

The Prince of the Power of the Air

Genesis 3: 1 – 5; Ephesians 2: 1 – 10

Where did that snake come from?

Last Lord's Day, in Genesis chapter 3 we noted the first appearance in Scripture of our ancient foe—the serpent, or, “that *ancient* serpent, who is the devil and Satan”ⁱ (as he is designated in Revelation, chapter 12). Our text read,

¹ Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made... Genesis 3:1 (ESV)ii

If we had been reading Genesis with no background in the rest of Scripture, we would undoubtedly have found that to be quite an abrupt introduction. One minute the serpent is not there; the next he is. On one page the world appears to be inhabited by the perfect couple living in harmony with the creation, with each other, and with the God who made them; on the next, this new character has appeared with the obvious intent to disrupt all of that.

In addition, Genesis chapters 1 and 2 said nothing of this evil being—in fact, quite to the contrary, Genesis, chapter 1, verse 31 stated,

³¹ ...God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good... Genesis 1:31 (ESV)

So, where **did** that snake come from? What **is** the origin of evil in God's good world?

Well, we can rule out the idea that Satan, or evil, was there all along as some kind of an opposing force to the goodness of God. Eastern religions posit that kind of dualism—the idea that you cannot have light without dark or good without evil; that there must always be balance in the force (if you are a fan of philosophically questionable science fiction)—but it is a patently unbiblical idea. The gospel of John, speaking of Jesus, the Word, who was in fact God, tells us clearly that

³ **All things** were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. John 1:3 (KJV 1900)

So, apart from the God who spoke all things into being and those things that He spoke into being, there has never been anything or anyone else. Add that to the text that we read a moment ago from Genesis, chapter 1:

³¹ ...God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good... Genesis 1:31 (ESV)

and it is equally clear that God did not create Satan as an evil being. The question remains then; what happened?

How art thou fallen from heaven...

There is, of course, an old tradition that says the answer can be found in Isaiah chapter 14, verses 12 – 14, which reads, in the King James Version,

¹² How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! ¹³ For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: ¹⁴ I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. Isaiah 14:12–14 (KJV 1900)

“You may ask”, as Tevye the dairyman said in *Fiddler on the Roof*:

“How did this tradition get started?” I'll tell you. I don't know. But it's a tradition... ⁱⁱⁱ

The thing is, traditionally, some think Isaiah 14, verses 12 through 14 are about the devil because **they** use the name Lucifer, but the name Lucifer is thought to belong to **the devil** because it gets used in Isaiah, chapter 14. This tradition goes back far enough that John Calvin felt obligated to object to it in the strongest possible terms, writing,

it was an instance of very gross ignorance, to imagine that Lucifer was the king of devils, and that the Prophet gave him this name. But as these inventions have no probability whatever, let us pass by them as useless fables.^{iv}

There are, of course, other passages of Scripture that could be cited, not least among them, Ezekiel 28, 11 – 19, and Daniel 10, 12 – 14, which refer primarily to the king of Tyre, and the princes and kings of Persia respectively, but seem to have a deeper context as well. Also, it seems to be the case that because Satan inevitably wears a disguise, Scripture inevitably addresses him through whatever particular mask he is wearing. If the Lord is willing, we will see more of this in the weeks to come, but we've seen it already in the text from last week. There, in Genesis 3, Satan appeared to Adam and Eve in the form of a serpent, and although the curse was ultimately directed at **the devil**—"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring..."^v—in verse 14,

¹⁴ The Lord God said **to the serpent**, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field..." Genesis 3:14 (ESV)

Clearly it was not a mere snake that was responsible for tempting our first parents, and yet, because Satan wore the guise of a snake, God addresses him **SO**. Calvin wrote,

...when all things are more accurately weighed, readers endued with sound judgment will easily perceive that the language is of a mixed character; for God so addresses the serpent that the last clause belongs to the devil. If it seem to any one absurd, that the punishment of another's fraud should be exacted from a brute animal, the solution is at hand; that, since it had been created for the benefit of man, there was nothing improper in its being accursed from the moment that it was employed for his destruction.^{vi}

There is much here that is not explicitly stated in Scripture, and that we may never know for a certainty, but C.S. Lewis gets to the reality of it in *Mere Christianity*.

One of the things that surprised me when I first read the New Testament seriously was that it talked so much about a Dark Power in the universe—a mighty evil spirit who was held to be the Power behind death and disease, and sin. The difference [between "real Christianity" and Dualism] is that Christianity thinks this Dark Power was created by God, and was good when he was created, and went wrong. Christianity agrees with Dualism that this universe is at war. But it does not think this is a war between independent powers. It thinks it is a civil war, a rebellion, and that we are living in a part of the universe occupied by the rebel.^{vii}

The prince of the power of the air.

And as if that weren't bad enough, not only do we live in a part of the universe occupied by the rebel, we live there because we are, or used to be on his side. The first part of our reading from Ephesians 2 this morning made this very point. Verses 1 and 2:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—

But before we move on, let me go back quickly to something from the last Lord's Day. In Genesis 3, Satan said, "You will not surely die...You will be as gods." We noted that it was an empty promise, coming as it did from the father of lies, especially when God had already commanded,

¹⁷ ...in the day that you eat of [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] you shall surely die."

