# “Occult Obstacles”

*Deuteronomy 18:9-14*

***Lonely and desperate for female company, a frog telephoned a psychic phone service to find out what his future held. “You’re going to meet a beautiful young girl who will want to know everything about you,” the psychic told him. Thrilled beyond belief, the frog exclaimed, “That's fantastic! Where will I meet her? At work? At a party?”***

***“No,” said the psychic. “In a biology class.”***

 Can psychics really tell the future? Is it possible for mediums to make contact with the dead? Does witchcraft really work? I’ve been asked these sort of questions from time to time, usually from inquisitive teenagers. Let’s face it: many people are curious about the supernatural. It makes for good stories in books, movies or around campfires. And as our society continues to move farther away from its Judeo-Christian foundations, aspects of the occult are becoming more and more commonplace.

***A number of years ago, Wiccans in the United States went to court to force the United States military to accept their five-pointed star symbol—the pentagram--on tombstones in military cemeteries. The ACLU said the Wiccans—a pagan religious movement that claims to be “white witchcraft”--want their symbol recognized for use in veterans' graveyards in the same way that Christian crosses or the Jewish Star of David are used. The U.S. government recognizes Wicca as an official religion, which gives it certain tax privileges.*** Some people believe the occult and the supernatural are harmless. It’s just myth--superstition from a less-enlightened time--or things with no real substance or power. But God has a very different perspective. Occult practices are dangerous obstacles that are to be avoided because they’re a camouflage for evil.

Go ahead and turn to our Scripture reading, Deuteronomy 18:9-14. While we’re doing that, let’s fill in what happened before and after it. In Deuteronomy 18:1-8 we’re told how the priests and Levites were to be treated and provided for. Then in verses 15-22 we’re told about the role of prophets--and specifically, a prophet whom God would raise up who would be like Moses. Sandwiched in between is our Scripture reading: *9“When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, be very careful not to imitate the detestable customs of the nations living there. 10For example, never sacrifice your son or daughter as a burnt offering. And do not let your people practice fortune-telling, or use sorcery, or interpret omens, or engage in witchcraft, 11or cast spells, or function as mediums or psychics, or call forth the spirits of the dead. 12Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord. It is because the other nations have done these detestable things that the Lord your God will drive them out ahead of you. 13But you must be blameless before the Lord your God. 14The nations you are about to displace consult sorcerers and fortune-tellers, but the Lord your God forbids you to do such things.”*

The priests and Levites served a specific role. They were a legitimate form of religious office. They represented God before the people and represented the people before God. Likewise, the role of prophet was a legitimate role sanctioned by God. But the practices of the Canaanites were not legitimate. The people of Israel were forbidden to associate with the Canaanites, and one of the key reasons was because of the occult. God provided priests and Levites. He provided Moses and would provide additional prophets in the future. Therefore, there was no need to be enticed by the tricks and mysteries of the Canaanites.

 But what were the Canaanites doing that was so troublesome? Why were their spiritual practices so out-of-step with God—so much so that God was going to erase them from the land? Look at what God told Moses in verse ten: *…never sacrifice your son or daughter as a burnt offering*. One of the gods worshiped by the people of the land was Molech, whose hideous practices included roasting children alive. ***Molech was often depicted as a man with a bull’s head and with outstretched arms. The idol was made of metal, and during worship a fire was stoked in the pedestal upon which Molech stood. As the pedestal heated up so did the metal statue. Children were placed in the outstretched arms of the idol while thunderous drums were beaten to drown out the screams of the child.***

 The law of Leviticus had already established that giving children as burnt offerings was a capital offense: *“If any of them offer their children as a sacrifice to Molech, they must be put to death. The people of the community must stone them to death* (20:2). Sadly, some of Israel’s later kings would ignore this and encourage the worship of Molech. Scripture records Solomon as the first king to build a temple to Molech.

 The Canaanites also engaged in other occult practices. “*And do not let your people practice fortune-telling, or use sorcery, or interpret omens, or engage in witchcraft, or cast spells, or function as mediums or psychics, or call forth the spirits of the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord”* (vv. 10-12). Fortune-telling, sorcery and interpreting omens were various methods of trying to ascertain future events by use of the supernatural. Witchcraft and casting spells were ways of using the supernatural to influence or control events or people. The first dealt with trying to know the future; the second with exercising power over people or situations.

The people of God were instructed to avoid mediums and psychics. The motivation here was to make contact with the deceased for the purpose of gaining secret information or knowledge***. Want to know the future? Visit your fortune-teller. Want someone to fall in love with you, or need to get rid of a rival? Some witchery would be just the thing to help you out. Want to know what the afterlife was like, or find out where Uncle Bojangles hid the family treasure? Have a séance with a medium and call the old boy up!*** God told his people, “*It is because the other nations have done these detestable things that the Lord your God will drive them out ahead of you”* (v. 12).

