



'I beheld Satan ... Fall'

The corruption of the best becomes the worst. The higher the status of any creature, the worse it becomes through sin. This must be so because the entrance and progress of sin in the nature of a creature turn all its excellences into poison. Hence, the potential for doing evil of any created being is directly related to its inherent powers. A grown man is capable of more wickedness than a young child, whose mind and body are as yet immature. A perverted genius is capable of more evil than a person of merely average ability. A king, if he be wicked, is in a position to murder thousands and ten thousands; the common criminal seldom harms more than a few. Power, when in the hands of any fallen being, corrupts; and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

This elementary and obvious truth should afford us some salutary thoughts about God, about the nature of sin and about our adversary the devil.

If ability to do harm increases in proportion to power and intelligence, we have reason to bless God that he is an unchangeably benign and gracious Being. It is our instinct to regard God as good and our instinct is right and true. But it does no harm to the soul to remember that God deserves our grateful worship for being the holy and loving Being that he is. If God were like the gods we read of, we should have a nightmare existence. If God were cruel, unmerciful, implacable, bloodthirsty — and what invented god is not? — we should all be hopeless prisoners of divine caprice. He might then hunt us like game or trawl us like fish — not only in this world but in the next. O what a universe of gratitude we owe to God that he is what he is! O what ecstasy of praise we ought daily and hourly to give him that he is infinite in holiness, goodness, truth and love!

Yet it is the strange and tragic folly of sinners that they are fascinated by evil rather than by what is good. Goodness is boring to men. Virtue is praised in public, and hated in secret. Virtue does not excite man's fallen nature. It does not thrill his soul. It does not gratify man's ambition, or fill his heart. Man's leisure-time is not to be wasted on virtue or on goodness but must be spent on vice. Man works at an honourable occupation to earn money. But money is earned in order to buy guilty pleasure. Man's reading, his viewing, his private hours are gratefully devoted to pleasurable vice.

It is melancholy therefore to think how deceived sinners are when they hope for heaven without an altered nature. Even if it were the teaching of the Bible that *all* sinners, whether repentant or not, would certainly be admitted to heaven after death, it could hardly be good news to those whose hearts are still wicked. The Christless man can scarcely bring himself to go to God's house for one hour on the Sabbath. And can the thought of heaven afford him pleasure, when heaven means *'dwelling in the house of the Lord forever'* (Psalm 23:6)? If the gates of heaven were thrown open to the eternally wicked and to the finally impenitent, what comfort would it be to them? If virtue and goodness are boring to men here, they will be boring to them hereafter. If the worship of God is purgatory to men now, it would be endless purgatory for them to be in a paradise of goodness. If Christ is contemptible to sinners in this life, how could they bear to bow before his throne day and night forever? Those therefore who have no love of God must go at last, all of them and eternally, *'to their own place'* (Acts 1:25).

To remember such a basic truth as this is to appreciate afresh that God has not only given to his people a robe of justifying righteousness but has also renewed their nature. New birth and sanctification are momentous acts of divine grace and power. To recreate one sinner is more wonderful than to make all the whole universe of nature. To alter our affections and our choices is the choicest work of God's creative energy. Those who remain God's enemies may in this life sit on thrones and enjoy great riches. But those whose heart God renews will at last sit on the throne of heaven; they will enjoy God himself in the end.

God is all our life preparing us, if we are Christians, for the eternal enjoyment of himself in the glory to come. It is the spot of grace on every believer's forehead that he chooses God as his portion and not the sin which worldly men live for. The believer has a changed attitude to sin. He has received new light on the hideous ugliness of sin. As an unconverted man he loved it as others still do. But as a sanctified man he now sees through the mask of sin and is convinced that sin is foul and loathsome. The change which grace has brought about in our nature is not just one which makes religion appealing, but one which makes God and godliness our ultimate ambition. The more holy we are, the more we shall crave nearness to God and likeness to God.

Satan, once an angel, is now the most depraved creature in existence. Though we are not to fear or admire him, we are to respect that he was once a highly-placed angel. The devil was once a burning spirit, whose place was beside the throne of God. He was at first perfect in beauty and radiant with light. He was endowed at his creation with vast intelligence and creaturely brilliance. How so bright a star could fall from the angelic firmament we may never fully know in this life. But we do know that he was not elected to the grace of perseverance as some angels were (1 Timothy 5:21) and that he *'kept not his first estate'* (Jude: 6) but fell from heaven *'like lightning'* (Luke 10:18). The devil and his angelic supporters *'left their own habitation'* and are now *'reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day'* (Jude: 6).

It is probably of Satan as much as of Tyre that God says:

'Thou art the anointed cherub that covereth; and I have set thee so: thou wast upon the holy mountain of God; thou hast walked up and down in the midst of the stones of fire. Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created till iniquity was found in thee.'

(Ezekiel 28:14-15)

It is probably as much of Satan as of Babylon that God says:

'How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit.'

(Isaiah 14:12-15)

Tyre and Babylon were haunts of Satan. What was true in part of them is true of him *par excellence*.

