

Opening Words

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Holy War in Heavenly Places – that’s the place holy war should be fought. We don’t fight holy war with bombs and bullets, with swords and spears. We don’t fight holy war against our fellow man. We fight holy war against the powers in the invisible realm who enslave mankind, and we fight with the weapons of the Spirit of God to liberate our fellow humans.

We are looking at Paul’s classic passage on spiritual warfare. Today, I want us to take some time and identify the forces we are fighting with. Follow along as I read Ephesians 6:10-12.

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. 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.

In verse 12, Paul uses four titles to refer to the forces in heavenly places. Normally, we think of the devil, or Satan and his demons or fallen angels. Those are the most common names for them. And the devil is mentioned here in verse 11 and in Ephesians 4:27. In Ephesians 2:2 he is called the prince of the power of the air which identifies him as the leader of all these forces. But Paul and Peter use other names for these forces and their names reveal important things about them.

First, they are called *rulers* which implies they have realms in which they exercise their authority. They were given this authority by God, and they were to exercise it for the benefit of mankind, but they have turned it against God by exploiting the weaknesses of humanity and seeking to thwart the work of God in the world to bless those who are made in his image.

Second, they are called *powers* which implies they not only have authority but that they also have great power in the universe. They use their authority, and they rule with great power and influence in their realms and on earth in a variety of ways.

Third, they are called *world forces of this darkness*. What a phrase this is. These are the ones who are behind the darkness that is in the world. These are the ones who blind people to the truth. I’m sure you remember these words from 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, “And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

These are the forces that keep people in darkness in the world. These are the forces that make the darkness of paganism even darker. We looked at the spiral of sin and death in Ephesians 4:17-19 and saw how a rejection of the truth led to hardness of heart and a callousness to the things of God. This led to ignorance and to a darkened mind. There's our word darkness again. People darken their own minds by their bad choices but these forces make them worse.

Notice, also, that they are called "world forces" of darkness. These are not just little demonic imps that sit on people's shoulders and put their fingers in people's ears so they don't hear the Gospel. That sounds more like cartoon characters. Far from that, these are powerful entities that are behind the great religions and ideologies of the world that turn people away from the true God. I think of communism, evolutionary naturalism, and secularism to name three. These are worldviews that are antagonistic to biblical revelation and these ways of thinking have captured the hearts and minds of our media, our educational institutions, and our governmental institutions.

In the ancient Roman world, cities, villages, and nations would claim the personal protection of a god. Athens was devoted to Athene. The city to which this book was written, Ephesus, was a center of the worship of Artemis, and the Ephesians dedicated their city to her glory. This is a world force of darkness. This practice persists to this day. In Thailand and Indonesia, for example, the governments call upon the god Garuda for protection and have his emblem on their flags!

There is one more term for these forces in these invisible realms – they are called *spiritual forces of wickedness in heavenly places*. This is one of the key verses to help us understand what Paul means by heavenly places. He is not just talking about heaven, but he is talking about realms of power and authority inhabited by majestic creatures who use their influence to turn people from God. Notice that they are called spiritual forces. This underscores that we are not fighting against people or against governments. We are fighting the powers that are behind them.

This was the great issue that Jesus tried to correct when he came to Israel. The Jews thought that Rome and the rest of the Gentile world was the enemy. Some segments of the Jewish population had armed themselves and were only waiting for an opportune moment to fight. This is why Peter carried a sword into the Garden of Gethsemane and started swinging it wildly when the authorities arrested Jesus. He had told Jesus he was ready to die with him, and he was completely sincere and he would have died for him in battle. That was Peter's vision – to go into battle with Jesus. But Jesus did not come to fight against Rome or Greece or any other nation of the world. This is why he said to Pontius Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over." Jesus told Peter to put away the sword, and when Peter heard that, he fled. He was ready to die for Jesus in a physical battle but not a spiritual battle. He was ready to go to war, but not to the cross.

And so, with his disciples and with his family members and with the religious rulers and with the masses Jesus had to show them that Rome was not the enemy. Sin was the enemy, and the powers behind sin were the enemy. Jesus had already engaged the enemy and won significant battles against him in the wilderness and in his ministry. He was getting ready for the ultimate battle as he

headed to the cross to pay for our sins. The enemy was the spiritual forces of wickedness in heavenly places.

I would like to make one other point about these forces. They are called spiritual forces of wickedness. I have mentioned to you before that my wife and I have been reading a book about the plight of women and children in the world. As we have read these stories, our hearts have been moved and we have been sobered up to the reality of extreme wickedness in the world.

I grew up in San Antonio. I like my home town. It is a pleasant place to live. I had a relatively peaceful youth and even to this day I live in peace as most of us in the United States do. But I have also come to realize that we live on islands of peace amid a great sea of wickedness. Let me share some sobering facts with you. And let me warn you, some of these will not be easy to hear.

- Domestic violence is the most widespread form of abuse against women in the world today. Between $\frac{1}{4}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$ of women have been abused by a partner. Only 44 countries specifically protect women against domestic violence. Courts in many countries are reluctant to rule on domestic violence, considering it a family matter only. TG, p 51.
- Women in Swaziland are expected to remain silent when they are abused and the Swati word for wife or woman means “one who dies without speaking of what she has endured.”
- In India, a kidnapping or abduction happens every 4 minutes, a dowry death every 10 minutes, a rape every 54 minutes, an act of cruelty every 33 minutes and a criminal offence against women every 7 minutes.
- 250 million of the world’s children must work for a living. Two-thirds of these work in hazardous conditions. In West Africa, children, as young as three are leased to work in the fields.
- Tens of millions of baby girls have been aborted throughout the world, but mostly in India and China, simply because they were girls.
- 300,000 children today fight in armies, out of force, and many of them are little girls.

I could go on and on. I don’t want to depress you. But I do want to impress you with the fact that we are living still in a world of darkness. And some may say, “Well, this is a sign of the times! Jesus is coming soon!” Perhaps. I hope so! But of that day and hour no one knows and Jesus told us that it is not for us to know the times or the epochs which are reserved in the authority of the Father.” And he said, “there is only one thing you do need to know, the Holy Spirit will come upon you and you will receive my power and you will be my witnesses even to the remotest parts of the earth.” Jesus has not commissioned us to commiserate about how bad things are. He has commissioned us to preach the Gospel. Jesus has not commissioned us to speculate about dates or times of his return but to be his witnesses wherever we go. And he has done this because he has commissioned the church to storm the gates of Hell and to bring down its gates to set people free. He has commissioned the church to shine brightly in the world and to draw people to the love of the Father.

Bright lights are shining in the world. They are shining through you. They are shining through your churches. They are shining through us at WGS Ministries. He has told us to engage the enemy, not with fear but with the certainty of victory. Paul said, “finally brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.”