

## PAUL AND SPIRITUAL WARFARE



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Many have linked spiritual warfare with missions.<sup>1</sup> Whether this link is accurate or not depends to a great extent on what we mean by *spiritual warfare*.<sup>2</sup> If by *spiritual warfare* we mean particular prayer practices such as “casting down” heavenly powers, we have little biblical warrant. If, however, we mean by *spiritual warfare* what the image means in the New Testament, missions and the Christian life *are* spiritual warfare. This spiritual battle includes but is not limited to prayer.

Though writing prior to the common use of the phrase *spiritual warfare*, Roland Allen similarly recognized the essential role of God’s divine intervention in the advance of the gospel. Allen writes, “It is faith [in God’s working] which we need today. We need to subordinate our methods, our systems, ourselves to that faith. We often speak as if we had to do simply with weak and sinful men. We say that we cannot trust our converts to do this or that, that we cannot commit the truth to men destitute of this or that par-

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<sup>1</sup>The emphasis here must be *spiritual warfare*; the New Testament does not use the warfare metaphor against people.

<sup>2</sup>For one discussion, see “Appendix: Statement on spiritual warfare: A Working Group Report,” in *Deliver Us from Evil: An Uneasy Frontier in Christian Mission*, ed. A. Scott Moreau, Tokunboh Adeyemo, David G. Burnett, Bryant L. Myers and Hwa Yung (Monrovia, Calif.: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 2002), pp. 309-12.

ticular form of education or training. We speak as if we had to do with mere men. We have not to do with mere men; we have to do with the Holy Ghost.”<sup>3</sup>

One could treat the subject of spiritual warfare in greater detail or breadth, but to remain concise I will focus on two primary topics: the image of spiritual warfare in Paul's letters, especially Ephesians; and Paul's confrontations with the demonic in evangelistic settings, what missiologists often call “power encounters” (especially Acts 13:6-12; 16:16-18; and 19:11-20).

### SPIRITUAL WARFARE IN PAUL'S LETTERS

Paul often portrayed the Christian life in terms of spiritual conflict. These conflict images are not limited to, but do include, the issue of conflict with superhuman powers. Even so, some modern approaches to spiritual warfare often miss crucial elements of Paul's teaching on the subject. The most commonly used text regarding spiritual warfare is Ephesians 6:10-20, which I address here in some detail.<sup>4</sup>

**The background.** Ancient thinkers often portrayed life or their work as a battle; in a world where virtually everyone knew about warfare, the image carried great weight. Thus everyone would understand when Paul speaks of fighting the good fight (1 Tim 1:18; 6:12; 2 Tim 4:7). They could portray destroying false ideologies as “tearing down strongholds” and the like.<sup>5</sup> When Paul speaks of destroying speculations and capturing thoughts for Christ (2 Cor 10:3-5), he may refer to challenging false ideologies (like those of his opponents in Corinth). Ancient philosophers also spoke of waging war against the passions, so when Paul speaks of conflict with passions in such language (Rom 7:23; cf. “peace” in Rom 8:6), his audience will understand him.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, on a deeper level, humanity is at enmity with God and can be reconciled in peace with him only through Christ (Rom 5:1, 10-11; Col 1:20-22).

While Greek usage made explicit warfare understandable to Paul's audience, Scripture had already provided the theology of superhuman con-

<sup>3</sup>Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), pp. 149-50.

<sup>4</sup>I take Ephesians to be a genuinely Pauline letter. See the argument in Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), pp. 2-61, 114-30.

<sup>5</sup>See, e.g., Seneca *Lucil.* 109.8-9; Diogenes *Ep.* 10; and sources in Craig S. Keener, *1-2 Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 217.

<sup>6</sup>See e.g., Diogenes *Ep.* 5; 12; and sources in Craig S. Keener, *Romans* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2009), pp. 94-95.

flict, even if the details were not always clear. More recently, Jesus may have figuratively portrayed his disciples' ministry of deliverance from demons as Satan's fall from heaven (Lk 10:17-20).<sup>7</sup> But such conflicts already appeared in the Old Testament as well. Jacob struggled all night with an angel before facing Esau—a spiritual battle that preempted a physical one (Gen 32:9-31; Hos 12:4). While Joshua fought the Amalekites on a physical level, Moses was upholding his people spiritually, holding up the rod that symbolized God's power on their behalf (Ex 17:8-13). Joshua encountered the heavenly commander of the Lord's army (Josh 5:13-15), and it was presumably the heavenly host that brought Jericho's walls down when Israel shouted (Josh 6:20; certainly it was not simply a sonic boom!).

