**Angels and Demons 7. The Adversary - R. C. Sproul**

We come now in our study of the biblical doctrine of angels to a study of the most evil of all creatures, indeed the one who is the quintessence of wickedness, whose name is Satan. I have to confess that I have a little bit of trepidation and apprehension about lecturing on the subject of Satan. I remember that when C. S. Lewis penned his famous Screwtape Letters, he testified afterwards that he had to suffer through a serious period of depression while he was penning that book, and he had an acute sense that he was being oppressed by the subject about whom he was writing, namely Satan himself.

And that always gives me a little fear and trembling when we begin to talk about Satan, because it's one thing to consider Satan in the abstract or look at it from a strictly doctrinal position, but when we come face to face with the biblical teaching of Satan, who is the saint's arch enemy, there is reason to proceed with great caution. Let me begin by saying I remember an occasion where I was teaching in a college classroom, and I asked the students in the class how many of them believed in the existence of God. I had thirty students in the class, and thirty students raised their hand.

And then I said, okay, how many of you believe in the existence of Satan? And three of the students raised their hands. And I was taken back by that, and I said, well, why is it that you believe in God and not in Satan? Well, they immediately put Satan in the category of witches and goblins and things that go bump in the night and relegated it to the realm of superstition. And I said, well, wait a minute.

If we define God as an invisible spiritual being who has the capacity to influence human beings for good, and you all affirm that, what's the problem with speaking of a spirit being who has the capacity to influence people for evil? I mean, both are invisible, but at the same time, we have manifest evidence in history of the outbreak of unspeakable evil. But again, when I pressed these students, what was coming across was their association of Satan with superstition. And one of the students even said, you surely don't believe in this little guy with a red suit, carries a pitchfork, and he has cloven hooves, and he has horns coming out of his head.

And I said, no, I don't believe in Satan as a man in a little red suit and so on. I said, but where do we get that image of Satan that we see on Halloween and we see in these comic caricatures of him? I said, that portrait of Satan, of the man in the red suit and the tights and so on, is dated back in the Middle Ages at a time when Christian people were acutely conscious of the reality of the spirit world, and particularly of the reality of Satan. And they took steps to defend themselves from the wiles of Satan, and in their studies, they wanted to see what was the point of weakness in the character of Satan, and they came to the conclusion that his greatest point of vulnerability was his pride.

And so they attacked him at that point by making these silly caricatures of him in order to poke fun at him. Nobody in the church at that time ever believed that Satan actually was a little guy with a red suit and with a pitchfork and so on. That image, as I said, was designed to ward him off by assaulting his pride.

Well, let's take some time to look at what the Scriptures tell us about Satan. The very name Satan means adversary, and I think that's an appropriate name for this one because that's what he is. He's not simply an arch-fiend given to wickedness, but he is the enemy of everything that is good.

He is the enemy and adversary of all who put their trust in Christ, and of course his most despised enemy is Christ Himself. And we remember at the time of the fall, when God responded to the fall of Adam and Eve by placing a curse upon the earth, a curse upon the woman, a curse upon the man, He also placed His curse upon the serpent who seduced Adam and Eve and said that from thenceforth He would crawl on his belly, and then He made the prediction that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent, while at the same time the serpent would bruise the heel of the seed of the woman. We call that the Proto-Evangelium, or the first gospel promise that came in the midst of a curse.

There was the promise of future redemption when the serpent would have his head crushed, but from that moment through the rest of redemptive history, Satan manifests himself in sacred Scripture as an adversary of the people of God. Now, it's important that we understand that we are looking at Satan from the perspective of our broader consideration in this series of angels, because in church history, as I've said already, there have been two serious distortions about the person and work of Satan. The one distortion is to minimize his reality, the fact that God even exists, and to fail to take him seriously as a real spiritual adversary to us.

The other side of the distortion is to attribute to him greater power and greater significance than he actually enjoys. So often the church has been influenced by dualistic religions that see the forces of good and evil, light and darkness as equal and opposite forces, vying with each other for ultimate supremacy. But the biblical view knows nothing of such a dualism, because the contest between God and Satan is no contest at all.

