - These were all originally created by Christ:

“For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him.” (Col. 1.16)
    - Some of them rebelled (2 Pet. 2.4) and were defeated through Christ’s work:

“[God] disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.” (Col. 2.15)

“[Christ is seated] far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.” (Eph. 1.21)
    - Others remained loyal to God and serve his purposes in the world:

“Are [the angels] not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?” (Heb. 1.14; cf. Mat. 18.10)
    - Angelic beings now see God’s gospel plan being revealed through the church:

“...through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” (Eph. 3.10)
    - Until the end, demonic powers will continue to war against God and his church:

“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Eph. 6.12)
    - In the end, all supernatural forces will be completely subdued before God:

“...the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.” (1 Cor. 15.24-25)
- While there is much mystery here, one thing is clear: there is a spiritual realm and “invisible war” going on all around us, and this conflict is intimately connected with our own spiritual journey and struggles.

<sup>1</sup> All statistical data under this heading taken from the ESV.

<sup>2</sup> See John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1979), 273.

### The Reality behind Human Darkness

- Demonic powers gain influence through pagan rulers and false religion:
  - In addition to the “prince of Persia” (Dan. 10.13, 20), consider how many times in Scripture an evil ruler tried to eradicate the line of Christ: Athaliah (2 Ki. 11.1), Haman (Est. 3.8-9), Herod (Mat. 2.16).
  - “...what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God.” (1 Cor. 10.20)
- Demonic powers gain influence over human beings through appetites and emotions:
  - “...so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.” (1 Cor. 7.5)
  - “...their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.” (Phil. 3.19)
  - “...do not let the sun go down on your anger... give no opportunity to the devil.” (Eph. 4.26-27)
  - “But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare...” (1 Tim. 6.9; cf. Acts 5.3)
- They also gain influence over human beings through fear:
  - “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, [Jesus] himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.” (Heb. 2.14-15)
- They also gain influence through unbelief:
  - “Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.” (Jn. 8.43-45)
  - “In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers...” (2 Cor. 4.4)
- Nevertheless, the work of Jesus has bound the devil (Mk. 3.27; Jn. 12.31), thus:
  - Limiting the power of demonic forces to deceive the nations (Rev. 20.3),
  - Protecting believers from demonic harm (1 Jn. 4.4, 5.18),
  - Empowering the church to stand against demonic assault (Eph. 6.10-20).

### The Reality of Spiritual Warfare

- Angels and demons, however powerful, were created by, and remain subject to, God.
- The spiritual realm, though invisible, is entangled with the visible realm of human life and history.
- Spiritual beings are therefore involved in the church’s trials and triumphs in the world. Though we may not know the extent of this involvement, we must not doubt the fact.
- Believers need not be scared. Even at their worst, demonic powers are chained and subject to the restraints of our loving heavenly Father (Job 1.12, 2.6; cf. 2 Pet. 2.4, Jude 6).
- Yet believers should beware of “the schemes of the devil” (Eph. 6.11):
 

The devil seldom attacks openly, preferring darkness to light... Sometimes he roars like a lion, but more often is subtle as a serpent. We must not imagine, therefore, that open persecution and temptation to sin are his only or even his commonest weapons; he prefers to seduce us into compromise and deceive us into error....

The ‘wiles of the devil’ take many forms, but he is at his wiliest when he succeeds in persuading people that he does not exist. To deny his reality is to expose ourselves the more to his subtlety. Dr Lloyd-Jones expresses his conviction on this matter in the following terms: ‘I am certain that one of the main causes of the ill state of the Church today is the fact that the devil is being forgotten. All is attributed to us; we have all become so psychological in our attitude and thinking. We are ignorant of this great objective fact, the being, the existence of the devil, the adversary, the accuser, and his “fiery darts”.’<sup>3</sup>
- Finally, we must actively rely on the power of Jesus through the Holy Spirit: “be strong *in the Lord* and *in the strength of his might*. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand...” (Eph. 6.10).

<sup>3</sup> Stott, *Ephesians*, 265, citing Martin Lloyd-Jones, *The Christian Warfare, An Exposition of Eph. 6:10-13*.