

The Angel Who Fell From Heaven

He's dark. He's evil. But who is the devil, really? The Bible gives us the clearest picture.

You don't have to frequent Christian bookstores to note the interest in angels in our society. Everywhere you go you can find angel bookmarks, greeting cards, bumper stickers, pens-even coffee mugs. Believers and nonbelievers alike are decorating their homes, their cars, their offices with them. But not too many Christians seem interested in the one-time angel who lost his wings-the devil.

Why? I believe there are four reasons.

1. Most people would rather focus on what's positive, and the subject of the devil is unpleasant.
2. Because false doctrine and immoral living are rampant, many conservative churches emphasize understanding scriptural truths and manifesting holy living to such an extent that they ignore the work of the devil in the lives of people who are saved.
3. On the other hand, some churches blame everything on the devil, teaching that every disease is directly caused by him and that every bad thought or wrong attitude needs the ministry of deliverance.
4. Talking about the devil works against the goal most human beings have of being liked and respected.

What we need is a recovery of balanced, biblical teaching on the devil. This would allow us to address the four concerns just mentioned.

Though it is right for us to focus on God and things that are good more than on Satan and evil (see Phil. 4:8), sometimes we must address negative things. Also, though orthodox doctrine and godly morality are essential, Bible-centered churches must understand that Satan is active within the congregation to tempt people to sin, to divide people over nonessentials, to make worship dull and to mislead people. We have to acknowledge that though he is not behind every problem, he is behind some.

Satan's most effective illusion is convincing people that he doesn't exist. But the devil is undeniably real. Jesus believed in a powerful ruler he called "Satan" or "the devil."

He spoke of the devil's work in His explanation of the parable of the sower (see Luke 8:12). He described the devil as a murderer and a liar (see John 8:44). He saw him as the ruler of this world and declared that His own atoning death on Calvary would bring about that ruler's condemnation (see John 16:11). As John wrote in his first epistle, Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8, NKJV).

The Old Testament uses prophetic statements about earthly rulers to comment on the origin and nature of the devil. This "bifocality of prophecy," as it sometimes is called, speaks both to an immediate earthly situation and to an ancient heavenly situation.

For example, the near-at-hand lens of Isaiah 14:12-23 looks to the King of Babylon (see v. 4), but the long-range lens views the origins of the devil. In verse 12 the devil is referred to as "Lucifer," rendered in other Bible translations as "Day Star" and "Son of the Dawn."

Ezekiel 28:12-15 refers both to the King of Tyre (v. 12) and to the devil. This passage describes Satan as “full of wisdom and perfect in beauty” with “every precious stone” as his covering. Verse 15 adds that he was perfect in his ways. That is, until iniquity was found in him (v. 15). Apparently he was endowed with enough free will to allow him to rebel against God.

Verse 17 tells us what his iniquity was. He had great beauty, and he was proud of it. As a result, he wanted the honors due only to God. Five times in Isaiah 14:13-14 he uses the pronoun “I,” in each case to vaunt himself: “I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit upon the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.”

The devil still wants to be the center of attention, of affection, of worship. He was willing to give Jesus the kingdoms of the world – something Jesus came to Earth to obtain – if Jesus would but worship him (see Matt. 4:9; Rev. 13:4,15).

How Does Satan Measure Up?

It is important to maintain a balanced view of the devil that is based on Scripture. Some Christians intentionally ignore him, yet the Bible says “resist” (not “ignore”) the devil and he will flee from you (see James 4:7). Other Christians focus on him too much and attribute to him more authority than he has.

One way to examine Satan's authority is by making use of what theologians call "the three omnis": omnipotence (being all powerful), omniscience (being all knowing) and omnipresence (being present everywhere)—all characteristics of God alone.

1. Omnipotence. The truth that only God is all-powerful brings up a major question: Why does evil exist? The answer given by most people unfamiliar with Scripture is that either evil exists because God cannot stop it (but then He's not all-powerful), or God could stop it but doesn't (in which case He seems to be unloving).

The answer in classical theology is that God endowed, first, some of the angelic orders and, second, the human race with free will. This is so our love for God and our obedience to Him can be freely given. Lucifer had free will and chose to sin, and then, masquerading as a serpent, tempted our first parents to do the same (see Gen. 3).

One thing believers need to understand about Satan is that although he is not omnipotent, he does have power. In the Bible, he is called the prince and power of the air (see Eph. 2:2) and the leader of the "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12, RSV).

He prowls around seeking people to devour, causing people to suffer (see 1 Pet. 5:8-9). He can ensnare people, holding them captive to do his will (see 1 Tim. 3:7; 2 Tim. 2:26). Occasionally he directly makes people sick or injured (Luke 13:16).

However, Satan's power is limited. The devil can do only what God allows him to do. We see the restraint God places on him in the book of Job. God allowed Satan to inflict various

calamities on Job but not to kill him (see Job 1:12; 2:6).

The Bible also tells us that Satan desired to have Peter, but that Jesus prayed for Peter's faith, trusting that when Peter was converted he would strengthen his brothers (Luke 22:31-2). God will not allow Christians to be tempted beyond our God-assisted ability to bear, and He always provides an escape (1 Cor. 10:13).

Satan is a real foe with real power, but it is limited, and he is dying. At the end of this age he will be bound (see Rev. 20:2). Until that time, this truth remains: "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4, NKJV).

2. Omniscience. Only God is omniscient—all knowing and possessed of infinite insight and understanding. However, Satan and his demonic host do have knowledge and wisdom—enough to prompt them to strike at God's leaders through the years.

For example, Satan incited David to count the people of Israel so that David could gloat over how many he ruled, depending on them, not on the arm of the Lord, for victory (see 1 Chr. 21:1). He stood by Joshua, the high priest, to accuse him before the angel of the Lord (see Zech. 3:1). He momentarily got to Simon Peter, who tried to talk Jesus out of His God-appointed rendezvous with the cross (see Matt. 16:21-23).

And today Satan continues to condemn and ensnare bishops so that outsiders will not think well of the Christian church (see 1 Tim. 3:6-7).

Satan is the founder and prince of an elaborate system of culture and sophistication (see John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). It

has reasoning that “makes sense” to those who do not understand the ways of God. Frequently the New Testament uses the word “world” to mean the “world system” set up by Satan. It is clever and enticing.

However, Satan’s knowledge is limited. He does not listen in on our every conversation or read our minds.

Also, his so-called “wisdom” is false wisdom. It seeks to blind people to the truth of the gospel (see 2 Cor. 4:4).

Seducing spirits and demonic doctrine lead people astray (see 1 Tim. 4:1-5). What Scripture describes as “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1 John 2:15-17) is selfish desires, improper motives, unworthy values, people seen as the measure of all things and human knowledge that contradicts God’s truth. The wisdom of the world—Satan’s wisdom—is “foolishness” (1 Cor. 3:19).

Finally, Satan’s wisdom is stupid and inconsistent. Satan tried three times to keep Jesus from going to the cross, yet he put it into the heart of Judas to betray Jesus—an act that led directly to the cross (see Luke 22:3; John 13:27).

3. Omnipresence. Only God can be everywhere at all times. But the Bible makes it clear that Satan shows up at key junctures in the history of God’s relating to His people. Here are some examples:

» When Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden, Satan, appearing as a snake, successfully convinced them to disobey God (see Gen. 3).

» At key moments in Jesus’ life Satan attempted to turn Jesus

away from His appointment with the cross: first, directly (see Matt. 4); next, through Peter, whom Jesus at that moment called “Satan” (see Matt. 16:23); and, finally, as a temptation deep within Jesus’ human nature in the Garden of Gethsemane (see Matt. 26:39).

» Satan tried to undermine both authority and moral integrity in the early church by enticing Ananias and Sapphira to lie and cheat (Acts 5:1-11).

» On a continuing basis, Satan tries to steal the good seed (the Word of God) that is sown in people’s hearts so they will not come to salvation (see Mark 4:15) and to sow bad seed that grows up to be weeds in the midst of the wheat (see Matt. 13:38).

But although Satan shows up at some times, he does not show up all the time. The Old Testament does not speak of him as hindering every good effort of God or the prophets. And though he jumped in the way of Jesus a few times, he was not constantly in Jesus’ face.

Satan and his demons aren’t everywhere. They do not put us into bondage every time we make a mistake. We are not to be paranoid about them or focus on them; we are to be God-oriented.

The Devil’s Strategy

Satan’s strategy for destroying mankind is multifaceted. One aspect of it is to make people believe the church is merely an option or even a human invention and not part of God’s plan. But being alienated from the church—the body of Christ—is, according to Jesus, a very serious matter (see Matt. 18:15-17).

Satan also entices people to rebel against the human authorities God has placed over them. This includes pastoral authority in the church and political authority in the state (see Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 2:13-14; Rom. 13:1-7). When these authorities violate clear biblical commands we must “obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29), but only then.

Satan will tempt us to sin and excuse it, and to be spiritually lazy while expecting the blessings that come only from committed discipleship. Although few illnesses come directly from Satan, on occasion he will strike a person directly (for an example, see Luke 13:16). And at times he plays games with us—bringing intimidation, self-consciousness, fear and so on—so we will back away from fruit-bearing ministry.

There’s no question that Satan is at work today, but remember, Jesus came to destroy the devil and his works (see Heb. 2:14; 1 John 3:8). God is at work with all His power to defend us against the assaults of the devil and empower us with His grace to fight offensively alongside Him.

As I stated earlier, we’re told in the Bible to resist the devil and he will flee from us (see James 4:7). But how do we resist?

First, we must discern whether something is of the devil or not. Paul tells us to “test the spirits” (1 John 4:1). “Discerning of spirits” is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor. 12:10).

What we need to realize is that not everything that is spectacular or appears to be supernatural is from God because

Satan can masquerade as an angel of light and, through false Messiahs and false prophets, do signs and wonders (see 2 Cor. 11:14; Matt. 24:24).

On the other hand, not everything that is amiss is directly from the devil. Often Jesus did not cast out a demon but ministered healing to an afflicted person or called him to repent.

Second, we must focus on God, not Satan. Unless there is a definite manifestation of the demonic, it's better to praise Jesus than to chase demons.

Third, get prepared for battle. We must resist, not just acknowledge, the work of Satan. We resist him when we are "steadfast in the faith" (1 Pet. 5:9) and refuse to "give place to the devil" (Eph. 4:26-27) through our conduct or attitude.

Since some kinds of evil spirits come out only by prayer and fasting, part of our preparation is to learn how to pray and fast effectively (see Matt. 17:21). And since we are doing battle we must put on the whole armor of God (see Eph. 6:10-18).

Fourth, we must enter the battle with confidence. At the cross Satan was judged and cast out (see John 12:31; 16:11). Though there is still a significant mopping up operation underway, Satan's power is broken and his works destroyed (Heb. 2:14-15; 1 John 3:8).

Finally, we can command evil spirits to leave. Jesus said we would do even greater works than He did, and He cast out

demons. He gave us not only the authority but also the mandate to do it (see Mark 16:17).

Don't cower before Satan. Like most schoolyard bullies, much of his power comes from bluff and intimidation. As Martin Luther suggests, "The best way to drive out the devil, if he will not yield to texts of Scripture, is to jeer and flout him, for he cannot bear scorn."

The devil is real, but he's not God—and God, who is in you, is greater.

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