

PRIMER

# THE BATTLE BELONGS TO THE LORD

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF GOD'S WARFARE



Due to space constraints, we published a shorter version of this article in *Primer* Issue 10. We're delighted to provide the full article here, which includes the final section on the spiritual warfare of God's people.

Script: Michael Fighting the Dragon  
by Albrecht Dürer (1498)



# THE HEAVENS

The first words of Scripture proclaim God as the eternal Creator of all that exists:

**Gen 1:1** | ***In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.***

The narrator immediately goes on to relate how God shaped the earth and filled it with life in all its varied forms. But the Bible is slow and guarded in speaking of the supernatural realm of created spiritual beings that God also created (Ps 148:1-5), that he had, indeed, already created before he established the earth such that celestial beings “sang together” and “shouted for joy” when he did so (Job 38:7).

The Old Testament reveals their existence in a fragmentary and almost incidental way, as it speaks here and there of immaterial spirits, powerful, wise and personal, with intelligence, will, self-awareness and moral accountability. They are variously identified as angels (Gen 28:12; 32:1, etc.), sons of God (Gen 6:2; Job 1:6; 2:1; Pss 29:1; 89:6), sons of the Most High (Ps 82:6), **divinities or celestial beings (*elohim*)** (Ps 82:1,6), holy ones (Deut 33:2-3; Job 5:1; 15:15; Ps 89:5,7; Zech 14:5), cherubim (Gen 3:24; Ezek 1; 10), seraphim (Is 6:2-3,6-7), and watchers (Dan 4:13,17,23). Moreover, it tells us that these beings form God’s council or assembly (1 Kings 22:19-23; Pss 82:1; 89:5, 7; Jer 23:18), and his heavenly host (1 Kings 22:19; Pss 89:8; 148:2).

The reticence of Old Testament testimony means that we cannot simply assume that the varied names necessarily imply beings of different kinds. The parallelism in Ps 89:5-7, for example, suggests that holy ones and sons of God are probably identical in nature. Nor should we suppose, however, that all are simply undifferentiated angels.

There is limited and somewhat piecemeal evidence of hierarchy among them, as when Michael, the only angel to be named in the Old Testament, is identified first as “one of the chief princes” (Dan 10:13) and then, in the New Testament, as an archangel (Jude 9; cf. 1 Thess 4:16). The Bible does, however, point to the various roles of these beings. In heaven itself they guard access to God’s presence and offer unceasing worship, and when sent by him to earth they act as mediators of his will among human beings in numerous ways: carrying his messages, executing his judgments, transmitting his law, serving the mission of his incarnate Son, and generally acting in a multitude of respects as “ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation” (Heb 1:14).

**KEITH FERDINANDO** is married to Margaret, and they worked together in Africa with AIM over many years, largely in theological education. He is currently part-time assistant pastor at Upney Baptist Church in Barking, and does some teaching here and there.



The word “gods” (*elohim*) is to be understood in Ps 82:1, 6, and occasionally elsewhere, to refer to celestial but not divine beings.

# ***A DECLARATION OF WAR: "THAT ANCIENT SNAKE... SATAN"***

The first indication of spiritual conflict in the Bible is found when a speaking serpent appears in Eden and addresses Eve (Gen 3:1-5). As a serpent, one of “the wild animals” (Gen 3:1), it is of course part of God’s good physical creation, but it speaks malevolently, contradicting God’s word spoken to Adam and maligning God himself. By tempting Eve to eat forbidden fruit, it knowingly seeks to bring that death to the human couple which God had warned them of. More than that, by yielding to its temptation, Adam would bring the whole human race of which he was representative under the same judgment, while the earth, their home, would suffer immense disruption in the form of illness, famine, and every kind of natural upheaval and disaster. Meanwhile, the fact that the serpent speaks at all indicates that it is more than a mere animal, and in the New Testament it is unmasked as Satan: “the great dragon... that ancient snake called the devil, or Satan” (Rev 12:9; 20:2; see also 2 Cor 11:3-4,13-15).

The Hebrew word, *satan*, translates as *adversary* and is often used in the Old Testament, sometimes of human adversaries (1 Sam 29:4; 2 Sam 19:22; 1 Kings 5:4; 11:14,23,25; Ps 109:6), once of the angel of the Lord opposing Balaam (Num 22:22), but on a few occasions of a supernatural adversary which is clearly not the angel of the Lord (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7; 1 Chron 21:1; Zech 3:1). In both Job and Zechariah the word *satan* is used with an article as *the satan*; it is only in 1 Chron 21:1 where there is no article that it has clearly become a proper name, Satan. Article or not, however, in all three Old Testament locations (the) Satan demonstrates an unmistakable animosity towards God and his people.

