# Matthew 2 January 7, 2018

*The Invisible Battle, Part 1*

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For several months, I have been thinking that the sermon series after Christmas should be about spiritual warfare – looking at scriptures in Ephesians and in James and many other places where we receive teaching from God about it. So many followers of Jesus don’t know or understand the reality of the invisible battle that is going on around us all the time. So, of course with Advent and Christmas as full as it is, it wasn’t until this past week that I took several days away from the office to stop, to read, to pray, to listen, and to plan. I had time to look at the whole picture of our church life from now until after Easter. What a blessing! What came out of that time was a bit of a change to the direction I thought we were headed. Here’s why:

In the church year, we have a precious period from Christmas to Ash Wednesday to focus on the life of Jesus before we start the journey to the cross. Of course, we can (and we do) focus on Jesus all year long, but there is this very precious time right now that should be protected and cherished. So, to focus on spiritual warfare the way I was thinking about it from now to Ash Wednesday (which is only 6 weeks away on Valentine’s Day) wasn’t quite right. Instead, we are going to focus on specific instances when Jesus was involved in the invisible battle and what we can learn from those encounters to heighten our awareness and strengthen our resolve to be victorious in the battle every single day.

Let’s pray: *Heavenly Father, sovereign Lord, protecting Shepherd, Savior and Friend, thank you for hearing our cries for help. Thank you for always giving us strength and wisdom for the battles we face. Thank you for your Word that shows us the right path and directs our feet to stay on it. As we attend to your Word now, grant us ears to hear, minds to comprehend, hearts to receive, and eyes to see beyond the visible. All this we pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.*

The foundational passage in the Bible we often turn to when thinking about spiritual warfare is Ephesians 6:10-12. Let’s take a look at it together.

***10****Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might.****11****Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.****12****For our struggle is not against [*[*a*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians%206%3A10-12&version=NRSV;NASB;ESV#fen-NASB-29350a)*]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.*

Warfare is engagement in the activities involved in war or conflict. Our military, no matter where they are or what branch of the military they are in, are engaged in the activities involved in winning the war on terror. Those activities could be boots on the ground or combat training or mechanical work or cyber engineering (there is a position called cyber warfare engineering officer). Warfare is engagement. **Spiritual** warfare is engagement in the activities involved in the war between good and evil. The ways of God vs. the ways of Satan.

There is an invisible world right here around us that is as real as the visible world around us. Francis Schaeffer wrote in his book True Spirituality that there is a certain content that fits in the material world – flesh and blood, trees and flowers, the sky and planets – and a parallel content that fills the spiritual world – souls, angels, demons, and all sorts of activity among them. Schaeffer suggested that there is an arch, a connection, between these two realities, and we live in that connection.

The Bible is very clear about the existence of angels, Satan, and demons and that they are organized by role, power, and rank. As believers, we cannot realistically dismiss the truths about the invisible realm inhabitants given us in Scripture without dismissing the whole of Scripture itself. We don’t want to do that, do we? C.S. Lewis wrote, *“There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.”* One of the most celebrated victories on the dark side is the victory of disbelief. Just think about it – if after 9/11 we didn’t take any precautions to protect ourselves at a higher level because we refused to believe we would ever be attacked again – we would be fools. You know the saying, “Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.” So if you are one of those people who struggle believing in the existence of the invisible realm, ask the Holy Spirit right now to open your mind. Open your mind to the possibility of the invisible world filled with angels doing God’s work on our behalf and fallen angels (demons) doing the work of the highest ranking fallen angel, Satan. Open your mind to the possibility and get to reading your Bible. Ask God to help you see so that you can be aware and readied for the battle we all face.

