

Know Your Spiritual Enemies: Overview

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

March 26, 2023

Readings

Deuteronomy 7:1-5, 17, 21-23

¹ “When Jehovah your God brings you into the land which you go to possess, and has shaken off many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you, ² and when Jehovah your God gives them over to you, you shall conquer them and destroying shall destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them. ³ And you shall not make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. ⁴ For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; and the anger of Jehovah shall be fierce against you and blot you out with haste. ⁵ But thus you shall do to them: you shall tear down their altars, and break their statues, and cut down their wooden images, and burn up their carved images with fire.

¹⁷ “If you shall say in your heart, ‘These nations are more numerous than I; how am I able to dispossess them?’— ²¹ You shall not be terrified at their faces; for Jehovah your God is among you, a great God and to be feared. ²² And Jehovah your God will shake off those nations before you a few by a few; you will not be able to consume all of them with haste, lest the beasts of the field multiply on you. ²³ But Jehovah your God will put them before your face, and shall upset them with a great upset, until they are blotted out.”

Luke 10:17-20

¹⁷ And the seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons are obedient to us in Your name.”

¹⁸ And He said to them, “I saw Satan, as lightning, falling from heaven. ¹⁹ Behold, I give you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing whatever shall hurt you. ²⁰ Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are obedient to you, but rather rejoice that your names are written in the heavens.”

Secrets of Heaven 4431:2

[E]very nation in the land of Canaan had in ancient times meant some good or... truth of the church.... But subsequently the nations there... turned aside into idolatrous practices, and therefore these same nations also mean forms of idolatry.

Divine Providence 251:3

The wars described in the Word are those which the children of Israel waged against various nations, as against the Amorites, Ammonites, Moabites, Philistines, Syrians, Egyptians, Chaldeans, and Assyrians. And when the children of Israel, who represented the church, turned away from their precepts and statutes and fell into the evils which those nations symbolized – for each nation with whom the children of Israel waged war symbolized a particular kind of evil – then they were punished by that nation.

Introduction

- One of the persistent themes in the stories of the children of Israel is their many encounters with many different enemy nations.
 - On a given Sunday we will often focus on one battle between the children of Israel and a particular enemy but today we're going to zoom out and think about these enemy nations in a more general way.
 - What is the spiritual significance of these enemies?
 - And what can we learn from these stories about how to be kept safe from these enemies?
- We're in this season leading up to Easter and this topic of the enemy nations connects to Easter in a couple of ways.
 - One way is that the time leading up to Easter can be a time of self-examination and repentance.
 - Understanding what our spiritual enemies are and how they attack us and how the Lord can defend us against them can be a useful tool in this self-examination and repentance work.
 - I've found that reflecting on my state from this perspective has yielded different insights than other approaches I've taken to self-examination and I hope it will be useful to you in a similar way.
 - Another way this topic connects with Easter is that the stories about the children of Israel driving out the enemies from the land also represent the work that the Lord did while He was on earth to cast out demons and restore to order the whole spiritual world (*Secrets of Heaven* 6306:2).

The First of a Series of Sermons

- This sermon is going to be the first in a series of sermons on knowing our spiritual enemies.
 - We're going to work our way through it over the next few months.
 - Today, we're going to talk more generally about our spiritual enemies
 - In coming weeks, when I'm preaching at the cathedral (and when I don't have some other topic that I'd rather preach about) I'll preach another sermon about these enemies and focus on one or a couple of specific enemies.
 - We'll probably have one about the Egyptians.
 - We'll probably have a sermon about the enemy nations that were people that were related to the children of Israel – the Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites.
 - We'll have one about the Philistines, probably one about the Syrians, one about the Assyrians, and one about the Babylonians.
 - We'll look at all of the interactions with a particular enemy and see what we can learn from taking that bigger picture view.
 - Does that sound useful and fun? Come along.

