
FLESHLESS FOES

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OPPRESSORS IN THE LAND: JUDGES 2:14-3:2

In addition to being a precise narration that chronicles God's dealings with His people—both as a nation and as individuals—the OLD TESTAMENT provides us with profound insights into the goings-on in the spiritual dimension. The stories and conversations it contains are “*written for our instruction*” for our spiritual walk (1 Corinthians 10:11), so we are invited to read the episodes not merely to glean an accurate glimpse of history, but also to extract principles and understandings about the invisible realm.

For instance, the people of God were delivered from Egypt by the hand of Moses; that is history. But the choices Moses made that enabled him to become a deliverer (i.e., eschewing worldly reward-systems), and the lessons he had to learn along the way (i.e., the inadequacy of taking matters into his own hands) serve as excellent training for our own journey and ministry. Likewise, when God declares to Israel that He has plans for their future—a hope-filled future that cannot be accessed by their own skill and effort—we legitimately cling to that same promise; it teaches us to keep turning to and relying on His plans, not our own. A long-ago pledge to God's people becomes a foundational understanding for how things work in the Kingdom!

From the earliest pages of the OLD TESTAMENT, we are introduced to the reality of an adversary who was cast down from God's presence because of his pride and his

refusal to accept God's order for the cosmos. Desiring to ruin the beauty of God's arrangement (*"And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good"* (Genesis 1:31), Satan drew Adam and Eve into his deception, claiming that God was, first of all, *a liar*, and that His prevailing motive was to deny them personal fulfillment.

The devil is not just an historical character. The Adversary still prowls about seeking to consume people like us; consequently, one of our main occupations as believers is to resist him and his forces (1 Peter 5:8-9). Like it or not, in joining ourselves to Christ, we have enlisted in the cosmic struggle *"not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places"* (Ephesians 6:12).

Not only are we called to resist sin/temptation—for which there is always the provision of forgiveness—but we are also called to *"stand firm against the schemes [ploys, traps, ambushes, methods] of the devil"* (v. 6:11)—for which there is also the provision of deliverance.

So, what is our enemy's modus operandi? What methods and minions does he typically employ? How will he often ambush us?

SPIRITUAL WARFARE

Unfortunately, many believers adopt a sensational approach to the subject, and as a consequence of the dearth of biblical teaching about spiritual warfare, it feels spooky and sinister. Pride and lawlessness underlie the enemy's kingdom, so if we're going to counter it, we must adopt an attitude of humility—and be especially careful to cling to the word of God. Sadly, many well intentioned people lapse into speculation and religious sounding superstition in their attempts to help others overcome points of demon-spawned evil and ruin in their lives.

To gain a biblical perspective on the forces of evil—and how they manifest in human experience—we can study the many passages in the OLD TESTAMENT that describe God's people in conflict with their adversaries. For example, in the BOOK OF NEHEMIAH we meet three leaders of the enemy camp, Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem, who are very displeased that *"someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel"* (Nehemiah 2:10). Their conspiracy to demoralize the people and their plots to halt the restoration of Jerusalem in 445 B.C., perfectly resemble the

kind of spiritual assault you and I undergo in 2005 A.D. The mocking statements they made (*“Nehemiah, your efforts and work are so pitiful; they’ll never stand”*) echo precisely the disheartening, demonic whispers sounding in our minds.

There are hundreds of such Bible passages: historically and literally accurate; and, spiritually instructive!

THE BOOK OF JUDGES

The BOOK OF JUDGES contains a couple well-known stories (about Gideon; Samson and Delilah), but for the most part, it gets passed over by many readers as no more than a listing of the twelve deliverers, freedom-bringers who judged Israel after the death of Joshua and before Saul became king. The statement that summarizes the spiritual, moral and political mess of that era is its theme verse:

“In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.” Judges 17:6

JUDGES describes the wild-west days in Israel’s history. But it also gives us profound insight into patterns of God’s dealings with His people and the enemy’s ploys among us. The most apparent theme is a cycle with which you and I are quite familiar! Disobedience leads to oppression; oppression brings misery; misery eventually leads to repentance; and, repentance enables forgiveness from the Lord followed by deliverance from the enemy. Repeated over and over...