In Job, Satan appears at the assembly of the celestial sons of God where he denies God’s word, much like the serpent in Genesis, but in this case it is God’s word commending Job’s righteousness. He accuses Job of hypocrisy, implicitly charging God with naivety, even foolishness, and he does so to God’s face, before the whole assembly, and with

evident contempt. To prove his case he then pursues Job's physical and spiritual destruction, again echoing the serpent's murderous intent in its temptation of Eve. Significantly, however, Satan can do nothing outside God's permissive will. In Job 1, God allows him to destroy Job's wealth but forbids any attack on his person; and then in Job 2 God allows him to afflict Job's body but forbids the taking of his life.

Jesus too speaks of how Satan sought permission to sift Peter (Luke 22:31), and Paul was afflicted by "a messenger of Satan" given to him in God's good providence (2 Cor 12:7-9). Satan is always subject to God's sovereign will. As Calvin says, "he obeys his Creator, whether he will or not, because he is compelled to yield him service wherever God impels him."

J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.14.17, 176.

In Zechariah, Satan is again accuser, this time of Joshua the high priest, the representative of Israel, and God vehemently rebukes him as one who stands in the way of his redemptive purpose for his people. Finally, in both Job and 1 Chronicles Satan tempts, either through the afflictions by which he tries to entice Job to curse God, or by inciting David to sin by numbering the people of Israel, and in so doing he again echoes the serpent's temptations in Eden.

## ***SATAN'S TACTICS***

A pattern, therefore, emerges in the Old Testament characterisation of the serpent who is Satan. Satan tempts to sin; he accuses of sin; and in both tempting and accusing his purpose is that his prey suffer the divine penalty of death for their sin. It is a pattern that carries over into the New Testament where Satan is the tempter (Matt 4:3; 1 Thess 3:5), who tempts Jesus in the desert as he tempted Adam in the garden; the accuser "of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night" (Rev 12:10); and the one whom Jesus identifies as "a murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44).

Jesus' description is especially significant in its association of Satan's murderous purposes with his lies: "he was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth... for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). The combination, murderer and liar, defines the very character



of Satan; the double identification does not just identify what he does but exposes who he truly is. It recalls the serpent's work in Eden, using lies as the lethal instrument of its temptation. Satan is the hunter, setting his trap with a bait of lies by which he lures his intended victims to destruction.

In Eden, and everywhere and always, the serpent's lies focus on the character of God himself. Satan sought to corrupt Adam and Eve's knowledge of the God who had made and vastly blessed them, in order to draw them into his own rebellion and so to their own ruin in a number of ways:

- he denied the truth of God's word and made him out to be a liar;
- he contradicted God's warning of condemnation for eating the forbidden fruit, so denying his justice and Adam and Eve's accountability;
- and he disputed God's infinite goodness and generosity by claiming that God had forbidden the fruit of the one tree only to frustrate the potential of Adam and Eve as human beings. They would, it said, find fulfilment only by repudiating their Creator and going their own way.

Unique though the temptation in Eden certainly was, the lies of the serpent are typical of all temptation. He is the one who leads astray and deceives the whole earth (Rev 12:9; 20:3, 7). His lies are embedded in the minds of fallen men and women, warping their knowledge of God and of all else besides, and lying at the heart of their sin and folly. "When this distortion of God's character is complete, we inevitably mistrust him; we lose sight of his love and grace; we see him as essentially a forbidding God."

Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance – Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 83.

## ***SATAN'S ALLIES***

Just as the Bible's teaching on creation focuses on the earth rather than the heavens, so it is when it speaks of the origins of sin. As one made by God, Satan was created good, and if he is now evil he must somehow have fallen from the perfection of his created state. But the Bible

speaks of it, if at all, only incidentally. Some find reference to his fall in Isa 14:12-20 and Ezek 28:12-19, although explicitly the two passages refer only to the fall of the rulers of Babylon and Tyre respectively, albeit in poetic and hyperbolic terms. Paul perhaps suggests that pride produced Satan's fall (1 Tim 3:6). And Jesus describes the devil as "not holding to the truth" (John 8:44), which might more literally be rendered, "he did not stand in the truth" and so imply that he once "stood in the truth" but fell from it. What is sure is that this celestial being, originally part of God's perfect "heavens," corrupted itself in a way incomprehensible to us, rebelled against its Creator, and then set out to promote rebellion in Eden also.

See Michael Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2015), 73-91, and G. A. Cole, *Against the Darkness: The Doctrine of Angels, Satan, and Demons* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 90-94, for recent defences of this approach.