When David heard the sound of marching in the trees, he knew that God's army had gone before him, paving the way for his victory over the Philistines (2 Sam 5:24; 1 Chron 14:15). When Elisha's aide feared the human army that surrounded their city, Elisha prayed for his eyes to be opened, and he saw the heavenly army of fiery chariots and horses (2 Kgs 6:17; for the future, cf. 2 Thess 1:7; Rev 19:11-14). As the aide's spiritual eyes were opened, the enemy army's physical eyes were blinded and they were pacified without a fight (2 Kings 6:15-23). (Elisha's own mentor, Elijah, had been caught up to heaven in a heavenly chariot; 2 Kings 2:11.) When Judah's army worshiped God, he threw their enemies into confusion, so Judah did not have to engage in any physical battle (2 Chron 20:22-25); as in Ephesians 6, the spiritual battle takes priority.

Even when physical battles proved necessary, God sent his hornet to confuse the adversaries (Deut 7:20; Josh 24:12); this hornet may well serve figuratively for his angel leading Israel (Ex 23:28 with Ex 23:20, 23; 32:34; 33:2). The angel of the Lord could strike down even Israel, though on a purely human level the judgment could be accomplished by a plague (2 Sam 24:15-17). That is, what human beings experience as natural events are not incompatible with, and often work in tandem with, superhuman intelligent causes. (See Rev 12:7-9 for the heavenly warfare surrounding Jesus' passion and exaltation in the context.) Can anyone who takes the Bible seriously

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<sup>7</sup>Cf. George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), p. 50; Gerald F. Hawthorne, *The Presence & the Power: The Significance of the Holy Spirit in the Life and Ministry of Jesus* (Dallas: Word, 1991), pp. 149-50.

deny that the spiritual issues are paramount in carrying out our mission? It may be wise, on the human level, to use various techniques and strategies for evangelism and church growth that are often known to work, but it is God that causes the growth (1 Cor 3:7). If we want his blessing, we must defer to him the credit.

**God's armor.** Besides the weapons in 2 Corinthians 10:4 noted above, Paul probably mentions spiritual "armor" in Romans 13:12, and possibly Romans 6:13 and 2 Corinthians 6:7 (the Greek term in all these cases can also be used in a nonmilitary sense). Paul's most extensive development of the image, however, comes in 1 Thessalonians 5:6-8 and Ephesians 6:10-20. By comparing the lists in 1 Thessalonians 5:8 and Ephesians 6:14-17, we see that elements of the believer's armor can prove interchangeable from one letter to another. That is, Paul draws on the particular items in the familiar Roman soldier's equipment not to pair spiritual concepts with these items in a one to one correspondence, but to illustrate that we need to be spiritually equipped. Salvation or the hope of salvation is a helmet in both cases, but Paul has the breastplate of faith and love in one case, with a breastplate of righteousness and shield of faith in the other.

We should note that his images of spiritual warfare do not involve special formulas or secret techniques, but salvation, faith, love, righteousness and so on. Without having to rule out the "mystical" elements that some see in spiritual warfare at times (as in 2 Kings 6:17), Paul's images of spiritual warfare tend to be more practical than some imagine. Most involve protective armor, and we are protected by our right relationship with God and one another.

As is also often pointed out, God's warriors, like Roman soldiers, have protection only for the front and not the back. Soldiers who discarded their shields and fled made easy targets for pursuing enemies; Roman soldiers who marched side by side, advancing on the enemy, were considered virtually invincible.<sup>8</sup> Whereas soldiers wore some pieces of armor in other circumstances, they normally donned the helmet and breastplate only for battle. The armor depicted here, therefore, involves a spiritual warrior directly engaged in spir-

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<sup>8</sup>See, e.g., Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Ant. Rom.* 9.9.9; 9.20.4; applied figuratively, Maximus of Tyre *Or.* 15.10. Retreat and flight were also both dishonorable (Polybius *Hist.* 6.37.12-13; Silius Italicus *Pun.* 10.7; Dio Chrysostom *Or.* 31.17) and severely punishable (Polybius *Hist.* 6.38.1-4; Dionysius *Ant. Rom.* 6.9.4).

itual war, with the assumption that this is the believer's normal state.

