

Tackling Tough Questions

Winter 2006 – GTW 1: Week Four – Angels, Demons and More

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For all the focus in popular culture (and this goes back to the Middle Ages) on demons, angels, and the spirit world, the Bible is not overly concerned with idea of any of these spiritual beings. The Bible's focus is on God, not on his servants nor on his enemies. Unfortunately, our human nature is such that we really get excited about mysterious things, and few things in the Bible are more mysterious (at least to our modern, post-Enlightenment mind) than the spiritual realm.

Angels

The term angel comes from the Greek word *angelos*, which means messenger. And that is the primary role of angels in the Bible– to serve as messengers (and ministers) from God to human beings (including Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and in the desert). The image is then that of an ambassador from one realm to another. In heaven, the Book of Revelation tells us that the angels primary role is to worship God (Revelation 4).

How many angels are there (and no, I wont answer how many can stand on top of a pin)? The Bible indicates that there are thousands of them (Dan. 7:10; Matt. 26:53; Luke 2:13; Heb. 12:22, 23) and that they appear to have a hierarchy (Zech. 1:9, 11; Dan. 10:13; 12:1; 1 Thess. 4:16; Jude 1:9; Eph. 1:21; Col. 1:16). They are spirit beings (Heb 1:14), but unlike God (who is “invisible”) they are corporeal (Acts 1:10).

We are given the names of several angels, such as Michael and Gabriel. Michael is the “Great Prince” among the angels (Dan 12:1) and Gabriel is seen as the “Great Announcer” for his role of announcing God’s intention. In the apocryphal books, like Tobit, we also see another three angels, Raphael, Uriel, and Jeremiel. These angels have a common ending; it is the Semitic word for God – *el*. This emphasizes that they belong to and serve God. Angels do not belong to us or to themselves, but are always serving at the behest and command of God.

The Devil

If you have ever wondered how the Devil got associated with the idea of a man in goat’s form, it is because the Hebrew word for him is *sair*, which means goat or satyr (Isaiah 13:21 and 34:14). His “proper” name, Satan, comes from the Hebrew word *shataan*, which means literally “adversary.” That is the role we see him in through scripture, but more as an adversary of humanity than of God, of whom he knows he is not an equal. His role as humanity’s adversary becomes clear in passages such as Rev 2:10 and 12:10, Job 1:6 and Zech 3:1. He was created to be second in power to God (Ezekiel 28:11-16), but we do well to remember that while his power is greater than human beings without the Spirit (1 Peter 5:8), he is quantitatively lesser than God. We must never assume that he is nearly equal to God. This takes us dangerously close to the ancient heresy of dualism, that sees good and evil as counter-balances, and which denies the clear scriptural description of God’s greatness and goodness.

As we talked about last week, he is traditionally alluded to as a fallen angel (“Lucifer,” KJV), who rebelled against God’s inherent rule, and invites us to do likewise (see Isaiah 14:12-17; cf. Revelation 12:9-12 and Luke 10:18). To accomplish this he also has a following, which the Bible calls demons.

Demons

Where do demons come from? Two theories exist. The first is that they are the angels who fell with Satan in his rebellion (Matt 25:41; 2 Peter 2:4; Rev 12:7-9). Others have speculated that they are the children of the unnatural offspring of angels and women (Genesis 6:2; Jude 6 and the apocryphal book 1 Enoch). Either way (I favor the first), we know that they serve wicked ends. In the Old Testament we see them associated with detestable practices, such as witchcraft and divination (Deut 32:17 and Psalm 96:5).

In the New Testament we see them primarily in their encounters with humans who they have enslaved. Paul sees them as the instigators of false worship and the beings receiving that worship (1 Cor 10:20-21; 12:2) and the Book of Revelation agrees with this (9:20). Paul sees these as the forces that currently rule this world, sometimes through human agencies (Eph 6:10-18).

But it is important to remember, the demons do not have run of the world. As Martin Luther said, the Devil is God's devil – he exists because God allows him to and his days are numbered by God. This means, as James Packer says, that the demons are God's demons, defeated enemies (Col. 2:15) whose limited power is prolonged only for the advancement of God's glory as his people contend with them.

