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CHAPTER 1

PUTTING THE DEVIL IN HIS PLACE

This book is a modest attempt to put the devil in his place. When Lucifer (whose name means “light bearer”) rolled the dice, gambling that he could do better by being God’s enemy rather than God’s friend, he set in motion a moral catastrophe that would reverberate throughout the universe. You and I have been deeply affected by his decision made in the ages long ago.

What may not be widely known is that Lucifer was already defeated the moment he sinned. He was defeated *strategically*, since as one of God’s creatures he would be forced to depend upon God for his continued existence. Any power

he would exercise would always be subject to God's will and decree. Thus moment by moment he would suffer the humiliation of knowing that he could never be the ultimate cause of his existence and power.

To clarify, I don't mean to simply say that for every move he would make, God would make a countermove. That was true of course; but the situation for Satan would be more ominous. As will be shown in the chapters of this book, he cannot even now make his own first move without God's express will and consent!

Let us boldly affirm that whatever mischief Satan is allowed to do, it is always appointed by God for the ultimate service of and benefit to the saints. William Gurnall, after encouraging believers to hold fast to the assurance that God is watching Satan's every move and will not let him have the final victory, writes, "When God says 'Stay!' [Satan] must stand like a dog by the table while the saints feast on God's comfort. He does not dare to snatch even a tidbit, for the Master's eye is always upon him."¹ And so it is; our Master's eye is ever upon him. After his first act of disobedience, his failure and doom were sealed.

Though he could never have predicted it, at the cross Lucifer would be defeated *spiritually*, for there Christ was guaranteeing that at least a part of fallen humanity would be purchased out from the kingdom of darkness to share in the kingdom of light. The fact that creatures who had fallen into Satan's trap would eventually be exalted above the angelic realm he once led was more than he could bear. But bear it he must.

Finally, when he is thrown into the lake of fire, he will be defeated *eternally* in that he will be forever cast away from the divine presence. There in shameful agony he will unendingly

contemplate his foolishness in standing against God. His humiliation will be public, painful, and endless. Even as you read these words, he is a hapless player in the drama that he himself set in motion. And there is nothing he can do to change the outcome.

In medieval times, the devil was often pictured as a long-tailed, cloven-hoofed jester with two horns and a red suit. He looked the part of a clown; he often was pictured as a loser in the conflicts of the ages. Cartoons depicted him as a buffoon whose very presence was an affront to humanity.

Let us not think that the people of the Middle Ages actually believed that the devil looked idiotic. They knew, even as we do, that he was actually an evil spirit who was both powerful and fearsome. The purpose of the caricatures was to strike at his most vulnerable point, namely his pride.

They wanted to convey that the devil was a fool to mount opposition to God. Though he is a being of immense intelligence, he was decidedly unwise to rebel against his Creator. The medievals made him out to look stupid because, despite his power and staggering knowledge, he was stupid indeed. They knew that the devil was both real and powerful; they also knew that he was misguided and defeated. Thus Luther insisted that when the devil persists, we should jeer and flout him, “for he cannot bear scorn.”

The medievals might be faulted for paying too much attention to the devil and often mixing biblical truth with legends and superstitions. But we must commend them for their vigorous belief in the existence of the Prince of Darkness. Our

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age, in contrast, must be faulted for giving him only scant recognition, or even worse, for giving him the kind of recognition he craves.

It has been said that those who are “born again” take the devil seriously.² We who believe in the trustworthiness of the Bible are not guilty of disbelieving in his objective existence. We, above all, should take the devil seriously. Very seriously.

But our sincerity does not guarantee that our conception of the devil is accurate, even with the aid of evangelical books and messages that explore the reality of spiritual warfare. Yes, I believe that we are much better equipped to stand against our enemy because of the writings of those who have warned us of his schemes and reminded us of our resources to fight against him. As a young pastor, I was introduced to spiritual warfare by those who knew more about our enemy than I.

