

Español
Northwest Nazarene University

The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 72

Of Evil Angels

"We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against wicked spirits in heavenly places." Eph. 6:12.

1. It has been frequently observed that there are no gaps or chasms in the creation of God, but that all the parts of it are admirably connected together, to make up one universal whole. Accordingly there is one chain of beings, from the lowest to the highest point, from an unorganized particle of earth or water to Michael the archangel. And the scale of creatures does not advance per saltum, by leaps, but by smooth and gentle degrees; although it is true, these are frequently imperceptible to our imperfect faculties. We cannot accurately trace many of the intermediate links of this amazing chain, which are abundantly too fine to be discerned either by our senses or understanding.

2. We can only observe, in a gross and general manner, rising one above another, first, inorganical earth, then minerals and vegetables in their several orders; afterwards insects, reptiles, fishes, beasts, men, and angels. Of angels indeed we know nothing with any certainty but by revelation. The accounts which are left by the wisest of the ancients, or given by the modern heathens, being no better than silly, self-inconsistent fables, too gross to be imposed even upon children. But by divine revelation we are informed that they were all created holy and happy; yet they did not all continue as they were created: Some kept, but some left, their first estate. The former of these are now good angels; the latter, evil angels. Of the former I have spoke in the preceding discourse: I purpose now to speak of the latter. And highly necessary it is that we should well understand what God has revealed concerning them, that they may gain no advantage over us by our ignorance; that we may know how to wrestle against them effectually. For "we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against wicked spirits in heavenly places."

3. This single passage seems to contain the whole scriptural doctrine concerning evil angels. I apprehend the plain meaning of it, literally translated, is this: "Our wrestling," the wrestling of real Christians, "is not" only, or chiefly, "against flesh and blood," weak men, or fleshly appetites and passions, "but against principalities, against powers," -- the mighty princes of all the infernal regions, with their combined forces: And great is their power, as is also the power of the legions they command, -- "against the rulers of the world." (This is the literal meaning of the word.) Perhaps these principalities and powers remain chiefly in the citadel of their kingdom. But there are other evil spirits that range abroad, to whom the provinces of the world are committed, "of the darkness," chiefly the spiritual darkness, "of this age," which prevails during this present state of things, -- "against wicked spirits" -- eminently such; who mortally hate and continually oppose holiness, and labour to infuse unbelief, pride, evil desire, malice, anger, hatred, envy, or revenge -- "in heavenly places;" which were once their abode, and which they still aspire after.

In prosecuting this important subject, I will endeavour to explain,

I. The nature and properties of evil angels; and,

II. Their employment.

I. 1. With regard to the First, we cannot doubt but all the angels of God were originally of the same

nature. Unquestionably they were the highest order of created beings. They were spirits, pure ethereal creatures, simple and incorruptible; if not wholly immaterial, yet certainly not incumbered with gross, earthly flesh and blood. As spirits, they were endued with understanding, with affections, and with liberty, or a power of self-determination; so that it lay in themselves, either to continue in their allegiance to God, or to rebel against him.

2. And their original properties were, doubtless, the same with those of the holy angels. There is no absurdity in supposing Satan their chief, otherwise styled, "Lucifer, son of the morning," to have been at least one "of the first, if not the first Archangel." Like the other sons of the morning, they had a height and depth of understanding quite incomprehensible to us. In consequence of this they had such knowledge and wisdom, that the wisest of the children of men (had men then existed) would have been mere idiots in comparison of them. Their strength was equal to their knowledge; such as it cannot enter into our heart to conceive; neither can we conceive to how wide a sphere of action either their strength or their knowledge extended. Their number God alone can tell: Doubtless it was only less than infinite. And a third part of these stars of heaven the arch-rebel drew after him.

3. We do not exactly know, (because it is not revealed in the oracles of God,) either what was the occasion of their apostasy, or what effect it immediately produced upon them. Some have, not improbably, supposed, that when God published "the decree" (mentioned Ps. 2:6-7) concerning the kingdom of his only-begotten Son to be over all creatures, these first-born of creatures gave place to pride, comparing themselves to him; -- possibly intimated by the very name of Satan, Lucifer, or Michael, which means, Who is like God It may be, Satan, then first giving way to temptation, said in his heart, "I too will have my throne. 'I will sit upon the sides of the north! I will be like the Most High.'" But how did the mighty then fall! What an amazing loss did they sustain! If we allow of them all what our poet supposes concerning their chief in particular, --

His form had not yet lost All its original brightness, nor appear'd Less than archangel ruin'd, and the excess Of glory obscured;

if we suppose their outward form was not entirely changed (though it must have been in a great degree; because the evil disposition of the mind must dim the lustre of the visage,) yet what an astonishing change was wrought within when angels became devils! when the holiest of all the creatures of God became the most unholy!