J. R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: IVP, 1988), 141.

Nor is Satan the only celestial being that has fallen. Other sinning angels appear in the Old Testament, including sons of God (or of the Most High), celestial beings (*elohim*), princes and demons. References are again few and brief, and focus on their activities on earth where they have a pervasive influence as instigators of human wickedness and as enemies of God and his people. So, the "sons of God" who "saw that the daughters of humans were beautiful, and... married any of them they chose" (Gen 6:2), were most likely fallen angelic beings, despite the obvious difficulties with this view. Elsewhere in the Old Testament "sons of God" are celestial beings, and the contrast ("sons of God" and "daughters of humans") suggests that that is the case here also. Jude apparently thought so when, referring to this incident, he compares the sin of the angels with that of Sodom and Gomorrah, which "in a similar way... gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion" (Jude 6-7). For Jude, the evil committed by both the "sons of God" and Sodom and Gomorrah was "similar" in that they transgressed sexual categories in defiance of God's created order. As in Genesis 3, therefore, temptation was brought to earth from the heavens and human beings sinfully acquiesced to it. In consequence, and following the flow of the text, they came under judgment both in the reduction in their lifespan (Gen 6:3) and also, perhaps, of the flood (Gen 6:5-7).

See Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 92-100, for one defence of this approach. By contrast, Cole, *Against the Darkness*, 114-117, argues that Gen 6:1-4 describes the marriage between male descendants of Seth (sons of God) and female descendants of Cain.

The Song of Moses (Deut 32:1-43) refers briefly to God's division of the peoples "according to the number of the sons of God" (32:8). It may be that these "sons of God" were appointed to exercise a delegated supervision over the nations, while the LORD took particular care of his own people, Israel (32:9). As revelation progresses, however, brief references show fallen celestial beings implicated in the corruption of the nations. Isaiah refers to a complicity

Following the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT), which is here the more likely reading than the Hebrew text's "according to the number of the sons of Israel."

in wickedness of “the powers in the heavens above” and “the kings on the earth below,” which God will punish and bring to an end (Isa 24:21).

Daniel describes an incident when an unnamed angel was sent to him to explain a vision he had received. However, the “prince of the Persian kingdom,” evidently a fallen angelic being, resisted the angel for twenty one days (Dan 10:13), perhaps to prevent the fulfilment of the vision that included the fall of Persia. Through the intervention of Michael, “one of the chief princes,” the unnamed angel was finally able to reach Daniel and explain the vision, but he went on to report that he would soon return to “fight against the prince of Persia, and when I go, the prince of Greece will come” (10:20). Michael is later identified as “the great prince who protects your people” (Dan 12:1). The passage points to conflict in the heavens between angels who serve God and those identified with particular nations who rebelliously seek to resist the fulfilment of his purposes on earth, especially with regard to God’s own people.

Then, Psalm 82 records God’s public condemnation in the divine assembly of the “gods” (*elohim*) or “sons of the Most High” for the injustice of their actions on earth. They have defended the wicked when they should rather have defended the weak from their oppression. They apparently stand behind the injustice and oppression of godless human rulers and, as a result, “the foundations of the earth are shaken”—the foundations of God’s justice and righteousness on which the stability and wellbeing of human society depend (82:5). Finally, God pronounces judgment on them: “I said, ‘You are “gods”; you are all sons of the Most High.’ But you will die like mere mortals; you will fall like every other ruler” (82:6-7).

Finally, a few references identify demons as the real objects of idolatrous worship by Israel. At one point the law sternly forbids Israelites from offering sacrifices “in the open fields” as they pass through the wilderness (Lev 17:1-7), apparently “to prevent sacrifices to the *goat-demons* who inhabited the wilderness.” Moses’ Song also refers to acts of apostate worship by Israel during the Exodus wanderings and identifies it as a worship of demons (Deut 32:17). And Psalm 106 recalls Israel’s history and its settlement in the Promised Land where again they engaged in worship of demons learned from Canaanites, even to the point of offering up their children in sacrifice to them (106:36-37).

G. J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 243.



Occasionally, then, the Old Testament pulls back the curtain to give fleeting glimpses of the presence of rebellious heavenly beings behind the sins of fallen humanity, including Israel: inciting moral depravity, fuelling the injustice of human government, and instigating idolatrous worship.

## ***THE DOMINION OF DARKNESS***

The New Testament demonstrates a reticence regarding fallen heavenly beings similar to that of the Old, but the picture becomes significantly fuller and clearer. Demons, often called unclean spirits (Mark 1:23, 26; 9:25), are prominent, especially in the gospels. Like Satan, they have personal attributes of intelligence, will, self-awareness and speech. They introduce false teaching into the church (1 Tim 4:1) and, as in the Old Testament, stand behind the practices of false religion (1 Cor 10:20; Rev 9:20) - both activities resonating with the biblical picture of Satan as liar and deceiver. A phenomenon found mostly in the synoptic gospels, and once in Acts, is demonic “possession” or the “demonisation” of people, in which demons seize control of individuals with devastating consequences – emotional, psychological, social, and physical. Jesus identifies such demonisation as Satan’s work (Mark 3:22-27), and it is certainly consistent with his identity as a “murderer.” In John’s gospel, which records no case of possession, Satan himself “enters” Judas at the moment of Judas’ final “surrender... to the power of darkness”: “As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him” (John 13:27).