What These Enemies Symbolize and Where that Symbolism Comes From

- For today, let's start by looking at what these enemy nations symbolize generally and where that symbolism comes from.
- One of the striking things that you notice if you look at the history of all the interactions that the children of Israel have with these different nations is that they're *not* all negative interactions.
 - The Egyptians, for example, do eventually enslave the children of Israel but before that they provide them with life saving food.
 - The Philistines, as another example, are this terrible enemy of the children of Israel during the time of Samson, Saul, and David but, in the time of Abraham, Abraham could negotiate peaceably with the king of the Philistines.
- Part of what we're going to be trying to understand with each of these nations is how they can go from being an ally to being an enemy and what the implications of that are to our spiritual lives.

How the Angels See the Land of Canaan

- In the teachings of the New Church, the Lord tells us some really intriguing, mind-boggling things about the land of Canaan and its significance.
 - We're taught that every single detail of the topography of the land of Canaan had a spiritual significance – every mountain and river, city and area had a spiritual significance (*Secrets of Heaven* 6516:2).
 - What's on the edge of the land or in the middle of the land has significance; what areas have a higher elevation or a lower elevation down in a valley has significance; what each and every place is named has a significance.
 - And it all fits together in one cohesive whole.
 - For an angel reading stories about the land of Canaan, they would be able to understand in a three-dimensional, multilayered kind of way how all the different meanings work together to give a perfect representation of the spiritual world (*Secrets of Heaven* 1025:4).
 - And so the symbolism of the people in the land are part of that larger symbolic picture.
 - One passage puts it this way:
 - *Secrets of Heaven* 6306
 - [W]henver the children of Israel represented the things of heaven those nations represented the things of hell; thus the land of Canaan represented every state that exists in the next life.
 - Every state that exists in heaven or in hell was represented in the land of Canaan.
- Wouldn't it be cool to be able to see and understand all of that in a holistic and integrated way?
 - And then any story we read from the Lord's Word that happened in this place or that place and involved this nation or that nation would all just make intuitive sense and have all this rich meaning and significance.
 - The teachings of the New Church tell us that this is what's there.

- And we can get glimpses of it with the help of the teachings of the New Church but I think we may have to wait till we get to the spiritual world ourselves to really see this reality in all of its beauty.
- But, even if we can't see the full picture, it's still useful to know it exists and to know that we can work towards understanding it more, bit by bit.
 - It's like there's a beautiful piece of poetry in front of us, written in some foreign language, while we're still learning basic vocabulary.
 - So we're really not appreciating the full beauty and artistry of the poem.
 - But, if we keep working at it, we'll gradually understand and appreciate more and more of it.

Symbolism Shifts Over Time

- Part of what makes it tricky for us to understand what all of these different details of the land of Canaan mean is because their meaning changes over time.
 - When the people living in a given area of the land of Canaan stopped doing what was right, the significance of that area changed in its representation (*Secrets of Heaven* 4816).
 - That might seem annoying and sort of unfair for we small-brained humans who are just trying to understand what it means – “Why can't it just mean one thing!”
 - But that's not how meaning works.
 - The meaning of different places changes for us too in our daily lives and, like the places in the land of Canaan, the meaning of places in our lives changes with the behavior of the people in those places.
 - Imagine that you went to a school and the first year you were there you had a great teacher and good friends.
 - But then, the next year, another kid came and bullied you throughout the year and the teacher didn't do anything to stop it.
 - The significance of that school in your life would shift from having a positive meaning to having a negative meaning.
 - The same sort of shift happened for areas in and around the land of Canaan.
- The Lord tells us in the teachings of the New Church that, long before the children of Israel came to the land of Canaan, there was a Golden Age, a time when some of the earliest people who lived on Earth lived in the land of Canaan.
 - They loved the Lord and they had tremendous wisdom and knowledge and they gave names to lots of different places in the land of Canaan.
 - That was the time of the Most Ancient Church.
 - We can picture the people of that time standing on a particular mountain, looking down on the view below, and feeling connected to the Lord their God and feeling grateful for the beauty of His creation.
 - After that was a time called the Ancient Church and, in that time, there were lots of different good nations who retained some of the knowledge that the earliest people had.
 - And they worshipped the Lord and loved their neighbor.
 - And they had a good symbolism.