Satan is a creature. He is a created being. He is always and everywhere under the sovereign power and authority of the Creator.

He is in no way an equal adversary to God himself. And as a creature, he possesses none of the incommunicable attributes of God. When we speak of the attributes of God in theology proper, we make that distinction between communicable and incommunicable attributes.

Communicable attributes are those attributes that God possesses that he can communicate to us or to the creature to some lesser degree. We can manifest goodness, for example, not the perfection that is found in God, but God as a good being communicates the possibility of goodness to his creature. So that's a communicable attribute and so on.

But incommunicable attributes are those attributes possessed by God that not only are not transferred to the creature, but frankly cannot be transferred to the creature. One of the things that God manifestly cannot do is create another God, because as soon as God created his second God, the second God would not be eternal. He would be a creature by definition.

He would have a beginning in time from the moment that the original Creator made him, so he could not, even God cannot create another God, because anything that God creates by definition would be a creature. But sometimes in our preoccupation with Satan, we are quick to assign to him attributes that belong only to God. Martin Luther warned his people about the stark reality of Satan, and he said, Satan is as close by as your own clothes.

If you're wearing a shirt, Luther would warn you that Satan is as near to you as your shirt is to your body. Now, I disagree with Luther on that point. I think at that point when Luther was speaking of the nearness and the proximity of Satan to people, Luther was speaking more out of his own experience than he was out of his exegesis, because certainly Martin Luther understood that as a creature, Satan did not have the power of omnipresence or of ubiquity, that Satan as a creature cannot be at more than one place at the same time.

So he can't be as close to you as your shirt, and at the same time be as close to you as your shirt, because he can't be in those two places at the same time. But of course, you have somebody pop up on the screen of church history who is as critical to the advancement of the kingdom as Martin Luther was. I can understand that Martin Luther lived every day of his life wearing this diabolical shirt who was chasing him all over the place, and Luther's experiences, as I mentioned before, that he called the anfecton of Satan, the unbridled, relentless assault and attack that the Prince of Darkness was bringing against him, we can understand why Luther would be in the cross of Satan, because if he could get Luther to fall, there goes the Reformation.

But I think we can take some solace and consolation that it's unlikely that in our lifetime we'll ever meet with Satan. He has bigger fish to fry. If he's going to come personally to try to get at people, he's not going to chase after us.

We're the little guys. But nevertheless, he has a host of his minions, his demons to do his work for him, and so we may have those surrounding us as close as our shirts, and we may have satanic emissaries besieging us, and we have to be alert to that. But the Prince himself, it's unlikely that you and I will ever encounter him, and I say that because he is not omnipresent.

That is an attribute that belongs only to God. He's not infinite. He's not omniscient.

Satan does not know everything. Satan is a creature, and he is defined by the limits of creatureliness now. Remember that angels are higher than we are, so that angels have more power than we have, presumably more knowledge than we have, and all of that, but they're still way below the level of God himself.

And so let's not be guilty of attributing to Satan divine characteristics. In that case, we overestimate him. Now, what is he like, actually? Well, the Scriptures tell us a lot about his character and his being.

The first is that when he is first introduced in the earlier pages of the Bible, he's called the crafty one, the one who is more subtle or gull-ful than all of the rest of the beasts of the field. When he approaches Adam and Eve, when they're in their Edenic paradise, Satan comes to seduce them, and he comes with great guile. And we've looked at this seduction in other series, but let me remind you of how the serpent attacks our primordial parents.

He comes to Eve with a question, and the question is, has God said that you shall not eat of any of the trees in the garden? Now, the question in one sense is absurd. It's ridiculous. God had not said that they could not eat of any of the trees in the garden.

In fact, God had said to his creatures, of all of the trees in the garden, you may freely eat with this exception. But now Satan comes and says, well, did he say you can't eat from any of them? Now, what's so subtle about that? Jean-Paul Sartre in the 20th century, when he gave his arguments against the existence of God, one of the arguments that he gave was based upon the assumption of human freedom. And he said that if man is truly free, God cannot exist, because as long as there's a God dictating the rules, however slight they may be, if God is sovereign, then man cannot be autonomous.

