

## **Spiritual Warfare**

Matthew 17:14-23

The time of Jesus' life on earth was one of great spiritual activity, a battle between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. The demons were very active, the warfare was intense. After all, the second person of the Trinity was living on earth as a man, and the battle against the Devil raged on. The kingdom of God had coming to earth, in the flesh of man. And that man, Jesus, appeared in a triumphant declaration of the power of the coming of his kingdom. We learn a bit more about that in,

Luke 11:19 "And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. 20 But if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you."

Jesus then uses a helpful and easy to understand illustration of that kingdom,

Luke 11:21 "When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace. 22 But when a stronger than he comes upon him and overcomes him, he takes from him all his armor in which he trusted, and divides his spoils."

So Jesus is the stronger man, the thief, who comes to divide the spoil taken from the kingdom of Satan. In fact, Jesus' whole ministry can be summarized in terms of the establishing of that kingdom. So we see a lot of healings, a lot of miracles, a lot of casting out demons. But the focal point of all that was Jesus' himself. His life. His suffering and death. And his resurrection. The power of his kingdom. And that's the lesson Jesus struggled to make his disciples understand.

They must have expected more of a triumph; not suffering. They must have expected a victorious outcome, from their own earthly perspective. They would have expected less resistance, less outward and apparent success from Satan, not more, for the immediate near future. So Jesus had to teach them, again and again, what we read in verses 22-23, that there would be apparent success by the forces of evil. There would be suffering, unto death.

v.22-23

That is,

### **I. THE FOCAL POINT OF JESUS' MINISTRY.**

And we ought to pause for a few moments to think about this emphasis, because it is so very edifying. Nothing new, I expect, if you are already a Christian. But this is the foundation of your faith, and it is the foundation of the faith you would seek to explain to others.

So what was it that Jesus came to do? Was it social justice, above all else? Was it social welfare, healings and cleansings? Was it his teaching? His moral example? All of things were there, of course, but none of them represent or define the essence of Jesus' ministry. The emphasis was redemption, a word that means the payment of a ransom. That was the focal point of Jesus' ministry on earth,

#### **A. A ransom will be paid.**

We read of Jesus in,

Titus 2:13 "...looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, 14 who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works."

Jesus “gave himself” “that he might redeem us.” That’s the language of salvation. The language of a ransom, paid to buy us back from the judgment and condemnation of our sin. A ransom had to be paid. A penalty had to be paid. And why? To satisfy God’s own justice! “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” The shedding of blood refers to death, and it is covenantal language. Death is the curse of the covenant. Put most simply,

Rom. 6:23 “...the wages of sin is death.”

Man the covenant breaker incurred that punishment in Adam. We died in Adam, both spiritually, in terms of our separation from God, and physically, in terms of becoming mortal. As God had promised, or threatened,

Gen. 2:16 “And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

So a ransom had to be paid. Thus, “The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men.” Delivered, turned over, betrayed actually. Put under the judgment and punishment of men! Jesus himself would endure that horrific act of wickedness and rebellion.

v.23 “...and they will kill him.”

We read more about this ransom in,

Heb. 9:11 “But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. 12 Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, 14

how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? 15 And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.”

Jesus is the sacrifice of atonement, the sacrifice of redemption. “By means of his own blood” and secured for us “an eternal redemption.” Why? So that we “who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.” So that we who believe might inherit eternal life.

That’s why the emphasis upon Jesus’ resurrection in our text. He was not only to be killed, but he would be raised from the dead! And that is the focal point of Jesus’ life and ministry—the resurrection. So this is the gospel I preach to you, the same gospel as Paul preached to the Corinthians,

1 Cor. 15:1 “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, 2 and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you— unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.”

That’s the gospel. It is a doctrinal proposition, to be sure, a proposition you must believe if you would receive the gift of eternal life, but it is no mere doctrine. It is no mere intellectual theorem to be debated in your mind alone. Rather, this is the message of life! So it is that we read,

Rom. 10:8 “But what does it say? “The word is near you, in

your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): 9 that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”

To put that negatively, again from,

1 Cor. 15:14 “And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. 15 Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise. 16 For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. 17 And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! 18 Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.”

