

The Spiritual Realm

The dominant world view among the anti-religious part of Western culture is a view called “naturalism”, the belief that everything that is real can be observed in some way and explained through the forces of nature. You can't see the wind, but you can understand what causes air to move from high pressure to low pressure, and can measure its speed and duration. You can determine the effects of the difference in temperature between the polar areas and the equator and the effect of the rotation of the earth and how this influences the air flows we call wind.

Many centuries ago, winds were thought of as caused by the activity of the gods - at least in some circles. But now that we know what actually causes winds, we no longer look to some supernatural explanation - we have a reasonable explanation that can be tested in the real world. We can even forecast the winds that are coming and how strong they will be and quite often these forecasts prove to be right, or at least nearly right. So, we have discarded the old explanations about wind being the result of the activities of the gods and we now trust science to explain those things for us. Naturalism, in its most aggressive form, is the belief that scientific explanations are possible for everything that happens; we just don't have all the explanations yet, but we're working on them. The other side of that equation is that supernatural explanations are never valid; they are just an excuse, a lazy way out of the search for a true understanding of natural phenomena.

Except that they're not. Supernatural explanations are rooted in the belief that there is such a person as God, that there is such a thing as a spiritual realm and that things that happen in the spiritual realm directly affect things that happen in the physical realm of observable reality. Some of these correlations between the spiritual realm and events that actually take place around us have been studied and measured and written about, but the skeptic can always claim, “Coincidence!” or shout their mantra that we're just overlooking some naturalistic explanation.

The evidence itself points to a real connection between, for example, prayer and events that take place in the real world. The evidence of radical and lasting changes in character and behavior as a result of a spiritual conversion is also measurable to some degree. Endless accounts of life after death experiences also indicate that there is more going on than meets the eye of the scientific observer. There are lots of ways in which we can peek into the spiritual realm, but today we're going to look at some of what the Bible teaches about it.

Speaking of wind, the Old Testament Hebrew word that is translated “spirit”, the word *ruach*, is also translated “wind” or “breath”. In several places it is called “the breath of life” or it is somehow equated with life itself. Here's an example from Job 27:3,4:

*As long as I have life within me
The breath of God in my nostrils
My lips will not speak wickedness
And my tongue will utter no deceit*

And later in Job, during a speech by Elihu:

*The Spirit of God has made me;
The breath of the Almighty gives me life (33:4)*

Psalm 104 describes the dependence of all creatures on the Spirit of Creator God:

*When You hide Your face they are terrified;
When You take away their breath
They die and return to the dust
When You send Your Spirit they are created
And You renew the face of the earth (vv. 29,30)*

So that is one meaning, the basic meaning of the word *ruach* in the Old Testament. But it is much more than that. Let's look at a simple verse from Deuteronomy:

Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. (34:9)

Here, we are told that there is something called a 'spirit of wisdom' and that it was conveyed to Joshua by having Moses lay hands on him. This is not a description of some natural process or personality trait. Both the process and the result are spiritual in nature rather than something physical or mechanical. This is a different thing than saying that Joshua had wisdom or a wise outlook on the challenges facing Israel. He was filled with something, something that came to him from his leader, Moses, and something that is described as a spirit. Could it be a primitive way of describing a gift or a natural ability? I can't think of a time when Scripture relates a natural gift or ability being conveyed to someone through the laying on of hands. The word 'filled' is also a word that seems to be used often, and especially in the New Testament, of an experience that is spiritual, but with physical consequences.

Let's look at another example, this time from the book of Numbers:

Because My servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows Me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to (as one of the 12 spies) and his descendants will inherit it. (Num. 14:24)

Here the word 'spirit' is describing a person's attitude towards God, his willingness to trust God while others around him are unwilling to go along with the direction God has led them in. This indicates a character quality, a measure of a person's faith. Caleb had a different spirit than the other spies and followed God eagerly.