To be autonomous means to be a rule unto yourself, a law unto yourself, answerable to no one. And the biblical view is that God is free, and He creates His creature, and He gives human beings freedom, but those freedoms are limited by God's decrees. And what Sartre was saying, unless you're totally free, you're not really free.

Unless you're autonomous, you're not free at all. So here's a very sophisticated philosopher in the 20th century giving basically the same argument that the serpent gives in the garden, because the suggestion, the subtlety of the suggestion is, well, Eve, you know, if God puts a restriction on this tree over here, He might just as well have said, you can't eat from any of the trees of the garden. Then He moves from the subtlety to the direct assault.

Eve said, He told us we can eat of all the trees, but if we eat of this one, we will die, and Satan now says, you will not die, but you shall be as gods. And that was the plum that was set before our original parents, not only idolatry, but deification. Now, again, Satan is described characteristically in the Scripture as a liar.

And we were told that he's a liar from the beginning, and that he is the father of lies. And again, his entrance into redemptive history is heralded by the great lie that is spoken to Adam and Eve, which was the promise of autonomy. If you really want to be free, if you eat of that, you are asserting your independence.

You are throwing off the yoke of this restrictive God, and you will be as God. You will be divine, and you will no longer be subordinate to Him, which is a lie. And yet, every time we sin, we believe the lie.

Because every time we sin, we set up our own desires over the desires of God. We are denying God's right to reign over us. In the slightest sin, we commit cosmic treason, because we are trying to overthrow the reign of God over our lives.

We will not have God reign over us, and we fall into this lie that we were given at the beginning. So he is clever and crafty. Not only that, the Scripture portrays Satan as incredibly strong.

He's no match for God. He's no match for the Holy Spirit. He is not omnipotent, but he is potent.

And he is more potent than we are. Again, you remember when our Lord said to Simon that he would betray Him and deny Him three times. And Peter protested that and said he would never do it.

And remember what Jesus said, Simon, Simon, Satan would have you sift you like wheat. You think you're strong. You're a piece of cake.

You're duck soup to the prince of darkness. Satan is so much stronger than Peter was. And the metaphor by which he is described in the New Testament is that of the roaring lion who goes about seeking whom he may devour.

Now, the lion in Scripture is always the image of strength. Its positive application is to the lion of Judah, to the king who will have the strength of the king of the beasts. But here in its negative application, Satan is described as a roaring lion for whom we are no match.

However, as I said, Satan does not have the divine attribute of omnipotence. His power is limited. And you have another image in the Scripture that suggests that as powerful as this lion is who tries to devour us, his power and craft are resistible.

We are given this admonition to resist him, and he will do what? He will flee from us. So I have this image in my head of this gigantic, sinuous, muscular lion on the prow who approaches us, and he growls, and he bares his teeth. But if we resist him, his tail goes between his leg, and he takes off in cowardly retreat.

At the same time, we are told that the Christian possesses a power that is not inherent to our humanity, but a power that is stronger than Satan's. And it is the power of the Holy Ghost. And we are told greater is He who is in you than He who is in the world.

So that when we're armed, when we are covered with the whole armor of God and have the indwelling Holy Spirit, we therefore in that situation have the power to resist Satan and to overcome him. You know, it's interesting to me if you love to sing, A Mighty Fortress is Our God, based on the 46th Psalm, how much attention in that song that looks to God as our fortress is that He is our great strength and our defense against Satan, against a world that is filled with devils that threaten to undo us. But God has given us the power of His Word, the power of the truth, the power of the Spirit, the Spirit and the gifts are ours, and so on, through which we can overcome these forces of hell.

After Luther died, his chief disciple, Philip Melanchthon, would say to their followers in times of trouble, whenever they would be discouraged, he would say, let's sing the 46th. Let's sing A Mighty Fortress. And so Satan is resistible.

But there's more for us to know and to understand about Satan, which we'll look at in our next session.