But, of course, as that chapter continues,

1 Cor. 15:20 “But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive.”

That’s the focal point. Not an earthly kingdom made evident by earthly victories. But a spiritual kingdom, in which salvation is granted as a gift of God’s own grace, with his justice being satisfied and his wrath appeased by the sacrifice of Jesus upon the cross.

v.22 ““The Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men, 23 and they will kill Him, and the third day He will be raised up.”

We read that cause the disciples great distress. For them, this whole subject brought about,

### **B. Distressing confusion.**

v.22b “...And they were exceedingly sorrowful.”

The word “sorrowful” might be translated, distressed. Or grieved, to make reference to a wide variety of emotions. They were terribly, terribly grieved. No doubt, because they could only think about death. They could only think about their own loss, their own pain, their own doubts and insecurities. They could only think about their own sorrows and troubles.

So shortsighted, wasn’t it? So insensitive and unaware of the greater and far more glorious purposes of God. There they were, in the presence of Jesus, learning about God’s great work of redemption, and they were greatly distressed because Jesus said he was going to suffer and die. They didn’t understand how that fit into the whole of his plan. Indeed, that suffering and death was his central focus. And this is what he accomplished,

Heb. 10:12 “But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, 13 from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool. 14 For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.”

With that focal point then, with those thoughts about the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus fresh in your mind, let’s look at the broader context of Matthew 17, in order to better understand,

## **II. THE REALITY OF A SPIRITUAL BATTLE.**

Let’s go back to the preceding context, Jesus healing a boy with a demon.

A few things about this account. First, the description of the boy is sometimes translated as “a lunatic.” That word comes from the root word for moon, and the popular usage came about that someone who acted “crazy” was thought to be influenced by the moon. Obviously, the word “lunatic” has very negative connotations for us. The better understanding, I believe, is a reference to a disease that affects your behavior involuntarily. Most likely, identified today as epilepsy, or some sort of seizure disorder. The boy was suffering terribly from seizures.

I have known of young children who have suffered from seemingly incurable seizures that might be very similar to this description. Seizures are frightening, debilitating. And only sometimes, treatable. Thankfully, many people with epilepsy are able live normal or very near normal lives, their disease controlled by the advances of modern medicine. That is, of course, a very good thing.

But the emphasis here isn’t about the physical nature of the ailment, but the spiritual aspects of it. And those two things are often related, interconnected. To be rather broad, then,

**A. The struggle of spiritual warfare is often evident in the physical realm.**

That doesn’t mean there is no longer any physical treatment that is appropriate. It doesn’t mean that a particular physical ailment is necessarily a punishment or consequence of sin. I simply mean to emphasize that we as God’s creatures are both physical and spiritual. God made mankind from the dust of the earth, and he breathed into him the breath of life, the spirit of life. So man is both a physical creature with a body and a spiritual creature with a soul. Human life can be well defined as the union

of body and soul; death, of course, would be the separation of body and soul.

So let’s be careful. Remember the lesson of,

John 9:1 “As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” 3 Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

Let’s be careful to avoid the disastrous example of Job’s counselors,

Job 4:7 “Remember: who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? 8 As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. 9 By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed.”

In other words, says Eliphaz, if you suffer, it is because of sin. And that simply is not true. And that is not my point this afternoon, and it is certainly not Jesus’ point here in Matthew 17. But it is obvious that this boy’s struggle are the evidence, the consequence, of the greater spiritual battle that exists in the heavenly realms. And that is a battle that in one way or another, touches every one of us. And some more than others.

That is a good perspective to maintain, for there is so much of a spiritual battle that continues to rage today. There is so much of a spiritual battle as Satan goes about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. There is so much of a spiritual battle all around us, and too often we refuse to acknowledge it. But Paul’s words are clear, aren’t they?

Eph. 6:12 “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the

darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.”

Beloved, please be conscious of this reality. “We do not wrestle against flesh and blood.” The battle is far greater, far more dangerous, for we engaged in battle with “the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.”