- But, eventually they stopped following the Lord and descended into idolatry and all sorts of dark things and then their symbolism changed (*Apocalypse Explained* 700:15).
 - That same mountain that the people of the Most Ancient Church used as a place to connect with the Lord and feel grateful for His creation became a high place where people performed child sacrifice in worship of some false god.
 - And so it became the role of the children of Israel to drive those corrupt people out of the land, symbolizing the end of the age for that Ancient Church (*Secrets of Heaven* 4057).
- So now, with that background, you hopefully have a fuller understanding of what these enemies symbolize, where that symbolism came from, and why that symbolism changed over time.

Symbolism on a Variety of Scales

- The one last thing to say about this is just to make the point that this symbolism applies on a variety of scales.
 - It applies at the macro level of the land of Canaan symbolizing all of the spiritual world and driving out the nations symbolizing the work the Lord did while He was on earth to cast out demons and restore spiritual order (*Secrets of Heaven* 6306:2).
 - And it also applies on the micro level of the land of Canaan symbolizing our inner landscape and the enemies there symbolizing the various evils and falsities that we have to deal with.
 - As the Lord said, "a person's enemies will be those of his own household" (Matthew 10:36; Micah 7:6).

How Can We Be Kept Safe From These Enemies?

- Maybe that was a bit esoteric so now let's get very practical.
- What can we learn from these stories about how to be kept safe by the Lord from these spiritual enemies?
- In future sermons we'll get into specific advice for specific enemies.
 - And it's going to be fun to go through them because there's a lot of variety.
 - Some enemies attack the children of Israel; others the children of Israel go out of their way to attack.
 - Some of the enemies that they attack are just meant to be subdued; others are meant to be completely annihilated.
 - Some enemies are a problem for the children of Israel for hundreds of years; others are just a problem for a couple of years.
 - Some are small local enemies and some are international super-powers.
 - There is a big difference between a little Moabite raiding party causing some trouble for the children of Israel and the army of the Babylonian empire coming to Jerusalem to besiege it until they knock down the walls and burn down the temple.
 - So that will be fun when we dig into that but, regardless of the enemy, there is one guaranteed way to be kept safe from the enemy: worship the Lord and keep the 10 Commandments.

Don't Worship Other Gods

- There is a pattern to when the children of Israel get attacked by one of their enemies: it's almost always after they have started worshipping other gods than the Lord.
 - Breaking that first commandment – “You shall have no other gods before my face....” – usually quickly leads to breaking other commandments like the commandments against murder, stealing, and lying.
 - We might think that the different enemies might represent breaking the different commandments but that's not quite how it seems to work.
- It seems to be more that the different nations and their gods symbolize the different qualities that we might idolize and treat as more important than following the Lord and then, having that as our highest good, leads us to break the commandments.
 - Take ambition as an example.
 - It's not wrong for a person to have some ambition – to have some desire to do well and make their way up in the world to higher positions.
 - But we should not make a covenant or binding agreement with our ambition; we should not intermarry our religious selves with ambition.
 - We should not start worshipping and serving the gods of ambition and making sacrifices to the gods of getting ahead in the world.
 - If we do, we will start going astray and find ourselves justifying breaking some of the commandments in service of that idol.
 - And then we will be entirely vulnerable to attacks from the hells of people who love ambition and will do anything to get ahead in the world.
 - How do we avoid going down that kind of road?
 - It might be that the way we realize that we have started worshipping some other god is when we find ourselves trying to justify breaking one of the commandments.
 - That's a really useful red flag.
 - If an ambitious person finds themselves trying to convince themselves that it's really fine to throw their co-worker under the bus in some way, that's when they need to remember that the Lord would never want them to serve Him by doing something like that.
 - It's only false gods that would want us to treat other people like obstacles.

Other Examples of False Gods

- Let's think of some other things that we might idolize and serve that could lead us astray and open us up to attacks from the hells.
 - Another one would be to make certain people our highest priority.
 - We're meant to make other people a priority in our lives but we shouldn't ever make other people more important than serving the Lord and, when we do, we open ourselves up to attacks from the hells.
 - How many commandments have been broken in the name of doing what's right for our family?
 - Family is important but not more important than doing what's right.

