

Introduction - The reality of Satan

Today we are dealing with the first skirmish between Jesus and Satan on earth. However, a proper understanding of Satan is difficult because he often masquerades as an angel of light. He can quote scripture, suggest alternatives to God's will that seem plausible and would feed our ego and desire for comfort and security, and be difficult to recognize. In fact, finding powerpoint images for this sermon was difficult because so often people have anthropomorphized Satan with horns and black wings and a terrible, evil-looking face. But he is a spirit-being. He exists to destroy all God's purposes and people on earth. In some ways the conflict between good and evil is better imaged by these two opposing chess pieces.



As Michael Wilkes says: “the devil is an intelligent, powerful spirit-being that is thoroughly evil and is directly involved in perpetuating evil in the lives of individuals as well as on a much larger scale. He is not an abstraction, either as a personification of the inner corrupt self or in the sense of a symbolic representation of organized evil. As the real enemy of God, the devil leads a hosts of other powerful spiritual beings that assist him in trying to thwart God's purposes. Paul calls him ‘*the ruler of the kingdom of the air.*’ (pp. 454, 455)
Let's pray

The face-off between Satan and Jesus

The battle was joined when Jesus was born in a manger in Bethlehem. This was the invasion of God on enemy territory. Scripture is very clear about the reality of Satan and his purposes. Paul tells the Ephesians that: “*in the past you were spiritually dead because of your disobedience and sins.*”² *At that time you followed the world's evil way; you obeyed the ruler of the spiritual powers in space, the spirit who now controls the people who disobey God.*”³

Notice v. 2: you obeyed the ruler of the spiritual powers in space, the spirit who now controls the people who disobey God.

Paul goes on: *Actually all of us were like them and lived according to our natural desires, doing whatever suited the wishes of our own bodies and minds. In our natural condition we, like everyone else, were destined to suffer God's anger.* Eph.2:1-3. GNT

And in Eph.6:11-17:¹⁰⁻¹⁸ *In conclusion, be strong—not in yourselves but in the Lord, in the power of his boundless resource. Put on God's complete armour so that you can successfully resist all the devil's methods of attack. For our fight is not against any physical enemy: it is against organisations and powers that are spiritual. We are up against the unseen power that controls this dark world, and spiritual agents from the very headquarters of evil. Therefore you must wear the whole armour of God that you may be able to resist evil in its day of power”*

To not be overcome by these evil forces we need to have truth as our belt, righteousness as our breastplate, salvation as our helmet, the sword of the Spirit in our hand and “*faith as your shield, for it can quench every burning missile the enemy hurls at you.*” (Phillips).

Jesus Himself said, right before his arrest and crucifixion, “*the ruler or prince of this world is coming.*” Jn.14:30 And come Satan did – with all the despicable evil purposes of destruction he could muster against our Lord – the mock trial, the scourging, the crown of thorns, the abuse and slander hurled at Jesus, the inhumane form of death. When his disciples took Jesus's lifeless body off the cross, Satan was sure he had won. He assumed the invasion had not been successful and his power over all humans remained intact. But that is not true! And the implications of the cross is getting ahead of our story.

What I want us to understand as we continue to unpack The Power of the Gospel is the nature of God's enemy and the tactics Satan uses to try to defeat believers. The confrontation between Satan and Jesus in the

wilderness provides that understanding. I've called this sermon Unmasked because Satan's real nature is clear in this temptation story.

The timing of this Jesus's temptations in the wilderness is not coincidental. Satan's purpose was to thwart, derail and potentially stop God's purposes for sending Jesus to the world. He tried that even at Jesus' birth by the terribly unhygienic place of the birth, and the slaughter of all the babies 2 years old and under in Bethlehem - Herod was assuming baby Jesus, whom the magi came to worship as King, would be among those slaughtered. That didn't work so after Jesus is baptized, the Spirit descends on Him and the Father's voice from heaven came to affirm him, Satan tried to move Jesus off his mission through the temptations before he even started his ministry.

As Wilkes continues in his commentary: "The battle line traced in the sands of the Judean desert is really a battle line in the sands of all times because the outcome has implication for all of humanity. This is the first skirmish that the ruler of the kingdom of the air undertakes to halt the advance of the kingdom of God." pp.454, 455. We learn a lot about Satan's tactics from this encounter with Jesus. And we learn a lot about how to defeat Satan ourselves from Jesus' victory in this initial face off.

Three of the four gospels all have this story of Jesus's encounter with Satan at the beginning of their gospel. It is that significant. So let's go to our text in Matthew four and answer four questions:

(pp) How does Satan try to do defeat Jesus?

Why are his tactics called temptations for Jesus?

What is the outcome from this first skirmish between Jesus and Satan?

And, what are the applications for our own lives and for the power of the gospel itself?

