

SPIRITUAL WARFARE IS OFTEN EARTHY, NOT MYSTICAL

By Gordon Bals

How often do you think about the enemy who accuses us before God day and night (Revelation 12:7-12)? The one who likes to rob and kill and destroy (John 10:10)? Many people I know don't want to talk about spiritual warfare or about evil. Some think we give evil too much credit and others think if we talk about evil we will just stir it up. No matter how we approach evil - he is not going to go away - and he is not going to decide to start having mercy on God's children.

Spiritual warfare is often a misunderstood concept in the church because, "We are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places," (Ephesians 6:12). Because our enemy is not recognizable to the natural eye his work is often misunderstood. Many believers think spiritual warfare primarily involves personally fighting these spirits we don't see. In such a context, spiritual warfare might involve discerning what the spirits are and praying against them or casting spirits out of people, homes, or groups (like a school or business). Although spiritual warfare certainly involves prayer, I don't believe that praying against them is our primary mode of warfare. In Power Encounters David Powlinson says, "Spiritual warfare with the power of evil is a matter of consistently and repeatedly turning from darkness to light in the midst of as-

sailing darkness. Christians fight spiritual warfare by repentance, faith, and obedience." The Scriptures teach that spiritual warfare has more to do with humility - with the ability to submit to God and resist evil. Our prayers should be directed more towards asking for help and spiritual sustenance to humbly submit to the Lord and resist evil, rather than seeing them as spiritual missiles to defeat the evil around and in us. We are not the mighty warrior, Jesus is. As we submit to him and resist evil he fights for us. Although our fight is

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not against flesh and blood it is often lived out through flesh and blood interactions where we need strength and faith for endurance.

Two of the major passages in the New Testament epistles that address evil (1 Peter 5:5-11 & James 4:6-10) begin with a refrain from the book of Proverbs (3:34), "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." They go on to describe how to humbly battle evil. The directives in both of the passages involve action that can only be taken hold of through humility. Humility that leads to submis-

sion and resistance is our greatest form of spiritual warfare. I want to review one of those passages (1 Peter 5:5-11) to help us think about spiritual warfare.

After Peter says, "God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble," he goes on to say, "So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time he will lift you up in honor," (v.6). Humbling ourselves under God's mighty hand means to, "Follow the Lord along paths that confront our pride." Both of

the passages that address spiritual warfare mentioned above are parts of letters to churches in the midst of trials and suffering. In such situations we often try to get out of the difficulty instead of letting it work on us. Trials and troubles are an opportunity to become aware of how much we trust ourselves and insist that the world work the way we want it to. Trials

and suffering help us recognize our lack of control and tempt us to turn into trusting ourselves instead of turning towards the Lord and trusting him more. Repentance involves turning away from trusting yourself and turning towards responding to God and what he is calling us to. Each of the directives in 1 Peter involves a movement away from self-reliance and towards a deeper trust in God. This is the earthy part of spiritual warfare.

For instance, someone might come to me for counseling

because a sinful pattern has just been exposed. Counseling is a path that confronts a person's pride. It involves "humbling themselves under the mighty hand of God." Take a man whose wife finds him surfing the internet and looking at porn. Such a pattern of addiction is fostered by refraining from intimate relationships, being secretive about struggles, and avoiding painful discussions. Counseling involves turning towards intimacy, being honest about struggles and having painful discussions. When a man comes for counseling after something like that has been revealed he is confronting his pride. When a sin like pornography use is uncovered it is a grand opportunity to reach out and find God's sustaining grace that will help a person to walk along new and redemptive paths. However, evil will try to push someone walking new paths back into their self-reliant ways.

Such a person must humbly assent to God's leading and look outside themselves and their normal ways of walking in the world to find the help they need. That is spiritual warfare and prayers in such a situation are offered more to seek the Lord's help to stand up and walk a new path. As they do this the Lord tears down the evil around and in them. However, evil will come against this. Spiritual warfare then involves resisting evil's pull. In the example above a man turning from an addiction to porn will have to resist the pull towards isolation, deceiving others, or numbing his pain. Such living is earthy not mystical.

Peter goes on to encourage spiritual warfare in the midst of trials. He says, "Cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you," (1 Peter 5:7). I think Peter

is saying, "God knows you want nice congenial relationships even with Him and that you don't want to grow into the type of trust he values in a relationship. So he lets you go through things that will stir your passion towards Him so you have something to talk about with him. Evil will deceive you and enflame your flesh and push you to turn away from God when you are in trials or trouble. He will mock your trust and belief in God so you feel dead to him. Don't believe it. Try to resist prideful indifference to God and instead talk with Him about whatever is going on inside of you." When you are going through a trial something precious to you

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has been challenged. It could be your reputation (sin) your ability to protect yourselves (suffering) or your desire to control your world (loss). Because something you love is being threatened you will have anxiety or angst. Evil will tell you the anxiety or angst is there because God doesn't care or you are not performing well enough. Both of those lies are attempts to bully you away from God. Spiritual warfare is resisting evil (stepping over the anxiety or angst you feel that God doesn't care or won't listen) and casting all your anxiety upon him.

