

Regional Spirits? Contending with the King of Persia

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Daniel 10:10-11:1

You may have noticed that my Bible text for today is the same as last week. This is not a mistake. As I prepared last week's sermon on Daniel 10 I realized that this text was so rich, you could easily preach multiple sermons on it. And so that's what I've decided to do. Last week we also mentioned that one of the features of apocalyptic literature is that it gives us a deeper view of reality. We tend to have a shallow view of life, we see things on the material plane, we focus on the physical realities in front of our eyes; apocalyptic literature wants us to see the deeper spiritual realities underneath the surface of things. To borrow from Ephesians 6, apocalyptic literature wants us to see our struggle is not with flesh and blood, but with the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Daniel 10 says some really interesting things about that spiritual struggle. Most of that centers around one character in this passage, the mysterious Prince of Persia. Let's read the passage (Daniel 10).

Who is this prince of Persia? Whoever he is, he must be pretty powerful, because the angel who comes to Daniel tells him that this mysterious prince has been resisting him for 21 days. And the angel is no weakling! In verse 6 of our passage we hear that the angel has a face like lightning and eyes like flaming torches. His presence makes Daniel fall on his face. So this is not an earthly prince, this is not a human ruler; this is a being who operates on the spiritual realm. This is some sort of demon, some sort of spirit, who opposes the Lord and his angels. What's more, he is not alone. In the very last verse of the chapter the angel messenger mentions another prince – the prince of Greece – who will show up to contend with the archangel Michael and the Angel Gabriel and the rest of the heavenly host. So who is this strange prince of the spirit realm? You may not know this, but for quite a few Christians in this world, this text is a really important text for understanding spiritual warfare. For many Christians, especially of the more charismatic variety, this text has become a main source for understanding how demons work in this world and how we are supposed to fight them. Have you ever heard Christians talk about regional demons and territorial spirits? Many Christians believe that this passage reveals the existence of regional demons and territorial spirits. According to this belief there are different geographical regions of the earth have specific demons, specific evil spirits assigned to them. So there might be an evil spirit assigned to Grand Rapids, and there might be an evil spirit assigned to Lansing and there might be an evil spirit assigned to Kalamazoo. If Christians really want their work to be effective they have to discover and name these territorial spirits before they try to do ministry in these places.

It's a belief popularized by Peter Wagner, a longtime professor of Church Growth at Fuller Seminary. Wagner wrote multiple books on the subject and he even came up with a kind of strategic guide to spiritual warfare which includes the concept of regional demons and territorial spirits. According to Wagner, spiritual warfare has three levels. The first is ground-level spiritual warfare, which refers to casting demons out of believers. The second is occult-level spiritual warfare, which refers to "dealing with powers of darkness that are more coordinated and organized than one or more demons who might happen to be afflicting a certain person at a certain time." The third is strategic-level spiritual warfare, which "involves

confrontation with the high-ranking territorial spirits which have been assigned by Satan to coordinate the activities of the kingdom of darkness over a certain area in order to keep the people's minds blinded to the "gospel of the glory of Christ." So, Wagner paints a picture of a corporate demonic structure. The Prince of Persia and the prince of Greece are like regional demonic governors and under them are all sorts of lesser forces. In order to be an effective fighter, an effective prayer, an effective Christian, you need to map out the demonic regions, map out which evil spirit is in charge in different locale, and strategically target your effort. So for example, in 1990, a minister named Larry Lea hosted a prayer assembly in Candlestick Park, the baseball stadium in San Francisco. His goal was to get 10,000 people there to bind and cast out the territorial Spirit that was over San Francisco. Here's how the UPI reported his efforts: "We believe ... there is a territorial demon that prevails over San Francisco and that's where the prayers are aimed," said Lea. "San Francisco's demon is the spirit of perversion," said Lea and Bernal. "Because Satan is not omnipresent he must delegate evil-mongering to territorial demons, who in turn cast prevailing evils over specific regions", they said.

My guess is most of you have never heard of territorial Spirits – although a high school student from our church did ask me about them this year in conjunction with a project he was working on. But even if you've never heard of it you've probably heard and seen its influence. If you've seen or heard people who go into places, geographical places, and pray aggressive prayers to cast out the evil influence out of that place, if you've heard prayers that are phrased like power encounters with unseen foes who inhabit a building or a space or a region, you are hearing and seeing echoes of that belief. What do we make of this belief? Is there really such a thing as regional demons? There are several things to say here.

First, let us thank our charismatic brothers and sisters for reminding us of the truth of spiritual warfare. We brainy Christian Reformed types can easily fall into the habit of thinking of things in a naturalistic way, attributing natural causes to all our problems. This is a mistake. We are in a spiritual battle. The Bible is full of stories of encounters with spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Jesus' ministry was very clearly a battle against the forces of evil and those forces included evil spirits. The Bible teaches us to be wary of these spirits. "*Be alert and of a sober mind,*" says 1 Peter 5, "*your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him.*" Our charismatic brothers and sisters are usually more alert than we are. They call us to attention. That's good. Second, let us be humble when we talk about these things. As 1 Corinthians 13 says, we see through a glass darkly at the best of times, but when we start to talk about how things work in the spiritual realm, the glass is *really* dark. We ought to be humble about what we affirm and what we dismiss.

