

What Satan Can and Cannot Do

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With Calvary before Him, the Lord spoke these remarkable words – ‘Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out.’ He was referring to His imminent suffering on Calvary’s cross, which would immediately accomplish salvation for His people, and judgement for Satan. From the time of Calvary Satan would be curbed in his power, a defeated enemy, still able to work much wickedness until the final day, but severely limited.

But how exactly was Satan cast out by Christ’s death? We know that Christ’s death saved vast numbers of people from eternal death, and by so doing, saved the human race from becoming extinct. Since the Fall of man in the garden of Eden not one person would live a perfect life, nor anything like it. The entire human race would therefore be condemned, leaving Satan triumphant and victorious. By tempting Adam and Eve he had utterly thwarted the purpose of God in making the human race, and God appeared to have failed in His design. Satan could flaunt himself throughout time as the murderer and conqueror of the human race, and, in a sense, the conqueror of its Creator.

But Christ came as the representative of His people, and in every conceivable way obeyed His Father, even to the death of the cross. And through that perfect obedience culminating in Calvary, His people (and therefore the race) were saved from condemnation. By His righteousness and atonement, a continuing human race was purchased, so that a glorified earth could be thronged by ransomed people. The human race would no longer be a failed concept, and God’s design would be restored and redeemed.

Satan’s apparent triumph was crushed, leaving him susceptible to judgement and curbing. No longer would he be able to keep people from the Truth.

The curbing of Satan’s power after Calvary is clearly revealed in the New Testament. The Saviour spoke, for example, of how ‘with the finger of God’ He cast out devils, to mark that the kingdom had arrived (*Luke 11.20*). This was judgement language, referring to a limitation of satanic power operating from that time.

Demons themselves knew that Christ would end their liberty, and this is seen in their anguished cries as the Lord cast them out. Possession was common in the time of Christ, but His ministry marked the end of demonic liberty to occupy human souls at will. We are aware that today there are still some reports of New-Testament-style demon possession, but only where people have voluntarily (and strenuously) invited demons into their lives by deep involvement in occult practices. (We disregard the unauthentic claims of demon possession made within the charismatic movement.) Satan via his demons can no longer enter uninvited into human souls to possess them since the work of Christ, this being one aspect of Satan being ‘cast out’.

Another of Satan’s limitations is that he is not allowed to reveal or show himself, being forced to work entirely by secrecy and stealth. He is a vicious enemy to all human souls, but non-appearance is a significant containment of his power. We learn in *2 Thessalonians 2* that Satan must content himself with an appointee, the man of sin, who will appear on his behalf at the end of time, only to be immediately destroyed by the brightness of the coming of Christ.

Satan is now a spiritual vagrant, powerful, yes, with a vast host of fallen angels doing his bidding, but he must tempt us from ‘outside’, and secure our co-operation for everything he wants us to do. He is certainly the prince of this world, but a prince with no palace or rights – a dispossessed and a doomed prince.

This limiting of Satan is also referred to in the book of *Revelation*, chapters 12 and 20, the last of

these telling us that Satan would be bound during the Christian era so that he would not be able to deceive the nations any more by keeping them in total spiritual darkness. All nations would be penetrated by the Gospel of Christ.

We read in *Ephesians 4.8* that on Calvary Christ led captivity captive, binding a multitude of captives – the devil and his demons. In *Colossians 2.15* we are told that Christ ‘spoiled principalities and powers’, making a show of them openly, and triumphing over them. In other words, He took powers away from them and contained them – terms for the curbing or limiting of the devil and his hosts. However, we repeat that he remains until the last day a dangerous and evil enemy of souls, and for this reason we need to know all we can about his powers and limitations.

Powers of Angels

We know a good deal about Satan from the fact he is an angel, though a fallen one. As such he was created without a body or physical aspect, for angels have no bodies, unless God clothes them with a temporary appearance in order to send them as messengers or witnesses into the world, as in the case of the angels that sat in the tomb of Christ. Angels evidently have an appearance in Heaven, but are not normally visible to human eyes on earth.

Angels are immortal only by God’s sustaining permission and power. We read in Scripture that they have mysterious differences in ‘rank’, so there are higher angels. Though spirits, they operate in dimensions of time and space, for they are not infinite and outside time, as God is.

Angels clearly have powerful intelligence, and although the day will come when believers, as glorified people in Heaven, will be greater than the angels, while on earth we do not have their powers of mind. They ‘excel in strength’, says the Scripture, which places them above people on earth in ability.

Angels have great knowledge but it has a limit. So, for example, we are told in *Ephesians 3.10* that they look down from Heaven in wonder at the conversion and sanctification of people on earth, marvelling at each case, and learning about the ‘manifold wisdom of God’. The Gospel age has been an immense education to the very highest angels.

