

# **THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL: A STUDY OF EPHESIANS**

## **(LESSON ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTEEN)**

### **“SPIRITUAL WICKEDNESS”**

#### **EPHESIANS 6:10-12**

*10 Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might.*

*11 Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.*

*12 For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.*

The **New English Translation** renders the verse **12** as follows: “*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavens.*”

The Apostle Paul is informing us in this verse that our real warfare is not waged against human beings, but against the devil and his forces.

Spiritual warfare is not a **political** struggle; it is not a **social** struggle; it is not an **economic** struggle; it is not even a **religious** struggle. It is not a struggle **between** human beings. It is a struggle **within** human beings.

In his commentary on **Ephesians**, **John Phillips** wrote the following: “Our enemies are not people. We must see beyond people. Satan may use people to persecute us, lie to us, cheat us, hurt us, or even kill us.

But our **real** enemy lurks in the shadows of the unseen world, moving people as pawns on the chessboard of time. As long as we see people as enemies and wrestle against them, we will spend our strength in vain. Certainly we see wicked people, hear the evil things they say, and feel the hurts they inflict on us. People are involved, but they are not the real problem. This is not an ordinary battle. **We are in a greater arena than the one we can see.**"

Brothers and sisters, it is not people who are our enemy. "*Our struggle is not against flesh and blood.*" Rather, our enemy is the one who controls people. It is important for us to understand that behind every person who seeks to oppose, and deceive, and harm us, is a spiritual enemy. The conflict is not with the human and the visible, but with the superhuman and the invisible.

As the American theologian **Adrian Rogers** said, "**We are at spiritual war!** Therefore, the church is not a cruise ship with the pastor as the master of ceremonies. Indeed it is not a showboat, but a battleship. We're called to see Satan's strongholds crumble under the power of heaven's artillery. We do not have the luxury of neutrality. We must engage in the fight. A truce will never be called. God's will for his saints is not that we merely survive, but that we thrive in total victory. General Douglas MacArthur spoke rightly when he said, 'In war there is no substitute for victory.' We must be aware of our enemy if we would have this victory. We need to learn of our infernal foe."

Brothers and sisters, the moment we were "born-again," or "born from above," we enlisted in the army of God, and thus we became personal targets of the devil. We were all placed on his hit-list. It is noteworthy that Paul does not invite the believer to enter into spiritual warfare. He simply announces it as a fact and explains that our struggle is not against human beings but against the schemes of the devil and his emissaries. Our spiritual battle is not so much a **power** struggle as it is a **truth** struggle. It is the truth of God's Word that renews our mind, and

determines how we think and believe, and therefore how we act and behave. As we apply the truth of the Word of God to our lives we stand firm and resist the devil.

In **James 4:7** James writes, *“Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”* **Warren Wiersbe** observed that before we can **stand** up to Satan, we must **bow** before God. Simon Peter resisted the Lord and ended up submitting to Satan! We are called upon to do the exact opposite. We are called upon to submit to God and resist the devil.

**J. Alec Motyer** noted that James’ command to resist the devil, “is not a word for one who is carrying the attack over into the enemy camp, but for one who is manning the defenses, knowing that enemy pressure is ceaseless and that he is constantly under fire. We do well to notice that it is those who have subordinated themselves to God who are commanded to stand firm against the devil. James knows of no act of consecration to God which takes us out of the conflict. On the contrary, it is the very act of decisive enlistment as his underlings which brings us into the firing-line and calls the devil’s attention to us as objects of attack.”

Believers are **never** instructed to **flee** from the Devil but to **resist** him! We resist him by first submitting to God. We submit to God by submitting to the authority of Scripture in **every** area of our lives. Several passages of Scripture have been written about spiritual warfare but this single command in **James 4:7** concisely presents the **primary** principle of victory in our daily struggle against the forces of evil: *“Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”* Every believer can successfully resist the devil because God commands him or her to do so, and His commands always include His empowerment.

