

The Adversary of Jesus

Please read Mark 1 v 1-13, meditating on v 12-13. Then pray; *Sovereign Lord, may your holy word strengthen me for all the battles I will face as a child of God – for the glory of your Name. Amen!*

It is customary to spend time considering the *temptations of Jesus* in the wilderness at the beginning of Lent, a *forty-day period* used by Christians to prepare for holy week and the celebration of Easter. We are not going to do that on this occasion because the gospel writer Mark chose not to do that. Unlike Matthew and Luke in their gospels, Mark chose to omit from his gospel the precise nature of the temptations faced by Jesus in the wilderness. Instead, Mark decided simply to introduce his readers to the important theological subject of **spiritual conflict** and to the **primary adversary of Jesus Christ – Satan**.

Mark's account is very brief indeed, but in it, he opens-up for his readers the extremely challenging and relevant concept of **spiritual warfare**. It is to this we now turn our attention, for this is one of the most significant subjects which confronts every Christian on an ongoing basis. Spiritual conflict for Mark lies at the heart of discipleship, taking up one's cross and following Christ daily. (Mark 8: 31-34) True and faithful discipleship is one of Mark's major concerns and it is an anathema to Satan.

One biblical scholar, Mark L Strauss writes, "*in Mark's gospel, Jesus's first three conflicts are with Satan and his demons (1:12-13, 21-28, 32-34), showing that Mark is setting his story in the context of spiritual warfare.*" In other words, Mark is interested in the conflict itself, in the enemy who opposes Christ and his kingdom, and in the victory of the Son of God. Whatever the temptations Jesus faced, or we face, our first consideration and focus needs to be upon the reality and identity of our main opponent, and the spiritual nature and seriousness of the conflict itself. To use the title of John Bunyan's famous book, Mark wants to encourage **The Pilgrims (disciples) Progress** in this very real spiritual battle.

So now let us turn to the text. Mark's approach to Jesus' wilderness encounter with Satan may be brief, but it is **packed full** of biblical ideas and concepts. These two short verses (12-13), are bursting at the seams with very weighty theological ideas and we need to note the following from the text:

- The Spirit sending (driving) Jesus out.
- The wilderness setting.
- The forty-day period.
- Satan.
- Wild animals.
- Angels in attendance.

We should quickly be able to see that this is primarily a spiritual conflict. In this drama, we have the Holy Spirit, Jesus, the Son of God, Satan, and the angels. If that isn't spiritual – I don't know what is. This is a spiritual battle that involves the Son, now anointed with the Spirit who was sent from heaven, the angels of heaven who attend him, the mighty fallen angel *here named Satan*, and all the angels (evil spirits) that fell from heaven with him. The Son of God will have plenty of encounters with demons (evil spirits) during his ministry, but at the outset of his calling and Kingdom work, Jesus **directly and deliberately** enters the arena of conflict with Satan.

No sooner had Jesus been baptised and received the Spirit's anointing, he was **at once** sent out, or to be more precise, *driven out* by the Spirit into a remoter part of the Judean wilderness. The Greek verb used here (*ekballo*), and 11 times altogether by Mark, is the same one used of Jesus when he *drove out demons* (v 34, 39). Jesus drove out demons with a word of command, but here the Spirit drove

Jesus out to face the prince of devils – Satan. Jesus *felt compelled through the Spirit* to face the Adversary and pursue God’s holy will. Let battle commence!

Jesus successfully endured this forty-day period of fasting in that inhospitable, arid, and dangerous wilderness. This recalls the **forty-year** long wilderness wanderings of the Israelites, and the **forty-day** periods of fasting which the prophets Moses and Elijah faced in the wilderness. (Exodus 24:18, 34:28 and 1 Kings 19:8). Moses and Elijah will appear later to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:4) to help him prepare for his journey to the cross, but for now Jesus took up the same marathon period of fasting that they themselves had endured. The lack of material support for Jesus also emphasised that this was a spiritual battle and test. But the great question facing us and facing the world God created is this; who is this chief adversary of Jesus Christ – the Son of the living God?

The diabolical spiritual entity and personality who is introduced by Mark and who opposed Jesus was named as *Satan*. The name means adversary, and that is exactly what he is – the enemy of God. In scripture, Satan is referred to by many other names including at the top of the list – *the devil*, but also the dragon, the ancient serpent, the strong man, the tempter, the thief, the accuser, the father of lies, Beelzebub, and very significantly, the god of this age, the god of this world, and the prince of this world. One verse of scripture in Revelation groups some of these descriptive names together as it describes Satan’s fall and his relentless fury against the world and in particular against the saints of God.

The great dragon was hurled down – that ANCIENT serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. (Revelation 12:9)

From what we can glean from Scripture, it appears that Satan, a beautiful and distinguished angelic being, was at one point in the long distant past, **cast out** and **hurled down** from heaven because of gross arrogance, pride, and rebellion against God. Jesus claimed to have seen “Satan fall like lightning from heaven”. (Luke 10:18) Many, including myself, see a picture of this dramatic fall in two of the OT prophetic books as they describe the humbling and downfall of two arrogant earthly kings. Isaiah describes the downfall of Babylon and it’s king who is referred to as *the morning star or lucifer*. (Isaiah 14: 12-17). Ezekiel, in a similar way describes the fall of the King of Tyre (Ezekiel 28:11-19). Behind both these descriptions of kings, there is another even darker and more sinister figure lurking– Satan – the evil Adversary of God, and his ancient and irredeemable fall from God’s presence is also being described. There is a double layer of meaning to these two O.T. texts.

