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Satan Is Alive and Active - Chapter 2 of "Counseling and the Demonic"

Rodger K. Bufford

George Fox University, rbufford@georgefox.edu

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CHAPTER TWO

SATAN IS ALIVE AND ACTIVE

Demons are satanic emissaries. If we are to consider meaningfully the activities of demons, and techniques for dealing with their influence, we must first consider the existence and character of their chief—"the prince of the power of the air," "the ruler of this world."

Michael Green proposes seven lines of evidence in support of belief in Satan.¹ The first is philosophical. It is absurd to imagine a universe of rational intellect without a supreme Reason, God. Similarly, it is most reasonable to suppose an organizing spirit of supreme evil behind all that is corrupt and malign. Second, theology teaches us to believe in a creator-God who, though unseen, is personal and good, and is concerned with redeeming

persons from the evil into which they have fallen. Such evil requires a devil, a personal force of evil, unless we are to posit a merciless, tyrannical God.

Third, the world around us is full of destructive forces; most notable among these is the human capacity and choice to marshal natural forces toward evil ends. Fourth is the fact of temptation, exposure to all manner of delightful inducements to do wrong. The universality of such experience suggests some organizing principle behind them. Fifth, there are many who actively worship Satan; these have often discovered remarkable powers, both real and terrible. Sixth, throughout Scripture we find explicit and detailed teachings about Satan, particularly in the Gospels. Finally, Christ himself clearly believed in Satan and engaged in conflict with him. This conflict led to the cross—and to the further battle which continues today.²

In summarizing his discussion of the person of Satan, Dickason notes that Satan is a creature made by God, a spirit being as other angels, of the class of cherubim, and probably appointed to the highest rank among all creatures, second only to God. This lofty position, however, was not enough to satisfy him. He sought to usurp the position of God himself.³ While Dickason's view of Satan's former rank is controversial, it seems clear that Satan is "an organizing intellect, a single focus and fount of evil inspiration, . . . a power of concentrated and hateful wickedness."⁴

In the material which follows we will examine the names of Satan, his character, his activities, the forces which he leads, his relationship to the believer, and his basic plan. The majority of this material will be drawn from Scripture.

NAMES OF SATAN

Names, as they are used in Scripture, portray the character of the person. If we are to understand who Satan is, the first step is to examine his names and descriptive titles: Satan, the devil, the dragon, the serpent, Beelzebul, Belial, Lucifer, Abaddon, Apollyon, the evil one, the tempter, the god of this age, the prince of the power of the air, the ruler of this world, the prince of demons, the accuser, the deceiver, "the spirit that now works in the sons of disobedience."⁵

Satan suggests the notion of “adversary”; it comes from a Greek root which means to lie in wait or to oppose. The Hebrew word from which the word *Satan* is derived means an adversary or an enemy; however, when used with a definite article (*the* adversary), it becomes a proper name, denoting Satan.

In the New Testament we find that the devil and Satan are the same personage.⁶ Satan is presented as the adversary of both God and man. His methods sometimes include direct frontal attack; however, he is also a guerrilla fighter who has mastered the techniques of sniping, bombing, and hostage-taking.

Although the Old Testament introduces Satan and clearly conveys his evil character, it is in the New Testament that we find most references to him and gain something like a full picture of his corruptness. Of the sixty-six references to Satan in the New Testament, thirty-three refer to him by this personal name, generally using the definite article, *the* Satan. An additional thirty-three references refer to him as the devil.⁷

Devil occurs only in the New Testament and is used in connection with descriptions of Satan as a traducer, a false accuser and slanderer. He slanders man before God, and God before man. His goal is to discredit each before the other.

Dragon seems to refer to a sea monster or sea serpent. In Scripture the dragon is used as a personification of both Satan and Pharaoh. The linking of Satan with a sea animal suggests that Satan may be active in the seas of the world as well as on land and in the atmosphere above the land. The dragon is portrayed as a creature of great wrath against God, and seeks to totally destroy God’s people.

Serpent Reference to the serpent first occurs in the account of the events in the Garden of Eden. This name suggests that Satan is deceitful and crooked; we might say that he speaks with a forked tongue. The serpent is also identified with Satan in the New Testament (2 Cor. 11:3, 13–15).

Beelzebub (Beelzebul) The precise meaning of this name is not agreed upon. It may suggest “lord of dung” or “lord of the house.” Its use is limited to the accounts in the Gospels in which the Pharisees charge that Jesus “casts out demons only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons” (Matt. 12:24), and to

one recorded instance in which Jesus used this name (Matt. 10:25).

