

Satan and his Subtle Devices

Aim: To show from the scriptures, a) some of the subtle methods used by Satan to deceive people, and, b) what measures God has put in place to combat him.

Reading: 2 Corinthians 2:10-11

Introduction:

The verses in the reading are most likely a reference to the action that the church at Corinth had to take against one of its members who “...*had his father’s wife*” (1 Corinthians 5:1) From the context of 1 Corinthians 5, we can see that Paul had instructed the church to remove the man from their midst in order to get him to repent (verse 5). And the measures seem to have been effective, because in his second letter, Paul is now exhorting the brethren to “...*forgive and comfort him...*” and to “...*reaffirm your love to him...*” (2 Corinthians 2:6-8).

One of the reasons for this is seen in verse 11 – “...*lest Satan should take advantage of us, for we are not ignorant of his devices.*”. There is a warning here that Satan will take advantage of people if they give him the opportunity.

Satan is not a myth. He is a real character. He is a spiritual being (Ephesians 6:12) who has even been in the presence of God (Job 1:6; 2:1) and angels (Jude 9). He has been given various names – the “*tempter*” (Matthew 4:3), the “...*great dragon...that serpent of old...the devil.*” (Revelation 12:9), a “*murderer*” and a “*liar*” (John 8:44), our “*adversary*” (1 Peter 5:8), and “*the god of this world / age*” (2 Corinthians 4:4).

In Genesis 3:1, he is described as being very cunning¹.

When you read the scriptures, you can see that he was active during Old Testament times (Genesis 3:1-5; Job 1:6-2:7), he was active during the time when Jesus was here on the earth (Matthew 4:1-11; 16:23), and he was active during the early days of the church (Acts 5:3; Ephesians 2:2; 1 Thessalonians 2:18; Revelation 2:10). He is still around today, and will be until judgement day, when he will be cast into the “...*lake of fire and brimstone...*” (Revelation 20:10, c.f. 2 Peter 2:4 Angels who sinned are also being kept until Judgement Day.)

From the reading we can see that Paul, and those with him, were not ignorant of Satan’s devices. In 1 Peter 5:8, we are told to “...*be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.*” Being “*sober*”, being “*vigilant*”, means that we need to be alert, we need to be “on the ball”, in order to fend off the attacks by Satan.

In this lesson, we will look at what the scriptures teach about some of the subtle ways Satan deceives people, and some of the measures that God has put in place to help us to resist him (the Devil).

¹ While the word “*Satan*”, or “*the Devil*” is not explicitly mentioned in this verse, we can see from passages like Revelation 12:9 that Satan is the one that the verse is referring to.

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1) Satan tries to destroy the works of God

Satan works against God and His people (**2 Peter 5:8** “...our adversary..”. *i.e.* our opponent). **Ephesians 6:12** talks about a “wrestle²” that we have against “...the spiritual hosts of wickedness...”. Whether we like it or not, we are in a battle; we are in a fight, and our opponent has been around for a long time. From the time of the Garden of Eden, we can see that he has been out to destroy the works of God. Consider the following examples from both the Old and the New Testament;

- **Genesis 1:31** – When God first created everything, there was no sin - everything was very good. But it didn’t take long for Satan to start to sow the seeds of doubt in people, causing them to sin (**Genesis 3:1-6**).
- **Job 1:6 – 2:7** – Satan went to great extremes to try and destroy the faith and trust that Job had in God – his aim was to try and get Job to curse God (**Job 1:11; 2:5**).
- **Matthew 13:19** (the context is the parable of the sower) – For some people who hear the Word of God, Satan comes along and snatches the Word out of their hearts before it has the chance to take effect.
- **Matthew 16:23** – Satan tried to use Peter to get Jesus to deviate from God’s purpose – he put forward the idea that Jesus shouldn’t allow Himself to be killed at Jerusalem.
- **2 Corinthians 4:4** – Satan blinds some people to the truth of the gospel so that they do not benefit from the salvation that God is offering.

Satan knows that he can’t get God to do the wrong thing (**James 1:13; 1 John 1:5**), so he concentrates on people, on us (**2 Timothy 2:26**). And from what we see in **Job**, he will use whatever means³ he can to try and achieve his aims. Some of Satan’s methods to hinder the work of God have been very obvious;

- The trials that Job faced (**Job 1, 2**)
- The opposition by the Sanhedrin to the preaching of Jesus (**Acts 4:18; 5:40**)
- The Jews who stirred up trouble when Paul was preaching in various cities (**Acts 14:1-2**).
- Some early Christians were thrown in prison (**Revelation 2:10**)
- Secular history records the persecutions that took place against christians, and the horrible death⁴ that some of them faced.

