

THE STRATEGY OF SATAN

by Ray C. Stedman

In this present series we are seeking to understand the evident bafflement of the world leaders today who are trying to grasp and solve the problems of our human situation. We have already noted that the clearest thinkers among the world leaders acknowledge abject defeat when it comes to really grasping the problems we face. The statesmen of the world have long ago abandoned any attempt to formulate long-range policies. They are content now to grapple with each problem as it arises. The policy of the nations is to play each situation by ear and to do the best they can under the circumstances, for the problems of the world have long since grown so complex and so difficult that no one can anticipate what is coming.

Further, we have seen that we will never understand and comprehend what is going on in our world for these many centuries until we accept the biblical diagnosis of life. Paul puts this diagnosis very plainly in Ephesians 6:

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 heavenly places. Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. {Eph 6:12-13 RSV}

We have noted already that our experience confirms the suggestion of this passage -- that life is basically a struggle. Life never conforms to the rosy idealism of our dreams, or to the romanticism of our songs. We saw, further, that the explanation of this struggle lies deeper than we ordinarily think. The common view of our struggle in the present world situation, as in every situation of the past, has been that we are engaged in conflict against flesh and blood, against other men and women. But Paul says the battle is not against flesh and blood; it lies deeper than that. The basic problem is that this is a battle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, and that man himself is the battlefield. The battle is visible not only in the wars, revolutions, and crime waves which oppress us, and fill our newspapers, but it is also seen in the inner tensions and fears of individual lives, in the neurotic problems and mental illnesses which afflict us today, in family fights and church struggles. It is even visible in nature, where all of life competes in a ruthless, deadly struggle to survive.

We saw that the whole race, according to this passage, has fallen under the control of satanic forces, whom Paul calls, "the world rulers of this present darkness" -- a most significant phrase. Jesus confirms this in his figurative description of Satan as the strong man who, armed, rules his own palace and keeps his goods in peace. The picture of the Bible from beginning to end is that all human beings, without exception, regardless of how clever or educated or cultured they may be, if without Christ, are the helpless victims of satanic control. Under the control of satanic forces human beings are uncomfortable and unhappy, but also completely unable to escape by any wisdom or power of their own.

But the good news is that some have been set free, some have been delivered. Through the coming of that "stronger one," Jesus himself, who came, as John tells us, "to destroy the works of the devil" {1 Jn 3:8b}, deliverance is obtained. Through the amazing mystery of the cross and the resurrection, Jesus has broken the power and bondage of Satan over human lives. Those who individually receive and acknowledge this (i.e., those who believe, for Scripture always addresses itself to belief), are set free to live in the freedom and liberty of the children of God.

But they are not set free to live unto themselves. That is a common misconception of Christianity. Many believe that Christ has come into their lives by means of the cross, and the things which have bound them and blasted them and ruined them have been stricken away, and they have been set free. All too frequently they feel they have been set free to do as they please, to live as they want to live. But they are set free in order to battle. That is the call which comes to all Christians. We are not set free in order to enjoy ourselves. We are set free to

do battle, to engage in the fight, to overcome in our own lives, and to become the channels by which others are set free. Thus there comes this call to us in this closing chapter in the letter to the Ephesians:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, {Eph 6:10-11a RSV}

We must now give closer attention to the actual conduct of this battle.

If this conflict is the basic problem of human life, how much devolves upon us in conducting or fighting this battle? How do you do this?

Paul's answer is in one phrase: "Put on the whole armor of God." Full provision has been made that you might win in this battle.

This is the amazing thing we must learn. It is something we seldom take seriously. God has made full provision for us to fight these great and powerful forces which hold the world in their grip.

But it would be a mistake to start there, to begin with the armor of God. If we start there, we find that this figure of armor strikes people with a note of unreality. It does not sound real. It is like a game they are playing, and there is no sense of the importance of this. We must end up talking about the armor of God, as we shall in this series, but we cannot start there.

We must start by seeing what it is we are opposed by. Armor is made for defense, and we will see no value in these pieces designed for our defense until we see what we are defending against. Let us realize something of the cleverness, the cunning wiliness of the forces against which we are battling, and we will begin to appreciate the armor with which we have been provided. Therefore we shall start there.

