

Biblical Thinking About Spiritual Warfare, the Devil, and the Gospel

By Riaan Strydom¹

Resources:

1. Alisa Childers' series on YouTube on *Deliverance Ministry* (should we cast out demons? On what basis do we do that?)
2. Conrad Mbewe's ministry (pastor of Lusaka Baptist Church in Zambia) and especially a sermon by him, "Are we preachers or witch doctors."
3. Books: *An Introduction to African Traditional Religion* by John Mbiti; *African Christian Ethics* by Samuel Kunhiyop, *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices* by Thomas Brooks.
4. If you are looking for a healthy church to be part of, visit the sola5 website for gospel-centered, Christ exalting, and Bible focussed churches in South Africa.
5. **GREATEST RESOURCE** – *If you forget everything I just said, please remember this and get this resource as quickly as you can.* This can literally change your life: *This is a **BIBLE**.* Read it, read it, and read it!
6. **Q&A** at the end
7. **This** manuscript will be in the description.

The title of my talk is thinking biblically about spiritual warfare, the devil, and the gospel. And how needed is that in our African context.

The great failure of Christian mission in the African continent has been to *only make a **superficial, on the surface** impact*, leading to a syncretistic faith: one in which "Jesus" is now the new **fix** or **formula** or **ritual** to **fix my poverty, my sickness, or my earthly problems** and the **pastor** or **Man of God** functions similarly as the **sangoma** who can communicate with God and solve my problems. And if I say enough "**In Jesus' name,**" or if I '**cover my children**' or '**my car**' or '**the road**' with the blood of Jesus, then I will be safe, the spirits and the problems will go away.

But that is foreign to Biblical Christianity. African Christianity has made an impact like the **tip of an iceberg**: *It looks Christian on the surface, but there is still a mountain of **pagan religion**.* And especially, **how should we think as Christians** when it comes to **spirits, demons, witchdoctors, or curses**?

Samuel Kunhiyop in his book, *African Christian Ethics*², suggested some core truths we need to know, believe, and teach if we are to **help people think biblically about spiritual warfare and witchcraft** (and I have added one of my own to his list for this talk):

¹ This talk was delivered on 9 May 2025 at Heritage Baptist Church Potchefstroom. This talk is available on YouTube.

² Samuel, Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

1. The nature of God
2. The source of suffering
3. The way of spiritual warfare

1. The nature of God

If we are to think rightly about **spiritual warfare** we need to think rightly **about the nature of God**. And the one attribute of God that is especially neglected (even in many churches today) is the **sovereignty of God**.

1. The sovereignty of God

Is God merely loving but unable to help us? Or if he wants to help us, are the spirits or ancestors just **too many** to work through in order to protect us? But if He is able to help us, then why doesn't He?

Samuel Kunhiyop writes "[Many Africans] believe that God is almighty and that Jesus is the Son of God who provides salvation through his shed blood. **At the same time**, they strongly believe that evil forces such as witchcraft, secret societies and evil spirits are ultimately responsible for all the suffering, sickness and death that afflict God's children. Thus while they theoretically believe in a supreme God, at the **practical level** their faith is dualistic. Like Manicheans or Gnostics, their understanding of ultimate reality is that there are two equal competing realities, one good and one evil."³

But what does the Bible say?

The best example is when Jesus came to the man with the **legion** of demons—about 5000-6000 or at least enough to drown **2000** pigs in the sea. If there is any battle that Jesus might have lost, it would have been with these legions of demons right?

But when the **demons saw** Jesus, they ***fell down before Him and begged Him not to punish them.***

Mark 5:10-13, "And he begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. 11 Now a great herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside, 12 and they begged him, saying, "Send us to the pigs; let us enter them." 13 So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the pigs; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the sea."

What picture do you get of Jesus? Was this a struggle? *No!* The demons are terrified of Christ. They *begged Him*, and asked ***His permission***.

³ Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics*, 376.

