

Satan, Demons and Spiritual Warfare

By Greg Witherow

For some Catholics the topic of Satan and demons is fraught with doubt. Many Catholics wonder whether Satan actually exists. Is he merely a caricature for evil? And are so-called demon possessions in reality mental illnesses? It is rare to find these as topics of books, articles, homilies or discussions in Catholic culture. Or perhaps Catholics have even heard such notions depicted as “medieval thinking”. What is the Catholic to make of it all? Has the Church re-evaluated her theology of Satan? And is demon possession a superstitious and uneducated response to chemical imbalances treatable by medicine¹? In the following essay we will confront these questions. And by our answers we will show the Catholic how to better live the Christian life.

The Existence of Satan

The Gospels can serve as a foundation to tackle our question. In each of the synoptic Gospels² Christ is recorded as going into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. This Satan vs. Jesus confrontation is Round II of an earlier event in the history of Man. Satan had successfully tempted Adam into sin as recorded in the book of Genesis. In the Gospels Satan now confronts³ the new Adam⁴, Jesus. And in this confrontation we learn a few things about Satan. First, Satan is an actual being that engages Christ in dialogue. This account is not depicted as a parable or allegory but as an actual historical event in the life of Christ. Secondly, Satan is clearly an intelligent being who knows the scriptures as he quotes Psalm 91:11,12. Third, Satan offers Christ the kingdoms of the world in return for worship. This was a valid offer as the world was under his dominion (more on this in a moment). As a result, we can be assured that the God-man Jesus Christ did in fact meet face-to-face with Satan in the wilderness.

But who is Satan and where did he come from? There is scant information in scripture but the Fathers of the Church see a reference to this question in Isaiah 14:12-17. The chapter is written as a prophesy against the king of Babylon. But there is a secondary meaning to this prophesy that is understood to be a description of Satan. It reads as follows:

¹ I will not assert that all claims of demon possession in the history of man have been valid. But in this essay I will claim that **all** the Biblical accounts of demon possession were valid (not mistaken instances of mental illness) **and** that Satan and demons are active and “on the hunt” in the current Church-age.

² Matthew, Mark and Luke. They are called synoptic Gospels because they “see together” a common series of events and stories in the life of Christ. The Gospel of John is more of a theological book and is primarily based on the last few weeks of Christ’s life.

³ And unlike the first Adam, the second Adam would confront Satan with the odds stacked against him. How so? The first Adam confronted Satan in a garden of plenty, the second in a wilderness of want. The first Adam had eaten his fill; the second Adam went 40 days without food. The first Adam had companionship; the second Adam faced Satan alone. But in both cases the first temptation was to eat. The first Adam never got past this first temptation.

⁴ Christ is called the new Adam in the New Testament. See 1 Corinthians 15:45ff.

“**12** How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, who didst rise in the morning? How art thou fallen to the earth, that didst wound the nations? **13** And thou saidst in thy heart: I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God, I will sit in the mountain of the covenant, in the sides of the north. **14** I will ascend above the height of the clouds, I will be like the most High. **15** But yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, into the depth of the pit. **16** They that shall see thee, shall turn toward thee, and behold thee. Is this the man that troubled the earth, that shook kingdoms, **17** that made the world a wilderness, and destroyed the cities thereof, that opened not the prison to his prisoners?”

Here we learn that Satan “fell” from heaven as the result of a freewill decision to exalt himself. But while the fall caused him to lose his **position** in heaven, it did not cause him to lose access to heaven, at least not at first. We see this in the book of Job where Satan presents himself to God in the opening chapters.

“**6** Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. **7** The LORD said to Satan, "Whence have you come?" Satan answered the LORD, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." **8** And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" **9** Then Satan answered the LORD, "Does Job fear God for nought? **10** Hast thou not put a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. **11** But put forth thy hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse thee to thy face." **12** And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power; only upon himself do not put forth your hand." So Satan went forth from the presence of the LORD.”

The Existence of Demons

But Satan is not alone. He has a host of other fallen angels of lesser rank ready to do his bidding. We catch one such glimpse in the book of Daniel. In the events recorded in chapter 10, we are told that Daniel has prayed to God asking for an interpretation of a dream. But it is three weeks before the prayer is answered with the arrival of Gabriel. This is the same Gabriel that would announce the birth of Christ to Mary and Joseph in the New Testament. But why the three week delay? We are told beginning in verse 12.

“**12** Then he [Gabriel] said to me, "Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your mind to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words. **13** The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days; but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, so I left him there with the prince of the kingdom of Persia.”

From the fall of Adam until the advent of Christ, Satan was given a dispensation to bind the nations. That is why Satan was able to offer Christ the kingdoms of the world during the temptation in the wilderness⁵. Christ did not correct Satan about his offer. He simply refused the offer. In Daniel we see the nations under the grip of Satan. Amazingly, God did not give Gabriel the graces to withstand this demonic henchman, called “the prince of the kingdom of Persia”. It is only by the power of Saint Michael the Archangel that Gabriel was able to break through to meet Daniel.

⁵ With the coming of Christ the kingdom of God was established. But the final defeat of Satan is not yet complete. In a weakened form, Satan still clings to his dominion. But as the armies of D-Day would eventually destroy Hitler and his Nazi empire, so too will the gates of hell not prevail.

Likewise the New Testament records a high level of demonic activity. The Gospels are filled with stories of the demon possessed. But are these actual demonic episodes? Or are these instances, as some charge, where the ancient culture mistakenly labeled mental illness as demon possession? Let us look closely.

