

SPIRITUAL WARFARE AND THE BIBLE

by Jan Willem Bakker

Table of contents

Part1 What is the biblical basis for spiritual warfare?

Spiritual warfare in the Old Testament

The New Testament reveals the real enemies

Jesus gave us His authority over all the forces of the enemy

Part2 Objections made against high level warfare

Discussion of three objections made against high level spiritual warfare

The roles Daniel and other prophets played in spiritual warfare

Part3 Lessons on spiritual warfare we can learn from the Bible

What are the objectives of spiritual warfare?

The battle and timing is the Lord's

We need purification and consecration

We need continual guidance

The battle plan is different every time

The right leadership is essential

Some people have to be sent home

Not everybody is called for spiritual warfare in the same way

Supporting intercession is vital

Part1 WHAT IS THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR SPIRITUAL WARFARE?

Spiritual warfare in the Old Testament

When we read the Old Testament, we see that warfare was very important for the Israelites. Warfare was not something Israel did because of its own demands and desires. It was a divine command. Already in the Old Testament we see that the goals of war were not restricted to the protection of the people or to the conquest of land and wealth. Warfare was also a spiritual issue. The Lord used the Israelites to judge the pagan nations of Palestine for their idolatry and abominations. He also wanted to remove the pagan nations so that the land He had chosen for Himself, Israel, would be free from idolatry and other forms of contamination. Apart from driving out pagan peoples from the land, the Israelites also had to remove their 'sacred poles' and other objects of idolatry and magic, in order to remove the spiritual pollution.

It is striking that the Lord Himself takes the initiative for war. He fights the wars against the pagan peoples and drives them away. However, this does not mean that His people are passive in these wars, just because the Lord is fighting them. On the contrary, the Lord uses His people actively as instruments to fight His wars. In various texts, such as Exodus 33 verse 2, God says that He will drive out the pagan people. At the same time He tells His people on numerous occasions, such as in Joshua 1:6 and 7, to be 'strong and courageous' in battle. This shows beyond any shadow of doubt that there is no contradiction between God's fights and an active role of His people in battle. God's effort in battle and His people's efforts in battle go hand in hand.

The fact that God's battle and the battle of the believers goes hand in hand, is just one manifestation of a very fundamental principle that God has put into creation. In his sovereignty God has chosen man to be His active partner, co-worker, on earth. He has chosen man to participate in executing His heavenly will in the realm of earth. This implies that many

of God's heavenly plans can only be executed on earth if and when He can find somebody on earth who is willing to collaborate with Him. That is why Jesus teaches us in Matthew 6 verse 10 to pray that 'Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. In heaven God's will is done, but it is our duty to pray that this heavenly will is going to break forth on earth.

The New Testament reveals the real enemies

When it comes to spiritual warfare, Ephesians 6 is foundational, particularly verse 12. In this passage Paul implies that warfare has not stopped with the Old Testament. But he clearly explicates who the real enemies are. These enemies were still somewhat disguised in Old Testament times. Paul states that it is not flesh and blood, pagan individuals and peoples, we are fighting against. We, the believers, fight against a diversity of demonic forces. The forces we fight are not merely 'ground level troops', like demons harassing people, but also high level forces such as principalities and world rulers. Paul was very aware that through Christ and the Holy Spirit the New Testament believer gains a deeper understanding of the ultimate meaning of Old Testament truths. This applies to the issue of warfare as well. Guided by the Holy Spirit Paul understood that the demonic forces are the real enemies, and not the human agents of these demonic forces, as various Old Testament passages may suggest.

Furthermore, Paul uses the term wrestle in order to characterise our fight with the demonic hosts. This shows that the New Testament spiritual war is just as intense and serious as the Old Testament wars. The fact that Paul says that we wrestle also with high level demonic powers such as principalities and world rulers clearly refutes the popular notion that the Bible merely gives believers power over demons harassing or possessing people. The term wrestle as used in this passage refers to a martial art that consisted of intense body to body combat. Such combat demanded extreme effort and concentration on the part of both contenders. In such contest only one could win, whereas the fights often would leave one contender dead. Therefore spiritual warfare is not a cerebral exercise or a children's game but extremely serious business.

Because New Testament revelation is founded on the Old Testament, it follows that Old Testament lessons and principles are still very relevant for us today. Therefore we can learn a lot about principles of spiritual warfare from the Old Testament teachings on warfare with flesh and blood. In fact, most failures or problems we face in spiritual warfare are due to our disregard or misunderstanding of biblical principles of warfare.