When Jesus was just a baby he was already involved in spiritual warfare. Gratefully he had people around him who were aware of it and who listened to God’s instructions to keep him safe. Let’s read from Matthew 2:

*Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying,****2****“Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.”****3****When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.****4****Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.****5****They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet:*

***6****‘And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah,  
Are by no means least among the leaders of Judah;  
For out of you shall come forth a Ruler  
Who will shepherd My people Israel.’”*

***7****Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared.****8****And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him.”****9****After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was.****10****When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.****11****After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they [*[*e*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+2&version=NASB#fen-NASB-23181e)*]fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.****12****And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way.*

***13****Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him.”* ***14****So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt.****15****He remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called My Son.”*

***16****Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi.****17****Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled:*

***18****“A voice was heard in Ramah,  
Weeping and great mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children;  
And she refused to be comforted,  
Because they were no more.”*

***19****But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord \*appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, and said,****20****“Get up, take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child’s life are dead.”****21****So Joseph got up, took the Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel.****22****But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Then after being warned by God in a dream, he left for the regions of Galilee,****23****and came and lived in a city called Nazareth. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets: “He shall be called a Nazarene.”*

First, I want us to see God’s obvious work in this part of our history.

1. The star. This was no ordinary event. Bringing forth an extraordinary star to lead these men from the East directly to Jesus and his parents was God’s doing. *“…went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was.”* This was the work of God.
2. Four different prophecies were fulfilled in these encounters, words written about 700 years before Jesus was born.
   1. Micah 5:2,4, *“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.* ***4****And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth;* ***5****and he shall be the one of peace.”*
   2. Hosea 11:1, *“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”* Joseph had to have taken Jesus to Egypt to fulfill these words.
   3. Jeremiah 31:15 is the prophecy about the mothers weeping for their sons who had been murdered by Herod’s edict.
   4. Isaiah 11:1, *“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.”* Commentaries state that the town of Nazareth took its name from this prophecy, and Jesus fulfilled it in several ways including having come from Nazareth.
3. God gave the wise men instructions in a dream not to go back to Herod.
4. Angels were part of the story warning Joseph to move to Egypt and instructing him to go back to Israel. That’s God’s army at work.
5. The obedience of Joseph was a beautiful picture of God at work in a man, wasn’t it? He was acutely aware of the battle for the life of the Child, and so he was always ready to do what God called him to do to protect that which had been entrusted to him.

We can see the many, many ways God was at work protecting his Son, our Savior in this portion of our history as followers of Jesus Christ. Now, let’s consider the spiritual warfare, the invisible battle that was going on.

First let’s remember the verse from Ephesians, *“Our battle is not against flesh and blood.”* Herod was not the real enemy, Herod was the tool of the enemy, easily picked up to use because of his sinful insatiable quest for power. He was used in Satan’s effort to try to destroy the One whom he knew would ultimately be victorious over him, using manipulation, deception, and murder. Herod wasn’t acting when he appeared to be interested in the child who had been born. He *was* interested, but not because he wanted to worship him. He wanted to destroy him, but he was deceptive in his interaction with the wise men telling them that he wanted to know when they found the baby so that he too could go to worship him. These are some of Satan’s favorite weapons of warfare: deception, manipulation, and murder. (By murder I’m not only speaking of taking someone’s life, including one’s own life, but according to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount it could be referring to hatred and unresolved, burning anger.)

How does Satan keep people from coming to faith in Christ? Deception. Manipulation. Murder. He twists the truth, he blinds their eyes, and he kills the hope that we were born with – a hope for a reconnection with our Creator.

