

ENGAGE

- This week we are looking at Psalm 82 as well as Luke 11:14-26.
- The topics will be: What are the *Elohim*? What are the angels? What types of angels are there? Who is Satan? What was Satan's fall? What are demons? What power or impact do they have on us?
- I will be alluding to the Luke passage but focusing on the Psalm 82 passage. I will be spending much of my time going over information listed in the first section of this study.
- My recommendation is that you in your classes focus on the Luke passage. Regarding the power distinction between Christ and the enemy. That Christ is the power and we are either with Him or against Him.

EXAMINE**Psalm 82**

We all have watershed moments in life, critical turning points where, from that moment on, nothing will ever be the same. One such moment in my own life came when I rediscovered the word *elohim*.

It was in church on a Sunday morning while still in graduate school. I was chatting with a friend who, like me, was working on a PhD in Hebrew studies, killing a few minutes before the service started. I don't recall much of the conversation, though I'm sure it was something about Old Testament theology. But I'll never forget how it ended. My friend handed me his Hebrew Bible, open to Psalm 82. He said simply, "Here, read that . . . look at it closely."

The first verse hit me like a bolt of lightning:

God [*elohim*] stands in the divine assembly;

He administers judgment in the midst of the gods [*elohim*].

I've indicated the Hebrew wording that caught my eye and put my heart in my throat. The word *elohim* occurs twice in this short verse. Other than the covenant name, *Yahweh*, it's the most common word in the Old Testament for God.

The first use of the word in this verse worked fine. But since I knew my Hebrew grammar, I saw immediately that the second instance needed to be translated as plural. There it was, plain as day: The God of the Old Testament was part of an assembly—a pantheon—of other gods.

Does the Bible say there are other gods?

Needless to say, I didn't hear a word of the sermon. My mind was reeling. How was it possible that I'd never seen that before? I'd read through the Bible seven or eight times. I'd been to seminary. I'd studied Hebrew. I'd taught for five years at a Bible college.

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What did this do to my theology? I'd always thought—and had taught my students—that any other “gods” referenced in the Bible were just idols. As easy and comfortable as that explanation was, it didn't make sense here. The God of Israel isn't part of a group of idols. But I couldn't picture him running around with other real gods, either. This was the Bible, not Greek mythology.

But there it was in black and white. The text had me by the throat, and I couldn't shake free.

I immediately set to work trying to find answers. I soon discovered that the ground I was exploring was a place where evangelicals had feared to tread. The explanations I found from evangelical scholars were disturbingly weak, mostly maintaining that the gods (*elohim*) in the verse were just men—Jewish elders—or that the verse was about the Trinity. I knew neither of those could be correct.

Wrestling with Psalm 82's implications

Psalm 82 states that the gods were being condemned as corrupt in their administration of the nations of the earth. The Bible nowhere teaches that God appointed a council of Jewish elders to rule over foreign nations, and God certainly wouldn't be railing against the rest of the Trinity, Jesus and the Spirit, for being corrupt. Frankly, the answers just weren't honest with the straightforward words in the text of Psalm 82.

When I looked beyond the world of evangelical scholarship, I discovered that other scholars had churned out dozens of articles and books on Psalm 82 and Israelite religion. They'd left no stone unturned in ferreting out parallels between the psalm and its ideas and the literature of other civilizations of the biblical world—in some cases, matching the psalm's phrases word for word.

Their research brought to light other biblical passages that echoed the content of Psalm 82. I came to realize that most of what I'd been taught about the unseen world in Bible college and seminary had been filtered by English translations or derived from sources like Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Heaven's hierarchy

The rulers of ancient Egypt were called pharaohs. In the language of ancient Egypt, the title was actually two words, per a-a, which meant “great house(hold).” The household concept for the ruling families of ancient Egypt was that of a dynastic bureaucracy. Pharaohs typically had large, extended families. They frequently appointed family members to key positions of authority in their administration. The elite staffing of the king's governing bureaucracy typically came from Pharaoh's household. They were administrators, not lowly messengers.

This concept and structure was well known throughout the ancient world. It spoke of layered authority: a high king, elite administrators who were often related to the king, and low-level personnel who served the higher levels of authority. Everyone in the system was part of the government, but authority and status were tiered.

