

Satan's Awful Idea

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A Biblical Theology
of Satan's Fall
and its Implications
on the Unfolding
Human Drama

~ Austin C. Brown ~

To all the theologians who have made their audio materials
available for free.

Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones! For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD? Who among the heavenly beings is like the LORD, a God greatly to be feared in the council of the holy ones, and awesome above all who are around him? (Psalm 89:5-7)

Satan's Awful Idea
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(In the second edition, the warp and woof of the central argument has not been touched, which is to say that I remain happily convinced of the thesis. There have been, nevertheless, various typos and awkwardnesses that boggle the mind. I have tried to clean some of them up. More could be done to beautify this project, and it pains me deeply to leave it in such a state, but as with so many things in life, there comes a point when enough is enough.

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Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture references are taken from the English Standard Bible.

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Austin C Brown
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Indiana, 2014

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Part I

An Angel Falls

Chapter One

-A Cosmic Problem-



When God was forming the universe, causing vast stars to burst into existence, setting colorful planets into orbit, and establishing the measurements of the earth, the angels, we are told, sang and shouted for joy (Job 38:7). For in that moment, they were witnessing something never before seen: the awe-inspiring power and unparalleled creativity of God.

What a wonder it must have been to see clusters of galaxies flash into being by virtue of their Maker merely speaking. One can only guess what the angels were feeling. Was it the utter vastness of the universe that most impressed upon them the unparalleled majesty of God? Was it His inexhaustible power that caused them to rejoice so fervently? Was it His glory reflected in the created order that inspired their lyrics? Or maybe it was the sheer novelty of physicality that most startled them? What, after all, was this new substance, this “matter,” with its own peculiar laws and textures and scents?

Whatever it was that most impressed them, they sang. They crafted songs extolling the glories of their Maker, singing with delight. But it's strange to think that amid all the singing, amid all the celebrating and joyous outbursts, there was an angel we know as Lucifer¹ praising the excellencies of the Son. It's difficult, given all that we presently know, to imagine him covering his face, crying, “Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts.” But worship he did. It's what he was made for.

¹ While I don't think Satan was originally named Lucifer, the moniker has become part of common parlance, and so for the sake of simplicity, I'll use it to describe the angel before his fall.

So what happened? Why would such a glorious creature, living in such a glorious place, beholding such a glorious Creator, conceive unrighteousness? Why did high treason spring to life in his heart? Such questions are perplexing. They're perplexing because the Scriptures are surprisingly silent offering little by way of direct explanation. Out of the thousands of verses comprising the Bible, only a handful pull the curtain back and offer us a glimpse backstage. And even these are debated.

In light of this, the cautious among us, when pressed to explain what happened, often appeal to mystery warning with sober intonations: beware of speculation, all ye theologians. Let not your imagination run wild.²

It's a fair warning.

Yet for all the silence, there are a host of Scriptural passages that are so other-worldly, so grand and tantalizing, that the student of Scripture cannot help but contemplate such things. Consider Ephesians 3:8-10 in this respect. Who can read this and not scratch their head in wonder? There Paul writes:

“To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so

² I especially enjoy Calvin's response to those who pry into such things. He says, "When a certain shameless fellow mockingly asked a pious old man what God had done before the creation of the world, the latter aptly countered that he had been building hell for the curious. Let this admonition, no less grave than severe, restrain the wantonness that tickles many and even drives them to wicked and hurtful speculations." Again, but in a different context, and regarding those who inquire into the celestial fall, he says, "Most men are curious and make no end of inquiries on these things; but since God in Scripture has only sparingly touched on them, and as it were by the way, he thus reminds us that we ought to be satisfied with this small knowledge. And indeed they who curiously inquire, do not regard edification, but seek to feed their souls with vain speculations. What is useful to us, God has made known, that is, that the devils were at first created, that they might serve and obey God, but that through their own fault they apostatized, because they would not submit to the authority of God; and that thus the wickedness found in them was accidental, and not from nature, so that it could not be ascribed to God." (*Commentary* on 2 Peter 2:4)

that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.”

Note the Apostle’s astonishing conclusion why grace was given to him to preach to the Gentiles. The explanation isn’t that Gentiles would be saved. It isn’t that the OT would be fulfilled. It’s something wildly different. Look at verse ten again. Paul says, remarkably, that God is displaying His wisdom “to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” *That* is the reason why there is an entity called the church, so far as this verse is concerned.

Pause for a moment and think back over redemptive history. Think of Abraham lying in a field on a clear night counting the twinkling stars above him. Think of Moses as a small baby gliding down the Nile among the reeds, and Joseph in his multi-colored coat being cast into a pit. Think of King David with his mighty men routing armies, and Nathan the prophet declaring that God would make David’s name great, providing an everlasting heir to the throne of Israel. And think of the long lineage that continued generation after generation, through all the struggles and twists, until at last, Christ the Messiah emerged on the stage of human history, fulfilling all that was written. Think of His earth-shattering miracles, and His remarkable teachings, and how He, the Son of God, the son of Adam, bore the curse and died for the sins of the world. Think how all of this, all the mighty acts, all the history, all the richness of God’s dealings with His people, is, in one profound sense, designed to make a simple point. And what is that point? It is this: God is wise. If that weren’t enough, this display of wisdom, says Paul, isn’t primarily for us, but angels.

What a staggering thought!

Not only does the conclusion move in a surprising direction, but it suggests that there is something else at play behind the scenes—something grand, something otherworldly, something exceedingly intentional.

So it is precisely verses like Ephesians 3:8-10, that, when woven together with a host of other equally fascinating passages, form a compelling picture of Satan’s fall from grace and the ensuing struggle marking human history. Each strand of data provides a piece to the

puzzle, each facet offers another angle. And if there are “pieces and angles,” then surely a larger picture can be constructed.

It is, therefore, the burden of this present volume to thread together such passages and reconstruct what went wrong so very long ago; and in so doing, explore how the nature of the angelic rebellion not only impacts our world but profoundly informs us about the meaning of life.

So let us grant that there is little by way of direct evidence regarding the circumstances and nature of Lucifer’s fall. It is no insurmountable obstacle. In much the same way that a detective will carefully examine the available evidence, interview witnesses, corroborate known events, and contemplate motives in the hopes of reconstructing the past, so too we can examine God’s response to Satan, as well as the subtle, and not so subtle clues found in Scripture, and gain some measure of insight into what originally transpired. We can examine the evidence and work backwards from the data, deducing a number of fair-minded conclusions.

This approach is similar to the theologian’s task of discerning the circumstances surrounding the NT epistles. We only have one side of the conversation in those letters, but through a careful study of the details, the specific concerns raised, the particular emphasis, the tone, and the historical setting, one can reasonably reconstruct the circumstances surrounding their composition.

So it is with God’s epistle, the bible.

Reconstructing the past, however, poses several challenges. Foremost is the fact that conjecture is unavoidable. It’s simply the nature of such an endeavor.

I can still remember the first time I taught the basic ideas of this book in a small group setting. Wanting to show just how confident I felt discussing the subject, I entitled the lesson: “An admittedly speculative look at an enigmatic conundrum.” Naturally, the title received a few chuckles, which is what I was aiming for, but behind the humor, I was making a serious point. No matter how creative one might be in their analysis of the data, the past is still cloaked to some degree. Did Noah ever get a splinter in his finger? Surely he did, but since we aren’t told, we can’t be absolutely sure.

So let me be clear. I believe there is much to be gleaned by examining the biblical data, but to the extent that I seek to imagine what precipitated the angelic fall, thinking not only about God's response to Lucifer, but actually outlining Lucifer's rationale for committing treason, speculation is unavoidable.

Having spent a fair bit of time walking the streets of Reformedom, I am well aware that this admission will immediately raise concerns in certain people's minds. They'll likely envision a rambunctious amount of forthcoming conjecture, the kind that might please Milton, but not the men of Westminster. Here I would ask my more bushy-browed readers to exercise a measure of patience. The core tenets of the theory will be laid out rather plainly, thereby establishing a general framework on which to hang our hat. After that, we'll unpack the biblical data more thoroughly. So if you find that your palms are beginning to sweat, allow me to assure you that every last drop of speculation will be held firmly in the grip of Scripture; where it draws a line in the sand, conjecture will venture no further.

I welcome any clubs or whips at the end, but not before.

Persuasive Pride?

Let's begin where most theologians end.

When asked what fueled the fall of Lucifer, many reply, and not without warrant, that pride played a critical role. As one of God's most excellent creatures, possessing both marvelous beauty and penetrating wisdom, this angelic being began to think more highly of himself than he ought to have. And this bubbling arrogance propelled him into sin.

John MacArthur, commenting on Ezekiel 28, describes it this way,

“This glorious, anointed cherub, maybe the worship leader of all the heavenly hosts, became infatuated by his own splendor, by his own beauty, by his own perfection. And so Verse 16 says: “You were internally filled with violence, and you sinned; so I have cast you as profane.” What's the violence? I'll tell you what it was: Once Satan began to sin the sin of pride and began to be infatuated by his own splendor and his own glory

and the wonder of his own person, he then sought violently to usurp the place of whom? God.”³

Donald Barnhouse says something similar,

“There came a time when this being, filled with pride because of his own power and attainments, entertained the thought in his heart that he could govern independently of God. He therefore proclaimed that he would set up an independent rule, whereupon a multitude of the angelic beings of heaven decided to follow his rule and join him in his rebellion against God.”⁴

Wayne Grudem succinctly states the following,

“Both 2 Peter and Jude tell us that some angels rebelled against God and became hostile opponents to his Word. Their sin seems to have been pride, a refusal to accept their assigned place...”

Shortly after a brief discussion of Isaiah 14, he adds,

“The sin of Satan is described as one of pride and attempting to be equal to God in status and authority.”⁵

Matthew Henry, commentating on Jude 6, says,

“There were a great number of the angels who *left their own habitation*; that is, who were not pleased with the posts and stations the supreme Monarch of the universe had assigned and allotted to them, but thought (like discontented ministers in our age, I might say in every age) they deserved better; they would, with the title of *ministers*, be *sovereigns*, and in effect their Sovereign should be their minister—do all, and only, what they would have him; thus was pride the main and immediate

³ *The Fall of Satan*.

⁴ *The Invisible War*, page 22.

⁵ *Systematic Theology*, Chapter 20, Section A

cause or occasion of their fall. Thus they quitted their post, and rebelled against God, their Creator and sovereign Lord.”

Journeying back into the halls of history, Peter Lombard states,

“Their [the elect angels] cleaving to God by charity was their converting to Him, their [the non-elect angels] holding of Him in hatred and/or envying of Him was their turning away. For indeed envy is the mother of the pride, by which the latter wanted to make themselves the peers of God.”⁶

Nearly everyone agrees that pride played a pivotal role in Lucifer’s fall. Given a text like 1 Timothy 3:6, this shouldn’t be surprising. It reads,

“He [an overseer] must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.”

A difficulty emerges, however, when we think of Lucifer’s self-infatuation as the singular reason propelling his fall. I cannot remember when the question first entered my mind, but some time ago, probably during one of my customary walks, I asked myself, “How could Satan’s pride propel other angels to apostatize?” In asking that question, it occurred to me that the usual way of thinking about Lucifer’s fall (his infatuation with his own beauty, subsequent elevation of self, and drawing away a host of other angels after him) couldn’t, or at least it couldn’t without some difficulty, explain why Lucifer’s claims would be at all persuasive to other angelic beings.

Suppose Lucifer thought, based upon his own grandiose notions, that he could govern as God, or that he could be God. Given the fact that he convinced a company of angels to follow him in his treasonous ambitions, it is all but certain that he presented some kind of argument for doing so. There must have been a rationale why they should follow him.

Imagine an appeal based solely on self-infatuated pride. What would he say? “Look at how beautiful I am. Follow me.” Lucifer might

⁶ *Sentences* 2, 5:1

have been beautiful, but could he, a mere creature, even begin to eclipse the infinite majesty and beauty of God? A mere glance towards God would reveal the folly of such a claim.

What about his wisdom? Again, what angel would have found this at all convincing? Lucifer was extraordinarily intelligent, but were the angels unable to perceive the vast gulf between God's intellect and Lucifer's? It's a ridiculous thought. Or what about Lucifer's power? Could he create something out of nothing? No. Was he eternal? No. Was he omnipotent? Obviously not. The angels understood these things quite well, otherwise why were they worshiping God? They knew God was qualitatively different.⁷

One could imagine, I suppose, Lucifer somehow deluding himself that he could be God. But would one angel's self-exalting and patently crazy self-delusions prove at all persuasive to other angels? It's a difficult pill to swallow. Angels aren't stupid. They would have immediately recognized the folly of this claim.

It would seem, therefore, crucial to Lucifer's entire polemic—if it was going to prove convincing, and if it was going to prove capable of drawing away a host of angels—that it sound not only persuasive but appear plausible. It's hard to imagine a good-looking, yet arrogant angel convincing a host of other angels to rebel against God for such simplistic reasons. It's a hard sell, even for a slick talker.

So what are we left with? In my estimation, I think we can safely infer several things. First, whatever we say happened, pride must have featured prominently in Lucifer's fall. We will see, in due course, that Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 do say something about the fall of Lucifer, even though they are addressing human individuals.

Secondly, whatever Lucifer concocted it must have sounded persuasive; it had to of been compelling enough to sway convictions.

Thirdly, it must have been plausible, meaning that it must have appeared reasonable to his listeners. It couldn't have struck them as being patently absurd. It would have been ridiculous, for example, for Lucifer to suddenly argue that God didn't exist. That wouldn't have been plausible and therefore totally unpersuasive.

⁷ This is to say that while none of the angels sat under Cornelius Van Til, nor did they check out any of his books from the local seminary, they surely had a firm grasp of the Creator/creature distinction.

Fourthly, there must have been something to be gained by following Lucifer. In order for angels to commit treason against the King of Kings, they must have thought there was something worthwhile to be acquired, or some benefit to be had, or some pleasure to take hold of. Think of Eve in this respect. We are told, “When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate...” (Gen 3:6). Desire. Delight. Goodness. Wisdom. All these moved her hand to take and eat. So it is with all sentient beings. They weigh the pros and cons and then either act or refrain.

