

THE FALL OF SATAN AND THE VICTORY OF CHRIST

Why Does God Permit Satan to Live?

God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment.

2 PETER 2:4

"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."

GENESIS 3:15

The devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

REVELATION 20:10



Vying for the most spectacular sin ever committed is the desire of once-holy angels to love their own glory more than God's. It is unfathomable. The Bible does not take us deep into the heart of such mysterious sin to explain the soul-dynamics that make rebellion rise out of righteousness. We are not given the final answer of how the origin of sin in the soul of a holy being takes

place. But neither are we left to wonder if God was surprised or if he had to revamp all his plans. We are taken by Scripture deep into the halls of eternity and given glimpses that are breathtaking. And God's aim in this is not to promote speculation, but to awaken worship and make us mighty for Christ in the midst of sin and misery.

As we come through Genesis 1–2 to Genesis 3, all is well, it seems. Genesis 1:31 says, “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.” God did not create anything evil. It was all very good.

Then suddenly when chapter 3 opens, there is this serpent. And he is clearly evil. He is calling God's word into question. Verse 1: “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” He is devious and deceitful and destructive. God had said in Genesis 2:17, “The day that you eat of [this tree] you shall surely die.” But the serpent says in verse 4: “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

Therefore, Jesus says of him in John 8:44 that he is both a “liar” and a “murderer.” “He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”

SATAN, THAT ANCIENT SERPENT

Who is this serpent? The fullest answer is given in Revelation 12:9: “The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.” So the serpent in the garden is *the devil* (which means *slanderer*), and *Satan* (which means *accuser*), and the deceiver of the whole world.

Jesus calls him “the evil one” (Matt. 13:19) and “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). The Pharisees call him

“Beelzebul, the prince of demons” (Matt. 12:24). Paul calls him “the god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4) and “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2).

That’s the one we meet in Genesis 3. He is already evil, already a deceiver, already a murderer when he appears in the garden of God. In Genesis 3:15, after the serpent lures Adam and Eve into sin, God pronounces judgment on the serpent: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

Notice that at first it looks like the warfare will be between two offsprings: “between your offspring and her offspring.” But in the next statement, something surprising is said: “He shall bruise your head.” Who is *he*? Answer: the woman’s offspring. Who is *your* (“he shall bruise *your* head”)? Answer: the serpent himself, *not* his offspring. That is significant.

THE CRUSHING OF SATAN AT THE CROSS

The day is coming, God says, when *you*, the serpent (not just your offspring), will be defeated and removed from the earth. The offspring of this woman will crush you. That’s why the Son of God became human. It was a human who would crush Satan—the seed of the woman.

Hebrews 2:14 describes the connection between the humanity of Jesus and the destruction of Satan. “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.” The decisive blow was struck by the perfect offspring of the woman, Jesus Christ, when he died on the cross. This is one of the reasons why the eternal Son of God had to become human—because it was the offspring of the woman who would crush Satan. “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). God intended for his Son to get the glory as the Victor over the serpent.

Colossians 2:14–15 describes what God did to the demons when his Son died on the cross: “The record of debt that stood against us . . . he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.” When Christ died for our sins, Satan was disarmed and defeated. The one eternally destructive weapon that he had was stripped from his hand—namely, his accusation before God that we are guilty and should perish with him. When Christ died for us, that accusation was nullified.

All of us who entrust ourselves to Christ will never perish. No accusation will stand against us. Satan cannot separate you from the love of God in Christ (Rom. 8:37–39).

THE INSURRECTION OF SATAN

Now the question that cries out for an answer is: Where did Satan come from? And why does God tolerate his murderous activity? In Genesis 3, he just seems to appear. God created everything good, but something happened. The good creation was corrupted.

The books of Jude and 2 Peter in the New Testament give us clues as to what happened. Jude 6 says, “The angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day.” And 2 Peter 2:4 says, “God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment.”

This may not be a direct reference to the original fall of Satan and his rebellion. Some argue that it refers to the sins of angels (“sons of God”) in Genesis 6:1–4. But in any case it is the best pointer we have in the Bible to how Satan and his subordinates came to be what they are.¹

¹Thomas Schreiner, for example, thinks the main reference of 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6 is to the sins of angels in Genesis 6:1–4 but says that the “prehistoric fall of angels” is “a legitimate deduction theologically.” *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, *The New American Commentary*, Vol. 37 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 336.