Jesus gave us His authority over all the forces of the enemy

The other foundational passage for spiritual warfare is Luke 10: 17 to 19. In Luke 10 we read that Jesus gave authority to 70 disciples to preach and do miracles in His name. When they came back from their mission and reported to Jesus, they were particularly pleased about their authority over demons. Verse 17 and verse 20 indicate that their newly experienced power over demons was the main source of contentment about their mission. In verse 19 we read that Jesus reacted by stating that this power over ground level demons is only a portion of the authority He has given to His believers. The disciples 'ain't seen nothing yet'. He, Jesus, has given them power to win over **all** the forces of the enemy. In other words, this power to confront and drive out the forces of the devil does not only refer to the ground level forces the disciples had just faced in their mission. It also includes the power to confront and drive away the high level forces. This power over all the forces of the enemy also clarifies verse 18. Jesus says in that verse that He saw the devil fall from heaven like a lightning. Jesus actually says that the power and authority He has given to the church to confront and drive out demonic forces even includes confronting the devil himself and driving him away.

Part2 OBJECTIONS MADE AGAINST HIGH LEVEL WARFARE

Discussion of three objections made against high level spiritual warfare

Opponents of the practice of spiritual warfare tend to object that there are no concrete examples of high level spiritual warfare in the biblical records of the lives of the apostles. Whether or not this is true partly depends on how one interprets some events in the book of Acts as Peter Wagner's commentary on this Bible book points out. Even if there are no such examples mentioned, that still does not refute the biblical foundation of this practice. As I have pointed out, the formulation of Luke 10: 19, and Ephesians 6: 2, clearly demonstrates that high level spiritual warfare is biblically validated. Furthermore, we have to keep in mind that the Bible does not include all the acts of all the apostles in their lifetime. For instance, there is a credible tradition that states that the apostle John judged the temple of Diana in Ephesus, which split into two as a consequence.

Another important issue to keep in mind is that much of biblical prophecy and promise has not yet been fulfilled. The more we move towards the end times, the more likely those unfulfilled, or partially fulfilled, prophecies and promises will come to pass. In this context it is not surprising that the authority Jesus gave to believers to confront high level principalities becomes increasingly manifest towards the end times.

A second objection against high level warfare states that this practice is a denial of Jesus' finished work on the cross. Since Jesus has defeated the demonic powers through His death and resurrection, so the argument goes, there is no need for believers to fight them. This argument is based on a gross misunderstanding of the relation between Jesus' finished work and the task of believers. Jesus has won over the forces of the devil of course, but we as the church still have to make his victory manifest on the earth. Therefore we reconcile people with God through the preaching of the word, even though Jesus has already 'reconciled all things under heaven and the earth with God'. The fact that Jesus has finished the work of reconciliation still leaves us with the duty to apply this finished work of reconciliation in the lives of people and people groups.

Likewise, Jesus has not merely defeated high level principalities on the cross, but also 'ground level' demons that possess or harass people. Nevertheless, this finished work of Christ does not render it unnecessary to drive demons out of people. On the contrary, we have the duty to apply the victory of Christ over ground level demons in order to set people free. Likewise, the fact that Jesus has already defeated high level principalities does not relieve us from the duty to fight them. We have to apply Jesus' victory over these high level principalities to facilitate spiritual breakthroughs in regions, people groups and institutions. Our spiritual position in this war is those of victors. We stand on Jesus' victory in everything we undertake. Nevertheless, this victory has to be worked out in all areas of Christian practice, including in spiritual war.

A third objection against high level spiritual warfare states that Ephesians 6 does not talk about offensive warfare, but only about the need for the Christian to defend himself against the demonic hosts. This argument is based on the observation that the weapons of the spiritual armour are predominantly defensive. However, this argument is based on a misunderstanding of what Paul is really saying. When Paul talks about the spiritual armour, he uses the metaphor of an army attacking a fortified city. In the old days archers were positioned on the wall of cities under siege. They used to shoot flaming arrows at the soldiers attacking the city. In order to protect themselves against the flaming arrows, the attacking soldiers needed protective weaponry. Now Paul is saying that the Christians are like the soldiers attacking a fortified city, whereas the archers are the demonic hosts defending the city with their flaming arrows. Paul's formulation clearly shows that in his view it is the Christians

who are supposed to attack, whereas the wicked hosts are on the defensive. The protective armour that Paul describes is the protective armour of a church on the attack!