Belial (Beliar) Found only in the Old Testament, except for one mention in 2 Corinthians 6:15, this word is used to connote “worthlessness.” The expression “sons of Belial” marks certain people as worthless persons. This is, perhaps, an understatement since it ignores Satan’s capacity for active harm.

Lucifer Whether this name refers to Satan is a matter of controversy.⁸ Used in reference to the morning star, this term is thought to refer to the planet Venus. Lucifer means light bearer. In the New Testament, Lucifer and Satan are one, and Satan is said to disguise himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). Thus, Satan’s character as a deceiver may also be implied by this name. However, the primary significance of the title *Lucifer* is that it draws our attention to Satan’s once lofty and honored position. A similar Old Testament reference to Satan describes him as the “anointed cherub who covers” (Ezek. 28:14). How far he has fallen.

Abaddon and Appolyon These names, which occur in Revelation, characterize Satan as the destroyer, and the accuser of the brethren. In the context of Revelation we see Satan as a destroyer of the earth, and especially of mankind; however, the balance of Scripture focuses our attention on his activities as the destroyer of spiritual life.

The evil one is an expression that presents Satan as a person who personifies evil. Not only is Satan himself bent on evil, wickedness, cruelty, tyranny, violence, and the like; it is also a feature of his character that he encourages others in this direction and desires evil ends for as many as possible.

The tempter This expression captures Satan’s involvement in encouraging evil in others. It is within his character to see that we notice opportunities to do wrong—the unguarded wallet . . . the attractive young man or woman who just happens to be married to another . . . the extra piece of pie when we’ve had enough. . . . Such temptation is not usually blatant; it is subtle, lurking just beyond our current tolerance for evil, always enticing us onward to another level of corruption.

The god of this age indicates that, whether we recognize it or not, it is Satan who stands at the head of false religion. He has

his bishops and priests, his worshipers, his sacrifices, his temples. It is doubtless he who stands behind all false cults and religions which through the ages have opposed true worship. He is *The Lord of the Flies*, in William Golding's term. The world is, to a substantial degree, his domain.

The prince of the power of the air is an expression that is subject to various interpretations. Some believe it implies that Satan is the ruler in the spirit world, that he has a vast host of servants at his beck and call to carry out his desires, and that he rules over these with despotic and near-absolute power.

The ruler of this world suggests that Satan's realm of influence extends over the whole earth. In addition to ruling over his servants in the spirit world, Satan also is the power behind the throne in all forms of corrupt government. It seems significant that Jesus did not dispute Satan's claim to some sort of right of dominion on planet Earth (Matt. 4:8, 9). Other phrases which refer to Satan include "the deceiver of the whole world," "an enemy," the father of lies," "the ancient serpent," "liar," and "murderer."

Satan is a personal being, the enemy of God and man. His activity includes slander and accusation, thus implying or bringing guilt and alienation. Although he is crooked and deceitful, he has the capability of appearing as an angel of light, a minister of truth and righteousness. He is characterized by worthlessness and evil, and he encourages and promotes evil among men. He has tremendous influence over the earth, sea, and sky and is a power behind earthly kingdoms. Although not omnipresent, he has a vast host of followers who do his bidding, thus effectively extending his influence throughout the world. He is a false god, the head of false religions in their many forms and manifestations. Satan's power is so vast that even Michael, the archangel, did not dare to pronounce judgment on him, instead saying "the Lord rebuke you" (Jude 9).

THE CHARACTER OF SATAN

In addition to the names and descriptions we have already seen, many additional characteristics of Satan are presented in Scripture. Satan is a personal agent, characterized by will and

knowledge. He is described as active within the sphere of this world and he is also able to enter into the presence of God.

Thus we see that Satan, once a creature of great beauty and lofty position in the service of God, is now cast down. His basic character includes murder, deception, and enmity toward God and all who would serve God. In this capacity he accuses believers constantly before God, encourages their yielding to temptation, fosters the guilty conscience, and, in all other ways he is able, he seeks to destroy and incapacitate those who would serve God. Although his ultimate doom has been pronounced, and a major victory over him was accomplished in Christ's death and resurrection, he continues to be active and powerful in the present age. Ultimately, he is to be judged, condemned, and cast into the lake of fire forever.⁹

THE ACTIVITIES OF SATAN

Some of the activities of Satan are intimated in his names and character. Satan is a tempter and seducer who encourages our every evil inclination. He exploits human weaknesses and limitations, enticing persons to sin. In doing so he uses all of the allurements of the world. He commonly tempts people to evil by the lie that they can attain a desired good through wrongdoing. In the process he deceives them by subtly questioning or denying the truth of God's revelation. We can see these activities in his approach to Eve in the Garden of Eden and again in the temptations of Jesus (Gen. 3:1-5; Matt. 4:1-11).

