

June 16, 2013

II Kings 6:8-17 / II Corinthians 10:1-5 / Ephesians 6:10-12
The Weapons God Gives For the True Battle We Are Engaged In

As we start today, I'd like to draw your attention back to our pass-age in II Kings. Because in that one short account of Elisha and his servant, from so long ago, we have in miniature, a vivid picture of the two types of people who dwell side-by-side in nearly every church.

The first group of people are Christians who have adopted a biblical view of the universe, and are therefore willing to admit that physical and biological beings are not the only one's that inhabit the realms of this planet. They are willing to admit, along with the Bible, that we share this time and space domain with invisible, spiritual entities possessing both good and evil natures.

Yet there are other Christians who read their Bibles, and see what they say, yet have chosen instead to adopt a Western scientific view of the world, where they honestly question or just plain refuse to believe in the existence of angels, Satan, demons, evil spirits -- what Paul calls in these verses, the "powers" and "authorities" and "principalities" and "forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

And interestingly, according to the last Gallup poll on the topic: The vast majority of all Christians polled (70%) do believe (39% of them very strongly) that a person can be under the influence of spiritual forces such as demons or evil spirits.

In fact, it is only the decided minority (21% of all polled) who are at best skeptical about their reality or reject the influence of supernatural forces outright (8% being unsure). An even higher number (75%) said they believe in angels of a good nature.

And I'm not saying Elisha's servant didn't believe in them. He may very well have. But he was not sensitive to their presence, nor could he see them like Elisha did, and he even seems to have been surprised after Elisha prays for his eyes to be opened and he is given the ability to see the invisible, spiritual entities which had been there all along.

That's what Paul is talking about in this passage when he says our struggle, or battle, or the ongoing war we wage to remain faithful to Christ, and true to His purposes, is ***"NOT against flesh and blood."***

That is, it's not against people, even if people are the one's lashing out at us, or persecuting us, or causing us to question our faith or make us doubt.

The early Christians were frequently persecuted -- at times with intense cruelty -- men and women were tortured, and crucified, and beheaded, and impaled, tarred, and lit on fire, or fed to the lions in the coliseum for their devotion or allegiance to Jesus.

Yet Paul says we should not see ***THEM*** as the ultimate source of our struggle or the primary cause of our troubles. ***"Our struggle,"*** he says, ***"is NOT against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."***

And LISTEN: When you're in a fight, or a struggle, or a war, it's imperative that you focus on the real source of the conflict -- the one who ultimately keeps it going -- like the allies did at one point later in WWII, when they made an intense effort to have Hitler assassinated. Because they realized the war would never end as long as Hitler was alive. In any war, you must focus your attention of the real source of the conflict.

And in the war with sin and intense temptation, or self-loathing and self-destructive thoughts or habits when we experience strong urges to hurt others, or do wrong, or participate in evil, we need to remember:
"Our struggle is NOT against flesh and blood... but the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

Because according to the Bible, we live in a universe where the physical and spiritual co-exist together -- the one being invisible to the other. That is, unless God -- as with the Elisha's servant -- sovereignly chooses to remove the blinders from our eyes and divinely enable us to be sensibly aware of their presence and activity, or make the invisible, visible to us -- even if only for a short time.

In Scripture we have abundant examples of this. Balaam is riding down the road on his donkey, unaware that an angel of the Lord is waiting ahead, sword drawn, ready to slay him for his disobedience -- an angel, by the way, that his donkey saw, but he couldn't -- until we read in v. 31: ***"The the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with his sword drawn."***

We see the same with reference to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is invisible to us on most all occasions. Yet God does -- *on select occasions* -- sovereignly choose to manifest His invisible presence to His people in visible ways, as when He manifested His presence in what looked like the form of a dove descending on JESUS at His baptism.

Or when He manifested His presence to the disciples, by the sound of a mighty rushing wind, and in the tongues of fire that came to rest upon them in the upper room on Pentecost -- allowing His people to both hear and see, what is normally both silent and invisible.

It's the difference between what we call the omnipresence and the manifest presence of God. The Spirit of God is **ALWAYS** present everywhere, in all places, at all times -- there is nowhere we can go to escape from His presence -- as David makes so clear in Ps. 139.

Yet, on certain occasions (and God alone knows why) He chooses to let us hear what is normally silent / sense what is often undetectable to our human senses, and see (with eyes given to us by Him) what is most often invisible to us at other times in our lives.

And the same is true with evil spirits or demons. At least, that's what Paul wants us to know. There is spiritual activity going on in the heavenly realms or spiritual realms all the time -- *both good and evil in nature* -- though today Paul's focus is on the evil.

And although we cannot, most often, see the entities behind it all, we can frequently see the results in such things as: Self-hatred, rage, acts of violence, paralyzing fear, war, cruelty, evil, oppression, injustice, genocide, ethnic cleansing, human trafficking, terrorism, concentration camps, torture, sexual abuse, persecution of the church, spiritual apathy, chaos, intense temptation that seem to come out of nowhere and for no reason, addiction, rape, abortion, and so on.