Scripture further reveals that Satan now has a tremendous amount of oppressive and controlling power over the entire world. (1 John 5:19) He is now the deceiving **god of this age** (2 Corinthians 4:4), and **the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient**. (Ephesians 2:2) Jesus referred to him as the **prince of this world** (John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11) who had no hold on him, and who he would now **drive out** as he embraced the scornful shame of the cross! (Hebrews 12:2)

Satan’s chief aim and ambition is to stir up, maintain, increase and intensify rebellion against God and God’s holy will and laws of love. He aims at causing maximum death and destruction and is described by Jesus as *“the thief who comes only to steal, to kill and to destroy.”* (John 10:10). He is intoxicated with fury against God and knows that *“his time is short.”* (Revelation 12:12).

The signal for his final demise, and the beginning of the end of his power and reign as prince of this world, came when God in Christ **entered this world**. And now in this arid wilderness, Jesus full of the **Holy Spirit** faces Satan – the Most Unholy Spirit just before beginning his kingdom ministry. The battle commences. Jesus will win every time they meet! His **death and resurrection** will pay the price for sin

and rebellion, and death will be defeated and overcome. Satan's fate is sealed. Christ will begin to overturn all Satan's work (1 John 3:8) and the dismantling of the kingdom of darkness will begin in earnest. The gospel of the Kingdom, with the word and power of the Kingdom of God, is now about to impact the world and Satan's territory. The seed will be scattered. Prisoners will be set free. The harvest will be gathered. The gospel that releases people from the kingdom of darkness and transfers them into the Kingdom of light will soon be carried from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8, Acts 26:18, Colossians 1:13) Jesus, in one of his lesser-known parables describes how he will tie up the strong man and take away his goods. (Mark 3: 23-29)

So, what do we as followers of Christ take from all this? Firstly, we must understand that Satan is not a myth or some make-believe character. He is a real living evil spiritual personality. Jesus did not wrestle psychologically in the desert with a figment of his imagination. The battle was against a personal and malicious evil entity. The teaching about Satan in the bible is demonstrably clear.

*It is evident that the existence of a personal hostile power, whether called Satan or by any other name, is **taken for granted** in the N.T. and that he cannot be explained away by a process of demythologization. (Henry Snyder Gehman: The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible).*

As C.S. Lewis also puts it in the Preface of his book *The Screwtape letters*:

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe and to feel excessive and unhealthy interest in them.

If you don't believe Satan is real and that he is the ultimate enemy of God and humankind, then you have tossed aside a crucial aspect of biblical teaching and truth, and you are in my opinion left in the dubious and untenable situation of having to believe that all the gigantic and putrid mass of evil in this world is to be accounted for solely by *human activity and rebellion*. Surely there must be something **bigger** and darker in power behind the great and vast amount of evil and suffering in this world? And although the bible teaches that the human heart "is deceitful above all things and beyond cure", (Jeremiah 17:9) the twisted human heart is not evil enough to account *for all the evil* in this world. But you can account for it if you believe in the existence of the one Jesus described as "the prince of this world", the evil one who leads the whole world astray (Revelation 12:9) and from whom we must urgently pray to be delivered from. (Matthew 6:13) We need to be delivered not just from evil, but as Jesus made clear in his prayer, **from the evil one**. Yes – he really exists!

When Mark wrote his gospel, he clearly wanted his readers **and all disciples of Jesus** to know who their ultimate enemy was. Mark reveals that it is Satan. The Christians biggest enemies are not particularly nasty human personalities, whether evil Roman Emperors, or the vicious and violent Gentile or Jewish mobs we read of in Acts. The real enemy is Satan and his army of fallen angels. Paul made this plain when writing to the Ephesians about the hard reality of their spiritual conflict.

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against SPIRITUAL FORCES OF EVIL in the HEAVENLY REALMS. (Ephesians 6:12)

I'm not sure Paul could have put it plainer than that. And it is true to assert as the bible itself does, that God's people, Christ's followers, are special targets of Satan's schemes and attacks, for they are "the ones who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus." (Revelation 12:17) Christians are "in Christ", "for Christ", and "belong to Christ." Satan wants to especially "sift us like wheat" (Luke 22:31); he wants to lead us into temptation and away from Christ; he wants us to put

down our crosses rather than take them up; he wants *us* to deny and disown the gospel rather than preach it and live it. As Peter wrote to suffering saints in his letter,

Be self-controlled and alert. YOUR ENEMY the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. (1 Peter 5: 8-9)

There you have it. Peter writes about “your enemy”, not just Jesus’s. And notice, he compares the devil to a roaring lion – and with this thought – we are back in the wilderness with Jesus and the “wild animals”. Only Mark in his gospel mentions the presence of **wild animals** in the wilderness. Why would he choose to do this?