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Several Old Testament passages describe this administrative structure existing in the heavenly realm, as well. Psalm 82 is perhaps the clearest—and perhaps the most startling. The psalm refers to *Yahweh's* administration as a council. The first verse reads:

“God (*elohim*) stands in the divine assembly;
He administers judgment in the midst of the gods (*elohim*).”

Translating the word *elohim*

You no doubt noticed that the word *elohim* occurs twice in this verse. You also probably recognize *elohim* as one of God's names, despite the fact that the form of the word is plural. In English we make words plural by adding -s or -es or -ies (rats, horses, stories). In Hebrew, plurals of masculine nouns end with -im.

While the word *elohim* is plural in form, its meaning can be either plural or singular. Most often (over 2,000 times) in the Hebrew Bible it is singular, referring to the God of Israel. We have words like this in English.

For example, the word sheep can be either singular or plural. When we see “sheep” by itself, we don't know if we should think of one sheep or a flock of sheep. If we put “sheep” into a sentence (“The sheep is lost”), we know that only one sheep is meant since the verb requires a singular subject. Likewise, “The sheep are lost” informs us that the status of more than one sheep is being discussed. Grammar guides us. It's the same with Hebrew.

Psalm 82:1 is especially interesting since *elohim* occurs twice in that single verse. In Psalm 82:1, the first *elohim* must be singular, since the Hebrew grammar has the word as the subject of a singular verbal form (“stands”). The second *elohim* must be plural, since the preposition in front of it (“in the midst of”) requires more than one. You can't be “in the midst of” one. The preposition calls for a group—as does the earlier noun, assembly. The meaning of the verse is inescapable: the singular *elohim* of Israel presides over an assembly of *elohim*.

Judging the *elohim*

A quick read of Psalm 82 informs us that God has called this council meeting to judge the *elohim* for corrupt rule of the nations. Verse 6 of the psalm declares that these *elohim* are sons of God. God says to them:

I have said, “You are gods [*elohim*],
and sons of the Most High [*beney elyon*], all of you.

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To a biblical writer, the Most High (*elyon*) was the God of Israel. The Old Testament refers to him as Most High in several places (e.g., Gen. 14:18–22; Num. 24:16; Pss. 7:17; 18:13; 47:2). The sons of God/the Most High here are clearly called *elohim*, as the pronoun “you” in verse 6 is a plural form in the Hebrew.

The text is not clear whether all of the *elohim* are under judgment or just some. The idea of *elohim* ruling the nations under God’s authority is a biblical concept that is described in some detail in The Unseen Realm. For now, it’s sufficient that you see clearly that the sons of God are divine beings under the authority of the God of Israel.

God presided over an assembly of gods?

You see why the psalm threw me for a loop. The first verse has God presiding over an assembly of gods. Doesn’t that sound like a pantheon—something we associate with polytheism and mythology?

For that very reason, many English translations obscure the Hebrew in this verse. For example, the NASB translates it as: “God takes His stand in His own congregation; He judges in the midst of the rulers.”

There’s no need to camouflage what the Hebrew text says. People shouldn’t be protected from the Bible. The biblical writers weren’t polytheists. But since Psalm 82 generates questions and controversy, we need to spend some time on what it teaches and what it doesn’t teach, along with other passages that inform us about the divine council.

Is God speaking to the Trinity?

Many Christians who object to the plain meaning of the Hebrew text of Psalm 82 assert that this psalm is actually describing God the Father speaking to the other members of the Trinity. This view results in heresy.

I’m confident you can see why—the psalm has God judging the other *elohim* for corruption (vv. 2–4). The corrupt *elohim* are sentenced to die like humans (v. 7).

These observations alone should make any Christian who cares about the doctrine of God abandon this idea. It has other flaws. The end of the psalm makes it evident that the *elohim* being chastised were given some sort of authority over the nations of the earth, a task at which they failed. This doesn’t fit the Trinity.

Are the *elohim* human?

Other Christians who see the problems with this first idea try to argue that the sons of God are human beings—Jews to be specific. Some Jewish readers (who obviously would not be Trinitarian) also favor this view.

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This “human view” is as flawed as the Trinitarian view. At no point in the Old Testament does Scripture teach that Jews or Jewish leaders were put in authority over the other nations. The opposite is true—they were to be separate from other nations. The covenant with Abraham presupposed this separation: if Israel was wholly devoted to *Yahweh*, other nations would be blessed (Gen. 12:1–3). Humans are also not by nature disembodied. The word *elohim* is a “place of residence” term. Our home is the world of embodiment; *elohim* by nature inhabit the spiritual world.