But without wanting to minimise the seriousness of that open hostility, it is the subtle methods that Satan uses that are probably the most dangerous. They are dangerous because they are harder to detect. We can be deceived by his influence without realising it (**Matthew 24:24; Revelation 12:9**).

So what are some of these subtle methods that he uses ?

² New King James Version

³ Job had his livestock either stolen or destroyed, most of his servants were killed, and his sons and daughters were also killed (**Job 1:13-19**).

⁴ For example, being burned alive, being fed to the lions, *etc.*

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2) Some of Satan's subtle methods

a) Casting the seeds of doubt about what God has said.

When you look at the account in **Genesis 3** of when Satan tempted Eve, you will notice that at no time did Satan tell Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. Rather, what he did do was to undermine what God had said. By saying that “*You will not surely die...*” (vs.4), he was implying that God wasn't being honest with Adam and Eve. And by his comments about “*their eyes being opened*” (vs.5), he was insinuating that God wasn't treating them fairly – *i.e.* that God was “holding back” on them. Satan's approach was to appeal to the emotions, not to the intellect. His approach was (and is) to appeal people's desires in order to undermine what God had commanded. Satan appeals to the “*What do I want?*”, rather than to “*What does God say?*”.

As a result, Eve gave in to the temptation and ate the fruit. But it didn't end there. She was also able to influence Adam to disobey God as well (vs 6). The end result was that Satan had been able to get two people to sin, primarily by casting doubt about what God had clearly said.

Today, we may not have a face-to-face discussion with the Devil like Eve did, but consider some of the things that are said by the world (of whom Satan is prince and ruler – **John 12:31; 16:11**) that go against God's Word;

- You don't have to worry about doing all that “church stuff”, just live a “good” life, and you will be OK. But **Matthew 28:18-20** says that we are to do all that He has commanded.
- It's only the really evil people who won't go to Heaven. But **2 Thessalonians 1:8** says that those who don't know God, or don't obey God, will face His wrath. Only the faithful in Christ can expect the reward (**Galatians 3:27; Revelation 2:10b**).

Consider some of the things that are also said in the religious world;

- It doesn't matter what you believe, just so long as you are sincere. But passages like **Matthew 7:21-23** and **Romans 10:1-3** show that sincerity and zeal alone are not enough – we need to be doing what God wants (**Colossians 1:10**).
- With regard to all the different faiths, we are all heading in the same direction, just getting there by different ways. But **Matthew 7:13-14; John 14:6** and **Ephesians 4:5** teach that the way to Heaven is a narrow way, not a broad way. They teach that there is only one way, one faith.

b) Striking when we are vulnerable

1 Peter 5:8 describes Satan as “...*walking about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour*”.

Have you ever seen those nature documentaries which show how lions sit and survey other animals when they are looking for something to eat? They usually crouch down out of sight so they can't be seen, they stay down-wind so that they can't be smelt,and they watch....and wait. And what are they looking for? They are looking for an animal that may be on its own, or an animal that may be a bit lame or injured so that it can't run as fast as the

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rest, or one that is not as big and strong as the rest. They are looking for a sign of weakness. And when they see their opportunity, they pounce.

Satan operates the same way. Notice Satan's timing when he tempted Jesus to turn stones into bread (**Matthew 4:3**). He didn't try it at the wedding feast (**John 2:1f.f.**), where there would have been plenty of food. No. He tried it after Jesus had been 40 days without food. He did it when Jesus was hungry (**Matthew 4:2**). After 40 days without eating, the "hunger pangs" would have been gnawing away at His body. That is when Satan chose to strike.

- when this didn't work, Satan went away to try again at "...a (more) *opportune time*..." (**Luke 4:13**). He would wait for another opportunity.

Consider the context of our reading (**2 Corinthians 2:10-11**). We can see that the man (who had been with his father's wife) had been sufficiently punished (vs.6) – I think that we can safely assume that he had now repented of his sin. There was now the possibility, if the church did not forgive and comfort him, that the man could end up being so sorrowful, so discouraged, that he could just "give it all away". Paul's concern now was that the man could end up in such a low spiritual state that it would provide an opportunity for Satan (vs.11). (There was also the possibility that Satan could sow the seeds of contempt for the man in the hearts of the brethren.)

From personal experience, the times when I feel most tempted to do wrong are when I'm angry (**James 1:20; Ephesians 4:26-27**), when I'm discouraged (**1 Kings 19:1-4**), when things just aren't going right (**1 Peter 1:6**). At these times my guard is lowered, and potentially, sin "...*waits at the door*..." (**Genesis 4:7**).

c) He uses people to try and lead you astray

Satan can use people to do his "dirty work". Consider the following examples;

- (i) Fundamental to the salvation of mankind was the sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross. His death allows us to be forgiven of our sins (**Ephesians 1:7; Hebrews 10:4**). His death, burial and resurrection meant the defeat of Satan (**Hebrews 2:14-15; 1 John 3:8**). If Satan was to avoid being defeated, he needed to prevent Jesus from going to the cross.