It is true that there were wild animals in the Judean wilderness, and these could have been a threat to Jesus. They included hyenas, jackals, panthers and even lions. It is possible that Mark deliberately mentioned the wild animals because he was mindful of persecuted Christians in Rome and elsewhere, who were being thrown into Roman amphitheatres with wild animals let loose upon them for the entertainment of the bloodthirsty crowds. Could Mark be wanting to teach Christians, that Christ has also faced wild animals including the roaring lion – the devil himself. Throughout his gospel Mark makes it clear through Jesus’ teaching that followers of Christ will face serious persecution. (Mark 10:29-30, 13:9-13) The verse that follows on from our passage (1:14) speaks of John the Baptist’s imprisonment. *Yet another prophet persecuted for righteousness sake.* This is part and parcel of Christian discipleship. Suffering for Christ must be accepted and even embraced. (1 Peter 4:12-14) Personal crosses must be taken up and carried. Jesus faced temptation without falling and he also faced severe persecution, suffering and death without wavering. We servants **are not above** our Master! (John 15:20)

As Christians we must realise that persecution for the gospel of the Kingdom (Matthew 5: 11-12) is a **real possibility** today. In fact, persecution is a daily reality for hundreds of thousands of Christians throughout the world. One of Satan’s *main sources of attack* is through cruel and brutal persecution. This is what Christians in the N.T. era faced, particularly from the Roman Empire – hence the book of Revelation and letters such as 1 & 2 Peter. Christians today must pray for each other, and must be ready to face what the prophets faced, and what their own Lord and Saviour faced. Whilst in this world, Christians are “aliens and strangers”, for this is a world and an age under the grip of Satan. He is the god of this age and the prince of this world. He will do all in his power to pressure and persecute Christians and those who come within the sound of the gospel, which is why the parable of the sower is so important for us to understand. **(Read Mark 4: 13-20).**

Satan wants to stop people making any connection with the lifeline of the gospel of the Kingdom. He wants to snatch the seed away. He wants to prevent and frustrate the mission (1 Thessalonians 2:18). There is obviously going to be an ongoing battle for the souls of men and women. Our job as Christians is to seek to further populate heaven with precious souls.

The most important thing for us to remember and to hold to is that we are not alone. **Christ is with us, and the Holy Spirit is upon us and within us**, just as he was upon Jesus as he strode out into the wilderness. Jesus faced Satan in the power of the Spirit, and with the **Word of God**, which we know he used as a sword, quoting it accurately and directly at the evil one. ***It is written!*** Jesus was also equipped through prayer and fasting as we can and should be. (Mark 9:29) Paul instructs Christians in Ephesians 6 v 10-18 about the need to take up the **armour of God, the sword of the Spirit and prayer**. These *spiritual weapons* work in defeating Satan and in resisting and overcoming temptation. I urge you to use the spiritual weapons (2 Corinthians 10: 3-4) *God has given us* for the battle!

And finally, we hear from Mark those comforting words that “**angels attended him**”. Angels came to serve Jesus at the end of this opening encounter with Satan. Perhaps they brought him food and water? Perhaps they helped him back to civilisation? The angels attended him and served him and met his needs. We need to be aware that one of the primary functions of angels is to act as **ministering spirits who are sent to SERVE (attend) those who will inherit salvation!** (Hebrews 1:14). The angels of God are also with us and around us, and they are sent to serve us as we face tough battles, ongoing temptations, overt or subtle persecution, and other threats. It was an angel that shut the mouths of the lions to rescue Daniel. It was an angel that released Peter from prison and almost certain death.

Are you aware of and thankful for the ministry of angels? I hope you are. The Psalmist rejoiced over the fact that “God will command his angels CONCERNING YOU, to guard YOU in all your ways; they will lift YOU up in their hands, so that YOU will not strike your foot against a stone. YOU will tread upon the lion and the cobra; **YOU will trample the GREAT LION and THE SERPENT.**” (Psalm 91: 11-13) Perhaps a reference to the roaring lion and the ancient serpent? (I Peter 5:8, Revelation 12:9, Genesis 3:1)

I ask you again. Are you appreciative of the ministry of angels? Do you believe in their presence and assistance? I want to close with one of my favourite stories from the O.T. The prophet Elisha was in serious trouble and surrounded by his Aramean enemies. His servant panicked and feared the worst. **But** Elisha said to him with firm faith and conviction these amazing words:

“Don’t be afraid” the prophet answered, “those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” And Elisha prayed, O Lord, open his eyes so that he may see.” And the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he saw the hills FULL OF HORSES AND CHARIOTS OF FIRE all around Elisha.”
(2 Kings 6: 16-17)

We may not know the whole truth concerning the mighty spiritual battle taking place all around us and in the heavenly realms, and the way the angels of God surround us and help us on our earthly pilgrimage with all its many obstacles, threats, and challenges; however, God is with **us**. His Kingdom is within **us!** This battle belongs to the *Lord of angelic hosts*, and the power and the victory are His alone. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans: “*The God of peace with soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.*” (Romans 16:20) Amen!

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