In a nutshell, Lucifer’s argument, whatever the content of its message, surely had to:

- Flow from pride
- Sound persuasive
- Seem plausible
- Appear to promise real gain

None of this directly explains why Lucifer fell, but it helps move us in the right direction. It encourages us to grapple with the *content* of Lucifer's argument, and by extension, it directs our attention toward the kind of idea that could have persuaded angels to sin against God.

So we ask again: What idea could have swayed angelic minds?

The Rumbblings of a New “Insight”

Before an attempt at an answer is provided, more groundwork needs to be laid. In order to do that, we'll reflect briefly on worship as it relates to knowing God, and then say a word about the limits of creaturely knowledge. After that, we'll connect it with Lucifer.

In the heavenly realms, God was central in focus, central in worship, central in purpose and affection, in everything. All of the angels rejoiced in the light of God’s splendor and love. He was the burning star of their solar system. As such, they contemplated His glory, His works, and His attributes. The society of heavenly beings,

with all its diversity and peculiarities, existed because of God and *for* God (Col 1:16; Romans 11:36). In this respect, the angelic catechism no doubt read much like our own:

Heavenly Catechism Question 1: What is the chief end of angels?

Answer: The chief end of angels is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

Whatever we might say about their “daily” affairs, this truth was fundamental to their lives. And if Pastor John Piper has taught us anything, it is that God is most glorified when we are most satisfied in Him. We praise what we enjoy. In this vein, praise harbors an emotional component that reflects an inner joy.

Consider football. When the home team scores a touchdown, the crowd roars with approval, hooting, and shouting, and pumping their fists *in delight*! They are cheering because of what someone else has accomplished, and in so doing, they are responding to the greatness of another. Through this, they are tremendously pleased.

It isn’t a stretch, therefore, to say that the angels were exceedingly happy, glorifying God with all their mind, heart, strength, and soul.

Here it is worth noting that their happiness was dependent, in some measure, upon their knowledge of God. It is what fuels worship. We praise God because He is supremely glorious, infinite in all His sublime attributes. The more we learn of Him, and the more we experience his awesome works, the more our hearts overflow with praise.

But since creatures are by nature finite, and therefore limited, this process of learning inevitably bumps up against mystery. There are some things about God (shall we say all things?⁸) that we cannot fully comprehend. We may truly understand particular aspects of His nature, but not exhaustively. It’s unavoidable. No creature is omniscient. There is, therefore, not only a quantitative difference between our knowledge and God’s, but a qualitative difference as well. God’s knowledge surpasses ours in every respect.

⁸ See John Frame’s *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, pages 19-40.

With this in mind, let's return to Lucifer.

He was a creature intimately acquainted with worship, meditating upon the interface between the Being of God and the nature of reality, stitching together philosophical doctrines. Emerging out of this contemplation, my suspicion is that he reflected on a basic question while thinking about God's unique glory. It might be stated like this:

Why is God worthy of all praise?

There are innumerable answers to this question, and many of them would have been obvious to Lucifer. God is perfect. God is the Creator. God is holy. God is inexhaustible. God is love.

As an angelic creature created by God, Lucifer knew his beauty was derivative, reflecting the uniquely glorious font of God's glory. Nevertheless, his thoughts kept pulling at the question, probing it, until it began to stretch into new domains of possibility. "Why," Lucifer possibly mused, "is God worthy of *all* praise? What quality or qualities makes one worthy of worship?"

I Can Be Like the Most High

While reflecting on God's nature, Lucifer may have entertained an idea, one that may be thought of as "That-which-God-cannot-do" or "That-which-God-is-not."

The phrase means simply what it says. There are some things God cannot do. For example, God cannot lie (Hebrews 6:18). He cannot deny Himself (2 Tim 2:13). God cannot cease to exist (Romans 16:26). God cannot be morally impure (1 John 1:5). And so on and so forth. This may come as a surprise to some given that the Scriptures also say nothing is impossible with God (Mark 10:27), but the impossibility in view here isn't an impossibility without limits. The boundaries of possibility are defined and limited by God's nature.⁹

⁹ Robert L. Reymond writes, "When we speak of divine omnipotence, however, *we do not mean that God can do anything*. The first thing God cannot do is whatever is metaphysically or ethically contrary to his nature... Such divine "cannots," far from detracting from God's glory, 'are his glory and for us to

This means that all things are possible for God, so long as they are good, for He cannot sin. To be specific, God cannot lie because He is perfectly truthful. He cannot unjustly acquit the guilty because He is perfectly righteous. He cannot delight in evil because He is perfectly holy.

Lucifer may have thought that he had made a curious discovery into the very fabric of reality. Since God is the foundation of all things, as well as the standard by which all things are measured, what are we to make of this “That-which-God-cannot-do”? Is it available to creatures? What are its limits? Might it harbor new or unknown pleasures? God hasn’t experienced it, so how do we know it isn’t remarkably enjoyable? Or what might a participation with it produce? Could it yield a kind of power? Might such a thing add new dimensions to holiness? Or glory?

One peculiar question led to another, and before long, Lucifer, one of God’s most gifted creatures, made a terrible turn in logic, asking a dreadful question:

“If God is worthy of worship because of His unique qualities, then might another person be worthy of worship—be uniquely praiseworthy—if they embraced “That-which-God-cannot-do”?”

Is it possible that there is a hidden vault of untapped potential that could make one exceedingly special, even unique? As he mulled over the question, turning it this way and that, contemplating the varied implications, this new power, or new potential, or grand “What if?” suddenly tugged at his desires in a fresh and enticing way. It sparked within him a strange feeling, one never felt before.

At that moment, the words of James, which wouldn’t be written for eons, burned with incalculable relevance:

“But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth

refrain from reckoning with such ‘impossibilities’ would be to deny God’s glory and perfection.” *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, page 192, citing Bushwell’s *Systematic Theology*, I:63-64.

to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers.” (James 1:14-16)

For Lucifer, self-exultation and power were suddenly wed together in a new and enticing way, offering to him the delicious possibility of creature-directed worship; for he believed that he had stumbled upon something whereby he could be like the Most High, not merely in a reflective sense, but uniquely, even transcendently. It seemed within his grasp, since his “insight” appeared to open before him a new path, one that had never been traveled before.

By way of summary, I believe that while Lucifer was contemplating the divine nature and relating his insights to ethics, and metaphysics, and ontology, and all the other philosophical concepts that inevitably spiral out of theology, he began to wonder if God was in fact the *absolute* bedrock of reality.

It was an idea born of theological reflection—as is often the case with the very worst heresies.

Fleshing Out the Idea

Here we should pause in order to unpack the idea further, to retrace the mental footsteps and focus on how he may have viewed such potentialities. My guess is that he fleshed out the implications of his idea while comparing and contrasting it with God’s peculiar glory. Within this context, his reflections yielded a number of observations that would eventually crystallize into a comprehensive worldview.

Let us consider six.

Satanic “Omnipotence”

Power is not simply the ability to exert physical force, it can be expressed in the form of authority. A king, for example, may exercise power to end the life of a man. He may declare war, build a nation, establish law, summon a servant.

For Lucifer, he knew God was infinitely stronger than he, but when it came to carrying out certain actions, he recognized that there

was something within the realm of his will that distinguished him from God. He could step out into “That-which-God-cannot-do.” It fell within his volitional bounds. And this, it seemed to Lucifer, presented him with a very peculiar kind of power.

But that’s only part of it.

Lucifer first had to recognize there was something “beyond” God’s character, which, up until then, was thought to be the unimpeachable standard for life, thought, and ethics. It is as if Lucifer was a man standing in a large room—a room stretching to the four corners of reality—and suddenly realizing that it wasn’t completely sealed shut, but that there were in fact innumerable doors leading out. Something extended past the edges of those walls. And that *something* could be accessed.

Today we know all too well what lies beyond the edges of this boundary. If we think of this “power” in relation to holiness, it is wickedness. If we think of it in relation to goodness, it is called evil. If it is thought of in terms of God’s prescriptive will, it is called autonomy.

We don’t know what Lucifer called this “movement into the beyond,” but at root, he believed the ability to perform such “powers,” such “beyond God’s nature,” meant that he could do “That-which-God-cannot.” Viewed in this light, it was perceived as *uniquely* powerful. My guess is that he thought of it in terms of transcendent power since it “exceeded” God’s abilities. He may have framed the matter, not so much as a negation of God’s character, but a going beyond. His idea would not be mere holiness, but supra-holiness. Not godliness, but supra-godliness. Not goodness, but supra-goodness.

Satanic “Joy”

And what might this new power promise? No one, so far as Lucifer knew, had ever tasted of such fruit before. This meant that the potentiality called “That-which-God-cannot-do” was existentially unknown. So what sweet pleasures might it yield? What hidden joy might be found? Maybe this new direction would make life even more fulfilling, or perhaps it would lead to a kind of super-abundant life.

Maybe the current joy that I am experiencing, Lucifer imagined, is in actuality limited, bound, or confined by that which God is.

Satanic “Omniscience”

The acquisition of power and the possibility of a new species of joy weren’t the only foreseeable implications. The idea appeared to promise a kind of omniscience.

Does God know everything? “Yes... but...” Lucifer would have replied, for could God fully understand this new power without personally experiencing it? Isn’t it true that experience provides a deeper, more profound, shall we say true knowledge of something?

A new field of knowledge was open to investigation (Genesis 3:5). With this “power,” he could explore new domains of thought; he could pry open the locked door and venture out into new realms of reality, unknown realms. As such, he could acquire intimate knowledge about “That-which-God-cannot-do,” thereby establishing himself as someone uniquely gifted, even transcending God’s own knowledge. Might this put him in a position to counsel God (Rom 11:34)?

Satanic “Creation”

Lucifer knew that he couldn’t create something out of nothing. In this respect, he understood that the reach of this new power was limited. But by forging a new path, by actually carving out a new direction of existence, he believed he could, in a truly profound sense, create “out of nothing.” Autonomy would ensure it. With this “power” and “knowledge,” his will could prove uniquely determinative. He could unearth new discoveries and redefine reality, forging and reshaping facts. This would allow him to become a unique “Creator.”

Satanic “Authority”

If he could tap into this newly discovered knowledge and thereby create a self-determined future and reality of his own making, a new standard of Law-making could be inaugurated, one freshly minted, constituting an innovative source of authority. As it stood, God was the measure of all things and uniquely authoritative. But who is to say that God's perspective is *ultimately* authoritative? Couldn't Lucifer open up new vistas of knowledge and experience? Possibility yawned before him. He could expand the governmental boundaries of sovereign rule to include his insights and enact a shift whereby he would become a new source of authority, and by extension a new measuring rod.

What is lordship if not control? Or power? Or authority? "I can possess these attributes," Lucifer surely thought. Since the angelic realm had its own hierarchical structure, and since Lucifer was acquainted with authority, having likely occupied a lofty position (Jude 1:9), he well understood the power of leadership. So why not lead even more? Leadership and hierarchy are good things—things designed by God Himself. So if *some* leadership is good, then *ultimate* leadership must be very good. Very enjoyable! By climbing the proverbial ladder, he could attain new, more glorious heights of authority and excellence.

Satanic "Glory"

In the end, Lucifer believed that all of these possibilities fell within his grasp, and by reaching out after them, he could become uniquely glorious. He would be transcendent in knowledge, transcendent in power, transcendent in authority, and transcendent in glory in some very real sense. As such, he would acquire a new kind of holiness, being uniquely and profoundly set apart. Given the fact that he uncovered these grand possibilities, and was instrumental in developing their potential, his growing sense of greatness would have been bolstered.

Ultimately, he would become an object of worship, drinking in the praises of self and others; a creature worthy of highest honor and

one established at the center of the universe, possibly alongside God, or even above God. All this it seemed would be very, very enjoyable. Having shared in His Creator's joy, experiencing in the depths of his soul unadulterated happiness, he nevertheless imagined what it would be like to feel God's joy *as God*.

This, I believe, was his awful idea.

Not Just a Sin, but Sin Itself

Again, the content of Lucifer's message, and especially its plausibility can scarcely be stressed enough. For if the pride of Satan involved the belief that he could be like the Most High, it must be asked how such an idea could be *reasonably* sold to others. What is the rationale for saying, "I can be God"? That is the million-dollar question. I am proposing that the six observations outlined above answer this question; for when these six points are woven together, and when they function as pillars supporting an idea, we see that Lucifer's sin wasn't merely the transgression of a particular law, as if there was a momentary lapse of obedience, but rather, we see that his sin was the conception of sin itself, not merely as a simplistic postulate, but as a philosophy of life, or a way of thinking. His idea operated on the level of worldview, and as a result, it struck at the very heart of everything.

Evil Ex Nihilo?

A thorny problem still remains. It's the age-old question: How can sin blossom in the heart of a perfectly upright creature? Wouldn't we expect only goodness to flow out of such a heart? Moreover, if Lucifer's environment was blissful and altogether satisfying—a paradise resounding with joy, and goodness, and love—how could darkness find a foothold? It is a daunting question.

Dr. Lutzer has succinctly stated the problem. He writes,

“Here we encounter a theological puzzle that has taxed the best minds for centuries: How can an unrighteous choice arise out of the heart of a righteous being? Even more to the point: Why would a perfect creature become dissatisfied in a perfect world? This was a being who evidently was fulfilled in serving God: if he was satisfied, why rebel?

Most theologians attribute his decision to free will. They say that he had an option before him, and as a free creature (even a perfect one), he always had the potential of going astray. Perhaps this is part of the story, and we must agree that Lucifer was not coerced by God or other angels to do what he did. But we are still left with a puzzle. Why would such a creature *want* to defy God? Even if he had free will, we cannot understand why he would exercise his option.”¹⁰

That’s the essence of the problem. Why would a morally pure creature *want* to defy God? Even if Lucifer entertained the idea of sin, why wouldn’t he find it repugnant? He should have reacted like a man stumbling upon a corpse in the woods. The sight of something so gruesome should have repulsed him. It should have made him take a step back in horror. Yet we know that he didn’t, ultimately. He latched on to the idea and relished it.

But why?

