

Answering 4 Common Questions About Satan

I used to think that Satan (or the devil) was behind all my temptations and every evil I encountered. I assumed he operated like the Satan figure of C.S. Lewis' satirical novel, *The Screwtape Letters*, orchestrating a network of demons to lead Christians astray. I believed my soul was caught in a battle between God and Satan and regarded my inner struggles as the devil's assault on my life. This all changed when I read what Paul says about Satan in his letters to the Thessalonian church. Here's how Paul's letters challenge some of our assumptions about Satan.

Is Satan really omnipresent?

Paul knew Satan's work. He encountered it shortly after being driven out of Thessalonica (see Acts 17:1–15). Paul wanted to return to the church he had helped establish, but every attempt failed. Writing to explain why he had not returned to see the Thessalonian believers since his departure, Paul says, “we wished to come to you—even I, Paul, once and again—but Satan hindered us” (1 Thess. 2:18).

Paul believed Satan acted in particular moments in specific places—such as the road between Paul and the city of Thessalonica. This verse also suggests that Paul believed Satan not only targets individual believers, but the relationships between believers (see 2 Cor. 2:11). Satan did not merely “block” Paul's journey back to Thessalonica (NIV); he “blocked” his reunion with his fellow believers in Thessalonica—his hope, joy and crown at the Lord's coming (1 Thess. 2:19).

The particularity of Satan's actions in 1 Thessalonians 2:18 and 3:5 helps us see that he is not omnipresent. Other

passages of the Bible confirm this. The book of James tells believers that Satan will flee from their presence if they resist his temptations (4:7). From the temptation narratives in the Gospels, we see that Satan is spatially limited—he departs from the desert when Jesus resists his temptations (Matt .4:11; Luke 4:13). By contrast, the Bible ascribes omnipresence to God alone (Deut .4:39; Ps. 139:7–12; Acts 17:24–25).

Is Satan really behind every temptation?

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul describes how Satan tried to corrupt the faith of the fledgling Thessalonian church and thwart his missionary efforts by preventing his return to them (1 Thess. 2:18; 3:5). He writes about Satan opposing his ministry by sending a “thorn ... in the flesh” or a “messenger of Satan” (2 Cor. 12:7). He even calls Satan the “god” (*theos*, θεός) of this world (2 Cor. 4:4). Certainly Paul regarded Satan as a powerful and dangerous figure. Yet nowhere in his letters does he describe Satan as the source of all temptation. Instead, Paul and the other early Christians write that our fallen human nature and evil desires (“flesh”) can also cause temptation in our lives (Gal 5:17; James 1:14). Paul believed that God is the one with ultimate power over temptation (1 Cor. 10:13). Satan’s temptations may challenge God’s sovereignty, but they will not overcome it.

Is Satan powerful?

If Paul and the other New Testament writers did not believe that Satan is omnipresent and the source of all temptation, then what do they say about Satan? The second reference to Satan in 1 Thessalonians provides a clue. Paul tells the Thessalonian church that he sent Timothy in his place “when I could no longer endure it, I sent to inquire about your faith, lest by some means the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor might have been in vain” (1 Thess. 3:5). Here, Paul refers to Satan using the title “the tempter.” Satan is

frequently associated with the activity of temptation in Jewish and Christian traditions. Writings from the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament all contain references to Satan's temptations of God's people.

Paul experienced Satan's work, and he now feared that "the tempter" (Satan) would attack the Thessalonian church. What was this temptation? Paul's stay in the city was brief and ended abruptly, before the Thessalonians could mature in their faith. Thus, it seems Satan's temptation was for the Thessalonians to abandon their Christian faith so that they could escape the "afflictions" they faced because of their belief (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14; 3:3, 7). Paul was concerned for the Thessalonians' behavior (1 Thess. 4:1–8), but it was their faith, not their morality, he feared Satan would tempt.

Other New Testament writers also believed Satan was a powerful being who sought to harm God's people. The Gospels, for example, frequently narrate Satan's efforts to challenge Jesus during His ministry (see Matt. 4:1–11; Luke 22:3, 31; John 8:44). In Acts 5:3, Peter accuses Satan of filling the heart of Ananias. Paul's letters include several references to Satan's schemes against Christians (see 2 Cor. 2:11; 12:7). Hebrews speaks of the devil possessing the power of death (Heb. 2:14). The New Testament also depicts Satan as the cause of temptation (1 Cor. 7:5; James 4:7; 1 Pet 5:8).

Will Satan succeed?

Paul and the other New Testament writers did not believe Satan would prevail in his efforts to corrupt God's people. Early Christians believed that God had judged all evil powers and figures—including Satan, but also sin and death—through Christ's death on the cross (Rom. 6:7–10; 1 Cor. 15:26; 1 John 3:10). This means that God "disarmed" every power opposed to Him, though they remain active until the day of judgment (Col 2:15).

The promise of God's ultimate victory is the foundational belief about Satan in the New Testament. Paul draws on this hope as he comforts the Roman Christians by telling them God will soon "crush" Satan under their feet (Rom. 16:20). The New Testament teaches believers to resist the temptations of Satan, knowing God has defeated Satan and equipped His people to stand against him (Eph. 6:11; James 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:8–9). Having defeated the forces of sin and death through the cross, God will one day destroy Satan, the ancient serpent and enemy of God's people (Rev. 12:9–12; 20:10). As Paul writes to the Corinthians, Christ will destroy every power and authority and place them under His feet so that God may be all in all (1 Cor. 15:24–28).

Paul's letters changed my ideas about Satan. I understand more fully now that only God is omnipresent; Satan is a created being with limited power. This also means that Satan is not the source of all evil and temptation—I can be my own source of temptation. Yet I am even more aware of Satan's threat in my life. Although God has disarmed Satan through the cross, Satan remains relentless in his quest to corrupt the faith and fellowship of God's people. We must stand strong against him and against our own selfish desires {eoa}

Article courtesy of Bible Study Magazine published by Faithlife Corporation. Originally published in print, Vol. 5 No. 5.