

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Ephesians 6:10–12

C.S. Lewis once observed that people often make one of two errors when it comes to the devil and demons: some disregard and dismiss the demonic entirely, while others drift into fascination and obsession. A healthy understanding of demonology avoids these extremes.

Demons exist, but they are not ultimate. The one true triune God is preeminent, and our consideration of demons must not distract us from our primary responsibility to know, love, trust and obey Him. As we consider the nature and work of demons and our proper response to them, we are to do so without fear or fixation. We do so through the lens of the gospel of Jesus Christ, who died for us and rose again, thus defeating Satan and sin.

What are Demons?

According to the Scriptures we find that:

1. Demons were created (Ps. 148:1-5; Col. 1:16).
2. Demons were originally created good, for all of God's works are good, but they subsequently fell from their original angelic position (2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6).
3. As created beings, demons are limited in power, influence and knowledge. Even Satan himself, the prince of demons and "ruler of this world," is ultimately subservient to the sovereignty of the triune God (John 12:31; 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2; 1 John 5:19).
4. Demons were effectively defeated and disarmed through the cross of Christ (Col. 2:15), though they will continue to attack and oppose the King and His kingdom until the final judgment (Jude 6; Rev. 20:10).

Though the Scriptures give boundaries of belief when it comes to the demonic, they do not explicitly answer a number of questions:

1. When were demons created?
2. When did demons fall and how? ¹
3. How powerful, influential and knowledgeable are demons?
4. Can demons read our minds? ²

As in other areas where God has not decisively spoken, it is best to avoid assumptions and presumptions. Scripture has been given to lead us to a saving knowledge of the person and work of Jesus Christ (John 5:39-40, 20:30-31), not to quench man's insatiable curiosity.

So rather than speculating on what is not revealed in the Scriptures, we should trust that God has revealed all that is required for our competency and equipping (2 Tim. 3:16-17) and all that is necessary for our life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3).

The Work of Demons

Demons oppose the kingdom of God. They prowl about the earth (Job 1:6-7; 1 Pet. 5:8) and even appear as angels of light (2 Cor. 11:14-15) in order to corrupt and destroy through lies (John 8:44), accusation (Rev. 12:10), deception (Rev. 12:9), false teaching (1 Tim. 4:1), suffering (Job 2:1-6) and other various tools at their disposal. They seek to exalt a dominion of darkness and death and attempt to rob God of the glory that is rightly His.

The Scriptures abound with examples of demonic encounters and the response of Christ and the apostles. Consider the following texts:

- Matthew 4:23–25; 8:14–17, 28–34; 9:32–34; 12:22; 15:21–28; 17:14–20
- Mark 1:21–28, 32–34, 39; 5:1–20; 6:13; 7:24–30; 9:14–29
- Luke 4:31–37, 41; 6:17–19; 7:21; 8:26–39; 9:37–43; 11:14–16; 13:10–17
- Acts 5:16; 8:4–8; 10:37–38; 16:16–18; 19:11–20

Demonic activity in the time of Christ and the early church is well attested, and there is no evidence in the Scriptures to suggest that such activity has been subsequently restricted. Certain texts might hint at some degree of weakening or restricting of demonic influence through the power of the gospel (Luke 11:21–22), but they do not imply or suggest that demons are no longer active, influential or powerful today.

¹ Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:12-19 are often interpreted as prophetically referencing both the fall of particular earthly kings and also Satan.

² It is important to note that the Bible explicitly states that God can hear our thoughts (Ps. 139:1-3; 1 Chron. 28:9; Ps. 44:21), but it does not explicitly restrict this activity to Him. We might infer that the ability to read minds is restricted to divine omniscience, but the Bible itself does not specifically state this.

Can Christians be “Possessed?”

One of the most common questions related to the demonic is whether or not Christians can be possessed by demons. The problem with this question is in the wording itself and particularly the word “possession.”