This also shows that angels cannot tell the future, apart from knowing the Word of God, as we also may know it. When Old Testament prophecies began to be fulfilled with the coming of Christ, they observed with wonder these events, things which ‘the angels desire to look into’ (*1 Peter 1.12*). In this they are not like God, Whose knowledge is infinite, and Who continuously knows all things that happen throughout eternal history.

Angels clearly have power to communicate with each other. They cannot create anything or kill anyone at will, though they may sometimes be appointed by God as His agents to terminate life. Even Satan is shown seeking the express permission of God to inflict disease and take life in the book of Job. Angels cannot do these things of themselves. Angels cannot change earthly substances, altering one element into another, nor can they alter or override the laws of nature, except at God’s direction. They are bound within these limitations. It follows that angels cannot work miracles unless God empowers them to do so.

As fallen angels, Satan and his demonic hosts share all these limitations. And here is another limitation, common to both good and evil angels, and one which is of very great importance to us in our battle with the devil. Angels cannot search our hearts and read our thoughts. They cannot enter into the innermost recesses of our thought-lives. An old Christian adage runs – ‘Demons can speak to the soul, but not search the heart.’ We will say more about Satan’s inability to read thoughts in due course.

All these limitations are clear from the Bible, which ascribes infinite intelligence and knowledge, power to create and end life, working of miracles, and searching of hearts, to God alone. These things are exclusive to Him. Indeed, the devil and his demons are more limited than good angels,

because God would never appoint or delegate to them His own wonder-working power. We are taught in *2 Thessalonians 2.9*, that when the man of sin is revealed, who will operate under the rule of Satan, his miracles and wonders will be 'lying wonders', or counterfeit deceptions. Satan and his demons cannot perform true miracles.

Satan, we need hardly say, is utterly evil. He is described as an unclean spirit, and the leader of the vast host of unclean, fallen spirits. However, since Calvary he cannot determine the actions of human beings irresistibly, overriding their freedom and responsibility, unless they have altogether yielded themselves to him and co-operated with him in opposition to God, so that they are 'taken captive by him at his will' (*2 Timothy 2.26*). And even such people are not beyond redemption.

Satan cannot make us do anything. He cannot so dictate to us that we are bound to do his bidding, but must work by deception and persuasion. It is therefore wrong to say, 'Satan made me do it.' He may urge us, suggest things to us, press us, and lie to us about the outcome, but he cannot make us do anything. We must never ascribe to Satan powers which belong exclusively to Almighty God; and while we should be very aware of his power, we must never fear him as invincible.

Satan's Purposes

A number of names are used of Satan in the New Testament, shedding light on how he acts, and his objectives. Satan means adversary, and he is also called the accuser of the brethren, an enemy of the souls of men, and the devil, which means slanderer. He is called Abaddon and Apollyon, names which mean destroyer of souls, and he is described as a dragon, indicating his great ferocity, and also as a serpent, expressing his cunning and subtlety.

He is referred to as the father of lies, indicating the method that he has always employed, and also as the murderer of souls, the prince of demons, and the prince of this world who guides the minds of unbelievers open to atheism and ready to show hostility to God. He is called the tempter, and an angel of light making evil appear good, and suggesting justification for selfish, covetous and other wrong actions.

Satan was cast out of Heaven for challenging God, and hates Him with all his being, opposing and frustrating His plans if he can, and keeping souls away from Him. Satan is intensely jealous of human beings and hates them also. He acts to tempt into sin both the lost and the saved, particularly striving to lead God's people into error and failure. If Satan can get into churches, inserting false teaching and bringing believers down in sin, how he triumphs! He therefore constantly seeks to discredit the church and the Gospel in the eyes of the world, and also to thwart and hinder Gospel work by tempting believers to worldliness, laziness, and indifference to the plight of lost souls.

Satan is always working to erode the faith of believers and spoil their assurance, peace and joy. He does these things by a process of attrition, causing believers to give way little by little to doubts and temptations, until he has gained victory over them. He also inspires false prophets and evil workers, putting into their minds ideas that are unbiblical, and succeeding wherever they fail to prove all things by the Word.

He controls people who are opposed to the Gospel, blinding their minds, and through them shaping society. When we see the world today, ruled by aggressive and vindictive secular humanism, with immorality legalised and encouraged, and laws passed to punish those who oppose these things, we see the orchestrating hand of Satan. How similar is the 'script' justifying these things in all parts of the world! Thus Satan is 'the prince of the power of the air'.

Against Christians he uses cunning strategies and traps, called 'the wiles of the devil', and 'the snare of the devil'. The latter means that he will surprise believers with sudden temptations, if he is able to do so.

There are three sources of temptation, for the devil is not the only tempter. According to Scripture the world lures us with sinful habits, practices and finery. Then we are tempted by our own hearts:

our appetites and sinful desires always wanting to do or possess things. And then we are tempted by the devil, who also makes much of and amplifies the first two forms of temptation.