Satan is a counterfeiter, able to work supernatural wonders at times, such as during the testing of Pharaoh in the plagues of Egypt, thus simulating the activity of God (Exod. 7-9). He also produces false believers within the church who cannot readily be distinguished from those who belong to the kingdom of God (see Matt. 13:24-30, 37-43).

Another objective of Satan's activity is to produce spiritual blindness so that persons reject the gospel and believe in a lie, giving heed to "deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons" (1 Tim. 4:1). Satan is an accuser; he is able to enter into God's presence (Job 1) and there accuse believers of sin (Rev. 12:10). Moreover, he is very effective at reminding us of our

transgressions even after they have been confessed and forgiven. In this fashion he fosters crippling guilt feelings.

Although at times an accuser who induces guilt in people, Satan also is a justifier, excuser, and rationalizer who encourages others to overlook or explain away even major transgressions such as child abuse and genocide (Rom. 1:28–32).

Satan fiercely and implacably opposes God and all who would enter into his kingdom. He is pictured as snatching away the Word of God from the unsaved who might believe it (Matt. 13:19). He hinders the work and welfare of the saints (1 Thess. 2:18); if all else fails he attacks and persecutes them (1 Pet. 5:8).

Finally, with the cooperation of the person involved, usually through some form of sin, Satan can enter into a person and gain control over him or her to a remarkable degree. It is this phenomenon which is referred to as “possession.”¹⁰

Although Satan is a powerful and determined adversary, it is clear that his capabilities are not without limit. He is described as a created being. God sets limits on the activities of Satan. Thus, Satan was able to afflict Job only within the boundaries set by God (Job 1:6–12; 2:1–6). He is similarly limited in his ability to harm other believers (1 Cor. 10:13). In fact, at times God uses Satan as his agent to chasten and correct erring believers (1 Cor. 5:1–5).

Believers are promised that God is greater than Satan, and that nothing can separate them from God’s love. God’s ultimate victory over Satan is assured in the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 8:37–39).

Satan uses Scripture, albeit to his own deceitful ends. He quoted from the Old Testament to Jesus in the desert, seeking to provoke Jesus to disobey God the Father (Matt. 4:1–11).

In addition to being a liar and the father of lies, Satan sends out false prophets and teachers who will lead astray, if they are able, even the very elect (2 Cor. 11:13–15; see also 2 Kings 10:18–23; Jer. 2:8; 5:30–31; 14:13–16; 23:1–32ff; Matt. 7:15–16; 24:11, 24; 2 Tim. 4:3–4; 2 Pet. 2:1–3ff; 1 John 4:1; Rev. 2:20; 16:13). Satan is also able to perform miracles (see Exod. 7:11ff; Matt. 24:24; Rev. 13:11ff; cp. Rev. 16:13–14; 19:20).

At the present time, Satan's powers and activities on earth are held in check by the "Restrainer," presumably the Holy Spirit. During the end times this restraint will be temporarily removed, and there will be a tremendous outpouring of evil and many supernatural events (see, for example, Rev. 9:13-21).

Satan is not divine; he is neither omnipotent, omniscient, nor omnipresent. He has vast power, but that power is definitely limited. He is not omniscient, as is evident from his blunders during the course of history, as seen, for example, in his futile efforts to destroy the child Jesus. Satan is not omnipresent but makes his power felt world-wide through the operations of his many minions. Satan acknowledged his limitations in his conversation with Jehovah concerning Job.¹¹

Satan's decision to seek to usurp the throne of God inaugurated an unrelenting cosmic struggle between Satan and God, between evil and good. By his seduction of Adam and Eve, Satan gained dominion over mankind. This dominion has been broken through the death and resurrection of Christ, but the full results of the victory won at Calvary are yet to be manifested.

The biblical picture of Satan is not dualistic. Good and evil are not presented as co-eternal principles. While Satan is seen as a mighty evil being, his kingdom is viewed as having a definite beginning and will have a definite end. The operation of evil is always viewed as being under the sovereign permission of the eternal God. God allows Satan to continue his work in order to give a cosmic demonstration of the bankruptcy of the satanic lie.¹²

THE FORCES OF WICKEDNESS

As we have noted, Satan is not omniscient, omnipresent or omnipowerful. However, he has help. When Satan chose to rebel against God he did not do so alone. Evidently a great number of angelic beings participated in the effort along with him. When Satan encountered initial defeat and was cast out of

heaven, these angels accompanied him (Matt. 25:41; Rom. 8:38; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6–7; Rev. 12:7–12).

