

Ephesians 6:12

Struggling Against the Rulers, Against the Authorities

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The second of three studies

In the previous study, we looked at the phrase: *We are not struggling against flesh and blood*. We come now to the phrase: *we are struggling . . . against the rulers, against the authorities*. There are various ways in which we could approach our brief study of these two phrases, but I want to try and show now that there is a close connection between what Paul is saying here and the everyday, ongoing conflict in any Christian congregation today where the Word of God is being faithfully preached, and the grace of Christ freely offered to men and women. Too often, we think of that conflict as concerning only the minister, instead of the whole fellowship. Let us see how all those called to serve in any way are inevitably caught up into the spiritual battle which rages unseen in the heavenly realms.

There are two obvious ways in which these two phrases connect the theme of conflict we have been considering.

First, the apostle is describing the struggle against the enemies of God which all Christians will experience. Since the church, as God's chosen force to fight back against evil in this world, is made up of many believers working at various levels of Christian service, it is appropriate that we direct our thinking towards everyone who is appointed to serve in any way within the church of God.

But there is another connection between our text and Christian service. In 1 Tim. 3:6, where Paul is listing the qualifications necessary for any who aspire to the office of elder, he points out that no one who is a recent convert should be appointed to the office of an elder, lest *he become conceited and fall under the same judgement as the devil*. What does that mean?

It is a most significant and important statement. Because it tells us that the origin of the devil's fall was

pride. Sometime between Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 1:2, one of the heavenly creatures God had created was lifted up with pride, and fell under judgement. That may possibly be why for millions of years this planet earth was desolate. Some think it may explain the fossils and hints of a prehistoric age, before ever humankind was created, that between the very first two verses of the Bible there was a gap of time, during which Lucifer fell through pride.

Be that as it may, we are told by Paul in 1 Timothy 3:6 that conceit, arrogance, pride was the cause of Satan's downfall, and now that is the condemnation upon him. Therefore, pride, the origin of all evil, must be guarded against in the church of God, particularly in the eldership and among all who are given special responsibility.

These, then, are two strong links between the phrases we are considering in this study and Christian service, whether in the eldership or in some other office within the church of God. To be specific, we are dealing here with the nature of the church's conflict and with the danger of pride.

Against the Rulers (better with AV: Against Principalities)

The word 'principality' (as in AV), means literally, 'a state ruled by a prince'. So here, the Bible is telling us that the rebellious pride of Satan has caused him to set up a kingdom which he rules; and the characteristic of this Satanic kingdom is pride. All other evils flow from this.

On one level, Satan is a great prince. He has many subjects under his government. The Lord Jesus calls

him *the prince of this world*.¹ Some members of the church in Pergamum are told by Christ that *they live where Satan has his throne*.² When, therefore, the apostle speaks of *principalities*, he is making clear reference to the domain of the devil, and warning us of organized forces which are ranged against us.

Other members of the church of Thyatira who are being rebuked by Christ, are told they have learned *Satan's so-called deep secrets*.³ So the kingdom of this great prince Satan actually extends right into the church of God. There are those within the bosom of the church who are actually members of Satan's empire. So says Christ, and I am not at liberty to disagree with him.

We are also told in Revelation that most of this world worships the devil.⁴ I don't think that means that most people are active Satanists, worshipping Satan as their prince in the way we worship Christ as our Prince. That is not what our Bible means. What is meant is that pride governs their lives. Pride rules their wills. They do not humble themselves before God, submit to him.

You and I will never understand why God allows Satan to have his kingdom. But God *has* allowed it. And Satan, as a great prince, at this present time rules over this world which is in rebellion against the Lord.

Now Christ's church is God's chosen army to fight against Satan's kingdom of pride. Every Christian is in the front line of the battle. But those appointed to have particular tasks within the churches also have a special responsibility to guide its life, witness and work; to help it stand firm and strong against Satan's mighty kingdom.

That is the foundation of all we do. That is our starting point. I know there is far more we have to do. But this underlies everything. We are called to struggle, to wrestle, against Satan's kingdom and his highly organized revolt against God. Being a Christian must involve that. It is us against the rest of the world, because the rest of the world, whether it knows it or not, is in Satan's power.

I wonder if you have been delivered from Satan's kingdom of pride? You do not have to be a member of a witch's coven to be in Satan's kingdom. Christ and Satan divide this world. It is the clear teaching of the Lord Jesus that in the church, mixed up with those who are Christians, are many who are not. Goats mingling with the sheep, and weeds that *look* just like wheat growing among the wheat.⁵

You and I can appear to praise Christ with our lips, as we sing. We can look just like Christians as we bow in prayer. But the litmus test is not our acts of praise or prayer. The litmus test is the pride of our hearts, and whether or not we have humbled ourselves before the Lord, and yielded our wills to him. Whose kingdom are we in? Whom do we obey? You may attend some Christian fellowship with meticulous regularity, but the

secret truth may be that you are living *where Satan has his throne*. You may appear to be a Christian to anyone looking on, but you yourself may well know that a few days ago, you were dabbling in the secrets of Satan.

