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BEYOND FLESH AND BLOOD

A malevolent spirit is leading many to a crisis of faith.

I used to disdain biblical talk of “invisible spirits.” No more.

Thoreau once remarked that the ancients—with their gorgons, unicorns, and sphinxes—imagined more than existed, whereas moderns cannot even imagine so much as exists. I confess that as a child of reductionist age, I used to explain away biblical talk about supernatural “powers.” I would read accounts of demon possession in the Gospels and instead see signs of mental illness or epilepsy. I could not stomach the notion of a world ruled by invisible spirits. I have changed, however, for the simple reason that my reductionist instincts failed to explain the world around me.

I saw one powerful force at work in downtown Chicago, where I

attended a church full of diversity. Homeless people would sit on the pews next to M.B.A.s from Northwestern and the University of Chicago. Some of the M.B.A.s attended a class I taught, and I knew them as reserved, sophisticated seekers after truth. Yet during the week, from a visitors’ balcony above the Chicago Board of Trade, I could watch these mild-mannered friends run around the floor, waving their arms in the air and screaming at the top of their lungs. They would later explain to me that the price of futures in pork bellies had been fluctuating wildly, and they were acting like madmen in

**Philip Yancey is a well-known Christian writer. © Philip Yancey, adapted from an article in Christianity Today.*

order to lock in speculative shares of the price of hog innards for their clients. Money exerts a most potent force on human behavior.

When Jesus encountered this same force, which drove people to build beautiful palaces on the shores of the Sea of Galilee while some in Palestine lived as slaves, he recognized it as a spiritual power and gave it the name of the god Mammon.

Worse than Beasts

I had a conversation with Bob Seiple, then president of World Vision, shortly after he had returned from Rwanda following the 1994 massacres there. Standing on a bridge, he had watched thousands of bodies float beneath him on a river scarlet with their blood. Hutu tribesmen had hacked to death with machetes almost a million Tutsis—their neighbors, their fellow parishioners, their school classmates—for reasons no one could begin to explain. Seiple seemed badly shaken.

“It was a crisis of faith for me,” he said. “I had to ask myself whether the Spirit that is in me is truly greater than the prince of this world. There are no categories to express such horror. Someone used the word *bestiality*—no, that dishonors the beasts. Animals kill for food, not for pleasure. They kill one or two prey at a time, not a million for no reason at all.” As I listened to Seiple, I too

could think of no force in nature to explain what was happening in Rwanda, only a malevolent force from the supernatural.

In his book *The Powers That Be*, theologian Walter Wink makes clear that the powers and authorities are not “some kind of invisible demonic beings flapping around in the sky, occasionally targeting some luckless mortal with their invisible payload of disease, lust, possession, or death.” Yet Wink insists that the biblical language about powers and authorities speaks to actual realities that cannot be described in the reductionist language of sociology, politics, and psychology.

Try to explain on rational grounds the mass insanity that seized Germany in Hitler’s day. Explain the logic behind the Cold War arms race, in which both sides accepted the appropriately named policy of MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction). Explain the rationale behind a Nasdaq crash, or the sudden collapse of economies in Asia and Latin America. What keeps a wealthy nation like the United States from finding shelter for its homeless population? What keeps the world from feeding the 30,000 people who die malnourished each day? The experts have no answer but “forces beyond our control.” New Testament writers agree and do not hesitate to name those powers.

In view of all the evil, exploita-

tion, and violence in the world, perhaps the Dutch novelist Harry Mulisch has it right: You can believe in God only if you believe in the devil as well.

I did not change my belief in the powers because I learned anything new about this world. I simply learned to recast what I already

knew in the language of the Bible, especially Ephesians, where Paul says, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood.” Paul admonishes that if we do not recognize the unseen forces acting on the visible world we live in, and arm ourselves accordingly, we will find ourselves woefully unprepared. □

T H E A C C U S E R R E B U K E D



Satan stands at the head of all the accusers of the brethren; but when he presents the sins of the people of God, what does the Lord answer? He says, ‘The Lord rebuke [not Joshua, who is a representative of the tried and chosen people of God, but] thee, O Satan; even the Lord that hath chosen Jerusalem rebuke thee: is not this a brand plucked out of the fire? Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and stood before the Angel.’ Satan had represented the chosen and loyal people of God as being full of defilement and sin. He could depict the particular sins of which they had been guilty. Had he not set the whole confederacy of evil at work to lead them, through his seductive arts, into these very sins? But they had repented, they had accepted the righteousness of Christ. They were therefore standing before God clothed with the garments of Christ’s righteousness, and ‘He answered and spake unto those that stood before Him, saying, Take away the filthy garments from him. And unto him He said, Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment.’ Every sin of which they had been guilty was forgiven, and they stood before God as chosen and true, as innocent, as perfect, as though they had never sinned” (Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 39, 40).