It appears then that at first there was a host of holy angels. And some of them, including Satan, “sinned,” or as Jude 6 says, “did not stay within their own position of authority.” In other words, the sin was a kind of insurrection. A desire for more power and more authority than they were appointed to have *by* God and *under* God.

So Satan originates as a created angel who, with other angels, rebels against God. They reject him as their all-satisfying king and joy and set out on a course of self-exaltation and presumed self-determination. They do not want to be subordinate. They do not want to be sent by God to serve others (Heb. 1:14). They lose their reverence and admiration and satisfaction in God. Now they dream of having authority over themselves and exalting themselves above God.

THE ORIGIN OF SATAN'S SIN

But now we ask: Why? How could this happen? There is no easy answer. In fact, the ultimate biblical answer creates even more questions. So it seems that in this age, while we “know in part” (1 Cor. 13:12), not all our questions will be answered.

Some people find help in saying that the angels had “free will,” and therefore God, out of respect for this free will, could not exert decisive influence to hold their allegiance or keep them adoring him. But I don’t find that idea helpful. It simply doesn’t answer the question: Why would a perfectly holy angel in God’s infinitely beautiful presence use his free will to suddenly hate God?

This idea that God was unable to prevent the rebellion because of his respect for the innate self-determining wills of sinless angels is not a solution to the problem. It doesn’t account for why perfectly holy beings would use their wills to despise what they were adoring when created. And it doesn’t fit with what the rest of the Bible says about God’s rule over the devil. In this setting, the term *free will* is simply another way of naming the mystery. But it’s not the way the Bible deals with the situation.

My approach to answering the question of how to think about the origin of Satan's sin is to read the whole Bible with the question: How does God relate to Satan's will? Is God helpless before the will of evil powers? Is he respectful of the freedom of Satan's will so that he does not intrude on it and exert his sovereignty over it? Are there powers outside himself that limit his rule over them? Or is God presented throughout the Bible as having the right and the power to restrain Satan anytime he pleases? And if so, why doesn't he do it more often? In fact, why doesn't he just nullify him or destroy him entirely?

So when I read the Bible, here is what I find. Here are just a few glimpses of God's power over Satan. They point the way for how we should think about what measure of freedom Satan has.

GOD'S SOVEREIGN SWAY OVER SATAN

1. Though Satan is called "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31), Daniel 4:17 says, "The Most High [God] rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will." And Psalm 33:10–11 says, "The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations." Yes, Satan is "the ruler of this world" in a subordinate sense. God has given him astonishing latitude to work his sin and misery in the world. He is a great ruler over the world, but not the *ultimate* one. God holds the decisive sway.

2. Though unclean spirits are everywhere doing deceptive and murderous things, Jesus Christ has all authority over them. Mark 1:27 says, "He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." When Christ commands the devil, the devil obeys. This raises the question about the difference between the command of God, say in the Ten Commandments, and the command of Christ in telling demons to depart or telling the universe to come into being. Clearly, God does exert his authority in giving

the Ten Commandments. All his creatures are obliged to obey, including the devil.

Nevertheless, the devil disobeys these commands every day. The authority that they have is not the same kind of authority that Jesus wields in Mark 1:27: “He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” This is an absolute, *effective* authority. When God exerts this authority, it produces what it demands. When he wills, he can make the demons do what he commands.

This is a different authority than he exercises in his written law, such as the Ten Commandments. It is decisive. Christ holds sway over Satan’s will whenever he pleases. This means that anytime demons are doing horrible things, Jesus is not commanding them to do otherwise. And in not commanding them to do otherwise, he has a reason for letting them do what they are doing.

3. Satan is a roaring lion, prowling and seeking to devour. Peter says, “Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of *suffering* are being experienced by your brethren throughout the world” (1 Pet. 5:8–9). In other words, “suffering” is the way Satan is trying to devour the saints. But Peter says in 1 Peter 3:17, “It is better to *suffer* for doing good, *if that should be God’s will*, than for doing evil.” *If that should be God’s will*. In other words, whether we suffer—whether the jaws of the lion are allowed to clamp down on our leg or throat—is ultimately decided by God. If the Lord wills, we will suffer or not. If the Lord wills, Satan will be given this permission or not. This suffering, these jaws of the prowling lion, are opened and closed only according to God’s will. God holds final sway, not Satan.