In **Matthew 16:21**, Jesus told His disciples that "...*He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things...be killed, and be raised the third day.*" In verse **22** we see Peter rebuking Jesus by saying, "*Far be it from you, Lord; this shall not happen to You!*". But notice what Jesus says in verse **23**, "*Get behind me, Satan....*"

- not, "*Get behind me, Peter,...*", but, "*Get behind me, Satan...*"

Satan was at work here. From Satan's perspective, who better to use to try and persuade you to deviate from doing what is right, than one of your closest friends. Jesus knew the suffering that lay ahead of Him. It was not something that He would have been looking forward to from a physical point of view (**Matthew 26:37-39**). I suspect that what lay ahead of Him was on His mind quite a lot: And now Satan was using one

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of Jesus' closest disciples⁵ to try and influence Him to not go through with God's plan. Satan can use your friends to do his work.

- (ii) In **2 Corinthians 11:13-15** we see another of Satan's tricks. The context is about false apostles – people who in reality are Satan's ministers. And from this passage, we see what type of people Satan uses. Are they people who have "*false apostle*" written all over them? Sometimes this may be the case, but not always. There are times when he uses people who appear as "*ministers of righteousness*" (vs.15). He uses people that you would be inclined to say, "*There is no way that that person would deceive me.*" But Satan is the master of disguises.

In other passages, God talks about some of the qualities of false teachers;

- People who have the "gift of the gab" – **2 Peter 2:18-19** "*...they speak great swelling words...*". These are people who can impress us with their use of the language. What they say can sound really great, but it is all emptiness. They promise liberty/freedom, but they are really "*...slaves of corruption...*" Like Satan, they appeal to the flesh, they appeal to the physical, not to the spiritual (**Romans 8:6**).
- People who are pretty "slick and persuasive" – **Romans 16:18** "*...by smooth words and flattering speech...*". These are people who can really win you over with their compliments. These are people who can "draw you in" and win your confidence and trust.

Note: There is nothing wrong with offering sincere compliments (**Philippians 2:25-30**). Nor is there anything wrong with being a great speaker (**Acts 18:24**) and being able to be persuasive (**2 Corinthians 5:11**)⁶. But the truthfulness of what is being taught is not to be based (primarily) on who presents the subject, nor on how well it is presented. The truthfulness of what is taught is to be determined by comparing it with the Word of God (**Acts 17:11**).

- (iii) In **Acts 20:17-30**, Paul is talking to the elders from the Ephesian church. One of the topics raised was that of false teaches (verse 29). He then says in verse 30; "*Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.*"

Now it seems to be generally believed among the commentators that the phrase, "*from among yourselves*" is a reference to the eldership, not to the Ephesian church in general. And so what was Paul saying here ?

- who would be among those leading the Christians astray ?
 - was it those who had a reputation for "dodgy" teaching ?
- Absolutely, No!

⁵ Peter was the one given the "*keys to the Kingdom*" (**Matthew 16:19**), was one of the three with Jesus when Jesus was transfigured on the mount (**Matthew 17:1-6**) and was one of the three that Jesus had close to Him in the Garden of Gethsemane (**Matthew 26:37**).

⁶ However, these qualities are not essential for preaching and teaching the Word of God (**1 Corinthians 2:1, 4**).

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He was referring to people who had gained the trust of the congregation. He was referring to people who, in the eyes of the congregation, would have been considered to be faithful stewards of God (**Titus 1:7-9**).

Now I don't say this to put a question mark over everyone who is an elder. I say it to point out how devious and deceitful Satan can be. Is it any wonder that Paul says that we need to be "*watchful*" (**Acts 20:31**), and that Peter says that we need to be "*sober*" and "*vigilant*" (**1 Peter 5:8**).

3) Measures that God has put in place

Now all of this could be pretty depressing if God had simply left us to it to fight Satan on our own. But He hasn't done that. He has set things in place, and given us instructions, to help us combat the evil one.

a) Avoid people and circumstances that can cause you to fall

In **Matthew 5:29**, Jesus said; "*If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell*".

He says a similar thing in verse **30** regarding "...*your right hand...*".