Divine beings are clearly not human

The real problem with the human view, though, is that it cannot be reconciled with other references in the Hebrew Old Testament that refer to a divine council of *elohim*.

Psalm 89:5–7 explicitly contradicts the notion of a divine council in which the *elohim* are humans.

And so the heavens will praise your wonderful deeds, O *Yahweh*,
even your faithfulness, in the assembly of the holy ones.

For who in the sky is equal to *Yahweh*?

Who is like *Yahweh* among the sons of God,

a God feared greatly in the council of the holy ones,

and awesome above all surrounding him?

God’s divine council is an assembly in the heavens, not on earth. The language is unmistakable. This is precisely what we’d expect if we understand the *elohim* to be divine beings. It is utter nonsense if we think of them as humans. There is no reference in Scripture to a council of human beings serving *Yahweh* in the skies (Jews or otherwise).

What Psalms 82 and 89 describe is completely consistent with what we see in Job 38:7—a group of heavenly sons of God. It also accords perfectly with other references to the sons of God as plural *elohim*:

The sons of God came to present themselves before *Yahweh*. (Job 1:6; 2:1)

Ascribe to *Yahweh*, O sons of God,
ascribe to *Yahweh* glory and strength.

Ascribe to *Yahweh* the glory due his name (Psalm 29:1–2).

Do these references describe a group of Jewish leaders, among whom (in the passage from Job) *Yahweh*’s great adversary appears, leading to Job’s suffering? The conclusion is obvious.

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Did Judaism evolve into a monotheistic religion?

Many scholars believe that Psalm 82 and other passages demonstrate that the religion of ancient Israel began as a polytheistic system and then evolved into monotheism. I reject that idea, along with any other explanations that seek to hide the plain reading of the text. In all such cases, the thinking is misguided. The problem is rooted in a mistaken notion of what exactly the word *elohim* means.

Since *elohim* is so often translated as “God,” we look at the Hebrew word the same way we look at capitalized G-o-d. When we see the word “God,” we instinctively think of a divine being with a unique set of attributes—omnipresence, omnipotence, sovereignty, and so on. But this is not how a biblical writer thought about the term. Biblical authors did not assign a specific set of attributes to the word *elohim*. That is evident when we observe how they used the word.

The biblical writers refer to a half-dozen different entities with the word *elohim*. By any religious accounting, the attributes of those entities are not equal.

Yahweh, the God of Israel (thousands of times—e.g., Gen. 2:4–5; Deut. 4:35)

The members of *Yahweh*’s council (Psa. 82:1, 6)

Gods and goddesses of other nations (Judg. 11:24; 1 Kgs. 11:33)

Demons (Hebrew: *shedim*—Deut. 32:17)

The deceased Samuel (1 Sam. 28:13)

Angels or the Angel of *Yahweh* (Gen. 35:7)

Elohim does not imply polytheism

The importance of this list can be summarized with one question: Would any Israelite, especially a biblical writer, really believe that the deceased human dead and demons are on the same level as *Yahweh*? No.

The usage of the term *elohim* by biblical writers tells us very clearly that the term is not about a set of attributes. Even though when we see “G-o-d” we think of a unique set of attributes, when a biblical writer wrote *elohim*, he wasn’t thinking that way. If he were, he’d never have used the term *elohim* to describe anything but *Yahweh*.

Consequently, there is no warrant for concluding that plural *elohim* produces a pantheon of interchangeable deities. There is no basis for concluding that the biblical writers would have viewed *Yahweh* as no better than another *elohim*. A biblical writer would not have presumed that *Yahweh* could be defeated on any given day by another *elohim*, or that another *elohim*

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(why not any of them?) had the same set of attributes. That is polytheistic thinking. It is not the biblical picture.

How the biblical writers talk about *Yahweh*

We can be confident that *Yahweh* stands above the *elohim* by once again observing what the biblical writers say about him—and never say about another *elohim*. The biblical writers speak of *Yahweh* in ways that telegraph their belief in his uniqueness and incomparability:

“Who is like you among the gods [*elim*], *Yahweh*?” (Exod. 15:11)

“What god [*el*] is there in the heaven or on the earth who can do according to your works and according to your mighty deeds?” (Deut. 3:24)

“O *Yahweh*, God of Israel, there is no god [*elohim*] like you in the heavens above or on the earth beneath” (1 Kgs. 8:23).