4. From the time that they shook off their allegiance to God, they shook off all goodness, and contracted all those tempers which are most hateful to him, and most opposite to his nature. And ever since they are full of pride, arrogance, haughtiness, exalting themselves above measure; and although so deeply depraved through their inmost frame, yet admiring their own perfections. They are full of envy, if not against God himself, (and even that is not impossible, seeing they formerly aspired after his throne,) yet against all their fellow-creatures; against the angels of God, who now enjoy the heaven from which they fell; and much more against those worms of the earth who are now called to "inherit the kingdom." They are full of cruelty, of rage against all the children of men, whom they long to inspire with the same wickedness with themselves, and to involve in the same misery.

5. In the prosecution of this infernal design, they are diligent in the highest degree. To find out the most effectual means of putting it into execution, they apply to this end the whole force of their angelical understanding; and they second it with their whole strength, so far as God is pleased to permit. But it is well for mankind that God hath set them bounds which they cannot pass. He hath said

to the fiercest and strongest of the apostate spirits, "Hitherto shalt thou come, and no farther." Otherwise, how easily and how quickly might one of them overturn the whole frame of nature! How soon would they involve all in one common ruin, or, at least, destroy man from the face of the earth! And they are indefatigable in their bad work: They never are faint or weary. Indeed, it seems no spirits are capable of weariness but those that inhabit flesh and blood.

6. One circumstance more we may learn from the Scripture concerning the evil angels: They do not wander at large, but are all united under one common head. It is he that is styled by our blessed Lord, "the prince of this world:" Yea, the Apostle does not scruple to call him, "the god of this world." He is frequently styled Satan, the adversary; being the great adversary both of God and man. He is termed "the devil," by way of eminence; -- "Apollyon," or the destroyer; -- "the old serpent," from his beguiling Eve under that form; -- and, "the angel of the bottomless pit." We have reason to believe that the other evil angels are under his command; that they are ranged by him according to their several orders; that they are appointed to their several stations, and have, from time to time, their several works and offices assigned them. And, undoubtedly, they are connected (though we know not how; certainly not by love) both to him and to each other.

II. But what is the employment of evil angels This is the Second point to be considered.

1. They are (remember, so far as God permits!) kosmokratores, -- governors of the world! So that there may be more ground than we are apt to imagine for that strange expression of Satan, (Matt. 4:8-9,) when he showed our Lord "all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them," "All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me." It is a little more particularly expressed in the fourth chapter of St. Luke: "The devil showed unto him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time." (Such an astonishing measure of power is still left in the prince of darkness!) "And the devil said, All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them: For that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will, I give it." (Matt. 4:5, 6,) They are "the rulers of the darkness of this age;" (so the words are literally translated;) of the present state of things, during which "the whole world lieth in the wicked one." He is the element of the children of men; only those who fear God being excepted. He and his angels, in connexion with, and in subordination to him, dispose all the ignorance, all the error, all the folly, and particularly all the wickedness of men, in such a manner as may most hinder the kingdom of God, and most advance the kingdom of darkness.

2. "But has every man a particular evil angel, as well as a good one attending him" This has been an exceeding ancient opinion, both among the Christians, and the Jews before them: But it is much doubted whether it can be sufficiently proved from Scripture. Indeed it would not be improbable that there is a particular evil angel with every man, if we were assured there is a good one. But this cannot be inferred from those words of our Lord concerning little children: "In heaven their angels do continually see the face of their Father which is in heaven." This only proves that there are angels who are appointed to take care of little children: It does not prove that a particular angel is allotted to every child. Neither is it proved by the words of Rhoda, who, hearing the voice of Peter, said, "It is his angel." We cannot infer any more from this, even suppose his angel means his guardian angel, than that Rhoda believed the doctrine of guardian angels, which was then common among the Jews. But still it will remain a disputable point, (seeing revelation determines nothing concerning it,) whether every man is attended either by a particular good or a particular evil angel.