That being said, I don't think this passage or anywhere else in Scripture, teaches territorial spirits or anything like them. Peter Wagner and his many followers have a level of certainty about how demons work that is WAY beyond what scripture provides. People love certainty of course. We love it when experts stand up and say, "you want to know how demons work and how to fight them? Just ask me! I have the answers. Follow my system and you will have results like you've never seen before!" It's much less satisfying to have a waffler like me say, maybe this, maybe that, we're just not sure. Nevertheless, I don't think evil spirits inhabit places and control places; evil spirits afflict people and groups of people.

That's the primary teaching of the Bible. It is the choices and behaviors of people that allow the evil one to gain power and influence. It's people, not geography. Ephesians 4: "*Do not let the sun go down on your anger, do not give the devil a foothold.*" When people like you and me hold on to our anger, we give the devil a foothold in our life and he can start to work on us with

temptations and sins related to that anger; revenge fantasies, bitterness. It's not geography; it's people and their sins. In Genesis 4 God comes to Cain and warns him not to stay angry. "*If you do not do what is right sin is crouching at your door,*" he says. It's not geography, its people and their sins. This same thing can happen with groups of people. If a whole nation, say like Germany before World War Two, joins together around hyper-nationalism and racism, that's a foothold for Satan. Satan can use that, can enter into it, and can magnify it into further horrors. If a whole tribe, like the Tutsi's in Rwanda in the 1990's can give themselves over to fear and hatred the evil one can grow that and magnify it into a genocidal fury. It's not geography; it's people and their sins. That's how we should probably hear our passage. When Michael, the angel fights the prince of Persia and the prince of Greece, he's not fighting demons who have an assigned geographical territory; he's fighting evil spirits that have used the sins of Persia and the sins of Greece as a foothold for corruption and idolatry and violence and fear.

In the Screwtape Letters, C.S. Lewis famously says there are two equally dangerous mistakes you can make with the devil. You can pay too little attention to him – I think that's probably the danger in our tradition – or you can pay too much attention to him, and walk around in mortal fear of devils everywhere. I wonder if that's the danger facing some of our brothers and sisters who focus on regional demons. The devil isn't Lord of cities or countries. The devil isn't Lord of anything. Jesus is Lord. By his death and resurrection, he broke the power of evil. In his ascension, he became Lord of heaven and earth. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him. As we affirmed in our confession of faith earlier in the service, 'Our world belongs to God, not to demons or fate or chance!' The devil is an enemy, but he is a defeated enemy. He is dangerous, but one little word shall fell him.

So what does spiritual warfare look like? It's not necessarily dramatic. Think of Ephesians 6 again. How does Paul tell us to fight the forces of evil in the spiritual realm? By putting on the armor of God. What are the weapons in this armor? The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the sword of the Word, and the shield of faith. Faith, truth, righteousness, prayer, and the Word. These are not fancy things. But they are powerful, and they are how we engage the evil one.

Sometimes it is dramatic. Some of you may have heard of Kevin Adams. He's a Christian Reformed preacher out in California. He tells a story about going to a class about spiritual warfare way back in the 80's. It focused on signs and wonders and the spiritual realm. One day he was sitting in the back of class next to one of his classmate, a friend. In the middle of class one of John Wimber's pastoral associates walked over to his friend, and quietly whispered something in his ear. His friend suddenly fell to the ground and began shaking uncontrollably. He kept shaking for some minutes. The whisperer sat beside the friend and held his hand while he shook. When the shaking stopped, Adams friend had tears streaming down his face and he was smiling. Later when Adams talked to his friend, he said that the pastor had whispered to him that God knew about a very specific sin in his life, and had forgiven him. He'd never told anyone about that sin. He had carried this secret for years. But the sin had obviously become a foothold for the evil one in a very real, very deep and very dark way, and the word of forgiveness set him free. An amazing story. One that reminds us that the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms are very real, and more importantly, the power of the Holy Spirit is very real too.

Or, if I may give just one more example of what spiritual warfare looks like, I think of our sister, our beloved sister, Sher Engbers. Sher if you are listening, we love you. This week, along with her family, she made the decision to go on hospice. That decision was announced on her blog. Her son Chad wrote an eloquent post which explained the decision, and in that post he

made it clear that this decision was not a defeat. Chad pointed out that Sher had never framed the journey as a battle against cancer because, *“Once we frame the situation as a battle, we’re likely to have a winner and a loser. And cancer too often wins that war. The metaphor too easily implies that those whom cancer kills were weak warriors, succumbing to a superior force... Mom is not raising a white flag, throwing in the towel, or surrendering to the enemy. All of those metaphors are bad approximations of what is happening because they add the wrong suggestions and connotations.”* You see cancer is a flesh and blood thing. It’s pretty powerful. It can cause you great pain. It can cause enormous fear. It can shake your Spirit, hard. And the truth is, although we are all pray for the opposite, cancer or some other fleshly weakness will eventually “triumph” over our physical bodies. But our fight is not against flesh and blood, it is against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm, and in those realms, death has been defeated, Jesus is Lord, and nothing will ever separate us from his hand. When we his people walk in that assurance into the face of our days, the power of the evil one scatters before us like dust in the wind and the glory of the Lord rises like the morning Sun. Thanks be to God.

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