Sometimes we can sense it, and feel it, or see it (or the results of it) and sometimes we cannot. But don't be fooled! It's still there and the activity is going on even when you can't. Because according to Paul we not only co-exist together, we co-exist in such a way that those invisible spiritual realities he speaks about actually exert an influence upon the lives of people -- tempting them, oppressing them, spawning evil desires, and causing them to want (or to actually do) the evil things God explicitly forbids!

And you know what I find most interesting (and I actually see as a good thing)? Belief in demons or evil spirits has actually risen dramatically in the past 23 years. In 1990 only 55% (just over half of all Christians) believed that such entities were real and could influence people's lives. But by 2007 it had risen to 70%, where it remains, if not slightly higher.

Though the same study also found some discouraging news: That although belief in angels and demons and evil spirits had risen dramatically, belief in Satan and the Holy Spirit had declined, with 59% of all Christians saying "Satan is just a symbol of evil" / and 58% saying the Holy Spirit is only, "a symbol of God's power or presence, but not a living entity" (with 9% being unsure).

That means that although 70% believe in demons and evil spirits / only 35% believe in the reality of the Holy Spirit. The One God has given to us to help us overcome their influence upon our lives and this world. It's a widening gap that can only lead to fear, anxiety, superstition, paranoia, powerlessness and people being unable to "stand firm" against "the devil's schemes."

And I don't know where all of you presently stand on this issue. But I'm going to ask you that if you have mistakenly fallen into that 59% who believe Satan is not real, or that 58% who believe the Holy Spirit is not real, that you repent of your unbelief -- *and come back to a biblical way of thinking and believing* -- not only for you, but for the sake of Christ, and His Gospel, and His church, and its efforts in carrying out His work in this world.

LISTEN: *You can't do battle -- you won't do battle -- if you don't believe your enemy exists, and therefore don't believe you are engaged in any type of spiritual conflict.*

And I know that's a long introduction! Sorry! You thought I was done, right? No, I'm just getting started! Because I can't finish without addressing 2 more things: The most popular (though irrational) explanation for the existence of evil (using this text) and a few experiences I've had that have served to convince me of the reality of what Paul shares today.

So, **FIRST**, let me address the very popular -- *though irrational and untenable assertion* -- that *"evil is simply the absence of good."* An explanation I have heard so many times I've lost track!

It's a way (I believe) of admitting (as any rational person must) that evil things happen, without at the same time lowering themselves to admit what they consider to be the antiquated, archaic and irrational biblical answer that behind it all stands a "personal, thinking, scheming, being" which the Bible calls the Evil One, Satan, the King of Pride, Lucifer, the Prince of the Power of the Air, or the Deceiver.

And the Greek word used here in Eph. 6:11 and translated "the devil," is the word, *"diablos,"* from which we get our English word, "diabolical," or "full of evil and wickedness."

Yet, to the suggestion that, "evil is the absence of good," it must be pointed out that even if one goes by nothing but logic (apart from faith, or the Bible) the absence of good would not lead to evil -- if there was no such thing as evil to take notice the lack, and jump in to fill in the gap.

As J. I. Packer argues: ***"The natural response to the denial of Satan's existence is to ask, 'who then runs his business?' since temptations which look and feel like expressions of cunning, destructive, malice remain facts of daily life... 'The realization that life is flawed' (as novelist John Updike says) at least, 'admits the***

possibility of a Fall, of a cause behind that Fall, or of Satan... Belief in Satan is not illogical," he says, "for it fits the facts. Inept to the point of idiocy, however, is disbelief in Satan in a world like ours..."

It's true. If there is no true entity called Satan, or evil, then the absence of good would lead to nothing, not evil! Evil can only slip in to fill the gap left by the absence of good, if it already exists! If this world is NOT fallen, and there is NO active scheming force of evil at work in it, then doing nothing good would lead to nothing getting done! It would NOT lead to evil!

Such an answer, though popular, lacks rational credibility -- **UNLESS** -- you are first willing to concede that "evil," like water behind a dam created by the good) exists as a tangible force, or power, or principle, or reality, just waiting for the opportunity to move into action, as the Bible suggests.

Yet, Paul tells us here that that "evil" doesn't simply exist / it actually plots, and plans, and schemes. It's not passive like water behind a dam. / It goes on the offensive! / That's why Paul can use military language and speak of our need to wear armor. Because he wants us to KNOW that "evil" is personal and scheming and launches coordinated, well-calculated, precisely timed attacks!

One commentator even suggests that the word "schemes" (in the context) carries with it the idea of: ***"Strategizing with tactical shrewdness and ingenious deception"*** -- with military precision.

That's also why he tells us we can only prevail against him if we, ***"stand strong in the LORD and in HIS mighty power."*** Alone, we are no match for Satan, but standing strong in CHRIST, and availing ourselves of HIS MIGHTY POWER, we have all we need.

Although Satan is powerful God is infinitely more powerful! Although Satan is "the strong man," Jesus is the infinitely stronger man who is able to bind him, and disarm him, and defeat him and protect us from his schemes! In all this we must never forget: "Greater is He who is in us, than he who is in the world."