How does Satan keep people of faith from growing in their faith? Deception. Manipulation. Murder. He plants apathy. He waters apathy. He fertilizes apathy. He tends it like nothing else. Because he knows that if we stop caring about whether we are growing or not, we won’t grow, we won’t take up the weapons of warfare, and not only will we not be of use to God to build His kingdom, our apathy could be used by Satan to build his kingdom. Apathy is a lack of motivation, a lack of enthusiasm, a lack of interest. Apathy = Indifference. He deceives us by convincing us that we don’t really need to grow in our faith. Faith is faith. We have a ticket to Heaven through Jesus, so what’s the point of putting any extra effort into it? He manipulates us by pointing out how tired we are. Sunday is the only day we have to sleep in or get caught up on stuff around the house. We can miss going to small groups and worship. We’ll get caught up and then we’ll be good to go for next Sunday. He dispenses murderous tactics, little by little, in killing our desire to grow, to serve, to converse with other believers about our struggles and our victories…

What if the travelers from the East had become apathetic and hadn’t paid attention to the message God gave them in a dream and instead gone back to tell Herod where Mary, Joseph, & Jesus were staying? And what if Joseph hadn’t been tuned into the reality of spiritual warfare in the life of his family? What if he had gotten all big-headed when the magi from the East came to worship Jesus with their expensive gifts, thinking (apathetically) that nothing could go wrong now – after all, he held the Savior of the world in his arms?! Everything was fine.

What if we aren’t paying attention to God’s work in the world, in our families, and in our own hearts? Could we find ourselves being deceived and manipulated by the *“rulers, the powers, the world forces of darkness, and the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places?”* You betcha. And the next thing we know we are embroiled in battles with people we love. We don’t talk to our brother. We won’t answer phone calls from our sister. We don’t help that neighbor anymore. We won’t serve in the church if ‘he’ is going to be there. In fact, one of the most pervasive victories Satan and his demons have is pulling people out of church altogether. *“They’re nothing but a bunch of hypocrites anyway,”* they declare. What a bunch of deceptive, manipulative, murderous malarkey! The Church is not perfect, to be sure, but in most houses of Christian worship, by God’s grace, we hear, we listen, and we increasingly submit to God’s Truth in our lives. We fail, but victory comes every time we get back up and keep walking on the path God has laid before us. Victory comes every time we hear those deceptive, manipulative, murderous thoughts and we stand against them and say, “NO! I am God’s adopted son. I am God’s adopted daughter. I belong to Him and His way is the way I’m going! As far as it depends on me, I’m going to live at peace with everyone. As far as it depends on me, I’m going to actively serve in his body, the Church, until the day I die. No more ‘it’s somebody else’s turn now.’ As far as it depends on me, I’m going to love the unlovable and welcome the stranger in Jesus’ name.” How? Ephesians 6:10:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His power! NRSV

Finally, brothers and sisters, draw your strength and might from God. MSG

Finally, be strengthened by the Lord and by his vast strength. CSB

That’s what the wise men did, otherwise their journey would have been called a fool’s errand. That’s what Joseph did, otherwise he surely would have folded under the pressure of having to protect God’s Son. And that’s what we need to do. We aren’t strong enough to win the invisible battle around us on our own might. So, let’s resolve in 2018 to gain more spiritual strength than we have ever had before as we make the commitment to study His Word (in worship and in small groups), to engage in daily prayer, to find places to serve, and to listen to the counsel of the Holy Spirit whose words do not tear down, deceive, or manipulate, but build up, teach, encourage, and strengthen us for the works and the will of God. Amen.

Holy Spirit, living Breath of God, breathe new life into my willing soul.  
Bring the presence of the risen Lord to renew my heart and make me whole.  
Cause Your Word to come alive in me; give me faith for what I cannot see;  
Give me passion for Your purity. Holy Spirit, breathe new life in me.  
  
Holy Spirit, come abide within; May Your joy be seen in all I do—  
Love enough to cover ev’ry sin in each thought and deed and attitude,  
Kindness to the greatest and the least, gentleness that sows the path of peace.  
Turn my striving into works of grace. Breath of God, show Christ in all I do.   
  
Holy Spirit, from creation’s birth, giving life to all that God has made,  
Show Your power once again on earth; Cause Your church to hunger for Your ways.  
Let the fragrance of our prayers arise. Lead us on the road of sacrifice  
That in unity the face of Christ will be clear for all the world to see.

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