The roles Daniel and other prophets had in spiritual warfare

Opponents of spiritual warfare often use a well known passage in Daniel 10 to dismiss this practice. This passage describes the appearance of a high level angel to Daniel. The angel talks about the fight he and other high angels had with the demonic princes of Persia and Greece. The passage does not describe that Daniel had a direct role in this fight. However, this passage needs to be interpreted within the context of the different focuses of the Old Testament and the New Testament in relation to spiritual warfare I have already discussed. I have pinpointed that the emphasis of spiritual warfare in the Old Testament is not on direct confrontation with demonic forces. The emphasis is on the fight against the human agents and idolatrous practices and occult objects. In this context the question whether or not Daniel played an active role in this fight against the demonic princes of Persia and of Greece, is entirely immaterial. After all, the Old Testament is also silent on the practice of exorcising demons from individual people. The direct and explicit confrontation of believers with demonic forces is only introduced in the New Testament by Jesus Himself. As I have argued from the key passages in Ephesians 6 and Luke 10, the New Testament does not merely speak of direct confrontation with ground level demons. It speaks of the authority given by Jesus to confront high ranking principalities as well. The conclusion is that Daniel 10 does not in any way invalidate the practice of high level spiritual warfare of modern day believers.

The apparently passive role of Daniel should not blind us for the fact that the Old Testament does contain some references to judgement of high level principalities through the tongue of God's human messengers. The prophet Isaiah states in chapter 49 verse 2 that 'the Lord has made my tongue like a sharp sword', and 'He made me a select, or sharpened, arrow'. Isaiah's ministry itself provides an example of a judgement spoken over a high level principality. In Isaiah chapters 13 and 14, the prophet was prophesying over Babylon. In chapter 14 verse 12 and the following verses, the text gains extra depth, when Isaiah not merely addresses Babylon but even the devil himself in judgement. This interpretation of these texts is even widely accepted in conservative evangelical circles. Something similar we find in Ezechiel 28 where the prophet not only addresses the human king of Tyre. Considering his rich and deep language, Ezechiel addresses the demonic force behind this king as well as Tyres's human king.

The story of 1 Kings 13 gives the best example in the Old Testament of what comes close to high level warfare. King Jeroboam had instituted his own religious version of the true worship of Jahweh. He appointed his own priests, and made Bethel the new religious centre. He made an altar and placed a statue of a bull in Bethel, and did the same in Dan in the north. This bull was supposed to represent the God of Israel. Amos 3:14 and Amos 5: 25, 26 indicate that the worship at Bethel was in fact a continuation of the worship of ancient gods. The memory of these gods had kept lingering in the hearts of the Israelites after their exile from Egypt. The statue of the bull at Bethel appears to be similar to the golden calf Aaron made in the desert. God considered this statue of the bull as an abomination and idolatry. This false worship at Bethel became the mother of all abominations for Israel. It created a huge opening for lying spirits and false prophecy. The counterfeit worship of Bethel and Dan resulted in a culmination of idolatry. This idolatry progressed over time to the worship of former gods in the land of Canaan, and subsequently moved to the worship of other gods found around Canaan. The idolatry culminated in the worship of all these idols plus the worship of sun, moon and stars. Surely, Bethel was a high level demonic stronghold. We read in the story that an unknown prophet received the assignment to speak out judgement over this altar. He indeed spoke out this judgement right on the spot which caused the altar to split into two. The

prophet also foretold that the later king Josiah of Judah was going to desecrate and finish off this altar completely. In the Old Testament perspective such destruction of an altar was also an act of spiritual warfare.

Part3 LESSONS ON SPIRITUAL WARFARE WE CAN LEARN FROM THE BIBLE

What are the objectives of spiritual warfare?

God owns the heavens and the earth, and it is His desire to fill the earth with His fullness. This will come to pass fully when Jesus returns. But God is using His children to do preliminary work towards that purpose. The ministry of spiritual warfare prepares for breakthroughs of His kingdom. In the Old Testament days the Israelites had to drive out the pagan people first before they could receive God's inheritance and establish God's theocratic rule in the land. Likewise, high level spiritual warfare precedes evangelism and the maturation of well established churches. It also facilitates a breakthrough in the spiritual atmosphere of a nation as a whole. This means that the spiritual warfare is like the preparatory work of John the Baptist. Spiritual warfare prepares the way for the Lord as well as for the people of the Lord. See Isaiah 40:3 and 4; 57: 14; 62: 10. Spiritual warfare prepares the ground for moves of the Lord. It does so by removing stones, high places, etc. which are symbols of demonic obstacles.

