

Unmasking the Serpent

Angels, Demons and Other Flying Creatures – Part V

Selected Scripture

Introduction

This month marks the anniversary of the fall of the Russian monarchy. On July 16, 1918, the last czar of Russia, Nicholas II, and his wife and children were executed by the Bolsheviks. That was over eighty years ago.

If I were to ask you what was the single most important factor in the downfall of a one thousand year old Russian monarchy, in the murders of Czar Nicholas II and his family, in the rise of a man named Vladimir Lenin and Russian communism; if I were to ask you what was the one fundamental cause that prepared the way for all the above, you would probably never imagine that the answer would be the work of one demonically empowered man named Grigory Yefimovich.

While Grigory was still in his teens, he gained a reputation for two things: being able to somewhat predict the future and living a immoral lifestyle. The local villagers gave him the nickname Rasputin, which means, “debauchery”. When he was twenty-two, he made a spiritual pilgrimage to Mt. Athos in Greece. There he came under the influence of a heretical religious sect known as the Flagelents. They believed sinning was necessary to salvation – the more you sinned the more secure your salvation. Two years later, Rasputin reappeared in his Russian village as a mysterious holy man – with a penchant for immorality and an unusual ability to cure the sick.

Rasputin eventually wandered into the capital city of St. Petersburg, where society was in the midst of delving into mysticism and the occult. They warmly received this priest who had already gained a modest reputation as a faith healer. Eventually, Rasputin gained an audience with the imperial family of Czar Nicholas and his wife Alexandra. They were struggling with the incurable condition of their son, who suffered from hemophilia. Through hypnosis, Rasputin was able to alleviate the suffering of their son. Because of that, he was welcomed into the family circle as a close and trusted friend. Alexandra came to revere him as a holy man sent by God to save her son, and her husband’s throne.

Under the spell of his influence as chief advisor, however, capable men were exiled and corrupt men put in their place. Even after Alexandra was confronted with Rasputin’s immoral and financial scandals in and out of court, she refused to act on any of it. She was strangely protective of this holy man with power to help her son.

When World War I broke out, Czar Nicholas took personal command of the army, leaving Alexandra and Rasputin even greater power at home than ever before. Key leaders were exiled at Rasputin’s wish and the economy and public morale reached the bottom. Strikes and riots erupted in the capital city and rumors began to circulate about the relationship between Rasputin and Alexandra.

A group of cabinet members and members of the royal family secretly conspired to kill Rasputin. On the night of December 30, 1916, Rasputin was invited to what he thought was a royal party. Instead, he was given poisoned wine, was shot when he tried to escape, and then, was thrown into a river where he drowned.

However, the damage to the Russian nation had already been done. Evil men were still in power, the czar had lost all credibility, as well as the queen, Alexandra.

Just three months later, Czar Nicholas and his family were brutally murdered by the Russian rebels, called Bolsheviks. The vacuum of leadership was filled by the leader of these rebels, whose nickname was Lenin. He brought with him his new ideas of Russian communism.

What was behind it all? A demonically empowered man with evil ambitions.

One historian wrote, “If there had been no Rasputin, there would never have been a Lenin – no Lenin and there would never have been the propagation of atheistic communism through the empire of the Soviet Union.”

A false spiritual leader – a supposed holy man with the power to heal – empowered by the kingdom of darkness, deceived the royal family and ultimately, opened the way for nearly a hundred years of

atheistic communism to dominate nearly one billion people.

There is little doubt in my mind that Satan is a mastermind, determined to influence and deceive nations. He often does so through single individuals like Rasputin.

The question remains, just how does Satan impact the life of the believer? Furthermore, can a Christian be demon possessed? For that matter, what power does the demonic world have over the church at large and the believer in particular?

I want to answer these questions, not by exegeting everyone's stories, but by exegeting the scriptures.

Three different words are used in the Bible to refer to Satan's specific operation against the believer. Let us look at these.

The Schemes of Satan

The first of the three words that refer to Satan's attacks against believers is found in II Corinthians, chapter 2, verse 11. Look at verses 9 through 11.

For to this end also I wrote, so that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. But one whom you forgive anything, I forgive also; for indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, I did it for your sakes in the presence of Christ, so that no advantage would be taken of us by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his schemes.