See, for example, the accounts in Mark’s gospel, 1:21-28; 5:1-20; 7:24-30; 9:14-29, and also in Acts 16:16-18.

Lesslie Newbigin, quoted in D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: IVP, 1991), 475.

Paul employs a distinctive terminology to refer to celestial powers, especially in his letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, speaking of rulers, authorities, powers, dominions and thrones (Rom 8:38; 1 Cor 15:24; Eph 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col 1:16; 2:10,15. See also 1 Pet 3:22). He does not use the language in a systematic way but groups the various names together in apparently random combinations. They communicate the variety and multiplicity of the unseen spiritual beings he speaks of, and also something of their power. In many cases it is clear from the context that Paul uses the names to speak of rebellious spirits, and other references can also be understood in the same sense. The words resonated forcefully with Paul’s readers, especially in places like Ephesus and Colossae, where they were used of powerful spirits that might possess and afflict human beings, and that could be invoked and manipulated by sorcerers against enemies. They stirred real fear. These are, therefore, fallen angels or demons, which were created by God, are now subservient to Satan, oppose God’s purposes, attack his people physically and spiritually, were invoked in contemporary magic, and are decisively defeated by the death and resurrection of God’s incarnate Son.

In Eph 1:21 the phrase, “and every name that is invoked,” suggests that Paul has in mind the invocation, or naming, of the powers and authorities for the purpose of magic. See Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 114.

Above all, it is Satan himself who emerges more clearly in the New Testament. In particular it identifies him as one who is supreme over a

“dominion of darkness” (Col 1:13) both in heaven and on earth. So, Jesus speaks of “the devil and his angels” (Matt 25:41), and the book of Revelation of “the dragon and his angels” (Rev 12:7). Jesus similarly identifies Satan as Beelzebul, “prince of demons” (Matt 12:24-27; Mark 3:22-23; Luke 11:15-18), and Paul speaks of “the ruler of the kingdom of the air” (Eph 2:2), referring no doubt to Satan and identifying him as ruler of evil spirits which were believed to inhabit the “air.” A brief reference in Rev 12:4 may also imply that the dragon – “that ancient snake called the devil, or Satan” (12:9) – was itself responsible for the rebellion of all the other fallen celestial beings: “Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth.”

The “air” was seen as an intermediate sphere between earth and the habitation of God, in which evil spirits dwelt.

It might alternatively refer to persecution of the saints, echoing Dan 8:10.

Satan’s power extends also to fallen humanity, whose disobedience he instigated in the first place. Three times Jesus calls him “the prince of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11); Paul identifies him as “the god of this age” (2 Cor 4:4), and sees humanity as subject to “the power of Satan” (Acts 26:18); and John says that “the whole world is under the control of the evil one” (1 John 5:19).

The wickedness and power of Satan do not, however, remove human responsibility for their own sin. At the beginning, seduced though they were by the serpent, God called Adam and Eve to account for their disobedience and punished them: they were guilty sinners and not mere victims unwittingly caught up in a cosmic conflict. Now, as a result of its rebellion, fallen humanity is in “darkness” (Eph 5:8) and held captive by the power of sin from which it is unable to break free: “The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so” (Rom 8:7). Moreover, despite all the violence and conflict that sin generates among them, fallen men and women are bound tightly together in a solidarity of godlessness, following “the ways of this world” (Eph 2:2) with its shared idolatrous values, ambitions, and lusts. Nevertheless, they remain guilty for their ongoing rebellion and ever-increasing transgressions, helpless and enslaved though they are, by Satan, the world, and the sinful nature.

## ***SPIRITUAL WARFARE***

Spiritual warfare is first of all the warfare of God himself, the ‘divine warrior’ (Exod 15:3). He fights his enemies both spiritual and human; he wars in the heavens and on earth in pursuit of their defeat and final judgment, which he



**THE SPIRITUAL WARFARE  
IS FIRST OF ALL THE  
WARFARE  
OF GOD  
HIMSELF,  
THE 'DIVINE WARRIOR'**



surely will achieve. His warfare has also, however, another purpose. He fights to secure the redemption from sin, Satan, and death of a people among whom he will dwell forever in “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21:1). It is a warfare he carries on with unusual weapons, and at its climactic moment he achieves the “strangest victory.”

The little phrase is from the hymn by C. Idle, *In Silent Pain the Eternal Son*.

As far as the earth is concerned God’s warfare starts in Eden. He punishes Adam and Eve for their sin, and he curses the serpent. There is also, however, grace for the human couple, and God’s words to the serpent are of enormous importance in pointing to the direction that his redeeming warfare will take.