The beginning portions of JUDGES focus on a generation of God’s people who had not personally experienced any of the warfare that enabled Israel to enter the Promised Land. Being untrained, they were fairly easy prey for their enemies. Like us today, they had to be taught so that they could advance from being novice recruits to spiritual veterans.

The Context

- Israel had not driven the enemy completely out of the land (v. 1:28).
- This generation had not witnessed God’s work on behalf of their ancestors (v. 2:10).

- They were bowing down to gods of the culture surrounding them (v. 2:12).
- As a result, God left them on their own, to be ruled over by their enemies (v. 2:14).

Descriptions of Oppression

- God's people were being plundered [destroyed, robbed, despoiled, pillaged] (v. 2:14).
- "They could no longer stand before their enemies" (v. 2:14).
- "They were severely distressed" [bound, tied up, restricted, cramped] (v. 2:15).
- "They did not listen to their judges" (v. 2:17).
- They were oppressed [squeezed, crushed, forced] and afflicted [crowded, thrust] (v. 2:18).

God's Response to Our Rebellion

- He lets us have it our way to show us the contrast between Him and other gods (v. 2:14).
- He is moved to pity at the sound of our groaning and our suffering (v. 2:18).
- He raises up judges who deliver [make open, wide or free; save, rescue] us from evil (vs. 2:16, 18).
- He allows some enemies to remain in the land—to teach us the need for active and persistent resistance against the ways of false gods (vs. 2:22; 3:2).

PART 2—ADVERSARIES TO OUR REBUILDING: EZRA 3-6

Few of us likely find much interest in the exact location of biblical cities in relation to one another and to surviving geographic landmarks because we are not archaeologists trying to discover ancient sites or artifacts. If we were on the lookout for those now-buried cities, we would pay far more attention to the many physical descriptions found in the OLD TESTAMENT. For instance, we generally feel little need to connect Jonathan's scrambled ascent up the mountain to battle against the Philistine garrison with the two "*sharp crags*" that "*rose on the north opposite Michmash...and on the south opposite Geba*" (1 Samuel 14:4-5). Where things happened isn't that interesting unless you're looking for clues to help revisit the places.

That is an apt analogy for the many statements in the OLD TESTAMENT that describe the invisible world in which the stories unfold. I do not mean to imply that there is a spiritual geography per se, or that we should try to "*go back*" to some location in the spirit-world, but just as archaeologists can rely on the physical descriptions, landmarks, and reference points for their profession, so too can we trust the spiritual descriptions and reference points for ours. Somewhat like archaeologists, we apply our trade among *ancient ruins* and *ruined cities*—not the remains of long-ago civilizations, but of present-day people who have inherited ancestral "*devastations of many generations*" (Isaiah 61:4).

That is our anointing, our calling, the very reason why we have been set apart unto the Lord—the *weapons of our warfare*, the tools of our trade, the stuff we use to do what we do in the world—are "*divinely powerful*" to dismantle the "*strong holds*" that, paradoxically, create such spiritual weakness and brokenness in people's lives (2 Corinthians 10:1-5). "*Under the reign of which king,*" an archaeologist might ask, "*Was this city overrun by its enemies?*" The *Bible-as-history* reveals much more of the whole story about a site than what just a few surfaced artifacts can tell.

In like manner, the Bible has more to tell us about what's going on with all things, "*both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities...*" (Colossians 1:16). Is a location's history always significant? No, of course not. Are spiritual powers behind everything that happens to people? Again, no, but if archaeologists look mostly beneath the surface of the soil to find answers, so too, do we; visible and invisible—material and spiritual.

The Bible is a manual about both dimensions—in the past, present, and future.

SPIRITUAL HISTORY

God names Himself, “I AM,” the ever-present, ever-the-same, now-as-always One; He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and how He has been is how He is going to be.