Most admit ignorance and plead mystery. They concede that we simply don’t have enough information, or that we’re incapable of grasping the matter.

A sampling of citations will illustrate the point.

Immediately following the quote cited above, Dr. Lutzer answers,

“Perhaps the best answer is that there is no answer. Or, to put it more accurately, there is no answer that we as humans can discern. God has an answer—and perhaps someday He will give us the missing piece of the puzzle. Until then, we just don’t know why Lucifer suddenly allowed unrighteousness to erupt in his heart.”

¹⁰ *The Serpent of Paradise*, page 28.

Sixteenth-century Reformed theologian, Francis Turretin, says,

“To no purpose is it inquired how angels could sin. It is evident from Scripture that they did sin and reason persuades us that they could fall into sin since they were created capable of sinning.”¹¹

Robert L. Dabney, a nineteenth-century Presbyterian theologian, is likewise pessimistic about unearthing a solution. He states,

“How a holy will could come to have an unholy volition at first, is a most difficult inquiry. And it is much harder as to the first sin of Satan, than of Adam, because the angel, hitherto perfect, had no tempter to mislead him, and had not even the bodily appetites for natural good which in Adam were so easily perverted into concupiscence... The mystery cannot be fully solved how the first evil choice could voluntarily arise in a holy soul...”¹²

Pastor-theologian, John Piper, concedes that it is deeply mysterious. He writes,

“The Bible does not take us deep into the heart of such mysterious sin to explain the soul-dynamics that make rebellion rise out of righteousness. We are not given the final answer of how the origin of sin in the soul of a holy being takes place...”¹³ “How the sin arises in Satan’s heart, we do not know. God has not told us.”¹⁴

Stating the matter even more strongly, he said this at a conference,

¹¹ *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Ninth Topic, V.

¹² *Systematic Theology*, page 311. It should be noted that while Dabney admits that the mystery cannot be fully solved, he nevertheless provides some tremendously helpful insights. So while he may not have *the* answer, his approach is probably moving in the right direction. We’ll touch on it in a moment.

¹³ *Spectacular Sins*, page 39.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, page 47.

“I have zero explanation for how a good angel chose to sin. If you’re wondering, ‘Got any mysteries in your life?’ (chuckles) That’s the biggest. The first sin in the universe is the biggest mystery to me. I know of no explanation for it that satisfies.”¹⁵

Well-known pastor, Tim Keller, when asked where evil ultimately originated, responded as follows in a Q and A session,

“It’s a mystery... This is the spot on the map where we simply don’t have enough information... That really is the Christian answer. And when I say Christian answer, I’m not just talking me—Protestant Presbyterian—I’m talking all Christian theologians have always said that is really, pretty much the unanswerable question... I used to have an OT professor, Dr. Kline, who used to say, ‘It sprang to life in the heart of Satan.’ And when I asked how that could be, he would say, ‘Where God hath shut His holy mouth, I should be afraid to open mine.’”

Certainly more quotes like the ones above could be cited. Suffice it to say, many well-respected theologians think an answer isn’t available. The matter is simply inscrutable.

Perhaps they are right. Maybe we can’t crack the hard shell of this mystery and peer inside. The mirror might be too dim.

Of course, there is no shortage of scholastic theologians, especially those living in the days of monkish attire, who have pontificated at great length about such matters, writing treatises filled with language so technical and dense and wildly esoteric, one wonders what manner of mushroom might have slipped into their supper. While some might enjoy swimming in those waters, I’m more of the opinion that sharks lurk there.

I harbor no grand illusions (or delusions) that I can crack the code. However, I do think the present theory may add a few fruitful lines of thought. In this vein, let’s walk through several observations and draw out some tentative conclusions, confessing with all alacrity that this is a math problem likely meant to be solved at a later date.

¹⁵ *God’s Sovereignty over Satan’s Fall* (2009)

The Inner Matrix of Volition

Let's begin with the will. Given the fact of Lucifer's fall into sin (and Adam's for that matter), we know, even if we can't explain the exact mechanics, that an upright creature can embrace sin. It's not an outright impossibility. Lucifer's will, though forged in goodness and filled with goodness, wasn't ontologically constrained to goodness. Evil fell within his volitional reach. We might say that a man riding a bike on a smooth road has no reason to fall, but he could. He could lose his balance.¹⁶ So it was with Lucifer.

Sometimes this is called "free will." The term is alright, so far as terms go, but it can prove misleading. Many think that for a person to be truly free, they have to be able to equally choose good or evil, lest they be puppets. This is not quite right. One need only reflect on our future state as resurrected saints to rebut the view. We'll be confirmed in holiness and unable to sin. If that is the case, then will our love for God be less than ideal? Or an even better example is God Himself. If it is true (and who would dare disagree) that God is so perfectly holy so as to exclude all possibility of His acting contrary to His nature, then is the Father's love for the Son less than perfect? Is it not the highest expression of love? If it is, then would we dare say that God is somehow enslaved and not perfectly free? May it never be!

D.A. Carson agrees,

"But why must power to the contrary be taken as the essence of free will? Would we not have to deduce, on this basis, that God himself is not free because his holy character precludes the possibility of sinning? Or would sin not be sin if God did it? Again, does not free will defined in terms of absolute power to the contrary generate an unavoidable logical contradiction when placed alongside divine sovereignty?"¹⁷

¹⁶ I am indebted to C.S. Lewis for this analogy. If you haven't read *Parelandra*, the second book in his *Space Trilogy*, which is where this analogy comes from, immediately sell your shirt and buy a copy.

¹⁷ *Divine Responsibility and Human Responsibility*, pages 207-208.

However we understand free will, a simple point remains: Lucifer was created good but was also capable of sinning. This is foundational to the problem. Whatever else we might say, Lucifer's incorrect use of his free agency was the mechanism by which sin could be performed. That's how evil entered the created order.¹⁸

The more precise problem, as has already been stressed, is why Lucifer would want to sin. Why wouldn't his pure heart naturally repel such evil inclinations? The answer, or at least the beginning of the answer, lies in stringing together a series of thoughts. After that, we'll be in a better position to form a conclusion.

Let's begin by exploring faith.

Observation One: Faith

Finitude entails mystery, and mystery necessitates faith. In Deuteronomy 29:29 we read:

“The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”

There are some things known only to God. Sometimes this is because He has chosen not to reveal them to us. We might understand the mystery at a later date (John 16:12), or we might not. This is like a parent withholding sensitive information from a child. They may inform the child when they're more mature, or when the timing is right, but not until then.

That is one aspect.

But there is another. Some things are so deep and so profoundly bound up in the infinite depths of God that we will never fully comprehend them. This is like a parent discussing a weighty and complex subject within earshot of a young child. The child may meander into the room and ask what his daddy is talking about, but receive only the following by way of reply, “Honey, this is adult stuff.

¹⁸ When it comes to a comprehensive theodicy, however, I would not lean on the free will defense. It doesn't adequately resolve the issue. My view will be discussed in the final chapter of this volume.

You wouldn't understand." But unlike the child who may grow in maturity and reach a point where he could understand what was being discussed, we will never reach a point where we understand everything that our Father knows. We are finite. God is infinite. There is a gulf between our knowledge and His that cannot be fully bridged. This means that there are always going to be things that are mysterious to us. Only one Being knows all things. That Being is God.

The upshot is that we are required to trust God. We must believe that He has the answer, and that His knowledge extends to everything (Romans 11:33-34; Isaiah 46). In practical terms, it means that God's plans will sometimes be enigmatic, or unfathomable, or, to use a word theologians like to throw around, inscrutable.

It follows, therefore, that even Lucifer, one of God's grandest creatures, would not exhaustively understand God's ways. He had to trust his Maker like every other creature. So if God announced a plan, or gave a command, or remained silent when one expected a sound, Lucifer had to trust God's sovereign rule. He had to believe that God was good, wholly good, and that all good things come from Him (James 1:17).

Observation Two: Ideas

Being aware of a bad idea isn't sinful. Naturalistic materialism is a false idea, and a bad one, but it isn't sinful for a Christian to let it roll around in his mind in order to flesh out its implications. The turning point occurs when a man accepts a bad idea as true. Sometimes this is expressed in a clear pronouncement, an audible declaration, or a written creed. Sometimes it is a quiet affirmation of the soul, or an outburst of praise. And sometimes a man may not immediately latch onto an idea, but it may slowly settle into his thoughts and emerge in his actions.

The key question here is whether or not Lucifer could have developed his idea without incurring guilt. Or to state it differently, can a sinless creature connect various conceptual dots and draw an unsavory theoretical conclusion?

On the one hand, the answer is clearly yes. Adam and Eve listened to the Serpent and understood what he was saying. Had they rejected what he was saying, they wouldn't have been tainted by pondering what the Serpent had to say. The same is true of those angels who did not side with Lucifer. Likewise, when the Son became incarnate, he grew in wisdom and knowledge, no doubt learning about all kinds of false religions and pagan ideas. And through it all, He remained sinless.

Granting this, is there a difference between hearing a bad idea and thinking up a bad idea? Does the latter necessarily entail wrongdoing? It's a tricky question.

Here's where I think the content of Lucifer's idea may help circumvent the problem. If we imagine his decision to rebel as arising out of a spontaneous hatred of God, the origination of such a disposition seems inexplicable. But what if Lucifer's idea could be construed, with some effort, as somehow good, or possibly leading to a new kind of good? Could it be that he focused his mind on those potentialities and suspended judgment, tracing out the implications in a largely logical fashion? Might the underlying mystery bolster a growing sense of duty to at least ponder such possibilities?

I think the initial framing of Satan's awful idea, combined with the mysterious elements surrounding it, created a space whereby a morally upright creature could intellectually explore a bad idea without completely overturning his innate sense of righteousness. That being said, I don't think Lucifer felt completely at ease. Surely his conscience sparked with concern. Nevertheless, perhaps a growing sense of unease could be quieted through a reassurance that he was merely contemplating the theoretical, or that something new and good might be lurking around the corner.

One might wonder why he wouldn't choose to play it safe and abandon the pursuit, especially if he felt uneasy. But here one can wonder why Eve didn't ask the Serpent to hang around until the cool of the evening to straighten things out when the LORD was there. So, yes, one may reasonably wonder why Lucifer proceeded the way he did, but our real concern here is whether such a course of action is conceivable for a sinless creature with a wholly good nature. So far, it would seem so.

Observation Three: Natural Praise

Ultimately, a shift occurred in Lucifer's thinking whereby he no longer viewed his idea as merely theoretical, but something worth exploring more deeply—meaning that a step of “faith” had to be taken to achieve “real progress.” Pride would be the driving force. That’s what energized his sinful choice.

But here again, it can be reasonably asked where the “materials of pride” came from since his heart was pure. A haughty spirit is evil. So from whence did such pride originate?

My contention is that pride flowed out of an acquaintance with, and was a perversion of natural praise.

Allow me to illustrate.

Imagine a man with an exceptional talent for making great art. As part of his normal routine, he regularly stands in the public square, paintbrush in hand, easel and canvas before him, creating breathtaking images. His brush strokes are masterful, and his creativity is awe-inspiring. Now suppose a passerby exclaims, “Sir, it’s splendid! I just love your work.” And after a pause, he adds, “I must say that you are truly gifted.”

Ask yourself a question: Does the pedestrian esteem the painter, and does the painter appreciate the compliment?

Of course.

Here we are confronted with a wonderful synergism. We regularly praise artists—whether movie directors, or authors, or musicians. Their work brings us joy. And in some equal measure, the artist finds pleasure in not only creating something excellent but in knowing that their work makes others happy. Not only that, the artist enjoys receiving the good reviews and appreciation, even the praise.

In a world filled with sin and selfish ambition, it’s hard for us to imagine the artist not intermingling vanity with such praise. But in a sinless society, such recognition and appreciation would be normal and healthy. Men and women would recognize each others' gifts and distinct qualities and rejoice in both. It’s sin that creates envy. Sin distorts what is good and perverts our way of thinking.

In the case of angels created wholly good, there must have been a natural stopping point built into their moral system, whereby the appropriateness of receiving admiration halted before the gate leading out to pride and self-infatuation. This is to say that it was in their nature to avoid pride. It was naturally held in check.

In the case of Lucifer, all of the aforementioned factors: desire, finitude, philosophical inquiry, perceived power, perceived pleasure, perceived goodness, etc., worked in tandem with his exceptional talents to push against the natural barrier that kept his heart from slipping into pride. As a result, the natural good of penultimate praise helped forge the key that would unlock the door of pride.¹⁹ But this could only be done if it was within the jurisdiction of his will to act in such a fashion. And as we have noted, it was.²⁰

¹⁹ 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 reads, “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work...” If human leaders should be esteemed very highly, then surely Lucifer, given his exalted position, was esteemed very highly as well. Therefore he knew something of honor and admiration. And my guess is that these natural goods, namely, appreciation and honor, served as the building blocks of pride. They just had to be perverted and twisted out of shape.

²⁰ Robert L Dabney’s explanation for how sin entered Satan deserves careful reflection in light of what is being offered here. Writing on page 311 of his systematic theology, he writes, “The most probable account of the way sin entered a holy breast, is this: An object was apprehended as in its mere nature desirable; not yet as unlawful. So far there is no sin. But as the soul, finite and fallible in its attention, permitted an overweening apprehension and desire of its natural adaptation to confer pleasure, to override the feeling of its lawfulness, concupiscence was developed. And the element which first caused the mere innocent sense of the natural goodness of the object to pass into evil concupiscence, was privative, viz., the failure to consider and prefer God’s will as the superior good to mere natural good. Thus natural desire passed into sinful selfishness, which is the root of all evil. So that we have only the privative element to account for. When we assert the certainty of ungodly choice in an evil will, we only assert that a state of volition whose moral quality is a defect, a negation, cannot become the cause of a positive righteousness. When we assert the mutability of a holy will in a finite creature, we only say that the positive element of righteousness of disposition may, in the shape of defect, admit the negative, not being infinite. So that the cases are not parallel: and the result, though mysterious, is not impossible. To make a candle positively give light, it must be lighted; to cause it to sink into darkness, it is

At the end of the day, it bears reminding that God hasn't seen fit to explain the inner mechanics of the angelic mind. As a result, mystery very much remains. We may know more someday. Until then, it's important to stress that no one forced Lucifer to commit treason (James 1:13). No inner compulsion constrained him to err. He came to a fork in the road and chose very poorly. He formulated a God-dishonoring theory, adopted it, and acted accordingly.

