

What is “Spiritual Warfare”?

Introduction

One of the topics that occasionally comes up in Christian churches is the concept of “spiritual warfare”. Basically, spiritual warfare refers to the belief that some spirit beings are *opposed to God* – and as a result, those spirit beings cause **problems** for humans.

Of course, as with any other belief, it is necessary to determine if Scripture supports the concept of spiritual warfare. So, let’s see what Scripture has to say, about this overall topic.

Information from the Apostles

To begin with, let’s take a look at the information that the apostles gave us, about the overall concept of spiritual warfare – since the apostles’ letters were directed to Christian congregations.

The apostle Paul made some very explicit statements about spiritual warfare. Consider these examples:

Ephesians 6:10-13 (ESV):

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. ¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.

Ephesians 2:1-3 (ESV):

² And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

In the first passage above, Paul tells us that our struggle is not against other humans – but rather against *spiritual* forces of evil in the *heavenly* places. That certainly seems to indicate that spirit beings are opposing us – especially since Paul explicitly states that the **devil** is scheming against us.

Similarly, in the second passage, Paul tells us that “the prince of the power of the air” is at work in disobedient people. That apparently refers to the fact that spirit beings are *all around us* – similar to the way that the earth’s atmosphere surrounds everything (and everyone).

The apostle Peter also had much to say on this subject. Here are a couple of his most notable statements about it:

1 Peter 5:8-9 (ESV):

⁸ Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.

1 Peter 3:18-20 (ESV):

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹ in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.

In the first passage above, Peter tells us that we are struggling against the devil – just as Paul did. Peter then compares the devil to a roaring lion. There are presumably *two* separate reasons for that comparison – the fact that the devil is a fierce opponent; and that the end result of falling victim to the devil is *death* (i.e., being “devoured”).

In the second passage, Peter tells us that during the time that Noah was building the ark, some spirit beings **disobeyed** God. As a result, those spirit beings are now “imprisoned” in some way. That definitely appears to state that some spirit beings are *opposed* to God.

The apostles James and Jude also made some brief allusions to this overall topic:

James 2:19 (ESV):

¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!

Jude 1:9 (ESV):

⁹ But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, “The Lord rebuke you.”

In the first passage, James tells us that demons are *aware* that God exists – and that they are **afraid** of Him. The most logical explanation for why demons would be afraid of God is that they are *disobeying* Him...

The passage in Jude tells us that there was a conflict between the archangel Michael and the devil, over Moses' body. This tells us that spirit beings sometimes fight against *each other*.

Finally, the apostle John provided us with numerous, *detailed* accounts of spiritual warfare – particularly in the book of Revelation:

Revelation 12:7-12 (ESV):

⁷ Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, ⁸ but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. ⁹ And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world— he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels

were thrown down with him. ¹⁰ And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. ¹¹ And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. ¹² Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”

Revelation 20:1-3, 7-9 (ESV):

20 Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. ² And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, ³ and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.

⁷ And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison ⁸ and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. ⁹ And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, ¹⁰ and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

In the first passage above, John describes a great war between the angels in heaven. On one side is Michael, and the other angels who **follow** God. The other side consists of the devil, and the other angels who **oppose** God. Michael and the obedient angels are victorious; and as a result, after the conflict, the devil loses the ability to influence angels. However, the devil still *does* have the ability to influence humans – and as a result, we are explicitly warned about him.

In the second passage, we see that during the millennium, the devil will be imprisoned – so that he will not be able to influence humans during that 1000 year period. However, after that period of time, the devil will be released – and he will again be able to influence people. Sadly, it appears that even after Jesus has ruled on the earth for 1000 years, the devil will *still* be able to turn many people away from God – and cause them to fight *against* Jesus.

Similar Accounts from the Gospels

There are a number of accounts in the Gospels, which also reference the fact that spirit beings are opposed to us. These accounts correspond very closely to the information that the apostles gave us. Consider these examples:

Matthew 4:1-11 (ESV):

4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ And the tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴ But he answered, “It is written,

“Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.””

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple ⁶ and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written,

“He will command his angels concerning you,”

and

“On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.”

⁷ Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” ⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. ⁹ And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written,

“You shall worship the Lord your God
and him only shall you serve.”

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

As shown above, the tempter of Jesus is the **devil**. That exactly matches the information that Paul and Peter gave us – that it is the devil who is opposing us.

Another, even more disturbing point about the above passage is the fact that the devil uses *actual Scripture*, in order to try to persuade Jesus to disobey God – or at least, to get Jesus to use the Holy Spirit inappropriately. I think this is one way in which the devil “disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14).

Mark 1:21-27 (ESV):

²¹ And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. ²² And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. ²³ And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, ²⁴ “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are— the Holy One of God.” ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷ And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

In the above passage, a man in the synagogue has an “unclean spirit” – i.e., the man is under the influence of a spirit being who is opposed to God. This spirit being knows that Jesus is the Holy One of God – and it is *afraid* of Jesus. This matches the information from James, above – i.e., that demons know that God exists, and they are afraid of Him.

Luke 8:26-33 (ESV):

²⁶ Then they sailed to the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. ²⁷ When Jesus had stepped out on land, there met him a man from the city who had demons. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he had not lived in a house but among the tombs. ²⁸ When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell down before him and said with a loud voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me.” ²⁹ For he had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many a time it had seized him. He

was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the desert.)³⁰ Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Legion,” for many demons had entered him.³¹ And they begged him not to command them to depart into the abyss.³² Now a large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside, and they begged him to let them enter these. So he gave them permission.³³ Then the demons came out of the man and entered the pigs, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and drowned.