Also, when Jesus did not **permit the demons to speak**, they remained silent. *Jesus has control and authority over the demons and they obey Him!*

Another amazing example is that of **Luke 22:31-32**, “**Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, 32 but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.**”

Satan *demanded* to have Peter. If you were Peter what would you have wondered? “*And? What did you say?*” I have **prayed** for you that your **faith may not fail**. Satan has his purposes and Christ has His. The devil is not **ultimate**, Christ is.

In **Job 1-2**, we see the **devil** coming to God **to ask permission** to afflict Job. And God, what? *Permitted it!*

This is crucial to understand. *The devil does have great power and authority in this world. The devil does **devastating** things in this world and in believer’s lives. But no, he is not sovereign. He does not have the **final** say. The devil and **demons** can only do what God permits them to do.*

God is not **only sovereign far above** the sky in heaven, *but completely sovereign over the events which happens to us on earth.*

Dan 4:34-35, “**At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; 35 all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven AND among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, “What have you done?”**

Lamentation 3:37-38, “**Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? 38 Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?”**

We can multiply verse upon verse upon verse that shows us that God is not just **in control** of the good things, but even the bad things.

For some of you, this does not sound like good news. *Is God really that sovereign?* Then **how can I trust Him** if He is in control of the suffering I have to endure?

Because of a **second** attribute we need to emphasize,

2. The love of God

Granted, if God was only sovereign, that would not be good news, right? That would be terrifying. Unless He is also good and loving.

When **Joseph** was **sold as a slave**, experienced **injustice**, and **was forgotten in prison**, *why did all of that happen to him?* Was it because a spirit was angry with him? No. It was because God intended all of that suffering and evil in order to save His people from famine.

When Joseph could've exercised **revenge** on his brothers, what did he say?

Gen 50:20, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”

There was serious suffering in Joseph's life, wasn't there? *Many Africans are experiencing the same thing.* But God is over it all and He is good. We can trust Him.

When we look at Job, again we see that Satan had **evil purposes** in Job's life, *but God meant it for good.*

Look at Paul. *When he was suffering because of a messenger of Satan harassing him*, look at God's reply, **2 Cor 12:7-9**

“So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 9 But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

Satan intends for evil; but God intends for good. “**My grace is sufficient for you!**”

By the way, this is the only way you can really believe **Romans 8:28**: *If God is both sovereign and love.*

“**And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.**”

Even a demonic attack, *God works together for good.* Even horrific suffering, *God works together for good.* But for whom?

For those who **love God** and **are called according to His purpose**. *This is not for everyone. This is for the children of God. But we need to **disciple** people and teach them **about the God they serve**.*

What a **comfort this is for Christians!** *The devil is not in control. The sangoma is not in control. The demons are not in control. Our Father who is in Heaven is in control . . . and He loves us!*

Look at the birds of the air, look at the grass of the field: *God cares for the **birds** and clothes the **grass***. But Jesus did not die for **birds!** *He died **for people!***

Please don't misunderstand me: *Our goal is not to minimize what Satan can do. Our goal is to **show you who God is!*** As Kunhiyop wrote, "The point is not to deny the existence and power of Satan and his agents like demons and witches but to affirm the power of God over those who oppose us."⁴

But there is one more attribute of God we need to **emphasize**.

3. The presence of God

There is a good understanding of the *transcendence of God*, but not of the **immanence** of God. How close is God? Is He with me in my trials, sufferings, and problems? *Is He far above and away that, even though He loves us, and has great power, He simply cannot help us.* The **spirits** must help us, for they are close.

You see, **in many African cultures**, *they need to bring a sacrifice to **appease the ancestors** or the **spirits***. Something goes wrong, because the ancestors are angry. We need to **bring a sacrifice** to remove their anger, so that it can go well with us again.

That is what the Bible calls **propitiation**: It is a sacrifice to take away wrath.

But here is where the **gospel** **is so beautiful**: *God so loved the world that **He Himself gave the sacrifice** to take away **His own anger over our sins** in the Person of Jesus Christ.*

Romans 3:24-25, "and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, **25** whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins."

⁴ Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics*, 387.