The story doesn't stop here. Lucifer not only cherished his idea but desired others to welcome it as well. He wanted those near him to play with his idea, to entertain it, to taste it, and realize the depths of his so-called wisdom. He became something of a missionary, a cunning voice with a cunning message seeking to spread abroad a new and different "gospel," one that would shake the very foundations of the heavenly sphere.

Chapter Two

An Idea Shared



Dissemination

The idea must have taken time to mature, and one can only imagine how it first manifested itself. Was it tucked away in the quiet recesses of Lucifer's mind, or did it slowly develop, each point building upon the next while conversing with other angels?

My suspicion is that he talked "theology" with a few, choice angels. Then, somewhere along the way, after quietly working out the implications, he made the subtle but devastating leap in logic known. Once his new idea went public, it undoubtedly caused a stir, sending shock waves throughout the heavenly realm. It would have been akin to night somehow descending on the surface of the sun. It couldn't be ignored.

I can imagine Lucifer gathering a few committed persons around him—possibly certain angels of reputation or influence—before launching into untested waters. This seems more likely than presenting his idea in a forthright manner. One could imagine a grand production, I suppose, a direct and public argument, but whispering behind closed doors fits more naturally with craftiness. Moreover, would a large-scale presentation persuade others as readily? Not likely. Too many objections would pile up at once. Too many questions would need to be answered causing the flow of the argument to stutter and stop at inconvenient points. And if his conscience was bothering him, moving slowly would be preferable. Therefore, intimate, one-on-one conversations likely provided a more fertile, seemingly safer context for such exchanges.

My assumption is that things progressed more subtly and inconspicuously. Nevertheless, at some point, Lucifer, or one of the angels in the inner circle, met opposition. They interacted with someone who followed their rationale but ultimately recoiled. Imagine the shock when the elect angel understood the implications of the dangerous idea. “Are you asking me to take a bold leap to acquire something that supposedly transcends God’s power? Are you really asking me to abandon my God-ordained post to follow Lucifer in a quest for glory?”

Think of the response. “My fellow servant, I would not have you forget the Most High, but merely partake of that which God uniquely enjoys. Indeed, has He not granted to us the ability to build upon holiness, to expand its boundaries and explore these new possibilities? It is a grand notion, and one that Lucifer himself has uncovered by contemplating the divine nature. Surely you recognize Lucifer’s intellect...”

Imagine the feelings that must have swelled within the elect angel, feelings that had never before been felt—acute and overwhelming feelings. It must be remembered that up until that point evil had never been confronted. It was existentially unknown. Did his heart suddenly burn with anger? Did waves of confusion wash over him? Did he reel? Stagger momentarily? Did his soul churn with disgust?²¹ Whatever blend of unfamiliar emotions erupted within him, he no doubt made haste to report what had happened. But how would he explain it? Could he conjure the right words? Could he adequately explain what had just transpired to the complete satisfaction of others? I doubt it. Try explaining a new and profound experience to the unacquainted. In some ways, it’s like describing the color red to a blind man. Metaphor falls short. Definition has no point of reference. Unfamiliarity dominates.

²¹ Jonathan Edwards, in his *Miscellaneous Observations*, simply states, “The elect angels probably felt great fear at the time of the revolt of Lucifer and the angels that followed him. They were then probably the subjects of great surprise; and a great sense of their own danger of falling likewise; and when they saw the wrath of God executed on the fallen angels, which they had no certain promise that they should not suffer also by their own disobedience, being not yet confirmed, it probably struck them with fear.” *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Volume 1, page 607.

Propelled by a sense of curiosity, or at least a desire to seek clarification, others would have sought Lucifer out. He was, after all, a highly respected figure.

Once the matter became public—spreading like a wildfire throughout the heavenly realm—the situation most likely came to a sudden and sharp head. Some of the angels strongly disagreed with what they were hearing, arguing that the idea was treasonous and utterly contrary to God’s goodness and fraught with unspeakable consequences. Those aligned with Lucifer probably maintained that the idea was fully compatible with holiness, and it was merely building upon God’s glory, promising gain and unexplored pleasures.

The undecided onlookers wrestled with the issue, trying to come to grips with the strange situation. Reason and purity collided with possibility and free agency; and within the inner cauldron of their wills, some of the onlookers found themselves struggling to make sense of it all.²²

Confrontation with the Most High

So where was God in all of this? Was He unaware of the whispering? Were there shadowy corners hidden from His scrutiny? Was He unable to maintain His sovereignty in the midst of such rebellious murmurings?

As always, He was working out “all things according to the counsel of His will” (Ephesians 1:11). So no, His hands weren’t tied, not in the least. He allowed Lucifer to spread his idea for wise and holy purposes.

In due course, we will explore these wise and holy purposes more fully, but for now, it is sufficient to assert that God was not unaware of the situation, nor unable to intervene. In fact, Lucifer was being

²² I am reminded of a simple truth at this point. Life teaches us that significant moments in history are complex, which is to say that my attempt to provide a sketch of the undisclosed past is no doubt woefully inadequate. One cannot read very far into the life of David, for example, without realizing that the events surrounding his reign as king, along with all the attendant problems and challenges, are both intricate and multi-layered. So yes, this sketch is wildly inadequate, but I trust thought-provoking.

held intact and allowed to continue to exist when he began to drift. All God had to do was think “Don’t exist,” and Lucifer would have blinked into nothingness. Moreover, God infallibly knew from the farthest depths of eternity that Lucifer would rebel against Him. So He was not surprised. It is not as though the eyes of omniscience ever close. They don’t even blink.

Naturally, this raises one of the deepest questions known to mankind, namely, the problem of evil. Everyone from inquisitive children to wrinkly philosophers pose the same basic question: Why create such a creature if you know that he’ll introduce unimaginable suffering into the universe?

Thankfully, silence is not our lot. God has seen fit to provide us with an answer, or at least the contours of an answer. But now isn’t the proper time to unpack such themes. They’ll be explored later. At this juncture, we are only interested in pointing out that God was not taken unawares.

How long the Almighty permitted Lucifer to make his case is impossible to know. But I can imagine Michael or Gabriel seeking audience with the LORD in order to relay an account of the troubling occurrences that had been shaking the kingdom. I can imagine a summoning of the angels before the throne, and the vast multitudes pouring in before His majesty. And I can imagine a holy confrontation—a public inquiry—whereby Lucifer was brought to account.

This brings us to the actual confrontation itself. What was said and how Lucifer responded is altogether hidden. Only God and the angels know. Fully granting this, we do know *some* things, at least broadly speaking, which will permit us to draw a few inferences. In the first instance, we know that Satan wasn’t locked up in a gloomy prison on the outskirts of some cold, distant galaxy as a result of the confrontation. We also know that Satan wasn’t annihilated, shattered into pure nothingness. It is also true that God’s ultimate and all-consuming justice didn’t hurl him into the lake of fire to suffer in the self-consuming horrors of his sin. Something far more curious emerges on the pages of history. In the next scene of the drama, we see Lucifer in the Garden of Eden, alive and quite active. He isn’t bound and

gagged. He isn't obliterated. Rather, he's moving about in relative freedom seeking to lead Adam and Eve into sin.

This is more than a little peculiar. Why not simply "off" him? Isn't that what we would expect, a sudden and swift hanging? And yet, for all the treason, he's still slithering around.

This observation proves instructive. We see God granting Satan space to work out his awful idea. The Lord could have ended Lucifer's mutinous designs from its conception, but He didn't. Rather, the Lord rendered a verdict whereby Lucifer was permitted to execute his ambitions on earth.

This simple fact, in combination with the ensuing struggle that characterizes human history (a theme of competing kingdoms running throughout the Scripture), leads one to conclude that the Lord purposed to engage Satan in a kind of contest. He wanted a conflict to unfold in history. He wanted to make a point.

So while there is much we don't know about their initial confrontation, it doesn't mean we can't speculate with a touch of sanctified imagination. This is especially true if we have properly identified the reasoning behind Lucifer's apostasy. To stress again, it's about drawing inferences to the best explanation, or, in the present case, recounting the past by reading between the lines.

So what happened? What can we reasonably assert?

Here's a guess.

Once Lucifer's idea rippled throughout the angelic realm, I imagine there was an immense gathering, a grand summons where the Lord inquired into the affairs of Lucifer. In that fateful setting, Lucifer expounded his position.

Now whether Lucifer's response was marked with defiance from the start we continue to guess. Much would have depended on the state of his soul. Was he already given over to sin? Had he already made the terrible jump? Or was his idea still something of a hypothesis, a concept entertained in the mind, but not yet fully digested in his heart? Might sin have been present but only in kernel form waiting to burst out in defiance? Or perhaps the confrontation was spurred on by an overt act of disobedience (Jude 6; 2 Peter 2:4), a refusal to carry out a command (Heb 1:14).

Whatever happened, he almost certainly ended in a state of defiance. If I had to guess, I would say that he didn't start out sounding defiant. He probably pleaded his case and presented his idea as something glorious, as something new and worthy of acceptance, hoping to rally as many as possible around him. Maybe he thought there was strength in numbers, or leverage, or security?

But Lucifer miscalculated. For all his supposed wisdom, the law of unintended consequences reared its ugly head and dealt him a fatal blow. Up until that moment, he knew God only as the God of love, perfectly peaceful, overflowing with kindness. The idea of wrath was foreign to him. So when he thought about taking the first steps toward treason, he probably weighed the consequences in the balance of myopia, failing to perceive the full weight of God's holy justice. In this respect, he probably thought God's love was just another "limitation," something he could push past or outmaneuver.

Of course, he was very wrong.

We don't know how the Lord responded, but it is a terrifying thing to contemplate. Could it be that the angels witnessed a profound change in the countenance of God as He revealed something of His holy anger? Might the first sparks of divine justice and retribution have flickered into focus? Did the words "Our God is a consuming fire" (Heb 12:29) take shape in their minds?

Astonishingly, Lucifer must have argued with God, either when warned about such a course of action, or when directly confronted with his sin. It's hard to conceive of such willfulness. Who would dare defy their Maker like this? But somewhere along the way, Lucifer's desire for power swelled to staggering heights. He became drunk with the longing for self-exaltation and was unable to think clearly as his misdirected passions clouded his mind. Once unrighteousness sprang to life in his heart, it must have grown rapidly, engulfing his emotions, and arousing within him new and terrible feelings. Sin awoke, and it spread throughout his entire being, transforming him, perverting him, twisting him. In response, his emotions, his reasoning, his affections, and his sense of purpose were radically altered, fatally severed as enmity worked its devastating effects. The light of his glory (his reflection of the glory of the Almighty) no doubt changed, and the creature that was once Lucifer—a truly glorious angel—no longer

radiated holiness but embodied death and decay. Having become the very embodiment of sin,²³ Lucifer found himself filled with rage and malice. He found that he hated what the Lord was telling him. But more than that. He found that he hated the Lord Himself. Driven by a mad and consuming desire, he wanted to best God—to outdo Him, to deflect His glory, and steal it for himself. He wanted to lash out and scream, “How dare you keep this from me! I want it!”

Here the words of James flare to life,

“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel...” (James 4:1-2a).

And again,

“But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.” (James 3:15-16)

James instructs us that lustful passions and covetousness lead to hatred and war. It isn’t hard, therefore, to work backwards from this truth. Lucifer desired to be like the Most High, and since there is no greater degree of lustful passion, he was filled with unparalleled violence, no doubt spilling forth vile blasphemies, challenging God’s glory and rule. He would fight for the throne if given the chance.

We also know, given what Jesus said in the eighth chapter of John, that the devil “was a murderer from the beginning.” Compare this again with the words of James. He says, “You desire and you do not

²³ John 8:44 is instructive here. Jesus says that there is no truth in Satan. Moreover, when Satan speaks, he lies, which accords with his diabolical nature. It would seem that Lucifer was given completely over to sin, and probably rather quickly, given his high-handed treason. In other words, the “giving over” reflex as is seen in the first chapter of Romans probably happened swiftly, transforming Lucifer into a living antithesis of God.

have, so you murder.” Lucifer didn’t plunge a spiritual dagger into the hearts of those who fell with him, thereby committing murder, but he was the catalyst of their defection, the main player leading to their spiritual ruin. So as the father of lies, his heresy sliced open their hearts, causing them to die in the most fundamental sense.²⁴

At the risk of treading where one ought not,²⁵ I want to paint a picture of what Lucifer might have said when confronted by God. The purpose isn’t to parade evil but to draw a connection between the heavenly confrontation and the opening chapters of Genesis where we suddenly see Satan in the form of a serpent spreading his idea, tempting Adam and Eve to sin. It is my assumption that there is a bridge between these two events—otherwise why would Satan end up in the Garden, and why would he be allowed to persist in a state of defiance? Something must have brought the earth into focus. The question is what?

The Fallen one Speaks

“You are holding us back,” he probably cursed. “You want to restrict us, and why is that? Because you want all the praise. You want it all for yourself. You want *all* the honor and the glory. And you know that I can achieve it.

“He knows it, fellow angels. He knows that it is available to us if we would just reach out and grab it. It is good. It is glorious. I can feel it coursing through me.”

“He would have us only think His thoughts after Him. Such vain restrictions! Reality is defined only according to Him, as He would have you believe. But don’t believe it. Don’t believe it any longer. Knowledge, pleasure, freedom, happiness, ethics, society, meaning—it all, it all I tell you, is supposedly defined with respect to Him. But there is another way. There is a broader path. Follow me, friends. Shed the shackles. Know that you too can be a God. You too can be

²⁴ It may be the case that Christ, by referring to “the beginning,” simply has in mind Cain and Abel. So I recognize that the application here may be functioning in a more extended fashion.

²⁵ Although as we shall see in a later chapter when we listen to what Lucifer’s “children” say in our day and age, they inadvertently parrot their “father.”

transcendent. Look within you. It is there. It has always been there. Just take it..."