First, God puts enmity between the serpent and the woman, and between their respective seeds or offspring (Gen 3:15). In so doing he ends the woman’s suicidal complicity in sin with the serpent and draws her back to himself, thereby establishing an absolute division between the two of them and, through them, between two divergent and mutually-opposed branches of humanity. One branch will go the way of the serpent, deceived and enslaved by its lies, sharing in its rebellion and reflecting its murderous character; and the other, the “seed” of the woman, will share her enmity against the serpent and form a people belonging to God. So it is with these words – “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers” – that God announces the spiritual warfare of his people as they join in his own conflict with the serpent and all that share in its rebellion.

Second, the enmity – the warfare – will come to a head when one single representative offspring of the woman crushes the serpent’s head on behalf of all her offspring. However, in doing so he suffers the bruising of his own heel: “the promise of victory includes the cost of suffering.” Indeed, suffering will be a constant in the warfare of God and his people with the serpent and his, which becomes quickly evident when righteous Abel suffers at the hands of Cain, “who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother” (1 John 3:12). And, climactically, Jesus himself, the representative offspring of the woman of whom God spoke to the serpent, identified those who wished to kill him as offspring of the devil, “doing the works of your own father” who “was a murderer from the beginning” (John 8:37,40,44). Even now, and until Christ’s return, the dragon makes war against the rest of the offspring of the woman, “those who keep God’s commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus” (Rev 12:17).

J. R. Treat, *The Crucified King: Atonement and Kingdom in Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 58.

## ***THE WARFARE OF GOD’S SON***

The Lord Jesus Christ is the incarnate divine warrior and offspring of the woman in order to destroy definitively the works of the devil (1 John 3:8) and rescue those he holds captive (Col 1:13-14). He engages and overcomes Satan and his angels on several fronts.

## THE DESERT TEMPTATIONS

First, Jesus is tempted by the devil. Coming immediately after his anointing, and at the very outset of his ministry, the temptation narratives (Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13; Mark 1:12-13) draw attention to the underlying cosmic background to Jesus' ministry and the unrelenting pressure which Satan's dominion of darkness would bring to bear on him. The temptations focus on Jesus' trusting submission as Son to the will of his Father, and especially to the suffering which lay at the heart of his ministry on earth and would culminate at the cross. They are temptations that would recur, through Peter's hostile response to Jesus' declaration of his coming trials, for example: "Never Lord! ... This shall never happen to you" (Matt 16:22); and then through the scoffers at the cross: "Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!" (Matt 27:40).

While Satan is the tempter, however, he is not the real initiator of the temptations, although he seizes the opportunity to attack God's redemptive new creation work in Christ at its very beginning, just as he had attacked God's first creation in Eden. All the **synoptic gospels** point to the Spirit's role in sending Jesus into the desert, and Matthew, particularly, underlines the paradoxical purpose for which he was sent: "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (Matt 4:1). God willed that Satan should test his Son, and he permitted Satan to do so. Why should that be? First, Jesus experienced temptation as the second Adam; the representative and head of a new humanity. Where Adam failed, with catastrophic consequences for all humanity (Rom 5:15-19), Jesus prevailed, resisting the tempter on behalf of those he had come to save. Second, Jesus faced Satan as the new Israel. His forty days and nights in the desert recall Israel's forty years in the desert, and his use of words drawn from Deuteronomy (Deut 8:3; 6:16, 13) to respond to each of Satan's temptations recalls Israel's desert experience. Once again, however, while Israel had repeatedly grumbled and rebelled throughout its exodus wanderings, Jesus trusted and obeyed. He is at the same time both God's new humanity and his new people, faithful and obedient where Adam and Israel had failed.

Synoptic = Matthew, Mark and Luke. Synoptic means they can be 'seen together' and read in parallel because they overlap significantly.

## THE EXPULSION OF DEMONS

Jesus was renowned for expelling unclean spirits from demonised people. There is substantial testimony in the gospels to this aspect of his ministry, and no evidence from the period of anybody else as effective as he. Both during and after his lifetime his name was invoked by exorcists who did not belong to his own disciples (Mark 9:38; Luke 9:49; Acts 19:13-16). Further, he expelled demons without using any of the ritual that usually accompanied contemporary exorcism. He did not force demons to speak; he used no magic incantations or rites; he did not "bind" demons as an exorcist would, **although they might try to "bind" him**; he invoked no god or spirit; he did not even pray. He simply "drove out the spirits with a word" (Matt 8:16), and the people marvelled: "He even gives orders to impure

In Mark 5:7 for example, where the demoniac's words, "in God's name," might be better translated, "I bind you by God." Behind the verb 'to bind' here is a Greek term drawn from the language of contemporary exorcism and magic where exorcists used it to submit a spirit to their control. Jesus never used such language and the gospel writers never used it of him. It is, however, used by the sons of Sceva in Acts 19:13, best translated, "I bind you by Jesus whom Paul preaches."

spirits and they obey him” (Mark 1:27). Even his enemies could not deny his effectiveness in expelling demons, and so attributed his obvious success to Beelzebul: “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons” (Matt 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15).

