

SPIRITUAL WARFARE IN REVELATION

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The modern spiritual warfare movement emphasizes the idea that we can now conquer Satan through our own act of faith. Since this present victory is possible, and even now is being accomplished more and more throughout the world, it becomes quite conceivable that the kingdom of Satan is falling. The church is viewed as the inexorable conqueror, with Christians everywhere binding Satan and overcoming his work.

Spiritual Warfare and Postmillennialism

What is the outcome of all this to be? Many in this movement believe that by consciously fighting the devil, the Christians will bring in the perfect kingdom of God. This sounds like the classic view of postmillennialism. According to that teaching, God will bring in the promised golden age of the kingdom through the church's missionary work; this kingdom will last a thousand years; and afterward the Lord will return to judge the world and bring in the eternal state. Many scholars in the Reformed tradition have believed this, including Charles Hodge of Princeton Seminary.

However, there is a world of difference between classic postmillennialism and the modern spiritual warfare movement. Reformed postmillennialists have insisted that the Lord works through the church in the ways spelled out in the Bible. These ways include the evangelistic work of Christians, their prayers, their obedience to God's commands, and their faithfully carrying out their duties in their vocations. God himself would bless these efforts and use them in bringing his kingdom to the earth. These classic scholars never suggested that Christians should brazenly order Satan or the demons to submit to them, or feel that their efforts were more potent than the evil angels. They respected the Scriptural warnings against such presumption, such as the words of Peter:

Bold and arrogant, these men are not afraid to slander celestial beings; yet even angels, although they are stronger and more powerful, do not bring slanderous accusations against such beings in the presence of the Lord. But these men blaspheme in matters they do not understand.¹

Unlike the classic postmillennialists, these modern practitioners "bind Satan" with reckless abandon; Peter goes on to describe such people as "brute beasts," because they are dealing with powers far beyond their understanding.

Purpose and Structure of Revelation

One of the main Scriptural arguments used by this movement is the warfare seen in the

book of Revelation. This book vividly describes a great warfare between God and Satan, with the saints of God “overcoming” Satan by their faith. If we are engaged in this great conflict, they ask, should we not be overcoming Satan now? Should we not be actively fighting Satan, casting him down from his high places?

In order to answer this question, we must examine the purpose and structure of this book more closely. The stated purpose of the book is to reveal the future to John and to his readers.² The central theme of the book relating to this purpose is the second coming of Christ.³ Of special interest are the times involved in the book; when do these events transpire? It seems the outline of the book is linked to these times. Jesus tells John: “Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.”⁴ John therefore speaks of three times: first, “what you have seen”; then, “what is now”; and finally, “what will take place later,” or literally, “the things about to be after these things.”⁵

Through the centuries Christians have debated how to divide Revelation up into these three times. In general three schools of thought have emerged. One view, the preterite view, holds that most of the events in the book have already taken place near the time of John, largely being fulfilled by the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. A second view, the historical view, believes that the events in Revelation are being fulfilled during the whole history of the church, stretching from the time of John up to the second coming of Christ. The third view, the futuristic view, believes that most of the book is telling of events that will transpire in the future, near the time when Christ returns. Each of these three views has had capable, godly, scholarly defenders, and deserves respect. And each view contains an element of truth—the times of John are relevant to the book’s understanding, the whole church should be blessed by this book, and the future coming of Christ is its theological center.

Of the three prevailing views, I believe the most easily defensible from Scripture is the futuristic view. The three-fold outline given by Jesus fits well with the actual words of Revelation. “The things you have seen” would be the vision of Christ just shown to John in chapter 1. “The things which are” would be the messages to the seven churches in chapters 2-3. And “the things about to be after these things” would be the description of the great events related to Christ’s coming found in chapters 4-22. That would agree with the expression at the beginning of chapter 4, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.”⁶ The phrase “after this” is in the Greek identical to that in Revelation 1:19, “later,” literally, “after these things.”⁷ Both the futuristic view and the historical view place these events after John’s time. However, the historical view relies on so much dubious symbolism, and so often has to readjust itself to the marching on of world history, that the futuristic view seems much more preferable.

If the futuristic view is correct, there are several observations that bear on the question before us. First, by far the largest part of the book deals with events that are still in the future. This is not surprising, given the stated purpose and theme of Revelation—to show the future to Christ’s servants, and to center that future around the second coming of Christ. Second, the truths of the book are to be relevant and a blessing for believers through all of church history. This is apparent by the statement at the beginning of the book, “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it,

because the time is near.”⁸ Third, the events pictured in the great conflict between God and Satan are placed at the end of the age, not during the present time. This does not mean that there is no conflict now, but that the final destruction of Satan and his power on earth are still in the future.

Spiritual Warfare in Revelation

One cannot read the book of Revelation without noticing the preponderance of warfare and related ideas. While much of the warfare is described in physical terms, the spiritual foundation for it is clear. The book has two major related themes: first, Christ will overcome all evil powers; and second, we should therefore endure and overcome. These truths make the book applicable to all ages and places. In every generation Satan fights against God’s church, yet in the end the Lord will be victorious. In the meantime, we must stand for Christ, suffer for him if need be, and thereby overcome the enemy.

