

# The Mind Behind the System

by Watchman Nee

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*Watchman Nee explores the spiritual implications of the world system and the Christian's relationship to it in light of Scripture.*

**Scripture:** John 12:31

**Topics:** "The Kingdom of God", "Spiritual Warfare"

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## Description

Watchman Nee emphasizes the profound implications of Jesus' declaration in John 12:31-32, where He speaks of the judgment of the world and the casting out of its prince. He explains that while Jesus' words may have shattered the hopes of the crowd, they also herald a new reign of righteousness through His death and resurrection. Nee explores the concept of 'cosmos' as a system governed by Satan, highlighting the need for believers to discern the spiritual forces behind worldly affairs. He warns against the seductive nature of the world and urges Christians to remain vigilant against its influences, ultimately reminding them that their allegiance must be to Christ and His kingdom. The sermon calls for a critical examination of how the world affects one's relationship with God.

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## Transcript

Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And I, if I be lifted from the earth, will draw all men unto myself" (John 12:31, 32).

Our Lord Jesus utters these words at a key point in his ministry. He has entered Jerusalem thronged by enthusiastic crowds; but almost at once he has spoken in veiled terms of laying down his life, and to this heaven itself has given public approval. Now he comes out with this great twofold statement. What, we ask ourselves, can it have conveyed to those who have just acclaimed him, going out to meet him and accompanying him home on his ride? To most of them his words, if they had any meaning at all, must have signified a complete reversal of their hopes. Indeed the more discerning came to see in them a forecasting of the actual circumstances of his death as a criminal (verse 33).

Yet if his utterance destroyed one set of illusions, it offered in place of them a wonderful hope, solid and secure. For it announced a far more radical exchange of dominion than even Jewish patriots looked for. "And I ..." - the expression contrasts sharply with what precedes it, even as the One it identifies stands in contrast with his antagonist, the prince of this world. Through the Cross, through the obedience to death of him who is God's seed of wheat, this world's rule of compulsion and fear is to end with the fall of its proud ruler. And with his springing up once more to life there will come into being in its place a new reign of

righteousness and one that is marked by a free allegiance of men to him. With cords of love their hearts will be drawn away from a world under judgment to Jesus the Son of man, who though lifted up to die, is by that very act lifted up to reign.

"The earth" is the scene of this crisis and its tremendous outcome, and "this world" is, we may say, its point of collision. That point we shall make the theme of our study, and we will begin by looking at the New Testament ideas associated with the important Greek word *cosmos*. In the English versions this word is, with a single exception shortly to be noticed, invariably translated "the world." (The other Greek word, *aión*, also so translated, embodies the idea of time and should more aptly be rendered "the age.")

It is worth sparing time for a look at a New Testament Greek Lexicon such as Grimm's. This will show how wide is the range of meaning that *cosmos* has in Scripture. But, first of all we glance back to its origins in classical Greek where we find it originally implied two things: first a harmonious order or arrangement, and secondly embellishment or adornment. This latter idea appears in the New Testament verb *cosmeo*, used with the meaning "to adorn," as of the temple with goodly stones or of a bride for her husband (Luke 21:5; Rev. 21:2). In 1 Peter 3:3, the exception just alluded to, *cosmos* is itself translated "adorning" in keeping with this same verb *cosmeo* in verse 5.

(1) When we turn from the classics to the New Testament writers we find that their uses of *cosmos* fall into three main groups. It is used first with the sense of the material universe, the round world, this earth. For example, Acts 17:14, "the God that made the world and all things therein"; Matt. 13:35 (and elsewhere), "the foundation of the world"; John 1:10, "he was in the world, and the world was made by him"; Mark 16:15, "Go ye into all the world."

(2) The second usage of *cosmos* is twofold. It is used (a) for the inhabitants of the world in such phrases as John 1:10, "the world knew him not"; 3:16, "God so loved the world"; 12:19, "the world is gone after him"; 17:21, "that the world may believe." (b) An extension of this usage leads to the idea of the whole race of men alienated from God and thus hostile to the cause of Christ. For instance, Heb. 11:38, "Of whom the world was not worthy"; John 14:17, "whom the world cannot receive"; 14:27, "not as the world giveth, give I unto you"; 15:18, "If the world hateth you ..."