Satan's Limitations

How do we defeat the devil? Says James – ‘Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.’ It is an amazing thought, that this mighty, evil being will run from weak believers. He is powerful and invisible to us; he will tempt and suggest evil things constantly, and is armed with unimaginable cunning. Yet, if we know how to resist him, he will flee from us. Before we outline the way to resist, we may derive encouragement from setting his powers against his limitations.

Satan may accuse us, but he cannot condemn us. Sometimes he will remind us of our sins, and bring us very low so that we almost lose our assurance, but then we run to God trusting in grace alone, and He strengthens us. Satan can certainly accuse, but he cannot condemn the one who is in Christ, because he has no power or say in how the Lord views His people.

He can tempt us to sin, as we have said, but he cannot make us sin. He can goad and press but never force us. He can take away our joy and peace by giving troubled thoughts, but he cannot take away our salvation, nor ever possess us. Charismatic teachers say that the devil can either possess, or oppress a believer, but both in their usage mean virtually the same thing, and both are wrong. Satan can trouble us, but never possess us, because the principle of *2 Corinthians 6.15* and other scriptures teaches us that Christ and Satan cannot co-exist in a soul.

Satan can masquerade as an angel of light, and quote Scripture in our ear, as he attempted to do even with the Lord at His temptation. But he cannot withstand our substituting the thought by quoting a Scripture promise.

He can hear us and see us, but not read our thoughts. By his deep knowledge of human nature and behaviour, and by close observation of us, he is able to discern or guess many of our reactions to temptation, and to seemingly interact with us, but he cannot see our hearts. If we speak to him (and we should not), whether by word or thought, he will ‘hear’, and some of our thoughts may be very ‘loud’ and obvious to him, such as hatred to someone, and great pride, but in the ordinary way he cannot read our minds. If a person’s temper is rising, or if he is looking at things with lust, the devil is very shrewd, and will read the signs and know what is going on. But never think he can get into the mind and actually read our thoughts from the inside. Many deeply introspective and serious-minded Christians have been painfully tormented by the idea that the devil has a telescope right into their thought lives.

He can fire thoughts into our heads from the outside, but he cannot make them stick, unless we let him by harbouring those thoughts. Satan can bring breaches between husbands and wives and between friends, and we are not here thinking of serious misconduct such as adultery, but day-to-day matters.

He can fire into the mind hostile thoughts, and by this temporarily break relationships, but he can do nothing to prevent godly reconciliation in answer to prayer. He can bring us right down to the gutter if we let him, but only if we let him, because he cannot force us to make a disastrous fall.

Satan watches us, by his host of demons assigned to follow us and to notice every omission of spiritual duty, every neglected prayer, every missed reading of God’s Word, every ignoring of a sermon, every delay in carrying out a good work, and every act of worldliness or of uncommitted conduct. Under scrutiny will be the things we look at and engage in, and by these things our vulnerability to temptation will be ascertained by the tempter, and the next assault upon us planned.

Every day Satan – by his demons – will hinder our spiritual work, putting distractions in our way. When we begin to pray, our attention may be drawn to any number of matters, interesting, troubling, or alluring, to divert us from the throne of grace. But, once again, he cannot succeed unless we let him.

Resisting the Devil

Resist the devil, and he will flee from you,' says James. When the devil hinders our prayers, or floods our minds with worldly benefits, or with depressing ideas, or with negative thoughts about other people or our church, then we must actively resist him. Critical negativism must always be strongly rejected. When he fills our thoughts with day-dreams of desire, or with a love of ease, these scenes of self-indulgence must be resisted and expelled. We must change our thinking, praying to God for help.

But how can we be sure the devil will flee? Is he weak? On the contrary he is very powerful. Is he a coward? Of course not; he is not afraid of us. Is it that I am strong and I can defeat him? No, it is certainly not that. Well then, why will he flee if I resist him? Is it because he has no stamina and can only trouble me for a few minutes at a time? No, he and his hordes have tenacity enduring until the very last day.

He will flee from us because if we submit ourselves to God, and pray for help, and really desire to do the right thing, then Christ will drive him away. If God be for us, who can be against us? One glance from the mighty Saviour of the world is enough, and Satan will cower and go. If we depend upon Christ, He will send him away. To tried and storm-tossed believers, the words of Isaac Watts describe perfectly the decisive act of Christ in dismissing the evil one:

***But hell shall fly at Thy rebuke,
And Satan hide his head;
He knows the terrors of Thy look,
And hears Thy voice with dread.***

It is the Saviour Who defeated him at Calvary, and Who has brought him under judgement, remanded to the final day. Through Christ, Who has cast out the prince of this world, we may resist temptation, be kept safe, and see Satan flee from us. He is powerful, hateful and cunning, but he is also bound, limited, and subject to Christ, whether now, or at the Saviour's return.

Again, the words of Watts are perfect for our encouragement in the seas of temptation:

***Should all the hosts of death,
And powers of hell unknown,
Put their most dreadful forms
Of rage and malice on,
I shall be safe; for Christ displays
Superior power and guardian grace.***