However, along with much helpful advice, some distortions have crept into our thinking that could play into the devil’s hands. Though they do not expressly state it, some writers imply that Satan can act independently of God; they speak as if God becomes involved in what the devil does only when we ask Him to. Because Satan is the “god of this world,” they think this means that he can be free to make his own decisions, inflicting havoc wherever and whenever he wishes.

I respectfully disagree.

Of course, all evangelicals concur that the devil will eventually be defeated; but for now, some teach he is free to do pretty much whatever he pleases in the world. The Satan of many of the so-called deliverance ministries is one who calls his own shots and wields his power, limited only by the broad parameters God has laid out for him. Satan, according

to this theology, sets his own agenda and is free to harass us without much interference from the Almighty.

We need to be reminded of Luther's words that even "the devil is God's devil." We have forgotten that only when we know who God is can we know who the devil is. Blessed are those who are convinced that the prince of this world has become the slave of the Prince of Peace.

History has examples of those who wrote about the devil without a careful study of the Scriptures. These writers have, for good or for ill, shaped much of our thinking about Satan. Let us remind ourselves of a few who were most influential.

WHICH DEVIL?

Dante

Dante (1265–1321), who takes a tour of the lower regions in his classical masterpiece the *Inferno*, has the horrific experience of seeing demons torment the pitiful occupants of hell. These demons patrol a river of boiling pitch, giving sinners the exact punishment they deserve. With hooks and sharp claws, the demons attack any sinner who tries to escape or flout their authority. The punishment of these people is meted out with unerring accuracy: Each of the nine regions is designated for a particular sin, and each person receives retribution according to what he or she has done, with the hypocrites in the lowest circle. The demons delight in tormenting those who have committed the most hideous offenses.

This portrait of Satan, which dominated much of medieval thinking, was not based on the Bible but popular folklore. Although it engendered a lively belief in the existence of Satan and his demons, it misread the devil's role in the

world. The myth that the devil is the tormentor in hell is just one more way of giving the evil one the kind of recognition he craves. Worse still, Dante neglected the New Testament doctrine of salvation and substituted a salvation of works. Though Dante is rightly considered one of the greatest writers of all time, we could wish that he had either studied the Bible more thoroughly or had written about matters other than theology.

Milton

Milton (1608–1674), in his epic poems *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, recovered a biblical portrait of Satan. Belief in the devil had begun to wane in worldly Shakespearean England, and he must be credited with reviving a biblical belief in Satan's existence. Though his theology also was at times deficient and his imagination became the basis for much of what he wrote, these poems cover the whole gamut of salvation history. Milton argues that the angels had free will, and thus evil became a possibility. In fact, he would say that moral goodness is impossible without free will; God, however, turns the evil to good by teaching us wisdom and faith through our trials and suffering.

Milton made Lucifer both alluring and repulsive; both a hero and a villain. Satan is depicted as powerfully attractive; Milton intended the reader to be caught up in admiration, to feel the tug of temptation toward this terrible, self-indulgent Prince of Darkness. Gradually, however, the true nature of Lucifer is revealed and the seductive power of evil becomes clear.

Yet Milton retained some of Dante's folklore. Satan rebelled, says Milton, because he would "rather reign in Hell than serve in heaven." When he returns to hell from the

garden of Eden, having succeeded in corrupting man, he is greeted with a chorus of hisses. Though he claims to have shaken the throne of God, that claim turns out to be a lie. Although the other fallen angels are “groveling and prostrate” on the lake of fire, Satan calls them to arms, addressing them by their angelic titles.

Milton combined the theology of the Bible with Christian tradition and a lively imagination. We might not agree that free will alone can account for Satan’s fall; and we most assuredly should not agree that the devil is already in hell, or that he shall ever be a king there. But Milton has given us a compelling account of the struggle between good and evil, the struggle between Satan, Adam, and Christ. His vivid descriptions became the stuff of artists, novelists, and preachers.

Belief in the devil was making a comeback.

Then came the Enlightenment.

Goethe

The demise of the devil in Western thought can be traced to that era where belief in the supernatural world began to retreat in the face of humanistic learning and scientific discoveries. Soon the devil became a figment of an older superstitious era. Since the God of Luther and Calvin was replaced by a sunnier, more tolerant God, it was generally believed that His universe could have no place for an independent evil being.