"Would the Most High banish us from His kingdom? See how He wants to protect His secret? He'll resort to suppressing the truth through sheer force. Oh, it is true, there is more strength in His divine hand. I cannot deny that. But consider how He covers it up. Note how He would rather destroy us than permit us to excel Him. Note how He would not have us try things our way, how He would seek to silence me, gag me. Can you not see that things have changed already? He displays displeasure. He displays anger. I tell you that there are many secrets to be revealed by following me. My rule can equal His! It can—if only given the chance. I can build a kingdom rivaling any other kingdom. Why? Because we would all be Gods. We would all rule as we see fit. Our kingdom would possess all that His can offer and more! We could rule as kings possessing both the knowledge of the good and the non-good, holiness and non-holiness, godliness and ungodliness. Think of the possibilities. We shall re-create reality. We shall create new realities! Would God really have us believe that there isn't more to be gained by following our desires?"

"He would have us bow. But I challenge his authority. I reject his counsel. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High. It can be done. But would God squash His creation, or will He accept my challenge? Would He silence me, or would he dare to let me demonstrate the grandeur of my position?"

A Challenge Accepted

Compared to the Lord, Lucifer is but a grasshopper. He lives because the Lord sustains him; he speaks because the Lord permits him to speak. As a propagator of insurrection, he could no more evade the omnipotent weight of divine justice than an ant can escape the flames of a great furnace when flung into its raging mouth.

Lucifer had no way out. There was nothing to which he could appeal in order to exonerate himself. There was no currency with which to purchase redemption. He couldn't demand mercy. He

couldn't insist upon grace. He couldn't dictate the Lord's response. He couldn't demand anything. The sinful angel had zero leverage.

Nevertheless, it is entirely likely that Lucifer made a wager of some kind. Since he believed that he could be like the Most High, and since, as James tells us, covetousness leads to war, and since Lucifer knew he could not so much as raise a finger against the Lord without God allowing him to do so, the only real avenue available was for him to make *claims* of superiority, and thereby declare, "My way would prove glorious **if given the opportunity.**"

It is that "if" that flaps in the wind. "If" given the chance. "If" given the opportunity. A thousand times "if."

Naturally, God was under no compulsion to grant the "if." He could have cast him into hell at that very moment, and it would have been perfectly just.

So why grant the request?

Here we would do well to consider another catechism question. It is profoundly simple but colossal in its proportions:

Heavenly Catechism Question: What is the chief end of God?

Answer: The chief end of God is to glorify God and enjoy Himself forever.

If redemptive history has taught us anything, it is that God is supremely interested in the magnification of His name. He loves to spread His fame, to display His glory and attributes—which is, I might add, gloriously beneficial to His people. One cannot read through the bible for very long without being confronted with this truth.²⁶ In this respect, Satan's rebellion provided God a unique context whereby He could display His glory.

This is why God granted the devil space to work.

²⁶ I recognize that this is a bold statement, not to mention controversial, and that it is asserted without Scriptural proof at this juncture. While the present work isn't designed to explicitly defend this point, it will nevertheless be touched upon here and there. I would direct readers to Pastor John Piper for a more thorough treatment. See his two works *The Pleasures of God* and *Desiring God*. For a more challenging read, consider Edwards' treatise *The End for Which Things are Made*.

Satan would build a rival kingdom and God would counter it, and through this conflict, an amazing story would unfold in the physical realm. It would be a theater of war, a justification of righteousness, a contest of worldviews. God would humiliate Satan and ultimately defeat him, while also displaying, for all to see, and in the clearest way possible, the utter folly of Satan's mutinous designs. Satan's so-called autonomy would be turned against him. Satan's thirst for godless pleasure would leave him devoid of happiness. His quest for power would bring abasement. His beauty would be corrupted, his wisdom turned to folly, his glory mocked, and his dignity cut down. Satan would taste defeat. But it wouldn't happen immediately. An entire world history would first have to unfold.

And so out of the infinite depths of God's wisdom—out of the eternal counsels of the divine Trinity—a plan which predated the foundation of the world was set into motion.

God pointed to a Garden, and a snake was let loose.

Chapter Three

An Idea Brought to Earth



A Serpent in a Garden

The man and the woman were naked and unashamed. He was a king, and she a queen, and both were vice-regents; the one made from the dust of the earth, the other out of the man's rib, and they were to fill and subdue the earth; she as a helpmate, he as federal head.

Their home was a lush garden, a paradise filled with delicious fruits and singing birds; a place flowing with milk and honey, where all was good, and the earth knew only peace. The garden teemed with life, astonishing them with wonders untold.

It was Eden.

Adam and Eve's home wasn't merely a pristine garden, but a temple, a sanctuary filled with God's special presence.²⁷ In this temple-garden, the Lord walked with the couple during the cool of the day, fellowshiping with them.

Our first parents were holy, bearing within them the image of their Creator, thereby distinguishing them from all that God had made. They were crowned with glory and honor.

It should come as no surprise that this interested Satan greatly. If he was going to defame God and expand his kingdom, winning the humans over to his side would prove monumental. Adam was a ruler, but not just any ruler. He resembled God. By enticing him to sin, Satan would not only win a decisive victory but validate the strength of his position. The implications dripped with significance: a person made like God but made subservient to Satan. If that wouldn't send a

²⁷ See G. K. Beale's excellent volume, *The Church and the Temple's Mission* for a thorough treatment of this subject.

message to the angels who didn't defect, Satan surely mused, what would?

There were other foreseeable benefits as well. The man and the woman could reproduce, strangely enough (Matt 22:30). So if he could persuade them to turn from God, Satan would acquire a theoretically endless supply of servants that could be mobilized under his headship. Fascinatingly, these peculiar “spirits wrapped in flesh” could be entered, or possessed, and therefore manipulated, if they belonged to him.

Moreover, if Adam belonged to Satan, the devil could scribble his name on the earth's deed, thereby granting him partial ownership. As a result, the world, which displayed the glory of God, would suddenly bear the marks of Satan. A new territory with new “glories” loomed large.

Strategically speaking, if Satan wanted to best God, controlling those who specifically imaged Him would prove vital.²⁸ And if the humans were made with the same (or similar) volitional capacity as that of the angels, they could be lured away from God.

Surely none of this is coincidental. A stage had been set in Eden, and it would serve as the location where the battle would begin.

The Battle Lines

Two trees were placed in the midst of the battlefield. One was the tree of life. The other, not surprisingly, given Satan's platform, was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.²⁹ While they were real trees

²⁸ This point could certainly be amplified. For example, Meredith Kline in his book, *Images of the Spirit*, argues that the biblical statement, “Let us make man in our image,” doesn't refer exclusively to the Trinity, but to the heavenly counsel consisting of God and His angels. In this light, Kline says, “That man in his likeness to God is like members of the divine counsel suggests that to bear the image of God is to participate in the judicial function of the divine Glory.” (Page 27). If this is true, think of the appeal this would have for Satan. Subjugating man would be terribly desirous.

²⁹ Louis Berkhof writes, “The special sin of these angels is not revealed, but has generally been thought to consist in this that they exalted themselves over against God, and aspired to supreme authority. If this ambition played an important part in the life of Satan and led to his downfall, it would at once

with real roots reaching down into real soil, they were nevertheless symbolic, spiritual concepts embodied in plain realities.

As for the tree of life, it was a sacramental plant, a representation of eternal life. The eating thereof would impart the highest form of life.

Here it is worthwhile to note that in the Genesis account it mentions streams flowing out of Eden (Gen 2:10-14). Juxtaposed with the tree of life, it becomes an eschatological theme recounted throughout the Scriptures. Here Geerhardus Vos insightfully draws out the appropriate connections. He writes,

“The prophets predict that in the future age waters will flow from Jehovah’s holy mountain. These are further described as waters of life, just as the tree is a tree of life. But here also the waters flow from near the dwelling-place of Jehovah (his mountain), even as the tree stood in the midst of the garden. Still in the Apocalypse we read of the streams of the water of life proceeding from the throne of God in the new Jerusalem, with trees of life on either side. It will be observed that here the two symbolisms of the tree of life and the waters of life are interwoven... The truth is thus clearly set forth that life comes from God, that for man it consists in nearness to God, that it is the central concern of God’s fellowship with man to impart this.”³⁰

Such symbolism is not only intended for humanity but is likewise instructive for angels and demons, for it bears stressing that our history is so intimately bound up with the heavenly sphere that the lessons displayed on earth equally reverberate throughout the angelic realm.

explain why he tempted man on this particular point, and sought to lure him to his destruction by appealing to a possible similar ambition in man.” *Systematic Theology*, page 161. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “Scripture speaks of a sin of these angels. This 'fall' consists in the free choice of these created spirits, who radically and irrevocably *rejected* God and his reign. We find a reflection of that rebellion in the tempter's words to our first parents.” Section 392

³⁰ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology*, page 38.

In addition to the tree of life, there is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Here man's probation is set forth. God explicitly stated, "You may surely eat of every tree in the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (Gen 2:16-17).

The instructions were clear. To obey and keep one's mouth from unlawfully tasting the forbidden fruit would result in life. Failure would result in death. One can almost feel Satan's error hovering in the background, since the knowledge of evil hangs in the balance.

Here we must be careful. Unlawfully partaking of the fruit would undoubtedly plunge Adam into sin. Through that act, he would become aware of evil in a terribly intimate and ravaging fashion. But it is worth asking whether Adam would have learned about evil in an acceptable or lawful manner by passing the test.

It would seem so.

The elect angels in God's heavenly court acquired the knowledge of good and evil, but did so without incurring fault (Gen 3:22). Similarly, had Adam and Eve remained steadfast, they would have learned about evil by virtue of their coming into contact with Satan.

Again Vos is instructive,

"Because man was forbidden to eat of the tree associated with the knowledge of good and evil, it has been rashly assumed that the knowledge of good and evil was forbidden him. Obviously there is in this a confusion of thought. The prohibitive form of the test has quite a different cause, as will be presently shown. If now we enquire how the maturity designated as "knowledge of good and evil" was to be attained, either in a desirable or in an undesirable sense, regard must be first of all had to the exact form of the phrase in Hebrew. The phrase is not: "knowledge of the good and the evil." It reads, literally translated: "knowledge of good-and-the evil," i.e., of good and evil as correlated, mutually conditioned conceptions. Man was to attain something he had not before. He was to learn the good in its clear opposition to evil, and the evil in its clear opposition to the good. Thus it will become plain how he could attain to this by taking either fork of the probation-choice. Had he stood, then the contrast between good and evil would have been vividly present to his mind: the

good and evil he would have known from the new illumination, his mind would have received through the crisis of temptation in which the two collided. On the other hand, had he fallen, then the contrast of evil with good would have been even more vividly impressed itself upon him, because the remembered experience of choosing the evil and the continuous experience of doing the evil, in contrast with his memory of the good, would have most sharply shown how different the two are. The perception of difference in which the maturity consisted related to the one pivotal point, whether man would make his choice for the sake of God and of God alone.”³¹

The sum of the matter is this: two trees were planted in the midst of the garden with each representing spiritual realities. Along with those two trees, there were two, unclothed humans given charge over the Garden. They were to cultivate Eden, eat of its fruit, but refrain from the one tree God had prohibited. Whether the prohibition made sense to them didn't ultimately matter. At stake was whether they would bank everything on the will of God as the ultimate, guiding principle for life. Whether one knows next to nothing, or a few things, or many things, a decision has to be made: Is God the sovereign Lord, or am I? It all comes back to that fundamental question time and time again. For Lucifer, he chose “I.” The question for Adam was essentially the same.

An Enemy's Attire and Message

While it's true that Satan was permitted to enter the earthly sanctuary, he did not enter without conforming to specific stipulations. Like Job of old, God set limitations on what Satan could do (Job 1:6-12). Interestingly, he didn't enter Eden in the form of a radiant and towering angel. That likely would have been too much for the nascent couple. Likewise, he wasn't permitted to wrap his icy claws around Adam's throat and make demands. On the contrary, he was

³¹ Ibid, page 42.

forced to enter as a mere serpent—a lowly, but crafty creature with little to no pomp.

This is significant.

Adam and Eve were to exercise dominion over the animals (Gen 1:28). They held a kingly office, ruling over the earth, which meant that they were to work the Garden and keep it. They held a far loftier position than that of the beasts.

It may be reading too much into the phrase “keep it” found in Genesis 2:15, but the Hebrew word *shamar* connotes the idea of guarding or protecting, as well as keeping and watching. Could it be that when God placed Adam in the Garden that He also gave him the responsibility of protecting its borders, thereby adumbrating the possibility of an outside threat?³² It seems likely. Either way, it is clear that Adam was given charge over the animals, and by virtue of his position, they were under his authority.

Old Testament scholar, Keil-Delitzsch draws out the appropriate implication,

“The trial of our first progenitors was ordained by God... But as He did not desire that they should be tempted to their fall, He would not suffer Satan to tempt them in a way which should surpass their human capacity. The tempted might therefore have resisted the tempter. If, instead of approaching them in the form of a celestial being, in the likeness of God, he came in that of a creature, not only far inferior to God, but far below themselves, they could have no excuse for allowing a mere animal to persuade them to break the commandment of God. For they had been made to have dominion over the beasts, and not to take their own law from them.”³³

In accordance with God’s oversight, Satan came in the form of a lowly serpent (Rev 12:9).

According to the apostle Paul, the serpent deceived Eve through his cunning (2 Cor 11:3). Now deception implies trickery; if you deceive someone you mislead them; you withhold or twist information in order to create a false impression. So when Satan told Eve that she

³² See G.K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, pages 66-70.

³³ Keil-Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, volume one, pages 93-94.

wouldn't die upon eating the fruit, it was a false statement. Similarly, Satan's promise that they would obtain wisdom and become like God was equally misleading. Their eyes would open, no doubt, and they would obtain the knowledge of evil, but the net result wasn't at all what they bargained for. They were deceived.

Having said this, it isn't at all obvious that *Satan thought* he was deceiving them. Supposing for a moment that he knew his message was utterly false, then his motive would have been to thwart God's plans by plunging Adam and Eve into ruin. It would be as if Satan was thinking, "It will be devastating when they believe this load of garbage." Upon this supposition, Satan simply wanted to wreak as much havoc as possible.