The triad of virtues envisioned in the armor of 1 Thessalonians 5:8 are a triad familiar in Paul's ethics: faith, hope and love (cf. 1 Cor 13:13; Gal 5:5-6; Col 1:4-5; 1 Thess 1:3). We will focus here, however, on the more extensive list in Ephesians 6:14-17. The expression, "armor of God" (Eph 6:11, 13) could refer simply to "armor from God" or "divine armor," but because some pieces of armor that Paul goes on to depict match items of God's own armor in Isaiah 59:17, Paul may also imply that spiritual warriors are carrying on God's own mission, functioning as his divinely protected representatives. What we can say for certain in Paul's context is that we dare not wage our battle in our own strength, but by depending on God (Eph 6:10). Western Christians have grown accustomed to depending on economic resources, technology, information and everything else but God; the way to advance the kingdom, however, is by humble recognition that God does the most important work and deserves the real credit.<sup>9</sup>

Because the first piece of armor mentioned guards the waist or loins (Eph 6:14), it refers to a "belt" or "girdle."<sup>10</sup> It may thus evoke the Roman soldier's leather apron beneath the armor or the metal belt that guarded his lower abdomen. God's warrior is protected partly by truth, which in the context of other virtues mentioned here may include integrity (cf. Eph 4:15, 25). For Paul, however, including in Ephesians, "truth" involves particularly the truth of the gospel, recognizing and living in the reality of God's claims as opposed to the world's falsehood (see Eph 1:13; 4:21, 24-25; 5:9; cf. Rom 1:18-19). Believers must live and speak consistently with God's reality.

Paul next mentions the "breastplate" (Eph 6:14), meant to protect the chest and usually made of leather with metal over it. God himself wears "righteousness as a breastplate" in Isaiah 59:17, so he can enact justice and

<sup>9</sup>Roland Allen writes, "What systems, forms, safeguards of every kind cannot do, He can do. When we believe in the Holy Ghost, we shall teach our converts to believe in Him, and when they believe in Him they will be able to face all difficulties and dangers. They will justify our faith. The Holy Ghost will justify our faith in Him. 'This is the Victory which overcometh the world, even our faith'" (*Missionary Methods*, p. 150).

<sup>10</sup>For soldiers' apparel, see G. L. Thompson, "Roman Military," *DNTB*, pp. 991-95 (here 993); James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p. 175. Many additional details treated in this section are documented in standard Ephesians commentaries (e.g., Markus Barth, *Ephesians: Introduction, Translation and Commentary*, AB 34-34A [New York: Doubleday, 1974] and Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC 42 [Waco, Tex.: Word, 1990]).

righteousness in a world that has abandoned it (Is 59:14-16). Part of God's mission into which he has invited us as agents is to work for righteousness and justice, for God's honor and the right treatment of people made in his image. Given Paul's usual usage, however (including in Eph 4:24; 5:9), this "righteousness" is also part of the new standing and character God has given us in Christ. Only those with this status and heart before God will be pure agents of his righteousness in the world.

Soldiers also would wear sandals or half boots (Eph 6:15); this was necessary preparation for battle, so that one could advance against the enemy without needing to be distracted by what one might step on.<sup>11</sup> Paul applies the image to "the gospel [good news] of peace," clearly alluding to Isaiah 52:7, where heralds bring good news of divine deliverance and restoration for God's people. Readiness to carry the gospel is necessary for God's warriors to advance and, as we shall see, prepares us for the one offensive weapon that Paul will include: the gospel message (Eph 6:17).

Roman soldiers used rectangular shields about four feet high, covered with leather. Because such shields could be vulnerable to flaming arrows, soldiers could wet their shields before battles where such projectiles were expected. As the soldiers marched together in formation, the front row's shields covering their front and the second row's lifted shields guarding both rows from above, they were considered virtually invulnerable to projectiles that individuals hurled against them. Greeks and Romans sometimes thought of sexual temptation in terms of fire or wounds, but the meaning is undoubtedly broader than that; Scripture already used arrows as a metaphor for attacks from the wicked, including slander (Ps 11:2; 57:4; 58:6-7; 64:3; cf. 120:2-4; Prov 25:18). Given the normal case of the Roman soldier, however, Paul might assume something about our defense that we sometimes neglect: we dare not break ranks. We must march together, protecting one another.

The threat for Paul is not human, as for Roman armies, but "the evil one."<sup>12</sup> While Satan is powerful, however, Paul declares that the shield of

<sup>11</sup>For soldiers' footwear, see R. J. Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1957) 5:60; Alexandra T. Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion* (Charleston, S.C.: Tempus, 2000), p. 63.

<sup>12</sup>One might read this title generically as "the evil person" (cf. possibly 2 Thess 3:3 with 3:2), but context makes explicit that the adversary is the devil (Eph 6:11), not human beings (Eph 6:12).

faith is sufficient to put out the fire on his arrows. Believers should not become fearful of Satan's attacks, but stand firm in faith. When readers think of "faith" today, because of the past two centuries of trends in philosophy we often think of a subjective feeling or of a mental ability to extinguish all doubt, both of which approaches put the focus on the believer's effort. In Jesus' teaching, however, the question is not how much faith one has (a mustard seed is enough), but in whom one has faith. In Paul's letters, Jesus and God the Father are the proper objects of faith. This is not a leap into the dark, as some generalized attitude of belief would be; this is a deliberate step into the light of God's reality. The protection afforded by faith comes not when we trust our faith, but when we trust God who is absolutely trustworthy and able to protect us.

