



Satan's Strategies and Skill

In his book, *Satanism*, Bruce Frederickson writes, "In the story of the Trojan horse, rather than attack the city of Troy directly, Greek soldiers built a huge, hollow, wooden horse. They left it in front of the gates of the city of Troy. Thinking the horse a gift, the Trojans wheeled it inside the city walls to admire it. After the Trojans fell asleep, the Greeks crept out of their hiding place inside the horse and took the city by surprise. Satan often operates like that — he attacks from behind (and from within) where he is least expected."

We encounter Satan's strategies and devices most when we experience God most, for Satan loathes seeing a true Christian commune with God. As Luther said, "For where God builds a church, there the devil builds a chapel. Thus is the devil even God's ape" — that is, imitator.

The Puritans, who experienced great intimacy with God, became greatly familiar with the strategies and devices of Satan. They wrote frequently and with great depth on spiritual warfare. I want to bring together in contemporary language the cream of what six Puritan authors said about Satan's devices and their remedies in the following works:

- Thomas Brooks's *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices*, a well-known classic that has often been reprinted by Banner of Truth Trust
- Richard Gilpin's *A Treatise on Satan's Temptations*, a 500 page classic recently reprinted by Soli Deo Gloria
- William Spurstowe's *The Wiles of Satan*, a rare but helpful little work, recently reprinted by Soli Deo Gloria
- John Downname's *The Christian Warfare*, a massive two-volume work of 1,800 pages, which has not been reprinted since the seventeenth century
- William Gurnall's *The Christian in Complete Armour*, a detailed work on Ephesians 6:10-20
- Thomas Goodwin's *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, which has a most helpful section on Satan's activity in our spiritual darkness (*Works of Goodwin*, 3:256-288).

I will address three questions: First, what do *strategies*, *devices*, and other related terms mean? Second, why is Satan so skilled at tempting us? Third, next month's editorial will consider: what are some of Satan's major strategies and devices, and what remedies does God provide for us in battling against them?

The Terms, Strategies and Devices

My family once had an unknown number of families living with us — families of mice. My wife and I approached this relatively calmly and rationally. We established four concentric circles. First, the outermost circle was our *goal*: remove all mice from our home. The next, somewhat smaller concentric circle was our *strategy* or *plan*: get a variety of traps to catch the mice. Our home was littered with snap traps, poison traps, and sticky traps. A third more focused circle called us to use a variety of *devices* or bait to catch the mice, ranging from cheese to peanut butter, to entice them to fall prey to our strategy. Finally, the innermost circle consisted of *remedies*: carry the dead mice in the snap traps outside to dispose of them; carry the caught but still living mice outside on the sticky traps and kill them (my least favorite approach, as I shrink from killing anything); or

dispose of the dead remains of poisoned mice, if and when they can be found (my wife's least favorite approach, as she doesn't like the idea of unfound, dead mice lying about).

Satan treats us like these mice, only his mission of four, concentric circles is more complex. His largest circle of *goals* (also called purposes or objectives), all of which are designed to injure God's glory, is at least fourfold:

- 1) to destroy us because we bear God's image,
- 2) to overthrow the kingdom of God,
- 3) to retain control of what he still possesses, and
- 4) to regain his lost territory.

Those goals have already been addressed in some measure, so we will not delve into them further now; in this article, we want to become more focused.

The second, somewhat smaller circle represents Satan's *strategies* or *plans*. The term *strategy* refers to the science of generalship, or to leading an army. It is an all-encompassing term, but can also be used of specific plans or traps for a war or campaign. Satan has many traps to use, including snap traps, poisonous traps, and sticky traps. Next month, we're going to look closely at four of his many strategies: Satan strategizes to entice us to sin, to hinder our spiritual disciplines, to misrepresent God and truth, and to oppose our sanctification.

The third, more focused circle is Satan's *devices* by which he carries out his strategies and goals. The term *devices* (Greek: *noema*) suggests the thoughts and actions involved in deceiving someone, such as ambushes in war, fake moves in a sport, or fallacies in a debate. In 2 Corinthians 2:11, Paul provides guidance to the church in Corinth for handling an incestuous person "*lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices.*" Paul warns the Corinthians not to let Satan get the upper hand over them by making them so zealous against the sin of the incestuous person that they would reject his sincere repentance. Then the man would be overwhelmed with sorrow and Satan would outwit them.