***I knew a girl in college who fancied herself a witch. She had a crush on my suite-mate, Robb, and was determined to have him (despite the fact Robb had a steady girlfriend). This girl cast a ‘love spell’ on Robb to make him fall for her. As you might imagine, that little bit of hocus-pocus didn’t work. I have another friend who lives in upstate New York who practices Wicca, the pagan religious movement I mentioned earlier. He doesn’t wear a pointy black hat or dance naked in the forest, but he does claim to practice a form of magic he says is intended for good and not harm.***

 I’ve heard many people say, “But what’s the harm? Let the girl from college mix her love potions; let your friend in New York fiddle around with his good witchcraft. So long as they’re not hurting anyone, what does it matter?” But they are hurting someone. They’re hurting themselves. You see, the reason God forbids occult practices is twofold.

First, the occult is a deception of Satan. All forms of the occult falsely promise control, power or secret knowledge. The evil forces at work in the world and in the spiritual realm lead practitioners of the occult astray. They offer hollow promises designed to appeal to our sinful nature, greed, lust and yearning for control. ***This is a big reason why youth are particularly drawn to the occult: it promises them control over aspects of their lives—family, love, school, pain—that they don’t have control over.*** The bottom line is that the occult is nothing more than a continuation of the original deception of Genesis 3:5, *“…and you will be like God…”*

 The second reason the LORD prohibits the occult is because it exalts man above God. All forms of the occult present us with that old Garden-of-Eden-temptation: will we try to know more and be more than God himself? Will we grab for wisdom and power that are reserved for God alone?

The occult seduces us with the lie that there’s a shortcut, an easier path. It’s the same old dry routine Satan pulled on Jesus in Matthew 4: “Turn these stones into bread.” Translation: Use my power to satisfy your own personal desires. “Throw yourself off the top of the Temple, God will protect you.” Translation: Make God do what you want him to do. “Worship me and you’ll have dominion over everything.” Translation: Take the shortcut to power and glory. “Forget the whole crucifixon-on-Calvary thing. Too painful! Do it my way because I know better than God.” Jesus told Satan to take his temptations and move along.

 So what does this mean for us today? I’m very confident that none of you are dabbling in the occult. There aren’t any mediums or sorcerers here. We know to stay away from these things. So why preach on it? Because we need to be reminded that there is an invisible, spiritual world that exists alongside our physical one. And that spiritual world is a battleground. ***Writing in the book* The Barbarian Way*, pastor Erwin McManus says, “When we are born again, we are dropped not into a maternity ward, but into a war zone. Our birthplace is less mother’s womb and more battlefield earth.”***

 Before our conversion to Christ, we were on Satan’s side. Now, we didn’t run around sacrificing chickens (unless it was on the altar of Chik-Fil-A, amen!). We weren’t drawing pentagrams and celebrating the Black Mass. But we did live for ourselves. We were focused on our own selfish desires. And by living that way, we were on Satan’s team. And that’s ultimately what Satan wants: for us to be focused solely upon our wants, demands and preferences.

 But, upon accepting Jesus Christ, we switched sides. And make no mistake: Satan was *not happy* about our change of allegiance! So he pulled out all the stops and tried to draw us back to his side. He used—and continues to use—a variety of tools to seduce us back to his ranks. Thus, we’re locked in a spiritual battle. Satan wants us for his own so he can destroy us. Jesus calls us to sacrificial love and service on behalf of others. It’s a war zone.

The forces at work behind occult practices are demonic. It’s the schemes, plans and power of Satan that drive it. Our Enemy loves nothing more than to keep humanity away from God. He doesn’t want us to sign our name in blood on a contract, as in *Faust* or old gothic horror stories. His aim is to keep us away from the Lord, to lure us back into our old ways of pettiness, greed, bigotry and selfishness.

 Therefore, we must remain vigilant. We need to stay grounded in God’s Word, in prayer, and in growing our relationship with Jesus. We need to remain connected with our church family for support and encouragement. The occult has no power over us if we do these things. All the powers of Hell cannot stand before the glory and power of Jesus Christ! James reminds us, *So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come close to God, and God will come close to you* (4:7-8).

 The spiritual battle around us--and for us--is real. But so is our Lord and Savior! He has conquered the worst of death and Hell, and he lives and reigns triumphantly. And in him we have the ultimate victory!

 Let us pray:

*Jesus, sometimes we can sense the ominous presence of darkness around us. We recognize our Enemy is at work again. Whether he's trying to discourage us to get sidetracked, to fall into temptation, to give up, or to take our eyes off you, he's always hanging around.*

*We need your supernatural power, Lord, to stand strong and not surrender. Physical force won't help, because you've said the weapons of our warfare are different from those in this world. These supernatural weapons originate from you. By your precious name and blood, Jesus, we’re asking you to confuse Satan and cancel his plans against us.*

*When we’re tired and weak, you are strong, Lord, and you are our only source of help. We cannot fight without you. Teach us how to pray and to trust you to pull down those strongholds that keep us helpless. We agree with your Word that you are in us and that you are greater than our Enemy. You, your Word, and* [*prayer*](http://www.crosswalk.com/faith/prayer/)*, Lord, are our secret weapons.*

*Strengthen our* [*faith*](http://www.crosswalk.com/faith/)*, Lord. Forgive our sins, so that we may be clean in your righteousness. Give us your wisdom and discernment so we won't be caught off guard. Together, Lord, we'll win, because in truth, you already have.*

*In Jesus's powerful name, before which every knee shall bow, amen!*