Roman soldiers wore for battle bronze (or iron) helmets with long cheek pieces (Eph 6:17). The specific phrase, "helmet of salvation," echoes Isaiah 59:17, as in Ephesians 6:14. In the immediate context in Isaiah, this helmet referred to God acting to deliver the oppressed from the wicked (Is 59:15-16), but in the larger context of Isaiah the theme of salvation included God delivering his people and all who would turn to him among the nations (e.g., Is 46:13; 49:6; 51:5-8). The message of salvation and God's reign is also called "good news of peace" (Is 52:7; see also Eph 6:15). That context might suggest that we participate in bringing God's message of salvation; more directly, given Paul's usage in 1 Thessalonians 5:8, Paul means that we are protected by means of God's salvation.

The list climaxes, however, with the only offensive weapon in the soldier's equipment that Paul will list (Eph 6:17). This limitation is not because Roman soldiers carried only one weapon; in fact they carried more, a pike or lance (or two) as well as their sword and dagger. For believers, however, there is only one weapon—God's message—and it is logical that Paul chooses the image of the sword over the lance. The front row of an advancing legion carried heavy pikes that deterred attackers and could be thrust into them at fairly close range. Once close battle ensued, however, the heavy pikes became less practical than swords. (The sword here was the *gladius*, roughly 20-24 inches in length.) Paul envisions hand-to-hand combat, spiritual warfare not from afar at this point but at close range.

Paul declares that this one offensive weapon is the "sword of the Spirit,

which is the word of God.” While God’s word includes Scripture (which Jesus deployed against Satan at his temptation), Paul usually uses this phrase especially for the gospel (e.g., the same term in Rom 10:8, 17; the same idea in Eph 1:13). Every other piece of equipment Paul mentions protects us; the one piece that enables us to take back ground taken by the devil is the gospel—evangelism. Too often the church lives off the benefits of past revivals, waging a merely defensive battle as the world surrounds and constricts the church. The most strategic means God has provided us of reversing the direction of influence is for us to bring the good news of peace and salvation to the world, through evangelism. Evangelism is the one element of spiritual warfare that takes back Satan’s possessions. Without it, spiritual warfare is incomplete. Likewise, we are kept safe by truth, righteousness and salvation.

Heralds of peace, bearing the sword of the Spirit, will not always be well-received. People in antiquity understood that heralds were granted diplomatic immunity, and any mistreatment of an ambassador signaled an act of war against the sender. Paul, however, is “an ambassador in chains” (Eph 6:20). Rome’s earthly empire was not willing to submit to God’s greater kingdom. Yet past earthly empires, including Rome, now lie in the dust, and God’s kingdom spreads, as promised, among all peoples. Jesus will return, and God’s kingdom will prevail. In the meantime, it often spreads, not through conquest, but through its agents’ suffering, as in Paul’s case.

***Spiritual powers in Ephesians.*** Much of the church in Ephesus was converted from a background familiar with magic and spiritual power (Acts 19:18-20). Paul thus reminds believers in and around Ephesus that they have been exalted with Christ above rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms (Eph 1:20-22; 2:6). These are the sort of spiritual powers against whom spiritual warriors have their conflict in Ephesians 6:12.

Early Jewish sources used titles like these not only for earthly rulers (which are not the point here) but for the spiritual powers that stood behind them, including angels of the nations.<sup>13</sup> These heavenly powers probably appear in the likeliest original reading of Deuteronomy 32:8, and most certainly and importantly in Daniel 10.<sup>14</sup> Here the “prince of Persia” and the

<sup>13</sup>Cf. *Jub.* 15:30-32; *1 En.* 89:59-90:19; later *1 En.* 40:9; 61:10.

<sup>14</sup>See here e.g., Tremper Longman, *Daniel*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), pp. 250-51.



“prince of Greece” delay a divine messenger until Michael, Israel’s prince, helped him (Dan 10:13, 20-21). In Daniel, these princes clearly relate to the political entities that they govern, but they are not identical with them.

