

Followers of the Way

Strategies of Evil Revealed – in the Bible, In History and Today

Steve Campbell, 22-01-23

Genesis 3:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11

In the Clash of Kingdoms it is vital not only that we know whose side we are on but also who we are fighting against.

Sun Tzu, a Chinese military strategist, wrote a manual 'The Art of War' around 500BC. In it he says, "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles."

In the clash between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of evil, we know who our enemy is – the Devil. He is revealed in the Bible and we can learn from there his strategies.

But where did evil come from in the first place? Some philosophers have put the blame on God, reasoning that if He is the creator of all things, then it follows He created evil also. However, the New Bible Dictionary says, 'God is separate from all evil and is in no way responsible for it.'

The Bible does not allow this thought either, because all that God created was pronounced 'good.' When God created mankind in His image, they were 'very good', but He made them with free-will, with the ability to choose to love Him or reject Him.

Through the temptation of Satan in the form of the serpent, who distorted God's good provision and one prohibition into something bad, Adam and his wife chose the evil way and thus began the Clash of Kingdoms.

The root of the Hebrew word for evil means, 'to spoil, to break in pieces, to be made worthless.' This is the result of evil in our world, and it's what the instigator of evil strives towards; as Jesus said, 'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy' (John 10:10)

We can discern the strategy of the evil one in the Bible, we can trace it throughout history, and recognise it quite easily today. His tactics are usually very similar; what he has done before he continues to do today. Three main ways in which evil is manifest is through the world, the flesh and the devil. And it's interesting to note that for those being baptised in a liturgical Church, they are asked if they renounce the world, the flesh and the devil?

The world refers to "indifference and opposition to God's design", "empty, passing values".

“The flesh” represents “gluttony and sexual immorality, our corrupt inclinations”. In other words, our sinful nature.

The Devil is of course “a real, personal enemy, a fallen angel, the Father of Lies, who labours in relentless malice to twist us away from salvation”. “The world” perhaps speaks for itself.

These three are indeed an unholy trinity!

They are reflected in the [Temptations of Christ](#) in the desert: Jesus was fully God and fully man, and it was as a human he was tempted by Satan. He resisted all his evil temptations, not because he was God, but because, as a man, He disciplined Himself.

The Devil took Him to the pinnacle of the temple, the highest point, possibly the southeast corner which loomed some 450 feet above the Kidron Valley, and said, “Throw yourself down” because, quoting Psalm 91, “God’s angels ‘will lift you up in their hands’” (v.6). What was the purpose of this temptation? The rabbis had all sorts of Messianic expectations: one was, ‘When King Messiah comes, he will stand upon the roof of the holy place.’¹

If Jesus had carried out the Devil’s request, the people would have recognised who Jesus was and, through the miraculous rescue, would have hailed Him as Messiah and King. He would gain worldly adulation, bypassing the way of the cross. Jesus knew the danger of this, as many times the people tried to make Him King by force, and He resisted every attempt, as He did with the Devil.

Jesus had been in the wilderness 40 days fasting and naturally He was hungry. The Devil took advantage of His weakness and said, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.” (v.3) First the Devil is introducing doubt, “If you are the Son of God”.

Just as he did with the first temptation in the Garden of Eden, “Did God *really* say...” (Gen 3:1). Secondly, he is appealing to Jesus’ flesh, His appetite for bread. We may ask, “Well what’s wrong with that, satisfying His hunger?” But there is also a Messianic slant to this temptation: the rabbis believed when Messiah came there would be a repeat of the gift of manna in the desert. That is why the Jews got so excited when Jesus fed the multitude in a desert place.²

But just as He was unwilling to put on a spectacular display to win the adulation of the world, neither was Jesus going to use His miraculous powers to satisfy the cravings of His flesh.

The final temptation is anything but subtle: The Devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. Then he boasts, “All this I will give you”, and Luke’s version adds a little detail, “because it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to” (Lk 4:6). Then comes the catch, “if you will bow down and worship me.” (v.9)

What’s the attraction of this temptation? As Messiah, God’s anointed, Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords. We learn in Revelation 11:15 “The kingdoms of this world have

become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!"

Jesus knew this was His destiny, and so did the Devil, but the only way to fulfil that destiny was through the Cross. Once again, the Devil is offering Jesus a way to bypass the suffering of the Cross and take an easy path. But how could He become King of all the nations if He bowed down to the prince of this world? The only way was to crush Satan's head by offering His life as a sacrifice.

So Satan's evil strategies of the world, the flesh and the Devil failed to divert Jesus from His goal. That did not stop him from attacking the Church in the same way.