Christ has his kingdom. But so does Satan. Whose kingdom are we in?

Against the Authorities (AV: Against Powers)

The Greek word means moral authority or influence. I don't know why the NIV dropped the word 'powers'. It is as good a translation as any.

You do not find a managing director of a large company who has no power. If he is the boss of a company which employs a thousand workers, you can be sure that he has a great deal of power. The logic of what Paul is saying is that if a prince has a great kingdom, he will also have great power. In other words, Satan is not just a prince in name. He is a prince in effect. He holds sway and controls vast resources.

The names the Bible uses for him tell us he is powerful. The Lord calls him *the strong man* with possessions he guards jealously.⁶ Try to take away some of his possessions (they are all stolen possessions taken wrongly from their rightful Owner), and he will resist you with all his might. Why else do you think we pray before we attempt anything for the Lord? We pray because we are up against the great power of the strong man.

Another name the Bible uses for him is a *roaring lion*.⁷ When the lion roars, the forest creatures tremble. So do the natives in their villages. The roar of the lion strikes fear into hearts. We saw on television some little time ago the pictures of that poor fellow who climbed into the lion's cage in London Zoo and was instantly mauled by the great beast. That is why the Bible calls Satan *a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour*. Great power!

A name for Satan used in Revelation 12 is *an enormous red dragon*. Obviously, this name, like the others, is used symbolically. I have no doubt that Satan could take on the appearance of a dragon if he wanted to. The Scotsman Newspaper carried this article on 29 January 1993:

Some 20 Filipino school-children went into a frenzy, after seeing a man they described as the devil standing under a tree in their school playground, police said yesterday. 'He is a gigantic man who has horns and a tail', 12 year old Marilyn Umpat told reporters. Classes were called off at the height of the hysteria in a classroom of a Manila school, and the children were rushed to a Roman Catholic Church where the priest sprinkled holy water on them and prayed. Joy Bolante, 12, fought off several adults who tried to calm her and kept

screaming, 'There is no God', before fainting with five other girls.

The Filipino children saw him in an apparition as a huge man with horns and a tail. (Having heard firsthand from several missionaries who have spent years in the Philippines of the spirit-worship there, and the vice-like hold explicit demon-worship has, I would not dismiss out of hand the newspaper story.) But the name, *the red dragon*, is again pointing out to us the great strength and power of Satan.

Another name which demonstrates his power is *the god of this age*.⁸ Satan is a kind of god. Here is a significant thing about Satan.⁹ In the whole of the Bible, he appears in person only three times: in Genesis before the Fall, in Job when he appears before God, and in the NT in the Temptations of the Lord.

So in the whole Bible, after the Fall, we never see him directly confronting a human being, not once in the whole of biblical history. But what we do find is a world which does not worship or submit to God, but which rather worships power and lives for money. When the NT calls Satan *the god of this world*, it is telling us that the power of Satan holds sway over people's hearts through arrogance and a trust in the pride of life.

What Does this Mean for Us Today?

There are three lessons for us from our Bible's teaching about the kingdom and strength of Satan—principalities and powers against which we wrestle.

(i) What place is there for pride in any of our hearts when we have such a real, spiritual enemy as this? The way I dress, my hairstyle, my appearance, my car, my home, my standing in society—all of these somehow fall into fifth, if not sixth place, when I realize that I am struggling against a mighty prince with such great power.

If I am a Christian, far more important than the bank balance I have, the house I live in, or the holidays I have, is that I am wrestling against powerful forces which control the hearts of this world. No Christian can use 'contact lenses' which see only things that are time-bound, fashion-bound, money-bound. Christians must see through eyes which Christ has opened to discern that purity, truth, righteousness, peace and love are the real possessions of Christ's kingdom. If we have not got these, then we are paupers.

There is no place in Christ's kingdom for the pride of life, the desire of the eyes, and the lust of the flesh.¹⁰ Those things belong to Satan's kingdom. If they have a place in our hearts, then we have already lost the struggle against the principalities and powers. Satan has us in his grip. I wonder, has the devil left any finger

prints this past week on that handle of the door of our hearts?

The strongest confirmation of this understanding of the origin of evil as pride comes from the Lord Jesus himself. His coming to us was an act of lowliness and humility. He laid aside his glory, he made himself nothing, he took on himself the form of a servant.¹¹ He tied a towel round his waist and washed his disciples' feet.¹² He was humiliated and hung in nakedness when he carried our sins. The Lord Jesus is the exact opposite of Satan. The nature of his kingdom is the exact opposite of Satan's too. Do we tremble to find traces of Satan's work, Satan's touch, Satan's style in our hearts?