Today, I want primarily to look at this phrase of Paul's, "the wiles of the devil." The first step for any soldier in training is to be introduced to the strategy and weapons which the enemy will use against him. The devil is a very cunning and wily strategist. Martin Luther is quite right when he writes,

For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great,
And, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

The record confirms that.

Read the Old Testament and you will see that every saint, every prophet, every patriarch, every one of the great and glorious kings of Israel was defeated at one time or another by the devil. The wisest and greatest of men are absolutely helpless and futile in attempting to outwit the devil by themselves. Yet, as we have already seen, the Bible indicates that it is quite possible to walk in victory.

James says, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you," {Jas 4:7b}. Think of that! This clever, cunning strategist who has held the world for centuries in defeat, whom no man is able to out-manuever, will flee from you when you learn, like Paul, not to be ignorant of his devices.

Now the questions we must ask are, "What is the general strategy of the devil? How does he plan to do this? How is it that he keeps the world in such bondage and such powerlessness?"

The only one in all history who has ever consistently and unbrokenly defeated the devil, not only in his life but also in his death, is the Lord Jesus Christ. He put his finger squarely upon the strategy and the tactics of Satan when he said, "The devil is a liar and a murderer from the beginning," {cf, John 8:44}. The strategy of the devil is to murder. The tactic by which he accomplishes this is to lie. If we consider these phrases carefully we will see how accurate they are.

How does the devil plan to oppose the work of God in the world? Well, by murdering, by destroying. One of the names given to the devil in the book of the Revelation is "Apollyon," the "Destroyer." What does "destroy" mean? It is to create chaos, to lay waste, to ruin, to make desolate. There you have the explanation for the whole tragic story of human history: a Destroyer is at work among men. Our God is a God of beauty, harmony, order, and perfection, of love, of light, and grace. There is enough evidence left in the world of nature, including our own being, and in the world of ideas, to see this marvelous symmetry, beauty, and perfection of God. God is a God of harmony and order. The world was created as orderly, and then along with it.

But into this scene a Destroyer came. It is his delight to smash, to mangle, to twist, to mutilate, to disfigure, to darken and blast in every way he can. It does not make any difference whether it is bodies or souls, flesh or ideas, matter or spirit, the aim of the devil is exactly the same in every case: It is to distort, to blast, to twist, to destroy. That is why the devil can never offer anything positive to human life. He can make nothing. He has never made anything and he never can make anything. All he can do is destroy what God has made. His power is totally negative, completely destructive in every way.

What are the tactics the devil employs to accomplish this dastardly destructiveness which is so abundantly confirmed as you look around at life and read your newspaper and review the story of human history? How does he do it? Well, by deceiving, by lying, by distorting, by counterfeiting, by play-acting and masquerading, by illusion and fantasy. This is what Paul calls "the wiles of the devil." Read through the Bible and see how many times the work of the devil is referred to in that manner -- the snares, the traps of the devil, the illusions, the stratagems, the wiles. We shall content ourselves now with a general survey of these wiles. In our next message we hope to take a much closer look at the actual tactics the devil is employing in your life and mine to defeat us and keep us in weakness, to ruin and lay waste our lives.

The Bible makes clear that the tactics of the devil fall into two major divisions. He attacks the human race both directly and indirectly. He is capable of a direct confrontation with human beings, and an indirect approach. And through these two avenues he maintains his world-wide control over the race of men. The Bible indicates that there are fallen hosts of angels called "demons," whom Paul calls here "the principalities and powers, the world rulers of this present darkness, the spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places." Now "heavenly places" does not mean far off in heaven somewhere. "Heavenly" means "the realm of the invisibilities," i.e., the invisible realities of life. The devil and his hosts are not visible. That is what he is saying. The devil's activity is in this realm of the invisible reality of life, the heavenly places where God works, as well as the devil.

In the Bible, we are told very little of the origin of the devil and his angels, these principalities and powers. There is enough to suggest that here was a being created originally as an angel of might and strength and beauty and power. There is a brief reference to the fall of this great angel, whose name was Lucifer, and who was lifted up by pride. Pride is always the mark of the devil. Lifted up by pride, he chose to rival God and, in doing so, he fell from his station of might and glory and beauty and became the devil. He drew a third of the angels with him, and these constitute the principalities and powers, the organized kingdom of darkness, as opposed to the kingdom of God. It is through these hosts of wicked spirits that Satan is able to make a direct assault upon human life.