As we unmask the serpent and reveal not only his true nature, but his ways, his approaches, his patterns, his plotting against the believer, we discover the interesting word "schemes". Paul warns the believer of the "schemes" of Satan.

The Greek word is "noema" (νοημα), which refers to the intellectual activity of the mind. It can be rendered "purposes or plans" of the mind. In a sinister way, as it relates to Satan, it can refer to evil plots and devices, or literally, "evil scheming".

The word appears again several chapters later in II Corinthians, chapter 10, verse 5. We will begin with verses 3 and 4.

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.

Let me mention at this point that this passage has produced a number of fanciful theological interpretations within the modern spiritual warfare movement. Many people fancy the believer riding against a castle on a horse with a lance and a battle cry, and crashing the castle walls of demonic strongholds to the ground.

The word "fortress," in verse 4, is a reference to that which a person relies upon intellectually or that reasoning that an unbeliever hides behind. Many biblical scholars believe that Paul was referring to Proverbs, chapter 21, verse 22, in which the same Greek word for "fortress" appears in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible). In that passage, Solomon writes,

A wise man . . . brings down the fortress in which they trust.

In other words, the fortress is a metaphor for intellectual, ungodly reasoning. It is not some mystical castle inhabited by demons, but mental, intellectual arguments that Satan has used to intellectually deceive the unbeliever.

Can we be sure that Paul is referring to mental defenses in the minds of unbelievers, motivated and encouraged by Satan and his demons? Do we really know that these fortresses are not a reference to territorial strongholds that need to be crushed by cosmic warfare?

Yes, all we have to do is read the next verse. The Bible, by the way, has a way of explaining itself. Remember this principle – all of the Bible is a commentary on any one verse of the Bible. So, the more you refer to the Bible in all of its verses, the better you will understand the Bible in any one of its verses.

Paul goes on in the next verse to describe the fortresses of human intellect that are being destroyed by the truth. In II Corinthians, chapter 10, verse 5, he says,

We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ,

"Speculations," or "logismos," in the Greek, means "worldly logic or worldly reasoning".

"Lofty thing" means to lift up one's self, and is a metaphor to the erecting of a tower of human pride and self sufficiency.

Paul uses a present tense verb, "taking every thought captive". He is saying, "we constantly capture and bring into captivity every anti-God

thought". This indicates the ongoing daily war within the mind.

If we want to know how to daily battle the mental schemes of Satan, who seeks to trouble, deceive, harass, and rob the peace and assurance of the believer, Philippians, chapter 4, tells us what we are to do on a daily basis. Look at verse 8 and 9.

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

Most believers would never admit that Satan has captured their minds with his schemes, but how many would say that the state of their mind and spirit is characterized by peace? Would you describe your mind and your life in general with words like, "serenity" or "contentment"?

If not, the discipline of Philippians, chapter 4, verses 8 and 9, asks the questions, "The television and movies you watched this past week, were they pure and true? The things you read, were they excellent and honorable? The conversations you had and the relationships and friendships you participated in, were they right; were they of godly reputation; did they create praise to God?"

The Systems of Satan

There is a second word that describes the attack of Satan against the believer. There are the schemes of Satan, but also the systems of Satan. It is a word found in Ephesians, chapter 6, verses 11 through 13.

Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

Verse 11, again, says,

. . . so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.

This is a different Greek word than the word that we just looked at, even though it is translated

"schemes". This Greek word, in Ephesians, is "methodias" (μεθοδιαις), which gives us our transliterated word, "methods".

We are to clothe ourselves in the armor of God, which will enable us to withstand the methods and systems of Satan.

I remember my older brother and I, along with a neighborhood kid or two, going to a particular neighbor's house on occasion. It had a yard that bordered a two lane street with regular traffic traveling thirty-five miles an hour. In that yard was a row of hedges about waist high that bordered the road and ran the distance of the side yard. Those bushes provided the perfect ambush spot. We would store our peaches and wait for a car to drive by. Just as a car came past us, we would jump up and let our peaches fly. Sometimes we would hear the gratifying thump and know that some ripe peach just splattered the target. Sometimes the car would screech to a halt, and we would hear, "Hey you . . ." We would race to the other side of the yard, dive headfirst over another row of hedges, and make our escape. We loved peach season.

