

UNDERSTANDING SPIRITUAL WARFARE



“Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. 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.

Ephesians 6:11-12 (ESV)

THE UNSEEN WAR

It's surprisingly easy to forget that the Christian worldview is fundamentally a *supernaturalist* worldview. We believe the very first line of Genesis 1:1, which says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Before creation, God existed. He created everything above, everything below--everything material and everything spiritual. But by Genesis 3, we see that there is a spiritual conflict already underway. There we see that the serpent, created by God but somehow now in rebellion against God, is already at work to draw the first humans, God's own image bearers, away from God's purposes and toward its own. It seeks to isolate the believers from God and from one another. Under the influence of the serpent, Adam and Eve reject God's words and opt to forge their own vision of what's good, right, beautiful, and real. The humans reject God, embrace sin, and the consequences spill out across the land (Gen. 3:6-19).

The same spiritual battle that marked the story of the fall in Genesis 3 continues today. God and his Kingdom continue to move forward but are met with opposition from fallen, God-rejecting spiritual beings (including Satan and the demons) who are opposed to Him and His purposes (Eph. 6:12). Fortunately, Jesus has triumphed over Satan and the demons through his death on the cross and exaltation to the right hand of God (Matt. 12:28-29; Eph. 1:19-23; Col. 2:13-15). The war has been decisively won, we just wait for God's final dealing with his enemies in judgment (Jn. 12:31; Heb. 2:14; Rev. 20:7-10). Until that day, however, we find ourselves still at battle in this world.

THE “EVERYDAY” DEMONIC

A key part of our enemies' agenda is to pull away as many of God's image-bearers from His rule and family as possible. When someone decisively trusts Jesus for salvation, victory is certain for that person--they are secure in God's loving grace. Evangelism, then, is one of the most important aspects of actively engaging in spiritual warfare. Even still, the demonic forces can continue to influence Christians (and non-Christians, of course) in a number of ways for the purpose of frustrating their intimacy, faithfulness, and fruitfulness with God. Because they're so commonplace, we often don't think of these things as instances of “spiritual warfare,” but they very much are:

- Temptation - Encouraging people to entertain and give into sin (1 Thess. 3:5; Matt. 4:1)
- Accusation - Influencing people to produce feelings of guilt, doubt, or fear (Rev. 12:10)
- Deception - Deceiving people to believe false things about God and themselves (among other things), leading people away from the truth (Jn. 8:44; 1 Tim. 4:1)
- Physical Attack/Abuse - Using people to inflict serious harm on themselves or others (Acts 19:13-16)
- Persecution - Organizing social structures and individuals to punish and deter faithful Christian witness (1 Thess. 2:17-18)

Of course, not every instance of these things is evidence of direct demonic activity. It is not only the devil, but also the world systems and people's own sinful flesh (or a combination of all three) that can produce temptation, accusation, deception, attack, or persecution (Eph. 2:2-3). Whatever the source, these are the most frequent evidences and instances of the spiritual battle we find ourselves in.

Surprisingly, the Bible's given strategies for defending against demonic activity are quite simple. We are called to stand firm against the devil by returning to the basics of Christian discipleship in community--pursuing truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, salvation, the Word of God, and Spirit-led prayer (Eph. 6:10-20). Confession and repentance from sin are vitally important, as well. In the end, faithful trust in and pursuit of Jesus is our defense--no more, and no less.

THE “EXTRAORDINARY” DEMONIC

If there are common ways demons try to influence people, there are also more extraordinary ways, as well. It is probably best to think of demonic influence on a continuum from simple occasional temptation on one end to demonized (or “demon-oppressed”) on the other end. We see many instances of these more dramatic kinds of demonic encounters throughout the Bible, especially during Jesus' earthly ministry (Mk. 1:21-28; Lk 8:26-39). A thoroughly biblical worldview will accept the reality of dramatic encounters with demons and demon-oppressed people, though they're usually not everyday occurrences and we are not encouraged to fascinate or obsess with them.

It's important to consider to what extent Christians can be demon oppressed. To answer that, it is helpful to break the concept into simpler questions that lie behind it. First, we should ask if Christians can be “owned” by Satan/demons. The answer is no, as there are key promises from God that Jesus has rescued his people from the domains of darkness and secured them in his hands (Col. 13:1; Jn. 10:28). Second, we should ask if Christians can be “influenced” by Satan/demons. The answer is yes, in all of the ways described in the section above. Third, we should ask if Christians can be “dominated” by Satan/demons to the point of losing control. The answer here is unclear and debated by experts. It seems best to conclude that Christians should both simultaneously take great confidence in the promises and security of Jesus, but also be vigilantly on guard against giving Satan any footholds in their lives over time (1 Pet. 5:8).

Should you find yourself in one of these “extraordinary” circumstances with someone, the key thing to remember is that it is the authority of Jesus alone that has complete power over Satan and the demons... not secret formulas, magical rites, or conversational tricks (Lk. 10:17). We are to act under the decisive authority of Jesus by declaring, “In the name of Jesus and by His authority and power, we command you to leave.”

HELP WHEN YOU NEED IT

If you're part of the community at Door of Hope and feel like you've encountered something along these lines (in your own life or in the life of someone you know) that is beyond what you're comfortable dealing with, please share it with the community. Specifically, share what's going on with both your community group leader and one of the [staff pastors](#). Demonic influence thrives in isolation and there is special power in joining together in Jesus's name to stand firm.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Basic Principles for Dealing with the Demonic](#) handout by Gerry Breshears - Dr. Breshears put together this short, thoughtful guide to understanding and dealing with various types of demonic influence.

[3 Crucial Questions About Spiritual Warfare](#) book by Clinton Arnold – A great systematic introduction to spiritual warfare addressing some of the most central and pressing questions.

[The Screwtape Letters](#) book by C.S. Lewis - An amazing look at temptation from one of Christianity's best writers.

[Supernatural](#) book by Michael Heiser - Basically a biblical theology of the spiritual realm. Thorough and clarifying.