Although Satan is not God, he is a god. The Scriptures do not deny him this title, but grant to him the position of being *'the god of this world'* (2 Corinthians 4:4). Our world, modern as well as ancient, is in many ways controlled by him and governed by him. Indeed, the mysterious truth about all our human history and temporal destiny is just this, that it is always and in every age ruled by Satan and overruled by God. Two conflicting intelligences guide the progress of all events: the devil forever drives poor mankind away from God; and God forever secretly draws to himself those of mankind for whom Christ died. In this way we perceive the love and grace of God and the infinite superiority of his wisdom and power. The true motto of Satan's kingdom is in the word 'Almost'. He may climb up to *'six, six, six'*; but he will never reach to seven, the number of perfection and of divinity (Revelation 13:18).

There must needs be in all of Satan's herculean labours to outdo God a perpetual frustration. Satan's fall from heaven at the first is matched all through history by similar successive falls. He is the counterpart of the mythical Tantalus who forever suffered frustration as he attempted to take the luscious fruit. Even as Tantalus reached for it, it eluded his grasp. So does the devil forever attempt the impossible task of devouring the church of Christ. Yet, for all Satan's raging and gnashing, not one of those whom the Father gave to his Son can ever perish. *'None of them is lost'* says our Saviour (John 17). And none will be lost.

The motto of Christ's church also in every age is in the same word 'Almost'. We have always been almost destroyed, almost exterminated, almost devoured. But even as Satan's iron grip tightened round our throat, he had to let go. The people of God were almost swallowed up at the time of

Noah. But then came a Flood. The purpose of God was almost frustrated at the Tower of Babel. But then came a dislocation of our human speech. The soul of Lot was imperilled by the men of Sodom. But angels got there just in time, and fire from heaven settled the matter. Israel was almost wiped out in Egypt, but then God sent Moses. Truth was almost lost in the four hundred years after Malachi. But then came the Only-begotten God himself. The gospel was almost lost in the late Middle Ages. But then came Martin Luther and John Calvin.

*'If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, now may Israel say;
If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when men rose up against us;
Then they had swallowed us up quick, when their wrath was kindled against us:
Then the waters had overwhelmed us, the stream had gone over our soul:
Then the proud waters had gone over our soul.
Blessed be the Lord, who hath not given us as a prey to their teeth.
Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers:
the snare is broken, and we are escaped.
Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.'*

(Psalm 124)

Each fresh assault of Satan upon the people of God is like a tidal wave. It surges forward, gains in strength, mounts on high, threatens to carry all before it, thunders menacingly; yet fails to dislodge a single stone that God's electing love has laid down. *'It fell not, for it was founded upon a rock'* (Matthew 7:25). Pharaoh found it so, and perished. The Canaanite nations found it so, and melted away. Belshazzar found it so, and feasted on ashes at last. The Herods found it so for all their dynastic might. The pagan emperors of Rome found it so. Julian the Apostate speaks for them all in his famous admission at the end of life: *'Thou hast conquered, O Galilean'*. Pagan Rome had fought for nearly four centuries against Jesus Christ. But in the end they lost; and He won.

When Satan fell from heaven like lightning, our Saviour was seated on the throne, secure in his Godhood and omnipotence. Creaturely wrath may rise upward like waters of a flood. But our Lord Jesus sits *'upon the flood'*. He sits *'King for ever'*. He *'will give strength unto his people; the Lord will bless his people with peace'* (Psalm 29:10-11).

Satan rages today with sevenfold fury knowing that his time is short. He knows that at his final judgment he and his followers are to be eternally *'tormented'* (Revelation 20:10). His hourglass is running out. The day is soon to dawn when he will be cast down once more, not from heaven only but from earth also. Like a prisoner on bail he does what mischief he can before he is called back into court. But in a little while his bail-time, and all mankind's probation-time, will come to an abrupt end. The devil's last, uncomfortable home will be a lake burning with fire and brimstone (Revelation 20:10). He has had notice served on him a long time ago of his eviction from this world. He knows that the hands of the clock are moving fast. At the stroke of midnight he and all his will fall to rise no more.

Followers of the blessed Lord Jesus must cheer themselves everywhere with the remembrance that Satan's time will not now be long. The fire rages mercilessly against many of the Lord's people at this hour. We in the West are oppressed by billows of smoke and dirt. The atmosphere is thick with moral pollution: the holocaust of babes slain in the womb, the silent scream of abused children, the clamour for younger and younger legalised sodomy, the public indifference to moral issues, the maddening failure to punish evildoers realistically, the craven fear of church-leaders to stand on the side of God and truth. These are immense evils and they pose a threat to our very civilisation.

We in the West, however, are well aware that many of our brethren in other lands are suffering still fiercer problems. Our hearts go out to many of our dear Christian brothers and sisters who are facing death itself for Jesus' sake as they gather for worship in some parts of the Middle East, of Africa and elsewhere. Our heart-felt prayers are with them day by day.

It will be a small thing, ten thousand years from now, to have suffered for a while in this world where Satan is at present so noisy. Even as Christ's weary servants renew their contest with the powers of evil, they remember that at any hour the angel who holds the seventh trumpet may

receive his command to blow the last blast. Once the Jubilee is sounded out over all the earth, every prison-house will be opened and all Christ's followers will go free.

Then the mystery will be complete. The church, which throughout history has seemed so vulnerable and weak, will at the end be seen to be eternally safe and secure. That little spark of grace now in our hearts will become a blaze of everlasting love for Christ. Weak faith will overcome the world. Fallen sinners, raised up and sanctified in Christ, will be the heirs of a glory which all the angels now assist us towards.

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