

TIM MUEHLHOFF

DEFENDING

YOUR

MARRIAGE

THE REALITY OF  
SPIRITUAL BATTLE

Taken from *Defending Your Marriage: The Reality of Spiritual Battle*

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# 1

## THE FIRST STEP

### MAKING SENSE OF OUR ADVERSARY



**I** love my husband, but I just can't shake these thoughts."

Sandy sat before me holding her husband's hand, avoiding eye contact. She explained that after fifteen years of marriage and raising two kids she decided to get serious about her faith. They started going to church together and even doing occasional family devotions.

"Then out of the blue, I start having these crazy thoughts that perhaps we shouldn't have gotten married."

She squeezed her husband's hand knowing the pain such words caused. Over time, she was consumed by the realization that she didn't consult God when her husband proposed.

"What if God had someone else for me? What if he had an entirely different plan for my life? I can't stop asking all the *what ifs* . . . it's like a never-ending loop in my brain."

We went through the normal checklist: meeting with their pastor, marital counseling, praying for God's peace, memorizing

Scripture, and so on. She affirmed that they'd done all of that, and yet the thoughts kept coming.

"Am I crazy?" she said looking up.

"No," I responded. "I think you are under spiritual attack."

To my recollection, that was the first time I had ever suggested such a possibility. After thirty years of counseling couples and speaking at marriage conferences, it would not be my last. All couples experience the normal ups and downs of marriage: we argue and make up; we appreciate the strengths of our spouse even when those very strengths sometimes greatly annoy us; we struggle to forgive, but eventually do. Yet, after listening to couples—and my own experience—there are times when something else is going on. Times in a marriage when negative thoughts or anger simply will not go away. Like the woman at the beginning of the chapter, we get stuck in a continuous loop.

If that's your experience, what is the next step?

New Testament writers advocate that the *first step* isn't to learn a set of spiritual warfare techniques but, rather, to gather information. The apostle Paul writes to young believers in Corinth that in order to keep Satan from outwitting us we must become aware "of his schemes" (2 Cor 2:11). Early church leaders understood that following Jesus necessarily meant paying attention to the demonic. Christian author Kenneth Boa notes that "about 25 percent of Jesus' ministry as recorded in the Gospels involved deliverance from demonic affliction." He then draws a chilling conclusion, "The forces of evil did not disappear when Jesus left the earth."<sup>1</sup> If Jesus devoted so much time to the demonic realm and it still exists today, then why are significant segments of the modern church so reluctant to address it?

Far from learning about our opposition, many within the Western church simply ignore the reality of Satan. This aversion to spiritual opposition is not shared by our brothers and sisters within the global community. While spending a summer in Nairobi, Kenya, doing relief work with local churches, I was struck by how local leaders prayed for us. Before we'd head out, a leader would pray for God's protection against evil forces bent on disrupting our efforts.<sup>2</sup> Why are so many within the Western church leery to do the same?

### IGNORING SATAN

Today, many are hesitant to focus on Satan for several reasons. First, one of the most persistent—and frustrating—stereotypes of Western Christians is that we are anti-intellectual. The fear of many Christians today is that taking Satan seriously will only add to the caricature that we put our brains on hold to embrace the demonic. Consider the following observations of some liberal religious writers. “It is impossible to use electric lights and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries and at the same time believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles.”<sup>3</sup> A belief in a literal Satan and demons is “outdated” and “throws away all credibility of theology.”<sup>4</sup> “If we believe in demons then we might as well hold to a flat earth.”<sup>5</sup> Those of us in academia are particularly sensitive to this reservation. What will non-Christian professors and scholars think when they learn I am taking seriously the topic of spiritual warfare? I can already imagine the snide comments and uncomfortable conversations. Similarly, what reactions would you get from neighbors or coworkers if you informed them of your acknowledgment of Satan?

Second, in our desire to be relevant we shy away from proclaiming a belief in demons. When I casually mentioned to a Christian friend that I was writing a book on spiritual battle to be shared at marriage conferences, a concerned look came across his face. “I thought our goal was to get people to Christian conferences, not drive them away. Bringing Satan into the mix is going to make people uncomfortable. Not sure it’s a good idea.” In the end, when our desire is to make conferences or churches “seeker friendly,” we withhold vital biblical information that could significantly protect people.