4. Yes, Satan is a murderer from the beginning, Jesus said (John 8:44). But has Satan taken the gift of life out of the hand of the Giver? No. Deuteronomy 32:39 says, “See now that I, even I am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and *I make alive*; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.” God holds final sway in every death and every life.

James says the same thing in James 4:15: “If the Lord wills,

we will live and also do this or that.” James does not say we will live “if *Satan* wills.” He says, “If the Lord wills, we will live.” The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. And his name is blessed (Job 1:21). Satan is a murderer. But his choices whom to murder do not make the life-giving God his lackey. God makes all the final choices concerning who will live and who will die. Satan is not absolute. God is.

5. When Satan aims to destroy Job and prove that God is not his treasure, he must get permission from God before he attacks Job’s possessions and his family with destruction, and before he attacks his body with sickness. In Job 1:12, God says to Satan, “Behold, all that [Job] has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.” That is, “You have my permission to attack, but you will not go beyond the bounds that I set.”

In Job 2:6 God gives Satan permission to go so far and no farther: “The LORD said to Satan, ‘Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life.’” And when the story is complete and the inspired writer is summarizing all that happened, he does not even give Satan so much as a mention. He sees only God’s overarching supreme hand in all that Satan did: “[Job’s brothers and sisters] showed him sympathy and comforted him for *all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him*” (Job 42:11). Satan’s causality in all Job’s suffering was not ultimate. That is why the writer can simply leave him out of account and say that the Lord was the final and decisive wisdom that ordered these things. Satan was not ultimate. God was.

6. Satan is the great tempter. He wants us to sin. Luke tells us that Satan was behind Peter’s denials. He tempted him to deny Jesus. But could he do that without God’s permission? Listen to what Jesus says to Simon Peter in Luke 22:31–32. It is very similar to the way Satan and God interact in Job: “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded to . . . sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”

Satan could not do what he wished with Peter without God's permission. And when he had it, just as with Job, God had set him a boundary: "You will *not* destroy Peter. You will only make him stumble tonight." Which is why Jesus says, "*When* [not *if!*] you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." Jesus, not Satan, has the upper hand here. And Satan is allowed to go so far and no farther.

7. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:4 that "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers." But is this power to blind people an ultimate power? Can God overcome it and resist and nullify it? Yes, he can. Two verses later Paul says, "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." In other words, the blinding effect of Satan gives way to God's light when he says, "Let there be light."

GOD GOVERNS SATAN'S EVERY MOVE

So now back to the question about the origin of Satan's sinfulness. Is God unable to do with his own angels what he does with the demons on earth: "He commands . . . and they obey" (Mark 1:27)? Is there a power outside himself that limits his rule over them? My conclusion is that from cover to cover the Bible presents God as governing Satan and his demons. He has the right and power to restrain them anytime he pleases. He holds sway over their wills. He commands the evil spirits, and they obey. I have no reason from the Bible to think otherwise.

I conclude, therefore, that God permitted Satan's fall, not because he was unable to stop it, but because he had a purpose for it. Since God is never taken off guard, his permissions are always purposeful. If he chooses to permit something, he does so for a reason—an infinitely wise reason because he is infinitely wise.

How the sin arises in Satan's heart, we do not know. God has not told us. What we do know is that God is sovereign over Satan, and therefore Satan's will does not move without God's permis-

sion. And therefore every move of Satan is part of God's overall purpose and plan. And this is true in such a way that God never sins. God is infinitely holy, and God is infinitely mighty. Satan is evil, and Satan is under the all-governing wisdom of God.

WHY NOT WIPE OUT SATAN?

Why, then, does God not simply wipe Satan out? He has the right and power to do this. And Revelation 20:10 says he is going to do it someday. "The devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever." Why didn't God cast him into the lake of fire the day after he rebelled? Why let him rampage through humanity for centuries?

Satan deserved the lake of fire the moment he rebelled against God. It is an infinitely grievous sin to rebel against an infinitely worthy Being. He was completely worthy of the lake of fire the moment he sinned. A finite number of sins following this rebellion would not bring Satan's guilt finally to the point of deserving the lake of fire. Satan did not need millennia of sinful carnage to deserve the lake of fire. God had the right and the power to put Satan out of commission the moment he sinned. Therefore, the fact that God did not do it shows that he had a reason. Can we know what it was?

