

Our Ancient Foe

M. W. Bassford

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Introduction.

- A. If you asked most people in the United States to describe the devil, I suspect there would be a lot of uniformity in the answers. They would probably describe him as being man-shaped, red, with two little horns coming out of his temples, a goatee, cloven hooves, a tail, and a pitchfork. This image is familiar to just about all of us from Looney Tunes cartoons and Halloween costumes. Many of the parts of that description are quite old; some of them, in fact, go back for thousands of years. None of them, however, come from the Bible.
- B. In fact, in the pages of Scripture, Satan isn't really given a description in any but the most metaphorical way. On the other hand, the Bible does tell us a great deal about his character, and that description is reflected in the portion of the hymn "A Mighty Fortress" on the screen behind me. Satan is very real, and he is a being with a personality, but he is anything but a figure of fun to laugh at. Just as has been true for God's people since the beginning of time, Satan is our single greatest enemy, and indeed the word "Satan" itself means "adversary." He can cause our bodies to be murdered just as Jesus was, and if we allow him to, he will also lead our souls to destruction. We are much better off not to laugh at Satan, but to fear him.
- C. Because Satan is so powerful and so dangerous, it's important for us to understand him, and I suspect that's the reason why I got another pageful of questions from the high-school class about him. As tends to be the case with these questions, not all of them have answers from Scripture, but we are going to look at the passages that do discuss Satan, so that we can better understand and defeat our ancient foe.

I. Satan.

- A. The first question that the high-school class asked is, "**WHO IS SATAN?**" We see a fairly good basic definition of the nature of Satan in 1 Peter 5:8. He is our enemy who is constantly searching for ways to destroy us. Of course, this Scriptural snapshot is not complete. It emphasizes how dangerous Satan is, but not how sneaky he is. To quote from the movie "The Usual Suspects," the smartest thing the devil ever did was convincing the world that he doesn't exist. Countless thousands of people are devoured by Satan every day, but few, if any of them realize it because of his great skill at luring in the unsuspecting. Satan is like a lion, but in many ways, he is like a spider too, and we need to remember that as we deal with him.
- B. Along these same lines, the class also wanted to know where Satan came from. That, I'm afraid, is a question I just don't have an answer to because the Bible doesn't say where Satan came from. There are a couple passages that people point to in order to answer this question, but those passages are never clearly referring to Satan at all. It's possible that Satan is a fallen angel; it's possible that Satan is an uncreated being. I try not to speculate, though, because I don't know, and speculation about spiritual things rarely leads to anything profitable. We can be assured that if the origin of Satan mattered, that God would have told us, but since God didn't tell us, knowing where Satan came from is something that is immaterial to our salvation.
- C. Next in line, they asked how Satan affects our lives and what **HIS POWERS** are. These are really the same question, because the only relevant powers of Satan are the ones that he uses to affect our lives. When we look at Scripture, we really see four main ways that Satan acts. The first is through temptation. We see a classic example of this when Satan tempts our Lord in Luke 4:1-2. The entire story of the temptation of Jesus actually tells us quite a bit about temptation generally. Usually, Satan tempts us by twisting desires that God has given us to ungodly ends. For instance, there was nothing sinful about Jesus being hungry after having gone without food for forty days. What Satan tempted Him to do, though, was to use the powers that God had given Him to confirm the word for Jesus' own selfish ends instead, by turning stones into bread to feed that hunger. Satan does the same with us, by taking something that is natural and good and twisting it.
- D. Similarly, Satan works by deceiving us. Paul discusses this in 2 Corinthians 11:3. In many ways, this is a similar idea to temptation. It certainly shows up in the temptation process when Satan tries to deceive us into believing that sinning will be beneficial to us. However, Satan's deceptions show up much more widely than that. He tries to deceive us into believing that God is not real, that some other way besides the Bible will lead us to God, that we ourselves are OK when in fact we're sinners in need of grace, and a hundred other things.
- E. Satan also works in the world by using wicked men who have given themselves over to his will. We see Paul condemn the sorcerer Elymas, who was one of those men, in Acts 13:9-10. Many times, these men are obvious. Just about everyone recognizes that murderers and thieves are servants of Satan. Sometimes, however, these servants are not obvious. A man doesn't have to serve Satan in everything to serve him in one thing, but we can still identify these men by their opposition to God's will. For instance, if we have friends or family in our lives who are trying to prevent us from obeying the gospel or who are hindering our Christianity, those people are acting as instruments of Satan's will. Even Christians can do this as they give in to him. This means that we need to watch out for those who do what Satan wants and not become one of them ourselves.