From the Day of Pentecost, the Church experienced phenomenal growth – 3,000 converts on that day, and the Lord was adding to their number daily. But where the Lord is at work the Devil is there also. And again he used a similar strategy – the world, the flesh and the Devil.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 is one of worldly pride. They decided to sell property and give the proceeds to the apostles, as they had seen others do, yet they kept some of the money back for themselves. This in itself was not a sin, but the fact that they lied about it to make themselves look good in the eyes of others, was.

The Spirit revealed this to Peter who announced they had not lied to men but to God, and both fell down dead. However, a Godly fear came over the people, so the Devil was unsuccessful with his worldly attack.

His next tactic was to use the fleshly appetite of hunger, just as he did with Jesus. In Acts 6, an argument broke out between the Hellenistic and Hebraic believers in Jerusalem, as the Greek widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. This may have caused a major split in the Church along cultural lines.

Instead the apostles called all the people together and asked them to choose seven deacons to take on this responsibility, so they would not be distracted from their ministry of prayer and preaching the word. So rather than causing division, this actually led to a delegation of ministry.

The third attack was much more confrontational in nature. Following the martyrdom of Stephen, persecution broke out against the Church and many believers "were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria". (Acts 8:1) But as they went they scattered the seed of God's word and so the gospel message spread to these areas, as Jesus had commanded just before His ascension – "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

Through his evil strategies the Devil has attempted, and failed, to destroy the Church. He has been using the same tactics throughout history. For the first 300 years of its existence the Church faced severe persecution, yet it continued to experience phenomenal growth.

However, the early 4th century saw a turning point that was to change the whole direction of the Church, and indeed the world. The Emperor Constantine embraced

Christianity, declaring tolerance for the religion; thus making it not only attractive to become a Christian, but also desirable.

On the surface this seems like a good thing: no more persecution; freedom to erect Church buildings; easier to evangelize. But what it also meant was that the Church became inextricably linked with the state, becoming rich and powerful, but spiritually impotent.

Thomas Aquinas, the most influential theologian in the thirteenth century, was visiting Rome, and the then pope Innocent IV showed him around, pointing out all the treasures the Church had accumulated. It is fair to say the visiting theologian was not only amazed but also shocked by what he saw. The pope then said, 'You see, Thomas, the Church can no longer say, as St Peter did of old, "Silver and gold have I none!"'

To which Aquinas replied, 'And neither can you command as the Apostle did, 'In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.'

The Church became indistinguishable from the world, and many of its leaders were entangled in the sins of the flesh. The most notorious was the Borgia family which produced two popes during the Italian Renaissance.

Their fleshly sins included adultery, incest, simony, theft, bribery and murder, following more in the footsteps of Herod the Great than Jesus of Nazareth!

The Church survived all these evils and still faces them today: the compromise by many Churches over moral issues to make themselves more attractive to the world; prominent Church leaders being caught up in the sins of the flesh, Ravi Zacharias being a recent example. At the same time, the twentieth century witnessed more Christian martyrs than all 19 previous centuries put together, and this century shows no sign of that abating!

In the Clash of Kingdoms, we know our enemy, we know his strategies, but we also need to know ourselves. So how can we as members of the Kingdom of Light launch our counterattack?

Against the world, and all the false promises it offers, we must immerse ourselves in the word of God. Remember, His word is "alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword" (Heb 4:12). But it's not enough just to know the word - after all, the Devil knows the word of God too. No, we must also seek to understand it, interpret it correctly, and obey it.

We must, in the words of an old collect, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the word; that is study it, memorise it and meditate upon it, until it becomes part of the very fabric of our being. That's how we overcome the world.

What about the flesh, our inner thought and passions that can have such a stranglehold on us? The Apostle Paul clearly gives us the antidote for this. In Galatians 5, before contrasting the works of the flesh/sinful nature with the fruit of the Spirit, he urges his readers, "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other (Gal 5:16-17)."

And, following the fruit of the Spirit and how we must daily crucify the flesh/sinful nature, he adds, "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (Gal 5:25). Allowing the Spirit to guide us along our path. Not like the soldier on his passing out parade, whose Mother, watching him, declared, 'All the soldiers are out of step, except my Johnny!'

And how do we combat the Devil? We resist him by using the weapon of love. Satan uses others to attack the kingdom of God, but Jesus tells us we are to be a kingdom recognised by love: love for God, love for neighbour, love for each other, and love for our enemies (Richard Wurmbrand).

In the Clash of Kingdoms we face many battles, but we know the enemy and his strategies, we know ourselves and the weapons at our disposal, and we know ultimately that we are fighting not *for* victory, but *from* victory in the Lord Jesus Christ. The battle belongs to the Lord!

¹ BST Matthew, p.83

² Ibid