Spiritual Warfare

One of the points of interest in recent years among certain Christians has been what is called "spiritual warfare." There are conferences and books aplenty on the topic, and I have been witness to some outright attempts to do "combat" in the "heavenly realm." For people who live in the modern and developed world, this can at times seem a bit primitive, if not just plain weird. At the same time, earnest, intelligent and scientific people, especially serving in missions around the world, testify to the very real battle that goes on in bringing people out of darkness and into the light with the demons that control them.

Two dangers exist in practicing spiritual warfare. The first is that it is very easy to see ourselves as the warriors, and thus to attempt this in our own power. Such an approach runs counter to the description of the armour of God passages from Ephesians 6. All of the armour is ultimately God's, and the only offensive weapon listed is "sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." Moreover, after this full description of the armour, we are told:

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

We do not win victories in spiritual warfare...it is God who does so when we announce our utter weakness before the plots of the enemy.

The second and equally dangerous mistake is to be so consumed with the enemy that we lose sight of God, which is after all what the Devil and his entourage want in the first place. One of my friends, The Navigator missionary Nabeel Jabbour puts the spiritual warfare in the biblical balance when he says that we should, "Glance at the devil; we should gaze, in worship, at God."

When conversations take place in which Satan is talked about more than God or where people are talking about their spiritual warfare battles, you will know one or both of these warnings has been missed.

A Word on Science and Religion

Last week we briefly discussed the question of Adam and Eve (their historicity, and whether or not the Genesis narratives are “true”), which raises the issue of the role of science and faith. Whether it be demon-possession stories (you know that is “just epilepsy”) or the question of the universe’s formation (you cannot be a Christian and “believe in evolution”), there seems to be a lot of fear on both sides. Science and religion have often had a very contentious relationship, with each side committing a lot of crimes against the other. The truth is that faith has nothing to fear from science and science nothing from faith.

Science at its best helps us to explore and understand the amazing mechanism of the universe. I for one continue to be fascinated by quantum physics, the big-bang, and other important scientific discoveries. Science can and does help explain how things work, and often the immediate cause of things. Faith at the same time helps to explain the larger world and can help us to understand something equally as (if not vastly more) important as how something works – the meaning and why of that something.

The trouble comes when either side out-of-hand rejects the service of the other. When science tells us that “all there is the universe is matter” they are attempting to enforce a lack of meaning in the universe. This is not properly science, but what is often called scientism. When science oversteps its bounds, it has moved beyond its proper sphere. Likewise, when people flatten the biblical text to exclude science or reject the findings of science (especially those which are verifiable) the same mistake has been made.

The news lately has carried a lot about the battle between evolution and what is called Intelligent Design (ID). When it is used to remove any role of science in the search for understanding creation, it is clearly wrong. Also, Intelligent Design can quickly fall victim to the old and fabled mistake of the “God of the gaps” thesis, where we simply insert God where an explanation is unavailable, which often means that when the gap is explained, God “loses.” At the same time, I do have a problem with those who say that since evolution explains the creation of the earth and its life, that therefore the Bible is a hoax. This is what is called material evolution, where the materials of the universe provide the entire explanation for all that is. This system likewise has proven to be unable to stand up to critique.

I often get asked, so do you believe in evolution? The answer is yes, because I own a dog that didn’t exist 2000 years ago, but that came about through breeding and mixed selection to produce the superdog (aka, the Beagle). Does that mean that I reject Genesis 1 and 2? Absolutely not, for I believe that God created. Did he use evolution? A microwave? A magic wand? Truthfully, I don’t know. I do know that God created, and that all that is exists because he willed it to be so and called it good. So, whether you believe in evolution, or a six day creation (or some combination of the two) the key is to understand that the idea that God created the universe, in whatever means, is ultimately a statement of faith. Mind you, not a statement of blind faith, but of faith in God’s goodness and continued involvement in creation as revealed through the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit. In this light, I can be a believer in science and a believer in the actions of God. There is no war between science and faith, only between scientism and religion that does not need faith.