“For you, O *Yahweh*, are most high over all the earth. You are highly exalted above all gods [*elohim*]” (Psalm 97:9).

Biblical writers also assign unique qualities to *Yahweh*. *Yahweh* is:

All-powerful (Jer. 32:17, 27; Pss. 72:18; 115:3)

Sovereign king over the other *elohim* (Psa. 95:3; Dan. 4:35; 1 Kgs. 22:19)

Creator of the other members of his host-council (Psa. 148:1–5; Neh. 9:6; cf. Job 38:7; Deut. 4:19–20; 17:3; 29:25–26; 32:17; Jas. 1:17)

The lone *elohim* who deserves worship from the other *elohim* (Psa. 29:1).

In fact, Nehemiah 9:6 explicitly declares that *Yahweh* is unique—there is only one *Yahweh* (“You alone are *Yahweh*”).

The *elohim* are spiritual inhabitants

The biblical use of *elohim* is not hard to understand once we know that it isn’t about attributes. What all the figures on the list have in common is that they are inhabitants of the spiritual world. In that realm there is hierarchy.

For example, *Yahweh* possesses superior attributes with respect to all *elohim*. But God’s attributes aren’t what makes him an *elohim*, since inferior beings are members of that same group. The Old Testament writers understood that *Yahweh* was an *elohim*—but no other *elohim* was *Yahweh*. He was species-unique among all residents of the spiritual world.

This is not to say that an *elohim* could not interact with the human world. The Bible makes it clear that divine beings can (and did) assume physical human form, and even corporeal flesh,

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for interaction with people, but that is not their normal estate. Spiritual beings are “spirits” (1 Kgs. 22:19–22; John 4:24; Heb. 1:14; Rev. 1:4). In like manner, humans can be transported to the divine realm (e.g., Isa. 6), but that is not our normal plane of existence. As I explained earlier, the word *elohim* is a “place of residence” term. It has nothing to do with a specific set of attributes.

Are the *elohim* real?

Those who want to avoid the clarity of Psalm 82 argue that the gods are only idols. As such, they aren’t real. This argument is flatly contradicted by Scripture. It’s also illogical and shows a misunderstanding of the rationale of idolatry.

With respect to Scripture, one need look no further than Deuteronomy 32:17:

“They [the Israelites] sacrificed to demons [*shedim*], not God [eloah], to gods [*elohim*] whom they had not known.”

The verse explicitly calls the *elohim* that the Israelites perversely worshiped demons (*shedim*). This rarely used term (Deut. 32:17; Psa. 106:37) comes from the Akkadian *shedu*. In the ancient Near East, the term *shedu* was neutral; it could speak of a good or malevolent spirit being.

These Akkadian figures were often cast as guardians or protective entities, though the term was also used to describe the life force of a person. In the context of Deuteronomy 32:17, *shedim* were *elohim*—spirit beings guarding foreign territory—who must not be worshiped.

Israel was supposed to worship her own God (here, eloah; cf. Deut. 29:25). One cannot deny the reality of the *elohim/shedim* in Deuteronomy 32:17 without denying the reality of demons. Scholars disagree over what kind of entity the *shedim* were. But whatever the correct understanding of *shedim* might be, they are not pieces of wood or stone.

Scholars of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians know that, in the apostle’s warning to not fellowship with demons (1 Cor. 10:20), Paul’s comments follow the history of the Israelites described in Deuteronomy 32. He warns believers against fellowship with demons on the basis of Israel’s failure in worshiping other gods. Paul uses the word *daimonion*, one of the words used frequently in the New Testament for evil spiritual beings, to translate *shedim* in Deuteronomy 32:17. Paul knew his Hebrew Bible and didn’t deny the reality of the *shedim*, who are *elohim*.

Luke 11:14-28

When you’re trying to get to know a person, it is revealing to see how they respond under pressure. Years ago, when my former church was interviewing candidates for principal of our church’s elementary school, one of the things I sought to find out from the candidate’s references was how he handled anger. How did she respond under crisis?

The common view of “gentle Jesus, meek and mild” is flat and two-dimensional. It misses the Jesus under fire that we see in this week’s lesson. What emerges is a direct and penetrating response to

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slander. Like it or not, you are faced with confrontations, too. How do you respond under pressure? How to do that is what we disciples are seeking to learn from Jesus.