Third, in a culture where individuals regularly avoid taking responsibility, we resist the urge to fall into the “devil made me do it” mentality. If we open the possibility that spiritual forces are inflaming my marital struggles, am I giving my spouse a perpetual out? “Sorry, Honey, my angry outburst was Satan getting the best of me! It’s not entirely my fault!” Better we accept full responsibility for our own actions than give each other a demonic get-out-of-jail-free card. This attitude was reflected by a conferee at a marriage conference where I merely suggested Satan’s *possible* involvement in marital struggles. He wrote in his evaluation, “I believe *too* much emphasis was placed on the power of Satan! He can’t be everywhere!”

If we are honest, the main reason many of us shun embracing the possibility of the demonic is embarrassment. When we think of demonic influence we envision spinning heads, levitation, guttural voices speaking in Latin, religious fanatics performing exorcisms, and we feel foolish giving credence to *any* of it. But can we continue to ignore this issue?

Having watched the horrors of Nazi domination in Europe during World War II, German theologian Helmut Thielicke felt

compelled to preach multiple sermons about spiritual battle. “Year by year we have seen an increasingly poisonous atmosphere settling down upon our globe and we sense how real and almost tangible are the evil spirits in the air” he began his famous series. “The overwhelming power of these experiences is so strong that it simply breaks through all the intellectual insulation which we are so prone to interpose in order to keep out these dark powers.”<sup>6</sup>

While it would be erroneous to compare the current state of our world to the aftereffects of the second Great War, do you also have the feeling that an increasingly *poisonous atmosphere* is present today? As we watch the news, are we growing more and more concerned that our world, neighbors, and loved ones are a type of target, and that the challenges we face are not all tied to human interactions? As we watch another marriage end or family be blown apart, are we finally willing to admit that *something else* is going on? Following Thielicke’s example, perhaps it’s time to break through our cultural and intellectual insulation. What would it look like to take the issue of spiritual battle as seriously as Jesus and the Scriptures? To begin, let us consider a view of Satan informed by the Scriptures rather than pop culture.



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How Satan has been portrayed throughout the centuries has taken an interesting turn. Early images of Satan from the 1500s projected him as a bestial character complete with horns and hooves. Slowly, Satan started to take on human qualities, as in a 1978 painting *The Devil as Tailor*, where he is pictured as an ordinary man sewing German SS uniforms during World War II. In the 2015

television show *Lucifer*, he receives a complete makeover as a well-dressed, handsome, LA businessman with a surprising soft spot for helping others. Has the transition from horned beast to compassionate entrepreneur contributed to a gradual lowering of our defenses toward this demonic threat?

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## A BIBLICAL VIEW OF SATAN

The reason we take spiritual warfare seriously is not because we've had personal experiences with demons, known friends who have hair-raising stories, or seen YouTube videos of seemingly credible exorcisms. "The primary witness to the reality and existence of Satan is not experience or sensational stories," notes theologian Paul Enns, "but the testimony of Scripture."<sup>7</sup> Embracing the Bible as a God-inspired book that helps us view the world as *it really is* necessarily entails a robust belief in the spiritual realm. This includes believing not only that evil exists, but is personified in the person of Satan. Every New Testament writer makes reference to Satan, and Jesus specifically mentions him twenty-five times.<sup>8</sup> Yet who is this mysterious figure?

The name Satan comes from a Hebrew word that means *adversary*.<sup>9</sup> Thus Satan fundamentally opposes God and his plans. But how did an angelic being described as "full of wisdom and perfect in beauty" (Ezek 28:12) come to be God's adversary? What led to such rebellion? Two Old Testament authors give us a glimpse into what put Satan on such a traitorous trajectory.