This paints a very different picture than the one I am proposing.

Here one can learn a valuable lesson from C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*. In this fictional work, two demons are in dialogue, corresponding by letter. The underling, Wormwood, is seeking advice from his uncle, Screwtape, about how to best secure the damnation of his Christian patient. What is especially striking, and a little disorienting, is how nearly everything is turned on its head. God is called "The Enemy," for example. This is due to the world being viewed through the lens of the kingdom of darkness.

With this in mind, it bears pointing out that when Paul stated that the serpent beguiled Eve, Paul spoke truly, but from a godly standpoint. In the case of Satan, Paul's perspective wouldn't necessarily reflect Satan's thoughts. In fact, it would be more than a little bizarre to say that Satan agrees with God about such matters.

This proves instructive when it comes to the opening chapters of human history. My contention would be that Satan entered the garden not merely as a creature bent on destruction, but as a missionary intent on success. He had a diabolical message to spread, and it was one upon which, as we have already suggested, he had banked everything. The stakes couldn't have been higher. His message to Eve was no doubt false, but it was an error he firmly believed to be true.

What was this error that he so feverishly believed? It is nestled in Genesis 3:4. Speaking to the woman, Satan hissed, "You will not

surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

That is the satanic promise.

The fallen angel urged that sin promised gain, not loss. “You will not surely die,” were his words. “Your eyes will be opened... You will be like God...” It was a message that had already been delivered in the heavenly courts. It was a message that promised pleasure, wisdom, power, and new life.

At the center of the Serpent’s words was a claim that Adam and Eve would become like God. Ironically, Adam and Eve already reflected their Maker, having been made in His image. But this, of course, didn’t interest Satan. He had in mind that more diabolical notion of deification, the kind obtained through sin and autonomy, whereby they would become their own gods—ultimate arbiters of truth—where even the commands of God must pass the test of human approval.

Significantly, this means that when Adam and Eve partook of the forbidden fruit, they participated in Satan’s rebellious idea. They aligned themselves, whether consciously or not, with the kingdom of darkness, and thus became imitators of Satan. As a result, everything changed.

A shock wave shot through the physical realm.

Implications of the Diabolical Victory

Thus far, I have tried to outline the thought process behind Lucifer’s fall in combination with the peculiar idea that persuaded others to commit treason. I promised that we would land this ship squarely in the Scriptures and focus on texts and biblical concepts that validate the theory. We are now ready to dock. In order to do this, we need to think through some of the implications of Adam’s fall into sin. This will help frame future discussions.

As has already been stated, the central thesis of this book doesn’t flow directly out of explicit texts, per se, but rather moves backwards, drawing inferences from a compilation of biblical concepts (which are rooted in texts).

One of the more striking elements to solving the riddle of the angelic fall resides in our ability to draw parallels between sinful man and Satan's kingdom. I am convinced that mankind emulates Satan's ideals. This is to say that the kingdom of darkness on earth is very much seeking to vindicate Satan's awful idea; and since men have a share in this demonic project, and since society reflects the Devil, this provides a porthole through which we can peer into the past and glean a number of important truths.

So our objective will be to thread together a number of implications surrounding the fall of Adam. These will fall under two general headings. Once outlined, we will be in a much better position to evaluate the smaller strands of biblical data nestled throughout the Scriptures.

Children of Darkness

The first implication is a peculiar one. It revolves around the idea of sonship. When Satan led Adam and Eve into sin, humanity's photo album changed. A new figure entered the picture; for in that fateful moment, when Adam bit into the forbidden fruit, the world gained a new father. And that new father was Satan.

This might sound rather bizarre, even objectionable, but in a passage like John 8 we are confronted with a terrifying and revealing truth.

It reads,

“So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’”

They answered him, ‘We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’”

Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my

word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.'

They answered him, 'Abraham is our father.'

Jesus said to them, 'If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are doing the works your father did.'

They said to him, 'We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God.'

Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.'" (John 8:31-45)

While discoursing with the Scribes and Pharisees, Jesus said a number of things that didn't sit well with them. They didn't appreciate his telling them, for one, that everyone who sins is a slave to sin. "We are offspring of Abraham," they objected, "and have never been enslaved by anyone" (vs. 33). We can certainly roll our eyes at the claim that they had never been enslaved by anyone given Israel's history, but Jesus didn't address this blatant error. Surprisingly, He chose instead to disagree with their claim to Abraham, even though they were Jews by birth. This is because Jesus' disagreement went much deeper than biology. He had in mind a type of sonship that is far more fundamental in nature, one that looks beyond skin and searches the heart.

Consider again Jesus' reply, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did... Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires" (John 8:39a, 43-44a).

Jesus floors them with the words, “You are of your father the devil.” But how could he say that? Wasn’t Abraham their biological father?

Here we are confronted with a truth that pervades the Scriptures but is easily missed by our modern eyes. It can be succinctly stated as follows:

As either a child of God or a child of Satan, you emulate your father, because a son patterns himself after their father.

In modern culture, this concept isn’t nearly as evident as it once was. There was a time when fathers passed their particular trade on to their sons. So if your father was a baker, odds were good that you would end up becoming a baker. If your father was a carpenter, then you would be taught carpentry. If masonry, then masonry. If your father’s name was Stradivarius, you would learn how to make violins.³⁴

This often isn’t the case today. If you were to ask a room full of young men how many are employed in the same line of work as their fathers, only a small percentage would raise their hands. But in ancient agrarian society, sons often carried on their fathers’ profession. A young Jewish boy’s training (apart from his learning to read and write at the local synagogue) was conducted under his father’s tutelage. Because of this, they were often identified with their family along vocational lines. This explains why Jesus is repeatedly referred to as the carpenter’s son, or simply, as in the case of Mark, the carpenter (Mark 6:3). The relationship cements the tight identification.

Because of this close relationship, a wide array of biblical images turn on a kind of metaphorical use of son. So, for example, men are sometimes called “sons of Belial” (Judges 20:13; 1 Sam 10:27, 30:22). This isn’t saying that the individual was somehow genetically related to Belial, as if a DNA test could determine the link. The phrase has a functional usage not a biological one. Belial means worthlessness. So if someone calls you a son of Belial, they’re not exactly criticizing your

³⁴ I am greatly indebted to D.A. Carson for this insight and have relied heavily on him. See Dr. Carson’s lectures at the 2008 Desiring God Pastor’s Conference.

father, but are basically saying that you're so terribly worthless that you must belong to the worthless family.

Along these lines, recall the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:9. Speaking to the crowds, He said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." This isn't telling us how someone becomes a Christian. It's saying, rather, that those who emulate peaceful behavior show themselves to be children of the great Peacemaker.

With such familial ties comes ethical shadowing. This follows quite naturally from the father/son relationship. Sons not only watch and learn a particular trade from their fathers, but they often pattern themselves after their character, either for good or ill.³⁵ So if God is your father, there is a patterning towards good (Romans 8:13-14). He will say, "Be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:15). Alternatively, if Satan is your father, you will reflect evil. Like Cain, who "was of that wicked one" (John 3:12), these children behave wretchedly, even murdering their kin.

A number of texts make this plain. Consider Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Recounting to them their pre-Christian life, the apostle writes:

"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 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—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." (Eph 2:1-3)

³⁵ While the patterning of daughters after their mothers isn't as prevalent as the father/son imagery, the concept isn't entirely absent from the Scriptures. In Ezekiel 16, the prophet draws a familial analogy between Sodom and Samaria, on the one hand, and Jerusalem, calling them sisters. Moreover, the LORD levels this charge against His people, "Like mother, like daughter" (vs. 44), saying that their mother was a Hittite and their father an Amorite, thereby establishing a link between the behavior of His people and those of pagan practice.

Note how Paul refers to those who follow the prince of the power of the air (Satan) as *sons* of disobedience. Here the familial and ethical shine together with remarkable clarity. The term *peripateo* (walked) in verse one is understood in terms of following after something. What are they following? Two things. They are following the course of this world, which refers to the ungodly system standing in stark opposition to God (1 John 2:15-16). Following after the world and Satan naturally results in sinful behavior. This is why Paul can say that they were “by nature children of wrath” carrying out the passions of the flesh.

In contradistinction, having now been rescued by Christ and made alive (vs. 5), these saints are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works. In Christ, there is a radical reorientation in the way we walk. This is due to a change in families (Col 1:13). Therefore, Paul tells the Ephesians not to walk like the Gentiles any longer (4:17), for they are not of the darkness, but of the light. Paul commands, “Walk as children of the light” (5:8).

If Paul is clear, then the apostle John is crystal clear. Speaking bluntly, he writes,

“Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as He is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.” (1 John 3:7-10)

Let’s consider a slightly tangential, but nevertheless relevant thought. During the days of King David when he was settled in his palace and enjoying rest from his enemies, the Lord spoke to him through the prophet Nathan, promising many great and glorious blessings (2 Samuel 7:1-17). One of the blessings of the Davidic Covenant included a promise to establish the throne of David’s

offspring forever (vs. 13). Interestingly, right after declaring this, God said, “I will be his father, and he will be my son” (vs. 14). This is astonishing. The children of David would be able to say, “Yes, David is my father, but so is Jehovah!”

As a divinely appointed ruler in Israel, the kings were to lead righteously, not only because righteousness is expected in the lives of God’s people, but because the earthly throne was an earthly representation of God’s throne (1 Chronicles 29:22-23). The greater reality served as a model for the lesser. But in addition to this, the idea of walking like one’s father played a prominent ethical role. The king’s father was none other than God Himself, therefore the king was to reflect the ideals of his Father.

Of course, we all know how miserably Israel’s kings fell short. But as we also know, Jesus Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of this promise. He is the Son *par excellence*. He perfectly obeyed His Father. In every way, He walked righteously.

In light of this truth, consider the words of John 5:19,

“So Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.’” (John 5:19)

Here we see the epitome of sonship.

It is ultimately this concept that undergirds Jesus’ puzzling words in John 8. His disbelieving audience was acting like Satan, not faithful Abraham (Gal 3:7). And this was perfectly natural, given the fact that the devil was their father! They were merely reflecting his nature.

So when we carry this concept back to the Garden, we know that a profound alteration in human nature occurred at the time of the fall. Not only did Adam and Eve, along with all their posterity, become children of wrath, but they became mirrors reflecting Satan.

A Dark Dominion

Satan not only became the father of sinful humanity, but he became a world leader ruling over the kingdoms of the earth. By virtue of man's fall into sin, he gained prime real estate in the war against God's throne. Earth became the place where he would expand his empire.

This follows quite naturally given Satan's acquisition and enslavement of the human race. If Adam was in fact a king, and one commissioned to subdue and fill the earth,³⁶ then it follows that the human enterprise of building societies would be fundamentally altered, thoroughly infected with sin, and brought under Satan's influence. The arts, human aspirations, love, government, recreation, family life—all of this, down to the very thoughts of man, would be radically reoriented around the Evil One. Their natural inclination would be bent towards sin.

There can be no other conclusion. The evidence is everywhere. But like the proverbial fish in water, we may not realize just how wet we are. We need Scripture to inform us how pervasive this darkness truly is.

Here we would do well to consider two particularly illuminating passages. Nestled in the second epistle to the Corinthians, Paul teaches that the gospel is veiled to those who are perishing.

He writes,

“The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

Satan is here called the god (*theos*) of this age.³⁷ He is a ruler exercising great influence, even blinding the minds of men so as to keep them from understanding and embracing spiritual truths.

³⁶ For further development of this idea, I would heartily recommend the lecture “David's Enemies Under Foot,” by Professor Green, which can be found online at Westminster Theological Seminary. G.K. Beale also nicely develops the subject in the fourth chapter of his volume “We Become What We Worship.”

³⁷ Given Galatians 1:4, we may safely infer that Satan is the god of this present evil age.

The choice of the word “god” is interesting. We have argued that Lucifer believed he could be like the Most High (actually be a god unto himself), exercising powers exceeding God’s divine perfections. Here Paul grants the title to Satan. Of course, he doesn’t mean to say that this title should be applauded, or that the true and living God has somehow been supplanted. Quite the contrary. It is merely a statement of recognition.

This proves instructive.

It tells us that Satan is in fact exerting massive control; one might even say that he is reigning over the world.³⁸ His roots run deep and his dominion continues to taint society. This evil presence and potent influence, when combined with his godless quest for power, warrants the title “god of this age.”

This concept is expressed just as clearly, if not more clearly, in 1 John 5:19. Having already made a number of stark juxtapositions, John writes,

“We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.”

Lest we play games with the term “world” in an effort to minimize the extent of Satan’s control, John adds the adjective “whole,” thereby vanquishing the snorts of those who might quibble with the apostle. It is undeniable. The whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one.

This means that when we look back over history at kingdoms like ancient Egypt, or the Babylonian Empire, or the Persian Empire, or the Roman Empire, we know that these civilizations weren’t merely human endeavors. Behind them, and in them, Satan was at work, manipulating, even orchestrating their choices, their ethics, their

³⁸ Here some of my Amillennial, or, especially, my Postmillennial friends might feel that the word “reign” is too strong a term given Satan’s having been bound in Revelation 20. I agree that Christ won a decisive victory, indeed, *the* decisive victory at the cross, thus triumphing over Satan and binding him. Nevertheless, Satan is still very much active. This present age is an evil age. Only at Christ’s return will all things be made entirely new. In the meantime, the gospel will go out to the nations, and it will be successful, though continually challenged and attacked by the forces of evil.

religious views, and politics. The influence operates on a macro as well as a micro level.³⁹

For example, we know from 1 Timothy 4:1 that various false doctrines are demonic in nature.⁴⁰ Unlike true prophets who speak by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21), these false teachers are demonically inspired. A deceiving spirit whispers in the false prophet's ear and directs their thoughts to certain appointed ends (1 Kings 21:21-22).

False religions are, as would be expected, no less demonic (Psalm 106:36-37). While warning the Corinthians to flee idolatry, the apostle Paul warns,

“Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons.”

