

“THE ROARING LION”

Even though we are living in an increasingly secularized age, I would imagine that most people have at least some conception of who the devil is, whether or not they believe that such a being exists. Our popular culture has kept the notion of the devil alive with its various treatments of him, ranging from the comedic to the horrific. But it seems that the popular conception of the devil is, in some respects, very far from the depiction of the devil in the pages of Holy Scripture. People know about the devil, but they don't really know who the devil is; much the same way that most of the people who will celebrate Saint Patrick's Day tomorrow know what Saint Patrick's Day is all about, but have no idea who Patrick was. What I mean is this. The popular conception of the devil often conceives of him only in terms of the physical harm that he can bring upon people. If people are in any sense afraid of the devil, they are afraid of the role he might play in fetching a satanic cult or a serial killer after them. But that is not where the devil's true power lies. He is not interested in the destruction of human bodies. He is intent on the destruction of human souls. And that is what this passage is warning us about when it describes Satan as a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. After all, the devil is a spiritual being, and he feeds upon souls.

The Bible gives us a limited amount of information about the devil and his demons. We first learn about him in Genesis 3, where he appears in the form of a serpent and tempts

Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. He appears again in the opening chapters of the book of Job, where he seeks to use various trials and afflictions to cause Job to renounce his faith. Jude 6 identifies demons as rebellious angels who are destined for eternal judgment. Jesus referred to Satan as “the ruler of this world.” (Jn. 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) Paul calls him “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.” (Eph. 2:2) And Paul also says that the church’s struggle is not “against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Eph. 6:12) As theologian John Murray summarizes:

“Back of all that is visible and tangible in the sin of this world there are unseen spiritual powers...The arch-foe of the kingdom of God is not the visible powers arrayed against it; for behind these visible agents and manifestations of evil is the ingenuity, craft, malicious design, instigation and relentless activity of the devil and his ministers.” (cited in Reymond’s Systematic Theology, p. 659)

There you have, in a nutshell, the biblical doctrine of the devil and the demons.

But there is much that we do not know about Satan. For example, we do not know why God provides for the salvation of a portion of fallen humanity, but does not do so for any of the fallen angels. We do not know if demons have access to our thought life, or

whether they can they can only work on us by external means. We do not even know how often demonic beings are the specific source of the temptations we face, since our own sinful nature is more than capable of filling that role. And finally, while we know that Satan is sometimes the cause behind sickness and calamity, as with Job, we do not know how often this is the case.

There is much that the Bible leaves unanswered about the demons, but the information that it does provide is the information that we need. We need to know that we have an adversary, an enemy, and that he is a very powerful enemy. We always need to remember that the Christian life is a life characterized by continual warfare. The great drama of history is the unfolding of a cosmic contest between good and evil. Our lives, your life and mine, are being lived out in the context of that great warfare. And this should cause us to adopt a very serious attitude about life. As any soldier will tell you, failure to take the battle seriously is deadly.

But remember, Satan's ultimate interest is not to do you physical harm. His desire is for your soul. He may use physical means to afflict you and tempt you, but his true goal is spiritual destruction, not physical suffering. Even if God were to allow the devil to physically kill you, he would not be able to cause any harm to your soul if you truly belong to Jesus Christ. Satan wants to devour us spiritually. He wants to bring us down to hell with him.

What are the devil's strategies? How does he try to devour us? In a variety of ways. First of all, he tempts us. He incites our sinful desires to act in rebellion against God. He deceives us into thinking that we know better than God, that sin brings more pleasure than obedience, and that God couldn't really expect us to do something so difficult as to control our temper, or our tongue, or our lust. Satan is greatly pleased when professing Christians continue on with sinful habits, all the while assuring themselves that it is really okay because, after all, nobody's perfect, and God will forgive them anyway. From the devil's perspective, such people are headed in the right direction.

In addition, the devil works against us by tempting and deceiving us into failing to fulfill the duties to which God calls us. When our neglect of God's Word, and of the church's worship and teaching, keeps us ignorant about our responsibilities as Christians, you can be sure that the devil is pleased. Satan is certainly happy to find professing Christians who do not believe that there is any significant duty and obligation involved with Christian discipleship.

Sometimes, Satan works against us by afflicting our consciences and causing us to fear that our sins are too great for God to forgive. This is his role as the great Accuser, as we see him depicted in Zechariah 3, where he stands before God to accuse Israel's high priest, who is symbolically clothed in filthy garments. Satan's goal in his accusations is

to drive us to a point of spiritual despair, to cause us to believe that we have committed sins that are too great even for the blood of the cross.

And Satan also uses trials, hardships, and persecutions to assault us. That was what he was doing with the Christians to whom Peter was writing. They were being persecuted for their faith, and Peter wanted them to know that Satan was, in some sense, behind that persecution. Satan uses physical trials, hardships and persecutions to try to inflict spiritual damage. That was what he was trying to do with Job – to get Job to curse God. Satan uses our trials to drive us to doubt, to despair, and to unbelief.

