

Speak of the Devil—Or Should We? Keeping a Balanced View of Satan and Evil.

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Medical students and novice psychologists are warned of a potential problem. When immersed in diagnoses and case studies of human abnormalities, it's easy to perceive the symptoms studied within themselves. Some begin to think, "With so many possible ailments, how can I ever expect to be healthy?"

So, should healthcare workers avoid studying diseases? Of course not! Although dwelling on dysfunctions can cause problems it's crucial in certain pursuits. C.S. Lewis rightly noted...

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.¹

Paul concludes a list of life principles with a qualifier: "...For we are not ignorant of [Satan's] schemes." (2 Cor 2:11) The implication here is that we have already considered the biblical facts about Satan and know them well enough to have an effective strategy against him. Nowhere in Scripture are we urged to relax and think *less* about the devil. Rather, many passages encourage us to "be sober-minded and watchful" because "the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Being "watchful" requires a knowledge of the nature and expected behavior of the threat.

In fairness, I must say that even though I suspect most believers know far too little about the enemy's schemes, I have experienced the

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*.

other extreme.² We do see cases in which focusing on Satan and his work can bring about fearfulness and a sense of defeat. Some would say the devil is “glorified” in these situations. However, these are almost always the result of knowing too *little* about the biblical truth of the devil’s defeat and God’s sovereign victory. It is the *imbalance* of knowledge and not necessarily the study of spiritual warfare itself.

Someone once said, “All extremes are bad except extreme love for and obedience to God.” There are many spiritual imbalances that may negatively affect a Christian’s life. We are in danger when we choose extreme positions in...

- God’s *love* and His *wrath*.
- Human *responsibility* and God’s *sovereignty*.
- Being *in* the world but not *of* the world.
- Strict *legalism* vs easy *grace*.

Yet these are all topics that should be studied by believers. We should consider the extremes but view the concepts with balance. Studying the Enemy is no different. The best strategy is to learn the whole truth of spiritual warfare as presented in Scripture. We must also view this subject within the context and priority of other biblical truths. The topic of “evil” is only one of many in God’s Word.

It’s also important to approach the subject of Satan and demons without the misconceptions and deceptions prevalent in our culture and even some churches. Let’s examine some of these.

² Despite warnings that learning about Satan gives him glory, that clearly isn’t the case for the majority. Only 26% of Christians in America believe that the devil described in Scripture is even a real being. (Barna Group, 2004).

Wrong ideas about Satan and demons...

1. *Satan is the opposite of God.* Pop culture portrays spiritual warfare as a battle between two equal forces with the outcome a mere chance roll of the dice.³ This is not the reality revealed in Scripture!

For reasons known only to Himself, God allows Satan to win battles occasionally, but the result of the war is never questionable. Satan and his cohorts are *utterly defeated enemies* through the finished work of Jesus. God has already determined the devil's "due" and will ultimately put him in eternal separation from the rest of creation. Case closed.

2. *Satan is unimportant.* Although Satan and all evil will one day be put away, at the moment he works viciously against God and His children. The Enemy is a significant factor in the life of a believer. Scripture says he opposes us by...

- Hindering (1 Thessalonians 2:18).
- Tempting (Matthew 4:10, 1 Corinthians 7:5).
- Keeping from truth (Mark 4:15).
- Causing to say things (Mark 8:33).
- Placing lies in the mind (Acts 5:3).
- Causing sickness (Luke 13:16).
- Performing signs and wonders (2 Thessalonians 2:9).
- Slandering believers (Revelation 12:10).

That's a formidable list! Again, these are all through the permissive hand of God, and though bad for a season will ultimately work for our good, as will any of our trials (Romans 8:28).

3. *Satan is to be feared.* There is a small creek behind my house. Occasionally, resident copperheads decide the hunting is better in my yard. These small, venomous snakes can inflict a lot of pain and suffering

³ This is a form of *dualism*, the idea that two equal and opposite forces have existed from eternity. Dualism is completely at odds with the reality presented in the Bible. Satan was *created by God* as a very powerful and intelligent angel, but he is absolutely no equal to the sovereign Creator.

on unsuspecting humans. I don't like the idea of copperheads in my yard. But after years of dealing with them, I know their habits. I've learned how fast they can slither. I've learned how far they can strike. In the back of my mind, I have a contingency plan in case one of my family is bitten. I do everything in my power to avoid them...

However, *I do not fear copperheads*. I respect the threat they offer. I'm certainly wary of them. I avoid them. Yet, I have more important things to do than to dwell on what a snake can do!

In the same way, I respect the effect Satan could have in my life, but God's Word assures me he is a defeated foe. I don't fear him. He has no ultimate authority over me because Christ has overcome him. I don't have to stay up at night worrying about the devil's next move. I'm watchful, but my thoughts are not constantly on Satan. "[God's Spirit] who is in me is greater than [Satan] who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

4. Every bad thing in my life is the work of Satan and his demons. This idea is common among Christians, and it certainly gives the devil more honor and prestige than he deserves! Often, we find ourselves in bad situations because we are all sinners—no devil required. Our fallen, sinful minds choose sin over righteousness. We hurt each other. They hurt us. We also live in a messed up, sinful world in which bad things happen. Perhaps Satan at times just sits back and enjoys the tribute people mistakenly give him.

5. I must constantly confront or bind Satan and his demons. This is another common misbelief among Christians—an extreme that probably causes some to avoid learning about the devil altogether.

Despite much contemporary teaching, Scripture never tells us to speak to, fight, or "bind" Satan. It does, however, clearly tell us to "put on the armor of God" in order to *stand* against the devil (Ephesians 6). This metaphorically armor includes faith, righteousness, and the truth of the gospel. And as opposed to confronting the Enemy, we are instructed to...

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you (James 4:7).

This implies that we are aware of the devil's ways. We are trained to recognize him in action and respond quickly. At that point, we refuse to follow his scheming and depend on God for the victory.

A balanced view of spiritual warfare is crucial in today's world. Satan is temporarily the "god of this world" (2 Corinthians 4:4) and controls the world system in general. His societies, governments, media, and educational strongholds feed us and our children a steady diet of deceptions.

Today more than ever, Christians must practice the spiritual disciplines commanded in Scripture. We must be watchful and prepared. This includes righteousness, obedience to God, prayer, and the diligent study of the Bible (the whole Bible). A clear, balanced knowledge of the devil is one of many results of such a study.