3. But whether or no particular men are attended by particular evil spirits, we know that Satan and all his angels are continually warring against us, and watching over every child of man. They are ever

watching to see whose outward or inward circumstances, whose prosperity or adversity, whose health or sickness, whose friends or enemies, whose youth or age, whose knowledge or ignorance, whose blindness or idleness, whose joy or sorrow, may lay them open to temptation. And they are perpetually ready to make the utmost advantage of every circumstance. These skilful wrestlers espy the smallest slip we make, and avail themselves of it immediately; as they also are "about our bed, and about our path, and spy out all our ways." Indeed each of them "walketh about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour," or whom he may "beguile through his subtlety, as the serpent beguiled Eve." Yea, and in order to do this the more effectually, they transform themselves into angels of light. Thus,

With rage that never ends, Their hellish arts they try; Legions of dire, malicious fiends, And spirits enthroned on high.

4. It is by these instruments chiefly that the "foolish hearts" of those that know not God "are darkened:" Yea, they frequently darken, in a measure, the hearts of them that do know God. The "god of this world" knows how to blind our hearts, to spread a cloud over our understanding, and to obscure the light of those truths which, at other times, shine as bright as the noonday sun. By this means he assaults our faith, our evidence of things unseen. He endeavours to weaken that hope full of immortality to which God had begotten us; and thereby to lessen, if he cannot destroy, our joy in God our Saviour. But, above all he strives to damp our love of God, as he knows this is the spring of all our religion, and that, as this rises or falls, the work of God flourishes or decays in the soul.

5. Next to the love of God, there is nothing which Satan so cordially abhors as the love of our neighbour. He uses, therefore, every possible means to prevent or destroy this; to excite either private or public suspicions, animosities, resentment, quarrels; to destroy the peace of families or of nations; and to banish unity and concord from the earth. And this, indeed, is the triumph of his art; to embitter the poor, miserable children of men against each other, and at length urge them to do his own work, to plunge one another into the pit of destruction.

6. This enemy of all righteousness is equally diligent to hinder every good word and work. If he cannot prevail upon us to do evil, he will, if possible, prevent our doing good. He is peculiarly diligent to hinder the work of God from spreading in the hearts of men. What pains does he take to prevent or obstruct the general work of God! And how many are his devices to stop its progress in particular souls! To hinder their continuing or growing in grace, in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ! To lessen, if not destroy, that love, joy, peace, -- that long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, -- that fidelity, meekness, temperance, -- which our Lord works by his loving Spirit in them that believe, and wherein the very essence of religion consists.

7. To effect these ends, he is continually labouring, with all his skill and power, to infuse evil thoughts of every kind into the hearts of men. And certainly it is as easy for a spirit to speak to our heart, as for a man to speak to our ears. But sometimes it is exceeding difficult to distinguish these from our own thoughts; those which he injects so exactly resembling those which naturally arise in our own minds. Sometimes, indeed, we may distinguish one from the other by this circumstance: -- The thoughts which naturally arise in our minds are generally, if not always, occasioned by, or at least connected with, some inward or outward circumstance that went before. But those that are preternaturally suggested have frequently no relation to or connexion (at least, none that we are able to discern) with anything which preceded. On the contrary, they shoot in, as it were, across, and thereby show that they are of a different growth.

8. He likewise labours to awaken evil passions or tempers in our souls. He endeavours to inspire those passions and tempers which are directly opposite to "the fruit of the Spirit." He strives to instil unbelief, atheism, ill-will, bitterness, hatred, malice, envy, -- opposite to faith and love; fear, sorrow, anxiety, worldly care, -- opposite to peace and joy; impatience, ill nature, anger, resentment, -- opposite to long-suffering, gentleness, meekness; fraud, guile, dissimulation, -- contrary to fidelity; love of the world, inordinate affection, foolish desires, -- opposite to the love of God. One sort of evil desires he may probably raise or inflame by touching the springs of this animal machine. Endeavouring thus, by means of the body, to disturb or sully the soul.

9. And, in general, we may observe that as no good is done, or spoken, or thought, by any man, without the assistance of God, working together in and with those that believe in him; so there is no evil done, or spoke, or thought, without the assistance of the devil, "who worketh with energy," with strong, though secret power, "in the children of unbelief." Thus he "entered into Judas," and confirmed him in the design of betraying his Master; thus he "put it into the heart" of Ananias and Sapphira "to lie unto the Holy Ghost;" and, in like manner, he has a share in all the actions and words and designs of evil men. As the children of God "are workers together with God," in every good thought, or word, or action; so the children of the devil are workers together with him in every evil thought, or word, or work. So that as all good tempers, and remotely all good words and actions, are the fruit of the good Spirit; in like manner, all evil tempers, with all the words and works which spring from them, are the fruit of the evil spirit: Insomuch that all the "works of the flesh," of our evil nature, are likewise the "works of the devil."