As I pointed out last Sunday, God promised that they would die, and they surely did, because God always

keeps His promises. Well, Ephesians 2 is why I can make that statement with confidence. It isn't that Adam and Eve physically died on the day that they ate the fruit in disobedience to the command of God. That they didn't is evident from the text of Genesis itself. Still, they did die in terms of their relationship to God, and they passed that death along to all of their children. Paul wrote in Romans, chapter 5:

¹² Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin...death spread to all men because all sinned... Romans 5:12 (ESV)

Jesus once said of Satan,

⁴⁴ ...He was a murderer from the beginning... John 8:44 (ESV)

and this is why. On the day that our first parents chose rebellion against God over the worship of God (and that was the choice—those who rebel against the revealed word of God **cannot** truly worship Him, not then and not now), on that day they became dead in sin, having “no disposition, inclination, or desire for the things of God,”^{viii} because that's what it means to follow the course of this world. Again, Romans 1, verses 22 and 23:

²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Romans 1:21–23 (ESV)

But notice also that they weren't merely choosing created things over the creator (as if that weren't bad enough). They were also “following the prince of the power of the air”, that is, they were following Satan. It's not the case, then, that Adam and Eve had been in some sort of favourable posture toward God and then fell to a neutral position from which they could choose either good or evil. Rather, God's children, the people that He had created in His own image—the people who walked **with Him** in the Garden in the cool of the day—were now choosing to walk in the footsteps of the devil's own rebellion. Turning away from the Living God was choosing active rebellion and enmity against Him, it was **not** choosing to become a blank slate. The children of God became the children of wrath, “having no hope and without God in the world,” to borrow a phrase from a little farther down in Ephesians chapter 2.

You gotta serve somebody...

The thing is, this condition of being “dead in trespasses and sins...following the course of this world,” and, “following the prince of the power of the air” was not merely our first parent's condition after the fall; it **was** our position after the fall. Ephesians 2, verses 1 – 3:

And **you** were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which **you** once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—³ among whom **we all once lived** in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, **and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.** Ephesians 2: 1 – 3 (ESV)

See, one of the things that we have to understand about the spiritual battle in which we find ourselves is that the idea of moral or spiritual neutrality is a fiction. It's the big lie put forward by the “father of lies” in his temptation of Adam and Eve. It's what he meant when he said, “You will be as gods...” but the truth is, you are not and cannot be as God. In this world you gonna serve somebody. Bob Dylan got that much right. “...yes indeed you're gonna have to serve somebody. It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody,”^{ix} Sadly, Dylan seems to have forgotten this after he wrote it, but it's true.

³...we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, **like the rest of mankind.** Ephesians 2:3 (ESV)

And, “What then?” as the apostle Paul wrote,

⁹ ...Are we better than they? **Not at all...**¹⁰ As it is written: “There is none righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. ¹² They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, **no, not one.**” Romans 3:9–12 (NKJV)

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Anyone who tells you different is selling something.

But God.

Which would all be pretty depressing if the next words in our text were not, “**But God...**” **We** were by nature children of wrath, just like everybody else in the world. **We** were dead in the trespasses and sins in which **we** once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air^x, following the god (small g) of this age who blinds the minds of those who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ should shine on them.^{xi}

⁴ **But God**, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses,

was not willing to leave us in that condition, rather, He

made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. Ephesians 2:4–7 (ESV)

¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.¹⁰ ...we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should **walk** in them. And, now, set free from our trespasses and sins by grace through faith,⁴ **But God**, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus... Ephesians 2:4 – 6 (ESV) **[We]** were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which **[we]** once walked, *following the* course of this world, **following** the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience... Ephesians 2:1 – 2

(ESV) Then, we might envision the helmet of salvation as the crown of the whole—the one piece which assumes all of the others—because it’s only when we have been saved by grace through faith and clothed with Christ, that we are fully equipped to resist the schemes of the evil one, and not only to resist, but to overcome. Because it’s true, Last week I said that the very first piece of armor that we need to stand against the schemes of the devil is the belt of truth, and that is, in fact, the first piece of armor listed by Paul in Ephesians chapter 6. But really, if we are to resist the devil, standing firm in **our** faith,^{xii} as Peter exhorted us, then it makes sense that we must first *have* faith—we must be children of God, born of His Spirit and saved by His grace in Christ Jesus. In this sense, maybe the armor of God should be thought of as singular. Instead of thinking of it as a collection of individual pieces which might be worn separately or mixed and matched, we need to think of it as **the whole armor** of God, the entirety of which is necessary if we are to stand against the schemes of the evil one. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. Ephesians 2:8–9 (ESV) Amen, and hallelujah! You were dead—**we** were dead—in our

trespasses and sins, **but God** made us alive together with Christ. made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

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The Whole Armor of God

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Then, we might envision the helmet of salvation as the crown of the whole—the one piece which assumes all of the others—because it's only when we have been saved by grace through faith and clothed with Christ, that we are fully equipped to resist the schemes of the evil one, and not only to resist, but to overcome. Because it's true,

[**We**] were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which [**we**] once walked, *following* the course of this world, **following** the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience... Ephesians 2:1 – 2 (ESV)

⁴ **But God**, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus... Ephesians 2:4 – 6 (ESV)

And, now, set free from our trespasses and sins by grace through faith,

¹⁰...we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should **walk** in them.

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i Cf. Re 20:2
ii All Scripture citations (unless otherwise noted), *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).
iii https://www.quotes.net/movies/fiddler_on_the_roof_3900
iv John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, vol. 1* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 442.
v Cf. Ge 3:15.
vi John Calvin, *Op. Cit.*, 165–166.
vii C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 45.
viii R. C. Sproul, ed., *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version (2015 Edition)* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2015), 1857.
ix <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/bobdylan/gottaservesomebody.html>
x Cf. Ep 2:1-3
xi Cf. 2 Co 4:4
xii Cf. 1 Pe 5:9
xiii Cf. 1 Pe 5:9