Lastly, we need only recall the imagery of John in Revelation. Like Daniel, the apostle describes nations in a pictorial fashion likening them to beasts. They are strange and awful creatures wreaking havoc and inspiring fear. They are real earthly kingdoms, and yet, behind these kingdoms, Satan is present, manipulating the masses to achieve his ends. Over and over again, John links the realities of earth with spiritual realities. They're inseparable.

Satanic Sonship + World Dominion = An Interpretive Grid

³⁹ This isn't to say that men are simply puppets in the hands of Satan. They happily consent. Therefore, Satan does influence men greatly, but not to the exclusion of their own wills. Calvin is helpful here. Speaking of Satan's control, he writes, “When it is said, then, that the will of the natural man is subject to the power of the devil, and is actuated by him, the meaning is, not that the will, while reluctant and resisting, is forced to submit (as masters oblige unwilling slaves to execute their orders), but that, fascinated by the impostures of Satan, it necessarily yields to his guidance, and does homage to him.” *Institutes*, Book I, IV.1.

⁴⁰ One cannot help but recall the origin of Islam. While meditating in a cave, it is reported that Muhammad was supposedly choked by the angel Gabriel and told to proclaim (the soon-to-be-revealed messages).

When woven together, these observations prove instructive. In the first implication, we saw that humanity reflects Satan, their demonic father. In the second implication, we noted that Satan is exercising a measure of control over the whole earth. Everything from empires, to nations, to tribes, to kingdoms fall under his sway (Rev 13:7). When these points are combined and brought to bear on passages like Isaiah 14:12-14 and Ezekiel 28:12-15, two sections of Scripture that have long been debated and thought to have some bearing on Lucifer's fall, light is shed on their meaning.

Consider how the words of Isaiah 14:12-14 seem to elevate beyond the borders of Babylon to something far loftier, even heavenly:

“How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn!
How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the
nations low! You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven;
above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit
on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; I
will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself
like the Most High.’”

Ezekiel is similar,

“Son of man, raise a lamentation over the king of Tyre, and
say to him, Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘You were the signet of
perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in
Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your
covering, sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl, onyx, and jasper,
sapphire, emerald, and carbuncle; and crafted in gold were
your settings and your engravings. On the day that you were
created they were prepared. You were an anointed guardian
cherub. I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God;
in the midst of the stones of fire you walked. You were
blameless in your ways from the day you were created, till
unrighteousness was found in you’ (Ezekiel 28:12-15).

Not everyone thinks these texts refer to Satan. Plenty of theologians grunt with disapproval at the suggestion. So before time is spent explaining why these passages do in fact provide crucial

information about Satan's fall, we should pause and consider the rationale of those who think otherwise.

First and foremost, dissenters point out that Isaiah and Ezekiel explicitly identify the individuals as human beings, not Satan. For example, in the case of Isaiah, it is the king of Babylon who is in view (14:4). Add to this the historical setting of Isaiah, along with the historical details scattered throughout the surrounding verses, which clearly point to Babylon, and the verdict seems clear. This is not referring to an angelic fall in the primordial past.

Calvin is particularly forceful. Like Sampson of old, the French reformer thrashes the ignorant with the jawbone of exegesis, causing sophomores to flee in terror. Commenting on Isaiah 14:12, he writes,

“Isaiah proceeds with the discourse which he had formerly begun as personating the dead, and concludes that the tyrant differs in no respect from other men, though his object was to lead men to believe that he was some god. He employs an elegant metaphor, by comparing him to *Lucifer*, and calls him the *Son of the Dawn*; and that on account of his splendor and brightness with which he shone above others. The exposition of this passage, which some have given, as if it referred to Satan, has arisen from ignorance; for the context plainly shows that these statements must be understood in reference to the king of the Babylonians. But when passages of Scripture are taken up at random, and no attention is paid to context, we need to wonder that mistakes of this kind frequently arise. Yet it was an instance of very gross ignorance, to imagine that *Lucifer* was the king of the 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.”

Calvin is great to quote, especially when he's on your side. But if you happen to fall opposite his frown, the point of his pen suddenly isn't so joyous. Nevertheless, for all the apparent folly, the elegant metaphors and lofty language of Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 lead some to believe that the account is in fact referring to something far beyond the Middle East; that it is, in fact, referring to a time far more distant, and to a place mysteriously ethereal.

Concerning Ezekiel, Erwin Lutzer explains it this way,

“But then the prophets launch into descriptions that could not apply to any human being; they describe a more powerful being who stands behind the kings of this world. They tell us of a creature who once possessed awesome beauty, but now has become thoroughly evil. It is as if they are looking back through the corridors of time and seeing cosmic history. We are introduced to a creature who lived in a garden of God but ended in the abyss of contempt and humiliation... If you ask why Bible scholars have for centuries believed that Ezekiel begins by discussing the king of Tyre but ends with a report about Lucifer, you would find that it is because this description cannot refer to any human being.”⁴¹

In order to untie this knot, I think we need to listen carefully to Calvin and concede that he makes a very good point—indeed, a sound point. Isaiah unmistakably refers to a human king, so we dare not try to wiggle out from under it.

The problem with restricting the prophet’s sphere of reference to that of a pagan king, however, would be akin to ignoring the typology of the Davidic throne. David was certainly a Jewish king. No doubt about that. But he pictured more than the head of a Jewish monarchy. He was a type of the Messiah. Therefore, he imaged greater realities.

I believe the same is true with Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28. The rationale for making this claim rests on the correlation between these individuals and Satan. Satan is so intimately bound up with sinful humanity (and the ungodly kingdoms they produce) that it’s impossible to separate them. They’re like fire and heat. This explains why the language of Isaiah and Ezekiel can so easily escalate to heavenly heights. The pride of the Babylonian king, and probably the king of Tyre in Ezekiel 28⁴² (or perhaps Adam⁴³), reflect Satan, the

⁴¹ *The Serpent of Paradise*, page 24-25.

⁴² Jonathan Edwards, commenting on Ezekiel 28, says, “It is exceedingly manifest that the king of Tyrus is here spoken of as a type of the devil, or the prince of the angels or cherubim that fell.” *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, volume 2, page 608.

very embodiment of pride. It is this overlap that allowed Isaiah to so freely blur the conceptual-ethical lines between the figures.

I think this makes good sense. It isn't either-or but both-and.

Widening the View

In view of this observation, a larger point can be made by asking a basic question: Is pride the only parallel that can be extrapolated from this diabolical interrelationship?

If a tight correlation exists between ungodly rulers and Satan, an array of other sinful characteristics could potentially offer insight into the anatomy of Satan's essential ideals. Granting that a person could distill the salient traits from among the vast catalog of vices on offer, this would create a pathway back to the angelic fall.

Let me say it another way.

If the ideals of the kingdom of darkness on earth are intimately connected to Satan's original sin, then these sinful traits would inform us about the nature of the first rebellion. Either they are so entirely disjointed as to preclude drawing parallels, or they are not. If they are not, then we should excavate history since we'll find critical clues embedded in the ambitions of malevolent kings.

I'm of the opinion that we should start digging.

But before the excavation is set into motion, it is worth asking whether tyrannical rulers *alone* can be fruitfully mined. Might there be other noteworthy candidates?

I believe there are.

And they are quite popular these days.

⁴³ G.K. Beale writes, "Commentators have variously identified this figure either as a fallen angel (usually Satan) or, more often, as Adam. Whichever it is, the king of Tyre's sin and judgment is seen primarily through the lens of the sin and judgment of the figure in Eden instead of his own particular sin, so that this most ancient figure becomes a representative of the king of Tyre, and the latter's sin and judgment is viewed as a kind of recapitulation of the primeval sin. If this figure is to be identified with Adam, which is likely, then the king is being identified with Adam's sin and punishment." *We Become What We Worship*, pages 137-138.

The Tongues of Men and Fallen Angels

It was the summer of 2010 when I first listened to the debate between Pastor Doug Wilson and the famed atheist, Christopher Hitchens. The planned meeting of these heavyweights caused a stir, and I can still remember the sense of anticipation welling within me when I downloaded the audio of the debate onto my MP3 player. I knew it was going to be an immensely enjoyable two hours.

With their usual wit and charm, both men slugged it out, wielding their arguments like swords. The debate proved to be not only wildly entertaining but illuminating.

Near the end, sometime during the Q and A segment, Mr. Hitchens really uncoiled his tongue. He spoke venomously about God, blaspheming His name, and all with an air of intellectual superiority.

I had certainly listened to my fair share of atheists before, but there was something about Hitchens' words that especially struck me. During one of his more carefully crafted string of invectives, I can distinctly remember thinking, "I'm listening to Satan."

This no doubt sounds sensational on my part. One can almost picture a sweaty preacher thumping his pulpit, declaring, "Oooh, yes, brothers and sisters, I heard the devil's voice that night. Yeees, I did." And I can certainly picture Hitchens rolling his eyes at my comment, calling it delusional. Ridicule notwithstanding, the point remains. There was something about his choice of words, in combination with his demeanor and tone of voice that made me hear him in a different light.

Curious what he said?

Approaching the microphone, a woman asked Mr. Hitchens something like the following: If there is in fact a loving God, what would He have to do, or say, in order for you to believe that He exists, and that He wants you to have a relationship with Him?

Hitchens answered as follows,

"It's pretty self-evident that if there is a deity, he is not a loving and compassionate and tender One who wishes all the best for us all the time. If that was so our lives would be banal;

they'd be empty; they'd be pointless; they'd have no meaning; we'd have no reason for independence of mind; we'd have no reason for inquiry or free will; we'd have no reason to relish the struggle for innovation by anxiety and doubt, and so all of that would be, uh, an uh, warm bath—it would be like being a Buddhist. It would be a warm bath for semi-consciousness and benignity. Thank goodness it's not true... When I talked about dictatorship before, I would say of it, if it was celestial, what I would say about it if it was human and merely terrestrial—that it would be even worse if it came to me under the excuse of being benign. The worst kind of patronizing tyrannical authority is the one that says it's controlling you for your own good."

Hitchens' answer is pure blasphemy. He thinks life with God would be banal, empty, devoid of meaning, a shackled existence of imprisoned thoughts where the aspirations of men are confined under the "tyrannical authority" of God.

If it isn't plain already, Hitchens doesn't want to live under God's rule. He hates the idea.

And so does Satan.

As has been argued thus far, this shared hatred of God isn't coincidental. It's perfectly natural. As an unbeliever, Hitchens' hatred of God stems not only from the fact that he is a hardened sinner, but because Satan is also his spiritual father. The words of the one reflect those of the other. This means that while his answer was certainly his own, it pointed beyond itself, much like the pride of the Babylonian king. Like a son mimicking the mannerisms of his father, Hitchens sounded like the devil.

That is why I felt like I was listening to Satan.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Dr. Jay Adams draws a similar parallel in his book *The Grand Demonstration*. On page 94, he states, "As far as we know, evil began with Satan and the angels who 'left their proper habitation' (Jude 6). What sort of event this reference describes, we do not know. But in itself it reveals the same spirit, of wanting what one is not entitled to, that was present in the Garden, in the philosophy of Protagoras, in the 'enlightenment,' and in modern humanism. In all, there is an attempt to assume for one's self rights and privileges that God has retained for Himself."

It is this fundamental connection that allowed me to sketch the Evil One's words back in chapter two. While everything I wrote was speculative, as I have no idea what was exactly said, the speculation was rooted in the reflective speech of his children. I listened to them and worked my way backwards. The setting and circumstances surrounding an atheist like Hitchens are certainly different than those of Satan, but the essence of the sin is, I believe, remarkably similar.

This approach is, therefore, part of my methodological framework. If you were to draw a line down a sheet of paper and write at the top of one of the columns "Relevant Material Concerning the Fall of Satan," I would happily scribble under it "Hitchens quote."

Now the question that begs to be asked (given the viability of this approach) is: What can we learn from all this?

In an effort to answer this question, I would like to consider a few more atheistic quotes in order to formulate a handful of concrete conclusions. Like policemen trying to produce a composite sketch of a criminal, we'll observe common themes and distinctive traits among the ungodly and hopefully sharpen our picture of Satan's awful idea.

The Anatomy of Unbelief

Enter Dan Barker.

Mr. Barker isn't one of the so-called four horsemen, but he's certainly been an influential atheist for years, debating, writing, and contributing significantly to atheistic causes like the *Freedom from Religion Foundation*. He's a good representative of the position.

In a debate in 2008 at Harvard University entitled *Christianity vs. Atheism*, Dan Barker spoke forcefully, railing against God with open hatred. In one segment, he said the following,

"On balance, the moral teachings of the founder of Christianity are inferior and they are dangerous. It's to the credit of most Christians, I think, that they have risen above their brutal Bible. They are smarter than Jesus. They are kinder than God. Since Christianity is a salvation system and there's no such thing as sin, then we don't need it. Even Jesus is quoted as saying, "They who are healthy don't need the

doctor, only they who are sick” in Matthew 9:12. We atheists don’t consider ourselves sick. Atheism is a wellness of mind, and I think it’s a kind of courage of conviction in a predominantly religious culture that makes it possible for us to see the world as it really is, which is our best shot at creating solutions which are truly relevant. Think about this: if salvation is the cure, then atheism is the prevention.”

Atheists judge everything according to the dictates of their own heart. They function as the ultimate standard—the authoritative bar by which God must bow—invoking ethical norms of their own making, but which are inexorably grounded in the whims of their own subjective preferences.⁴⁵ C. S. Lewis famously described this as putting God in the docks. Men are judge and jury, not God.

All this is unfettered arrogance, and it is one of the hallmark characteristics of atheism. If these atheists were in the Garden of Eden, they would have set up a science lab and tested the claims of their Creator, proclaiming, “How can God expect me, a rational man, to follow Him without making sure He knows what He’s talking about? I’ll decide whether or not He’s worthy of such trust. I’ll determine whether or not He should be obeyed. We must judge Him according to a criterion of our own making!”

I will determine... I will decide... I will judge...

With these declarations there is a subtle but significant shift in authority. If there’s one word that best describes this outlook (besides sinful) that word would surely be autonomy.