Our biggest problem is not our poverty or our sickness or our failed business. *According to the Bible, your greatest problem is **your sin against God**. And because God is holy, just, and the righteous Judge, **He must punish you for the countless sins you have done**.*

Because there is life after death, there is an eternity waiting for each of us. Each one of you will stand before God with your **life open before Him** and you will have to **give an account** for what you have done. *But who will be good enough?* No one will.

The temptation is to say, “Ok, what **can I bring to take God’s wrath and anger away?** What must I do to satisfy His **anger?**”

But do you see what the text says? **God put forward [Jesus] as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.** We did not come to God; *God came to us!* God Himself **brought the sacrifice to satisfy His own anger and wrath.** And we **receive that gift by faith.**

And when we do, *God completely forgives us, completely cleanses us, and **adopts us as sons and daughters** into His family.*

Do you see? **God is so close that He took on flesh.** God the Son, humbled Himself **by becoming a Man.** *His name is Emmanuel, “God with us”!* By faith, He dwells in us and we in Him. His Holy Spirit is given to us **as a seal and Comforter.**

And because Christ came, you don’t need another mediator to go to God!

1 Tim 2:5, “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”

Because He has opened the way through His blood, we have **access to the throne of grace . . .** immediately! *You can just pray and God hears you.* You have God’s ear not because you were good or brought the **perfect sacrifice, but because God has loved you even while you were still a sinner.**

And now we are safe. *We are in His hands and nothing can snatch us out of it.*

Romans 8:36-39, “As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

You don't have to fear anything, because nothing can separate you from God's love. The **worse** the devil can do to you is kill you, **but all he is doing is shoving you right into arms of Jesus** to enjoy Him forever!

But here's the call of the gospel: Repent and believe! *Repent means to change your mind.* And we need to make that **call** clear to those in an African context. *That means you must leave behind the worship of ancestors.* You must turn to Christ and follow Him.

You must count the cost of following Christ! *This will probably lead to persecution from your own family.* But it is worth it, because you will belong to God's family, the church, and be **with Him forever.**

That is the call to all of you this afternoon: *Do not fear those who can kill the body, but cannot kill the soul. Rather, fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in Hell.* Repent and believe in Christ.

2. The source of suffering

Although God is sovereign over suffering, the Bible does give other, secondary reasons why we suffer. And we need to understand these in order to help people in discipleship.

1. The fall

Ultimately, we suffer and die because of sin. *Not necessarily your personal sin, but sin in general.* If there were no sin, there would be no suffering.

Rom 5:12, "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned,"

We should clarify this. Why? *Because poverty, a death of a child, or some other trial is often seen as a spirit hurting you or some other force.* But the Bible teaches that we have trials simply because we live in a fallen world. Do the devil and demons **play a role in that?** *Certainly, like we see in Job, right?* But ultimately, it is because of our sin that we suffer.

2. Personal foolishness

Suffering is not always from spirits. *It can simply be because of your own foolish decisions.* If you sleep around, the STD is not a demon, but the **consequences** of your sin and your choices.

In some circles, sin is often redefined as a demon. *A demon of anger, of lust, of whatever.* So instead of taking the **biblical medicine** of repentance and faith, *the person is told to go see the man of God or a deliverance minister* to get the demon out.

We see this in the way problems are dealt with.

*A couple comes to the “man of God” and asks for help with their **serious marital conflict**. And instead of turning to the man and asking him, “Husband, do you love your wife **as Christ loves the church?**” and to the wife, “Wife, do you respect and submit to this man as the church does to Christ?” The solution is, “Come for deliverance; come to the **prayer meeting where we will pray for your breakthrough**.*

Conrad Mbewe mentions that if the witchdoctor has given you a solution, it is seen as an act of betrayal to go to the doctor. Sadly, many **pastors** do exactly the same thing: *If you have received your healing, don’t go to the doctor, don’t take the medicine, don’t drink that pill, because then you will be doubting God’s promise.*

By the way, be very careful of churches that **always promises “breakthrough” or “deliverance” or “breaking curses.”** *If time permits, we will see that this is nothing but another form of paganism.* And see how many **pastors** who say that **you should always be healthy** wear glasses! *Why do you wear glasses if you have to be perfectly healthy?* Why can’t they restore their eye-sight by faith? [PAUSE].