This direct assault covers what the Bible refers to as "demon possession," the outright control of human personality by the power of a wicked spirit. It also extends to such activities as soothsaying, occultism, spiritism (or spiritualism), and related black magic arts such as astrology, horoscopes, voodooism, fortune telling, etc.

A word of warning is in order right here. There is no question that there is much chicanery and deception in this whole field of black magic. There are charlatans at work who make their living off the superstitious fears of people and who engage in deceptive tricks which give the impression they are genuinely dealing with the occult. It is very difficult to tell the difference between the genuine and the false in this field. Great care must be displayed by anyone attempting to investigate it, because there is very much smoke, but the Bible makes clear there is considerable fire as well. There is truth behind this black magic.

The Bible consistently warns against dabbling in these matters. Under the Law, the people of Israel were strictly forbidden to have anything to do with wizards "that peep and mutter" {cf, Isa 8:19}, and those who try to make contact with the dead, or those who deal with the world of the occult. This prohibition was largely because any investigation into this realm immediately lays one open to powers beyond men's ken and makes possible control and influence beyond the will of the individual investigating. This is dangerous ground. It opens the way, oftentimes, to outright demon possession.

As to this subject of demon possession, I am very well aware there are many people who raise their eyebrows in incredulity whenever this subject is mentioned. They say, "Surely you don't believe in that kind of stuff anymore. In this 20th century day you're not telling us there are such things as demons! After all, the days in which the Bible were written were primitive times. People believed in that type of thing then, but we're much better informed now. What was once called demon possession we now know to be only mental illness. We can treat it with drugs and other therapy."

What is our reply to that? Simply this:

First, the Bible itself is very careful to distinguish between mental illness and demon possession. The Bible is not as primitive a book as many people imagine. It makes a very careful distinction between these two things. The writers of the Scriptures were certainly aware of this distinction. One of them, Luke, was a physician himself and was certainly acquainted with the distinctions between diseases and mental illnesses, as well as demon possession. In Matthew 4:24 a careful distinction is made between those who were afflicted by diseases, those who were demon possessed, and those who were lunatic or mentally ill. Dr. Luke refers to the same thing in Luke 4:40-41.

Second, it is important to notice that the biblical cases of demon possession do not conform to the clinical pattern of any known mental disease. There are diseases of the body and there are diseases of the mind. Diseases of the mind, like those of the body, present standard clinical patterns which can readily be recognized. But when you examine carefully the biblical accounts of demon possession you find these do not fit any of the standard patterns of mental diseases. They are not the same thing; they do not conform.

In the first place, there is always a debasing element in the biblical cases of demon possession, an uncleanness, a moral debasement. Also in the biblical accounts of demon possession there was an immediate recognition by the demon within of the character and identity of the Lord Jesus Christ. When Christ approached these demons, many times they would call out and say, "What have we to do with you, thou Son of God?" {cf, Matt 8:29, Luke 8:28}. They called him by name and used titles for him which the victims they were possessing were not at all acquainted with. There is so often this immediate and strange recognition of the authority of Jesus Christ. Further, there is always the presence of a totally distinct and different personality involved. In some cases many personalities were involved, as in the incident when Jesus asked the name of the demon and the reply was, "Our name is legion. There are many of us here," {cf, Mark 5:9}. Finally, there is the ability on the part of Christ to transfer demons from an individual to animals. How do you explain the case of the Gadarene swine? If demon possession is merely mental sickness, if it is only hallucination, if it is some kind of schizophrenia, then how do you explain these demons leaving the man and entering the swine, causing them to rush down the hillside and drown themselves in the sea? These cases simply do not conform to any clinical pattern of known mental disease.

A third factor is that Jesus himself invariably described these cases as demon possession. This is what he said they were, and he treated them that way. He dealt with this kind of thing continuously. He sent out his disciples and gave them authority to cast out demons. "Well," someone says, "we have an explanation for that. It is simply a recognition that Jesus was accommodating himself to the thought of the men of his day. They believed in demons and devils and he is simply speaking their language." But it is impossible to take that position and be consistent with the rest of the account of Christ's ministry, for we see him constantly correcting misconceptions like that. On one occasion he said to his disciples, concerning another matter, "If it were not so I would have told you," {John 14:2}. He came to reveal the truth about things, and in other areas he was constantly correcting the misconceptions they held.