Which brings me to my **LAST** point -- sharing a couple real life experiences I've had which have served to convince me of the reality of what Paul speaks of here in today's text -- knowing that some of you, if you don't know me, or have adopted the western scientific view of the world, which doesn't allow for such things, surely will take what I'm about to tell you in the wrong way.

I've shared this with some of you before in private, though today I feel I need to share it from the pulpit. Because it was these experiences (along with others) that convinced a skeptic like me (who as an engineer in my 20's had adopted that western scientific worldview which did not allow for such things) that the worldview Paul gives us here in this passage is not archaic, or antiquated, or the irrational view of bygone years, but the way things still are.

So here goes. And I speak as one who does not (to the best of my knowledge) have any form of mental illness! It was November of 1988 and I had been asked by people in my church to teach a Bible Study on "Satanism." / Because starting in April of that year, and going through November, police had discovered in our area, six, of what would end up being the dismembered bodies of 12 prostitutes -- one found less than a couple miles from the church.

Yet, rather than just tell them what I thought Satanists believed, or make stuff up (as I'd known others to do), I went to a used book store, and bought a used Satanic Bible. It was a big book, with a

black cover, and on the cover was a circle surrounding a silver pentagram, and written with ink, were handwritten words, scribbled around that circle in a language I did not recognize.

I'd been reading and teaching on it for about a month before we got to Sunday, November 6, 1988 -- my birthday (and just two days before another body was found). My parents had driven down to Westport, MA with my twin sister and her family, so we could celebrate our 32nd birthday together. And by the time everyone left, and Nancy and I cleaned up, it was about 11:45 p.m.

So, we did our usual nighttime routine. We prayed together, and then, after we prayed, Nancy went to sleep, and I continued praying, since that was my favorite time of the day to pray. I prayed 10 minutes or so, until about midnight -- when all of a sudden Nancy screamed!

Startled by the scream, I opened my eyes. And as I did, I saw a glowing, florescent green head of a man floating over our bed, about a foot below the ceiling, and moving from Nancy's side of the bed to my side. I can still see it.

He was bald, had a fat face, with a triple chin, and a prominent wart on his left cheek. He had a throat, and shoulders, but from the shoulders down it all tapered off to a point, like the wisp or tail of a comet -- about 4 feet in length. And as he floated above the bed, his eyes were locked onto mine, though otherwise, he looked dead.

He, or it, floated slowly about 6 to eight feet, across the room, and then it disappeared. And somewhat shocked, and a tad bit scared, I woke Nancy and said, "*Did you see that?*" "*See what?*" she said. "*That thing,*" I said, as I proceeded to describe it. "*No,*" she said, "*I didn't.*"

So, a bit confused, I asked her: *"Then why did you scream?"*
 To which she answered: *"Because in my dream all these hands
 were reaching out to strangle me."*

I'll tell you, up until that point I was be part of that 45% or so that did not really believe evil spirits or demons were real. Yet all that changed, because not only did that happen, but our dog, Sasha, who slept on the rug beside my bed every single night for the first two years we lived there, never came upstairs again! In fact, from that point on, she would look up the stairs and cower -- like she was seeing something.

I kid you not. Ask Nancy. And not only that, but 4 and 1/2 months later, at about 2-3 a.m., on March 26, 1989 (I know because it was Easter Sunday and I was scheduled to preach at the oceanside sunrise service on Westport beach) both Nancy and I were awakened out of our sleep by a very loud noise that sounded like a large vase being smashed on our floor.

And I'll tell you, I sat up in a flash! And as I did I saw a round, glowing, and once again florescent green -- ball of light. It was about a foot or foot and a half in diameter and it started at the far end of our bedroom (a different one!) and came right at us, and then went right through the roof above our heads.

And because both of us heard the loud crashing noise, we both got up to search for what it could have been, finding nothing. I am not making this up, folks!

In fact, a few months later one of our foster daughters woke us out of our sleep screaming, only to tell us that when she woke up, see saw two lime green eyes floating about a foot above her head -- even though we had purposely, never mentioned anything, about our experiences to her.

It was then that I and two pastor friends decided to go through the house, praying in each room, and anointing the doorposts with oil. And I also took some gasoline, went out in the back yard, and burned that Satanic Bible to ashes -- at which point we never had a problem again.

And I tell you all that because it was those experiences (and others since then) that have taught me that what Paul says is true. I know it's in the bible, and I should have believed it anyway, but it wasn't until those things happened that I came to affirm the reality of, ***"the forces of evil in the heavenly realms,"*** and the need to ***"be strong in the LORD, and in HIS mighty power."***

No one needs to try and convince me that Satan, or demons, or evil spirits, or angels are real! I take it as a given, because I've not only seen the RESULTS of their activity, God has "graciously opened my eyes on occasion" (like He did with Balaam and Elisha's servant) and I've actually seen THEM.

He made the invisible, visible, I believe, to show me the reality of the battle (that even I as a pastor) can forget we are engaged in. A battle where I've had the privilege of seeing the absolute power of Jesus over all those things.

Before, I was scared of such things. But now I know that by the power of the Holy Spirit (who is not just a symbol, but very real my friends!) and in the name of Jesus, all I need do is command the spirits to be gone in the name of Jesus, they must obey me!