We need a good understanding of the **Wisdom books** of the Bible, like Proverbs. *O what a tremendous good that one book will do to alleviate poverty and other problems* if people were to live their lives **in accord with God’s wisdom.**

3. Spirits and demons

We should teach the whole counsel of God. And it is clear that **sometimes our suffering is due to Satan or demons.**

Notice, that the Bible does not teach anything about **ancestral spirits.** *I think if people do experience something in those lines, it is demonic forces.*

But it is again important to emphasize that even the **harm and evil** the devil and demons can do to you is **always limited by God’s permission!** And if you are His child, **He will always work it for good.** If you are not His child, your greatest **problem isn’t the suffering**, but your sin! *And God has provided a way for you to be saved through His Son.*

We need to teach this clearly.

We need a **robust** understanding of the nature of God, the source of suffering, but lastly also the way of **spiritual warfare**.

3. *The way of spiritual warfare*

There are two extremes we should avoid: *The first is seeing the **devil and demons in everything**. Every time something goes wrong, every time you are sick, every time you struggle with sin, *it is the devil*. And the solution is often given of **unbiblical superstitious** ways to solve it. Sadly, when all you have is a hammer, everything will look like a nail.*

But the other extreme is equally **damaging**: *to ignore the devil and be ignorant of his plans*. Paul said that we are not to be **outwitted** by Satan's **designs / plans**. *It means we need to have a working knowledge of **what his common schemes and plans are**.*

Also, before we look at some specifics, we need to apply good hermeneutics here. *Throughout this part, I am looking mainly to the **Epistles** and the **Letters of the New Testament** to guide us how to do spiritual warfare.*

I say that because people want to go to a **story** of the Bible in the Gospels and in Acts and then say, "That is exactly how we should do it today!" *The problem is that there were different ways of doing it, so which one do you do?* Also, we do not interpret narratives this way: *When Jesus said the disciples should go and get the donkey, that does not mean we should **now go into Potch and look for a donkey somewhere**.*

Of course, the Gospels and Acts applies to us, but we should be careful of just saying, "It happened then, that's how it should be now." (Again, go and listen to the entire playlist by **Alisa Childers in the description**).

My goal is that even if you disagree with me, to **be a good Berean** and go to the **Scriptures to see whether these things are so**.

I will briefly do this part as short Q&A and I hope you find that helpful.

1. **What is the devil's ultimate goal?**

2 Cor 4:4 gives a decisive answer,

"In their case the god of this world [the devil] has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."

You tell me, what does Satan ultimately want to keep you from? ***The light of the gospel of the glory of Christ!*** He doesn't want you in this book! He doesn't want you to understand **the good news of Christ** dying for sinners on the cross. He wants to distort the gospel so that you **can stay** in his power.

But this leads to a second important question,

2. Where is the battlefield?

Look at the text again, **the god of this world has blinded . . . what?** *The minds of the unbeliever.* For unbelievers, the devil keeps them captive through **lies** and **philosophies** and **beliefs** that are contrary to Christ.

For believers, is it different?

Same book, 2 Cor 11:3, **"But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ."**

This happened to Peter.

Mark 8:31-33, "And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

Peter was probably saying, "Jesus, what is this **death** talk? No! Don't speak death over yourself! You are the Son of God! *Remember, we must reign with you when you overthrow the Romans.*

But that is the problem: *They were only thinking **of their little lives on earth** and not **the purposes of God.***

But did you catch it?

"Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting what? Your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

Where is the **main battle?** *The mind!* It is a battle for truth.

3. What are some of his major schemes?

Ultimately, the devil wants you to sin. He wants you to doubt God's word, doubt His goodness, His promises, and His faithfulness. And He is called the **father of lies** and **the tempter** and **deceiver**.

He accuses us to God and God to us.

Here is a **short list of the kind** of things the devil wants to accomplish:

Lies – through false gospels, false teaching, and **false teachers** (teachers who are money-hungry, power-hungry, who cannot be criticized, who distort God's Word, are some of the red flags of a false teacher). A major red flag is if you constantly hear, "You shall not touch the Lord's anointed," meaning you can never criticize the man of God or the pastor. That is unbiblical. (See Gal 1:6-10; John 8:44; 2 Cor 11:13-14).