Thus, Paul was not ignorant of Satan's strategy to destroy the church of Corinth. Satan's first device was to encourage laxity of discipline, and so all manner of disorders broke out (cf. 1 Corinthians). When the church repented, Satan's next device was to promote a harsh, unforgiving kind of church discipline. All along, Satan had the same strategy, but used different devices. Paul warns against an abuse of church discipline, lest Satan thereby accomplish his strategy for the Corinthian church.

The term *devices* has several synonyms, of which I'll just mention the three most important. One biblical synonym is *wiles*, from the Greek *methodeia*, and the source of our English word *method*. Both of its New Testament occurrences are in Ephesians (4:14; 6:11) and indicate a negative, cunning method that involves scheming. Some translations of Ephesians 6:11 use "*the schemes of the devil*" rather than "*the wiles of the devil.*" Another synonym, *stratagem*, is only a part of a plan or strategy; it refers to a ploy or dirty trick that always involves deception. Hence, devices, wiles, schemes, and stratagems all carry the same meaning.

Finally, there is the innermost circle, the *remedies*. Here is where my mice analogy breaks down, because we need to outfox Satan by implementing the biblical remedies that God provides, so that Satan does not carry us away to hell to destroy us forever.

We now want to focus on the inner circles of Satan's strategies and devices and their remedies. William Spurstowe warned us,

"Satan is full of devices, and studies arts of circumvention by which he unweariedly seeks the irrecoverable ruin of the souls of men."

(p. 6)

Just as it is essential for military leaders to record the strategies and devices of an enemy in war, so it is essential for true Christians to acquaint themselves with their enemy, Satan, and his methods of doing battle. We need to study the strategies and devices that Satan uses today to be able to think through and act upon God's scriptural remedies.

Satan's Skill at Tempting

Before we look at Satan's devices, however, we need to ask: What makes Satan so skillful at tempting us to sin through various devices? William Spurstowe provides the following six reasons:

1. Satan's spiritual being and intellectual power

When people tempt each other, they do so with overt actions. For example, Joseph tempted his brothers' devotion to their youngest brother, Benjamin, by asking his steward to hide his cup in Benjamin's sack. But Satan, who is a spirit, doesn't have to use overt actions. He can prey directly on the mind, tempting us to yield to his devices. Satan could enter the heart of Judas Iscariot and tempt the disciple to betray Christ (John 13:2). Satan could enter the heart of Ananias and tempt him to lie to the Holy Ghost (Acts 5:3).

Satan, though fallen, is still an angel, so he is intellectually far superior to us. That makes him very dangerous.

Jonathan Edwards said, *"The devil was educated in the best divinity school in the universe, viz., the heaven of heavens."*

Calvin called him *"an acute theologian."* In addition, this fallen angel is able to hide his deadly intellectual poison under *"a beautiful and shining skin."* Satan's great intellect and cunning deceit should make us especially wary, for we know that we cannot defeat him through our limited intellectual abilities (Spurstowe, *The Wiles of Satan*, p. 14).

2. Satan's experience and work

The devil is old but not infirm. His temptations are like the arrows of a skillful archer that seldom fail to hit their target (Jer. 50:9). Over the centuries he has mastered the art of wickedness. Satan knows by experience when the best time is to shoot his arrows. He knows what bait to use whenever he fishes. He tempts young people with beauty, the thrifty with money, and the ambitious with power.

William Jenkyn says, *"He has an apple for Eve, a grape for Noah, a change of raiment for Gehazi, and a bag for Judas."*

He has remarkable experience in overcoming every defense against yielding to his temptations.

Satan knows how to disguise sin by giving it a false complexion. Spurstowe says that just as Apelles painted only one side of King Antigonus's face to conceal the side that had no eye, so Satan paints the half-face of sin.

Satan is adept at deflecting our defenses. Believers are often startled and perplexed when they are tempted because Satan responds so quickly and effectively to their arguments against sinning. Satan's rapid response ought to teach us to totally and immediately deny him rather than dispute with him.