The term “possession” connotes control, and this is misleading. Demonic possession implies that the possessed person has no choice or responsibility, effectively rendering him or her a mere pawn or puppet. However, the Greek term used in the Scriptures does not actually communicate this meaning. Many modern biblical translators thus acknowledge this fact by stating that a person “had a demon” or was “oppressed by a demon” rather than “possessed by a demon.”

The question then is not whether a Christian who is sealed by the Spirit can be “possessed” by a demon but, rather, whether he or she can be oppressed, influenced or attacked by a demon to varying levels. Satan’s enticement of David (1 Chron. 21:1) suggests that it is possible for a believer to be oppressed and influenced to various degrees by the demonic.³ Additionally, both Satan’s attack on Job and Paul’s thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:7) exhibit the ability of the demonic to attack a believer; though such assaults are surely under the sovereign hand of the God who does all that He pleases (Ps. 115:3) and works all things together for the good of His children (Rom. 8:28), such that even fallen angels cannot separate us from His love (Rom. 8:37-39).

Though demons can influence, oppress and assail believers, such a reality does not excuse our sin. Christians are responsible for their sin regardless of the particular influences. Even if a demon is somehow involved, this involvement does not negate personal responsibility (1 Chron. 21:7-13).

Demonic Influence and Fleshly Impulses

Signs and symptoms of demonic influence and attack are numerous. If Satan and his minions are crafty, then surely they are always devising and updating forms of assault. We make a great mistake if we limit demonic attack to the particular forms which merely mirror those of the New Testament. While demonic attacks can, today, manifest in supernatural ways similar to those in the Bible, it is often much subtler.⁴ The signs and symptoms of an attack are often similar to the temptations of the flesh. Apathy, anger, lust, bitterness, depression and despair are common manifestations of demonic influence, as they are of fleshly desires. The common appearances of demonic influence and fleshly impulse make diagnosing a particular struggle extremely complicated. It is often nearly impossible to unravel and identify where one ends and the other begins.

The Work of Deliverance

Deliverance involves direct engagement of a spiritual attack and attachment in a believer’s life through dedicated prayer. While there is certainly a time and place for this type of ministry, it is not to be seen as primary or ultimate. The principal weapon of the Christian’s arsenal is the Word of God.

There are no explicit biblical guidelines to follow in the process of deliverance, but a few principles can be drawn from the Scriptures:

1. Demons differ in levels of attachment and authority (Mark 9:14-29), so a believer’s responsibility or ability to engage directly varies greatly.
2. God has granted authority to all of His children through the power of Christ’s death and resurrection, yet He has also sovereignly distributed various gifts to various persons. Thus, some will be more gifted in the discerning and engaging of spirits than others (1 Cor. 12:8-11, 28-30).
3. Gifts were and are distributed for the edification and encouragement of the Church and the exaltation of Christ (1 Cor. 12:8, 14:12), not for the display of sensational signs. Spiritual displays out of step with the call for peaceful (1 Cor. 14:33) and orderly (1 Cor. 14:40) exercise are to be avoided.
4. Various passages warn believers against the dangers of presumptuously engaging the demonic (Acts 19:11-17; 2 Pet. 2:10-11; Jude 8-9).

These few principles should lead Christians to sobriety, humility and wisdom in the area of deliverance. Though it can be a valuable weapon in spiritual warfare, deliverance is neither an absolute remedy nor the primary shield or sword against the demonic.

Discipleship Through the Word of God

The chief strategy for protecting against and engaging the enemy is proclamation and prayer enlightened by the truth of Scripture. Whether demonic influence or fleshly impulse, a greater reliance upon the Spirit and a deeper understanding of the gospel is most needed.

³ This example is not perfectly analogous to our present state as the Spirit did not indwell Old Testament saints in the same way He does believers today, but the fact remains that David was a believer yet heeded the subtle whispers of the enemy. Those who argue that the demonic cannot influence believers today do so without explicit biblical evidence.

⁴ This is especially the case in the West. The enemy certainly may employ different strategies elsewhere as is evidenced by a number of credible accounts of more sensational demonic manifestations in other parts of the world.