Anger and bitterness and unforgiveness (Eph 4:26-27; 2 Cor 2)

Doubt (Gen 3:1-5; Eph 6:16)

Jealousy and selfish ambition which is described as demonic wisdom in James 3:14-16.

Love of money, pleasures of the world (1 John 2:15-17 with 1 John 5:19).

False signs and wonders to keep people from the truth (2 Thess 2:9-11).

Asceticism (legalism, and extra rules which God never made – 1 Tim 4:1-5 calls it the doctrine of demons).

Pride and trusting yourself instead of God (Matthew 4:1-11).

Persecution (Rev 2:10).

4. What are our weapons?

The text that most **explicitly** speaks of the Christians warfare is in **Ephesians 6** and notice something with me.

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. 11 Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. 12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

Against what must we stand? **Schemes!** Plans.

How?

“Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, 15 and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. 16 In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; 17 and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,”

Do you see *how central God’s Word is?*

The belt of truth; ***Your Word is truth!*** Breastplate of righteousness, but ***God’s Word defines for us what true righteousness really is.*** The shoes of the gospel, ***which we know through the Scriptures.*** The shield of ***faith, and ‘faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.***” Helmet of ***salvation, and again, that salvation is spelled out for us in God’s Word.***

And finally, **the sword of the Spirit** which is the **Word of God.**

We learn as much about what **Paul says** than what he doesn’t say!

He does not say, “Stand against the devil by anointing your house with oil,” or, “By pleading the blood of Jesus over you,” or, “by seeking demons in your life and casting them out,”

Now, we fight ***with the truth of God’s Word.*** We fight, like Jesus, and say, ***“It is written,”*** when attacked by the enemy.

2 Cor 10:4-5 says exactly the same thing,

“For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. 5 We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,”

2 Tim 2:24-26, “And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, 25 correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, 26 and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.”

Every time you share the truth with people, you are in a spiritual war. *We should not be quarrelsome or angry or irritated. We should be gentle, patient, all the while speaking the truth in love.*

And when the **devil lies to us**, we resist him with the truth! But we also have the **mighty weapon of prayer**.

Verse 18 of Ephesians says “praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints,”

What do you do when you feel a demonic presence? *You pray.*

Jesus Himself taught us, **“Father, deliver us from the evil one.”** We pray, and then we trust Him. Let God decide what to do. *Rest in His sovereignty, goodness, and love for you.*

It is interesting that Christ even told his disciple **most severe demons** get out how? *Through fasting and prayer!*

Do you see? We do **spiritual warfare** when we *are deeply in God’s Word, trusting it, obeying it, sharing it, and all the while praying for God to **protect us, and deliver us from evil.***

What about when someone has a demon?

*In the Bible, the only examples of **demonization** or people having a demon were **unbelievers**. And how are **unbelievers set free from demon-possession**? By the **power of Christ** through faith in Him. It was Christ who set people free. His Apostles and those He gave authority to, also could cast out demons. But for us, the weapons of our warfare are truth, prayer, and a holy life.*

If you are a Christian, then no demon can indwell you. They **can harass you, oppress you, tempt you, and influence you**. *But they cannot **live inside of you**.* Because Christ has set you free, the Holy Spirit dwells in you, and greater is He that is **in you** than he that is in the world.

I have not touched on **generational curses, binding the devil, or even casting out demons**, but Lord willing we will make a resource available soon and let everyone know :)

Two final exhortations: You must know God yourself deeply. *Go deep into the attributes and character of God.* Have a first-hand knowledge of God. *Don’t just **know things about God**, but know God yourself! Then **you will be able to disciple those struggling with these things.***

We need to stop doing **quick fixes** and only **short-term missions** which leaves people more confused and open to syncretism. We need people who are willing to **go into Africa** and **die in Africa**. People who **are willing to walk a road with people in biblical discipleship, planting healthy churches, so that people can be set free from the lies of the devil and change generations** to come.