



## Satan in the New Testament

### Satan's names

The New Testament most often refers to Satan as "*the devil*" (*diabolos*). That term, which means traducer or slanderer, is used sixty times in the New Testament, forty times in the gospels alone. Satan is slanderer par *excellence*. He slanders God to man, as he did to Eve; he slanders, at times, man to God, as he did in Job's case; and he slanders man to man.

The term Satan occurs thirty-four times in the New Testament. Half of those terms are in the gospels and Acts and half in the epistles and Revelation. All but six of the references refer to "the Satan." Other New Testament names for Satan include the Accuser (Rev. 12:10), the Adversary (1 Pet. 5:8), Apollyon (Rev. 9:11), Beelzebub (Matt. 12:24), Belial (2 Cor. 6:15), the Dragon (Rev. 12:7), God of this world (2 Cor. 4:4), Prince of the power of the air (Eph. 2:2), Prince of this world (John 12:31), the Serpent (Rev. 20:2), the Tempter (Matt. 4:3), and a roaring Lion (1 Pet. 5:8).

### Satan's personality, army, and subjects

These names teach us that Satan is not an impersonal evil force. He possesses all the traits of personality, such as intellect (2 Cor. 11:3), emotion (Rev. 12:17), and will (2 Tim. 2:26). Personal pronouns are also used of him (Matt. 4:1-12). Being a person, he is held morally accountable by the Lord (Matt. 25:41). That's why the New Testament speaks of him as proud, rebellious, lawless, and slanderous, and why he is called a liar, a deceiver, a distorter, and an imitator.

The New Testament reveals Satan as the ruler of a host of fallen angels (Matt. 25:41), and as the head of a well-organized army of spiritual agents. Terms such as principalities, powers, and rulers of the darkness of this world indicate ranks in Satan's army (Eph. 6:12). By means of these ranks of demons, Satan, like a competent general, gathers his information and carries out his program throughout his worldwide kingdom of darkness.

Satan and his demons carry out their evil, devilish activity among people in the world who do not acknowledge Christ as Lord (Mark 4:15; John 8:44; Col. 1:13). With temptations ranging from asceticism to libertinism and from intellectual theism to crass occultism, he blinds their minds, seeks to prevent their believing in Christ alone for salvation, and strives to retain their allegiance to himself (2 Cor. 4:4; Luke 8:12). That's why his human followers are called "the children of the wicked one" (Matt. 13:38), his "ministers" (2 Cor. 11:15), and "the children of the devil" (1 John 3:10).

### Demon possession

In some cases, Satan and his demons enter into and control their followers so fully that they engage in "*demon possession*." Luke 8:30 describes a man whose name was called Legion because "*many devils were entered into him*." Particularly prior to Christ's death and resurrection, Satan and his demons were permitted to exert dreadful, powerful, overt attacks upon some people's minds and bodies. God permitted that power, in part, so that people might deeply know their need for a deliverer, and that the power of Christ to deliver them would be prominently displayed. Demon possessions could produce blindness (Matt. 12:22), paralysis (Acts 8:7), convulsions (Luke 9:39), paroxysms (Mark 9:17, 20, 26), self-destruction (Mark 9:22), superhuman strength (Mark 5:4), personality splits (Mark 5:6-10), special knowledge to identify Jesus (Mark

5:7), or insanity and bizarre behavior (Luke 8:27; Matt. 17:15). All of this shows that there is no kind of affliction, mental or physical, that Satan and his demons are unwilling to bring upon people. Common to all these is destructiveness, for Satan is ever the destroyer. In most cases, the gospel authors are careful to differentiate demonic activity from various physical sicknesses (Matt. 4:24; Luke 4:40-41).

Satan is bitterly opposed to God and seeks to alienate everyone from God; hence Satan also wages intense war against the followers of Christ (Luke 8:33; 1 Cor. 7:5). Since every believer is indwelt by the Holy Spirit and belongs to Jesus, no believer can be demon possessed (1 Cor. 6:19). John affirms this by saying that Jesus, who is in us, is greater than Satan who is in the world (1 John 4:4). Nevertheless, Satan still so influenced Peter's thinking that Jesus had to say firmly to Peter, "*Get thee behind me, Satan!*" (Matt. 16:23). Luke 22:31 tells us that Satan wanted to sift all of the disciples as wheat to test them.

