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Hitting Evil From All Sides

Paul N. Anderson

George Fox University, panderso@georgefox.edu

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BY PAUL ANDERSON

EVIL IS NOT INERT. It stalks its prey as a lion seeking whom to devour (1 Peter 5:8). It harasses and molests its victims with health-denying consequences. It accuses the brethren with self-defeating lies (Revelation 12:10). It opposes all that is good, lovely, and pure; and the furthering of the Kingdom of God hinges upon its being confronted effectively.

Evil manifests itself in many forms, and the failure to take note of this fact may jeopardize the effectiveness of our struggle against it. It deserves to be hit from all sides. First, however, let's consider what evil is not—at least, not necessarily. Evil is not synonymous with people who disagree with us, or even with people who seem not to like us. Such a view represents an immature view of the world, deeming ourselves on the side of good and opposition as "bad." Life always has its tensions, and one need not interpret the common struggles of life as always being against evil.

Another thing evil is not is disappointment. While we plan and hope for the best, it doesn't always happen—at least not as we envisioned it. Rain falls on the just and the unjust, and the frustration of hopes will always be a part of human existence. One of life's paradoxes is that what we perceive as failure and gloom often turns out to be the means of God's blessing in disguise.

So what is evil; and how is it overcome? The New Testament gives us several images of what evil is like and how it is overcome by Jesus Christ. The first image is that of demons who do the work of Satan: pestering, harassing, and torturing their victims and driving them into convulsions. Jesus liberated these hostages by casting out the demons and commanding them to cease their abusive activity.

NOTICE THAT Jesus is not portrayed as praying for the victims. Rather, with divine authority He commands the foul spirits to leave and sends His disciples out to administer deliverance and healing with the same authority. Apparently the demons recognize Him and shudder at His power. And, Jesus declares that He

has come to bind the "strong man" and to plunder his household. According to Mark, this is the way the Kingdom of God advances.

Such accounts may seem odd to our modern sensibilities. We may wonder, for instance, whether the personification of evil in the Bible points to the real existence of supra-natural malevolent beings, or whether it was more of an ancient way of talking about the spiritual source of human bondage and oppression. With the advances of medical science, we may feel we know a little better than the ancients what the true source of illness is. Physiological; we tell ourselves. And yet, despite these

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advances, our appreciation of the connection between emotional and physical health has been heightened as never before. We may find ourselves considering again the degree to which spiritual disorders lie at the root of physical ones. In an age filled with drivenness, compulsions and obsessions, perhaps we need a fresh consideration of a radical means to deliverance and wholeness.

A second image of evil and Christ's victory over it in the New Testament is the light/darkness motif. While the Gospel of John mentions no exorcisms done by Jesus, it does describe His triumph over evil as the light shining in the darkness. The darkness has neither understood nor overcome the light (John 1:5). In fact, by its very shining, light "extinguishes" darkness. Jesus goes further in explaining that the reason some do not believe is that they abide in darkness. They may even refuse to come to

the light "lest their deeds be exposed." (John 3:18-21) Jesus declares later, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will by no means walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (John 8:12) By truth and light the Kingdom of God advances in John.

ATHIRD IMAGE of evil in the New Testament is structural. From the "powers and principalities" of Ephesians 6 to the Babylonian "beast" of Revelation, the followers of Christ wage warfare against human authorities who do the bidding of the evil one. William Stringfellow portrayed this "demonic" activity as any attempt to cause, or willingness to allow, the well-being of persons beloved of God to be sacrificed for the sake of an institution, reputation, or empire. The only cause that is on the side of Christ is that which redeems the individual and society and restores us to loving fellowship with God and one another.

While Christians may experience the personal renewal Jesus came to bring individually, we are still called to labor for that new Kingdom of God on earth that Jesus came to bring.

Jesus' final victory over the powers and structures of evil and darkness was accomplished through His death and resurrection. Satan and his minions need only be reminded that they are defeated foes, and the follower of Christ has won yet another battle. To ignore the powers of darkness is to be foolishly naive. But to fear them is to become their hostages. Because Christ has conquered evil from all sides, it deserves to be assaulted from all sides by His followers. This is the liberating hope of the Easter event and the powerful reality of "Christ within you, the hope of glory." Happy Easter — on April 11... and always! ■

About this issue...

In this issue, we have tried to describe various ways that evil makes itself manifest and ways that Christ has overcome it. We hope it broadens your understanding of some of the ways evil works, and strengthens your solidarity with Christ in His victory over it.