Now this may sound like a rather drastic illustration, but it shows how serious God considers sin and its consequences. The point He is making is that if there is anything in your life that causes you to stumble, even if there is nothing wrong with that "anything", in and of itself, but if it causes you to stumble, then you need to get rid of it. It may be the places that you frequent, or the type of books you read or movies you watch, or maybe some type of activity that you engage in. If these things cause you to be tempted to sin, then God says you need to get them out of your life. You need to remove the source of temptation. Better to suffer a small loss now than to lose your soul.

But it is not just some "things" that we need to avoid. There are also some people that we need to avoid. Let me give two quick examples;

- In **1 Corinthians 15:33** we read, "...*Evil company corrupts good habits...*". Just as we are to have an influence on other people (**Matthew 5:13-16**), other people can also have an influence on us. If we choose to hang around with the "wrong crowd", then we can expect to find ourselves in situations that could lead us to compromise our faithfulness to God. We cannot avoid some people in the world (**1 Corinthians 5:9-10**), but God's advice to us is, "*Choose your friends carefully*".
- There can be times when we need to avoid some people in the brotherhood. **Romans 16:17** says that we should "...*note those who cause divisions and offences, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them*". We are to avoid those who cause problems⁷ and bring teachings that deviate from the Word of God.

⁷ Not everyone who causes "problems and divisions" is necessarily a false teacher. Jesus caused uproar in the synagogue with some of His teaching (**Luke 4:16-29**). Sometimes, it may be the audience that is in error, not the teacher (**Acts 7:1-60**).

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Conversely, there are some people with whom we should associate and look to as examples;

- **Hebrews 10:24** – Those who can encourage us to love and good works.
- **Galatians 6:1** – Those who can help us to shake off sinful habits.
- **Philippians 3:17** – Those who themselves are striving to “*press towards the goal*”

b) Stick with good, solid, preaching and teaching

Most of us would be familiar with the image that Paul paints in **Ephesians 6** about the armour of God. In this passage there is both a direct and indirect reference to the Word of God as part of our battle against Satan.

The indirect reference is in verse **16**, where he talks about the “...*shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one.*” Our faith is our shield against Satan’s attacks. This is a defensive measure. And how do we build up our faith ? We build it up through hearing (and reading) the Word of God (**Romans 10:17**).

The direct reference is in verse **17** where he talks about “...*the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.*” It was the Word of God that Jesus used to great effect against the temptations from Satan in **Matthew 4:1-10**;

- verse **4** “...*it is written*...”
- verse **7** “...*it is written*...”
- verse **10** “...*it is written*...”

When it comes to our teaching and preaching, God tells us to; “*Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and teaching*” (**2 Timothy 4:2**)

If you want a verse that summarises the nature and purpose of preaching and teaching, this verse is it (- along with Ephesians **4:11-16**). It tells us;

- what to preach – the Word of God,
- when to preach it – “*in season and out of season*”,
i.e. whether people want to hear it or not,
whether it is popular or not, and,
- what its meant to do – convince people of the truth, and the need to obey it.
 - rebuke error so that they are not lead astray.
 - and exhort and encourage Christians in the faith.

Our preaching and teaching needs to follow these criteria to ensure that we are “...*no longer...tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men...*”

If we don’t have a knowledge of the truth, how will we ever be able to recognise error that Satan may put before us ?

Never underestimate the value of teaching. Jesus was always teaching people. Many times we read in the scripture how that, when the crowds came to Him, He taught them (**Mark 4:1-2; 10:1**). Even on the cross, He was still teaching us things (by His example – **1 Peter 2:21-23**).

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c) God is still in control

Most important of all is that God is in control. We can see from scripture, such as the book of **Job**, that God has overall control and authority. In the case of Job, Satan did not go beyond the boundaries that God had set him (**Job 1:12; 2:6**). And at the end of time, it is God who will be casting Satan into everlasting punishment (**Revelation 20:10**), not the other way around.

While God Himself does not tempt anyone (**James 1:13**), He does limit the temptations that we are exposed to (**1 Corinthians 10:13**). He won't allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able to cope with. Therefore, whatever temptation we face, it is within our abilities to handle it. But even then, if we fail, God has a mechanism in place for us to be forgiven (**1 John 1:7-9**).

Conclusion:

Satan is a real entity. We need to take him seriously and not be complacent. If he is game enough to try and tempt Jesus while He (Jesus) was on earth, we can be sure that he will "have a go" at us.

But we have someone mightier than Satan as our Father – we have God. And while He is there to help us, we still have to do our part. We need to put on the "*whole* armour of God" (**Ephesians 6:13**), not just part of it. We need to resist the Devil, and he will flee from us (**James 4:7**)⁸. And we need to be watchful, sober, and vigilant. (**Acts 20:31; 1 Peter 5:8**).

⁸ But from **Luke 4:13**, we can see that he will come back again at an opportune time.