In **1 John 2:14**, the Apostle writes, *“I have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I have written*

*unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one.”*

The young persons mentioned in the second half of this verse, overcame the “*wicked one*” because God’s Word dwelt in them in a rich way and they were therefore knowledgeable concerning sound doctrine. If we take our **stand** on the Word of God we will be able to **withstand** the attacks of the devil. We must resist the temptation to try special formulas or words directed at the devil or his demons. We must simply purpose to remain steadfast in the faith, living in accordance with the truth of God’s Word. As we feed on a diet of **sound doctrine** and **obey** God’s truth, the devil is “resisted.” The devil is the father of lies and the prince of darkness but God’s Truth exposes his lies and overpowers darkness.

Paul says, “*We wrestle not against flesh and blood.*” The word “*wrestle*” is a translation of the Greek word **palé**: (**pal’-ay**), which is the literal word for wrestling. As such it pictured hand-to-hand combat between wrestling athletes, this combat in the ancient world being characterized by trickery, cunning and deception. The Greek word **palé**, pictures one engaged in an intense struggle involving physical or nonphysical force against strong opposition. Paul uses pale in the figurative sense to picture the believer’s struggle and conflict against evil angelic forces, arranged in a military like hierarchy.

Commenting on Paul’s use of the word **palé**, the Greek New Testament scholar **Kenneth Wuest** made the following remarks: “In the word ‘*wrestle*,’ (**pale**), Paul uses a Greek athletic term. **Thayer** defines as follows: ‘a contest between two in which each endeavors to throw the other, and which is decided when the victor is able to press and hold down his prostrate antagonist, namely, hold him down with his hand upon his neck.’ When we consider that the loser in a Greek wrestling contest had his eyes gouged out with resulting blindness for the rest of his days, we can form some conception of the Ephesian Greek’s reaction to Paul’s illustration. The Christian’s wrestling against the powers of darkness is no less desperate and fateful...The fact that Paul

uses the word 'wrestle' indicates that we are involved in a hand-to-hand battle and are not mere spectators at a game. Satan wants to use our external enemy, the world, and our internal enemy, the flesh, to defeat us. His weapons and battle plans are formidable."

The word **palé** is in the **present tense**. The clear implication is that this struggle or hand to hand combat is not a one-time occurrence but a continual day-by-day warfare. If we are not aware of this we are already in trouble! But even if we are aware of it, we are still in jeopardy if we fail to walk in a conscious awareness of our need to be clothed with "*the whole armour of God.*"

Paul lists four distinct satanic orders against whom believers wrestle in spiritual warfare. These are a. **principalities**, b. **powers**, c. **rulers of the darkness of this world**, and d. **spiritual wickedness in high places**.

One commentator states that, "Paul pulls back the curtain of the invisible spiritual 'mafia' to give us a brief glimpse of the tremendous spiritual forces arrayed against the children of God. His point is that although interpersonal relationships often appear to be our major battleground...Paul explains that the real battle is against a hierarchy of evil invisible supernatural beings who are organized and determined to **disrupt, discourage, disillusion, discomfort, disarm**...all the while seeking to cause believers to **doubt** the Word of God and the faithfulness and goodness of God. So often we hear the phrase 'the battle between good and evil' but this passage makes it abundantly clear that evil is not some imaginary, inanimate force but instead is an active, organized evil perpetrated by an invisible, albeit not invincible, foe. Too many Christians have failed to realize that they are engaged in this titanic spiritual struggle of the ages, and that they were 'drafted' into God's army the moment they were saved by grace through faith. To be ignorant of our calling and the magnitude of this great struggle is a dangerous ignorance."

The Greek word translated “*principalities*” is **arché**: (**ar-khay**’), which in this context means, “the first place, principality, rule, magistracy.” It refers to those having the position of priority and preeminence. Paul is informing his readers that there is an invisible audience of evil princes or chiefs among angels. He is also teaching that even in the invisible angelic world there is a strict order and levels of authority.