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever.” Hebrews 13:8

What has been true about the Lord will continue to be true in the future, so when we read about the ways in which He dealt with His people in the past, we can see patterns that repeat themselves today. What motivated Him and moved Him then, does so now. We love that—and count on it.

In a perverse parallel, the devil, and his cohorts continue their pattern of stealing, killing and destroying (John 10:10), so as we read the Bible, and pay attention to the spiritual topography, we can learn a great deal in order to minister effectively to people who have been sorely wounded by spiritual forces. Patterns of enticement, captivity, oppression, and affliction found in the ancient, physical foes of God’s people, are repeated by our present-day supernatural adversaries.

As the saying goes, *“People are people.”* People from the 21st Century A.D. act like people from the 6th Century B.C., who were harassed and assaulted by enemies whose tactics and ploys closely resemble ones used against us today. Since the history of God’s people is so vast, and most of it had to be left out of the Bible record, we have to ask ourselves why the stories we read were included in the anthology God edited! May I suggest that His aim was to give us both a natural and a spiritual history from which to learn?

The BOOK OF EZRA tells portions of Jerusalem’s history dealing with the reconstruction of the temple after the Babylonians had sacked the city, and most of its inhabitants were sent into exile. Nearly 70 years later, after the Babylonian Empire gave way to the Persian Empire, several of the exiles returned to Jerusalem in an attempt to restore worship in the temple. It is a perfect picture of our spirits being renewed when we receive Jesus as our Savior, and His Spirit comes to dwell in our heart. The theme verse is:

“For we are slaves; yet in our bondage our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us

reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.” Ezra 9:9

EZRA depicts the plight of a conquered, broken people who long to worship God in full freedom; though it ends victoriously with the rebuilt temple, it gives us glimpses of the kinds of opposition people face when they move toward full spiritual restoration. Their enemies employ discouragement, frustration, and accusation to stop the repairs, but because of prophetic words, the work resumed after having dwindled to half-hearted piddling—barely.

The Context

- After 70 years in captivity, a group of nearly 50,000 return to rebuild the temple under Zerubbabel’s leadership.
- The whole restoration work begins with setting the altar on its proper foundation (v. 3:3).
- After a good start, the work bogs down, and everyone feels discouraged and hopeless.
- Two different men, first Zerubbabel then Ezra, provide necessary leadership to the people. And it will take a third, Nehemiah, to oversee the rebuilding of the city walls years later.
- Two different prophets are used by the Lord to encourage His people in their work.

Descriptions of Oppression

- God’s people were terrified [dreading what would be done to them] (v. 3:3).
- Their enemies offered partnership in the restoration process (v. 4:2).
- They discouraged [weakened, enfeebled, slackened the hand, made to feel alone or abandoned] and frightened [created anxiety, heart palpitations] God’s people (v. 4:4).

- The enemies “hired counselors” to frustrate [break up, cast off, disannul, bring to naught] good counsel (v. 4:5). Those who sought to halt the restoration accused the people of God (v. 4:6-7).

Counter-Measures to Spiritual Opposition

- Their willingness, generosity, and praise at a foundational level in your life (v. 1-3).
- Disregard for worldly counsel or any “help” that is contrary to the counsel of the Lord (v. 4:3).
- Close attention to prophetic words of direction or action from well-established prophets (vs. 5:2; 6:14).

PART 3 - CARVINGS OF THE GODS: PSALM 115:8; GALATIANS 4:8

Not only does the OLD TESTAMENT provide us with historical parallels to our life-experience—giving us understanding about the swirl of sinful tendencies and demonic activities in which we live—it also lays out the spiritual laws that govern the cosmos, both in the heavens and the earth. Just as the physical universe operates according to basic principles (like gravity), so, too, does the spiritual dimension. And some tenets administrate both realms! For instance, “What we sow, we will reap.” (Reference 1 Corinthians 9:11; Hosea 10:12.) In the natural arena, when we plant an orange seed, an orange tree eventually emerges from the soil; in the invisible realm, it explains why we receive when we give—or why unforgiveness toward others produces such misery for us.