Before we examine the incidents in detail, let me give you the big picture of what is going on here. I considered breaking these verses up into several lessons, but I think they're better understood as a whole -- if you can keep the lines of Luke's presentation clearly before you.

Jesus casts out a demon, and most of the crowds marvel, but:

- Some accuse him of driving out demons by the power of Satan himself (dealt with in 11:17-28)
- Others ask for a sign from heaven (dealt with in 11:29-32)

He answers the accusation of casting out demons by the power of Satan in three ways: (11:17-22)

- If Satan were attacking his own forces, he would soon defeat himself.
- Jewish exorcists (of whom his opponents approved) would be subject to the same criticism.
- Jesus casts out demons by overpowering Satan who is oppressing the person.

Then he states emphatically that there is no place for neutrality in the war against Satan (11:23-28)

- Those who don't gather with Jesus, scatter
- Unless the "house" of an exorcised person is inhabited and guarded, it will fall to demonic forces again.
- Freedom from Satan is only possible through obedience to God's word.

First, let's examine how Jesus handles the slanderous charge that he is empowered by Beelzebub.

Exorcising the Mute Man (11:14)

"Jesus was driving out a demon that was mute. When the demon left, the man who had been mute spoke, and the crowd was amazed." (11:14)

This conflict began in the context of Jesus' everyday ministry of preaching the Word, healing the sick, and casting out demons where necessary. On this occasion Jesus heals a man who is mute, that is, he is unable to speak (and, according to Matthew 12:22, he is also blind). As I discussed in my essay "Demonization and Deliverance in Jesus' Ministry" <http://joyfulheart.com/scholar/demon.htm>, all disease is not due to demons, but some may be. In this case, Jesus discerns that the root of these physical symptoms is spiritual, not organic. And so he expels from the sufferer the demon that has caused his affliction. The word translated "driving out" is Greek *ekballo*, "to throw out, cast out," the common word used for casting out demons from afflicted persons. In English, we sometimes use the word "exorcism" to describe this process.

When the mute man -- now healed -- speaks, the crowds are amazed. Most of them, that is.

Accusation of Exorcism by Beelzebub (11:15-16)

"But some of them said, 'By Beelzebub, the prince of demons, he is driving out demons.' Others tested him by asking for a sign from heaven." (11:15-16)

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According to Luke's narrative, Jesus' ministry has moved south into Judea, much closer to Jerusalem, the center of Judaism. His successes have also attracted critics. Matthew identifies them as "the Pharisees" (Matthew 12:24) and Mark as "the scribes" (Mark 3:22).

Unwilling to see God's hand in these healings and exorcisms, they present an alternate theory. They accuse Jesus of being an agent of Beelzebub, the prince of demons, and therefore able to command his minions where to go. Jesus answers this slanderous charge rather fully in 11:17-28. To those who ask for a sign from heaven (11:16) he responds in 11:29-32.

Beelzebub (sometimes spelled Beelzebul, and considered the same figure as Belial in the intertestamental literature) comes from the Hebrew Baal, "lord, husband," the name of an early Canaanite god. Bul is the Hebrew word for "house, high place, temple (1 Kings 8:13; Isaiah 63:15). So Beelzebul means "god of the high place." However, the Jews may have purposely corrupted Beelzebul -- as a sign of their disgust -- into the word into Beelzebub, meaning "Lord of the flies" or "god of filth." [1] By Jesus' day, Beelzebul or Beelzebub had become the popular name for Satan, the prince of demons. The scribes and Pharisees are attributing Jesus' success at exorcism to being empowered by Satan, the prince of demons. This is gross blasphemy and slander.

Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines "slander" as "the utterances of false charges or misrepresentations which defame and damage another's reputation." [2] Last weekend the regional body of our denomination met for a special meeting to discuss new bylaws. While the debate in the meeting was civil, gossip around the edges was sometimes ugly. Instead of focusing on the issues, people imputed dishonorable motives to their opponents. It wasn't the Church of Jesus Christ at its finest.

Sometimes people will whisper some scandalous rumor about a leader. If someone tars a leader with the hint of sexual abuse or sexual misconduct -- no matter that it may be utterly false -- it is very difficult to remove the nagging doubt from people's minds. Slander is evil, and trying to identify Jesus with Beelzebub is slander at its worst. (You can learn more about gossip and slander from my article, "Coming to Grips with Gossip." <http://joyfulheart.com/maturity/gossip.htm>)

A Kingdom Divided against Itself (11:17-18)

"Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them: 'Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? I say this because you claim that I drive out demons by Beelzebub.' " (11:17-18)

The Pharisees' accusation was outrageous, but unanswered it could dog Jesus' steps the rest of his ministry. He must speak to it. He must put it to rest. There is a time to be silent, and not to answer foolish charges. This was not one of those times.