Although references to demons occur a few times in the Old Testament, these are in poetic passages and they seem to be used metaphorically to refer to qualities associated with pagan deities. An evil spirit is described in the Old Testament, but is later identified with Satan.

The Old Testament is consistent in its adherence to a monistic emphasis on one God. Thus earthly (some would say natural) disasters and disease are consistently attributed to the activity of God. However, there is also a consistent emphasis on disease as a normal physical process to be dealt with largely by physical means.

[Ironically, during the intertestamental period,] so pervasive had Near Eastern superstitions become that Jews and Gentiles alike regarded the onset of disease as the work of demonic powers. In Israel, in particular, the physician was of comparatively low repute, since God was regarded as the dispenser of sickness and health alike. When superstitious beliefs in demons arose, the best the physician could do was to treat the patient by means of charms, incantations, and the like, which was a far cry from the nonmagical, empirical therapy of the Mosaic law.¹³

While not a matter of universal agreement, it appears that the best view is that devils or demons are fallen angels, and are identical with those who sided with Satan in the initial cosmic struggle between evil and good. As his agents, demons are under Satan's rule and control, they exercise his bidding and extend his influence far and wide over our world.

In addition to Satan and his fallen angels, the demons, it is clear from Scripture that all mankind outside of a personal relationship with God is also under Satan's dominion and is servant (or slave) to his ends (John 8:39–45; 1 Cor. 10:20). Thus, in the affairs of men, Satan is often the unseen "power behind the throne," the true spiritual leader and guiding force who shapes and directs the lives of men to serve his ends (2 Cor. 4:3–4; Eph. 6:12).

SATAN AND THE BELIEVER

In light of Calvary, believers are promised victory over Satan and assured that soon God will crush Satan under our feet (Gen. 3:15; 1 Cor. 15:55–57; Rev. 12:1–10; 20:1–5). As believers, we are instructed: “Resist the devil . . . and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). We are to be sober and watchful, to give the devil’s schemes no opportunity for success either through carelessness or personal sinfulness (Eph. 4:26–27). The metaphors of stalking prey and of battle are used to communicate the seriousness of this matter. To succeed, the believer is instructed to “take up the whole armor of God”—truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the Word of God, and prayer (Eph. 6:10–20).

Other key factors in successfully resisting Satan include “the blood of the Lamb and . . . the word of their testimony, and not [loving] their life even to death” (Rev. 12:11).

SATAN’S PLAN: IDOLATRY

The original plan of Satan was to usurp the very throne of God, thus supplanting God himself (see Isa. 14:12–14). When Satan’s efforts were thwarted and he was thrown down upon the earth, his activities toward this end did not cease. One aspect of Satan’s current activity involves the encouragement of idolatry (Matt. 4:8–9; 1 Cor. 10:19–21).

Idolatry involves worshiping something other than the true God in some manner other than the true way. Anything which takes precedence over the true God in our thoughts and actions is idolatry. Although most people seem unaware that they practice idolatry, and many seem to believe that idolatry is rare in our contemporary societies, it is, in fact, quite common and widespread.

Any false god, idea, philosophy, habit, occupation—anything which has our primary concern and loyalty or occupies first place in our thoughts and actions, thus supplanting concern and loyalty to the true God—is idolatry. Some people keep their idols parked in their garages; others take them to the health club to keep them in shape; still others devote long hours in offices and factories, or in sporting arenas to attain their idols.

Movie, television, and rock stars are often referred to as “idols,” as are sports heroes. And idols they often are. Consider, for example, the continuing cult of followers of Elvis Presley, who has now been dead for several years. Cars, boats, children, clothes, position, degrees, wives (or husbands), athletic prowess, shapely (“heavenly”) bodies, desires (appetites) for food, drink, drugs, leisure, comfort or happiness, and virtually anything else we value, has the potential of becoming an idol (Phil. 3:19). Even other people can become, and often are, our idols.¹⁴

Job shows an understanding of the significance of idolatry when he says:

If I have put my confidence in gold, and called fine gold
my trust,
If I have gloated because my wealth was great, and
because my hand had secured so much;
If I have looked at the sun when it shone, or the moon
going in splendor,
And my heart became secretly enticed, and my hand
threw a kiss from my mouth,
That too would have been an iniquity calling for
judgment,
For I would have denied God above. (Job 31:24–28)

The breadth of idolatry is identified by a number of Scriptures. Most persons recognize that the worship of carved images of people, or of animals, or of other living creatures is forbidden by God as idolatry (see Exod. 20:4–6; Deut. 4:14–18, 23–25; Rom. 1:24–26). Worship of heavenly objects is forbidden in the same context (Deut. 4:19).