We will understand the OLD TESTAMENT better if we read it almost more as a Physics text (of the non-physical world) than as just a catalog of rules/regulations, *do’s and don’ts* handed down by a grumpy God. Because this planet is severely malfunctioning and no longer working the way it was intended to work, life is lots more complicated than God wanted it to be for us. Life was easy and the choices were few BEFORE sin threw everything out-of-whack. Now, life is no Eden, and nothing comes without a little sweat.

In the Scriptures God lays out advantageous patterns for *life on planet earth*, guiding us around dangers and into blessings, until such time when we leave this life for the eternal (*as-it-was-meant-to-be*) life. There are many cause-effect

connections, and the commandments of God try to alert us to dangerous courses. For example, the first of the 10-Commandments says, “*You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol...you shall not worship them or serve them...*” (Exodus 20:3-5). That warning is repeated in the New Testament: “*Guard yourselves from idols*” (1 John 5:21).

Of course, the most obvious reason why we should not have any other gods before the Lord is because it is wrong; He is the true God and our worship belongs to Him. “*He jealously desires (dotes upon, yearns for) the spirit He has caused to dwell in us*” (James 4:5). It’s a love-thing! God wants to possess us! But God’s love also wants to protect us from certain cause-effects that will have detrimental power over us. Idols are dangerous; their physical form (wood or metal carved in some image) is nothing, just a piece of this world, but behind idols are demonic forces that prompt people to acts of worship. It’s what gods do.

IN WHO’S IMAGE?

As surely as worshippers of the true God are transformed into His image (Romans 8:29), and their minds are realigned with His (Romans 12:1-2), so, too, will those who worship idols become like the demons behind those idols. Every god—even those that are no gods—seeks to make us in its image. An idol is, literally, a “*carved thing, an object deeply engraved.*” To transform a block of wood into an idol, it has to be carved and etched, gouged and cut: to turn liquid silver into an idol, it must be poured into a pre-existing mold.

Think of the parallels. When life heats up, and we have a “melt-down”, it is very easy to start conforming to patterns of thought and behavior that run counter to the ways of the Lord. Anger, bitterness, despair, resentment begin to shape us, and before long, that’s what we look like. When we get cut deeply enough, or when we’ve been scored over and over again by painful things, patterns/shapes start appearing on our soul. Before long, certain *self-hating* and *other-blaming* thoughts cycle endlessly in our minds, and instead of dismissing/repenting of them, we allow them to become our focus. In our inner being, an image comes more and more into focus...and it isn’t His!

A catechism of *worship* carves mental and emotional grooves that become, like well-worn ruts, the primary patterns by which we end up living. Consumed by these thoughts, it is as though we become trapped inside the idol, peering out at the world through its “sight-less” vantage point and perspective.

History lessons bore most students—especially when teachers simply list long-ago dates and names of far-off places that have little relevance to today’s world. Who really cares when (or where) the Crimean War pitted an Anglo-French alliance against Tsarist forces, or why the famed “Charge of the Light Brigade” ended so disastrously? Basically, no one!

But when a seasoned river-guide relates the story of a catastrophic spill from a raft that took place years ago when white-water thrill-seekers steered too close to the outcropping on the south side of the river, we pay attention—especially when we find ourselves on the south, near that very finger or stone jutting from the grey granite! When the reports of brake problems in certain model cars (i.e., a model we own) exceed the proportions of chance and coincidence, the manufacturer recalls those automobiles to fix the flaw; it would be foolish to say to ourselves, “My car is different, and I don’t think the problem will happen to me.”

These are cases where other people’s history has much to say about our present/future. The books of the OLD TESTAMENT are much like that kind of history. They relate instructive episodes of times and people past, but the stories contain lots and lots of guidance and warning for us in the 21st Century. Without disregarding the actual historic events and situations, we can find helpful explanations and suggestions. Realizing, too, that the books of the Bible were written over the span of centuries, it is especially significant when we discover repeated themes and/or see characters that lived hundreds of years apart going through the same type of trials.