FOR THE FULLNESS OF CHRIST'S GLORY

The ultimate answer, as we saw in the last chapter, is that "all things were created through [Christ] and for [Christ]" (Col. 1:16). God foresaw all that Satan would do if he created Satan and permitted him to rebel. In choosing to create him, he was choosing to fold all of that evil into his purpose for creation. That purpose for creation was the glory of his Son. All things, including Satan and all his followers, were created with this in view. They were created knowing what they would do, and that knowledge was taken into account in God's decision to create

them. Therefore, the evil that they do in the world is part of how the greatest purpose of God will be accomplished.

Satan's fall and ongoing existence are for the glory of Christ. The Son of God, Jesus Christ, will be more highly honored and more deeply appreciated and loved in the end because he defeats Satan not the moment after Satan fell, but through millennia of long-suffering, patience, humility, servanthood, suffering, and decisively through his own death. A single, sudden, and infinitely holy display of power to destroy Satan immediately after his fall would have been a glorious display of power and righteousness. But it would not have been the fullest possible display of all the glories in the Son and the Father. God chose an infinitely wise way of displaying the full array of divine glories in letting Satan fall and do his work for millennia.

The glory of Christ reaches its highest point in the obedient sacrifice of the cross where Jesus triumphed over the devil (Col. 2:15). Jesus said in that final hour of his own sacrifice, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him" (John 13:31). Paul said that the crucifixion of Christ is the point where we see his wisdom and power most gloriously displayed: "We preach Christ crucified . . . the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:23–24).

Jesus said to Paul about Satan's thorn in Paul's side, "My power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). Satan, and all his pain, serves in the end to magnify the power and wisdom and love and grace and mercy and patience and wrath of Jesus Christ. We would not know Christ in the fullness of his glory if he had not defeated Satan in the way he did.

HOW TO RELATE TO EVIL

So I close this chapter with an urgent and practical question: How then should we relate to evil? How should we think and feel and act about satanic evil? The death of a little boy at the attack of a pit bull? The deaths of three valiant miners trying to save their

buddies? Five hundred dead in an earthquake in Peru? These are just some of the agonies in the news the week I preached this message. And what about the evil and pain you confront in your own lives? Here is my summary answer.

Eight Things to Do with Evil

On the one hand:

1. *Expect* evil. “Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Pet. 4:12).

2. *Endure* evil. “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:7; cf. Mark 13:13).

3. *Give thanks* for the refining effect of evil that comes against you. “Give thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 5:20; cf. 1 Thess. 5:18). “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance . . .” (Rom. 5:3–5).

4. *Hate* evil. “Let love be genuine. *Abhor* what is evil; hold fast to what is good” (Rom. 12:9).

5. *Pray for escape* from evil. “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matt. 6:13).

6. *Expose* evil. “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them” (Eph. 5:11).

7. *Overcome* evil with good. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21).

8. *Resist* evil. “Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (Jas. 4:7).

Four Things Never to Do with Evil

But on the other hand:

1. *Never despair* that this evil world is out of God’s control.

“[He] works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11).

2. *Never give in* to the sense that because of seemingly random evil, life is absurd and meaningless. “How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! . . . For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever” (Rom. 11:33, 36).

3. *Never yield* to the thought that God sins or is ever unjust or unrighteous in the way he governs the universe. “The LORD is righteous in all his ways” (Ps. 145:17).

4. *Never doubt* that God is totally *for you* in Christ. If you trust him with your life, you are in Christ. Never doubt that all the evil that befalls you—even if it takes your life—is God’s loving, purifying, saving, fatherly discipline. It is not an expression of his punishment in wrath. That wrath fell on Jesus Christ our substitute (Gal. 3:13; Rom. 8:3). Only mercy comes to us from God, not wrath, if we are his children through faith in Jesus. “The Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Heb. 12:6).

When we renounce the designs of the devil and trust the power and wisdom and goodness of God displayed in the humble triumphs of Jesus Christ, we fulfill God’s purpose in letting Satan live a little longer. We glorify the infinitely superior worth of Jesus. So I invite you to trust him and to stand in awe of how he saves you and defeats Satan in one great sacrifice of love.