

# Followers of the Way

**Children of light and children of the dark.  
How has evil become so seemingly 'successful'?**

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**John 17:6-19**

As Steve reminded us a couple of weeks ago, when God created the earth and all that was in it, and created man and woman in His own image, He 'saw everything that He had made, and indeed, it was very good' (Genesis 1:31). Then evil got to work. But who is this Adversary? 'What' is he, and why was he there in the first place? We can't trespass into the realm of God and expect to know all the answers, but I think it's helpful, if we're to stand against the threats today, to try and find out as much as we can.

One of the confusing things first off, of course, is that we know evil by several different names – so what is the devil's right name ... does he even have one, or does he have several? A 20 minute sermon isn't long enough to do justice to do any of this, but I'm going to try and give a quick background overview, before looking at how evil seems to have got such a hold in the world today.

First off, and according to early Hebrew traditions, that admittedly aren't canonical but were highly regarded as providing background and insight into Scripture, different places and countries have guardian angels. The first place we encounter this in the Bible is Daniel 10, where the angel sent by God to help Daniel, explains that he has been delayed. V.13 'the prince of the kingdom of Persia opposed me twenty-one days. So Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, and I left him there with the prince of the kingdom of Persia, and have come to help you understand...'

In other words, the angel speaking to Daniel at God's command, has had a real battle to get through and needed help, because the ruling angel of the region had opposed him. Now this is interesting, because another one of these traditions claims that God, at the creation, appointed a guardian angel for the earth as a whole – a bit like a governor. An angel that subsequently rebelled, and who we later came to identify as Satan. It's this idea perhaps that's being referenced by Jesus in John 14: 30, when he says, 'I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming...'

Now we might just think Jesus is referring to the devil, who somehow got control of the world after the fall. But read the words in line with this tradition, and it indicates an angelic being holding not just real, but initially legitimate, delegated authority. Who's obviously gone rogue and staged a coup, but is essentially exercising the office to which he was first appointed. But, and this is very important, there are bounds to that power.

Point no.2, we most often (though not always) identify the devil with Lucifer, cast out of heaven for his rebellion. Again, there are tantalising references to this in Scripture. Ezekiel 28: 11-19 for instance – paraphrasing – ‘You were the model of perfection ... you were in Eden, the garden of God ... you were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you ... till wickedness was found in you ... and I threw you to the earth’.

But we encounter a slight problem in our investigation, because the idea of evil as a supernatural force, hostile to God, only really begins to emerge in Old Testament times around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC – really very late. Similarly, the identification of the devil with Satan was also quite late. When we first encounter this figure in the Bible, in Job, the designation isn’t a name at all. Rather, it seems to be a kind of job description for the angel tasked with tempting, or testing, mankind. The satan is the accuser, the adversary. To test Job, a seemingly blameless and upright man, God gives permission to the satan to inflict him with loathsome sores. God says, “... he is in your hands; but you must spare his life.” (Job 2:6)

Admittedly, this angel doesn’t feel very nice, but he’s not presented as evil. In fact, the underlying idea would seem to be that temptation is there to help men and women develop and grow. A bit like tests in school, designed to help pupils consolidate their learning. But back to Eden – the temptation of the snake was not in any way intended to help. It was wholly malign, and an overt challenge to God, expressly designed to spoil and gain control. A key point here perhaps is that, ever since that time, that’s how the devil has worked – tempting and leading people astray, with suggestion, lies, and flattery that feeds our ego. And over the centuries, as a tactic, it’s been remarkably successful. So the later identification of Satan with the devil – only explicitly made in the New Testament, by the way – does seem remarkably apt.

So we have two facts that we know with certainty here: (1) the devil, is the despoiler, (2) he holds power - and we know this because from the moment Adam and Eve fell, all of creation came into bondage and we became slaves to sin. So why didn’t God just deal with the problem there and then? After all, He was and is Sovereign, and He could have done, easily! The answer would seem to be that because of the power the devil held, and the hold he’d got over us, to destroy him, would have destroyed us. The only way to avoid that happening was, first, to set us free. But that couldn’t happen by our own efforts. Which was why, in time, God had to send His own Son.

But at the same time it’s important to realise that as there were limits to Satan’s power, his hold was never complete. God still remained our Sovereign Lord and Creator - and we didn’t lose that part of us that still looks beyond. We also retained free will, though our capacity to exercise that was of course severely impaired – corroded by sin. But there remained in all of us that yearning after something more, that Satan couldn’t extinguish. As Blaise Pascal memorably said, ‘The God-shaped vacuum at the heart of every man that cannot be satisfied by any created thing...’

So from the moment of the Fall, though we were in thrall to evil, at no point was God absent. He was, and is, always there, helping ... planning for our restoration.

Which brings us to children of light and children of the dark – which is a shorthand way of describing those who seek after the light and try to live lives of obedience, and those

who embraced, hook, line and sinker, the lies of the evil one, that we don't need God and that we can have it all.

When God finally managed to bring all the pieces into place to mount the counter-offensive, and Jesus was born, the battle entered another level. From the moment, Satan knew that, unless he could do something to stop it, the writing was on the wall. But God is, above all, a master strategist, and to save as many as possible, He has allowed a period of dispensation before the final battle, so that everyone be given chance to hear the good news and be saved. Which Satan knows all too well. He knows the final confrontation is very close now – which is why the battle has intensified. He's not going to give up without a fight, and if he can't win – which he can't – he's going to take down as much as he can, with him.

It's beyond question, I think, that in recent years evil has grown in power. The question for us is, how?

Though the battle's changed, and the enemy's updated his strategy, first off, we need to recognise that his weapons of choice, and aims, remain the same. He is still trying to divert the worship that belongs to God onto himself, because that builds his power – and if he can't ultimately win, he wants to destroy. His preferred weapons for achieving this remain misinformation and lies, twisting truth ... feeding and flattering man's hubris and desire for control. But remember too, Satan is not creative. He can only sabotage and hijack. And he's been very successful in recent years in not just subverting, but entirely reframing the values by which we live, spinning the lie that everything we think we know is actually only illusion, imposed by the chimera of a judgmental and vengeful deity, who demands unquestioning obedience, and gives nothing in return. This is the God of fairy tales, Satan whispers, but mankind has come of age. You don't need Him anymore.

The lies actually can seem very attractive, and many have fallen for them. We can do whatever we want, and have whatever we want, provided only we don't judge anyone else. Self ... self-gratification, that's what's important! And the primary targets of attack are the family and children - the family because it underpins the social order and society, giving stability; and children, because they're the future. Control what children think, and you control society. The ideological indoctrination that seems to be a feature of life today, is demonic. And it's causing enormous damage.

Faithfulness, commitment, purity, responsibility, duty ... all seem to have disappeared, and we live in a society that feels to be in terminal decline, with unprecedented rates of sexual exploitation, mental illness, loneliness, violence, despair. We may have a mantra of tolerance and acceptance, but it's become a dog eat dog world, and more and more people have become ensnared by the lies. Yet still, in every one of us, there remains that divine spark that is birthed, and has its being, in God.

As children of light and followers of Christ, while we remain in this world, we are called to be a beacon. A city set on a hill cannot be hid, and that's how it's to be with us. And until the Lord's return, and the final battle is fought and won, our commission remains the same – to stand up for truth, and seek after the lost.