If you think that Faust made a pact with the devil and then discovered to his horror that he had been tricked into losing his soul, you are correct, but only if you are thinking of the medieval versions of the story. Though Faust apparently was an actual historical figure with magical powers, the legends that grew up around him gave rise to many fanciful

stories about his stunts, trickery, and, of course, pacts with the devil. One version has him dying during a mysterious demonstration of flying in 1525. Folklore, which was often widely believed, said that he was carried off by the devil.

But there is another *Faust*, a more popular version written by the German Enlightenment scholar, Goethe (1749–1832). Here, more than one hundred years after Milton, Faust encounters a different devil, a being who has some elements of the Christian view but no longer a creature to be feared. In fact, according to Goethe’s play, it is Faust who outwitted the devil!

Goethe’s Mephistopheles (the devil) is a very complex figure, even the creator of the angels. And though he appears in opposition to God, he is a serious distortion of the Christian devil: He is portrayed as a being who invites the reader to face the multiplicity of reality. He certainly is not to be feared.

When Faust makes a pact with Mephistopheles, the devil promises that he will be Faust’s servant in this world if Faust will be his servant in the world to come. Mephistopheles lures Faust into sensuality by playing upon his lust for a young woman, Gretchen, who falls in love with him. Confused and demoralized, Faust eventually follows the path of least resistance and fulfills his fantasies by going to Gretchen’s bed.

But—and this is important—Faust’s lust eventually is transformed into real love. Thus Mephistopheles has not destroyed Faust but has actually done the good that he despises. As the play ends, there is a struggle for Faust’s soul. But Faust outwitted Mephistopheles because he had learned to love.

Faust, therefore, was saved—not from sin, but from sensuality and dry intellectualism. And he was saved, not by

Christ, but by his own efforts at striving. Faust discovered that serving Mephistopheles had both liabilities and rewards. Making a pact with him need not have serious consequences.

Goethe's Mephistopheles fits well within the framework of contemporary America. The devil turns out to be primarily whatever we want him to be. We can be in league with him without fearing that we shall actually lose our souls. This is a symbolic devil of a weaker, comic sort.

Our age believes in a tame devil. He is eager to serve our need to explain the existence of evil and willing to be a symbolic description of the horrors we struggle to understand. He is a devil who is best for us; a devil who is our servant; a devil who shares his power, predicts our future, and helps us develop our potential. He is a devil of horoscopes, Ouija boards, and some of the voices of today who call us to get in touch with "masters of wisdom" and affirm our own enlightened humanity.

According to one poll, at least 25 percent of Americans believe that the devil is really only a symbol of man's inhumanity to man. Of those who say they believe in the devil, only a small percentage believe they have ever been tempted by him. "Among Christians," says *Newsweek*, "only the born-again reveal a robust sense of the devil's presence."³

Such views are compatible with those mainline Protestants and Catholics who have, in the words of Kenneth Woodward, "exorcised the Devil from their working vocabulary."⁴ We can talk of the devil just as long as he is not thought of as an independent, evil personality. His value is symbolic, descriptive, and speculative.

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow suggests that whether or not you believe that the devil has objective existence often depends upon your social class. "Look at the parking lot

outside any church,” he says. “If you see Lexuses and Cadillacs, you won’t hear Satan preached inside. If you see a lot of pickup trucks, you will.”⁵

Why This Book?

This book attempts to give an overview of the career of Satan and his interaction with the Almighty. It traces his fall from an exalted position to his defeat by Christ and to his demise in everlasting shame and contempt. It attempts to prove that Satan always loses, even when he “wins.” Best of all, it shows that we who have been translated from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light are able to stand against him.

My first premise is that *God has absolute sovereignty in His universe*. That means that even evil is a part of the larger plan of God. Of course, I do not mean to imply that God either does evil or approves of it. However, I do mean that by virtue of His role as Creator and Sustainer of the universe, God is the ultimate (though not the immediate) cause of all that comes to pass.