For those with a background in the occult, it was important to know that Jesus’ name was above every name that was invoked (Eph 1:21). This declaration is particularly important in Ephesus, where people repudiated their magic when they learned that Jesus’ name worked only for those authorized by Jesus, not as a magical formula to be manipulated for gain (Acts 19:13-16)! Echoing Psalm 110:1, Paul announces that Christ has been enthroned above these hostile powers (Eph 1:20-21) and that believers have been exalted with him (Eph 2:6). Indeed, because we comprise Christ’s body and these exalted powers are beneath his feet, they are beneath us as well (Eph 1:22-23).

Paul’s point is not that believers can go around ordering these rulers to obey them, thereby shaping the destiny of nations. Our one biblical example of dealing with these powers involves persistent, patient prayer to God, not commands to the powers themselves (Dan 10:12-13). Rather, it means that they have no control over us. It was widely believed in this period that Fate controlled people’s future, ruling them through the heavenly stars. Only some exalted deity or other figure could free people from this tyranny (and most of our extant examples of this idea are later than Paul). But for Paul, believers are exalted above the control of these spirits. In a letter reinforcing the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers (Eph 2:11-22), transcending “angels of the nations” who symbolized their division would be important.

***Spiritual warfare in Ephesians.*** What Paul has in mind in describing exaltation above these spiritual powers is made clearer by his continuing comments. Believers now exalted with Christ were previously dead in sin, living by the values of the present age characterized by the world (Eph 2:1-2). This world is ruled by the prince with authority over the atmospheric realm, that is, the leader of the hostile rulers in the heavenly realms noted in Ephesians 1:20-22; this ruler is active among the disobedient (Eph 2:2).

Some of Paul’s contemporaries acknowledged Satan’s activity in the world, but conceptualized it differently. For example, the sect that wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls viewed every human action as determined either by the

Spirit of Truth (God's Spirit) or the spirit of error; as fixation on magic and demons became more widespread, some Jewish people came to believe even that one could not stick out one's hand without touching a thousand demons.<sup>15</sup> Paul's approach is, however, more sober. Paul argues that Satan works through human passions and the world system (Eph 2:2-3), apparently not micromanaging every sin but promulgating sinful patterns, ideas and temptations. In Western culture driven by marketing to consumers' desires, for example, Satan can extend his influence strategically through the entertainment industry. (Many Christians who do not have the mentality that we are at war with eternal stakes even spend more time watching television than reading their Bibles.) Satan also targets centers of philosophy, public opinion and so forth, making intellectually reasoned responses important as believers carry forward the gospel (cf. 2 Cor 10:3-5).

Paul's point is that Jesus has liberated his followers from Satan's grasp and from this lifestyle. To borrow popular idiom, Christians no longer have the right to say, "The devil made me do it." In this passage, then, the key element of spiritual warfare is recognizing what God has already done for us in Christ. Exalted above these spiritual powers, we no longer need fear them nor submit to their influence on our respective cultures. Western Christians need not practice syncretism with materialism, lust for comfort, skepticism about God and the supernatural, dependence on solely natural solutions and the like that pervade our culture. Christians in some other cultures need not be swayed by beliefs about ancestors, fear of spirits or the like. To the extent that Christians reflect unbiblical values in their cultures more than the kingdom, to that extent they are failing at spiritual warfare, whether because they fail to acknowledge Christ's victory or fail to recognize the seriousness of their situation.

In Ephesians 4:27, Paul warns believers against giving ground to the devil, in other words, against providing him opportunity. Context probably specifies what means of giving ground Paul has in mind: the Ephesians must avoid deception, anger, stealing and unhealthy speech, instead speaking truth, providing for the needy, speaking upbuilding words, forgiving and loving as in Christ's example (Eph 4:25-5:2).<sup>16</sup> That is, the way that believers

<sup>15</sup>1QS 3.19-21; *Test. Benj.* 6:1; *Num. Rab.* 11:5.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. here also Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic. The Concept of Power in Ephesians*

avoid giving ground to the devil by maintaining godly relationships, preserving the unity of Christ's body (Eph 4:1-6, 13, 16; 5:21). Similarly, James speaks of resisting the devil (Jas 4:7) by resisting the world's values of greed and retaliation (Jas 3:15-4:4). The similar passage in 1 Peter 5:8-9 in context refers to resisting the devil by withstanding persecution, refusing to fall away from the faith.

After mentioning the armor of God, Paul invites Spirit-inspired prayer for all those set apart for God, including his own mission as a herald (Eph 6:18-20). Perhaps Paul continues to think of how Roman soldiers cover one another (though he is no longer listing pieces of armor), but whether that image is in view or not, believers' unity has been a matter of considerable emphasis in this letter (e.g., Eph 4:1-6). By prayer, covering one another and those working on the front lines of God's kingdom is part of spiritual warfare.

