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Revelation 12:1-17

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WHAT THE DEVIL IS UP TO

We have learned an extremely important truth in our studies in the opening chapters of the book of Genesis, and that is that mankind has a spiritual enemy. That enemy is identified as Satan. Satan is a malevolent killer. Jesus called him a murderer and a liar (John 8:44). His goal is destruction (he blights and destroys human life), and his method is deception (he lies). Satan is the great deceiver. Christians must accept the fact that there is a personal devil. Jesus did. Satan's name is mentioned twenty-nine times in the gospels, twenty-seven times by the Lord himself.

In a progressive revelation, the Bible sets out the character of this enemy of mankind. This morning we will focus on Satan's activity in the world. In Genesis, we saw that Satan invaded the garden in the form of a serpent. In the first reference to him, he is called "the Satan." "Satan" means "adversary." Initially he is called by this term, but later, it becomes his name. In the New Testament, he is called the devil. He is given other descriptive names, too. Jesus calls him, "Beelzebub." In the OT, the first syllable of this word is used for Baal, which means "lord." The second syllables, "ze-bub," or "ze-bal," refer to flies. Satan is the lord of the flies, the lord of the dung heap, because that is where flies swarm. It is interesting that Jesus refers to hell as "Gehenna" instead of Hades, the term which the apostles used for hell. Gehenna, the garbage dump of Jerusalem, was located in a valley southwest of the city. The garbage smoldered and caught fire, and it smelled. So Jesus referred to hell as "Gehenna." It is a place of wasted lives, where lives are cast, ruined and destroyed. And Satan, Beelzebub, the lord of the flies, presides over this cosmic garbage dump.

In our text today from the book of Revelation, Satan is revealed in a face to face encounter with Jesus. I am not going to attempt an exposition of this passage from chapter 12 of this book, but I do want to look briefly at it because it gives insight into the character of Satan. Verse 1:

And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars;... (Rev 12:1 NASB)

Clearly, the woman is Israel. The figures of the sun and the moon and the twelve stars correspond to Jacob's vision.

...and she was with child; and she cried out, being in labor and in pain to give birth. And another sign appeared in heaven: and behold, a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads were seven diadems. [Later in the chapter we learn that this dragon is Satan.] And his tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven, and threw them to the earth. [This reference to a tail is obviously symbolic. It is probably a reference to Satan's rebellion when he dragged a third of the angels with him.] And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her child. And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron; and her child was caught up to God and to

His throne. And the woman fled into the wilderness where she had a place prepared by God, so that there she might be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days. (12:2-6)

A period of three and a half years, in other words. This is both a prediction and a historical description of Satan's efforts to destroy the Messiah. The woman is Israel. She gave birth to the Messiah. Satan wanted to kill Jesus and destroy God's plan, but he was thwarted.

Verse 7:

And there was war in heaven, Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon. And the dragon and his angels waged war, and they were not strong enough, and there was no longer a place found for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them before our God day and night. And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even to death. For this reason, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them. Woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, knowing that he has only a short time." And when the dragon saw that he was thrown down to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male child. (12:7-13)

This explains the hatred shown toward the Jews over the years, and why there is so much anti-Semitism in the world. This is why there was a Hitler. All of this can be traced back to the dragon, who wants to destroy the woman who gave birth to the male child.

And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and went off to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. (12:17)

So we learn that when Jesus came, Satan pulled out all the stops in his efforts to destroy the manchild. That is what was behind Herod's slaughter of the innocents, and the inclusion of a traitor, Judas, into the apostolic band. These were Satan's attempts to put Jesus to death. But God overruled. He actually used Satan's efforts to thwart his plan to bring redemption to the world. What a remarkable thing: God took Satan's worst efforts and used them for good.

Next, we learn that Satan made war against the "offspring of the woman," i.e. all of God's people, to frustrate and hinder them. All through Scripture we find the revelation that an enemy is out to destroy us. Knowing that his time is short, he does everything within his power to thwart God's plan to bring salvation to the earth.

And next, Satan's origins. Much of Scripture remains a mystery to us. We would like to know everything about it, of course, but much

of it is hidden from us. That is why books are published with titles like, “Everything you wanted to know about such and such.” But Scripture does not reveal the origin of Satan. We are only told what we need to know, what is necessary to be “wise unto salvation,” in Paul’s words, i.e. to live out the life of God in the world. We do not know whether certain passages in the OT, such as Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28, refer to Satan’s origin. I am inclined to think that they refer to the King of Babylon and the King of Tyre, respectively.

