

The Warfare Worldview of Ephesians

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When was the last time you prayed against the devil? Or, attributed your physical pain or emotional vexations to a demonic spirit?

If it has been some time (or never), it's probably because you live in 21st Century America, where the evils of the world—moral and natural—are explained by biological factors and scientific calculation. But if you lived in 16th Century Europe, it would be a different story.

In the Medieval period, ghosts and goblins, spirits and demons were regularly blamed for spiritual and physical tribulations. In that world, God and the angelic realm were not excluded from visible world. Sovereign over all spirits, God ruled the world and nearly every struggle in life could be connected to spiritual realities. Today, faith in God, especially Christian faith has been demystified. Religion is a private affair. And God, in the public square and in the halls of learning, is an unwelcome guest.

As a result, Bible-believing Christians must fight against the prevailing, scientific worldview handed to them by television and education. Whereas leading scientists once gazed into the heavens to worship God, now scientifically-minded man is blind to the enchanted world in which we live. This is not to say we should go back to the pre-scientific age of vain superstitions, but as Scripture testifies, we should see that the events on earth are part of God's cosmic conflict with evil.

This fall, as we remember the Protestant Reformation, the supernatural makeup of the world and the spiritual warfare that the God's Word invites is but one unified truth we need to recover. As John Calvin commented in his words to King Francis, "When the light shining from on high in a measure shattered his darkness, . . . [Satan] began to shake off his accustomed drowsiness and to take up arms." Indeed, faithful preaching of God's Word will be met with spiritual opposition, and thus we who seek to make Christ known must be steeled by the word of God, which is the sword of the Spirit.

For that reason, we come to the book of Ephesians and the faithful examples of the Protestant Reformers.

Martin Luther and the Devil

It was 500 years ago that Martin Luther, an Augustinian Monk with an earned doctorate in theology, nailed 95 theses to the Wittenburg Castle Door. Much like presenting a theological paper at a society of academics, he intended to start an academic discussion about the sale of indulgences. What resulted, however, was the formation of the Protestant Church—a people who recovered a biblical understanding of the gospel and who committed themselves solely to what Scripture taught about Christ, grace, and faith.

At the front of this Reformation, as it would come to be known, was Martin Luther. As every biographer notes, Luther's conscience was tormented by his sin. He would sometimes confess his sins for hours, literally exhausting the confessors who heard him. And what drove him to such madness? It was the holiness of God and the active presence of the devil in the world.

Indeed, to read Luther's own works, he was regularly speaking of the devil and speaking to the devil—cursing him, taunting him, and profaning his name. For Luther, spiritual warfare was hardly a symbolic application of Ephesians 6. It was for him, like everyone else in his day, a daily battle. Satan, for the Medieval Christian, was not a distant foe. He and his hordes were present throughout the world, and aggressive against the church.

Thus, one of the factors impelling Luther to (re)discover the doctrine of justification by faith alone was the threat of spiritual evil. A threat that perhaps he overestimated in his colorful speech, but clearly something we underestimate in our technological world.

The Spiritual Warfare in Ephesians

Enter Ephesians. If any book captures our attention today concerning spiritual warfare, it's Paul's prison epistle to the Ephesians. Ephesians 6 is the classic text on spiritual warfare, and one we often remind ourselves when we can't make sense of troubles in 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" (v.12).

Ephesians 6 is a key passage on spiritual warfare. But in the book of Ephesians, it is only the tip of the iceberg. In fact, if we read the whole book through, we find that spiritual warfare, in the form of Christ's victory and evil's attack, is present in every chapter. And thus, as we prepare ourselves to study Ephesians this fall and to see all the glorious Reformation truths it contains, it is worth noticing the cosmic conflict that Ephesians identifies and the way in which Christ, who is seated in the heavenly places, has won and is now winning the battle on earth.

If you are interested in that, go read Paul's six chapters with an eye to all the places where evil or the devil are mentioned. Notice too every place where Christ's authority over the powers is mentioned. You can also read more on my blog, where I have highlighted a number of passages in Ephesians where spiritual warfare is manifested.

From Ephesus to Us

As Acts 18–19 report, magic arts and spiritual oppression were well known. Thus, Paul in writing to the Ephesians whom he knew so well (he spent more time with that church than any other), paid great attention to the spiritual battle engulfing the church. In the days of Martin Luther, the battle was just as fierce. As the light of the gospel broke into Europe, the armies of Satan raged against it. The same will be true today; wherever light shines brightest, evil will fight hardest.

Praise be to God, in 1st C. Ephesus, and 16th Century Germany, and 21st C. America, the Spirit of Christ continues to uphold his church and empower his saints. While the clouds of darkness threaten, the risen Christ will not fail. As Martin Luther teaches us to sing,

And though this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,

We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us:

The Prince of Darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo! his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.

Therefore, as we remember the gospel recovered in the Reformation, let us remember the spiritual warfare that Luther knew so well. Let us, like him, plant ourselves in the word, and pray for God to grant light to eyes blinded by Satan, so that Christ would redeem his people and build his church. In that way, may God grant us gospel vision in our study of Ephesians, so that we will be ready for the battle when it comes our way.