



Know Your Enemy

The price of liberty is eternal vigilance against the deceiver

At 4am on 24 February 1991, General H. Norman Schwarzkopf gave the order for the “mother of all battles” to begin: “Execute Desert Storm.” At that moment, thousands of allied tanks crashed across the heavily defended positions of Saddam’s army along an 800-kilometre front of the Iraq-Kuwait border.

It was a rout. Desert Storm was all over within 100 hours. Saddam had been savaged and Schwarzkopf had given new meaning to the term blitzkrieg.

The reason for Schwarzkopf’s success was simple: he knew his enemy. He had already anticipated Saddam’s move before it actually happened. In 1977 Saddam had written a book entitled *Our Struggle*, which was also published in Germany as *Unser Kampf*. (Doesn’t that name have a familiar ring?) In it, he announced his plan to unite the Arabs under his leadership, to defeat Israel and give its land to the Palestinians, and to cause a rift between the United States and Europe/Japan by introducing a new policy on oil once he seized Kuwait’s oil fields.

Schwarzkopf had been made aware of all Saddam’s intentions, and so on 2 July 1990, a month before Saddam invaded Kuwait, Schwarzkopf ordered a contingency plan for the possible invasion of Kuwait. The US ran a computerised war game that anticipated all Saddam’s moves before he had even struck a blow. When the long-awaited attack came, Schwarzkopf was ready for him.

Being ready for the enemy, especially by understanding his strategy, is the key to success in battle. One of the greatest classics on military science, *The Art of War*, by the ancient Chinese philosopher-general Sun Tzu, says: *“In practising martial arts, assess your opponents; cause them to lose spirit and direction so that even if the opposing army is intact, it is useless. Those who win every battle are not really skilful — those who render others’ armies helpless without fighting are the best of all.”*

What Sun Tzu wrote about military conflict is equally true of spiritual warfare. The aim is to disable your opponent as effectively as possible, and in 1 Chronicles 21:1-30, we see how Satan wrought havoc on the church by disabling King David, an unsuspecting and highly accomplished leader.

Satan somehow planted the thought in David’s mind that he should conduct a census of Israel, possibly as a means of showing how much the nation had prospered under his rule. God was angered by David’s act, and decided to discipline both the king and people. David was given three choices: three years of famine, three months of military defeat or three days of plague. David opted for the shortest, the plague, and thousands perished.

This account in 1 Chronicles is the first time Satan ever appears by name in the Bible. It is particularly important for us because it reveals a number of Satan’s strategies that he employs against believers in many parts of the Scriptures, and by implication, in our own day as well.

What we find emerging is a pattern of operation that should be a solemn warning to Christians everywhere to be alert and prepared for a similar attack today. By studying this episode, we can be ready when it happens.

The first thing we notice about Satan’s method is that he often employs a strategy of deception. The writer tells us that *“Satan rose up against Israel and invited David to take a census”* (v1). What actually came into David’s mind at this point is unclear. However, we do know that he had

precedent for his action. On two occasions before, God had directed Moses to take a census of the nation. (Num. 1:2; 26:2) David's action seemed innocent enough, which explains why he gave the order so readily. It seemed so logical, and he could justify it from an administrative point of view. But therein lay the danger.

Satan often begins his process of disablement by offering us an apparently harmless choice. This was the way he approached Eve. (Gen. 3:4, 5) Indeed, he suggested to her that his proposal would be to her advantage. But clearly it wasn't; nor was it in this case.

While David may have had no idea where his thought of the census had come from, the Chronicler suggests that the idea originated with Satan. David obviously felt a twinge of conscience about what he was doing when he ordered the census (v8). He had overruled the protests of Joab, his commander-in-chief, who clearly sensed that either the policy or the motive was wrong. But it was all to no avail. David pushed ahead with the census, and plunged Israel into a crisis.

Here we discover a pattern of Satanic strategy that recurs throughout the Bible. Satan is an expert at deceiving us either by creating confusion in our minds about the nature of the truth, or by leading us into open sin through blinding us to our true motives.

In David's case, it seems as though Satan probably convinced him to do something that was innocent, however with a wrong motive. David's decision was probably inspired by pride. The tragedy was that David was unaware that he was being manipulated by Satan, and that the stakes were so high — 70,000 people died because of this sin.

The Scriptures are full of warnings about Satan's strategy of deception. He is a master at giving false impressions and leading his victims into greater harm. How many Christians have fallen into sexual sin because they have become morally confused at the point of temptation?

Satan always has the right words to persuade us to sin: "My husband doesn't meet my needs like you could"; "Who will ever find out? We're completely alone, absolutely safe"; "Look, we're going to get married anyway. Why wait? What does it matter?"

But Satan deceives in other ways as well. He has the capacity to appear as an "*angel of light*" and a "*servant of righteousness*" (2 Cor. 11:14). Nevertheless, the message that he gives is a false gospel (2 Cor. 11: 3).

Satan and his servants are tireless in their efforts in the theological field. Nowhere are they more active. That's why the Scriptures are replete with warnings about false prophets and deceivers.

Paul knew the danger of deceivers when he warned believers to beware of people in the church "*who paid attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons*" (1 Tim. 4:1). In other words, Paul foresaw a day when theological professors and ministers would be involved in publishing and preaching doctrines of demons, that is, doctrines inspired by the devil.

This is precisely what has happened on a number of occasions in this past century in the Presbyterian Church of Australia. Prominent teachers have used orthodox terms to promote false doctrine. They have attacked the Bible, the uniqueness and deity of Jesus Christ, and the reality of Jesus' resurrection. They have taught a permissive new morality by perverting the doctrine of God's grace (Jude 4). All this is the work of the devil, whose main strategy is deception.

The second major lesson we discover in this episode involving David is that Satan deliberately targets leaders. There is good reason for this. Key people have a tremendous amount of influence over others. The decisions of a CEO can affect hundreds of people's lives. A politician's deals can touch countless thousands. If a single person sins, the effect may be isolated. If a father sins, his wife and children will suffer. If a minister sins, a whole congregation — even a denomination — may be hurt. And if a President sins, the whole nation can be deeply affected.

The upshot of all this is that Satan particularly targets Christian leaders. His aim is to lead them into error, or to fall into shame. In the last two decades, the church has been rocked and

embarrassed by revelations of sexual and financial misconduct by some very high-flying names in the Christian world. People have been caught with their hand in the till, or visiting motels with prostitutes.

The press has had a field day when these sins have been exposed, and headlines around the world have proclaimed the shame and hypocrisy of Christian leaders. That's why this incident involving David is so important: it urges leaders to beware. Dire consequences can follow from unguarded moments and careless acts.

The final element that emerges in Satan's pattern of operation is his purpose in all this. His aim is to inflict as much damage as possible upon the church, and to turn unbelievers away from the Gospel. The results of David's actions were horrendous: tens of thousands of people died because of his foolishness, and God's name was brought into disrepute. It seems hard to believe that so much harm should have flowed out of what appears to be a relatively insignificant deed. But it wasn't; and Satan knew it. That explains why he set the trap.

As a young boy, I used to pass the local RSL Club on my way to school each day. Emblazoned across the front of the building were these words: "*The Price of Liberty is Eternal Vigilance.*" This sad event in David's life should make us realise that we have to be constantly vigilant against Satan's strategy of deception, and continually prayerful for all who are in leadership positions. If a leader falls, the results can be very damaging to the Christian community. Like General Schwarzkopf, having been forewarned of the enemy's strategy, we can be forearmed against his attacks.

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