Another Old Testament example of a spiritual experience that became the source of a physical action:

So Yahweh stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God. (Haggai 1:14)

I began by saying that things that happen in the spiritual realm directly affect things that happen in the physical realm, and all three of these are examples of this: Joshua being filled with a spirit of wisdom resulted in him knowing how to lead the Israelites, Caleb having a different spirit than the other spies resulted in him acting differently, out of faith instead of fear, and the stirring of the spirits of all these people mentioned in Haggai resulted in the temple being rebuilt.

Now, while ‘spirit’ refers to the life force, the breath of life, in both humans and animals, it clearly means more in this and other passages. It describes emotion, conviction, courage, determination, understanding and the will to do the right thing, such as is described in Malachi 2:15 where the prophet twice says to men who were being unfaithful to their wives, “So guard yourself in your spirit and do not break faith.” (2:15,16)

The New Testament picks up on these insights into the spiritual world and builds on them. Let’s look quickly at a couple of key passages from the New Testament:

For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by Him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.

(Romans 8:15,16)

Instead of receiving wisdom, the person receives the conviction, the spiritual certainty, that they are a child of God. Instead of having someone lay hands to impart that knowledge, it comes to us by the Holy Spirit living within us. And the result is freedom from fear, and a confidence that we can call God our daddy. That’s not a natural event with a naturalistic explanation. It is a supernatural spiritual experience with a spiritual explanation. We who have trusted in Christ have received a Spirit of sonship who testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.

The most informative, and yet challenging, passage on this topic is found in Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth and I’ll read a chunk starting with 2:9:

*No eye has seen, nor ear has heard
No mind has conceived what the Lord has
prepared for those who love Him*

But God has revealed it to us by His Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way, no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit (here it gets a bit tricky, but there are two ways of reading it that are most likely) ... “explaining spiritual things in spiritual terms” or “interpreting spiritual things to spiritual people.” The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to them and they cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Cor. 2:9-14)

In this passage we're getting a bigger window into the spiritual realm. We're seeing that the Spirit of God is always searching, even into the deepest regions of knowledge, including what Paul calls "the deep things of God." Not only does the Spirit search out these depths but He reveals them, or at least some of them, to those who trust in Jesus. "We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God *that* we may understand what God has freely given us." A deep understanding and appreciation of the gospel, of our need for it and of God's willingness to lavish His grace upon us, is not available to ordinary human wisdom. It can only come to us by a revelation given by the Spirit of God. Paul is so strong on this that he goes so far as to say that the person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God. So, if we can return to the terms we started with, natural wisdom, the insight that humans have without the Spirit, is incapable of grasping the mysteries of God and His ways with us. Natural wisdom sees the Gospel as something foolish and unnecessary because natural wisdom doesn't have insight into spiritual things. It's like there's a wall there, a wall without a window to see through to the other side. And so the natural mind, the person without faith in Christ and therefore without the Spirit of God, will accept anything as equally valid to the gospel message - in the mind of that person, there is no real difference between believing in Jesus or chanting an invocation to whatever might be out there.

Faith is the door that opens understanding into the spiritual realm because faith invites the presence of the Holy Spirit who will then reveal what He wants to reveal to us, starting with the revelation that we are children of the living God.

A few weeks back I referred to a passage from Colossians which talks about Jesus as the 'visible image'. Let's go there again today:

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before God made anything at all and is supreme over all creation. Christ is the One through whom God created everything in heaven and earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see -- kings, kingdoms, rulers and authorities. Everything has been created through Him and for Him. (Col. 1:15-17)

How many of you would have thought, before reading this passage, that kings, kingdoms, rulers and authorities are invisible? This passage is referring to spiritual beings that stand behind, that influence, the people who are in positions of power. The Bible refers, for example, to the king of Tyre, but is this a man?

The word of Yahweh came to me: "Son of man, take up a lament for the king of Tyre and say to him: 'This is what the Sovereign Yahweh says: You were the model of perfection, Full of wisdom and perfect in beauty You were in Eden, the garden of God (and skipping down to verse 14) You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you You were on the holy mount of God You walked among the fiery stones You were blameless in your ways

From the day you were created

Until wickedness was found in you' (Ez. 28:11-15)

And the passage goes on from there to describe how God threw this guardian cherub from the mount of God and from among the fiery stones.

