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Spiritual Warfare: Is it just an expression or is it real?

Images of Jesus and angels engaged in the fight are common in the Bible, but is “Spiritual warfare” just an expression or not?

Right up until the Elizabethan era in the 16th century swords were the common image of a weapon. Hence, in the Old Testament when Ballaam on his donkey is stopped by an angel, the angel has a sword, as shown here in the Nuremburg manuscript.



C S Lewis was a senior academic at both Oxford University and Cambridge University. He is better known as the author of the Narnia books and as a lay theologian. Anyone would do well to read his book “Mere Christianity”. In one of his books he writes about a devil and his apprentice and the book is called “The Screwtape Letters”.

In “The Screwtape Letters”, C S Lewis writes as one side of a conversation between two demons as they correspond by sending letters to each other often in the form of instructions from the senior demon to his apprentice. C S Lewis exposes the subtle nature of temptation and manipulation which the devil employs against Christians. Since the devil in the book refers to God as “the enemy” I have avoided using that terminology here.

One of the common ideas that the devil has, as shown by CS Lewis, is “an ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure” which the devil sees as a formula that works well. Since all of us have experienced, in one form or another, us taking an unhealthy preference (indeed obsession) in something in which we find pleasure, only to find that the more we do it, the less pleasurable it actually becomes.

C S Lewis’ warning is:

“Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.”

Scripture tells us that bad events will happen to Christians just as much as others because we are told in the gospels that the sun shines and the rain falls just as much on the evil as the good people. The weeds grow amongst the crops. However, it is going too far to see “Spiritual warfare” in everything. The equal opposite problem is to say that because everything is fine then there is no “Spiritual warfare”.

Josh Wester wrote in 2018 about C S Lewis, and wrote:

For years, I’ve been assuming the absence of visible demonic activity also guaranteed there was no such activity to speak of. I’ve been functionally, and

sometimes literally, assuming the Devil isn't at work today. Instead of wrestling with "powers and principalities," I was content to chalk all of that up to bad luck or human nature or something else. And here Lewis offers a remarkable course correction.

Through the voice of Screwtape, Lewis sets forth plausible scenarios chronicling the very "schemes of the Devil" I had so blindly ignored. On page after page, Lewis exposes the subtle nature of temptation and manipulation which the enemy employs against Christians, including me, every day.

This is the error of under emphasis as we find described in the "Got Questions" website which tells us about Spiritual Warfare and says:

There are two primary errors when it comes to spiritual warfare—over-emphasis and under-emphasis. Some blame every sin, every conflict, and every problem on demons that need to be cast out. Others completely ignore the spiritual realm and the fact that the Bible tells us our battle is against spiritual powers. The key to successful spiritual warfare is finding the biblical balance. Jesus sometimes cast demons out of people; other times He healed people with no mention of the demonic.



This then all directs us towards numerous passages in the Bible. Let us start with the letter to the Ephesians.

In this icon, shown here, there is not only a sword in hand and a shield but also the armour.

St Paul wrote in the letter to the Ephesians at chapter 6:

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.

¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

So even in the New Testament we are warned that we must be prepared to use Scripture to go against evil.

When Jesus is tempted in the desert it is always Scripture that he uses back against the devil. Therefore talk of a "Sword" is almost always Scripture from the Bible. Indeed it is hard to find any case where it is not. It is the word of God that so many do not want to hear and certainly the devil does not want to see used.

What is also noticeable is that the devil himself quotes Scripture out of context so that he can pretend that it means something that it does not. This is a trick for which we, all of us, too often fall, particularly when we start to make rules out of individual passages without reference to the rest of the Bible. This is what our Lord Jesus Christ speaks against and constantly tells us we have to understand God's word holistically.

Yes, "Spiritual warfare" is real, and we need to be constantly be on the look out for the attacks from the devil whose purpose is to keep us away from God's word and the right way of living and from truthful relationships with others.

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