- F. Finally, though, Satan is able to affect our lives by using the forces of nature against us. We see an example of this in Job 2:6-7. In this context, Satan has been arguing with God that the only reason Job serves God is because God protects him and blesses him. He contends that if he is allowed to harm Job physically, Job will curse God. God gives Satan permission to do anything to Job short of taking his life, and so Satan afflicts Job with boils. This passage is interesting for a number of reasons. It shows first of all that, although Satan is powerful, God is always able to limit and control Satan's powers. This is why God promises us that we will never be tempted beyond what we are able—because He won't let Satan do it. Second, though, it shows that Satan is able to control natural forces. Here, he uses disease. In the previous chapter, he uses wind and fire to kill Job's children. Why? Because he is evil and enjoys causing pain, and friends, that's something that Satan still does today. Too much of the time, when something horrible happens to some religious couple's baby or something like that, they say "It was God's will." That's not true. It was the devil's will. God allowed it to happen for His own unknowable reasons, but it was the devil who was behind it.
- G. Next, in our study of Satan, we move on to considering **HIS LOCATION**, whether he currently resides on earth or in hell. The answer to this question comes from Revelation 20:10. This passage describes the moment when Satan will take up his eternal abode in hell, and it occurs at the very end of time. Satan is certainly headed to hell, but he hasn't gotten there yet. As for where Satan actually IS, that's a more complicated question. Certainly, he is still able to influence us to some extent; after all, we see his handiwork everywhere. However, there are passages in Revelation that imply that Satan is bound at the present time, that he is not able to exert the full force of his power in attempting to destroy the church as he did during the first century. Of course, this being Revelation we're talking about, those passages may be talking about something else entirely, so it's probably not best to base a whole lot on those few verses.
- H. Finally, our students wanted to know, what are all of **SATAN'S NAMES**. Over the millennia, Satan has accumulated countless names, some from the Bible, most not. For instance, when we call Satan "Old Nick," we're actually naming him after Niccolo Machiavelli, an Italian political theorist who lived about 500 years ago and whose political philosophy was widely denounced as evil at the time. Rather than delving into too many of those kinds of names, though, we're just going to look at the ones in the Bible. According to Revelation 12:9, Satan is also called the devil, the serpent, and the dragon. To that list, Matthew 12:24 adds two more names: Beelzebub and the prince of demons. John 8:44 calls him the father of lies. John 12:31 describes him as the prince of this world. According to Ephesians 2:4, he is the prince of the power of the air. 2 Corinthians 4:4 says that he is the god of this world, which is a passage that certain denominations love to jump on to justify their belief that Jesus isn't a real god. 1 Thessalonians 3:5 calls him the tempter. Finally, Revelation 12:10 describes him as the accuser. Put it all together, and we get the idea that Satan is powerful and bad news.

II. Satan's Minions.

- A. With this, we turn our attention from the prince of darkness himself to those who claim to serve him. One such group is composed of **DEMONS**. Our young people want to know whether all demons are ex-angels. We don't know for certain, but the answer is, "Probably." Here's why: We see that Satan has angels that help him from passages like Revelation 12:7-9. By the way, this passage doesn't say that Satan is a fallen angel either. In the context of Revelation, this battle took place when Christ triumphed over death, not earlier.
- B. Satan, however, is not only described as the lord of fallen angels. As we saw just a moment ago, he is described as the prince of demons in Matthew 12:24. The gospels especially have a lot to say about demons and the chaotic and evil work that they do for the devil. There isn't anything in Scripture that explicitly connects demons with fallen angels, but it's a logical connection to make. If demons aren't angels, then where did they come from? They aren't people, God didn't create any other intelligent beings besides angels and people, and Satan, though powerful, does not have the power to create things himself. Thus, although the Bible never comes out and says so, it's fairly likely that the demons are just fallen angels.
- C. Finally, though, our young folks wanted to know about **SATANISTS**. They asked, "Are Satanists shown favoritism in hell?" To be honest, I was kind of surprised to see the question come up. I had always thought that Satanism, the worship of the devil, was something that had its heyday back in the 1980s heavy-metal era and has since died down somewhat as people have found less complicated ways to do evil. Nonetheless, the question's on the table, and the answer is that Satanists will certainly NOT receive better treatment in hell. All folklore to the contrary, Satan is not the one who is in charge of running hell, any more than the mass murderer is the one in charge of running the prison. Satan isn't the boss, he's just the first of the inmates.
- D. Consider, for instance, what Paul writes about hell in 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9. When the Lord Jesus appears in the skies, He is the One who is going to be dealing out retribution. He is the One who is going to be charged with sending to eternal destruction all those who did not obey His gospel. We know the group that's going to get preferential treatment from Jesus. They're called "Christians." The one those poor deluded Satanists are worshiping isn't actually a god. He doesn't have any power to reward or punish. He certainly doesn't have the power to lighten the punishment that Satanists deserve and will receive from the One who is in control.

Conclusion. If you don't want to be punished by God, you can choose to serve Him instead.