

Generational Spirits?

Let me lead into this subject by sharing my personal experience with a fellowship that used the term “familiar spirit” to refer to evil spirits that (according to this fellowship) entrench themselves in the families of mankind. For example, if Grandpa and Uncle Bill and cousin Jack are alcoholics, this is the work of a “familiar spirit,” and inevitably the new generation will grow up and be victimized by the same. Or, if Great Grandma and Grandma and Dad have heart disease or Alzheimer’s, this is no doubt the work of a “familiar spirit.”

The elders of this fellowship would sometimes visit the fellowship I was part of, bringing this teaching with them—to the point that just about every sin and problem and sickness in our midst was credited to the evil working of familiar spirits. Prayer times were invariably filled with their loud declarations binding the familiar spirit in So and so, and the familiar spirit over Such and such a family, or breaking the curse of a familiar spirit over this one who was sick... and so on.

I was very uncomfortable with this but said nothing at the time; everyone in our fellowship seemed to be going along with it readily enough. But something about this wasn’t ringing true; something was wrong with this, and I realize now I should have spoken up. Because a few years later when someone in our own fellowship suggested that a hereditary disease that had surfaced in my own life could be the result of a familiar spirit, I finally went to the Word, and searched it out for myself. I am still embarrassed that it took so long for me to do this, for I discovered that the King James Version “familiar spirit” is translated “medium” in newer translations such as the English Standard Version, the New American Standard, and the New International Version. And this—if you examine the context—is the true meaning of the word. It has nothing whatever to do with evil spirits that have some kind of domain over families. A “familiar spirit” is a demon used by a medium to contact the spirit world or, supposedly, the realm of the dead. God forbade His people to get involved in this.

“Regard not them that have familiar spirits, neither seek after wizards, to be defiled by them: I am the LORD your God” (Lev. 19:31, KJV).

The ESV has:

“Do not turn to mediums...”

In spite of this commandment we discover King Saul actually doing this in a time of great crisis when he needed divine direction, but could no longer get through to the Lord because of his disobedience. So he said to his servants,

“Seek me a woman that hath a familiar spirit that I may go to her and enquire of her” (1 Sam. 28:7).

One of the servants told him of the witch of Endor, and so this desperate and deluded king, totally out of touch with God now, actually went to see her. What a sad and pitiful man he had become—once a man of God, but now actually coming to the place where he goes to a witch for counsel, ironically fulfilling a prophecy Samuel had given him when he rebelled

against the counsel of the Lord: that “rebellion *is as the sin of witchcraft*, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry” (1 Sam. 15:23).

(Other scripture references to “familiar spirit” are listed at the end of this article.)

The Hebrew for “familiar spirit” is the word “owb.” It is thought this word came into being for the spooky moaning sound that was made as the human medium came under the spirit’s control, perhaps somewhat like the sound you’d make blowing over the top of a bottle. It was the Geneva Bible revisers of 1557-1560 who, casting about for some English word to translate “owb,” and finding nothing that fit it exactly, decided on “familiar spirit.” This is because in their day—note this: in *their* day—they regarded the spirit to be most likely that of a deceased relative of the medium, and therefore a ready servant (Lat. “famulus”) of the family (Lat. “familiaris”). The medium had, in the thought of the translators, a “family” spirit at work for her. A “familiar” spirit. However, this is categorically false: the spirits of the wicked dead do not turn into demons any more than the spirits of the righteous turn into angels. Nevertheless this bit of superstitious theology introduced by the translators stuck—and now has apparently taken on an enlargement no less superstitious.

I don’t know who first started this (apparently without the Word of God) but now we have a completely new doctrine and usage around “familiar spirit.” Now, there are many who like myself, neglecting to search out the Scriptures, hold that a familiar spirit has nothing to do with mediums and the occult: now a familiar spirit is an evil spirit that harasses families, rules over families—even Christian families—and is able to afflict them in a thousand ways and bring them into bondage to various sins and diseases.