(3) In the third place we find *cosmos* is used in Scripture for worldly affairs: the whole circle of worldly goods, endowments, riches, advantages, pleasures, which though hollow and fleeting, stir our desire and seduce us from God, so that they are obstacles to the cause of Christ. Examples are: 1 John 2:15, "the things that are in the world"; 3:17, "the world's goods"; Matt. 16:26, "if he shall gain the whole world, and forfeit his life"; 1 Cor. 7:31, "those that use the world, as not abusing it." This usage of *cosmos* applies not only to material but also to abstract things which have spiritual and moral (or immoral) values. E.g., 1 Cor. 2:12, "the spirit of the world"; 3:19, "the wisdom of this world"; 7:31, "the fashion of this world"; Titus 2:12, "worldly (adj, *kosmicos*) lusts"; 2 Pet. 1:4, "the corruption that is in the world"; 2:20, "the defilement's of the world"; 1 John 2:16, 17, "all that is in the world, the lust ... the vainglory ... passeth away." The Christian is "to keep himself unspotted from the world" (James 1:27).

The Bible student will soon discover that, as the above paragraph suggests, *cosmos* is a favorite word of the apostle John, and it is he, in the main, who helps us forward now to a further conclusion.

While it is true that these three definitions of "the world," as (1) the material earth or universe, (2) the people on the earth, and (3) the things of the earth, each contribute something to the whole picture, it will already be apparent that behind them all is something more. The classical idea of orderly arrangement or

organization helps us to grasp what this is. Behind all that is tangible we meet something intangible, we meet a planned system; and in this system there is a harmonious functioning, a perfect order.

Concerning this system there are two things to be emphasized. First, since the day when Adam opened the door for evil to enter God's creation, the world order has shown itself to be hostile to God. The world "knew not God" (1 Cor. 1:21), "hated" Christ (John 15:18) and "cannot receive" the Spirit of truth (14:17). "Its works are evil" (John 7:7) and "the friendship of the world is enmity with God" (James 4:4). Hence Jesus says, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). He has "overcome the world" (16:33) and "the victory that hath overcome the world" is "our faith" in him (1 John 5:4). For, as the verse of John 12 that heads this study affirms, the world is under judgment. God's attitude to it is uncompromising.

This is because, secondly, as the same verse makes clear, there is a mind behind the system. John writes repeatedly of "the prince of this world" (12:31; 14:30; 16:11). In his Epistle he describes him as "he that is in the world" (1 John 4:4) and matches against him the Spirit of truth who indwells believers. "The whole world," John says, "lieth in the evil one" (5:19). He is the rebellious cosmocrator, world ruler—a word which, however, appears only once, used in the plural of his lieutenants, the "world rulers of this darkness" (Eph. 6:12).

There is, then, an ordered system, "the world," which is governed from behind the scenes by a ruler, Satan. When in John 12:31 Jesus states that the sentence of judgment has been passed upon this world he does not mean that the material world or its inhabitants are judged. For them judgment is yet to come. What is there judged is that institution, that harmonious world order of which Satan himself is the originator and head. And ultimately, as Jesus' words make clear, it is he, "the prince of the world," who has been judged (16:11) and who is to be dethroned and "cast out" for ever. Scripture thus gives depth to our understanding of the world around us. Indeed, unless we look at the unseen powers behind the material things we may readily be deceived.

This consideration may help us to understand better the passage in 1 Peter 3 alluded to above. There the apostle sets "the outward adorning (cosmos) of plaiting the hair, and of wearing jewels of gold, or of putting on apparel" in deliberate contrast with "the incorruptible apparel of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price." By inference, therefore, the former are corrupt and worthless to God. We may or may not be ready at once to accept Peter's evaluation, depending upon whether we see the true import of his words. Here is what he is implying. In the background behind these matters of wearing apparel and jewelry and make-up, there is a power at work for its own ends. Do not let that power grip you.

What, we have to ask ourselves, is the motive that activates us in relation to these things? It may be nothing sensuous but altogether innocent, aiming by the use of tone and harmony and perfect matching merely to gain an effect that is aesthetically pleasing. There may be nothing intrinsically wrong in doing this; but do you and I see what we are touching here? We are touching that harmonious system behind the things seen, a system that is controlled by God's enemy. So let us be wary.

The Bible opens with God's creation of the heavens and the earth. It does not say that he created the world in the sense that we are discussing it now. Through the Bible the meaning of "the world" undergoes a development, and it is only in the New Testament (though perhaps to a lesser extent already in the Psalms and some of the Prophets) that "the world" comes to have its full spiritual significance. We can readily see the reason for this development. Before the Fall of man, the world existed only in the sense of the earth, the people on the earth, and the things on the earth. As yet there was no cosmos, no "world," in

the sense of a constituted order. With the Fall, however, Satan brought on to this earth the order which he himself had conceived, and with that began the world system of which we are speaking. Originally our physical earth had no connection with "the world" in this sense of a Satanic system, nor indeed had man; but Satan took advantage of man's sin, and of the door this threw open to him, to introduce into the earth the organization which he had set himself to establish. From that point of time this earth was in "the world," and man was in "the world." So we may say that before the Fall there was an earth; after the Fall there was a "world"; at the Lord's return there will be a kingdom. Just as the world belongs to Satan, so the Kingdom belongs to our Lord Jesus. Moreover it is this Kingdom that displaces and that will displace the world. When the "Stone not made with hands" shatters man's proud image, then the kingdom of this world will "become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" (Dan. 2:44, 45; Rev. 11:15).