As listed above, a man is under the influence of many demons. Similar to the passage in Mark, the demons know that Jesus is the Son of God; and they are afraid of him. In this case, there is another point to note – the demons have given the man **superhuman strength** (in addition to driving him insane). Notice the passage – people would bind the man with chains and shackles, but he would *break* them apart. No normal human has that ability!

John 8:43-44 (ESV):

⁴³ Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. ⁴⁴ You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

In the above passage, Jesus is chastising some Pharisees, because they are refusing to listen to him. The reason *why* they refused to listen is because they were following the devil. This is an extremely important point – not only can the devil influence us to commit sins; but if we follow him then we will not even be willing to *listen* to the truth about God!

What about the Old Testament?

As mentioned previously, the overall belief about “spiritual warfare” is that there are some **spirit beings** who are opposed to God – and as a result, those spirit beings cause *problems* for people.

As it turns out, some Christian denominations do not believe that any spirit beings are opposed to God. In other words, those denominations believe that *all* spirit beings are completely **obedient** to God.

From what I have seen, one of the primary reasons *why* those denominations do not believe that any spirit beings are opposed to God, is because they claim that there are no references in the Old Testament to spirit beings disobeying God. So, let's take a look in the Old Testament, to see if we can find any references to spirit beings opposing God there.

Job 1:8-12 (ESV):

⁸ And the Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?” ⁹ Then Satan answered the Lord and said, “Does Job fear God for no reason? ¹⁰ Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. ¹¹ But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.” ¹² And the Lord said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.” So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

Job 2:3-6 (ESV):

³ And the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil? He still holds fast his integrity, although you incited me against him to destroy him without reason." ⁴ Then Satan answered the Lord and said, "Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. ⁵ But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." ⁶ And the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life."

The most obvious case of Satan causing problems for humans is contained in the book of Job. However, some people believe that Satan was merely "following God's orders" when he attacked Job. In other words, some people think that God, Himself, decided to test Job – and then He *ordered* Satan to carry out the test.

The passages above show us that God did **not** initiate the test of Job. Instead, it was Satan who wanted to attack Job; so he slandered Job's character. God then *allowed* Satan to attack Job – but He certainly did **NOT order** Satan to attack Job!

Not only that, but in the second passage God explicitly states that Satan incited Him against Job, **without reason**. In other words, God would not have attacked Job on His own – it was only because of Satan's slander against Job that the attacks occurred. At the very least, this implies that Satan caused problems that would *not have occurred otherwise*.

Daniel 10:5-6,11-14 (ESV):

⁵ I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, a man clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. ⁶ His body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude.

¹¹ And he said to me, "O Daniel, man greatly loved, understand the words that I speak to you, and stand upright, for now I have been sent to you." And when he had spoken this word to me, I stood up trembling. ¹² Then he said to me, "Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words. ¹³ The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days, but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I was left there with the kings of Persia, ¹⁴ and came to make you understand what is to happen to your people in the latter days. For the vision is for days yet to come."

As listed above, an angelic spirit being appeared to Daniel, to provide him with information about his vision. The angel also states that he would have appeared to Daniel much sooner – but he was delayed by "the prince of the kingdom of Persia", for 21 days. After that, the archangel Michael appeared, and assisted this angel – and that then allowed the angel to reach Daniel.

Some churches believe that the "prince of the kingdom of Persia" is a human being – because under normal circumstances, the prince of a country would refer to a human man. However, in *this* case, the "prince of Persia" is in a conflict with an angelic *spirit being* – and he causes the angel to be *delayed* for 21 days. As a result, it is inconceivable that this prince of Persia is actually a human – because human beings cannot stand against spirit beings for even one *second* (let alone 21 days.) After all, consider the account in 2 Kings 19:32-35 – in one night, a single angel killed 185,000 human soldiers!

So, it certainly appears that the prince of the kingdom of Persia is actually a spirit being – *and* that that spirit being is **opposed** to God’s plans.

Isaiah 24:19-22 (ESV):

¹⁹ The earth is utterly broken,
the earth is split apart,
the earth is violently shaken.

²⁰ The earth staggers like a drunken man;
it sways like a hut;
its transgression lies heavy upon it,
and it falls, and will not rise again.

²¹ On that day the Lord will punish
the host of heaven, in heaven,
and the kings of the earth, on the earth.

²² They will be gathered together
as prisoners in a pit;
they will be shut up in a prison,
and after many days they will be punished.

The passage above refers to the “day of judgment” – i.e., the close of the age, when God will judge all of creation.

One of the interesting items in that passage is that it states that God will punish “the host of heaven, in heaven“, and “the kings of the earth, on the earth“. In other words, two different types of beings will be *punished* by God – **heavenly** beings, and **earthly** beings. That definitely appears to indicate that there are some spirit beings (i.e. heavenly beings) that will be punished by God. That, in turn, indicates that those spirit beings disobeyed God – i.e., that God will *punish* them for their *disobedience*.

Conclusion

From all of the above information, it certainly appears to me that there are some spirit beings who are opposed to God – and as a result, those spirit beings attempt to cause problems for us. In particular, those disobedient spirit beings try to incite *us* to disobey God *ourselves*. They certainly cannot *force* us to sin; but they can **tempt** us to do so.

The fact that there are spirit beings causing problems for us is one reason why it is so important to draw close to God – i.e., to put on the “whole armor of God”, as Paul mentions in Ephesians 6 above.

Fortunately, we can take comfort in the fact that God will not let us be tempted beyond our ability to endure it (1 Corinthians 10:13); and that if we resist the devil, he will flee from us (James 4:7). To quote 1 Corinthians 15:57 – Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!