

Jesus' Present Ministry
Implications for the Spiritual Battle

In the weeks leading up to Easter we are discussing "Jesus' Present Ministry." Specifically we are noticing the links made in Scripture between Jesus being seated at God's right hand and our discipleship. Last week we saw the implications for our praying. Today we are going to discuss the implications for our daily spiritual battle.

For some of you, this will be a brand new topic; others of you are very conversant with spiritual warfare, both theologically and experientially. I want to acknowledge that up front. I would also like to lower your expectations for this message. We are not going to discuss many aspects of the spiritual battle; you will leave here today with many unanswered questions. But what we **are** going to discuss is very foundational for the topic of spiritual warfare. We are going to see how Jesus' enthronement at God's right hand can give us confidence in the unseen spiritual battle.

Let's first consider. . .

The Spiritual Battle in the Old Testament: The God of Israel (YHWH) vs. the gods of the nations. (Exodus 12:12, 20:3-5, 34:13-15; 1 Samuel 5; 1 Kings 11:19-40; etc.)

The argument of the OT is that there is one God (YHWH) who is superior to all others; unlike the lesser gods, He is the Creator and He alone deserves our worship. [See Note#1 - *elohim*]

The spiritual battle is evident in the first pages of the Bible. Genesis 3 describes how a spiritual being (later identified as Satan, the serpent of old in Revelation 12:9), challenged God's command not to eat from the Tree and convinced the woman that disobeying YHWH would have great advantage. When Adam and Eve sinned, they were banished from the Garden (and from God's immediate presence). But God didn't give up on humanity. Rather, God set in place a plan to redeem fallen humanity and to defeat Satan and the other lesser gods who had rebelled against Him.

Out of all the people on earth YHWH chose Abraham and his descendants as His own possession; the Jewish people and the Promised Land belonged to God. Much like the Garden of Eden, the Promised Land was to be a place where God alone was worshiped and obeyed. The other nations had their gods, but Israel had YHWH, the Creator and Sustainer of heaven and earth. The vision throughout the Old Testament was that one day God would rule all the nations.

The conflicts between Israel and surrounding nations weren't merely physical/military battles; they were also spiritual battles. For example, when the children of Israel were in slavery in Egypt, God performed a series of supernatural miracles through Moses; they were plagues that should have convinced Pharaoh to let the children of Israel go free. Pharaoh's magicians were able to mimic the first few plagues through the supernatural powers they gained from the gods of Egypt; but eventually their gods proved to be no match for the God of Israel. When God was ready to deliver His people, He described it this way (Exodus 12):

12 'For I will go through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments—I am the Lord.

The exodus from Egypt wasn't merely a judgment on Pharaoh and his army; it was a judgment on the gods of Egypt.

When God shortly thereafter gave the "ten commands" which formed the core of the Law, the very first one involved not worshipping other gods (Exodus 20):

3 "You shall have no other gods before Me.

God wouldn't settle for being one of several "gods" that the people worshiped; Israel's relationship with Him was to be exclusive.

4 "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. 5 "You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God. . .

In many contexts being "jealous" is wrong; it can be fueled by pettiness, by a desire to control another person, and by insecurity. But when you're in an exclusive relationship such as a marriage, there is a type of healthy jealousy. Here God is saying, "I am jealous in the sense that I won't tolerate my people cheating on Me. I am their God; they should be My people." The nations had their gods - actual spiritual beings who ruled over each nation (something taught in Deuteronomy 32 and Psalm 82); and Israel had her God, YHWH. [See Note #2]

Eventually God sent the people into exile in Babylon because of such spiritual adultery ("playing the harlot with the gods of the nations - see Exodus 34). God basically said that if they wanted to worship the gods of the nations they would have to do so *in* those nations. The exile in Babylon is described as a spiritual battle between YHWH and the gods of Babylon. Who was more powerful - the God of the Jews or the gods of Babylon? Time and time again, against all odds, YHWH proved that He was more powerful - even in Babylon; His power wasn't restricted geographically.

The Old Testament ends with the people back in the Land with the temple rebuilt. But they are largely at the mercy of other surrounding nations. It appeared that their gods were stronger than the God of Israel. But YHWH had a plan for winning the spiritual battle that *nobody* saw coming - not the Jewish people, not the surrounding nations, not the gods of the nations.

The Spiritual Battle in the New Testament: Jesus (YHWH Incarnate) vs. the gods of the nations.