Covetousness is explicitly referred to as idolatry (Eph. 5:5). A person’s appetite for food, drink, sexual pleasures, and for recognition by others, also has the potential of becoming a false god (see Rom. 16:17–18; 1 Cor. 6:13–20; Phil. 3:18–19). Finally, the worship of demons and angels is also forbidden, and is considered idolatry.

In summing up his discussion of the issues regarding eating

meat sacrificed to idols, Paul concludes that those who sacrifice to idols unwittingly sacrifice to demons:

What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons. (1 Cor. 10:19–20)

Through this, idol worshipers are ultimately involved in worship of their head, Satan himself. At first, this suggestion may seem surprising. However, Jesus told the Pharisees “You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father” (John 8:44). Whether they recognized it or not, in choosing not to truly serve God the Pharisees were in fact choosing to be servants of Satan. Such is true of all false worship. We will elaborate on this theme further in a later chapter.

Because “the earth is the Lord’s, and all it contains” (Ps. 24:1), the good things which God has provided are to be enjoyed within the framework of his divine decrees. Even these good things, when taken outside of God’s expressed will, are sinful and idolatrous.

Given the widespread practice of putting other things before God in our contemporary culture, and the reality that sacrifice to idols is essentially the same as worshiping demons, it appears that the issue in our culture is not so much whether the demonic is present as in what form it is manifested.

Most of us tend to think that our contemporary culture is far more sophisticated than that depicted in the Old Testament and that we do not have idolatry as portrayed there. Careful reflection, however, suggests some uncomfortable parallels. For example, the Israelites sacrificed their children by causing them to “pass through the fire for Molech” (2 Kings 23:10; Jer. 32:35), though this practice was clearly prohibited, and was a capital offense.¹⁵ While little is known about Molech, it seems likely that this practice was intended to ensure good crops, and hence prosperity. Is this so different from our contemporary practice of abortion, which serves economic and social convenience through avoiding the

responsibilities, costs, publicity, and time demands of unwanted children?

Other practices of worship involved the portrayal of exaggerated sexual organs. Is this so different from the *Playboy* and *Hustler* magazines, "adult" movies, and topless bars in our cities, and the preoccupation with sexual pleasures?

While superficially different, it seems likely that these activities have several common features. First, they involve seeking good things, which have been created by God to be enjoyed within divinely appointed limits, but obtaining them at times or in ways which are outside God's sovereign provision.

Second, they take precedence over God in our lives, in terms of our time commitments, money, and emotional allegiance. Third, they have behind each of them the power of Satan and his minions. As we have seen, all false worship ultimately involves worship of demons; it is choosing sides with Satan rather than with God.

Again we are faced with an illustration of the craftiness of Satan, the master deceiver. He has truly blinded the minds of our generation. Sadly, many believers are also at least partially blinded to Satan's tactics. The very fact that many doubt the presence and activity of Satan and his demons is evidence of the effectiveness of his deceptions.

SUMMARY

In this chapter we have reviewed the names, character, and activities of Satan as he relates to his minions, the fallen angels, to fallen men, and to the believer. We have seen that Satan is not merely a force or principle, but a personal agent, a usurper who sought to seize the throne of God. We saw that he is an enemy or adversary both to God and to mankind, and that he is a thoroughgoing deceiver who uses any means at his disposal to accomplish his ends of encouraging humans to join him in rebellion against God.

Satan is a being of great knowledge and power, who is the god of this age. He has at his disposal a great array of fallen angels who joined with him in his insurrection. One of Satan's chief modes of action involves fostering and encouraging all forms of false worship or idolatry, characterized centrally by giving to

some aspect of creation, chiefly Satan himself, the honor, respect, and obedience due to God. Like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, most persons today would doubtless be astounded to be told that they belong to Satan; yet that is essentially what the Scriptures teach us. Satan has been so effective that most of us are not even aware of his active involvement in the process of fostering un-Christian worldviews and the worship of "things," of the creation of God, rather than the God of creation.

In the next chapter we will turn our focus to the activities of Satan's chief emissaries, the fallen angels or demons.