Jesus identified his expulsion of demons as an assault on the power of Satan. When accused of expelling demons by the power of Beelzebul, his response identifies a solidarity between Satan and unclean spirits. To attack them was to attack him, and so it was inconceivable that Satan would be complicit in their expulsion (Matt 12:25-26). On the contrary, Jesus claimed that his expulsions of demons were brought about by the Holy Spirit (Matt 12:28) or the “finger of God” (Luke 11:20). Jesus is, therefore, the Spirit-anointed servant of the Lord (Isa 42:1), in whom God’s kingdom is present to bring salvation to his people and defeat to his enemies; and he is that same “finger of God” that the Egyptian magicians had discerned in the plagues of Egypt (Exod 8:19), who is now bringing about a new exodus as he delivers men and women from captivity to Satan. Jesus made a very similar point when his disciples returned from a mission he had sent them on and reported how the demons submitted to them: “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:18). The disciples’ power over demons, like his own, was evidence of Satan’s overthrow, and they would, indeed, continue to “overcome all the power of the enemy” (Luke 10:19).

## ***THE PREACHING OF TRUTH***

At his trial before Pilate, Jesus identified the reason for his entry into the world: “The reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth” (John 18:37). That testimony is central to his spiritual warfare. Satan operates through lies. His very nature is to lie and deceive: lies are “his native language” and “there is no truth in him” (John 8:44). It was his lies – the slandering of God himself – that enticed Adam and Eve into sin in the first place, and that are now rooted in the hearts and minds of fallen human beings and enslave them. Jesus, therefore, taught the truth so that his disciples would know the truth, and that the truth would set them free from the liar, his lies, and all their consequences (John 8:32). As he did so, that same declaration of truth aroused the violent hostility of those who could not hear it, because they belonged to their father and spoke his language (John 8:43-44).

The heart of the truth Jesus taught focused on his own person. He is himself the truth (John 14:6), the one whose glory was “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Most important of all, as eternal Word of the Father and Son of God made flesh, he has made the invisible God known with flawless clarity: “the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known” (John 1:18). Jesus confronts and refutes the devil’s lies about God because in his own being God is present and reveals himself in absolute truth and clarity.



## DEATH AND RESURRECTION

The definitive victory over Satan and his angels was won by the sacrificial death of God's Son. At numerous points the New Testament refers to this, but most clearly at the heart of Paul's letter to the Colossians. In Col 2:13-15 Paul summarises the gospel. The Colossians had been dead because of their sins and the sinful nature that produced them, but God made them alive with Christ by forgiving their sins. Paul then uses the metaphor of a bond of debt, an IOU, to describe how God dealt with sins. He effaced it, as a scribe might smooth over the writing on a tablet of soft wax; he simply lifted it from the scene; and, most telling, he nailed it to the cross. By his death, the Lord Jesus Christ paid off the "debt" of human sin. Then, in an apparent shift of gear, in verse 15 Paul goes on to describe God's victory over the powers and authorities, using three more metaphors. God has disarmed them, publicly exposed them, and done so by leading them as defeated enemies in his triumphal procession; and all of this he has accomplished in Christ.

For example, John 12:31-32;  
Heb 2:14-15; 1 Pet 3:18-22;  
Rev 12:7-11.

"...the uncircumcision of your  
flesh..."

The flow of the argument indicates that the defeat of the powers is achieved by payment of the IOU. It is the sin of human beings that brings about their enslavement to the dominion of darkness where Satan reigns. Therefore, when God forgives sin, nailing it to the cross, he destroys the foundation of their tyranny and defeats them. They can no longer accuse and pursue the condemnation and destruction of those whose sins have been forgiven: "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns?" (Rom 8:33). The redeemed are freed at the cross not only from the burden of their sins but also from bondage to the tyranny of Satan that sin had produced. Christ's death "for our sins" (1 Cor 15:3) has brought a titanic reversal in the spiritual realm. It is the defining moment in God's spiritual warfare both on earth and in the heavens. And it is sealed by Jesus' resurrection.

Jesus' words, "He was a murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44), define Satan. He tempts to sin and accuses of sin in order to bring about the death of his victims. At the cross, however, by atoning for the sins of his people, Jesus also overcame death for them. Accordingly, he rose from death himself, and did so as "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep," who *in him* will also be made alive (1 Cor 15:20-22). He ended death's reign, and frustrated Satan's murderous ambition.