- The Lord says, "A person who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And a person who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me" (Matthew 10:37).
- We need to have only one God that we worship and serve.
 - If we start prioritizing doing what we think is right for our family over everything else, then we have become idolaters worshipping other gods than the Lord.
- For other examples we can think of all the different personality traits or qualities that different people have.
 - In every case there is a place for that quality and a value and use to it and there also is potential for harm if that quality becomes our god.
 - Take diligence or industriousness – the desire to work hard.
 - That is good to a point and also can verge into workaholism and many important things can be sacrificed on the altar of workaholism.
 - How about friendliness and a desire to connect with other people?
 - That's great and we need it but, if having people like us becomes the god that we are serving, then we will find ourselves starting to justify breaking commandments.
 - Maybe lying to people to tell them what we think they want to hear.
 - Maybe gossiping about other people behind their backs.

Use This is Self-Examination

- You can try using this in your self-examination work.
 - Ask yourself, What personality traits do I seem to have?
 - What strengths does the Lord seem to have given me?
 - What am I good at? What is easy for me?
 - And then ask yourself, What is the dark side of those things?
 - Are there times when I have made those things my god instead of the Lord?
- This can be a difficult and painful line of thinking.
 - We might see some pretty gross and dark things within ourselves.
 - These nations are more numerous and mightier than we are.
 - But, like we read in our first lesson, if you say in your heart, "These nations are stronger than I am; how can I get rid of them?" You don't need to be terrified of them because Jehovah your God is among you and He is "a great God and to be feared" (Deuteronomy 7:17, 21).
 - Generally it's good to think of the Lord our God as being all loving and wise (which He is) but, when we're dealing with powerful spiritual enemies, it's also good to remember that He is the only real God and He is all powerful.
 - The hells tried to mess with Him and they lost every single time.
 - There was no demon that He could not cast out.
 - And there was no enemy that attacked the children of Israel that Jehovah could not deal with easily, if the people were following Him.

Keep This in Mind in Difficult Situations

- This is also a useful thing to keep in mind when you find yourself heading into complicated or challenging situations.
- Maybe there's a lot going on in a particular meeting that you're walking into, or at a family gathering or in another social situation.
 - And you find your head spinning with all of the different things to keep track of and manage – lots of different motivations and desires.
 - Wanting to impress people, or have people like you, or wanting to make sure that you get your way, or wanting to make sure that *that* person doesn't get their way like last time, or holding anxiety that people that you care about who are there have a good time and get what they want.
 - Lots of stuff going on.
- Try going into that situation with a prayer to the Lord in your mind and in your heart in which you say, "Lord, please help me to worship and serve You as the highest priority in this situation. Please help me to not break any of Your commandments and to notice if I'm heading in a bad direction."
 - With a prayer like that, the Lord can quiet down the clamor a bit.
 - The enemies are strong but the Lord is stronger.
 - The Lord is stronger than social anxiety.
 - The Lord is stronger than greed.
 - The Lord is stronger than our desire for control.

Conclusion

- And when we let the Lord be in charge, then the various nations have their place.
 - There is a place for our other motivations.
 - There is a place for all the different personality traits that people have.
- There are lots of beautiful promises in the Lord's Word of how things can be different for us because the Lord is in charge.
 - In the Psalms it says that the Lord will make His enemies His footstool (Psalm 110:1).
 - And in another Psalm it says, "They shall not be ashamed, But shall speak with their enemies in the gate" (127:5).
 - When we are following the Lord, we can deal with these enemies without being worried about them harming us.
 - The same this is represented by the Lord making the demons obedient to the seventy disciples in the Lord's name and by the Lord saying to them, "Behold, I give you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing whatever shall hurt you" (Luke 10:19).

- I want to end with one of these promises from the prophet Micah.
 - We said part of this earlier as our recitation.
 - Here is a bit more of it.
 - Micah 4:2-5
 - ² Many nations shall come and say,
"Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
To the house of the God of Jacob;
He will teach us His ways,
And we shall walk in His paths."
For out of Zion the law shall go forth,
And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
 - ³ He shall judge between many peoples,
And rebuke strong nations afar off;
They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
And their spears into pruning hooks;
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
Neither shall they learn war anymore.
 - ⁴ But everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree,
And no one shall make them afraid;
For the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.
 - ⁵ For all people walk each in the name of his god,
But we will walk in the name of the LORD our God
Forever and ever.
- Amen.

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.