Jesus appeals to his hearers' reasoning by demonstrating how the accusation is ludicrous. He first states the universal principle that an internally divided kingdom will crumble from within. Then he extends this to the specific accusation. If Satan goes about scattering his own forces, he can't survive. The charge is foolish.

Then he moves to a second approach to undermining his critics' charge.

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Questioning Jewish Exorcisms (11:19)

"Now if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your followers drive them out? So then, they will be your judges." (11:19)

Jesus wasn't the only one in Palestine casting out demons. There were various Jewish exorcists in Jesus' day. Here is an interesting quote from Josephus describing one of these exorcisms, which Josephus attributes to knowledge handed down from Solomon's time:

"God also enabled [Solomon] to learn that skill which expels demons, which is a science useful and sanative to men. He composed such incantations also by which distempers are alleviated. And he left behind him the manner of using exorcisms, by which they drive away demons, so that they never return; and this method of cure is of great force unto this day; for I have seen a certain man of my own country, whose name was Eleazar, releasing people that were demoniacal in the presence of Vespasian, and his sons, and his captains, and the whole multitude of his soldiers. The manner of the cure was this: He put a ring that had a Foot of one of those sorts mentioned by Solomon to the nostrils of the demoniac, after which he drew out the demon through his nostrils; and when the man fell down immediately, he abjured him to return into him no more, making still mention of Solomon, and reciting the incantations which he composed...."[3]

Another (non-Jewish) prescription for exorcism with clear Jewish affiliations begins this way:

"For those possessed by daemons, an approved charm by Pibechis. Take oil made from unripe olives, together with the plant mastigia and lotus pith, and boil it with marjoram (very colourless), saying: '*Joel, Ossarthiomi, Emori, Theochipsoith ... come out of such a one....*' "[4]

Luke also makes note of non-Christian exorcists in Luke 9:49 and Acts 19:13-16, who had, in both instances, incorporated Jesus' name into their incantations.

Jesus says to his critics, "Now if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your followers drive them out? So then, they will be your judges" (11:19). In other words, he is arguing, If I am casting out demons by Beelzebub, the same could be said of your own disciples (literally, "sons"). First, Jesus displays his critics' flimsy logic and then turns their charge against exorcists of their own religious sect. But then he goes a step further.

Deliverance by the Finger of God (11:20)

"But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you." (11:20)

Jesus is saying, If you're wrong, and God, not Beelzebub, is empowering me, then the kingdom of God has come to you and you are too blind to see it.

The term "finger of God" is a powerful term. (Matthew uses the term, "Spirit of God.") The expression "finger of God," which has a similar meaning to the term "hand of God," comes from the time when God's action was powerfully seen during the Exodus and the giving of the Law before Mt. Sinai: "When the Lord finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the Testimony, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God" (Exodus 31:18). But perhaps Jesus' reference is to the Pharisees' hardness of heart as he compares them to Pharaoh. After the Third Plague on Egypt, the Plague of Gnats, "The magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God.' But Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not listen, just as the Lord had said" (Exodus 8:19).

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My dear Christian friend, when the power of God is at work through you and your ministry, as small and insignificant as it may seem to you, it is "the finger of God" writing in history and extending the kingdom of God one step further. Your work and ministry can be evidence to those who will see that the kingdom of God has come to them.

Overcoming the Strong Man (11:21-22)

"When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up the spoils." (11:21-22)

If Jesus isn't casting out demons by Beelzebub, then how is he doing it? Jesus continues with a parable to explain the spiritual dynamics of what is going on when he casts out demons.

He tells a brief story of a wealthy man whose home (Greek *aule*, "house, palace")[5] contains rich treasures, so rich that he hires armed guards to protect it. No one is able to break in by stealth, only by greater strength. But when a stronger force attacks the armed guards and disarms them, then the house's contents can be looted.

This is a curious parable if we were to allegorize it by making the demonized man correspond to the "house" that is guarded by its owner, the prince of demons. But I don't think this is an allegory. It is a story about of superior force overcoming armed might, pure and simple. The point of the story applies to Jesus and Beelzebub, not every detail.