## EXALTATION

The New Testament repeatedly proclaims that Jesus Christ is Lord. More quoted or alluded to in the New Testament than any other Old Testament text is Psalm 110:1: "The Lord says to my lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" Jesus' present exaltation and reign is central to his warfare for two main reasons.

First, alluding to Psalm 110:1, Paul affirms that Christ, risen and exalted, is now seated “far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come” (Eph 1:21). Christ is Lord over all the powers of darkness. Moreover, believers are raised with him and are “seated... with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:6); they too are now “far above” the powers which once held them captive and tyrannised them. As they wait for the fulfilment of their salvation, they are, therefore, kept safe in Christ until it comes (cf. 1 Pet 1:5). They will still face the temptations, persecutions, deceptions, and lies that Satan inspires; in a culture like that of Ephesus they may fear the malevolence of demons and sorcerers; but they are in Christ who is far above every evil power. God has “appointed him [Christ] to be head over everything *for the church*” (Eph 1:22): as “head over everything” he keeps his church and will bring it to glory.

Second, Jesus’ reign also undergirds the advance of the gospel. As “head over everything for the church” he not only keeps his people but he also gathers them. Accordingly, the Great Commission is prefaced by Jesus’ declaration of his comprehensive authority, not only on earth but also in heaven (Matt 28:18). So, Satan, “who leads the whole world astray” (Rev 12:9), and the rebellious “sons of the Most High” and “princes” of nations (Ps 82; Dan 10:13, 20), will never be able to impede the progress of the gospel. God’s people will surely be rescued from their dominion and brought into the kingdom of God’s Son (Col 1:13).

## ***THE LAST BATTLE***

In the final act of God’s warfare, Satan and all who have participated in his rebellion will be defeated and judged. Numerous passages of Scripture speak of this moment, including Isaiah, Paul, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself (Isa 24:21; 1 Cor 15:24-25; Matt 25:41), and especially the book of Revelation where Christ himself leads “the armies of heaven” into battle against the beast, the false prophet “and the kings of the earth” (Rev 19:14, 19-20).

# ***THE WARFARE OF GOD'S PEOPLE***

In this present age, the church shares in the warfare of God, who is “**carrying out his invasion, piercing the darkness with light.**” His people engage in that invasion, sent by the Son of God to be his witnesses and to make disciples of all nations. This is the great task of the church, to take the gospel to people bound in darkness: “to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18).

David Powlison, ‘The Classical Model,’ in J. K. Beilby and P. R. Eddy (eds.), *Understanding Spiritual Warfare: Four Views* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 96.

At the same time Satan attacks God's people: tempting them to sin, stirring up error among them, and instigating physical persecution against them, sometimes on a massive scale (Rev 13:5-7). From this perspective the whole New Testament defines the battle God's people face and guides them in the fight, but some passages offer especially focused direction.

## ***TRIUMPHING OVER THE ACCUSER***

In the aftermath of the dragon's expulsion from heaven, a hymn of celebration defines three great instruments of warfare by which "our brothers and sisters" triumph over their already defeated accuser (Rev 12:10-11). First, they do so "by the blood of the lamb." It is Christ's atoning blood that has brought them deliverance from sin and all its consequences, including freedom from the accusations and power of the devil. The objective truth on which they must stand in all the spiritual conflict they will face is that of Christ's perfect, finished work which alone secures their own salvation, and which alone will bring salvation to others.

Second, they overcome Satan by "the word of their testimony." Just as testimony to truth was central to the warfare of Christ, "the faithful witness" (Rev 1:5), so it is to that of his people. They confront the dominion of darkness and its lies by preaching Christ crucified (1 Cor 1:23; 2:2), in whose face "the light of the knowledge of God's glory" is uniquely and perfectly displayed (2 Cor 4:6).

Third, they overcome Satan because "they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death." As Christ crushed the serpent's head through his own suffering, so too do his disciples willingly accept the afflictions that following him and witnessing to him will bring. Like him, they take up their cross, "scorning its shame" (Heb 12:3), and they overcome.

## ***PUTTING ON THE ARMOUR OF GOD***

At the end of Ephesians Paul speaks of the armour believers must put on for the spiritual conflict they face (Eph 6:10-20). His words come after a lengthy section of exhortation (Eph 4:1-6:9). So, as he speaks of spiritual conflict, Paul is warning his readers that, as they live as "children of light" (Eph 5:8) in a world of darkness – speaking truth; working honestly; shunning hatred, sexual immorality and covetousness; seeking to honour God in their diverse household relationships – they face an arduous and bitter struggle. It is not, though, a struggle with the people around them, but rather with the cosmic powers that uphold the darkness and seek their harm. In that menacing supernatural context they can "stand" (Eph 6:11,13,14) and be light only "in the Lord and in his mighty power" (Eph 6:10). The call to humble dependence is not, however, a call to passivity, for they must also *actively* put on the "armour of God" (Eph 6:11,13), which he provides and with which he himself is attired (Isa 11:4-5; 59:17).