Finally, as a last suggestion along this line, throughout the Christian centuries there have been various outbreaks of demon possession described by missionaries in many lands. It is significant that wherever Christian teaching spreads, the direct assault of these evil powers upon human life is kept in abeyance. Even secular teaching which is based upon the Bible and Christian values and is moral and uplifting has an ability to keep these manifestations under control. But when education becomes purely secular and denies the Bible and denies God then, even though men and women reject superstition and profess a degree of sophistication about these matters, this is not enough to keep these powers at bay. As our world grows more and more godless and more and more secularized, we will find an increasing tide of demonic manifestation creeping into our culture and insinuating itself into our civilized life. There is no power in man to withhold these or to stand against them. I was interested to read in the newspaper recently that the defense attorneys for a young man in Nebraska who killed three people and wounded another in a bank robbery are suggesting, as one of their maneuvers in trying to defend him, that perhaps he was demon possessed.

I wish to say one more thing before I leave this description of direct demonic attack. I want to recognize this briefly and then move on to that which is more important to us. When Christians are confronted with what they suspect is demon possession, the one thing we are told to do in order to help such people is to pray. These cases of demon possession, Jesus said, yield themselves to concerted and persistent prayer. Prayer is the recommended therapy in any case of this type. Let us give ourselves to prayer and nothing more.

I feel there is altogether too much concern among Christians about this matter of demon possession. That sounds almost as though I am contradicting what I have said before, but I am merely trying to balance it. I know certain Christians who feel they must "bind" Satan before they do anything. When they go into a room to have a meeting they will pray to bind the powers of darkness before they hold the meeting in the room. I know others who ascribe every common problem of human life to some manifestation of demon activity.

The New Testament gives absolutely no warrant for this type of approach. The apostles very seldom mention the direct attack of Satan against human beings. There are a few instances of it, but after our Lord physically left the world there seems to be a diminution, a dying down of the evidences of demonic activity. These dark powers were stirred up by his presence on earth, but to a degree this faded away after he left, so that in the epistles you do not get the same concern for demonic activity as you do in the Gospels. There is much about Satan in the letters of Paul, but there is little of the direct attack of satanic forces. Nowhere do you read that Christians are instructed to go around binding the powers of darkness before they enter a room, or to ascribe all the common problems of life to demonic activities. That idea is not in the New Testament. Therefore, I say there is far too much concern along these lines.

By far, the majority of the attacks of the devil against Christians are not direct but indirect. That is why they are called the "wiles" of the devil. Wiliness means deviousness, circuitry, something not obvious. A direct attack of the devil upon a human life is an obvious thing, but this is something devious, something circuitous, difficult to detect.

This is what we shall concern ourselves with in our next message. We need to examine this more thoroughly, for the major attack of the devil and his powers against human life is not by direct means but indirect -- by satanic suggestions through the natural, commonplace channels of life.

This indirect approach comes largely through two media, or channels. One is what the Bible calls "the world," and the other, "the flesh." We often hear the idea, "The enemies of the Christian are the world, the flesh, and the devil," as though these were three equally powerful enemies. But there are not three. There is only one enemy, the devil, as Paul brings out here. But the channels of his indirect approach to men are through the world and the flesh. If you would like to see these in Scripture in one passage, I suggest you study Ephesians 2:1-3. Writing to Christians, the apostle says,

And you he [i.e., Christ, the "stronger one," who comes to set us free] made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world [there is the first channel, the world], following the prince of the power of the air [there is a description of the devil], the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. {Eph 2:1-2 RSV}

He says, "Do not forget, you Christians, that you too once were following the course of this world, under the grip and in the control of the prince of the power of the air, the evil spirit which is now at work in all the children of disobedience." Further, he says,

Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh [there is the flesh], following the desires of body and mind ["Oh," you say, "we were not aware of any control of the devil." No, of course not. You did what you felt like doing, the natural desires of the body and the mind. You responded to these so-called "natural" stimuli.], and so [because we were doing these things, following the course of this world under the direction of the prince of the power of the air, and obeying the impulses of the body and the mind] we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. {Eph 2:3 RSV}

Do you see how consistently the Bible presents this picture? Now the most basic of these two channels of approach to subverting the Christian life is "the flesh." I would like to say a word about it now.