Old Testament prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah both give us key information about this cosmic rebellion by first critiquing a human leader gone bad and then moving on to Satan himself.<sup>10</sup> In commenting on the ruler of Tyre, Ezekiel condemns him for gross human pride in

proclaiming that he is powerful, wealthy, and skilled, leading to the final self-assessment that he is “a god” (Ezek 28:2). What could prompt a man to be so arrogant? Ezekiel gives us an answer by shifting his focus from the ruler of Tyre to the true king of Tyre, who inflamed this human leader’s pride, Satan. The prophet then moves away from considering a human king and describes an angelic power. The qualities used to describe this cosmic influence could not possibly be true of any mortal leader. We learn that this being was, in the beginning, anointed as a cherub (prominent angel), full of wisdom, perfect in beauty, blameless, and a model of perfection (Ezek 28:11-15). How did such a wonderful creature fall from grace? God asserts through Ezekiel:

Your heart became proud  
on account of your beauty,  
and you corrupted your wisdom  
because of your splendor. (v. 17)

The prophet Isaiah incorporates the same progression by first focusing on the demise of the human king of Babylon and then moving on to the equal demise of an angelic being referred to as the “morning star” (Is 14:12). We quickly learn that the same arrogance that brought down the king of Babylon equally undid Satan.

You said in your heart,  
“I will ascend to heaven;  
I will raise my throne  
above the stars of God.” (v. 13)

What most characterizes Satan’s sin is the bold assertion “I will,” which occurs five times in the space of two verses.<sup>11</sup>

From these two prophets, we can ascertain the following concerning Satan. First, Satan exhibits strong signs of personality, such as intellect, jealousy, and ambition. Second, as a cherub—an angel who has unique access to the throne of God—Satan continually stood in the presence of a flawless God worthy of eternal praise and admiration. Over time, admiration turned to searing jealousy: *Why can't I sit on the throne? Why can't I receive worship? Why can't this all be mine?* Having spent so much time before God, Satan must have been haunted by two facts: this can *never* be all mine and any attempt to possess it will have disastrous results. Yet it did not curb his insatiable desire.

J. R. R. Tolkien, in his classic fantasy books *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, gives us a creative look into where unchecked desire can lead. Readers are introduced to an unsightly character, Gollum, whose life has been destroyed by his unyielding desire to possess the One Ring. While seemingly an ordinary gold ring, this particular ring yields magical powers strong enough to subdue entire kingdoms. However, the one who wields the power of the ring falls prey to its spell. Wizards are wise to warn inhabitants of Middle Earth to avoid its seductive power. Gollum ignores this advice, spending his entire life pathetically trying to possess the ring, which he affectionately names “my precious.” Gollum is not ignorant of the dire cost of obtaining the ring. For every year he possesses it, he is transformed from being an innocent hobbit to a deformed and sickly creature controlled by obsession to keep the ring. Though possession of the ring is killing him, he cannot stop his tragic pursuit. Eventually, his final doom is sealed as he risks everything to secure the ring. Similarly, Satan knows he cannot

ultimately usurp God and possess his throne, yet he gives up heavenly privilege and position in order to feed his failed obsession, resulting in severe judgment.



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The fact that Satan was once a type of angel called cherubim (plural of cherub) made his betrayal even more tragic. Cherubim were tasked with proclaiming and protecting God’s glory and holiness and are pictured as forming God’s personal chariot (Ps 18:10). They had four wings and shined like burnished bronze. Ironically, after Satan deceived Adam and Eve into sinning, cherubim protected the gate of the Garden of Eden to keep sinful humans—and perhaps Satan—from coming back to eat from the Tree of Life. Many Jewish writers believed that eating from the tree would keep humans in a perpetual state of sin. Thus, in an act of mercy, God placed cherubim—armed with flaming swords—to keep humans away (Gen 3:24).

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## SATAN’S JUDGMENT

In candid language, Scripture informs us of the forcefulness of God’s judgment. Not only is Satan stripped of his position, but he is cast out of heaven (Is 14:12; Ezek 28:18). Where did he go? The answer has deep implications not only for humans in general but ultimately your marriage specifically. Satan was banished to our planet. However, he did not go without a fight.

The Scriptures introduce us to this cosmic struggle with these chilling words, “Then war broke out in heaven” (Rev 12:7). Using powerful imagery, John describes a cosmic battle in which an

enormous red dragon (Satan) flanked with rebelling angels fights against the archangel Michael and his angels. While we do not know how long this battle ensued, John tells us that Satan “was not strong enough,” and the dragon and his defeated angels “lost their place in heaven” (Rev 12:8) and were hurled to earth (Rev 12:9). These outcast angels are what New Testament writers call *demons*. How many fell with Satan? John suggests that one-third of the angels were swept up in this failed coup d’état (Rev 12:4). However, not all were allowed to accompany Satan. In an attempt to protect us, God consigned some angels, or demons, directly to hell (2 Pet 2:4). These quarantined demons were “apparently too depraved and harmful to be allowed to roam upon the earth.”<sup>12</sup> What do we know about the demons free to wreak havoc on earth?