The NT teaches that Jesus was God in the flesh. His basic message was "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The take-over has begun . . . God is establishing His

kingdom on earth. If that is true, the only sane, rational thing to do is to repent and believe the gospel; turn away from yourself and from your sin and turn back to God in faith. In this way you will enter the Kingdom.

What is fascinating in the gospels is that almost nobody understood Jesus' true identity - not the Jewish authorities, not the crowds, not even His closest followers. The only beings who recognized Jesus were demons. They understood His identity and His power. For example, Matthew 8 records the words of demons who inhabited two men:

29 And they cried out, saying, "What business do we have with each other, Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?"

They understood that Jesus was the unique, uncreated "Son of God." They understood that one day in the future they would be judged and banished from His presence. They knew these things because they were *elohim* who dwelled in the spiritual realm. What they didn't know was that God's plan for defeating them involved the crucifixion of Jesus. They didn't see it coming. In 1 Corinthians 2 Paul wrote about the wisdom of the gospel. Notice verse 8:

8 the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory;

Some understand "the rulers of this age" to refer to the Jewish and Roman rulers. I'm fairly convinced that "rulers" here is a reference to the spiritual powers (as in Ephesians 2:2, 3:10, 6:12, etc.). If this understanding is correct, Paul is saying that the powers of darkness "would not have crucified the Lord of glory" if they had understood what it would accomplish. As we'll see in a few minutes, the crucifixion, resurrection, and enthronement at God's right hand has defeated the powers of darkness. They are still powerful and active; but their authority over the nations has been rescinded.

Let's notice three foundational things about the spiritual battle (as revealed in the NT): ***"Making disciples of all the nations" is God's plan for winning the spiritual battle (reclaiming the nations for Himself).*** (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 13:9-10, 14:8-18, 16:16-21, 17:22-31, 19:21-41, etc.)

In Matthew 28 the risen Christ said this to His followers:

18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.

Significantly, Jesus has been given all authority in both in the heavenly and earthly realms. Here's the command:

19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

The one who has all authority is “with” His followers “always, even to the end of the age.” Whereas the nations had the opportunity to **come** to Israel and learn about her God, the church is to **go** to the nations and make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them to obey everything Jesus commanded. We are to share Christ in word and deed so that Jesus has disciples within every nation. Through Christ all the families of the earth will be blessed. People from every tribe, tongue, and nation are rescued from the “domain of darkness” and transferred to “the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Colossians 1:13).

That’s exactly what we read about in the book of Acts. In Acts 14, for example, Paul healed a man who was lame from birth. The people of Lystra assumed that their gods were responsible. They called Barnabas Zeus and Paul Hermes (because he’s the one who spoke). The priest of Zeus wanted to offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas (verses 12-13); but Paul and Barnabas tore their clothes and said this:

15 and saying, “Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.

Paul quoted Exodus 20:11 to explain that they shouldn’t be worshiping lesser gods; through Jesus they can worship and serve the Creator God, YHWH. [See also Acts 16:16-21, 17:22-31, 19:21-41.]

On a big-picture level, “making disciples of all the nations” is God’s plan for winning the spiritual battle. I think that Michael Heiser says it best when he writes: *As the kingdom of God grows, the kingdom of darkness shrinks and loses ground.*

Just this past week I talked with someone who has recently become a believer in Christ. He is experiencing new life in some amazing ways. He’s very aware that he’s not perfect, but it’s obvious that his conversion means that he is no longer in the kingdom of darkness; he is in the kingdom of God. When he became a disciple, the kingdom of God grew and the kingdom of darkness was diminished.

Making disciples of all the nations is possible because of Jesus’ enthronement at God’s right hand. (Colossians 2:13–15; Ephesians 1:18-21, 2:4-7; 1 Corinthians 15:20-25)

We’ve finally come to the connection between Jesus’ present ministry and our spiritual battle. In Ephesians 1 Paul tells the Ephesians the things that he has been praying for them. In verse 19 Paul writes:

19. . . These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might 20 which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

Remember that when Jesus became one of us, He was made “a little lower than the angels” (Hebrews 2:9). When He was raised bodily from the dead, Jesus was raised up and seated at the right hand of God “**far above** all rule and authority and power and dominion. . .” Those terms are a reference to the evil supernatural spiritual beings who rule over the nations. Even though they have authority, power, and dominion, they are looking up at Christ; their power, authority, and dominion pales in comparison to His. He is *far above them* in every way.