This is a troubling departure from truth, and can be very damaging to the undiscerning and the weak of conscience, those who are not grounded in the word of God—or simply the sheep of God’s pasture. Sheep are inclined to follow, so when they are led to believe that all their problems—even their health problems—are due to a “familiar spirit,” this can undermine their faith, leave them with a lingering fear, and condemnation, and confusion. They know they have nothing to do with the occult, but now they are told a familiar spirit is at work in their lives?

It is false teaching.

What is the truth, then?

Okay, you say, so we’ve been using “familiar spirit” wrong. What we mean is familial spirit, or generational spirit. But does this get it right, then? Are we any closer to the truth? Are there familial or generational spirits that rule over families?

Neither of these terms—familial spirit, or generational spirit—is found anywhere in the Bible. In no instance is a familial or generational spirit bound or cast out, or even addressed or referred to in the Old Testament or the New.

What about the Scripture that says God visits the sins of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children “unto the third and to the fourth generation?” (Ex. 34:7). God declared this to those under the law of Moses, but note. It was the sins of the fathers that

caused this—not some familial spirit, so called. And when the children turned from their sins, God did not “visit” them with the punishment of the sins of their fathers. That’s what *visit* means—God visits *the punishment of* the sins of the fathers upon the children—not the bondage to those sins. And when the children turned from their sins, they were not held accountable for their fathers’ sins. God told Ezekiel that the proverb in Israel about the fathers eating sour grapes and the children’s teeth being set on edge was a false proverb. No, He said, “the soul that sinneth, it shall die.” Meaning the soul that sinned died for his own sins. A son who sinned was held accountable for his own sin. And a son who was righteous “shall not die for the iniquity of his father” (Ezek. 18:17).

Notice from the Exodus passage that the Lord proclaimed Himself as He who was:

“...merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness (covenant lovingkindness) and truth,

Keeping mercy (covenant lovingkindness) for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear (or acquit) the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children unto the third and fourth generation” (Ex. 34:6,7).

This is a reference back to the Ten Commandments, where we read the same words in a different order.

“For I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me;

And shewing mercy (covenant lovingkindness) unto thousands of them that love Me and keep My commandments” (Ex. 20:5,6).

Notice the qualifications here. Under the Sinai covenant, God visited the iniquities of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them *that hate Him*. He would by no means clear the guilty; no person guilty of sin every found God saying He is okay with that; if they did not repent, and their children did not repent, He visited them with their just recompense. But if they acknowledged their sin and repented and turned to Him, He was abundant in lovingkindness. He forgave, He no longer visited upon them what He punished the fathers with.

And He promised He would show His covenant lovingkindness to thousands of them that love Him and keep His commandments. “Thousands” refers to generations, as we discover in the following passage.

“Know therefore that the LORD thy God, He is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy (covenant lovingkindness) with them that love Him and keep His commandments to a thousand generations;

And repayeth them that hate Him to their face...” (Dt. 7:9,10).

And so this was the key: the individual’s own responsibility to be right with the Lord. When an Israelite was right with the Lord, when he or she loved Him and kept His commandments, God overshadowed, protected that one with covenant lovingkindness. For He is a covenant keeping God.

Now, while these passages are all with regard to a covenant which is no longer in effect, the principle remains the same. Scripture is as clear as day: membership in the New Covenant community is on an individual, not a family basis. Regardless how one's parents may have lived, there is no condemnation—no sentence or judgment against—those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1).

Also this:

Therefore if any man be in Christ he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17).

Amen. Whatever was in the past in any individual's family, or own life, the instant that one becomes a new creation in Christ, it all passes away.

It is possible that in certain people groups some ancestor may have made a family pact (covenant) with the Devil by means of a shaman. Some societies practice this, and thereby open doors to evil spirits. But to maintain that the families of all societies are indiscriminately the territory of what is termed "generational spirits" cannot be supported by Scripture. In any case, when we are in covenant relationship with God by the Lord Jesus Christ—that is, when we are no longer in Adam, but now in Christ—any covenants made with demons are summarily broken. Covenants made with demons have their ground only in the old man. If I am in Christ, and no longer in Adam, I am totally liberated from the ability of any demon to work ill in my life. They might try—deceptively—but as I war a good warfare with the armour of Light, they are undone. They cannot touch me.

"Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob, neither is there any divination against Israel" (Num. 23:23).

This, again, is from the Old Covenant. Is the Old Covenant then stronger than the New Covenant?

So, I reject outright the teaching of familial or generational spirits. Certainly the families and societies of Adam—I select the word *Adam* carefully—are ruled over by spirits of darkness in the heavenly realm. In fact the whole family of Adam conduct their lives in this world "according to the prince of the authority of the air, the spirit that now works in the children of the disobedience" (Eph. 2:2). But those *in Christ* are in another family, the one great family of God in heaven and earth (Eph. 3:14,15). This family is able to war effectual warfare with spiritual weapons and armour against these forces of darkness (Eph. 6:12-18). Yes, at times it is necessary that a demon be cast out of a troubled individual. But, soldiers of Christ, what about casting these forces of darkness completely out of their heavenly stronghold? What about entering the heavenly realm from whence these spiritual forces exercise the power of darkness over the hearts and minds of people, and casting them out of that stronghold once and for all so that they are unable to continue their evil work?

How is this to be accomplished? By the blood of the Lamb, the word of our testimony, and loving not our own lives unto death. (See Rev. Chapter 12.)

In other words, it is the warfare of the Cross, the warfare of putting on the whole armour of God and warring a good warfare in the heavenlies—the kind of warfare that involves the Cross. But no, the Prince of darkness has succeeded in causing many to neglect this weapon—the one he fears most—preoccupying them instead with the false methodology of the generational spirit. According to this technique it almost appears that if all the generational spirits could be rebuked and bound and cast out, the families of man could live happily ever after. Family of God, the Scriptures clearly teach that it was *in His Cross* that Christ triumphed over all the principalities and powers of darkness in the heavenlies. How did He do this? He did not cast them all out by a powerful word. He brought them down, triumphed over them, by being crucified. He destroyed him who had the power of death with his own weapon.

“...triumphing over them in it (that is, *in His cross*)” (Co. 2:15).

This utterly took the ground away from the powers of darkness. Christ in His cross dealt the death blow to *the old man*, leaving the Devil no ground in which to work. If we are in the old Adam, yes, the Devil has ground in which to do his dirty work. But if any man is in Christ the new Man, the Devil’s former territory is taken from him.

Let us make sure we understand this. It is not because of Grandpa, or Dad, that I sinned. It is because of “the old man,” that is, the man who has his origin in the disobedience of the first man, Adam.

“As by one man’s disobedience, many were made sinners...” (Rom. 5:19).

Those of Adam’s race are capable of sinning all by themselves. They don’t need any demonic help. Yes, the Devil is the Tempter. Yes, he goes about seeking whom he may devour. No doubt this involves his hordes of evil spirits. We are not to be ignorant of His devices. But it is wrong to attribute every sin and disease and wicked thing to demonic activity. Those in Adam are born sinners: if there were no Devil at all, no Tempter at all, and not so much as a single demon in existence, those in Adam would still be capable of sinning. We were all made sinners because of Adam’s disobedience. Regardless of any demon’s influence, we are capable of sinning.

“Every man is tempted when he is drawn away of *his own* lusts, and enticed” (James 1:14).

Our own lusts, James said, are enough to tempt us and draw us into sin. Grandpa may have been involved in some kind of sin. Dad too. In me there may be some propensity toward that same sin because of my own makeup and upbringing. But it is because of Adam’s sin that this is so—not some familial or generational spirit, so called. And God’s old-fashioned remedy for sin is the Cross of Christ: the redemption, the remission of sins, that is ours because of the blood of Christ when there is good old-fashioned repentance.

What about spirits and sicknesses?

There are instances in Scripture in which an affliction was the work of an evil spirit.

“And He was casting out a devil [a demon], and it was dumb, and it came to pass, when the devil [the demon] was gone out, the dumb spake; and the people wondered” (Lk. 11:14). (See also Mt. 9:32 for the same occasion.)