In this passage, the “king of Tyre” is a spiritual being, an angel who fell into evil and who was banished from God’s presence.

Now, let’s turn to a familiar passage regarding the nature of spiritual beings, spiritual forces, that operate in the world today:

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (Eph. 6:12)

Notice that the words “rulers” and “authorities” appear both here and in the Colossians 1 passage we read earlier. What is added in this verse are the phrases, “the powers of this dark world” and “the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”.

Paul makes it clear that these powers and rulers and authorities are not human, they are not “flesh and blood” but are spiritual in nature. Our struggle in this life is not to overcome the people around us, but to overcome the spiritual forces that are arrayed against us, especially against our faith in Christ and determination to follow Him. We will look more at the struggle we go through as followers of Jesus next week, but for now I want to focus on the concept of spiritual forces of evil.

How does the world explain the existence of evil? Think about that for a moment. Where does evil come from in the minds of those who are influencers, educators, politicians, media? Do they have a theory, a process through which evil has ‘evolved’? Usually, what I have heard, is that evil comes out of poverty and ignorance. The solution to the problem of evil, then, is really quite simple: equal distribution of goods and education. Let’s consider the theory and then the proposed solutions. The theory itself would suggest that evil doesn’t come from the wealthy and the powerful. The reality, through ages of practical experience, is that most of the evil in the world comes as a result of the words and actions of the wealthy, the powerful, the highly educated.

What do the wealthy and powerful tend to do with their wealth and power? They look for ways to increase it, and they do so at the expense of the poor and weak. That was true in ancient Egypt and Babylon and Greece and Rome and it’s true today. One of the means of gaining wealth for the powerful is through making war. There’s no other good reason for the conflicts that are going on all over the world today and which will erupt on who knows what fronts over the next few months and years. The reasons all have to do with a vision for creating more wealth and power for the well-connected few; the greatest sacrifices always made by the poor, the less well-connected masses.

Now, how are the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms described? They are described by words like kings, kingdoms, rulers and authorities. They work through the people in charge, the physical rulers and authorities. Now you see why those physical rulers, the royals and presidents and prime ministers are not the ones we are to struggle

against. Because you replace one of them and what you get may be much worse. The flesh and blood person who is in the position of leadership will lead well or poorly, at least in part depending on their spiritual ability to resist the influences of the rulers and authorities, the powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Okay, Lord of the Rings fans, one more time. Why did Tolkien choose to make the heroes of the war against Sauron the simple hobbits of the Shire? Because they had the one thing that resisted the lure of the evil force bound up in the ring - humility.

The world's solutions to the problem of evil: distribution of goods and education have not, and will not, solve the problem of evil. Evil impulses can't be educated away, nor will a higher standard of living do the trick. The whole requirement for more education is to distract us from the real causes of evil and its real perpetrators and to keep teachers busier than a termite in a sawmill.

To summarize: the Christian world view holds that there is both a physical world that we can see and a spiritual world that we can't. We believe that we can see the effects of things that happen in the natural world and the effects of things that happen in the spiritual world. We humans can have an influence on the natural world and on the spiritual world.

And I have three simple applications for you:

1. Think like a hobbit. Be humble. Don't think too highly of yourself or build yourself up by comparing yourself to others. Be content to be a beloved child of an infinitely wise and good heavenly Father and never let yourself think that you are Him.
2. Make yourself always more and more familiar with the presence of the Spirit of God who is with you always. In your prayer time, your devotional reading or your private worship, listen for His voice, allow your spirit to receive what the Holy Spirit is saying to you. At the same time, be aware that the insights God gives you into the spiritual world, into how He has made you, into the lives and issues of the people you love the most, are His gifts to you and are meant for you to use wisely.
3. Finally, pray. A few weeks ago, David shared about his experience of responding to God's call to pray for people, especially to pray for his family. Prayer doesn't make much sense outside of the spiritual world, but it is the most powerful weapon we have to enter that world and to deal with the things that are coming against us from that world. Pray often, pray about everything and pray in reliance on the Spirit who leads us in our prayers.