Of these “*principalities*,” **John Phillips** wrote the following: “There are also ranks in Satan’s spirit realm. At the head of his countless minions are the principalities-princes who share with Satan the power he wields over other fallen angels, over evil spirits, and over the world. The word Paul used to describe these beings is **arché**, which literally means “beginning” and can be translated “chief ruler” or “magistrate.” So principalities are high-ranking, governing authorities who are under Satan’s control.”

It appears from what we read in **Daniel 10**, that the devil places these spirit princes over specific regions of the kingdoms of men. In verse **13** we read about the “*prince of the kingdom of Persia*,” and in verse **20** we learn about the “*prince of Grecia*.” The “prince of Persia” was powerful enough to hinder the angelic messenger from fulfilling his God appointed mission for 21 days. These principalities obviously wield great power, but they are defeated foes, as **Colossians 2:13-15** tell us. The **New English Translation** renders the verses as follows:

*13 And even though you were dead in your transgressions and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, he nevertheless made you alive with him, having forgiven all your transgressions.*

*14 He has destroyed what was against us, a certificate of indebtedness expressed in decrees opposed to us. He has taken it away by nailing it to the cross.*

*15 Disarming the rulers and authorities [principalities and powers], he has made a public disgrace of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*

The word “*powers*” is a translation of the Greek word **exousia**: (**ex-oo-see’-ah**), which means, “permission, authority, right, liberty, power to act.” Until the end of the age these Satanic forces who have already been defeated by the work of Christ on the Cross, are allowed to exercise a certain limited **exousia**, or authority in temporarily opposing the purposes of God. The word **exousía** denotes executive power, whereas the word **arché** represents the authority granting the executive power.

**John Phillips** has a helpful note regarding “*powers*.” He writes, “Satan seeks to compensate for his lack of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence by efficiently organizing the countless clever beings who share power with him in the spirit world. Some of these beings are called “*powers*.” They wield authority delegated to them by Satan. They gather information, influence events, implement Satan’s schemes, inflict woe and bondage on the human race, and laugh at man’s blindness in refusing to believe that such evil beings exist.”

We now turn our attention to the “*rulers of the darkness of this world*,” or, as the **New English translation** renders it, the “*world rulers of this darkness*.” The phrase “*world rulers*,” is the translation of the Greek word **kosmokratór**: (**kos-mok-fat’-ore**), which means, “lord of the world, prince of this age.” The word describes one who holds power over the world and therefore refers to a ruler of the **kosmos** or the ordered world system of which Satan is the head, the fallen angels are his servants, and all mankind other than the saved, are his subjects. This includes those people, pursuits, pleasures, purposes, and places where God is not wanted. In the plural as used in this verse, it speaks of devilish forces, composed of fallen angels who control the present evil world system.

These “*world rulers*” are rulers of “*the darkness*.” They reign over the realm of darkness. The Greek word translated “*darkness*” is **skotos**: (**skot’-os**), which literally means, “that sphere in which light is absent.” The word refers to the essence of darkness, and when it is applied to sin,

it refers to the essence of sin. Darkness is a tragic picture of the life of a person who is separated from God, now and forever, unless the Gospel opens the eyes of such a person.

In **Luke 22:53**, **skotos** is used metaphorically by our Lord to describe the spiritual powers of Satan and his evil empire: *“Day after day when I was with you in the temple courts, you did not arrest me. But this is your hour, and that of the power of **darkness!**”* (**New English Translation**)

Again **John Phillips** is helpful in explaining who these *“world rulers of this darkness”* are:

“Satan’s master plan for holding the world in subjection can be summed up in a single word: deception. He keeps people in a state of spiritual, philosophical, religious, political, social, and personal blindness. He has invented every false religion and is behind every false philosophy, every false ideology, and every false theory. He keeps people in a state of darkness, and he has a legion of evil spirits whose supreme task is to fasten false ideologies like iron shackles on the souls of men.

Think of the outrageous beliefs that otherwise intelligent people hold in the name of religion. Think of the millions of people who are enslaved in various forms of idolatry. Think of the countless cults that caricature the gospel...Where do all these false ideologies come from? Why are they so attractive? ...