More generally, as noted earlier, bad relationships among Christ's servants yield ground to the devil (Eph 4:27); elsewhere in Paul's letters, failure to forgive succumbs to Satan's plots (2 Cor 2:11). Even in other contexts, forgiveness is linked with prayer (Mt 6:12-15; Mk 11:25). Christians cannot claim to depend on God to help them when they still want to take revenge into their own hands or hearts. Spiritual warfare, then, includes some very practical elements of relationships with one another. If a mission team is in disunity among its members, unwilling to live at peace with one another, they compromise God's blessing on their mission.

One should be clear about what spiritual warfare is not. I attended one "prayer meeting" where, instead of praying to God, the people (including my close friends who brought me) spent the entire time directly rebuking Satan and "casting down" spiritual powers. In antiquity, a number of Jewish people cursed the devil; others recognized that this approach was unwise. Scripture is clear that mocking the devil, or treating lightly the devil or delegated heavenly authorities, is wrong (2 Pet 2:10-11; Jude 8-9). Moreover, such a practice lacks clear biblical precedent for directly addressing heavenly powers. In all biblical cases of rebuking and casting out demons, the demons addressed were active on earth. In the case of heavenly princes in Daniel 10, Daniel prayed to God, who took care of the earthly powers. Satan was dis-

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*in Light of its Historical Setting*, SNTSMS 63 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 65, 118.

placed from his role in heaven by Christ's victory (Jn 12:31-33; 16:11; Rev 12:5-10). Christians essentially wage a ground war with evil as they find it here; they trust God for the air cover.

This does not mean that believers should not be informed about spiritual issues relevant to the lands for which they are praying, so they may pray most intelligently. Prayer manuals like *Operation World* are among the most valuable tools for informing prayer for the nations; moreover, there is biblical precedent for believing that those who pray for workers are often sent as workers (Mt 9:37-10:1, 10).<sup>17</sup> But these important considerations do not justify using prayer time, which should address God, to address directly spiritual powers who are not likely listening and whom even believers are not normally divinely authorized to confront in that manner, except perhaps in rare cases of special prophetic inspiration.

#### PAUL'S POWER ENCOUNTERS IN ACTS

Looking to Paul's ministry in Acts, the image of warfare (common in Greek writers, hence intelligible to Paul's audience) is less obvious, but spiritual conflict itself is quite clear. Paul's letters address only some aspects of his ministry, particularly situations that arose through his interaction with the communities of believers to whom he was writing. Acts addresses a different side of his ministry, one that carries forward the sort of power encounters reported in the Gospels.<sup>18</sup>

Power encounters appear before Paul in Luke's work. He earlier reported Jesus' deliverance of those afflicted or controlled by demons. He also reported similar ministry for the Jerusalem apostles and recounted the confrontation with Simon the Samaritan sorcerer (Lk 4:33-36, 41; 6:18; 7:21; 8:2, 27-39; 9:1, 39-42; 10:17; 11:14; 13:11-13; Acts 5:16; 8:7-11, 18-24). Now he reports at least three of Paul's major confrontations; the first involves the Jewish magician Elymas Barjesus toward the very beginning of his mission from

<sup>17</sup>Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, *Operation World: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Edition* (Waynesboro, Ga.: Paternoster, 2001).

<sup>18</sup>On power encounters, see further the sources cited in Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), pp. 843-52. Roland Allen writes, "Miracles were illustrations of the character of the new religion. They were sermons in act. They set forth in unmistakable terms two of its fundamental doctrines, the doctrine of charity and the doctrine of salvation, of release from the bondage of sin and the power of the devil" (*Missionary Methods*, p. 45).

Antioch with Barnabas. Luke often emphasizes Jesus' representatives as better proclaimers of monotheism than their non-Christian Jewish detractors were (Acts 17:29-30; 19:26), noting Jewish magicians (as here in Acts 13:6, 8; also Acts 19:13-14; cf. Acts 8:9-11). Moved by God's Spirit, Paul pronounced judgment on the magician, leaving him with a temporary physical blindness that corresponded to his spiritual state.

Paul's ministry in Philippi is another step forward in his mission and again encounters opposition. Troas, from which he sailed for Philippi, was widely regarded as a traditional boundary between what the Greeks called Asia and what they called Europe; it was also the location of the two most famous Greek and Macedonian invasions of Asia in antiquity, namely the Trojan War and Alexander the Great's invasion of Persia. Paul's small mission, however, brought a message of peace from Asia to Europe and ultimately into the heart of the Roman Empire.<sup>19</sup> Paul's first stop there is in the Roman colony of Philippi, and from there until he leaves Macedonia he faces serious hostility.