In chapter 2 Paul explains the implications for those who believe in Jesus. Speaking to believers Paul writes:

4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),

In verse 6 Paul makes this staggering statement:

6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

We find the principle throughout Paul’s writings that “whatever happened to Christ happens to His people.” Those who are saved “by grace” (by God’s free gift) have died with Christ, been buried with Christ, have been made alive with Christ, and **raised up and seated with Christ in the heavenly places**. It’s **not** the case that we are down here on earth helpless and hopeless! No, we too are seated far above every evil power. In Christ we fight the spiritual battle from a position of confidence and victory.

Ephesians 6 ties this all together, telling us:

We engage the spiritual battle (and make disciples) through the core habits of discipleship: truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, salvation, the word of God, and prayer. (Ephesians 6:10-20)

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. 11 Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.

Here we see that we have the responsibility to “put on the full armor of God.” This is not something God does for us; this is something we do. By putting on the full armor of God (as opposed to merely **some** armor) we “will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.” A “scheme” is a deception as opposed to an obvious attack. The devil is an intelligent, crafty spiritual being who thinks us schemes in order to deceive us into living in a way that is contrary to God’s will. But this doesn’t mean that we have to be blindsided at every turn; the Spirit can give us discernment. In 2 Corinthians 2 Paul

wrote that “. . .we are not ignorant of [Satan's] schemes” (speaking of unforgiveness). Ephesians 4 mentions anger as another way that Satan tries to ensnare us.

12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.

This statement would freak us out if we hadn't read earlier that ***Christ has been raised up*** and seated at God's right hand far above these evil spiritual beings . . . and that we have been ***raised up and seated with Him!***

Of course we have conflicts with flesh and blood people; there are people who hate Christ and His people. But our real struggle (as was the case in the OT and in the NT), is not against flesh and blood, but against these unseen powers, world forces, and spiritual forces of wickedness. As we interact with people in the physical world, we need to be mindful that there are intelligent, crafty spiritual beings who scheme up ways to distract and demoralize us.

So how do we engage this spiritual battle? Through the core habits of discipleship described in verses 13 through 20. There are times when people engage the spiritual battle more aggressively and directly; on some occasions a demonic presence needs to be confronted (as we see in Acts 16:16-18). But the everyday way that we engage the spiritual battle is through core practices of discipleship such as truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, the word of God, and prayer. Let's consider an example. In verse 15 Paul mentions “the gospel of peace.”

15 and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace;

The gospel brings peace in at least two ways. First, we experience preach the gospel to ourselves. There are times when the enemy of our souls whispers in our ears, “You are worthless. Your prayers are worthless. Why don't you just give up and play it safe?” But when we rehearse the gospel to ourselves, we realize that in Christ we are fully accepted by God; and we are just as alive to God as Jesus is. This realization brings peace to our souls and gives us the confidence to stand firm in the spiritual battle.

Second, sharing the gospel brings peace to others. The spiritual battle involves more than our own individual peace; it also involves extending the kingdom of God. As you think about this coming week, are you prepared for the possibility that God might give you a choice opportunity to share your spiritual story and the gospel with someone you know or with someone you might meet? If we've prepared ourselves like a soldier putting on his boots/sandals, we will be able to engage the spiritual battle successfully.

The main thing I want you to walk away with today is this: *Because Christ is enthroned at God's right hand, far above every spiritual power, and because we are raised up and seated with Him, we engage the spiritual battle from a position of confidence and victory.*

Note 1: A few quick comments about the term “God/god.” The same Hebrew word *elohim* is used for the God of Israel and for the gods of the nations (which were usually represented by idols). The term *elohim* was used to designate any spiritual being (see *The Unseen Realm*, Heiser, p. 30); the term didn’t designate whether they were good or evil. Any being that lived in the spiritual realm was called an *elohim*. Sometimes they took human form in the physical world (such as Genesis 18 when the angels appear to Abraham as men); but they were normally spiritual beings in the spiritual realm.

Note 2: When Scriptures such as Deuteronomy 4:35 say that “the Lord is God; there is no other besides Him,” they aren’t saying that other gods don’t exist. Rather, He is saying that no other gods begin to compare to Him in power and wisdom. This is evident from the way this expression is used elsewhere (e.g., Isaiah 47:8, Zephaniah 2:15; see Heiser, p. 35).