COMMON TRAPS

One such theme centers around the traps and snares into which we can fall when we serve idols, false (misleading) gods, who wish to imprint their image on our lives. They want to compel their handicraft through our hands in the same manner that unscrupulous sweat-merchants drive slave laborers in 3rd world garment factories. The more we worship idols of *resentment* and *rejection*, for instance, the more we find ourselves preoccupied with their trade (rejecting and resenting) and consumed with the sorts of activities and thoughts such beings would exhibit if they suddenly took shape in our world.

It may be helpful to picture idols as peddlers who travel about offering pots and pans, curios, and the *latest thing*, to people who live somewhat isolated lives. Demonic, spiritual peddlers bring their goods right to where we live, and they

unveil their hand-wrought wares and *signature-line* products for us to buy into. Instead of household items and physical goods however, the handiwork and *must-have* items they suggest for sale are soulish items and mental/emotional mantras. They peddle statements and conclusions and vows that seem helpful at first, but become deadly refrains in the end.

People buy peddled vows like, “*Never trust anyone*” because they need such a line after a huge betrayal, but unless renounced, that vow will lead to a life that never finds anyone who can be trusted! Sometimes the proffered statements end up barking at our soul: “*Be afraid!*” they might shout. Likely, that statement gets peddled after a series of frightening episodes have begun to erode a person’s sense of life. What begins as a form of protection, (i.e., “*Be on guard to be safer.*”) turns into perpetual insecurity (i.e., “*You’re never safe!*”). The snares of idols are baited traps that slip a noose around our neck or a hook in our nose.

For example, the very nature of *resentment* [RE + SENTIRE L *to feel*] is to rehearse an injury or insult again and again—long after it has happened. Initially, the rehearsed pain offers protection against future vulnerability, but the trap is that the cycle of remembrance becomes its own source of perpetual pain. People have to feel pain in order to be resentful, so in order for that idol of resentment to maintain its place in our lives, it must prevent the resentment-inducing pain from subsiding. Chicken or egg, which comes from which?

A COMMON HISTORY (PSALM 106)

The PSALMS are like reading someone’s journal from thousands of years ago, and they are filled with intimate, genuine reflections of people trying to live life in the Lord. In the PSALMS, we find a rich trove of passages that offer parallel instruction for us personally; they hearken back to actual situations viewed through the eyes of real people like Moses and David, so we can see how they responded to the same sorts of life-challenges we face today. Additionally, as we have been learning about the entire OLD TESTAMENT, the PSALMS have much to say about the enemies we face in the invisible dimension. Few of us have actual flesh-and-blood foes, so the numerous references to Israel’s enemies, for instance, are either irrelevant to us—or they must be read on an additional level than just historical.

Furthermore, several OLD TESTAMENT passages actually rehearse history in light of the lessons it teaches God’s people for the now. People, people, people—pretty much the same in any century B.C. or A.D.—the temptations are common to all (1

Corinthians 10:13), as are the options available to us—and their spiritual consequences. Let's look at ourselves way back then:

PSALM 106

- *"We have sinned like our fathers..."* (v. 6).
- *"He saved them from the hand of the one who hated them...and redeemed them"* (v. 10).
- *"The waters covered their adversaries; not one of them was left"* (v. 11).
- *"...;they did not wait [stay grooved in] His counsel...and tempted God"* (vs. 13-15).
- *"...they became envious of Moses"* (v. 16).
- *"They made a calf...and worshipped a molten image"* (v. 19).
- *"They despised the pleasant land...and did not believe...but grumbled..."* (vs. 24-25).
- *"They joined themselves to Baal-Peor..."* (v. 28-31).
- *"...it went hard with Moses on their account; because they were rebellious against His Spirit"* (vs. 32-33).
- *"And served idols which became a snare to them"* (v. 36).
- *"Their enemies oppressed them, and they were subdued under their power"* (v. 42).
- *"...They, however, were rebellious in their counsel, and so sank down in their iniquity"* (v. 43).
- *"Nevertheless He looked upon their distress, when He heard their cry; and He remembered His covenant for their sake,"* (vs. 44-45).