Behind all these ideologies is more than the persuasive power of clever leaders. Behind them all are Satan’s capable deceivers-the rulers of this world’s darkness. Their supreme task is to blind people to the gospel.”

The last of the four distinct satanic orders listed by Paul, against whom believers wrestle in spiritual warfare is *“**spiritual wickedness in high places,**”* or the *“**spiritual forces of evil in the heavens,**”* As the **New English Translation** renders it.



The Greek word translated “*spiritual*” is **pneumatikos**: (**pn-yoo-mat-ik-os**’), which in this context, refers to that which belongs to the **supernatural** world as distinguished from that which belongs to the **natural** world. Paul desires for believers to understand that their struggle is against invisible forces whose wickedly corrupt disposition leads them to practice only evil.

The word “*evil*” is a translation of the Greek word **ponéria**: (**pon-ay-ree’-ah**), which means, “depravity, iniquity, wickedness.” The word is used in the New Testament in the moral and ethical sense only, and refers to intentionally practiced ill will. **Ponéria** speaks of wickedness, not merely in the abstract, but of active evil. The idea is of not only **doing** evil, but **being** evil.

These spirits exist in “*high places*,” or in “*the heavens*.” **Kenneth Wuest** writes that in this context, the “*heavens*” do not refer to the highest sphere inhabited by the holy angels, but to the lower heavens, the lower atmosphere surrounding this earth.

Brothers and sisters, we are constantly engaged in spiritual warfare with spiritual forces. In **physical** warfare, it is not unusual for the combatants to experience victory and defeat in individual battles. The same is true for those of us who are engaged in **spiritual** warfare. We will win some battles and we will lose others. That is a part of growing in grace and the knowledge of Christ Jesus (**2 Peter 3:18**). It is an aspect of maturing in our Christian walk, progressively being sanctified, or being conformed more and more into the image of God’s Son. The truth is that as long as we live in this world, in our mortal bodies, sin will still bring us “fleeting” pleasure (**Hebrews 11:25**), and we will occasionally succumb to its temptations in moments of weakness, self-confidence and even rebellion.

When we lose a particular **battle** however, we must remember that in Jesus Christ, we have already won the **war**. We must not allow the devil and his servants to convince us that we are “losers” and that we will never obtain victory. We must remember that God continually gives us

the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (**1 Corinthians 15:57**). We must remember also, that the devil and his host are already defeated (**Colossians 2:15**). We are not fighting for victory; we are fighting from victory! As we wrestle against principalities, against powers, against the world rulers of this darkness, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavens, let us be strengthened in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Let us clothe ourselves with the whole armour of God, so that we will be able to stand against their schemes.

A teacher in a Bible school once gave his students an hour-long exam. They were to spend half of the time writing about the Holy Spirit and the other half about the devil.

One student used the entire hour to write about the Holy Spirit. At the bottom of his examination paper he wrote, "I had no time for the devil."

Now admittedly, that was not the way to get a good grade on the exam, but the student's comment does point us to the only way we can resist and overcome Satan. In **Ephesians 4:27** Paul writes, "*Do not give the devil an opportunity*" (**New English Translation**). How do we ensure that we do not give the devil an opportunity? Paul gives us the answer in **Ephesians 5:18**: "*And do not get drunk with wine, which is debauchery, but be filled by the Spirit*" (**New English Translation**).

As we have noted in previous Lessons, being filled with the Spirit is synonymous with allowing the Word of Christ to dwell in us richly (**Colossians 3:16**). When our minds are saturated with, immersed in, and surrendered to God's Word, His Spirit will control and dominate us and the fruit of the Spirit will be produced in our lives. Not giving the devil an opportunity is really a matter of our being willing to consistently surrender to the influences and control of the indwelling Spirit. The more willing we are to surrender to the influences and control of the indwelling Spirit, the more the Spirit's power becomes available to us.

If we fill ourselves with God's Word, and submit to the Holy Spirit, we will not "*give the devil an opportunity.*" The devil cannot gain a foothold in any area of our life that the Holy Spirit controls.