When the Bible speaks about "the flesh," of course, it uses it in a symbolic sense. Many of us approaching middle age are troubled with too much flesh. But that is not the sense in which the Bible uses the term. "The flesh," in this sense, is symbolic. It is not our bodies, not the meat and blood and bones of our physical life. It is a term which describes the urge to self centeredness within us, that distortion of human nature which makes us want to be our own god, that proud ego, that uncrucified self which is the seat of willful defiance and rebellion against authority.

You recognize that we are all born with this. None of us had to go to school to learn how to do these things. Who taught us to lie? Who taught us to be proud, and bitter, and rebellious, and defiant, and self centered? We never had to take classes in these, did we? We were all experts in them by the time we were ready to go to school. We were all born with "the flesh," and it is the presence of this which makes us sinners. James calls this the wisdom which is from beneath, which is "earthly, sensual, devilish," {Jas 3:15 KJV}. Devilish! It is the devil, attacking indirectly, through the essential character of human nature, distorting it and twisting it, changing it from what God designed it to be. You can see the satanic origin of this in the fact that it is a distortion of the beauty which God intended man to have. Romans 3:23 says, as Phillips translates it, "Everyone has sinned and has missed the beauty of God's plan."

The world, on the other hand, is the corporate expression of all the flesh-centered individuals who make up the human race. Since the flesh is in every one of them -- acting satanic, devilish, sensual, earthy -- therefore the total combined expression of such beings constitutes the world, and determines the philosophy of the world. It is that tremendous pressure of the majority upon the minority to conform, adjust, keep in step, not to digress or to be different. When the Bible addresses itself to Christians it says, "Be not conformed to this world" {Rom 12:2a KJV}, i.e., "Do not let the world around you squeeze you into its mold." Why? Because the world is flesh-centered, flesh-governed, and as Jesus said to Nicodemus, "That which is born of the flesh remains flesh. It needs a new birth in order to be changed. It must be born of the Spirit," {cf, John 3:6}. So this is the world -- that human society which insists on satanic value judgments, and is guided by satanic pride and philosophy. It is totally unaware of it, yet nevertheless it is under the control of satanic philosophy.

Next time we shall examine how this affects us. But remember this, the aim, the goal which Satan has in all this clever stratagem by which he has kept the human race in bondage through these hundreds of centuries is to destroy, to ruin, to make waste.

That is what he is aiming at with you; that is what he is aiming at with me. Only yesterday I talked with a man concerning a young man who had been raised in this church, one of our own boys. Though he is only twenty-one years of age, already, because of the rebellious determination of his heart to reject the truth of God and to live his own life, he is a mental and physical wreck. Why? Because he has turned aside from the truth and he has followed the philosophy of Satan. Satan is accomplishing his aims, destroying this life which God loves, wrecking, mutilating, laying it waste, ruining it.

That is what he is attempting to do with us all. Against this we who are Christians are called to battle, not only

for ourselves, as we will see in this account, but also for others as well.

Battling against these forces of darkness is what makes human life possible on this earth at all. If Christians, who are the salt of the earth, are not giving themselves to an intelligent battle with Satan and satanic forces, fighting along these lines which Paul suggests -- being "strong in the Lord and in the power of his might" -- it would be absolutely impossible for human life to exist on this planet. If this were not going on, life on earth would be one horrible, unending hell. It is the presence of Christians, and those who are affected by their testimony and by their teachings, and the spread of the gospel throughout the world which makes possible those moments of enjoyment of life which even the non-Christian is able to know.

That puts things in right perspective, doesn't it?

There you see life as it really is. What a mighty call this is then!

"Be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might," in these terrible and glorious days in which we live! Many are falling by the way. Many are slipping back under the control of satanic ideas and satanic philosophy and are denying the essential truth of God. But these are the days when, more than ever before, we are to respond to this mighty call: "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might."

Prayer

Our Father, we pray that you will awaken our hearts and minds, and tear away the delusive veils by which we have allowed ourselves to be defeated and weakened and rendered powerless and ineffective in this great battle. Help us to understand that we would have no possibility of fighting in this battle were it not for the delivering work of the Lord Jesus who, as the stronger one, has come to bind the power of darkness. We thank you that the victory is already won. Thank you for the privilege we have of moving over into the kingdom of God, and for the chance to stop fighting a battle already lost and to begin to fight a battle already won. In Christ's name, Amen.

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