“Then was brought unto him one possessed with a devil [a demon], blind and dumb: and he healed him, insomuch as that the blind and dumb both spake and saw” (Mt. 12:22).

“And behold, there was a woman which had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bowed together, and could in no wise lift up herself. And when Jesus saw her, He called her to Him, and said unto her, Woman thou art loosed from thine infirmity. And He laid hands on her: and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God” (Lk. 13:11-13).

(Note that the phrase “a spirit of infirmity,” which is used by some nowadays so indiscriminately, appears only once in the Bible, and this with regard to a specific infirmity.)

However, not all cases of sickness are the work of evil spirits. A careful search of the Scriptures reveals that the vast majority of the people Jesus healed simply had diseases or infirmities of the body that the original sin of Adam brought on the race. Even those in the new Man still dwell in mortal corruptible bodies in which the redemption of Jesus Christ has not yet been fully wrought (Rom. 8:10,11,23, 1 Cor. 15:53). It is because of this original sin that our bodies are capable of getting sick in countless ways, including hereditary diseases. A hereditary disease is caused by a breakdown in the genetic code, not a generational spirit. We can get sick without the help of any demon.

In some cases, as we said, a sickness or affliction could be caused by one’s own sin. (See Jn 5:14, where Jesus warned the man he had healed to sin no more lest a worse thing come upon him.) But in either case—whether Adam’s sin or our own—there is a clear distinction between demon possession and physical sickness. There are many passages showing this. For example:

“When the even was come, they brought unto Him many that were possessed with demons: and He cast out the spirits with His word, and healed all that were sick” (Mt. 8:16). (See note* below for other verses.)

I have known Christians who prayed as though every sickness they came across was the result of an evil spirit. But see the two categories here? Those possessed with evil spirits, and those who were physically sick. Jesus discerned the root cause in each and every case, and dealt with it accordingly, whether healing a disease or casting out a spirit (not once calling any spirit He cast out a familial or generational spirit; the most frequent term is *unclean spirit*, which appears to be equivalent to *demon*).

We in the body of Christ have the same provision. One of the gifts of the Spirit is “discerning of spirits” (1 Cor. 12:10). And so in all our interactions with people let us not be implementing a man-made methodology, but true, Spirit-birthered discernment. Demons may or may not be behind someone’s affliction. I need discernment in each case lest I be found trying to deal with the Enemy like a blind man flailing his sword in the darkness only to find out later

I was doing the very work of the Enemy—wounding the redeemed of the Lamb and leaving them bleeding. I know by personal experience what that feels like—when well-meaning brothers and sisters prayed against the generational spirit in my life, and also when it was insinuated by others that the reason this disease came upon me was because there was sin in my life. I had to seek God very earnestly about this till He came and bound up my wounds, and reassured me that all was well between Him and me.

And so now I am like the Bereans of old. I respect teachers God has set in the body of Christ, but I search the scriptures for myself to find out if what is being taught is truth or not. The teaching concerning generational spirits, I discovered, cannot be sustained by Scripture.

Yes, apart from that, evil spirits might be involved in certain cases. But in every situation we face, our earnest prayer needs to be... Lord, grant me discernment... or join me to someone who has discernment. This situation I face, is it the work of an evil spirit? That sin in So and so's life: are demons involved in this person, or not? This sickness—is it because of the congenital sin of Adam, or is it a case of some particular sin in this one's life that has caused it... or is it an evil spirit?

We cry for *Light*, Lord, in these things. Amen.

Scriptures that refer to “familiar spirit” in the KJV: Lev. 20:6, 27; Dt. 18:11; I Sam. 28:3-9; 2 Ki. 21:6, 23:24; 1 Chr. 10:13; Isa. 8:19, 19:3, 29:4

*Jesus' discernment concerning evil spirits and diseases: Mt. 4:24, Mt. 8:16, Mt. 10:1; Mk. 1:34, Mk. 6:13; Lk. 6:17-18, Lk. 7:21, 8:2. See also Acts 5:16, 8:6,7.

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