Satan's experience helps him to confidently assault the holiest believers. If Satan cannot keep believers out of heaven, he will do what he can to keep heaven out of believers here on earth. As Spurstowe says:

"If not to extinguish their light, yet (Satan tempts) to eclipse their luster; if not to cause a shipwreck, yet to raise a storm; if not to hinder their happy end, yet to molest them in their way."

(p. 21)

Satan is a confident, experienced adversary. Who has wrestled with him without being wounded? If great men like Noah, Lot, David, and Peter fell under Satan's temptations, how can we hope to withstand the Tempter? Do not presume that you can defeat the devil in your own strength.

3. Satan's tireless energy for promoting evil

Satan relentlessly and endlessly tempts man to keep him from God. Satan has a one-track mind. That single-minded purpose makes him formidable. An ancient Italian proverb says, "*Lord, deliver me from a man who has but one business to do.*"

Satan tempts us to be idle, but he is never idle. Spurstowe writes,

"How hard it is to persuade men that to walk circumspectly is a duty, or that to be diligent in their callings is one of the best antidotes to preserve the soul from the putrefaction of lusts, and to fence it against the incursions of an assiduous tempter!"

(p. 25)

4. Satan has a kingdom of demons

Daniel 7:10 says that "*thousand thousands*" of angels minister to God, and "*ten thousand times ten thousand*" stand before Him. Fallen angels who serve Satan are also numerous, since Scripture describes Satan and his demons as a powerful kingdom. Paul implies that the number of fallen angels is great when he says that we wrestle against "*principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places*" (Eph. 6:12).

Satan's kingdom is also united in purpose. Every demon hates God's glory and our happiness. Every demon unitedly promotes Satan's doctrine, Satan's distinctions, Satan's domination, and Satan's distractions. Every demon unitedly opposes God's position, God's precepts, God's purity, and God's people. There are no divisions in Satan's kingdom (Matt. 12:26), no uprisings because of poor pay, no complaints about strenuous marches, no balking at difficult tasks. We expect the angels in heaven who dwell with the Triune God to be united. But is it not remarkable that the devils in hell are more united in purpose than the church on earth? What a tragedy that the communion of devils so often exceeds the communion of saints.

If devils are filled with pride, wrath, envy, and bitterness, how can they be so united? Just as enemies on earth can be united through mutual hatred of a third party, so Satan's demons are united by their mutual hatred of God and man. As good angels rejoice over the repentance of a sinner, evil angels rejoice over the destruction of a sinner. Spurstowe says, "Ruined sinners are the only trophies and spoils of hell" (p. 29).

5. Satan's evil suggestions, which are nearly indistinguishable from our own corrupt desires

It is difficult at times to know whether a sinful thought originates with Satan or with us. It is difficult to distinguish between evil that is sown in the mind by the Tempter and evil that is ours by nature. As the old saying goes: "The devil's boots don't creak." Spurstowe says that a bird will hatch an egg and nourish a young bird until it discovers that the young one is not its own. Then the mother bird pushes the intruder out of the nest. Likewise, if we would recognize promptings as those given by Satan, we would have the strength to repudiate them. If King David had known that Satan was tempting him to number the people of Israel, he undoubtedly would have stopped counting immediately (1 Chron. 21:1).

6. Satan's skill at matching his suggestions with our own corrupt reason

Satan cannot conquer our soul by force; his success depends on confusing us about the origin of his suggestions. "*The devil may allure, God alone can effectually change, but none can compel us*" (p. 33).

Satan is a master at suggesting that we believe what we want to believe rather than believe the truth. To the atheist, Satan suggests that worshiping God is a crutch for the weak-minded. To the

convicted, Satan suggests that a little religion will do. To the nominal Christian, Satan suggests that intellectual faith is sufficient. To the true believer, Satan suggests that the worldly do not suffer as the righteous do (Ps. 73).

Spurstowe concludes, "If Satan, who is the evil seed-man, scatters any seeds of temptations, to which the heart is as a prepared and disposed soil by the corrupt principles that lodge in it, they will quickly sprout forth into acts, and grow into a root that will bear gall and wormwood."

(p. 35)

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