There are some clues in Scripture as to Satan’s origin, however. First, we know that he was a created being. There were no other uncreated beings except God, who created everything. Secondly, Satan seems to be an angel. He is part of the angelic hierarchy, the leader of the wicked angels who rebelled against God. Certain NT passages (2 Peter, Jude, and our passage from Revelation 12) indicate that Satan rebelled against God and drew other angels with him in that rebellion.

And we know that Satan is a lesser being than God. Dualists say that the universe is under the control of two equal powers, one good and one evil. Unfortunately, Christianity is often presented that way, that God is good, and Satan is evil; and that there is a battle going on, the outcome of which is uncertain. But that is not true. As a young Christian, I was taught that my life as a believer was like having two dogs inside me, a black one and a white one, and whichever dog I commanded to “sick em!” would win! But that is not so.

A more accurate picture of the battle would portray Jesus as a huge lion, and Satan as a little dog that is forever jumping up and down and yapping. Now and then the lion would raise up his paw, and say, “That’s enough. That’s the end of it.” That is the picture that the Bible presents. Satan may be the prince of this world, and the god of this world, and the spirit which works in the sons of disobedience—he is a formidable foe—but as far as God is concerned, he is just a pest. God is going to put him away in his own time. He is letting him have his day now, but that is temporary. Satan has already been judged. We don’t need to be afraid of him. That is the point.

God, then, is not intimidated by Satan. The devil is not free to rampage around the world, having his way. Unfortunately, many evangelicals today communicate as if he were. They describe Satan in intimidating terms. But we do not need to be intimidated by him; things are under control. In the book of Revelation, God’s throne is said to be seated on a sea of glass. There are no waves in heaven! God isn’t pacing the floor, biting his fingernails, wondering how everything is going to work out. He is control.

In Ephesians 6, Paul says that Christians can stand firm against these forces. The Christian life is a struggle, and this Ephesian passage puts that struggle in perspective. Our battle is not against people, circumstances, or things. These are simply instruments that the enemy uses. He is behind all the evil in the world, but we can stand against it.

Since we are in a battle, and Satan is our enemy, it might be helpful if we knew his objective, strategy, and tactics. Clearly, his objective is to be worshipped. He wants people to fall on their knees and bow down to him. That is obvious in the Matthew 4 story of the temptation of Jesus. Let me say as an aside that any man who wants to be worshipped plays right into Satan’s hands. And whenever we worship any man, we play into Satan’s hands. God wants us to worship him and only him and to be controlled by him. But Satan wants us to worship him and be controlled by his philosophy.

Satan’s strategy to achieve that objective is to undermine our confidence in God, to erode our belief that God knows what he is doing. When our trust in God wavers, we do not become neutralists, rather we begin to trust Satan and his philosophy. We have seen in the opening chapters of Genesis that man was made to be mastered. He can never be truly autonomous. Luther said this of mankind: “we are a beast of burden. We were made to be ridden.” But we don’t really believe that. It is not that some people trust God, and others trust Satan, while yet another group remains neutral, living life all on their own. That is a lie. It can’t be done. There is no neutral position. You either believe God and trust him, or you believe Satan and trust his philosophy.

There are only two powers in the world—God and Satan. If Satan can get us to distrust God just a little, and erode our belief in God’s goodness, trusting in and living for ourselves, then we have played right into Satan’s hands. The devil does not attack front and center. He does not introduce himself and say, “My name is Satan. I am going to tempt you.” He slips in and starts working in the periphery of our lives, tempting us to disbelieve God in seemingly insignificant areas. He wants us to take matters into our own hands and decide what is best for us. Whenever we feel that life has dealt us a bad hand, then we are falling prey to Satan’s lie that God does not have our best interests in mind and we cannot trust him. That is Satan’s strategy.

Now let us look at Satan’s tactics, how he influences people. First, he influences by direct possession. We have seen that his objective is to make us worship him; and we know what his strategy is—to undermine our confidence in God. In some parts of the world people do not have any confidence in God. (Regrettably, our world is becoming just such a place.) In these places, Satan can directly control a life by possessing it. Take India, for instance, where there are many recorded instances of demon possession. The religion of India, Hinduism, has a million gods, but no one believes in any of them. Hinduism is essentially atheistic. During the Greek classical period there was a great outburst of demon possession, because the Greeks thought that philosophy had done away with God. Some scholars think that Socrates was demon possessed. People flocked to the priestesses of Delphi because they listened to the demons.