The next thing we are to do is, "To be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour," (1 Peter 5:8). During difficult times we usually prefer to go in two directions that are opposed to "sober watchful-

ness." We like to get busy or we like to numb ourselves. For instance, I will often see someone in counseling after they experienced something they thought they never would (e.g. their spouse had an affair or they lost their job). Such a difficulty is humbling and evil will play on this person's pride and tell them they need to gain back a sense of control and find something they can do that will right the situation. Thus, they might spend time checking phone records of their spouse or scouring the internet for job possibilities. These things can be good to do but they are often done at the expense of humbly and soberly watching and listening to what God is saying. As David

Powlinson says, "*Spiritual warfare involves consistently and repeatedly turning from darkness to light in the midst of assailing darkness.*" That might mean walking away from checking the phone records or turning off the computer.

In trials, Paul encourages you to be patient (Romans 12:2) and James encourages you to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry (James 1:19). You are to slow down and pay attention. That is spiritual warfare. You are not to speed up and do something.

When my friend and counseling partner Dewayne died I coveted silence. I spent hours at night trying to listen and hear what the Lord could say to me in light of his tragic death. For months the only passage I could read or meditate on was, "Look here, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit.' How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it's here a little while, then it's gone. What you ought to say is, 'If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do

this or that.' Otherwise you are boasting about your own plans, and all such boasting is evil," (James 4:13-16). I kept hearing God talk about my boasting and my trust in my plans. It took me a while to ingest the largeness of his message. In The Problem of Pain C.S. Lewis said, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." Trials or troubles are a time for us to listen and to pay attention, but we often follow our fleshly pride and speed up or and try to gain control or numb ourselves. Instead, spiritual warfare is soberly slowing down, and watching and listening for what God is saying.

Peter goes on to say, "Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world," (v.9). Here, Peter is encouraging believers to stand up to self-contempt and fight the tendency to isolate when you are in a trial. As I have watched and walked with people as they have journeyed through trials I have seen how reflexive it is for them to blame themselves. Years ago I was driving

my friend Jeff Bannon home from work. He was in the midst of watching his life be ripped away from him because he had Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS). Jeff was a man rooted in the scriptures and the truth of God. Because evil was so attacking him in his trial he began to ask me, "Have I gotten this because of some sin?" As we talked about it I said, "Jeff, if you have that disease because of sin then there would be two of us sitting back there." In some ways I know Jeff even voiced his fears to hear me speak to them. Jeff knew that trials help you to face the foolishness of isolation so you more naturally embrace community. He was reaching out for that. It was spiritual warfare.

As a church we need to grow in doing earthy spiritual warfare. It would be good for us to get better at moving into and not away from sin, sickness and death. We let those things be Satan's territory and we listen to him tell us we can't bring grace to the sinful, help to the suffering or peace to those who have been treacherously violated by the fallenes of this world. We would rather fight it mystically through

prayer. We have over spiritualized spiritual warfare. We want it to be mystical and ethereal not gritty and humble. Jesus did not defeat evil on the cross through intercession! Spiritual warfare involves accepting someone who has done something wrong, trying to patiently sooth your own or someone else's suffering, or sitting tenderly with a person who has lost someone close to them. If we don't draw near to each other in trials and troubles how will we remember that "the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by our brotherhood throughout the world"?

Spiritual warfare is a battle against an unseen force. Often we are to move towards the ways the unseen forces are causing chaos and suffering not just pray against them. Humility, or a willingness to incarnate the Gospel where we are called to do it, is a primary mode of spiritual warfare. God will call us towards this and he will support us in it. We don't fight alone. The Holy Spirit fights in us and for us. As we gain the humility to submit to him and follow him and resist evil, he fights it off on our behalf. We do

DAYMARK NEWS

We wanted to express our overwhelming gratefulness for the generous year-end financial gifts we received. Over \$23,000 came in during the month of December! Given the present economic culture we were more than overwhelmed and grateful. Amazingly, the regular monthly contributions together with our year end giving means we ended the year on budget. Thank you! As you are able please pray for Bill, Julie and Gordon as they meet each week with the people the Lord sends to Daymark.

Bill will soon be starting work on his dissertation for his Doctor of Ministry in Pastoral Counseling. Pray for him as he adds this to his existing work.

Gordon is teaching his Grace from Head to Heart Seminar at St. Peter's Anglican Church. If you are interested in purchasing audio files and a workbook contact Sharla Rose (our office administrator) at sharla.rose@gmail.com

Continue to pray for the publication of Gordon's book Common Ground: Disarming Evil and Finding Redemption in Marriage. Some interesting possibilities are emerging and we hope to have some definite news in the next newsletter.

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