## **Satan versus Christ**

The conflict between the devil and the Seed of the woman took the center stage upon the Incarnation of the Word. The coming of Jesus Christ in the fullness of time was God's greatest move against Satan in spiritual warfare. Jesus spoke more about Satan and demons than anyone else in the Bible. Satan and his demons unleashed their strongest fury against Jesus, whose sinless humanity motivated Satan to tempt Him in special ways. In the desert of Judea, Christ stepped from the water of baptism into the fire of temptation. For forty days, Satan attacked Jesus in the lusts of the flesh, the lusts of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life, trying to get Christ's sacred humanity under his control (Matt. 4:1-11). Satan tempted Jesus to independence (4:3-4), indulgence (4:5-7), and idolatry (4:8-10). He tempted Jesus to turn away from the will of His Father, from the Word of God, and from the cross. His underlying goal was to make Christ's substitution unnecessary by offering Christ glory without the cross, just as he had promised glory to Eve without obedience to God.

Jesus held His ground, repeatedly driving away Satan and his demons from Himself and, subsequently, from other people in His public ministry. He engaged in a ministry of proclaiming deliverance to the captives (Luke 4:18). In His confrontation with the Pharisees over the healing of a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, Jesus made clear His intent to drive Satan out of people's lives (Matt. 12:26).

In Gethsemane, Satan unleashed all the powers of hell. He brought Jesus to His knees, crawling as a worm and dripping with such bloody sweat that God's Son cried out in agony, "*O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me*" (Matt. 26:39). Oh, what bruising of the soul Christ experienced at the hands of Satan's instrument, Judas Iscariot! No wonder He said to the satanic forces, "*This is your hour, and the power of darkness*" (Luke 22:53).

The satanic attack continued at Gabbatha, where Christ was forced to wear a purple robe and a crown of thorns while He was scourged, mocked, slapped, and bruised. Finally, at Golgotha, Satan unleashed all the forces of evil once more. The bulls of Bashan encompassed the suffering Messiah (Ps. 22:12). Every insult was heaped on Jesus; the brutal soldiers, the cruel spectators, and the selfish priests and elders in their holy robes of office engaged in satanic mocking while Christ hung on the cross in the naked flame of His Father's wrath, rejected by heaven, earth, and hell. His unfathomable cry of agony rang through the dark realm of nature, "*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*" (Matt. 27:46).

Luther once spent an entire morning trying to comprehend this agony, only to rise from his knees, confessing: "*God forsaken of God; who can comprehend it?*" Indeed, that truth is incomprehensible. But this much we know: Satan was defeated on the cross, once and for all. Hebrews 2:14 says, "*Through death he (that is, Christ) might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil.*" Jesus spoke of the cross as a kind of cosmic exorcism in John 12:31-32: "*Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And I, if I be lifted*

*up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.*” The victory belongs to Christ because of His perfect obedience throughout the most severe tests instigated by Satan.

Through His life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Christ single-handedly broke the power of the oppressor. Satan lost his suffocating rule over the nations. The balance of power was turned. In the Old Testament era, flashes of light appeared in the darkness. But now, in and through Christ, the light has dawned. Christ’s abiding light and glory now outweigh Satan’s remaining evil and darkness.

## **Satan versus the New Testament church**

After Christ’s resurrection and ascension into heaven, demon possession greatly diminished. The book of Acts reports a few instances which generally emerged when the gospel was first brought to an area. Peter and Philip both cast out demons on at least one occasion (Acts 5:16; 8:7). Paul delivered a young woman from a fortune telling demon at Philippi and cast out demons at Ephesus (16:16-18; 19:11-12). But the New Testament epistles — though speaking often of satanic opposition against the church (Rom. 8:38-39; 1 Cor. 2:8, 15:24-26; Eph. 1:20-22, 3:10, 6:12; Col. 1:16, 2:15) — make little mention of demon possession and give no instructions for exorcism. Demon possession does not seem to have been a significant problem in the established New Testament church.

Satan, however, did not easily admit defeat. He continued to bruise the heel of Christ’s church in other ways. The New Testament church found victory in Christ only through the same kind of suffering and bruising that the Savior experienced. Acts tells us how Satan brought trouble into the church by persuading Ananias and Sapphira to disrupt the church’s peace with a lie (Acts 5:3). Satan tempted Corinthian church members to abandon self-control in sexual matters (1 Cor. 7:5). Satan tempted Paul by inflicting on him “*a thorn in his flesh*” (2 Cor. 12:7) and by preventing Paul from traveling to Thessalonica (1 Thess. 2:18). Satan persecuted believers in Smyrna (Rev. 2:9-10) and deceived the nations of the earth (Rev. 20:7-8), disguising himself as an angel of light to accomplish his purposes (2 Cor. 11:14). His demons serve as agents of apostasy (1 Tim. 4:1-3), and promoters of the Man of Lawlessness and the spirit of antichrist (2 Thess. 2:9; Rev. 2:18-29; 9:1-11).

Throughout all of Satan’s opposition, the church pressed on. Despite temporary setbacks, the gates of hell did not prevail against her, for Jesus is mightier than Satan.

Joel R Beeke

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