According to Scripture, the prerequisite for demon possession is an empty house. Matthew 12 has an account of a demon that departs a man only to return when he learns that the house has been swept out and cleaned. The lesson is clear: Demon possession requires a receptive spirit. Satan never overwhelms believers who do not want to be overwhelmed. Just as God does not invade our personality, Satan cannot, either. We have to ask God to possess us; we have to open the door and invite him in. The same is true of Satan.

The characteristics of demon possession are given in Scripture. These are extremely helpful, because we should not confuse the activities of the flesh with demon possession. Some people today go around casting out so-called demons of lust, fear and pride. But that is not demon possession. I believe these things are signs of the flesh at work. In Scripture, demon possession is identified by clear marks. There is the mark of *lewdness*, that is, filth (physical, mental and moral uncleanness), and an outpouring of profanity and filthy speech. That is why they are called “unclean spirits.” A second mark is *superhuman strength and knowledge*. An example of this from the NT is the man who lived in the tombs. Then there is the phenomenon of *multiple personalities*—two or more clear-cut personalities. *An aversion to truth* is another sign of demon possession. This is manifest

whenever the gospel, or the name of the Lord Jesus, is evoked, and there is a strongly negative reaction. Another mark is a *self-destructive* tendency. In the NT, we read of people who cast themselves into fire or water in an effort to destroy themselves. Finally, there is *physical impairment*, such as blindness or dumbness.

These characteristics are clear-cut. We need to be very cautious before we attribute demon possession to anyone, because it is easy to blame demon possession on things that are manifestations of the flesh.

Our Lord's way of handling these situations was with a quiet word of command. When he was confronted by demon possession, without fanfare or hoopla, he quietly commanded the demons to come out. That is what astonished the Jews of his day. They demanded to know by what authority he could make such commands. They had exorcists in those days, but they approached demon possessed people with dread and apprehension. What amazed them was that Jesus simply spoke a word and the demons were banished. This is further evidence that demons are no threat to the Lord Jesus. He is in control.

A much more common approach by Satan, however, is to influence lives through an indirect approach. We have only one enemy, Satan, but he operates indirectly through two channels—the world and the flesh. The world and the flesh and the devil are not three distinct enemies. There is only one, and that is Satan.

Let's look at these terms, the world and the flesh. Some people think that the flesh is an evil force inside us that worms its way through on occasion and does us in. But in the NT, the term "flesh" is consistently used with respect to our humanity. The flesh is what we are apart from God. Our bodies come in all kinds of shapes and sizes and colors, but they are animated by that immaterial part of us that we call the soul. We are more than just bodies. Our souls are what make us distinctive. That part of us is our humanity, the flesh. Sometimes in the NT the term "flesh" is used in a neutral context. For instance, the Bible refers to Jesus coming "in the likeness of sinful flesh." That is merely saying that he was human. He was God, but in human form. But almost invariably, the term "flesh" describes an evil principle when it is used of humanity living independent of God. When Paul describes the works of the flesh, he is referring to what we are capable of as humans when we fail to trust God. That is what Satan tries to get us to do—to trust our humanity, to believe in ourselves, our education, our physique, our personalities, etc., to change both ourselves and the world, in the misguided belief that we can be godly without God.

Abraham is a classic example of this. God promised the patriarch that through him the promised seed would come. Abraham thought that he would help in the process. He took a wife, Hagar, and through her had a son, whom he named Ishmael. Of course, we now know that Abraham merely succeeded in hindering God's program, although he thought he was doing a good thing. He was acting out of his humanity. Apart from the grace of God, God's program would have been thwarted through the actions of Abraham.

That is the choice we all face—to believe that God is good, that we cannot live without him, and that his word is true; or, on the other hand, that we can determine on our own, apart from God, what is right and wrong.

The cable cars of San Francisco are driven by what are called grip men. The grip man pulls on a lever, and underneath the street a claw hooks onto a cable which draws the cable car along. This is a good illustration of the Christian life. God wants us to take a grip on him. He is the one we need to trust. If we want to change anything about ourselves, he is the only power that can help us. This is the choice we must face in life: to believe God, or to trust in ourselves. May God grant us the grace to choose wisely.

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