Now, it did not occur to me until after I prepared to share this story, that my parents would be in the service today. As far as I can remember, I was there against my will – the other guys did all of the peach throwing – I just stood there quoting my AWANA verses. Mom, that is what I want you to believe.

Now, to those drivers, what we did was irritating, probably startling, and it created a messy spot that they had to clean up when they got home. It was just peaches.

Most Christians seem to think that Satan is just some mischievous little man who lobs peaches at us every once in a while as we drive through life. He is not too organized; he does not have a very good aim; he just wants to disrupt or startle us or make a little mess of things every once in a while. He is not much worse than a ripe peach in the wrong place.

Peter wrote instead, in I Peter, chapter 5, verse 8, that,

. . . the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

The word devour could be translated, "discredit; ruin; destroy".

We are not given specifics in Ephesians, chapter 6, as to what the methods are by which Satan devours and destroys. However, in Ephesians, chapter 4, the word "methodias" appears again. Look at verses 11 through 15.

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ,

Verse 14 has the word again. You could translate it, “by crafty methods of deception”.

Once again, the primary attack of Satan is upon the mind of the believer.

The deceptive lies of Satan continually buffet the believer, whether they are communicated through the media or the pride of our own sinful nature. It could be through the temptations of the flesh or the philosophy of a greedy world system. The battle is real; it is deadly serious and it is daily.

I am convinced that every believer encounters one of Satan’s methods every day. Call it a daily test of integrity or purity or purpose or honesty – you name it – every day you face the test.

Four methods Satan can use against the believer

Let me suggest at least four methods that Satan and his demons can use against the believer; four “tests” of the serpent. These include:

- temptation – an attempt to discredit the believer and destroy fellowship with God;
- persecution – an attempt to discourage the believer and damage trust in God;
- division – an attempt to disrupt the community of believers and dissolve unity with others;
- deception – an attempt to distract the believer and dilute the purity of the gospel.

In other words, Satan is not lobbing little ripe peaches at us. What we have to lose is not a little time cleaning up some peach stains. It is:

- a matter of God’s reputation;

- a matter of Christ’s glory and honor in the world;
- a matter of being usable by Christ for the advancement of His church;
- a matter of enjoying the preciousness of unity;
- a matter of protecting the purity of the gospel.

The systems of Satan are designed to destroy all of these, if they can. He is ruthless; he is patient; he is organized; he is cunning; he is proficient.

The Snares of Satan

There is another word that is found in I Timothy that further unmasks this enemy and reveals another nuance of his ways. There are the schemes of Satan, the systems of Satan, and there are also the snares of Satan. In I Timothy, chapter 3, verses 6 and 7, Paul is demanding that elders in the church meet certain qualifications.

and not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

Paul uses the same word in II Timothy, chapter 2, verses 24 through 26, to describe the unbeliever who is caught up in the snare of Satan.

The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.

Paul uses the word to refer to a believer who, by pride, falls into the snare of the devil and loses his credibility. He uses the same word to refer to an unbeliever who is totally caught up by the snare of the devil.

Demon possession

We know that unbelievers can actually be possessed by demons who have ensnared them. So, can a believer also be possessed or inhabited by demonic spirits?

Many proponents of today's modern day warfare movement say "Yes." They point to the modern day deliverance ministries that deliver believers from all sorts of demons; such as, the demon of cancer, the demon of sloth, the demon of poverty.

They, however, have no biblical ground to stand upon. Furthermore, they do not understand what Paul wrote in Colossians, chapter 1, verse 13,

For He [God] rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son,

Our redemption frees us from any claim of Satan. As I Peter, chapter 2, verse 9, says, we have been,

. . . called . . . out of darkness into His marvelous light;

Those who believe they can be owned by God, but inhabited by demons do not draw on scripture for their belief in this regard. They are relying on subjective experiences and stories that make the rounds. Nowhere in the New Testament, do you ever see an illustration of a believer who is inhabited by a demon.