The nature of the temptations

Here's the main principle behind all three temptations: "Satan tries to foil God's plan for humanity's redemption by disqualifying Jesus as a sinless Savior and obedient Son."(Wilkes Ibid., p. 157.) The temptations were to get Jesus to go contrary to God's will.

Temptation one: "*turn these stones to bread.*" Jesus had been fasting and praying for 40 days in the wilderness. He had a human body and so of course he must have been terribly hungry and thirsty. The temptation was for Jesus to use his divine power for his own ends, for comfort for self over the rigors of discipline of his body for God. It was not inherently wrong to turn stones into bread. Jesus could certainly do that. He was co-creator of the whole universe; He brought all things into being which had not existed before. In fact the word for God in Gen. 1:1 is plural and then in Gen.1:26 God says "Let us make man in our image." So stones to bread was small potatoes for the Creator of the universe. BUT, it was against God's will for "the Son at this time was to fast, not to eat" (Wilkes, p. 158).

Temptation two: throw yourself down from the temple and have the angels catch you (like it says in the Bible) and everyone will know your power and nature. But that was violating God's ordained way to reveal Himself and a misuse of scripture and how Jesus would reveal the character of God while He was on earth.

Temptation three unmasks Satan's ultimate goal and is the most terrible of the temptations. *Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.*⁹

Let's stop here, beloved. The powerpoint image here does not include Satan in anthropomorphic form. I expect this was in Jesus's mind. Satan's target is always your mind. His weapon is lies, for a distortion of reality, His purpose is to make you ignorant of God's will and to serve yourself. So our antidote is to fill your mind with God's word and you will have no room for Satan's lies. We will get back to this.

But first the story. "*All this I will give you,*" Satan said, "*if you will bow down and worship me.*"¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "*Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'*"¹¹ Then the

devil left him, and angels came and attended him. Mt. 4:8-11. Satan tempted with a short cut. The appeal to comfort and to avoid suffering. The end result was partially right – all the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our Lord Christ. BUT not by worshipping Satan.

I think we need to take a careful look at this temptation, beloved, because Jesus did not contest the fact that Satan has control over all the kingdoms of the world and thought he could deliver them to Jesus. This enemy of God is much more powerful than we usually believe. It's an incredible, audacious promise. But Jesus resists and rebukes Satan: *Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only Mt. 4:10.*

Applications:

"FOR IT IS WRITTEN"- and there is the first application for victory in our own lives.

1. We win through proclaiming the truth of God's Word

Notice, beloved, that "as powerful as Satan may be and as frail as Jesus must be because of the extended fasting and the intensity of the temptations, Jesus vanquishes Satan with a word." (Wilkes, Ibid, p. 153.) That's what we can do as well.

Tony Evans told this story to his congregation some years ago before everyone ordered everything on line at Amazon. "The preacher came to have dinner with one of the families in his congregation. The woman of the house was very pleased to have the minister in her home and wanted to impress him. She wanted the preacher to read something to the family after dinner. She asked one of her daughters, 'Darling, please go and get the good book. Go and get the book we love. Go get the book we read every day.' The girl came back with the Sears catalogue." Tony Evans' book of illustrations, Moody Publishers, 2009, p.21).

Do we know Scripture well enough that the Holy Spirit can bring it to our minds and we can tell Satan: 'Away from me for *It is written*'? I'd like us to encourage one another in this lived out faith. So let me invite your sharing in this area: Can you describe a time in just a few sentences when you were facing a serious temptation that you recognized as temptation, and the Scripture God brought to mind that you quoted in rebuking the devil?

Sharing

Application #2. Heb. 2:18

The second application from this story today comes from Heb. 2:18: *Since He Himself (our Lord Jesus) has gone through suffering and testing He is able to help us when we are being tested. Other versions say: He was tempted; He can help deliver us from our temptations.* This is an enormous promise, friends. We are not strong enough to deflect or resist all the deceptions and lies the enemy puts in our minds and in our bodies and in our emotions. But Jesus is!! He is able to help us when we are being tested. Praise the Lord.

Application #3 I Cor.10:13

This is related to a similar promise and application: I Cor. 10:13: *No temptation^[a] has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted^[b] beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted,^[c] he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.* Temptations are not sin, but when they "seize us" as one translation says, or "overtake us" we are on the downward path to sin. BUT God knows our limits and will provide a way of escape so we can endure it. Wonderful, merciful Savior, indeed.

Finally, Application #4– Our word of victory

We are not fighting for Victory, but FROM victory. Jesus defeated Satan in the wilderness and ultimately on the cross and rose triumphing over Satan. As Christians we are IN Him, our conquering Head. We then live in His victory and claim it each time Satan attacks. This is the power of the Gospel foreshadowed in Jesus' victory in the wilderness. Jesus had the final word then and has the final word now. Hallelujah!

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