In Philippi he encounters a slave girl who is doubly exploited: she is possessed by (literally) the "spirit of a pythoness," and her legal possessors exploit her for her "gift" (Acts 16:16, 19). The literal "pythoness" was the priestess of Apollo at Delphi, the most famous of all Greek oracular shrines; she is thus possessed by a powerful and perhaps respected prophetic spirit.<sup>20</sup> She announces that Paul and his colleagues are servants of the Most High God (a common name for Israel's God), announcing the way of salvation (Acts 16:17). Jesus had silenced the witness of demons to his identity (Lk 4:34-35), and Paul does the same, although he waits a few days. Perhaps he waits because he was not ready, or perhaps he waits simply because he recognized in advance the trouble that this exorcism could cause.

In any case, he orders the demon out, ending part of the young woman's exploitation (Acts 16:18), and the slaveholders, recognizing their loss of profit, drag Paul and Silas before the civic authorities. We should note that the missionaries' direct persecution here stems not from the demons per se

<sup>19</sup>See discussion in Craig S. Keener, "Between Asia and Europe: Postcolonial Mission in Acts 16:8-10," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 11, no. 1-2 (2008): 3-15. I address all these Acts passages in greater detail in *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012-).

<sup>20</sup>E.g., Apollodorus *Bib.* 1.4.1; Lucan *C.W.* 5.86-101.

but from human greed. When the success of the mission challenges vested economic interests, whether by delivering this slave girl or later by challenging the economic interests of those dependent on the Artemis cult (Acts 19:25-28), local hostility follows. In various settings, confrontations with spiritual power are necessary, but one should not suppose that victory in such confrontations always makes believers' lives simple; confronting and casting out demons does not exhaust the forms of evil they must face. Some other parts of the New Testament portray persecution and other sufferings in the language of warfare (Rev 11:7; 12:11; 13:7); whatever our various tests, however, believers are summoned to "overcome" (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 12:11; 15:2; 21:7 NASB), language often used in battle or conflict settings.<sup>21</sup>

Paul's most prominent public ministry in Acts occurs in Ephesus, after years of experience in less publicly visible forums. There for some two years Paul spreads the Christian message through the accepted public role of a teacher (Acts 19:9; many would have viewed him as a philosopher). Meanwhile, however, miracles are also taking place, including many exorcisms; some of these take place even secondhand (Acts 19:11-12). Paul's success invited imitators: some popular non-Christian exorcists (in antiquity, exorcism often overlapped with magic) try to use the name of Jesus whom Paul preaches (Acts 19:13-14). People used various incantations and even malodorous substances to try to coax spirits to vacate their hosts; another method was to invoke more powerful spirits to expel lesser ones.

The magical exorcists discover, however, that Jesus' name is not simply a magical formula to be exploited; it bears an authority delegated only to those authorized to use it (Acts 19:15-16). Like the spirit in Acts 16:17, this demon recognizes who God's servants are (Acts 19:15). Whereas Jesus and his followers cast out demons by the finger of God, some other exorcists did not, and hence would accomplish little if any long-term good (Lk 11:19-20). In response to this distinction between Jesus' true servants and those whose magic was ineffective against true demons, many people in Ephesus, including some syncretistic Christian converts who had secretly kept one foot in a magical worldview, publicly repudiated their magic. By confessing their practices (Acts 19:18), they repudiated them. (Indeed, divulging spells was

<sup>21</sup>Cf. perhaps also insights in Richard J. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), pp. 216-18.

believed to deprive them of their efficacy.) Burning books (Acts 19:19) was also a conventional way of publicly repudiating their content.

### IMPLICATIONS OF PAUL'S POWER ENCOUNTERS FOR MISSIONS TODAY

Today, Christians in many cultures often encounter situations like that of “those who had believed” in Ephesus, who publicly rejected their practices only once they saw God’s superior power demonstrated (Acts 19:18). In some parts of the world, Christians continue to visit shamans and other traditional religious practitioners because their new faith seems to lack power to confront the problems that their old faith addressed. Elsewhere, however, local Christians reading Scripture have recognized that God’s power is greater than that of its putative competitors and have learned to pray to God for their various needs, sometimes with striking results. Sometimes missionaries in the past resisted such insights because their Western lenses forced them to read past these examples in Scripture; in other cases, their interaction with local cultures helped them to readjust their lenses.<sup>22</sup> Missions today often involves partnering with local believers, often in teaching roles; but it also involves learning. Although the West dominated missions for several centuries, today Christian missionaries from various cultures can learn from one another’s insights, recalling Paul’s Asian mission to the West.