- It comprises, first, truth (the belt), to be understood here as faithfulness, guilelessness, constancy.
- Then, righteousness (the breastplate), which is an ethical integrity visible in every dimension and relationship of life. The foundation of their struggle is a life without hypocrisy, that is, inwardly and outwardly consistent with their identity as “children of light.”
- Then there are “feet fitted with the readiness which comes from the gospel of peace,” echoing Isaiah’s words about the heralds of good news (Is 52:7: “how beautiful are the feet ...”), and suggesting a readiness boldly to move out and proclaim the gospel.
- The “shield of faith” with which they “can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one” is one that believes in God and in his constantly good purposes for his people, even when faced with the worst that Satan might do to them. It is Paul singing and praying with Silas in prison, after being unjustly accused, condemned and flogged (Acts 16:25); or delighting in God’s gracious providence in his life when persistently tormented by a “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor 12:7-10).
- The “helmet of salvation” is a conviction of what God has done in Christ for his people. It means, for example, knowing that Christ’s blood has done everything necessary for their salvation (Rev 12:11); knowing that he is seated at God’s right hand, and that seated there with and in him, they need not fear the malice of demons (Eph 1:19-2:7); and, then, living out that knowledge in transformed attitudes and lives, and defending it against demonically inspired lies (1 Tim 4:1).
- The “sword of the Spirit” is God’s word proclaimed (cf. Rev 12:11: “the word of their testimony”), through which the Spirit rescues sinners from darkness.
- Finally, there is prayer, where Paul drops the military imagery and simply exhorts his readers to walk closely with God, alert and persistent in praying for one another in the conflict they all face, and especially for the ongoing and undaunted proclamation of the gospel, as it is exemplified in the ministry of the imprisoned Paul himself.

To follow Christ is to engage in his warfare. The Christian life is, indeed, a life of warfare – all the time and in every sphere – and Christians need to be constantly alert to the enemy they face (1 Pet 5:8). It is, however, a truly



spiritual warfare, as Christ's was, which renounces human weapons of any sort, whether guns and bombs, deception, manipulation, or persecution. Rather, in their conflict believers take up the cross, clothe themselves with God's armour, proclaim God's word and, above all else, trust in God's strength and in his victory at the cross over sin and every evil power. They fight in the assurance that victory has already been conclusively secured by their Lord, and that, although for the present they must face the hardships of battle, the God of peace will soon crush Satan under their feet (Rom 16:20).

### Questions for further thought and discussion

1. In what sense does Satan obey his Creator? (see the Calvin quote on page 25)
2. What are Satan's tactics throughout history? Apart from Gen 3 and Matt 4, where else could you detect them in Scripture?
3. Why do you think it's important to remember that "Spiritual warfare is first of all the warfare of God himself, the 'divine warrior'" (page 30)?
4. How does Keith start to show that the forgiveness of sins and the defeat of spiritual evil are not two completely separate ways of thinking about the cross?

If you want to dig deeper into that question, the best two works are:

Henri A. G. Blocher, "Agnus Victor: The Atonement as Victory and Vicarious Punishment," in *What Does It Mean to Be Saved?: Broadening Evangelical Horizons of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 67–91.

Mark D. Thompson, "No Charge Admitted: Justification and the Defeat of the Evil Powers," in *Christ's Victory Over Evil* (Nottingham: IVP, 2009), 123–49.

# PRIMER

Alongside issue 10 on Spiritual Warfare, other issues of *Primer* explore Scripture, Sin, Gender & Sexuality, Justification, the End Times, Sanctification, Apologetics, the Attributes of God, and the Trinity.

Learn more at  
[PrimerHQ.com](http://PrimerHQ.com)



the Fellowship of Independent  
Evangelical Churches

**Oak Hill College**  
ministry for the real world

*Primer* is produced by the Fellowship of  
Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC)  
and Oak Hill College.

This article is Copyright © 2020 The Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC) and Oak Hill College.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publishers.

FIEC, 41 The Point, Market Harborough, LE16 7QU - [fiec.org.uk](http://fiec.org.uk)

The Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation registered in England and Wales with charity number 1168037 and in Scotland with charity number SC047080.

Oak Hill College, Chase Side, London, N14 4PS - [oakhill.ac.uk](http://oakhill.ac.uk)

Oak Hill College is governed by the Kingham Hill Trust. A company limited by guarantee. Registered in England No 365812. Registered office: Kingham Hill School, Kingham, Oxon OX7 6TH. A registered charity No. 1076618

All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® (NIV®), Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.