The disciples recognized and understood the spiritual nature of this battle, and they had prayed for healing. They had sought to exercise their faith, and from the perspective of Jesus’ response to them, they had failed.

v.16

Because we aren’t given much of a description, Jesus’ words may seem harsh or overbearing. But we have to assume that what Jesus said was completely appropriate. He knew and understood their hearts, and he knew of the shallow and ineffective exercise of their faith at this point. So he rebukes them! Rather pointedly.

v.17

A faithless and perverse generation. Strong language. They were without faith, at least faith in the sense of a willingness to trust and believe that God would act! And they were perverse, the word even means perverted. Distorted, twisted in two, turned aside, in opposition to the saving purposes of God. They were resisting the purposes of God, corrupting the declaration of his glorious power, all demonstrated by their failure to bring healing to this epileptic boy.

Jesus uses words that, for us, seem despairing, hopeless.

Rather, I believe, they are a lament. A longing for a better time, a new age. He, of course, had that longing as the eternal son of God, the second person of the Trinity. Of course he would wish to be done with his earthly, human estate of humiliation.

“How long am I to bear with you?” Thankfully, we know that Jesus is long-suffering, and we know that he does bear with us. And we need it, don’t we? So don’t be put off by these words. Rather, feel the rebuke that might be appropriate for yourself, and heed the exhortation to live by faith!

### **B. The struggle of spiritual warfare requires deep and active faith.**

To further his point, Jesus has a private word for his disciples as well.

v.19-20

Please don’t take these verses out of context, and come away with something like the prosperity gospel, “name and claim it,” as if all your unanswered prayers are the consequence of weak faith. There are times, when God calls us to wait. There are times when God, in his providence, allows us to endure the temptations and even the afflictions of body and soul. There are times when God intends us to be weak, refusing to remove the thorn in the flesh in Paul’s experience.

Sometimes, this is what we need to hear for our encouragement,

2 Cor. 12:7 “And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. 8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 9 And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in

weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

I propose to you that those are the times that require the strongest exercise of faith, the faith to endure weakness even when “a messenger of Satan” comes to harass you. At those times, we need to hear, and believe to be true, what God declares, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.”

So sometimes, the mountain doesn’t move because God determines to permit us to live in that weakness. And it is strong and vital faith that is able to “take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses. [And to say with the Apostle Paul], For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

There are other times, however, when you must admit, that your faith is weak as well. There are times we have little faith. Thankfully, we are not condemned. Thankfully, our eternal salvation does not depend upon our own strength, for sometimes, that strength is severely diminished. We hear Jesus’ words in Matthew 6, “O you of little faith.”

His disciples had such a moment here! Their faith failed. They didn’t believe in the exercise of the power of God. On another occasion,

Luke 17:5 “The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” 6 And the Lord said, “If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

Faith is the willingness to believe that God’s word is true.

Faith is the willingness to believe what Paul declares in,

Rom. 8:38 “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

In the midst of the battles of a deep spiritual warfare, faith still clings to God. It is the faith so well expressed by Habakkuk,

Hab. 3:17 “Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, 18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. 19 God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places.”

Again, dear friends, “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.” That spiritual battle rages on! With this encouragement,

### **C. The struggle of spiritual warfare will be overcome by Jesus’ power.**

v.18

Remember the verse I read at the outset,

Luke 11:20 “But if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.”

I continue to believe that spiritual battle rages among us, to this day. I can see and observe great struggles in so many of our families. And the evidence of God’s power in the midst of that

warfare is the way in which he continues to build this church.

If you have a King James or NKJV Bible, you see words in verse 21 that are not included in most other translations, believing that the phrase isn't found in the most reliable, early manuscripts, but the verse is included in Mark's gospel, so the words are true and right. "However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting." So that's what we are called to do in the midst of the spiritual battle. Prayer, and fasting as a demonstration of intensity and urgency in prayer. "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but...against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

Thus my exhortation to you, people of God, is simple and direct.

Eph. 6:13 "...Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand...18 praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints— 19 and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel."