

Devils and Demons: Their Powers and Limitations

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The Bible itself does not tell us much about the origins of Satan and his henchmen and the circumstances of their fall. Therefore we do not need to know much about these particular items, for Scripture gives us all we need to know for our salvation.

On the other hand, we should not forget his existence nor underestimate him. Some of the greatest defeats in history have been suffered by generals who have underestimated their opponents. Scripture warns us that the devil is a roaring lion who seeks to “devour” Christians. Therefore we should not overlook or underestimate the power of the devil. Scripture does give us a lot of information on how the devil works to deceive men and what kind of tactics, such as temptation and false doctrine, he uses. He has great power and uses it to sow destruction. If we did not have God’s power behind us, we would soon be overwhelmed. However, the lesson that Scripture teaches in regard to the powers and limitations of the devil is this: The devil’s power to work harm in the world, though awesome, extends only as far as God permits.

Part One—The Powers of the Devil

The names of the devil

Before we address the question of what the devil can and can’t do, let’s first see what Scripture has to say about who and what the devil is.

The first time we hear of the devil is of course in the account of the fall of man. There he is called the serpent. He appeared in the form of a serpent to deceive Eve. After the fall God cursed the serpent as a species: “Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life” (Gn 3:14). The description of the devil as a serpent is fitting—snakes are often poisonous, and the devil poisons men against God. Snakes are unpleasant to see, to hear, and to touch. So men should realize that the devil too is unpleasant—any association with him or his teachings is dangerous, just as it is dangerous to play with a cobra. A cobra can bring death. So can the devil—eternal death.

We can learn a good deal about the devil by looking at the names Scripture gives him:

Satan. The devil is also known as Satan. According to the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, “Satan” means “adversary, one who withstands.”¹ This name fits him to a “t.” He is God’s enemy who tries to wreck everything God does, much as the Noid in the commercial likes to wreck frozen pizzas. (I include this reference because of Luther’s remark, “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.”) “Satan” is also translated as “accuser.” This translation is fitting as well, for that is what an adversary does. He quarrels with his opponent, and accuses him before others. Satan loves to point out to God the sins of men. I have a niece about 4 years old. She has a brother about a year younger. I heard that on one occasion she got her brother to climb up on a window ledge, and once he did, she quickly ran and told her mother on him. This is much the same way Satan operates, except on a much larger and more insidious scale. He does his best to get us to sin, and once we do, he’s the first one to tell God about it. In the book of Zechariah we find him carrying out this activity: “Then he [the angel] showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him” (Zch 3:1).

Devil. This name comes from a Greek word meaning “slanderer.” This too is a very fitting name for Satan. In the garden of Eden he slandered God—“Did God really say that?” Satan slandered Job to God, “Stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face” (Job 1:11).

Belial. In 2 Cor 6:15 the devil is called Belial, “worthlessness.” In the context the worship of God is contrasted with the worship of idols. Such worship is Satan-inspired. Since there is no profit whatsoever in idol-worship, the name of “worthlessness” for Satan is fitting.

Beelzebub. This name was originally the name of a Philistine deity. It meant “Lord of the flies.” Certainly all that is unclean, nasty, and irritating may be associated with the devil.

Destroyer. In the book of Revelation the devil is called Abaddon and Apollyon. Both names mean “Destroyer.” The devil aims to destroy God’s creation, especially the souls of men.

Other names of Satan include “the angel of the bottomless pit,” “enemy,” “father of lies,” “Lucifer,” “murderer,” “prince of this world,” “prince of the power of the air,” “tempter,” and “the god of this world.”

The origin of Satan

The clearest passage I could find on the origin of Satan was the following from the book of Jude: “And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day” (Jd 6), The devil and his followers were created as good angels at some point in God’s creation. Evidently the devil had a high position of authority and power in heaven. But he was not satisfied with this, he wanted more and even challenged God himself. His basic sin was pride and selfish ambition, as we see from the following passage: “He [one who wants to be an overseer] must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil” (1 Tim 3:6). We also know that Satan fell away from God not long after he was created, for Scripture says that he was a murderer from the beginning.

The powers of the devil and his cohorts

The teaching that there is a devil is not accepted by many these days. Anything that cannot be boiled in a test tube and studied analytically must not exist. Prevailing intellectual opinion is anti-supernatural. That need not bother us, for “the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength” (1 Cor 1:25).

We may rest assured that the devil and his cohorts do exist, not that the existence of an evil personage who would delight to see us suffer eternally could be any cause for rest. Satan exists—not only in our imaginations but also in a very real way. Did not our Lord say to Peter, “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat” (Lk 22:31)?

The presence of evil in our world cannot be denied. Did not Hitler send millions of Jews and other undesirables to the concentration camps to be starved, overworked, mistreated, burned, gassed, and shot? In this century wars have reaped millions of lives and left untold others bereaved and saddened. Murders occur on a daily basis. Adulterous affairs are commonplace. Societies distort values to such an extent that those who oppose homosexuality and speak against it are viewed as the evil parties. Does all of this wickedness come from man himself? To be sure, he has a culpable role in all of this, but there is a mastermind behind it all, a supernatural mastermind. And that is Satan.

Satan indeed is active in our world today, as this section points out. His powers are formidable. The dragon in Revelation chapter 12, a symbol of the devil, sweeps one third of the

stars out of the sky with his tail. The following section is intended to give a view as to what power Satan has.

Scripture does not tell us precisely what the bounds of Satan's power are. For example, it does not say that Satan can cause men to have strokes, but he can't cause them to have heart attacks. It does not tell us that the devil can take possession only of males under the age of thirty. However, Scripture does give us examples of what he can do. We can get a good idea of his power by studying these examples. I have divided these examples into two categories—his physical powers over men, and his spiritual powers over men.

Physical powers over men

Job is perhaps the most familiar example of a person over whom the devil was able to exert physical power. One day the angels came to present themselves before God. Perhaps this is a regular occurrence, that angels appear before God to discuss matters and get assignments. At this particular meeting, Satan presented himself before God together with the angels. This fact already gives us a hint of his power, that he is able to masquerade as an angel of light. Some have raised the question, "If Satan was kicked out of heaven, how could he reappear in heaven at this meeting?" My answer to that question is another question: "Do we know that this meeting took place in heaven?" There is no mention in the text of the location of this meeting.

The subject of this meeting was the character of a man named Job. "Then the Lord said to Satan, 'have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.'" Satan's reply was this: "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face" (Job 1:8-11). God's position was that Job was a faithful believer; Satan's position was that Job's faithfulness would soon disappear should God refrain from blessing him so richly.

God then made a remarkable offer. "The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger'" (Job 1:12). We should not suppose that God allowed harm to Job simply to prove a point. This was not the main purpose of the trials the Lord allowed Satan to lay on Job. The main purpose was to strengthen Job's faith.

After God told Satan this, Satan brought down a number of calamities on Job's family and property. The Sabeans carried off his cattle. A stroke of lightning (if that is what is meant by "the fire of God") burned up Job's sheep and the servants who were tending them. The Chaldeans raided his camels and killed the servants who were tending them. A storm killed his seven sons and three daughters. By the time Satan was finished, Job had only his wife and four servants to his name. And I don't imagine that these four servants stayed around for long, for what did Job have left to pay them with?

In this first incident, Satan did not harm Job himself as far as his health was concerned, but he just about ruined him financially. Job, who had been a rich man, was now bankrupt. However, this occurrence did not cause him to lose his faith or to mutter against God.

Satan was not about to give up in his attack on Job. He again appeared before God and claimed that Job would lose his faith if he were to lose his health. Satan told God, "Skin for skin! A man will give all he has for his own life. But stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face." God replied, "Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life" (Job 2:4-6).

Satan then afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. We know from experience how painful even one blister can be. Can you imagine being covered with them? These instances in the life of Job give us examples of Satan's power. He was allowed to ruin property, cause the death of people, and bring a painful disease to Job.

Scripture gives other examples in which Satan has physical power over men. Satan was the one who caused a woman to be crippled. Jesus said, as part of his answer to some Pharisees who accused him of sin because he had healed on a Sabbath day, "Should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?" (Lk 13:16). A demon was responsible for the condition of the man who could not talk in Matthew 9:32. The daughter of the Syrophenician woman suffered terribly because she was possessed by a demon (Mt 15:22).

An evil spirit brought torment to King Saul. Scripture tells us, "Whenever the spirit from God came upon Saul, David would take his harp and play. Then relief would come to Saul; he would feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him" (1 Sm 16:23). I'm not sure, however, if we can identify this "evil" spirit as a devil, for Psalm 78:49 uses the same adjective to describe the angels who had brought destruction to Egypt. The text repeatedly identifies this spirit as "from God."

The devil for a time even had limited physical power over Jesus. The devil took him to a mountain and to the highest point of the temple (Mt 4:5,8). This should not surprise us, for Pilate, a man, is spoken of as having power over Jesus.

The devil could exert physical influence against the apostles. Paul wrote the congregation in Thessalonica, "We wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan stopped us" (1 Th 2:18). Here the devil had some influence over a physical process—he kept Paul from traveling to Thessalonica. Paul doesn't say how he did it, but he did. If the devil could cause physical harm to Jesus and the apostles, there is no reason to think that he cannot cause us physical harm.

Satan has power not only to bring pain and suffering to individuals. His power and influence extend to the nations and kingdoms of the world. In 1 Chr 21:1 we read: "Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel." In a crafty, round-about way, Satan schemed to bring harm to God's people. His plan worked, for God chastised the people of Israel for the pride of their king. Because David had sinned, God told him through the prophet Gad, "I am giving you three options. Choose one of them for me to carry out against you" (1 Chr 21:10). The three options were these: three years of famine, three months of being swept away before the enemies of Israel, or three days of plague. David chose the last, and as a result, 70,000 men in Israel died of sickness. This was an indirect result of Satan's temptation.

The book of Daniel contains reference to Satan's influence in the nations of the world. In one of the visions seen by Daniel, an angel told him, "Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia" (Dn 10:12,13). The "prince of the Persian kingdom" is likely a reference to the devil or one of his angels, since it is unlikely that a mere man could offer an angel (or the Son of God, who is likely the one speaking to Daniel in this vision) so much resistance. We should also note that the same Hebrew word for "prince" is used for the prince of Persia and the archangel Michael. If this is a reference to the devil, then we see him battling with archangels and even God himself over the destiny of nations.

Scripture also makes reference to Satan's influence over the kingdoms and nations of the world when it calls him the prince of this world. Jesus told his disciples on the night before his crucifixion, "I will not speak with you much longer, for the prince of this world is coming. He has no hold on me, but the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me." The prince of the world was coming. Was not Jesus referring to the soldiers sent by the high priests and the mistreatment he was about to receive at the hands of men who were guided by the devil? Satan was about to launch his final onslaught against Jesus, bringing on blows and wounds and insults and the cross, but his attack failed.

Spiritual powers over men

We have seen that the devil has considerable influence in the physical affairs of the world. What he really wants, however, is spiritual control over men. He wants their minds to be attuned to his will instead of God's will. Ultimately, he wants men to worship him instead of God.

a. Demon possession

The first area we want to consider is demon possession. This topic really falls into both categories—physical and spiritual control over men.

Scripture shows that demons are in certain circumstances able to possess men. They take over bodily control of the person and use that body as they so desire. They also seem to have spiritual control over the individual in most cases of possession.

A prime example of demon-possession is the man in the region of the Gerasenes. We have this account in Mark:

When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an evil spirit came from the tombs to meet him. This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him any more, not even with a chain. For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones (Mk 5:2-5).

This man was possessed with a legion of demons, and had superhuman strength as a result. I wonder if Bible critics who deny the supernatural could produce an example of an insane person who has the power to tear iron chains. Other examples of demon-possession in Scripture are the following: A boy had epilepsy and often fell into fires or bodies of water because a demon had control of his body (Mt 17:15,16). Mary Magdalene had seven demons driven out of her (Mk 16:9).

The demons who possessed men seem to have had some control over the souls of those they occupied. People possessed by demons often tried to stir up trouble for Jesus and the apostles. A demon-possessed man in the synagogue in Capernaum cried out to Jesus, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" (Mk 1:24). A demon-possessed slave girl followed Paul and Silas around the town of Philippi, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved" (Ac 16:17). Jesus alluded to the spiritual control demons exert over humans when he said, just after he had cast out a demon,

When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes seven other spirits more

wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first (Lk 11:24-26).

The seven more-wicked spirits enter the man and produce even more spiritual wreckage, leaving the man farther from God.

Can there be demon-possession today? Since there was demon-possession in the days of the apostles after Christ ascended into heaven, there seems to be no reason to claim that there can be no demon-possession today. In a country such as ours, where human reason has accomplished much and where supernaturalism is considered unreasonable, reported cases of demon-possession are few. Unger has an explanation for this:

Demons, notoriously clever and intelligent themselves, have a superlatively wise and cunning leader. It is only reasonable to conclude that they are adapting their stratagems to the enlightenment of the age and the locality. With the crude savage, Satan may best accomplish his purpose as a “roaring lion,” inspiring dread and base fear, but with the cultured and educated, in a so-called Christian society, he can often work more effectively when disguised as “an angel of light.”ⁱⁱ

Indeed, in cultures that do not lay so much stress on science and human reason, there are many reports of demon-possession. One of our former missionaries to Africa, Ernst Wendland, reports second-hand the story of Amai Mweenda:

Amai Mweenda is very sick. She has a severe earache. It will not go away. It causes buzzing sounds inside her head. She dreams strange dreams. Since the ‘Azungus’ (Europeans) came to her country with their strange machines, she dreams about airplanes and is very much frightened whenever a plane passes overhead.ⁱⁱⁱ

He then reports a tribal dance which was held in an effort to drive the evil spirits out of her:

The dancing carries on through most of the night. People eat. They drink. They clap their hands. Some of the dancers are shaking their arms and legs at a pace which is incredible. Amai Mweenda is leading it all. She, besides the witch doctor, is the center of attraction. She revels in this newly found prominence, and it is for her well-being that this is done. Through it all she stares into space as if in a trance. Her movements follow the drumming as one possessed. She is possessed.^{iv}

Note: this is the conclusion of the storyteller as related to Wendland. What conclusion does Wendland reach about the possibility of demon-possession in cultures such as the African? He writes,

Many of these stories and experiences defy any kind of human logic or reasonable explanation. Frequently one is at a loss to know just what to say when confronted with them. Is a satanic power at work, struggling mightily to stave off the ever-increasing power and influence of Christianity?...Certainly it is more to the point to ask, ‘How can these people be helped?’^v

He then reaches the conclusion that they can be helped best by turning to the Almighty in prayer.

The above reference is cited to show that there are references to demon-possession by missionaries in our church fellowship, We can respect their opinion because they share in our beliefs and in our respect for Scripture. The reports of a missionary in a church that has an abnormal interest in healings and exorcisms might not be as reliable. There are reports from other sources that can be viewed as reliable, however, since they take a reserved view toward demon possession. We might view as reliable the reports of Dr. Nevius, a missionary to China in

the late nineteenth century. The attitude with which he approached demon possession is explained in the following:

I brought with me to China a strong conviction that a belief in demons, and communications with spiritual beings, belongs exclusively to a barbarous and superstitious age, and at present can consist only with mental weakness and want of culture.^{vi}

This Dr. Nevius later studied cases of demon possession and came to the conclusion that there were real cases of it in 19th century China. His study led him to come up with certain classical signs of possession:

1. The chief differentiating mark of so-called demon possession is the automatic presentation and the persistent and consistent acting out of a new personality.
 - a. The new personality says he is a demon.
 - b. He uses personal pronouns; first person for the demon, third person for the possessed.
 - c. The demon uses titles or names.
 - d. The demon has sentiments, facial expressions and physical manifestations that harmonize with the above.
2. Another differentiating mark of demon possession is the evidence it gives of knowledge and intellectual power not possessed by the subject.
3. Another differentiating mark of demonomania intimately connected with the assumption of a new personality is that with the change of personality there is a complete change of moral character (aversion and hatred to God and especially to Christ.)^{vii}

Can the devil possess a Christian? I consider this an open question as far as a Christian's body is concerned. As far as the soul is concerned, see the section below entitled "God's promises to Christians." Pieper in his *Christian Dogmatics* maintains that the devil can possess a Christian bodily; he cites as proof the case of the demoniac in Luke 8:38,39. After Jesus casts the devils out of this man, he sat at Jesus feet and begged to go with him. Obviously this man now was a believer. Scripture, however, does not tell us when this man became a believer—was it before he became possessed, or after?

We need to be careful in this connection. Mental illness is a malady which may strike Christians so that they are not in their right mind, and are therefore not responsible for their actions. If an illness can wrest physical and mental control from a person, cannot a demon? Dr. Siegbert Becker has this to say:

I would be inclined to agree with Dr. Walther that we can assume that also believers can be possessed, but that they should be comforted with the assurance that the Lord Jesus has taken away their sins and will not hold them accountable for obscenities and blasphemies which they have uttered involuntarily. On the other hand, they should be reminded of the promise of God that says, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you."^{viii}

For the worried person who asks, "You mean that the devil could possibly take control of my mind and body?" I would ask in return, "Where in Scripture do we have a clear example of a believer who was possessed by a demon?" I would also point to God's promise to work everything for the good of believers.

b. The occult

There are instances in Scripture where men do Satan's bidding quite faithfully with no need for the devil to possess them directly. This service that men offer to Satan may be done knowingly or unknowingly. The devil has tricked these men into worshipping him instead of God.

Those who practice the occult do the devil's bidding. This includes those who practice magic and sorcery and all the black arts. (Note: performers like David Copperfield who practice sleight of hand tricks for entertainment and who claim no supernatural powers for themselves would not be included here.) God has a stern warning against such practices in Dt 18:11-12: "Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord, and because of these detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you."

Satan on occasion works his powers through men who serve as his tools. The Antichrist is one such tool: "The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing" (2 Th 2:9,10).

Those who practice magic or claim to practice magic are also tools of the devil. The sorcerer Bar-Jesus or Elymas certainly filled that role well. Paul and Barnabus met up with him on the island of Paphos: "There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabus and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith" (Ac 13:6-8). Elymas was a tool in Satan's main goal—oppose the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our day and age has seen quite a revival in the practice of the occult. We even have those who knowingly and blasphemously worship Satan and form churches in his name. A whole book could be written about this. (One has been written by Dr. Becker.) The subject of the occult is beyond the scope of this paper, however. Suffice it to say that those who dabble in the occult are dabbling in the realm of Satan, whether they know it or not.

c. Deception

So far we have seen Satan's power to hurt men physically and to control them directly. His power in those areas is eclipsed by his power to tempt and deceive man. In this area he excels and takes his greatest pride. In his area, no man has been untouched by Satan's power.

We must remember what Satan's purpose is. His goal is to oppose God, to harm him as much as possible. Since he cannot do anything to God directly, he has to settle for trying to wreck what God has made. (This is somewhat akin to throwing darts at a picture of a person you don't like.) When God created the world, he saw that everything he had made, including man, was good. In order to get back at God, the devil did his best to ruin what God had made. His plan was to lure men to join him in rebelling against God. The parable of the weeds illustrates the devil's activity: "His enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat" (Mt 13:25).

We see Satan's power and talents at work in the Garden of Eden. We are told in Genesis 3:1, "Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made." Satan, called the serpent, knew whom to tempt and just what to say. He asked the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" This question, seemingly innocent, was designed to lead the woman to regard God's command as unreasonable and

restrictive. After the woman's reply indicated that she was starting to waver in her trust in God's command, the devil hit her with this: "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gn 3:4,5). Here the devil hit her with an out-and-out lie. He takes God's words and puts a negative in front of them (see Hebrew). He holds before the woman the false ambition of becoming a god herself, and she takes the bait. Through his craft and cunning the devil easily brought death upon the whole human race.

Another example of the cunning of the devil is in the way he disguises himself in idols. When he leads men into worshipping a false god or idol, he really has tricked them into worshipping himself. Scripture tells us, "The sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God" (1 Cor 10:20). Whenever anyone bows down to a Baal or a Marduk or a Buddha, he is really bowing down before the devil.

As the devil proceeds in his work to tempt man away from God, he pulls out the greatest weapon in his arsenal—false doctrine. Someone has said that the best lie is 90% truth. No one knows this better than the devil, the father of lies, himself. His goal is to get his trojan horse full of false teachings inside the castle of God's truth. Merrill Unger has this to say:

The whole body of revealed truth, as constituting the Bible, inspired and God-given, is the great bulwark and defense against all wicked power and evil supernaturalism. Implicit faith in its teachings, and hearty appropriation of its precepts, moreover, constitute the only, but all-sufficient, guarantee against Satanic subtlety and demonic cunning. As long as Scriptural truth is accepted and followed, Satan and his hosts are stripped of their power to harm or to lead the child of God astray...It is not surprising, therefore, in the light of these facts, to find Satanic and demonic assault directed particularly and relentlessly against the Word of God, nor is it amazing to discover that attack against the citadel of revealed truth is, perhaps, the most conspicuous and potent role played by demons."^{ix}

Scripture identifies the devil as the source of false doctrine. In the parable of the sower the devil "evil one" is the one who steals the Word of God out of a person's heart. The apostle Paul wrote Timothy: "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron" (1 Tim 4:1,2). Paul then lists certain false teachings such as forbidding marriage and the eating of certain foods.

The book of Revelation as well shows that the devil is the source of false doctrine. In one of the visions in this book John saw the devil falling out of heaven:

The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were not given power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes a man (Re 9:1-5).

One might ask, "Fine. What does this have to say about false doctrine?" We must remember that Revelation uses symbolic language to help us picture spiritual realities. We know that we are not talking about literal locusts here, because they do not hurt grass and plants. What real-life locust

could resist such a feast? Rather, we have locusts which symbolize some spiritual reality. Note that they obscure the light of the sun. If we take the light of the sun as a symbol of God's Word, then it is easy to understand the locusts as false doctrines. They come from the Abyss, the abode of Satan.

False teachings also come from the unbelieving world, of which the devil is the prince. It should be no surprise that Satan's followers should take after their master in introducing soul-destroying lies into the world. This activity is portrayed later in the same vision of Revelation we looked at above:

The sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice coming from the horns of the golden altar that is before God. It said to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, 'Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.' And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind. The number of the mounted troops was two hundred million. I heard their number (Re 9:13-16).

What do these millions of mounted troops symbolize? I'll let Dr. Becker answer that one:

There can be no doubt that of all the evils that have their origin in the world, the false philosophies and heretical theologies are far more injurious to the souls of men than the moral evils which lead men astray. Where the gospel of grace and free forgiveness is proclaimed, even publicans and harlots can find salvation. But where that gospel is obscured or completely hidden by humanism, materialism, evolutionism, communism and countless other false world views, men are finally robbed of all hope of salvation. These horsemen that come from the region of the Euphrates are symbols of these false doctrines that the world invents and proclaims.^x

False doctrine is the greatest source of danger for the Christian church and the souls of men. False teachings are so dangerous because they are disguised so cleverly. Take this statement for example: "If you follow Jesus' example and do enough good works, you will get to heaven." Sounds good, doesn't it? Yet we know that work-righteousness is the fastest way to hell. Unfortunately false churches are able to use statements similar to this one to lead millions to damnation. The devil well knows how to make a wolf look like a sheep. With his cunningness and craftiness he is able to make the greatest enemies of the church look like the greatest champions of the church. He has done that with the office of the papacy, which has done more harm to the church than those such as Nero and Stalin who have openly persecuted the church.

Yes, the devil has great power and he uses it cleverly. By ourselves we would be no match for him. Thanks be to God that he has gotten the victory for us. Here is where we see the limitations of the devil and his demons.

Part Two—The Limitations of the Demons

Conquered by Christ

In the preceding section, we looked at the many ways that the devil and his cohorts are active in the present world. Their cleverness and power seem quite formidable. Nevertheless, the devil stands defeated. *Christ has conquered the devil and his kingdom forever.*

The victory that Christ won over Satan was predicted already at the time of Adam and Eve. God said to Satan in the form of the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gn 3:15).

The victory that was promised in the Old Testament was fulfilled in the New. The Son of God came into the world as Jesus, “Savior,” and as Immanuel, “God with us.” He fulfilled the law for us, and as he hung on the cross, he proclaimed what his ministry had accomplished: “It is finished.” He had defeated Satan and released men from his bonds.

This victory is pictured clearly in the New Testament. We read in Colossians 2:15, “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” There can be no doubt that Paul with the words “powers and authorities” is referring to the devil and his angels, for elsewhere he refers to Satan as the one who holds the power over death.

The book of Revelation leaves no doubt that Christ has conquered Satan and his kingdom. In the vision of the seven trumpets, after the seventh angel sounded his trumpet, John saw a sign of a woman who gave birth to a child, and a dragon who came to attack that child. The woman is the church, the child is Jesus, and the dragon is the devil. The dragon was unsuccessful in his attempt to devour the child, because the child was caught up to heaven. Then John heard a loud voice in heaven say,

Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony (Re 12:10-11).

That last passage from the book of Revelation shows us the meaning of the victory Christ has won for us—“The accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.” As we stand in God’s courtroom, the prosecuting attorney is the devil. Now that our sins have been washed away by the blood of Christ, the devil has no case against us. He can point to no reason why we should be punished. God, the judge, pronounces the verdict: *not guilty*. We are reunited with God as his children, and as such we become heirs of eternal life. The door to heaven has been opened to us; God invites us into his presence forever. All fairy tales notwithstanding, this is the only story where it is true that “And they lived happily ever after.”

Christ’s victory over Satan means that we as Christians have been freed from the power of Satan. No longer is death our destiny. Scripture tells us, “Since the children have flesh and blood, he [Jesus] too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (He 2:14,15). The devil brought death into the world by tempting man into an action which held the curse of death. Jesus removed that curse from the world by suffering that death for us. The chief limitation on the devil’s power is this: *he no longer holds the power of death*.

If Jesus has conquered Satan, why do we see him still at work in the world? Why does he still retain awesome powers? Normally when we think of someone who has been defeated, we think of a warrior who lies on a battlefield, mortally wounded, breathing his last. Yes, the devil has been defeated, but he temporarily retains his power to harass men. Now that the venom has been drawn out of his fangs, he can inflict only surface wounds.

We already looked at a part of one of the visions in the book of Revelation in which John saw a dragon (Satan) unsuccessfully attempting to devour the child (Jesus) of a woman (the church). Then the dragon tried to harm the woman and again he failed. Then we read, “Therefore rejoice you heavens, and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short” (Re

12:12). And a few verses later we read, “Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (Re 12:17). Here we have a good picture of the powers and limitations of the devil. He cannot harm the woman, the Christian church. There will always be a Christian church; the gospel will be preached until the end of the world. The devil is powerless to stop it. However, we also see the devil making war against the offspring of the church—the individual Christians. He intends to harass them to the extent of his ability. Satan’s fury is channeled directly against believers.

Yet the fury of Satan is only the fury of a dog in chains. Another vision in the book of Revelation shows us the following:

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations any more until the thousand years were ended (Re 20:1-3).

The angel or messenger who binds Satan is Jesus, and the chains which keep him from deceiving the nations are the gospel. However, just as a dog on a chain can snap at those just out of his range and bite those who foolishly come close enough, so Satan can use his power to harm men.

The providence of God

Satan’s power to harm men stretches only as far as his chain stretches, and it is God who holds the chain. We should not picture God and the devil wrestling over control of the world, as with God holding 80% control and the devil 20%. No, God is in complete control. Whatever power the devil has is only what God lets him have. Jesus told Pontius Pilate that he would have no power over Jesus if it had not been given to him from above. The same is true of Satan. His limitations are set precisely by God; he has not one gram of power beyond what God allows.

God’s control of the world extends down to every last detail. When Jesus comforted his disciples with a description of God’s providence, he told them that not even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from the Father’s will. He also told them that the very hairs of their head were numbered. Do we want to know what the limitations of the power of the devils are? They cannot cause a single hair on our heads to fall to the ground apart from the knowledge and consent of our heavenly Father.

If we are disturbed by the powers of the devil, God’s providence is a comfort to us. He runs the show, and he does so for the benefit of believers. We have the assurance, “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Ro 8:28). Since God is almighty, what, who, can stop him from making everything work to our good? The devil? By no means. A few verses later Paul asks the question, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” (Ro 8:35) Read his answer: “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Ro 8:38,39). That passage has everything we need to know about the powers and limitations of the devil and his angels.

Earlier in the paper we looked at the account of Job to get an idea of the powers of the demons. That same account shows us God’s providence and the limitations of the demons. Each time Satan was allowed to bring some calamity into Job’s life, he had to ask God for permission!

The first time Satan asked permission to bring harm to Job, God gave him this limit: “On the man himself do not lay a finger” (Job 1:12). Satan was not allowed to bring a hair’s worth of physical damage to Job. The second time Satan claimed that Job would fall from the faith if his health were affected. God again gave him a limit: “You must spare his life” (Job 2:6). Satan did not have a choice; he could not rob Job of his life. We may be assured that God cares for us just as he cared for Job; Satan cannot do anything to us beyond the limit set by God. We simply need to remember that it is not for us to know these precise limits as far as our bodies are concerned. Our times are in God’s hands. However, we do know his limits as far as our souls are concerned, as the next section points out.

God promises to protect Christians

I think the question we’re really interested in here is this: “What can the devil do to me? Can he rob me of my faith?” We find our answer in the promises of God. Satan is powerless to steal away those who belong to God. Paul wrote to Timothy, “Nevertheless, God’s solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: ‘The Lord knows those who are his’” (2 Tim 2:19). The devil cannot steal away the elect, those who were chosen by God to come to faith and to remain in the faith until eternal life. Jesus once described himself as the Good Shepherd. How can he be a good shepherd unless he takes care of his sheep and guards them from attack? Indeed, he gives us this assurance: “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:27-30). The devil is powerless to steal away those who belong to Christ.

The devil may come with his temptations, the world may bring sorrow and misfortune, but these things are not enough to rob God’s elect of their inheritance. We have this precious promise in the book of Isaiah: “‘No weapon forged against you will prevail, and you will refute every tongue that accuses you. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and this is their vindication from me,’ says the Lord” (Is 54:17).

We can take great confidence in God’s promises to us. He is able to guard and keep us against any weapon that Satan has in his arsenal. God encourages us to rely on his power. He does not encourage us, however, to become complacent and overconfident. The Bible does not teach “once a Christian, always a Christian.” It is clear from the parable of the sower that it is possible for a Christian to fall away. Some of the seed fell on shallow soil and quickly sprouted. However, the sun beat down upon this plant, and it quickly withered because its roots were not deep enough. This plant represents a person who becomes a believer when he first hears the word but soon falls away because of temptation and/or persecution. The book of Hebrews also warns us that a Christian can fall away: “It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace” (He 6:4-6).

If a Christian can fall away, what value do God’s promises to a Christian have? If we find ourselves asking that question, we need to remember that God’s promises to us are all “Yes” in Jesus Christ. He furnishes us effective weapons with which to ward off the temptations and deceits of the devil. Properly used, these weapons will keep the Christian safe and sound until heavenly life. The warnings about the possibility of a Christian falling away tell us not to lay

these weapons down or neglect them. No armor is any good if it is left at home while the soldier marches out to the battlefield.

The armor God provides us is described in Ephesians chapter six. We have the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the gospel, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit. Note the effectiveness of this armor: “Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand” (Eph 6:13). The armor of God enables the Christian to stand. No doubt about it. We have a similar promise in 1 Cor 10:13: “God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”

The Christian knows that Satan is a roaring lion. We would be well-advised not to underestimate him; rather, Scripture encourages us to fortify ourselves against him. In this connection, the apostle Paul has an encouragement for us:

We eagerly await a Savior from there [heaven], the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends! (Php 3:20-4:1).

If I may paraphrase Paul, “Keep your eyes right on Jesus, who died for you, and the devil can’t touch you.” That is the main thing we need to know about the demons and their limitations.

Summary

This paper did not give a precise account of what the devil can do and what he can’t do. It does not try to show, for example, that the devil can cause death by heart attack but not by cancer. It does, however, show that the devil can do, in each and every situation, only what God permits him to do. God has not said that he will not let the devil test us and afflict us. But he has said that our afflictions will not last forever and that he will not let us be burdened beyond what we can bear.

That is why, even though the devil is a raging lion, we take comfort in the promises of God. We know first of all that Christ has conquered Satan. We also know that God is in complete control of the world. Nothing happens without his permission. We as Christians also find comfort in God’s promise to keep us safe until the end. Jesus tells us, “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Re 2:10).

Scripture also tells us what it means to be faithful until the end. It means to keep our faith in Christ alive through the regular use of the means of grace. These are the tools God has given us to remain in the faith and battle the devils and he wants us to use them.

Perhaps the best summary for this paper would be the following hymn verse:

Tho’ devils all the world should fill,
All eager to devour us,
We tremble not, we fear no ill,
They shall not overpower us.
This world’s prince may still
Scowl fierce as he will,
He can harm us none,
He’s judged; the deed is done;
One little word can fell him. (TLH 262:3)

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ⁱ R. Laird Harris et. al., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 874, 875.

ⁱⁱ Merrill F. Unger, *Biblical Demonology* (Wheaton: Scripture Press Publications, 1972), p. 82, 83.

ⁱⁱⁱ E. H. Wendland, *Of Other Gods and Other Spirits* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1977), p. 41.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 43.

^v *Ibid.*, p. 46.

^{vi} John Warwick Montgomery, ed., *Demon Possession* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1976), p. 216.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 224.

^{viii} Siegbert Becker. *Wizards That Peep* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1978), p. 120.

^{ix} Unger, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

^x Siegbert Becker. *Revelation: The Distant Triumph Song* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1985), p. 149.