“27 And as he [Christ] stepped out on land, there met him a man from the city who had demons; for a long time he had worn no clothes, and he lived not in a house but among the tombs. 28 When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell down before him, and said with a loud voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beseech you, do not torment me." 29 For he had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many a time it had seized him; he was kept under guard, and bound with chains and fetters, but he broke the bonds and was driven by the demon into the desert.) 30 Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" And he said, "**Legion**"; **for many demons had entered him.** 31 And **they** begged him not to command them to depart into the abyss. 32 Now a large herd of swine was feeding there on the hillside; and they begged him to let them enter these. So he gave them leave. 33 **Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine**, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.”

This was no case of mental illness. Swine do not spontaneously stampede and run over cliffs when somebody down at the hospital snaps out of a schizophrenic, multi-personality state. This man was possessed by demons that identified themselves by the name of Legion. And it says **they (not he)** begged Christ not to throw them into the abyss. Christ believes in demons and as Christians so must we.

Satan and Demons At War

Christ firmly planted his wounded heel on Satan's head during his advent and passion. We see this from heaven's perspective in Revelation 12:1-9.

“1 And a great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; 2 she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery. 3 And another sign appeared in heaven; behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads. 4 His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven, and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth; 5 she brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, 6 and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which to be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days. 7 Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, 8 but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9 And 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.”

The heavenly drama of the first advent is unveiled in this vision. Mary gives birth to Jesus with Satan waiting to destroy him. But the tables are turned as **war breaks out in heaven**. It culminates with Saint Michael the Archangel casting Satan and the fallen angels from heaven. Here we learn that one third of the angels fell with Satan. Unable to destroy Christ or the Woman, Satan now turns on the faithful. Later we read,

“17 Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus.”

While Revelation unveils this event from the vantage of heaven, the Gospels unveil this event from the vantage of earth. In Luke chapter 10, Christ sends out seventy disciples to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom of God. At the end of the mission, the seventy come back rejoicing that even the demons were subject to them. But Christ expands on what was unfolding. **It was with the proclamation of the Gospel on earth** that Michael drew his sword on Satan and his minions in heaven.

“*17* The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" *18* And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. *19* Behold, I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall hurt you. *20* Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you; but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.””

And at the end of history Satan will be dealt a final blow. Revelation 20:10 states,

“and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.”

Our Spiritual Warfare

But what does this mean for the Christian today? **It means we are engaged in a spiritual war, whether we acknowledge it or not.** Scripture is quite clear on this. **To the world, this talk is sheer madness.** But the world has rejected Christ and does not have the mind of Christ. As Christians, we are called to have the mind of Christ⁶. Make no mistake, Satan desires to devour us⁷. The apostle Paul advises us on how we must confront Satan in Ephesians 6:10-17,

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. *11* Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. *12* **For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.** *13* Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. *14* Stand therefore, having girded your loins with **truth**, and having put on the breastplate of **righteousness**, *15* and having shod your feet with the equipment of the **gospel of peace**; *16* besides all these, taking the shield of **faith**, with which you can quench all the **flaming darts of the evil one**. *17* And take the helmet of **salvation**, and the **sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God**.

Paul speaks of a spiritual war and exhorts us to go into battle fully garbed. And of all the armor we are given to wear, there is only one item that is offensive in nature - the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. As Christ drove Satan from the field of battle in the wilderness with the Word of God, so is Satan driven from heaven with a proclamation of the Word of God as the seventy proclaimed the Gospel message. And it is the Word of God and its Gospel message that drive the powers of darkness from our lives, from our marriages, from our communities and from our world. It is a true weapon.

⁶ Romans 12:2 and 1 Corinthians 2:16

⁷ 1 Peter 5:8, “Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”

Conclusion

Satan and demons are real beings and they exist today. Catholics need to know this and believe it. Why? It is because the Bible describes our current struggle as warfare against Satan and his hosts. As a general rule, if you're in a war it's always good to know who your enemy is. But the reality of this warfare is widely unknown in our Catholic parishes today. Perhaps this is one reason so many Catholic's lead a spiritually defeated life. Perhaps this is one reason so many Catholic's for all practical purposes have left the faith.

Do we fear Satan? No. But we must avoid the occult and refrain from an inflated view of our power over the forces of darkness⁸. Instead we must wear the full armor of God as protection from Satan's fiery arrows, opposing him with the sword of the Spirit. During his temptation, Christ drove Satan from the field of battle by utilizing the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God as his only weapon. We too are called to resist Satan with the same weapon. Scripture tells us that if we do so, Satan will flee from us⁹. In practical terms this means to proclaim the Gospel to ourselves. It means to proclaim the Gospel to our spouse. It means to proclaim the Gospel to our families. It means to proclaim the Gospel to the world. The Church dogmas have not changed. We, with one accord with Christ and his Church, must collectively place our foot squarely on Satan's head, apply pressure and smite him for good¹⁰.

“Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him we humbly pray; and do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly Host, by the power of God, cast into hell Satan and all the evil spirits who roam throughout the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen”

⁸ **Acts 19:13-16** states, “Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to pronounce the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, “I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches.” Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?” And the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, mastered all of them, and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. And in **Jude 1:9**, “But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, disputed about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a reviling judgment upon him, but said, “The Lord rebuke you.””

⁹ James 4:7 states, “Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”

¹⁰ Romans 16:20, “the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.” Also, see Genesis 3:15.