One author wrote, and I wholeheartedly agree, *There is no example in the Bible where a demon ever inhabited or invaded a true believer. Never in the New Testament epistles are believers warned about the possibility of being inhabited by demons. Neither do we see believers rebuking, binding, or casting demons out of a true believer. The epistles never instruct believers to cast out demons, whether from a believer or unbeliever. Christ and the apostles were the only ones who cast out demons (as a sign, I might add, of Christ's credentials as the Son of God), and in every instance the demon-possessed person was an unbeliever.ⁱ*

Certainly there is conflict with the enemy – we are talking about the serpent's schemes and snares. But you need to understand, this is vastly different than believing that demons can spatially inhabit a believer.

Let me give you Charles Ryrie's definition of demon possession, which is consistent with what we read in the entire New Testament record. I believe this clears up the issue.

A demon residing in a person, exerting direct control and influence over that person, with certain derangement of mind and/or body. Demon possession is to be distinguished from demon influence or activity in relation to a

person. The work of the demon in the latter is from the outside, in demon possession, it is from within.ⁱⁱ

Let me summarize that definition with two statements:

- While the enemy can influence the believer, he cannot possess the believer.
- While the enemy cannot possess the believer, he can destroy the believer.

People impacted by Satan for God's purpose

Now, for the remaining part of our discussion, we will look at illustrations in the Bible of both believer and unbeliever who were impacted by Satan and what we can we learn from them.

Paul – to ensure personal humility

The first illustration is the apostle Paul. In II Corinthians, chapter 12, verse 7, we read that Paul struggled with pride and God used Satan as an agent of His sovereign purpose. Paul wrote,

Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger from Satan to buffet me – to keep me from exalting myself!

Many people have tried to identify Paul's thorn – epilepsy, poor eyesight, malaria – but we are not told. However, the Greek word for "buffet" refers to bone-crushing blows. Whatever it was, it hurt; it distracted him; it plagued him.

Nowhere do you read that Paul attempted to bind, rebuke, or cast out this Satanic messenger. You do not read of him saying, "Messenger of Satan, I rebuke you in the name of Jesus."

Paul simply prayed that God would remove it and God chose not to answer Paul's prayer in the way Paul wanted.

Listen to Paul in verse 10.

Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake . . .

If Paul were living today he would never be interviewed on *The 700 Club*. In the eyes of modern Christianity, Paul would be a loser. People would say, "What do you mean you're content with distresses and difficulties?"

People today, would be giving Paul *The Prayer of Jabez*, and saying, “Listen, Paul, what you need to do is pray that prayer – you’re not receiving God’s blessings.”

No. Satan was allowed access into Paul’s life to ensure personal humility; and Paul received the greater blessing. Look at verse 9,

And He [God] . . . said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” . . .

Peter – to develop spiritual maturity

Satan was allowed access into the life of Peter in order to develop spiritual maturity.

Jesus said to Peter, as recorded in Luke, chapter 22, verse 31,

Simon, Simon [Peter], behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat;

Then Jesus said, in effect, “but once you’ve repented, you’ll be prepared for effective, lasting ministry.”

Judas – to advance redemption’s plan and fulfill prophecy

Judas was actually inhabited by Satan, thus proving he was an unbeliever – for the Spirit of God and the serpent of hell will not occupy the same temple. Satan impacted the life of Judas, however, by the will of God, in order to advance redemption’s plan and to fulfill prophecy that He would be betrayed by one of His own (John 13:21).

Church members – to maintain moral and doctrinal purity within the church

There are several illustrations of church members who were impacted by Satan. We do not know if some were believers or unbelievers. However, Satan was allowed to impact their lives in order to maintain moral and doctrinal purity within the church.

Look at I Corinthians, chapter 5, verses 1 through 5. We are told that there was a man who persisted in immorality. He was living with his stepmother in an incestuous relationship. The church refused to deal with the man who was evidently, a believer.

Paul wrote in verses 4 and 5,

In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, I have decided to

deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Satan actually causes the death of believers who refuse to repent. He acts as God’s agent in bringing discipline to its final stage.

In I Timothy, Paul uses the same language. In chapter 1, verses 19 and 20, he writes,

. . . some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith. Among these are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered over to Satan, so that they may be taught not to blaspheme.

Paul’s instruction is a lot different from what we hear about today. Rather than delivering people from Satan, Paul actually says that the church sometimes delivers people to Satan! Now that is a deliverance ministry few speak about today. That will not sell any books, but it will purify the church.

