

It's Spiritual – Part 1

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We have now heard the stories, possibly even seen graphic pictures of the atrocities committed by Hamas against the Jews on October 7, 2023. In all, over 1,200 residents of Israel were killed and another 4,000-plus wounded. Thirty Americans were among them. As I write this, over 200 hostages were taken and have yet to be recovered.

Stories are now emerging with forensic and photographic evidence of the brutality. Entire families burned alive, eyes gouged out, limbs cut off, beheadings, rapes. Pregnant mothers killed after their babies were cut from their wombs. Other atrocities so malevolent that I am too repulsed to write the words.

And now the inevitable war has erupted with explosive retaliation by Israel against the Hamas terrorists. Many more thousands will die, and inevitably there will be civilians who will perish in the war...possibly hostages too.

Perhaps you have asked yourself, "What on earth would possess the Hamas extremists to begin such a war against a much stronger force? They knew the inevitable outcome. And why showcase a massacre of such brutality, only to have the world look at them with disgust while garnering sympathy and support for Israel? I mean these are the people of the Holocaust, right? Six million of them gassed, riddled with bullets, and buried in mass graves. These are the people who have suffered persecution for thousands of years. They've been scattered to the ends of the earth by oppressive nations. Don't they deserve our compassion and respect?"

"And what about the history of overcoming odds? Weren't there prophecies in the Bible about God bringing them back to their own land? Wasn't it a miracle when God brought the fragments of these people together again in 1948 to re-form their nation? And wasn't it a miracle that they were sustained as a nation in wars where they were vastly outnumbered? Surely even a hostile or cynical world can see the hand of God upon these people, right?"

Actually, no they don't! While it's true that some who embrace Christianity recognize their spiritual heritage from Israel, the vast majority of "believers" are essentially biblically illiterate. In fact, those who attend nominal churches may actually hear messages focused not on the plight of Israel against an axis of nations that want all Jews to be exterminated but rather the "plight of the Palestinians" who have been "occupied" by Israel. And little or no thought is represented as to the suffering of Palestinians because of Hamas terrorist ideology. For many, it's now up to Israel to make peace with the terrorists.

When you see things in the natural, always ask God what is happening in the spiritual dimension. It makes no sense to see thousands of anti-Jewish protests in the wake of an unprovoked massacre of Jewish people. Where is the logic that students in New York City would take the side of terrorists as they stand in the shadow of 9/11? Some protesters literally deny that the October 7th attack even happened, let alone the atrocities. So when a hospital in Gaza was hit by a stray Islamic Jihad rocket, "the Jews did it!" No matter what the facts suggest. For them, their truth is formed by ideology, internet bloggers, and antisemitic extremists.

Remember how we scratched our heads in disbelief listening to the Holocaust deniers spin their yarn about how the Jews made up the story? It made absolutely no sense, right? Exactly! To bring it closer to home, remember the conspiracy stories about our own 9/11? "Guess who did it? It was the Jews manipulating world events for their own benefit!"

This is what the Apostle Paul described in his letter to the Thessalonians as "strong delusion." And the end times culture will be filled with it. According to this prophecy, Satan will come as "the lawless one" and because people reject the truth and refuse to be saved, "therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false." (2 Thes 2:8-11 ESV).

I can't say with certainty that we are living in "the last days." What I can say with confidence is that we are living in the days of strong delusion. Whether it's the rejection of God's creative design regarding gender, the denial that real, human babies live in the womb, or the false notion that lawlessness is compassionate, these are lies that would seem to fly in the face of logic. And they are propped up with strong pillars of delusion and defended with deep anger, if not rage.

How do we pry people loose from the bonds of such deception? Why not just reason with people, right? Ah, but these are not rational premises. Neither faith nor unbelief are functions of the intellect. I can build a strong rational case for salvation, but it won't save someone. No, without faith it is impossible to please God. Likewise, I can try to talk you out of spiritual delusion. My logic, however cohesive, is not an equal opponent against "the god of this world" who has "blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ." (2 Cor 4:3 ESV) My logic is no match for the practiced craft of Satanic deception over millennia of time. When we strike at Satan with our own wisdom, experience or knowledge, we are punching well above our weight class.

So, what is the answer? How do we save a world that seems bent on hell? How do we unravel the bonds of strong delusion wrapped so tightly around this culture? The answer is the Holy Spirit! The Spirit of God is the Great Equalizer. He is the One commissioned to us by God, for the purpose of making us equal to every task given to us by Jesus.

How do we deal with a culture that's gone mad? Out of our control? Jesus often had to deal with this question by His disciples...right up until His ascension into the heavens. They've witnessed miracles, signs and wonders. They've seen the resurrected Christ in His glorified body. Yet, as Jesus stands poised on the Mount of Olives, ready to ascend into the heavens, what do they want to know? "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6) They are still stuck with how to change their culture – namely to overthrow the Roman government.

Jesus virtually ignores their nagging question, one with which they have often equated the coming of the Kingdom of God. And He says, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by His own authority (v.7)." In other words, whoever exerts earthly power is ultimately in God's providence.

"BUT" – that's the next word. It's an incredible word! It is a coordinating conjunction that both connects and contrasts ideas. "But...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Jesus has just given them an impossible assignment. They are to preach the gospel to every living creature. They are to lay hands on the sick and expect them to recover. They are to cast out demons and set people free. Every one of these expectations is unreasonable! Why? Because they are incapable of doing any of these things. They can't save a single soul, heal a sick person, or expel demons by their own power. BUT – the Holy Spirit is the Great Equalizer. He is the One who will make them equal to every assignment from Jesus in His Great Commission!

The 120 who made it to the Upper Room were empowered with the Holy Spirit to change the culture around them by transforming lives within that culture. Their assignment was not to overthrow Rome, but to overthrow the Devil! In 1 John 3:8, the Bible tells us that Jesus came to “destroy the works of the Devil.” The Greek word for destroy there has multiple meanings including to “undo” or “release” the works of the Devil.” In that context it is similar to what John the Baptist said of Jesus as the One coming after him, “whose sandal laces I'm not worthy to untie” ...or some say “unloose.”

The point is this. Satan has people tied up in knots! They are bound by fear and held in strong bonds of deception. But Jesus came to untie the knots! To release them and set them free. How do we partner with Jesus to loose people and let them go? It will not be by our great acumen or our convincing rhetoric. BUT... “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.”

Do you feel inadequate to the assignment of God? Of course you do...because it's impossible! When the young Virgin Mary asks Gabriel how the impossibility of a virgin birth could be accomplished, he said, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” In other words, “The Holy Spirit will make you equal to the assignment God has for you.” The messenger's assignment wasn't to reason with Mary, it was to give the message and reveal the power to make it happen!

We live in a complicated, upside-down world of distorted values fueled by a corrupt culture. We can either squabble with debaters and cynics about how wrong they are. Or we can partner with the Holy Spirit to untie knots and set people free. Remember, it's spiritual! And the Holy Spirit is the Great Equalizer!

May it be said of us that “those who have turned the world upside down have come here...” (Acts 17:6 NKJV). When you live in an upside-down culture long enough, even right-side up seems wrong to those under the strong delusion. But the Holy Spirit can even upend a culture! May it be said of our city what was said of Samaria after Philip had shared the gospel and the Holy Spirit had set people free: “So, there was much rejoicing in that city.” (Acts 8:8)

It's spiritual!