The point is that Jesus casts out demons by his superior power, not by the lesser power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons. Jesus' power is far superior to Satan's! Hallelujah.

Gathering with Jesus (11:23)

"He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters." (11:23)

In this context of spiritual conflict between demonic powers and Jesus' kingdom power there can be no neutrality.

We live in a world where agnosticism is sometimes considered a respectable alternative between faith in Christ and atheism. It is in the middle. It is neutral. It doesn't say I don't believe. It doesn't say I do believe. It says, I don't know.

But Jesus makes it clear that when mighty forces are arrayed against each other, individuals must take sides or they'll be crushed in the battle. The strong man, the prince of demons has taken a stand against the Anointed One and the angelic armies of heaven. The war has been won; the enemy has been dealt a decisive blow at Calvary. But there is an ongoing battle with frequent skirmishes, and it is fatal to be caught in No Man's Land. The final battle is to come: Armageddon (Revelation 16:16; 20:7-10).

Jesus' words in 11:23 pose a two-fold question:

- Are you with Jesus?
- Are you gathering with him?

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You cannot straddle the fence. You are either with Jesus fully, or you oppose him and effectively scatter the harvest that he is trying to gather.

Demons Returning to their Former Home (11:24-26)

Now Jesus relates a narrative, a parable of sorts, a story explaining the necessity for commitment vs. neutrality.

"When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first." (11:24-26)

Before we look at the whole, let's consider a few of the words. The word translated "evil spirit" (NIV) is better translated "unclean spirit" (KJV), since the adjective *akathartos* means "impure, unclean." It is used of "unclean" foods that could not be eaten by the Jews, as well as everything connected with idolatry. A moral sense of the word includes the ideas of "unclean, impure, vicious," and is especially used to describe demonic spirits.[6] In this case the demon "has gone out" of the man. The Greek word is *exerchomai*, "to go out," which doesn't indicate whether the demon was forced to leave or not, but just that he left.

The phrase "goes through arid places seeking rest" reminds us of Old Testament references to demons living in deserted cities.

"And thorns shall spring up in their cities, and in her strongholds; and they shall be habitations of sirens, and a court for ostriches. And demons shall meet with satyrs[7], and they shall cry one to the other: there shall satyrs rest, having found for themselves a place of rest." (Isaiah 34:14, Septuagint)

"For from the Everlasting fire will descend upon [Jerusalem's enemies] for many days, And she will be a habitation of demons for a long time." (Baruch 4:35)

"Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!
She has become a home for demons
and a haunt for every evil spirit,
a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird." (Revelation 18:2)

Leon Morris observes, "Desert places were popularly regarded as the haunts of evil spirits and Jesus pictures this one as wandering through such waterless regions without finding rest." [8] But Marshall notes, "The point is perhaps not the dryness but the absence of men from such desert regions, so that the demon cannot find anywhere to rest." [9] The Greek word *anapausis* can mean both "rest" and "a resting place." [10] Whatever the significance of the desert places, the demon doesn't find a comfortable abode, so he decides to return his former "house" (Greek *oikos*). The demon thinks of the person as a dwelling place.

"When it arrives, it finds the house swept clean and put in order" (11:25). The phrase "put in order" is the primary meaning of *kosmeo* (which can also mean "adorn, decorate," and from which we derive our word "cosmetics"). [11] Without the demon's presence the man's life has become more regular and organized --

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but still empty. Matthew 12:44 explicitly tells us that the house is empty, Greek *scholazo*, "of a place or house 'be unoccupied, stand empty.'" [12]

The point of the parable is to illustrate Jesus' saying, "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters" (11:23). There can be no neutrality in the spiritual battle. Emptiness, lack of commitment are not enough.

The father of one of our church's elementary school students ran a radiator shop. He was a profane man and a heavy drinker. Occasionally he would come to church when his daughter's class was in a program. One day he called me up to tell me that he had stopped smoking and stopped drinking. I rejoiced with him. But I waited for the other shoe to drop. He had turned away from two evils, but what was he filling his life with now? Unfortunately, he didn't seem to have turned to Jesus. I've often thought of him when reading this parable. Just getting your life cleaned up and more orderly is a good thing -- but inadequate. To be empty is to be vulnerable. Without the strong power of Jesus in our lives we set ourselves up to be oppressed by evil in some other form.