Power encounters are reported in subsequent missions history, including through Patrick in Ireland; Columba in Scotland; and Boniface in Germany; they are reported frequently in new evangelistic settings today as well.<sup>23</sup> In many parts of the world, believers are more aware of these intense spiritual battles than those in the West are.<sup>24</sup> In the twentieth century, for example,

<sup>22</sup>Roland Allen expects the Holy Spirit to authenticate and empower the advance of the gospel in his day, though not in miracles of the type mentioned in Acts. He writes, “We have powers sufficient to illustrate in act the character of our religion, its salvation and its love, if only we will use our powers to reveal the Spirit. One day we shall perhaps recover the early faith in miracles. Meanwhile, we cannot say that the absence of miracles puts an impassable gulf between the first century and today, or renders the apostolic method inapplicable to our missions. To say that were to set the form above the spirit” (*Missionary Methods*, p. 48).

<sup>23</sup>E.g., on Boniface’s confrontation, see Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1964), p. 75; Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1975), 1:348.

<sup>24</sup>See, e.g., R. E. K. Mchami, “Demon Possession and Exorcism in Mark 1:21-28,” *Africa Theological Journal* 24, no. 1 (2001): 17-37 (here 17); Felix Augustine Mensah, “The Spiritual Basis of Health

the earlier Chinese church leader Watchman Nee challenged some particularly theologically divisive Western critics with the observation that their theological debates would benefit them little in his country “if when the need arose you could not cast out a demon.”<sup>25</sup> Granted, those who recognize the reality of superhuman evil beings are more apt to indulge in fearful speculation and may sometimes imagine such activity where it does not exist. Many circles also harden particular views about such spirits into theological traditions that differ from actual realities.

Nevertheless, many cases of spiritual activity cannot be explained on the purely materialistic terms that Westerners prefer.<sup>26</sup> Many of these are documented even in some academic literature, despite the prejudices against such beliefs in the academy today.<sup>27</sup> For example, the well-known New Testament scholar David Instone-Brewer reports encountering a spirit controlling a person who knew David's very thoughts.<sup>28</sup> I also am a personal witness to the reality of superhuman spiritual forces. My wife is from the Evangelical Church of Congo, and we, along with our family in Congo, have had to confront some of these spiritual forces in ways that I as a Western Christian was not initially prepared to confront and would not have believed had I not experienced them myself. Those involved with what locals considered witchcraft were—at least in these cases—dealing with real and

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and Illness in Africa,” in *Health Knowledge and Belief Systems in Africa*, ed. Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 2008), pp. 171-80 (here 176); cf. also John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophies* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 253-56.

<sup>25</sup>Angus Kinnear, *Against the Tide: The Story of Watchman Nee* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1978), p. 152.

<sup>26</sup>See e.g., Paul G. Hiebert, “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle,” *Missiology* 10, no. 1 (1982): 35-47 (here 43).

<sup>27</sup>E.g., Craig S. Keener, *Miracles*, pp. 788-856; idem, “Spirit Possession as a Cross-Cultural Experience,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20 (2010): 215-36; Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 67-69; Stafford Betty, “The Growing Evidence for ‘Demonic Possession’: What Should Psychiatry's Response Be?” *JRelHealth* 44, no. 1 (2005): 13-30; M. Scott Peck, *Glimpses of the Devil: A Psychiatrist's Personal Accounts of Possession, Exorcism, and Redemption* (New York: Free Press, 2005); David W. Van Gelder, “A Case of Demon Possession,” *JPastCare* 41, no. 2 (1987): 151-61; R. Kenneth McAll, “The Ministry of Deliverance,” *ExpT* 86, no. 10 (1975): 296-98; see especially John Warwick Montgomery, ed., *Demon Possession: A Medical, Historical, Anthropological and Theological Symposium* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1976).

<sup>28</sup>David Instone-Brewer, “Jesus and the Psychiatrists,” in *The Unseen World: Christian Reflections on Angels, Demons and the Heavenly Realm*, ed. Anthony N. S. Lane (Grand Rapids: Baker; Paternoster, 1996), pp. 133-48 (here 140-41).



dangerous powers that sometimes threatened our lives. I can also affirm, however, that God's power to protect his children is much greater than the power of these created entities.

### **CONCLUSION**

Images of spiritual conflict in Paul's letters apply to a wide range of struggles, with false ideologies, with sin and with spiritual forces at work in the world to lead people away from God's truth and righteousness. For Paul, believers resist hostile spiritual forces by how they live and pray for one another; they take ground from those forces through evangelism. As we examine Paul's own missionary experience reported in Acts, we see that Paul also had to confront these forces on a more direct level in power encounters. These direct encounters with demonic forces did not by any means exhaust the evils Paul faced, but they were among them.