(ii) The second lesson for us. Let none of us dare think that entrance into heaven will be a piece of cake, and that now we have booked our ticket we can lie out in the backyard of Christ's House sunning ourselves. The road to heaven is beset by hoards of demons, who are out to trip us up, take us off the pathway and hinder us as we travel. Before any of us can plant our banners on the walls of the New Jerusalem, we have real battles to fight, and we will sustain many wounds. Be sure of that.

We struggle against principalities and powers. We have a powerful enemy, who rules a great kingdom who will oppose us tooth and nail. Be sure that if we dare to try to rescue one of Satan's captives the way we ourselves have been rescued, and make them citizens of heaven, then we will bring down on ourselves a hail of his flaming arrows.

That is one reason why the Puritans lived such careful lives, dressing modestly, having a simple lifestyle, avoiding every appearance of evil. They knew the power of the enemy opposing Christians. We have forgotten much of this. We need to relearn it. No congregation will be strong and effective until at least a core of members have relearned it.

(iii) The third lesson is this: Christ has overcome Satan. As we lift high the Cross, and follow our exalted Lord, we must know that we have joined the winning side. It may continue to be a struggle. We still wrestle. But we are on the right side. Therefore we do not actually fear Satan. The only one we fear is God. We are certainly wary of Satan, always watching out for him. We would be fools to ignore him, or to pretend he does not matter. But our eyes are to the Lord.

You see, when Satan said to Christ in the temptations in the wilderness,

I will give you all the kingdoms of the world, all their authority and splendour for it has been given to me

and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me it will all be yours (Lk. 4:5-7),

he was not to be believed. His power is only by the permission of God. He is a liar, and he does not give power to whoever he wants to give it at all. His power is limited. The power ultimately remains in God's hands. Be sure of that.

I was once at a Committee Meeting when a man spoke and stated his view; he was a very powerful man (so he thought), and he said, 'That is what will happen'. People looked anxiously at me to see what my reaction was, because what he said affected me very seriously. But I only smiled. Do you know what was in my mind? Words Luther spoke when he heard of a decision of the church of his day. He said, 'It was decreed one way by the church, but another way in heaven.' That was why I was smiling. I was saying in my heart, 'You are decreeing that, but what is God decreeing? Something very different, is my guess!' Some months later, events turned out to prove the powerful committee man to have been quite wrong. What happened was the opposite of what he wanted. You see, God is in control.

I am convinced that if we knew more about the enormous power of Satan, it would make us run with all our might and main into the arms of Christ. And we would keep far, far closer to Christ than we do. Indeed, we would love Christ more and more, because our Saviour, our Prince of Peace, our glorious Lord, has won the victory over Satan's kingdom and his hordes

of devils. Not only are we safe when we are close to him, we are also more than conquerors!

We struggle against principalities, against powers and through the dear might of Christ our God, we shall do valiantly, and the praise and glory shall all be his alone.

Fierce may be the conflict, strong may be the foe,
But the King's own army none can overthrow.
Round His standard ranging, victory is secure,
For His Truth unchanging makes the triumph sure.
Joyfully enlisting, by Thy grace divine,
We are on the Lord's side; Saviour, we are Thine.

Frances Ridley Havergal (1836-79)

Footnotes

1. John 14:30.
2. Revelation 2:13.
3. Revelation 2:24.
4. Revelation 13:4.
5. Matthew 13:24ff, 37ff; 25:31ff.
6. Luke 11:21f.
7. 1 Peter 5:8.
8. 2 Corinthians 8:8.
9. See Chapter 1 p. 6.
10. 1 John 2:15-17.
11. Philippians 2:5-11.
12. John 13:1ff.

Suffering as Blessing

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Suffering is an incontrovertible fact of life. Human nature meets it with resistance and resentment; it is certainly not normally viewed as something to be embraced. The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* admits that suffering causes religion a problem: 'it would seem that if God were good, He would not want His creatures to suffer, and if, all powerful, He would be able to prevent their suffering.'¹ John Stott concurs in writing that 'the fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith'.² But, as E. Stanley Jones writes in *Christ and Human Suffering*, 'There is something fundamentally wrong in the belief that God should spare the righteous from trouble and if he doesn't, either he doesn't exist, or there is

something wrong in him or in us.'³ This being the case, what should be our view of, and response to, suffering?

Anthony Hanson, in his essay entitled, 'The Paradox of the Cross in the Thought of St. Paul,' states that 'suffering is God's special way of bringing about redemption'.⁴ C. S. Lewis elaborates on this view by dubbing pain 'God's megaphone which removes the veil [and] plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul'.⁵ He concludes:

We can rest contentedly in our sins and in our stupidities . . . but pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world. . . . Tribulations