The prominence of the Word of God and prayer as the primary defenses against the demonic is evidenced in a number of passages:

1. In Ephesians 6:10-20, one of the clearest statements in Scripture about the believer's struggle against the demonic, Paul exalts biblical truth and prayer as the primary devices to defend against the enemy.
2. In 2 Timothy 2:22-26, Paul writes to Timothy of those who are ensnared by the devil and commends repentance as the principal and proper response to such captivity. Furthermore, the teaching of the Word is the chief instrument leading to such repentance.
3. In 1 Peter 5:6-11, the apostle writes of the adversarial activity of Satan and commends sober-minded watchfulness. Resistance to the accuser is best expressed by humility, endurance, prayer and faith founded upon the knowledge of the gospel.
4. In Ephesians 4:25-27, the proclamation of truth and application of the gospel are commended as the main means of protection against demonic footholds in the lives of individuals and communities.
5. In 2 Corinthians 10:4-5, the "knowledge of God" is advanced as the weapon with which we wage war against the enemy.
6. When immorality, dissension and false teaching threatened the church of Corinth, Paul did not command the elders to rebuke particular personal sins of lust, disunity or heresy but, rather, to pursue faith and repentance through a better understanding and application of the gospel.

Believers are a complex combination of flesh and Spirit. The Bible is clear that there is an internal war being fought within the souls of the saints. The desires of the flesh are against those of the Spirit (Gal.5:16-17), and we are thus commanded to put the flesh to death by means of the Spirit (Rom. 8:13). Our primary weapon in this struggle is "the sword of the Spirit, the word of God," wielded in a spirit of constant alertness and prayer (Eph. 6:17-18).

As we mortify the flesh by the Spirit, we eliminate the footholds that the enemy would employ to gain influence in our lives. Truth, which gives rise to repentance, faith and prayer, is thus the primary strategy against the enemy, while a particular time of deliverance is to be seen as secondary. This is not to deny or diminish the place of deliverance but, rather, to elevate and emphasize the foundational role of the Word of God in the believer's life.

Practical Steps

Given the preeminence of the Word as the best defense against the demonic and the flesh, those struggling with besetting sin or other possible manifestations of the demonic should primarily pursue freedom through faith and repentance by saturating themselves in the truths of Scripture.

Below are a few practical steps to consider:

1. Pursue faithfulness in the biblical disciplines of the Christian life, such as the study of Scripture, prayer and fasting. A person should not expect God to grant deliverance from the demonic or fleshly desires when neglecting the foremost means the Lord has ordained for our defense.
2. Pursue gospel-centered community. A person should not expect God to grant healing while disregarding the chief environment in which God graces His people. The primary avenues for this at The Village are Home Groups and Recovery Groups. We also highly encourage anyone struggling with fleshly or demonic influence to walk through Steps at The Village.
3. Confess your sins. Satan and sin thrive in the darkness, but there is great healing and hope to be found in bringing your struggles to the light (1 John 1:9; James 5:16).
4. Repent of known sins. Take steps in your life to put sin to death and thus destroy the footholds of the enemy. Get violent against those things which provide opportunity for the flesh or demonic (Matt.5:29-30; Rom. 8:13, 13:14; Heb. 12:1).
5. Persevere in the struggle. The Christian life, on this side of glory, is marked by struggle, and we are to be marked by long-suffering endurance as we press on toward maturity and healing.
6. As you wrestle, remember that our greatest good and hope is in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Fully fix your focus on His life, death, resurrection, exaltation and future return. He alone is worthy of all attention and affection.

A word to our members and attendees

As stated above, deliverance is not a silver bullet or universal spiritual remedy. We are absolutely for you and for the good and right exercise of your gifts, but gifting needs to be viewed within the context of the larger picture of discipleship at The Village. Deliverance divorced from the holistic process of discipleship is dangerous and does more overall harm than good to the body. As you encounter men and women with questions about the demonic and deliverance, please push them initially toward

Home Groups and Recovery Groups at The Village. These are environments in which we can apply the balm of the Word of God, which is powerfully able to heal, convict and restore God's people from various ailments of sin and spiritual attack.

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

Colossians 2:13-15

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