### UNMASKING DEMONS

While we often think of demons as all-powerful beings who delight in terrorizing us, the Scriptures give clear limitations to what they can do. First, demons can only be in one place at a time. In the Gospels, Jesus encounters two men who are afflicted by demons (Mt 8:28-34). When Jesus casts the demons out of the two men, the demons immediately find a home in a herd of pigs. Apparently, they could not be in both the men and pigs. Second, demons excel at observing us but cannot read our minds. After twenty-six years of marriage it only *appears* my wife can read my mind. After years of observing my habits, she can eerily predict what I am going to do or what I am thinking. The same is true of demons who are intently studying us. After careful and consistent study of us, they have a strong understanding of our habits and tendencies. But is it

possible they can actually know our thoughts? No. The Scriptures are clear that the only being who is omniscient is God (Ps 139). Third, while demons are powerful, they have limitations. Mark tells us that a man indwelt by demons was able to break free of chains and no one could contain him (Mk 5:3-4). However, unlike God, there are limits to their power. John notes that they cannot do God's work (Jn 10:21) or possess a follower of Jesus.<sup>13</sup>

While demons inherently have these limitations, the Scriptures are clear that they can inflict disease (Lk 13:11), tempt us (1 Thess 3:5), encourage disobedience (Eph 2:2), and, most alarmingly, plant thoughts in our mind (Gen 3:1-5; 2 Cor 4:4; 2 Cor 11:3). In upcoming chapters, we will dive deeper into the strategies of demons and how to utilize spiritual resources to rebuff them.

**READER** Stop! Before we go further, I have a million questions.

**AUTHOR** I'm not used to being interrupted, but I understand this might all be a little confusing.

**READER** Ya think?

**AUTHOR** I could do without the sarcasm, but go on.

**READER** If God was willing—and able—to send some demons directly to hell, then why didn't he send *all* of them? And while we're at it, why didn't he just send Satan directly to hell? Or even better, why in the world does God create Satan *in the first place!*

**AUTHOR** Good questions. Let's start with the easy one: Why did God create Satan?

**READER** That's the *easy* one? You gotta be kidding. Well, go for it.

- AUTHOR** God didn't create Satan.
- READER** What? I thought God created everything?
- AUTHOR** He did. What God originally created was a majestic angel called the *morning star*! This angel had unique access to God and witnessed firsthand his glory! This angel also had something you possess, as evidenced by your interrupting me.
- READER** What's that?
- AUTHOR** Free will. Thus, this angel had a choice to make—do I continue to worship God, or try to wrestle God's glory from him? Tragically, he chose rebellion and became God's adversary or, as we know him, Satan. But he wasn't created that way.
- READER** Couldn't God have forced Satan to continue to worship him?
- AUTHOR** Yes, but what good is forced worship or, for that matter, forced love? If you knew your friends were grudgingly manipulated into liking you, wouldn't that diminish the friendship?
- READER** Yes. I don't want people to be forced into liking or spending time with me.
- AUTHOR** God agrees. Therefore, he didn't compel the morning star or his angels to worship him. They chose rebellion over praise.
- READER** Okay. But why not throw all their "you know whats" into hell and be done with it?

- AUTHOR** Now we are onto the harder question. Why hurl Satan to earth where he had access to Adam and Eve?
- READER** You have my attention.
- AUTHOR** Like Satan and his angels, God didn't want to force this first couple to follow him. If the only voice Adam and Eve had to listen to was God's, then what choice did they have? Suppose I tell you that you are free to leave a particular room whenever you want. Yet, when you try to leave, every door or window is locked. What would be your response?
- READER** Thanks for giving me an option I can't use. Everything's locked. I'm stuck.
- AUTHOR** That's right. God didn't want Adam and Eve to be *stuck* with him. So, in the middle of paradise he put an exit door—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God was clear. Eating from the tree will have disastrous effects, such as spiritual and physical death. And God allowed Satan access to this couple to be a countervoice—“You will certainly not die” (Gen 3:4). Well, you know the rest.
- READER** It seems like God is really committed to us choosing to love him.
- AUTHOR** He is. It's a key part of being human. This entire book is about choosing to put God first in our marriages and rebuffing Satan's attempt to derail us. Now may I continue?
- READER** Yes. For now.<sup>14</sup>