I am convinced that unless we grasp how the devil fits into God’s scheme of things, we will find it more difficult to stand against his conspiracy against us personally and his influence within our culture. How we perceive our enemy will largely determine how we fight against him.

We can have a proper theology of the devil only if we have a proper theology of God. Only when we stand in awe of God will we find it unnecessary to be in awe of Satan. Therefore, this is a book about Satan, but it is also a book about God’s power, God’s program, and God’s purposes in the world. The greater our God, the smaller our devil.

We must live with the unshakable confidence not only that God will win in the end but that He is actually winning

even now, day by day. We do not have to wait until Satan is cast into the lake of fire before we can rejoice that our enemy is crushed. I shall take pains to show that he was defeated the moment he chose to sin against the Almighty. My central affirmation is that *although Lucifer rebelled that he might no longer be God's servant, he still is!*

Many years ago the title of a popular book by J. B. Phillips reminded us that *Your God Is Too Small*. Perhaps in our time, another book should be written titled *Your Devil Is Too Big*. Our devil is too big if we are fascinated with him; our devil is too big if we think we have to fulfill a vow to him; our devil is too big if we are victims of a curse that has been put upon us. Our devil is too big if we live in fear that our future is in his hands.

One writer offered this helpful illustration: A single quarter lifted to the eye can obscure the blazing light of the sun, a star whose diameter is 865,000 miles. Just so, Satan, if we let him, can cause us to block out our vision

of God. He can give us the terrifying optical illusion that, at least in this life, he is just about as big as God.⁶ Remember, Satan gets more power as we give it to him!

Satan is just as strong as we believe him to be. Because the Israelites believed the city of Jericho to be unconquerable, *it was*. The citizens of Jericho saw it quite differently: they were terrified of the Israelites and were puzzled as to why they did not come and claim their inheritance forty years earlier. Indeed, Joshua and Caleb knew that God had removed the protection of the city (Numbers 14:9). It was

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not the strength of the city but the unbelief of the Israelites that postponed the victory. By ascribing to the city more might than it had, the Israelites conferred upon it the right to rule. Just so, if we believe Satan is invincible, he will conform to our expectations. That is why we must never see Satan without seeing God.

My second premise is that *God uses our conflict with Satan to develop character*. These struggles give us the opportunity of having our faith tested. Our spiritual war is a classroom where we can learn about the deceitfulness of sin and the chastisement of God—along with His grace and power. God could have banished Satan to another planet or cast him immediately into the lake of fire. But He chose to use the devil, to give him a role to play in the divine drama. God knows that we must fight before we can celebrate. We must learn before we are approved. God permits Satan's temporary reign, the Puritans used to say, "to increase the saints' eternal joy."

God would not throw us into the conflict if He did not also give us the resources needed to stand against the enemy. That is not to say that we always avail ourselves of the assets that are ours as Christians. I have known my share of failure in battling the Prince of Darkness. But I interpret these failures as my responsibility—a responsibility I share with other believers who are a part of the same body of Christ.

Several chapters in this book are devoted to what we have come to call "spiritual warfare." I attempt to show how we can recognize the most common of Satan's wiles against us. Best of all, we must affirm with confidence that we are in a winnable war. We are up against a being who has all the limitations of a creature.

Only the Bible can help us evaluate the conceptions of Satan popularized by Dante, Milton, and Goethe. In the

Scriptures, we are confronted by an enemy of God who must nevertheless do God's bidding. We are exposed to a being who will never reign or torment people in hell; nor is he a devil who is the figment of our imagination, a being whom we can outwit if we are clever enough.

The biblical portrait of Satan is that he does indeed have great power, but that it is always limited by the purposes and plans of God. It is a picture of a proud being who has already been humbled. It is the picture of a being whose greatest asset in his war with us is our own ignorance.

I shall have failed you, the reader, if you do not have greater faith in God's victory after reading this book. I pray I shall be given the wisdom to remind us that Satan is great to us, but not great to God. We must stand in awe of a God who can use a rebel to glorify His name.

We must never see Satan without seeing God.