Politics, education, literature, science, art, law, commerce, music—such are the things that constitute the cosmos, and these are things that we meet daily. Subtract them and the world as a coherent system ceases to be. In studying the history of mankind we have to acknowledge marked progress in each of these departments. The question however is: In what direction is this "progress" tending? What is the ultimate goal of all this development? At the end, John tells us, antichrist will arise and will set up his own kingdom in this world (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7; Rev. 13). That is the direction of this world's advance. Satan is utilizing the material world, the men of the world, the things that are in the world, to head everything up eventually in the kingdom of antichrist. At that hour the world system will have reached its zenith; and at that hour every unit of it will be revealed to be anti-Christian.

In the book of Genesis we find in Eden no hint of technology, no mention of mechanical instruments. After the Fall, however, we read that among the sons of Cain there was a forger of cutting instruments of brass and iron. A few centuries ago it might have seemed fanciful to discern the spirit of antichrist in iron tools, even though for long the sword has been in open competition with the ploughshare. But today, in the hands of man, metals have been turned to sinister and deadly uses, and as the end approaches the widespread abuse of technology and engineering will become even more apparent.

The same thing applies to music and the arts. For the pipe and the harp seem also to have originated with the family of Cain, and today in unconsecrated hands their God-defying nature becomes increasingly clear. In many parts of the world it has long been easy to trace an intimate relationship between idolatry and the arts of painting, sculpture, and music. No doubt the day is coming when the nature of antichrist will be disclosed more openly than ever through song and dance and the visual and dramatic arts.

As for commerce, its connections are perhaps even more suspect. Satan was the first merchant, trading ideas with Eve for his own advantage, and in the figurative language of Ezekiel 28, which seems to reveal something of his original character, we read: "By thy traffic thou has increased thy riches, and thine heart is lifted up" (verse 5). Perhaps this does not have to be argued, for most of us will readily admit from experience the Satanic origin and nature of commerce. We shall say more of this later.

But what of education? Surely, we protest, that must be harmless. Anyway, our children have to be taught. But education, no less than commerce or technology, is one of the things of the world. It has its roots in the tree of knowledge. How earnestly, as Christians, we seek to protect our children from the world's more obvious snares. And yet it is quite true that we have to provide education for them. How are we going to solve the problem of letting them touch what is essentially a thing of the world, and at the same time guarding them from the great world system and its perils?

And what of science? It, too, is one of the units that constitute the cosmos. It, too, is knowledge. When we venture into the further reaches of science, and begin to speculate on the nature of the physical world-and of man-the question immediately arises: Up to what point is the pursuit of scientific research and discovery legitimate? Where is the line of demarcation between what is helpful and what is hurtful in the realm of knowledge? How can we pursue after knowledge and yet avoid being caught in Satan's meshes?

These, then, are the matters at which we must look. Oh, I know I shall appear to some to be overstating things, but this is necessary in order to drive home my point. For "if any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15). Ultimately, when we touch the things of the world, the question we must ask ourselves always is: "How is this thing affecting my relationship with the Father?"

The time has passed when we need to go out into the world in order to make contact with it. Today the world comes and searches us out. There is a force abroad now which is captivating men. Have you ever felt the power of the world as much as today? Have you ever heard so much talk about money? Have you ever thought so much about food and clothing? Wherever you go, even among Christians, the things of the world are the topics of conversation. The world has advanced to the very door of the Church and is seeking to draw even the saints of God into its grasp. Never in this sphere of things have we needed to know the power of the Cross of Christ to deliver us as we do at the present time.

Formerly we spoke much of sin and of the natural life. We could readily see the spiritual issues there, but we little realized then what equally great spiritual issues are at stake when we touch the world. There is a spiritual force behind this world scene which, by means of "the things that are in the world," is seeking to enmesh men in its system. It is not merely against sin therefore that the saints of God need to be on their guard, but against the ruler of this world. God is building up his Church to its consummation in the universal reign of Christ. Simultaneously his rival is building up this world system to its vain climax in the reign of antichrist. How watchful we need to be lest at any time we be found helping Satan in the construction of that ill-fated kingdom. When we are faced with alternatives and a choice of ways confronts us, the question is not: Is this good or evil? Is this helpful or hurtful? No, the question we must ask ourselves is: Is it of this world, or of God? For since there is only this one conflict in the universe, then whenever two conflicting courses lie open to us, the choice at issue is never a lesser one than: God ... or Satan?

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