Spiritual warfare, however, is not merely preparatory. It also has to consolidate the effects of breakthroughs of the Kingdom of God. The Israelites not only had to drive out pagan people from their land. They also had to defend themselves against the counterattacks of other peoples who wanted to take back Israel's inheritance. Likewise, modern day believers also have to conduct spiritual warfare in order to hold on to the achievements of past breakthroughs of the kingdom. They have to defend against the devil's counterattacks, lest the gained ground will be lost again. The second objective of spiritual warfare is just as important as the first one. The history of both Israel and the church has demonstrated how thoroughly the devil can destroy God's work in an area. The best example is the land of Turkey, which once was the home of numerous big and powerful churches, but now has little Christian testimony left. Of course such setbacks are never God's faults. They are due to the fact that His partners on earth, His people, have allowed things to be stolen from them.

The battle and timing is the Lord's

In Joshua 5: 13-15 the Bible tells about the meeting between Joshua and the Captain of God's heavenly armies. This story is highly instructive. Most likely this Captain was Jesus Himself, in His Old Testament appearance as the Angel of the Lord. In his naïvety Joshua asks Him if He is for them or against them. The remarkable answer is no, meaning that God is neither for them nor against them. What God wants to make clear to Joshua is that this battle is the Lord's, and not the battle of Joshua, or of the Israelites. The issue is not whether God is on our side in our battle, but whether we are on His side in His battle.

This passage has some very deep and crucial implications. Because this war was God's war, and Joshua and Israel were on God's side, the Lord guided and blessed them. In spiritual warfare it is absolutely crucial to know if a battle is really the Lord's battle or not. If we prepare and fight a battle at our own initiative, and somehow hope the Lord will be with us, we will not really break through. We might even suffer tragic defeat. The other implication of this passage is that timing is essential. The Lord says 'now I have come'. It would not have made any sense for Joshua and for Israel to have gone to fight against Jericho before this time. Not only should we be sure that we are fighting God's battle. We have to do

so according to His timing and wait till He Himself gives the go signal. If we go prematurely, or miss His opportune moment, we might end up in defeat.

We need purification and consecration

The third crucial lesson of the meeting between Joshua and the Captain of God's hosts is that we have to purify and consecrate ourselves if we want to fight alongside with Him. Joshua was told to put off his shoes, because he was standing on holy ground. This speaks, on the one hand, of purification as an essential requirement of preparation. We have to confess and renounce all sin, and resist any sinful pattern in our lives. Cleansing ourselves from any demonic bondage and deception is also essential. We have to do this humbly and honestly. If we do not want to deal with issues of sin and bondage honestly and effectively, we will endanger a whole spiritual warfare campaign.

But sanctifying ourselves before the Lord also means total focus and dedication to the Lord's assignment. Many warfare campaigns are not effective because some participants are half hearted and lukewarm during their assignment. Their thoughts may be elsewhere; they may conduct all sorts of other business through their cell phones during the campaign, or take numerous coffee breaks. Especially those who joined only to please some friends or leaders may be susceptible to such lukewarm attitude.

We need continual guidance

The story of the battle for Ai, in Joshua 7, is highly instructive. The stunning victory over Jericho had stirred up presumption in Joshua and Israel. They had fallen prey to believing that they could conquer the city of Ai in their own strength, and that they no longer needed to enquire from the Lord. The result was an embarrassing defeat and 36 needless casualties of war. This demonstrates that our past victories, skills and experience, useful as they may be, are no guarantees for future success. We need to rely on continual guidance from God.

When Joshua started to listen to the Lord again after this defeat, it was found out that a man called Achan was to blame. He had disobeyed God's instructions and secretly taken from the war loot that was emphatically dedicated to the Lord alone. As a result of this sin, Israel no longer walked and fought in the power of God, but only in the power of the flesh, resulting in defeat. The case of Achan shows how important it is to purify oneself radically before entering into spiritual war. Moreover, it shows that the spiritual pollution of one man can lead to the defeat of the whole group. The 36 lethal casualties in the war against Ai show that not only the guilty may suffer dramatically. Therefore, leaders of warfare campaigns have to make sure that each participant is radical in his or her personal purification. If necessary, some prospective participants may need to be discharged from participation lest they jeopardise the entire warfare campaign. It is my experience that the Lord gives leaders wisdom and discernment, if they take this matter seriously enough.

The battle plan is different every time

Reliance on the Lord also means that we have to receive our strategies from Him. In the Bible we see that the Lord is very willing to give His war strategies to His people. We also see that those strategies are often very different, and sometimes defy any military logic. The battle plans for Israel's fight against Jericho, in Joshua 6, and Gideon's fight against the Midianites, in Judges 7, were both very specific, weird and highly successful.