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If God is committed to humans and angels choosing to love him, then will we have the ability to choose in heaven? If so, couldn't we rebel all over again? The answer is yes and no. Yes, we'll retain free will in heaven, but we won't choose rebellion for several reasons. First, in heaven we'll clearly see sin for all of its ugliness. The attractiveness of sin—so prevalent in this world—will be removed, and our eyes will be open to the full destructiveness of sin. Second, in this life we are constantly putting to death our desire for sin (Col 3:5). In heaven, the desire for holiness is finally consummated. The question “Can we sin in heaven?” presumes that the desire to sin remains in us. In God's full presence that desire will have been once and for all put to death.

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As we close this examination of Satan, it is important to remember one key fact. While Satan is God's adversary, he is *not* God's equal. “There are dozens of references to God in the Scriptures for every one to the figure of Satan,” notes Christian author John Ortberg. “This reflects a sometimes forgotten theological truth that the devil is by no means God's counterpart. He is a creature, not the Creator.”<sup>15</sup> When compared to God, Satan's inferiority becomes pronounced. While Satan can only be in one location at a time, God is everywhere (Ps 139:7-18; Ps 11:4); Satan's knowledge is limited to what he can observe, while God knows everything (Is 46:9-10; Col 2:2-3); Satan's strength is impressive, yet God's strength knows no limits (Job 42:2; Eph 3:20). However, just because God's power dwarfs Satan's, it would be a mistake to think the battle between God and Satan isn't real.

Daniel 10 shows us the reality of this cosmic struggle. In this disturbing chapter, we learn that the prophet Daniel is growing increasingly discouraged because he has fasted and prayed for three weeks for divine help but has received none. Suddenly, an angel appears and informs him that he was dispatched by God after Daniel's *first* prayer but was delayed because "the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days" (vv. 12-13). The angel eventually broke through demonic resistance only when the archangel Michael showed up to fight with him (v. 13). While this passage is filled with mystery and must be interpreted with care, we can ascertain certain insights. First, while God's superiority was never in doubt, at times demonic resistance can hinder his angels and our prayers. Second, if the fight is real for angels like Michael, then we can be assured the fight is equally real for us. Third, even though Satan is inferior, he can still win significant victories.

Not only is Satan God's inferior, he is a defeated creature. The Scriptures assure us that Satan's fate is sealed—he will one day be forever banished in exile. Using vivid language, John assures his readers that Satan—and all those who willingly followed him—will be "thrown" into a lake of fire, where they will be forced to face the consequences of their rebellion "day and night" for eternity (Rev 20:10). However, followers of Christ live in the reality that this final banishment has yet to occur. Our enemy is desperate, wounded, and looking for a fight.

Toward the end of 1944, German armies were in tatters and Hitler was fortifying himself in Berlin. While the final result of the war was no longer in doubt, it mattered little to soldiers defending the Third Reich. Some of the conflicts at the end of the war—such

as the Battle of the Bulge—were the fiercest fought. Why? German soldiers, facing certain defeat, still bitterly fought to defend their homeland. In fact, some of Hitler’s most hardened troops continued to fight for weeks after Germany officially surrendered on May 7, 1945. The same is true of our battle with Satan. The Scriptures tell us that the earth is Satan’s domain (1 Jn 5:19), and though he knows he’ll eventually lose, he still fiercely defends his territory. Peter, when describing this beaten angelic foe, stated he is a “roaring lion” seeking to devour those around him (1 Pet 5:8). Peter intentionally used graphic language to grab our attention and prod us into preparing for likely attacks.

## CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

1. What images do you associate with Satan or the devil? List five descriptors of the devil that readily come to mind. Are these images spurred on by the Scriptures or pop culture?
2. While most of the global church takes Satan seriously, the church in the West struggles to embrace the reality of spiritual battle. Why? When you think through the last year, how many sermons did you hear about Satan or spiritual battle? Why does the uncomfortable idea of spiritual battle cause Western Christians to shy away from the reality of Satan?
3. What keeps you as a couple from embracing the reality of spiritual battle? How often do you or your friends discuss Satan or the possibility of spiritual opposition?

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