In Acts, chapter 5, verses 1 through 11, Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, brought a gift of money to the apostles, saying it was the money they had earned from the sale of some personal property. Ananias came to the church meeting first. His wife was late – some things never change, right?! Look at verses 3 and 5.

But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? . . . And as he heard those words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last . . .

Then, Sapphira came in. Look at verse 8.

And Peter responded to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?” . . .

(The rest of the congregation is holding their breath.)

. . . And she said, “Yes, that was the price.”

Continue to verses 9 and 10.

Then Peter said to her, . . . “Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well.” And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last . . .

The church had funeral number two.

We get the idea that Satan, the destroyer, at any moment when given permission from sovereign God, will destroy a believer’s life.

Application – Succeeding Against Satan

How do you avoid Satan’s snares, systems, and schemes? Let me give two principles for the believer who wishes to finish the race.

The principle of consecration

1. Principle number one is the principle of consecration. This is simply allowing the One who owns you to operate you.

Paul wrote in I Corinthians, chapter 6, verse 19,

... your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and ... you are not your own

The principle of consecration simply means that you allow the owner of the vehicle to operate it as he sees fit.

The principle of concentration

2. Principle number two is the principle of concentration. In other words, “Who are you looking at? Who are you following? Who are you allowing to influence you? Who is your teacher and guide?”

There are basically two ways of trying to overcome temptation. These are illustrated wonderfully, though accidentally, in the Greek myths of Ulysses and Jason. You will understand as I read from these myths.

When Ulysses and his men set sail on their journey of conquest, they were warned to avoid the sirens at all costs. They were told that the sirens’ voices were alluring, but fatal to all who stopped to listen. The unfortunate listeners became rooted like a tree and could not tear themselves away, until they died of hunger. “Fill your companions’ ears with wax,” he was counseled. “if you yourself want to listen to their songs, first let your men bind you securely to the mast.”

Ulysses heeded the advice. “If the melody beguiles me,” he ordered his men, “I charge you, disobey my word, and bend more strongly to your oars.”

At length, Ulysses heard the beautiful strains that stole into his mind, overpowered his body, and overcame his will. As the music came sweeter and sweeter, Ulysses’ love for home weakened. He struggled with his shame, but at last the bewitching

voices of the sirens prevailed. “Loose me and let me stay with the sirens!” he raged. He threatened and entreated; he promised his men mountains of gold with desperate signs and gestures. His men only bound him more securely. He raged and tore at his bonds, for it was agony for him to leave the spot. But not until the last sound of music died away did they loose him. He had passed the zone of temptation.

In the myth of Jason, he and his men set out in search of the Golden Fleece. He also was warned of the sirens, and as they sailed, they began to hear the bewitching strains. All around they could see the shore strewn with the bones of those who had succumbed to the sirens’ charms. There were seagulls in long lines and shoals of fish that came to listen.

Soon the oars of Jason’s men fell from their hypnotized hands. Their heads drooped and their heavy eyes closed. On board was Orpheus, the king of minstrels, and he began to loudly sing. He struck his skillful hand over the strings of his harp and his voice rose like a trumpet. The music penetrated the souls of the infatuated men, and their souls thrilled. Orpheus kept on singing until his voice completely drowned out the voices of the sirens. Once again the men took up their oars, and Jason and his men sailed to victory. “Sing the song again, Orpheus,” they cried, “we will dare and suffer to the last.”ⁱⁱⁱ

These two stories strikingly illustrate two ways of handling temptation.

One way is to put wax in your ears – to escape to a monastery or convent; to hole up in a room and never go out into the world – that way you will never have to hear the sirens’ song.

The other way is to concentrate on the voice of another; to hear the voice and music of heaven as far lovelier and more desirable than the alluring music of earth.

It simply comes down to this – on whose voice are you concentrating?

Consecration and concentration – two ways to defeat the siren sounds of the serpent!

ⁱ John MacArthur Jr., How to Meet the Enemy (Chariot Victor Publishing, 1992), p. 23.

ⁱⁱ David Jeremiah, What the Bible Says About Angels (Walk Through the Bible Publishers, 1995), p. 73.

ⁱⁱⁱ Intimacy With God.