10. On this account, because he is continually inciting men to evil, he is emphatically called "the tempter." Nor is it only with regard to his own children that he is thus employed: He is continually tempting the children of God also, and those that are labouring so to be.

A constant watch he keeps; He eyes them night and day; He never slumbers, never sleeps, Lest he should lose his prey.

Indeed, the holiest of men, as long as they remain upon earth, are not exempt from his temptations. They cannot expect it; seeing "it is enough for the disciple to be as his Master:" And we know he was tempted to evil till he said, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

11. For such is the malice of the wicked one, that he will torment whom he cannot destroy. If he cannot entice men to sin, he will, so far as he is permitted, put them to pain. There is no doubt but he is the occasion, directly or indirectly, of many of the pains of mankind, which those who can no otherwise account for them lightly pass over as nervous. And innumerable accidents, as they are called, are undoubtedly owing to his agency; such as the unaccountable fright or falling of horses; the overturning of carriages; the breaking or dislocating of bones; the hurt done by the falling or burning of houses, -- by storms of wind, snow, rain, or hail, -- by lightning or earthquakes. But to all these, and a thousand more, this subtle spirit can give the appearance of accidents, for fear the sufferers, if they knew the real agent, should call for help on One that is stronger than him.

12. There is little reason to doubt but many diseases likewise, both of the acute and chronical kind, are either occasioned or increased by diabolical agency; particularly those that begin in an instant, without any discernible cause; as well as those that continue, and perhaps gradually increase, in spite of all the power of medicine. Here, indeed, "vain men" that "would be wise" again call in the nerves to their assistance. But is not this explaining ignotum per ignotius "a thing unknown by what is more

unknown" For what do we know of the nerves themselves Not even whether they are solid or hollow!

13. Many years ago I was asking an experienced physician, and one particularly eminent for curing lunacy, "Sir, have you not seen reason to believe that some lunatics are really demoniacs" He answered, "Sir, I have been often inclined to think that most lunatics are demoniacs. Nor is there any weight in that objection, that they are frequently cured by medicine: For so might any other disease occasioned by an evil spirit, if God did not suffer him to repeat the stroke by which that disease is occasioned."

14. This thought opens to us a wider scene. Who can tell how many of those diseases which we impute altogether to natural causes may be really preternatural What disorder is there in the human frame which an evil angel may not inflict Cannot he smite us, as he did Job, and that in a moment, with boils from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot Cannot he with equal ease inflict any other, either external or internal malady Could not he in a moment, by divine permission, cast the strongest man down to the ground, and make him "wallow, foaming," with all the symptoms either of an epilepsy or apoplexy In like manner, it is easy for him to smite any one man, or every one in a city or nation, with a malignant fever, or with the plague itself, so that vain would be the help of man.

15. But that malice blinds the eyes of the wise, one would imagine so intelligent a being would not stoop so low, as it seems the devil sometimes does, to torment the poor children of men! For to him we may reasonably impute many little inconveniences which we suffer. "I believe" (said that excellent man, the Marquis de Renty, when the bench on which he sat snapped in sunder without any visible cause) "that Satan had a hand in it, making me to fall untowardly." I know not whether he may not have a hand in that unaccountable horror with which many have been seized in the dead of night, even to such a degree that all their bones have shook. Perhaps he has a hand also in those terrifying dreams which many have, even while they are in perfect health.

It may be observed, in all these instances, we usually say, "The devil;" as if there was one only; because these spirits, innumerable as they are, do all act in concert; and because we know not whether one or more are concerned in this or that work of darkness.

It remains only to draw a few plain inferences from the doctrine which has been delivered.

1. And, First, as a general preservative against all the rage, the power, and subtlety of your great adversary, put on the panoply, "the whole armour of God," universal holiness. See that "the mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus," and that ye "walk as Christ also walked;" that ye have a "conscience void of offence toward God and toward men." So shall ye be "able to withstand" all the force and all the stratagems of the enemy: So shall ye be able to "withstand in the evil day," in the day of sore temptation, and "having done all to stand," to remain in the posture of victory and triumph.

2. To his "fiery darts," -- his evil suggestions of every kind, blasphemous or unclean, though numberless as the stars of heaven, -- oppose "the shield of faith." A consciousness of the love of Christ Jesus will effectually quench them all.

Jesus hath died for you! What can your faith withstand Believe, hold fast your shield! and who Shall pluck you from his hand

3. If he inject doubts whether you are a child of God, or fears lest you should not endure to the end;

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