The first theme is explicitly stated, especially throughout the “future” part of this book, starting in chapter 4. Christ will overcome all evil powers. Here are some typical statements:

- You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.⁹
- The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.”¹⁰
- And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.”¹¹
- Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.¹²
- They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.¹³
- Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: “Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns.”¹⁴
- His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his

name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. “He will rule them with an iron scepter.” He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.¹⁵

- Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.¹⁶
- There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.¹⁷

These are only a few of the verses that could be chosen. Indeed, the whole structure of chapters 6-19, with the series of seals, trumpets, and bowls, shows how the Lord will destroy the evil world and the followers of Antichrist, and take the kingdom for himself. God does this through his own power. With the exception of angels, such as Michael and the angels in chapter 12, and the specially gifted witnesses in chapter 11, God does not use the intermediate power of his creatures, but rather his own miraculous and catastrophic intervention. Christ brings in his own kingdom by his own power. The saints ride with him and share the benefits of his victory, but the Lord personally smites his enemies.

The second great theme in Revelation is related to the first. Since Christ will obtain this great victory, we should endure and overcome. It is this aspect which makes Revelation relevant for all times in church history. The saints will share in Christ's victory and glory. They will reign with him. Both those who have died and those still living when Christ returns will be with him. Our job now is to be faithful, and to endure whatever persecution Satan throws at us. We are to “overcome” Satan by being true to Christ. Then, whether we live or we die, we are the victors, for our faith has stood firm.

Revelation abounds throughout with this exhortation. In fact, John calls attention to his own status as one suffering for Christ: “I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”¹⁸ He frequently points to others who have or who will overcome Satan in this way.¹⁹ And Jesus himself tells his followers that this is what is expected of them, and that for which they will be rewarded: “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”²⁰

When John wrote this in the first century, the saints faced the hateful persecution of the Roman empire. Many had died; others were about to die also, or to suffer in other ways, as John was suffering in exile. Later centuries have seen millions of Christian martyrs. Our own twentieth century has been called the bloodiest century of all, with more Christians killed for their faith than in all the previous centuries combined. Yet is Satan winning? No! All these have overcome; they have obtained the victory over Satan and his hosts. They have done it through faith, by the power of the blood of the Lamb.

Compared to this grand, epic struggle, the proud little pronouncements of self-appointed

fighters of Satan appear puny and ridiculous. We best fight Satan, not by pronouncing exorcisms or claiming special powers today, but by being loyal to our God. Living a life of simple Christian obedience, witnessing for Christ to those we see day by day, and praying for strength and spiritual growth, are the paths to spiritual victory in our warfare against Satan.

¹ 2 Pet 2:10b-12a; unless otherwise noted, quotations are from the NIV.

² Rev 1:1.

³ Rev 1:7; quoting Zech 12:10.

⁴ Rev 1:19.

⁵ “After these things” is μετὰ ταῦτα.

⁶ Rev 4:1b.

⁷ μετὰ ταῦτα.

⁸ Rev 1:3.

⁹ Rev 5:9-10.

¹⁰ Rev 11:15.

¹¹ Rev 12:7-10.

¹² Rev 15:4.

¹³ Rev 17:14.

¹⁴ Rev 19:6.

¹⁵ Rev 19:12-16.

¹⁶ Rev 20:6.

¹⁷ Rev 22:5.

¹⁸ Rev 1:9.

¹⁹ As in Rev 5:9-10; 7:15-17; 11:18; 12:10-11; 13:10; 14:13; 16:15; 18:20; 20:4-6; 21:3-4; 22:3-5.

²⁰ Rev 2:7; see also 2:11, 26-27; 3:5, 12, 21.

Spiritual warfare is real, even though we cannot physically see the attacker. But, we can educate ourselves on how the battles are fought and how they impact our lives on a daily basis. As Christians, we are in a spiritual battle of some sort on a daily basis. In warfare, battles are fought on different fronts, for different reasons, and with varying degrees of intensity. The same is true in spiritual warfare. Our spiritual battles and warfare are real, even though we cannot physically see the attacker. But, we can educate ourselves on how the battles are fought and how they impact our lives on a daily basis. We have to ask ourselves, "Why do we even want to fight?" Spiritual warfare is the Christian concept of fighting against the work of preternatural evil forces. It is based on the biblical belief in evil spirits, or demons, that are said to intervene in human affairs in various ways. Although spiritual warfare is a prominent feature of neo-charismatic churches, various Christian groups have adopted practices to repel such forces, as based on their doctrine of Christian demonology, too. Prayer is a common form of spiritual warfare among Christians. Other Spiritual Warfare in Revelation One cannot read the book of Revelation without noticing the preponderance of warfare and related ideas. While much of the warfare is described in physical terms, the spiritual foundation for it is clear. The book has two major related themes: first, Christ will overcome all evil powers; and second, we should therefore endure and overcome. These truths make the book applicable to all ages and places.