And it is often when we are at our weakest, or when our guard is down (for that is when we are truly weakest), that Satan seeks to devour us. Satan really is like a lion, and lions and other predators often choose to prey upon animals that are weak or lame. You remember, of course, that that was what the devil did with our Lord. He did not come to tempt Jesus until Jesus had fasted for forty days. Satan hoped that this would make Jesus easy prey. But he was wrong.

The devil often looks to prey upon you when you are at those low points in your life. Perhaps you are sick, perhaps you are depressed, perhaps you are anxious, perhaps you are sorrowful or in mourning, perhaps death is knocking at your own door. All of these can be occasions for the devil to seek to devour you. Yes, even the approach of death can

provide one last opportunity for Satan. We have an illustration of this from one of the great forerunners of the Reformation, the Italian priest Savonarola. In many ways, the reforms that he called for were very similar to those that Martin Luther would call for just a few decades later. In 1496, just two years before he would be put to death as a martyr for his faith, Savonarola preached a sermon entitled, “The Art of Dying a Good Death.” In that sermon, he said this:

“Death is the most solemn moment of our life. Then it is that the evil one makes his last attack on us. It is as though he were always playing chess with man, and awaiting the approach of death to give checkmate. He who wins at that moment wins the battle of life.”

Well said. A Christian needs to fight the good fight all the way up to the end of his or her life in this world.

Satan has many strategies for trying to devour us. But regardless of which one he employs, his goal is always the same: he wants to separate us from God, so that he might claim us as his own.

Again, this underscores the seriousness of human life. We have a very fierce enemy, and we need to stay awake and alert at all times. What if it was reported that a real lion was

running loose in your neighborhood? Wouldn't you stay on guard? Wouldn't you be very careful? How much more should we be watchful and alert with respect to this fierce spiritual adversary.

And do not think that, because you have professed faith in Jesus Christ, you are out of danger. That is exactly the sort of thing that the devil would have you believe.

Remember, Peter was writing this letter to Christians. He was warning them that the devil wanted to devour their souls, and that it was absolutely critical that they resist him. Never make the mistake of thinking that your profession of faith in Christ renders you immune to spiritual danger; that it somehow means that it would be utterly impossible for you to be claimed, in the end, by Satan and by hell. Yes, it is true that none of Christ's elect will be lost in the end, but it is also true that the mark of the elect is faith that perseveres through all of life's trials and temptations and that bears the fruit of Christian obedience. So do not rest easy. You must keep watch and resist the devil, all the days of your life. Listen to these words from Martin Luther:

“The poisonous serpent takes such delight in doing mischief, that he not only deceives secure and proud spirits with his delusions, but also undertakes, through his deceptions, to bring into error those who are well instructed and grounded in God's Word. He vexes me often so powerfully, and assaults me so fiercely with heavy and melancholy thoughts, that I forget my loving Lord and Savior Christ

Jesus, or at least behold him far otherwise than he is to be beheld. There is none of us so free, but that often he is thus deceived and bewitched with false opinions. Therefore we should learn how to know the conjuror, to the end that he may not come behind us, being sleepy and secure, and so delude us with his witchcraft. And truly, if he find us not sober and watching, and not armed with spiritual weapons, that is, with God's Word and with faith, then most surely he will overcome us." (*Table Talk*, no. 609)

You can never rest easy in your spiritual warfare. You have an enemy, and he wants your soul. You must keep watch and resist him.

How can we resist the devil? How do we engage in this spiritual warfare? Well, the Bible does not offer us any elaborate technique for fighting Satan and the demonic world. Our warfare is spiritual, and so are our weapons. And Peter tells us that the most fundamental weapon is that of faith. We resist Satan by remaining firm in our faith. How can we do that? Well, the same way a person keeps his or her body firm and fit: by exercising it on a regular basis. We exercise our faith by being much in prayer, much in the Word of God, much in song, much in spiritual conversations with other Christians, and much in the worship of God. When you regularly feed your faith by these means, you will receive strength to resist temptation and practice obedience.

Sermon on 1 Peter 5:8-9
OT Reading: Psalm 46

Grace PC, Laconia (3/16/08)
An Exposition of 1 Peter, No. 20
Rev. Andy Wilson

We have a great enemy, and we must always remain on guard. But we need not despair. Our Lord has defeated the devil, and we will share in his victory, if we remain firm in our faith. And isn't that an amazing thought? That we - frail, weak, and sinful as we are - will be able by God's grace to overcome a foe as great as this? As Luther says,

“It is almost incredible how God enables us, weak flesh and blood, to enter combat with the devil, and to beat and overcome so powerful a spirit as he, and with no other weapon but only his Word, which by faith we take hold on. This must needs grieve and vex that great and powerful enemy.” (*Table Talk*, no. 615)

That is the victory that Jesus Christ secured for you, and you will have it, if you remain firm in your faith. Amen.