In spiritual warfare it is also very important to receive our strategies from the Lord. Though some tactics and weapons may be similar in various campaigns, each specific battle plan needs to come through revelation. Therefore it is absolutely essential to take time to seek the Lord and hear from Him, often through intensive prayer and fasting in various forms. Moreover, the Lord often reveals various parts of a battle plan to different people. The leader

or leaders of a campaign needs special wisdom and discernment to test these pieces of revelation and to put them together. Spiritual warfare without prophecy and listening to the voice of God is a guarantee for failure.

The right leadership is essential

We see all through the Bible that the right leadership is essential. Joshua was God's selected leader for the conquest of Canaan, just as Moses was God's chosen leader for the exile from Egypt. The texts on Zerubbabel, the first political leader in Israel after the exile in Babylon, demonstrate how crucial chosen leadership is. The prophets Haggai and Zachariah made clear that Zerubbabel was God's chosen instrument (Haggai 2:24). A great mountain, being a symbol of strong demonic opposition, would become a plain before him, as we read in Zechariah 4:7. This shows that the opposition against Israel at that time in Israel's history would not be broken with just anybody leading Israel. God was only going to crush this opposition with Zerubbabel, His sovereign choice for leadership, as the political head of Israel.

Like natural war, spiritual war requires disciplined teamwork and a clear structure of command. Without God's choice for leadership and a loyal acceptance of this choice by the rest of the team, will make us violate biblical principles. Consequently we make ourselves vulnerable to defeat and counterattacks by demonic forces.

Some people have to be sent home

High level warfare requires mature and dedicated soldiers. In the sections on warfare in the Bible we read that some people were excluded from warfare. We read this in Deuteronomy 20. Apart from those who had just married or had just obtained a house or planted a vineyard, fearful people had also to be sent home. The argument is, as verse 8 shows, that fear is contagious. The fear of people could easily spread to others, and thus undermine the morale of the troops fatally. We should also apply this biblical principle to spiritual warfare. When we discover that people have open or hidden fears about spiritual warfare, we should not let them join.

There are other important reasons not to take persons into a spiritual warfare campaign. It would not be wise to bring people who are bitter, resentful, or sceptical, lest they undermine the morale and cohesion of the team. The same applies to people who still strongly struggle with demonic bondages, or who still hold on to personal grudges, or who are living in sin or gross deception. Some people who have a tendency towards flakiness and who do not have proper control over their spirit, should better stay out of spiritual warfare campaigns as well. Such people would be easy targets for demonic counterattack and this would undermine the whole campaign.

Not everybody is called for spiritual warfare in the same way

Considering Ephesians 6, all believers are involved in spiritual warfare to some degree, whether they like it or not. But not every Christian is called to engage in warfare to the same degree. Verses 4, 5 and 6 of chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians state that there are varieties of gifts, varieties of ministries and varieties of effects. Spiritual warfare is basically a variety of the prophetic or the apostolic ministry. Not everybody has the calling and gifting of warfare to the same degree. The story of Gideon in Judges 7 also teaches us that not everybody is called for high level war. In the case of the army of David we also read that there were those with a higher gifting in warfare than others. There were 30 high level specialists and three top level specialists. We read about this in 2 Samuel 23 and 1 Chronicles 11.

Supporting intercession is vital

In Exodus 17, verse 8 till 16 we read about the fight of Israel against the Amalekites. The attack of Amalek was unprovoked and malicious. The hatred of Amalek against the people of God was so intense, that God intended to eradicate Amalek completely. Amalek reflected the malice and hatred of the devil himself. In this extremely important battle we see that Joshua is leading the army of Israel, whereas Moses is praying on a hill, with the support from Aaron and Hur. This prayer is crucial. Every time Moses let his hand down from weariness, Amalek prevailed. In the end Israel won the battle because of the support Moses gave in his prayers. In spiritual warfare campaigns supporting prayer from intercessors is just as essential. Various campaigns fail to make the necessary breakthrough because of inadequate prayer support.

Of course the effort of Moses, Aaron and Hur was just as important as the efforts of Joshua and his fighters in their battle against Amalek. Likewise, intercessors who pray for a warfare campaign from their closets are of no less importance than the believers battling at the location of a demonic stronghold. The example of Moses, Aaron and Hur illustrate that such supporting prayer can be very intense and demanding. Therefore every leader of a spiritual warfare campaign is advised to give proper gratitude and appreciation for his or her supporting intercessors.

© J.W.A. Bakker, 2004. Reproduction or quotation requires permission of author and mentioning of source.