Emptiness represents here lack of commitment, lack of purpose, lack of focus. There can be no spiritual neutrality.

The Blessing of Hearing and Obeying (11:27-28)

Our passage concludes with one more word about neutrality and commitment.

"As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, 'Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.'

He replied, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.' " (11:27-28)

There is a woman in the crowd who is enthralled with this young rabbi. I imagine her as old enough to be his mother. Such a wonderful teacher! Such a spiritual man, he is! Wouldn't she be proud if Jesus were HER son! She calls out, "Blessed is the mother who bore you and nursed you." Everyone hears her words. A ripple of comment moves over the crowd. Some smile, some frown. How will Jesus reply? they wonder.

Jesus has a wise word to give in response: "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (11:28). You would expect Jesus to pause and say something kind about his mother Mary. Indeed she WAS blessed by God, and Luke has pointed out Mary's blessedness in her cousin Elizabeth's words, "Blessed are you among women..." (1:42).

But instead Jesus says the unexpected, a very pointed and almost sharp word that underlines the theme he has been following in today's teaching -- that only full commitment will suffice. Neither neutrality, nor emptiness, nor family relationship mean anything here.

On another occasion Jesus has made nearly the same point:

"Now Jesus' mother and brothers came to see him, but they were not able to get near him because of the crowd. Someone told him, 'Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.'

He replied, 'My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice.' " (Luke 8:19-21)

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Jesus' disciples do not follow out of family allegiance or pride -- though Jesus' mother and brothers did follow him, and his brother James rose to prominence in the Jerusalem church. Jesus' disciples are those who have committed themselves to hearing God's word through his Son, and obeying it.

Examining Motivations

Why do you follow Jesus, my dear friend? Is it history or geography or family tradition? Those are good reasons to follow Jesus, and I began my walk with Christ partly because my brother had preceded me by two weeks in surrendering his life to Christ. I had parents and grandparents praying for me and a family heritage of ministry and church service. Family tradition to follow the Lord is a good and powerful thing. Joshua declares, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15). But it is not adequate for disciples. In this lesson Jesus makes the strong point that Jesus' kinsmen are those who listen ever so closely to discern God's voice and word, and then put it into practice. Are you this kind of kinsman? You must be.

And there's a similar lesson for us: We must either stand with Jesus or against him, there is no non-aligned position. "Middle-of-the-road" Christianity won't cut it. On the day we are studying about, Jesus is confronted and questioned and maligned. And if they do it to our Lord and Master, we can expect them to do it to us. We must be able to give an answer when called upon (1 Peter 3:15). The prince of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) seeks to neutralize our witness, to silence our testimony, to undermine our credibility. But we cannot compromise our stand. We must stand with Jesus and help him in his harvest work, or by our example we help to scatter and weaken Jesus' church and kingdom.

Finally, this passage reminds us that Jesus is the Stronger Man who has the power to overcome the lies, enticements, and deception of the enemy that you and I face. In Him is power for you for deliverance. He is your Stronger Man. He is your Savior. He is your Rescuer. He is the power of God working in you who believe (1 Thessalonians 2:13; Phil 2:12-13). As the Apostle John put it many years later, "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." (1 John 4:4)

Yes, there are days that we, like Jesus, will be scorned by critics and enemies. But, praise God, we have a great hope while our critics have none. You may have been battered, but don't give up, my friend. Let me leave you with the encouragement that I find in the Apostle Paul's words:

"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58, RSV).

QUESTIONS

1. When Jesus is accused of being empowered by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, what are the three points of his answer? Put these points in your own words.(11:17-18a) (11:18b-20)(11:21-22)
2. What in scripture indicates that the spiritual warfare against Satan and his demons is not an even match?
3. What verse in this passage indicates this?
4. In Luke 9:49-50 Jesus says "Whoever is not against you is for you." But in 11:23 he says "He who is not with me is against me." Are these statements in conflict?

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5. What are we to learn from each?
6. What are the dangers of seeing Christianity mainly in terms of family pride and responsibility, like the woman in the crowd? (11:27-28)
7. Why do you think Luke included the story of the mute demon cast out of the man in his Gospel narrative?
8. What is it trying to teach us?
9. Why do you think Jesus was compared to Beelzebul?
10. Why did Jesus include the analogy of a demon being cast out and returning with more?
11. What was he trying to teach those around him?
12. How would you describe the main point(s) of the conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan in your own words?

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