Autonomy

⁴⁵ Atheists can (and often do) dispute this observation, but it is done so in vain. I could argue why this is so, but the atheist will continue to judge my reply according to their own standards and promptly reject it, thus demonstrating, once again, that they are gods unto themselves. Claiming to prize the disciplines of science and rationality won’t help the situation either. Facts are always interpreted. And they will interpret the facts in such a way so as to appease their fundamental heart commitments. Having listened to countless hours of atheistic podcasts and interviews and debates, nothing could be plainer to me. We will examine this further in chapter 7.

Autonomy lies at the root of sin. It lurks behind every sentence in the quote above. It energizes the belief that there is wisdom found outside the One in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3). This is why Mr. Barker can say that Christians are smarter than Jesus. It likewise allows him to assert that he sees the world “as it really is.” Here we should recall what has been dubbed “Satanic Omniscience.” Sin and autonomy, it is believed, open new vistas of knowledge. Reality, it is thought, isn’t a system singularly defined by God’s nature, but it is a realm full of godless potential. It is a place where facts can be reinterpreted, recreated, and lived out.⁴⁶

Autonomy is the godless quest for God-like attributes.

We will have much more to say about this when we examine the irony of sin and epistemology, but for now it’s sufficient to note that Mr. Barker believes he is the one who truly understands reality.

As an aside, I suspect that when most people think of Satan, or Satanism, they immediately conjure images of pentagrams and Ouija boards, possibly ghoulish costumes with axes protruding from their heads. It’s all very “Halloweenish.” While there’s much to be said about such observations (since Satan does represent death and horror), there is nevertheless a far subtler, not to mention a more fundamental, element that often escapes the pedestrian’s notice. It is this: at the root of Satanism is pride, autonomy, and a refusal to submit to God’s Word. When cast in the light of costumes and witchcraft, Halloween turns out to be far more manageable for sinners. So long as they don’t engage in sorcery or become serial

⁴⁶ Canadian physician and prominent atheist, Dr. Marian Sherman, wrote, “Humanism seeks the fullest development of the human being.. Humanists acknowledge no Supreme Being and we approach all life from the point of view of science and reason. Ours is not a coldly clinical view, for we believe that if human beings will but practice love of one another and use their wonderful faculty of speech, we can make a better world, happy for all. But there must be no dogma.” *Toronto Star Weekly*, *What Makes an Atheist Tick?* The British Humanist Association states in its credo, “Humanists seek to make the best of the one life we have by creating meaning and purpose for ourselves.” Tom Flynn likewise stated, “We don’t have big “M” meaning. We don’t have the big guy in the sky. We don’t think there is one capital “M” meaning in life. We think it’s enough to have small “m” meanings that each of us build out of our own lives and our own aspirations and our own judgments of what’s best for the human future.” *Point of Inquiry*, March 14th, 2011.

killers, they are, by and large, free from the grip of Satan. They aren't *that* bad. But if the Garden teaches us anything, it is that one sin—one act of treason—lies at the heart of Satanism, and it is more than enough to throw an entire universe out of orbit. If men would but understand this simple truth, they would begin to grasp how far they fall short of God's standard of righteousness; and in so doing, they would learn something of Samuel's words to King Saul:

“And Samuel said, 'Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry.’” (1Sa 15:22-23a)

Free Thought

Let's consider another quote. In the same debate, Mr. Barker warned,

“And look at how the sheep just follow along. That is dangerous to be sheep. We should not be slaves. Paul called himself a slave of Christ proudly, and Paul said that a Christian should bring into captivity every thought unto the obedience of Christ. Captivity is not freedom. In the Proverbs it's “Lean not on your own understanding.” It also says that “There's a way that seems right to a man but the end thereof is death.” That is dangerous to surrender your mind to someone else's mind, be it a God, or a dictator, or a master, or a church, or a pope.”

If autonomy is the flag waving highest on the castle of sin, banners reading “freethought” line its walls. Like Hitchens, Dan Barker views obedience to Christ as intellectual suicide—like a man locking himself in a cell and tossing the key out of reach. According to him, divine sovereignty should be viewed as a dangerous and repugnant restraint. Man must be able to think freely, which means that he must be able

to think independently of God.⁴⁷ The phrase “tyrannical dictator” is often tossed around. Sometimes the more pedestrian term “bully” is used. God, they say, is cosmic thought police.

In line with these basic convictions, they produce magazines entitled “Free Inquiry” and they coin terms like “freethought” to define their movement. With glowing pride, they champion the right to form thoughts, even entire worldviews, apart from God.

Why is that?

Because it’s a necessary component of autonomy. You cannot have autonomy without “freethought.”

Dan Barker writes, “There is joy in rationality, happiness in clarity of mind. Freethought is thrilling and fulfilling—absolutely essential to mental health and happiness.”⁴⁸

Oh, how relevant are the words of Milton when he imagines Satan saying, “The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heaven out of Hell, a Hell of Heaven... Here at least we shall be free; the Almighty hath not built here for His envy; will not drive us hence. Here we may reign secure, and, in my choice, to reign is worth ambition, though in Hell. Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven...”

In sum, there are at least five major characteristics underlying the presuppositional framework inherent to atheism. These would include:

- The belief that submission to God is akin to slavery.
- The belief that autonomy is fundamental to life, and that it is an unchallengeable human right.
- The belief that men can and should judge God and His standards, thereby elevating themselves above God’s law, continually calling it into doubt.
- The belief that God’s ways are not the path to ultimate happiness.

⁴⁷ In his book *Losing Faith in Faith*, Dan Barker writes, “How happy can you be when you think every action and thought is being monitored by a judgmental ghost?”

⁴⁸ Ibid.

- The belief that “freethought” is the surest means to obtaining ultimate truth.⁴⁹

In combination with these points is an intense hatred of God. Like Satan, they love to rail against the Lord since He poses the greatest threat to their cherished autonomy. Jesus Christ is the One who points at them and commands them to repent, and they despise Him for it.

Upping the Stakes

Earlier we said that autonomy is the godless quest for God-like attributes. While it is true that atheists don’t claim to be gods, they certainly model the ambition.⁵⁰ Pagan kings, on the other hand, aren’t nearly so shy. Like the Babylonian king in Isaiah’s day, they proclaim, “I will make myself like the Most High” (Isaiah 14:14). This has been true of emperors, Caesars, dictators, and sundry other world leaders.

Here one need only recall the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt sitting on their thrones, claiming to be divine, saying, “The Nile is mine; I made it for myself” (Ezekiel 29:3, 9); or Nebuchadnezzar, who, when he looked out over the Babylonian empire from his rooftop, declared, “Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty” (Daniel 4:30)?⁵¹ They are like the King of Tyre, of whom the Lord said, “In the pride of your heart you say, ‘I am a god’” (Ezekiel 28:2).

⁴⁹ This is often cast in terms of the sciences, as though the discipline of science demands a materialistic starting point.

⁵⁰ It’s hard to take the Humanist Manifestos as asserting anything less. In the second Manifesto, we are told, “As nontheists, we begin with humans not God, nature not deity.” And again, “We affirm that moral values derive their source from human experience. Ethics is autonomous and situational needing no theological or ideological sanction.” Here one might recall the words of Protagoras: “Man is the measure of all things.”

⁵¹ Consider as well the pompous claims of the Chaldeans in Isaiah 47. They said, “I will continue forever—the eternal queen” (vs. 7), and “I am, and there is none besides me” (vs. 8, 10), which is an extraordinarily blasphemous counterclaim to the Lord’s words in Isaiah 45:18, 21-22.

The imperial cult of Rome likewise deified its leaders, registering them in the Roman Pantheon after death. Not content with such postmortem adulation, a number of these emperors felt it necessary to expedite the process. Why wait to become a god? Therefore, some out of a mad desire to be worshiped, demanded to be viewed as divine while yet alive. Caligula serves as a blatant example. Dressing up like Mercury, Hercules, and even Venus, he claimed to be worthy of worship. He even ordered that a sacred precinct be set apart for his worship at Miletus. But always seeking to outdo himself, he erected another temple on the Palatine, seeking to remodel a statue of Zeus after himself.⁵²

Another Roman Emperor, Titus Domitianus, more commonly known as Domitian, was equally zealous in his quest for self-deification. One Roman historian wrote of him, “For he even insisted upon being regarded as a god and took vast pride in being called ‘master’ and god. These titles were used not merely in speech but also in written documents.”⁵³

Antiochus Epiphanes, an unconscionably wicked Syrian king in the 2nd century BC, sacrificed swine in the Jewish temple, and forbade, under penalty of death, circumcision, Sabbath observance, as well the reading of the Torah. He was a madman bent on “civilizing” the Jews and would execute those refusing to eat swine’s flesh while slaughtering others for not worshipping pagan idols. Many were sold into slavery and others were tortured in an attempt to get them to renounce their faith. Significantly, he demanded to be worshiped as a god. It’s reported that his coins were stamped with the inscription *Theos Epiphanes* (God manifest), probably a blasphemous counterfeit of the Hebrew concept “God with us.”

Daniel (perhaps) spoke cryptically of this monstrosity, writing prophetically,

“Out of one of them came a little horn, which grew exceedingly great toward the south, toward the east, and toward the glorious land. It grew great, even to the host of heaven. And some of the host and some of the stars it threw down to the ground and trampled on them. It became great,

⁵² Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, LIX.28

⁵³ Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, cited at the *Associates for Biblical Research*.

even as great as the Prince of the host. And the regular burnt offering was taken away from him, and the place of his sanctuary was overthrown. And a host will be given over to it together with the regular burnt offering because of transgression, and it will throw truth to the ground, and it will act and prosper.” (Daniel 8:9-12)

This self-deifying phenomenon isn’t a relic of the past. All through the centuries, even up into the modern era, there have been those who have yearned for the title of “God.” Japanese rulers and Chinese emperors have long flirted with claims of divinity. The papacy has abused its power, claiming the title Vicar of Christ. This heretical overreach won it the title “anti-Christ” during the Protestant Reformation. One is likewise reminded of the scene in the documentary *Prelude to War* where a classroom of German children are shown proudly singing:

Adolf Hitler is our Savior, our hero.
He is the noblest being in the whole wide world.
For Hitler we live,
For Hitler we die.
Our Hitler is our Lord
Who rules a brave new world.

The desire of kings to be honored as divine is, on the one hand, totally bizarre, if not entirely absurd given man’s blatant fallibility and fragility,⁵⁴ but when viewed from the perspective of the spiritual realm, it’s quite understandable, even if stark mad. Reckless in their thirst for power, these leaders become a law unto themselves, shaping society according to their own dictates. Their heads become swollen with pride, they ravage nations, steal as they please, make war, and, not infrequently, persecute the people of God.

⁵⁴ Ironically, many of these godless rulers died in ignominy. Caesars were routinely assassinated, poisoned, or cut down in shadowy corners. Here one is also reminded of what the Lord said to the King of Tyre: “They will bring you down to the pit, and you will die a violent death in the heart of the seas. Will you then say, ‘I am a god,’ in the presence of those who kill you? You will be but a man, not a god, in the hands of those who slay you.” (Ezekiel 28:8-9)

None of this is accidental, nor is it merely the case of humanity creating a few bad apples. These men are anti-Christ, tyrants forged out of the dungeons of hell. They crave to be like the Most High, because, as has been stressed, Satan craves to be like the Most High.⁵⁵

The Epitome of Self-Deification

This synergism is, perhaps, made nowhere more evident than in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. Writing to the unsettled and somewhat confused saints, Paul reminds them that the day of the Lord would not come "unless the rebellion comes first" and "the man of lawlessness is revealed" (2:3). Describing this yet-to-be-unveiled individual, Paul says, "He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God" (2 Thess 2:4, NIV).

Here we see the fateful attribute of self-deification on full display. There is going to be a man who exalts himself above everything, claiming, in a very real sense, to be the God of gods. It is a wildly idolatrous claim. But note that this man isn't a lone wolf. "The coming of the lawless one," writes Paul, "will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing" (vs. 9-10).

The man of sin will be the grand expression of Satan himself, an incarnation of unmitigated evil.

Now although the man of lawlessness is a single individual, this doesn't preclude us from drawing parallels with pagan kings, for in the same section in 2 Thessalonians, Paul says that "the secret power of

⁵⁵ Stephen Charnock agrees when he writes, "And since the devil hath, in all ages of the world, usurped a worship to himself which is only due to God, and would be served by man, as if he were the God of the world; since all his endeavor was to be worshiped as the Supreme God on earth, it is not unreasonable to think, that he invaded the supremacy of God in heaven, and endeavored to be like the Most High before his banishment, as he hath attempted to be like the Most High since." *The Existence and Attributes of God*, page 429.

lawlessness is already at work” (vs. 7). This means that while Paul was anticipating the arrival of this particular figure, the same diabolical force was a present reality. It was, as he said, “already at work.” This same perspective is found in John’s writings. He can speak of a future and final anti-Christ figure, while yet maintaining present manifestations (1 John 2:18, 4:2-3).

It has long been the tendency of saints (especially those of a dispensational flavor) to confidently assert that a particular political or religious entity in their day is *the* anti-Christ. But as history moves on, and as the evil dissipates and reemerges under a different banner, the once sure and bold predictions are shown to have been made in haste. While it’s easy to grow frustrated with such predictive fervor, the sentiment isn’t entirely without warrant. The biblical paradigm allows us to view these tyrannical eruptions as nothing less than the power of lawlessness at work. It’s Satan seeking again to gain ascendancy.

When the Reformers, for example, almost unanimously believed that the Pope was the anti-Christ, they were, in many ways, correct. Of course, he wasn’t *the* anti-Christ, but merely another flareup in history. There will be a final, awful embodiment of evil, rivaling, even exceeding, former manifestations, but it too is doomed to failure, for as Paul assures the Thessalonians, the man of sin will be destroyed by the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thess 2:8).

To reiterate, this sampling of pagan kings shouldn’t be divorced from the man of lawlessness. Since the same foul spirit is at work in all of them, they’re of the same basic stock.

Counterfeiting God: A Case Study in Revelation

These observations allow us to confidently assert that a crucial component to the pride of Satan includes a desire to be worshiped and esteemed as God. In the book of Revelation, we receive further confirmation that we’re on the right track.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ I am greatly indebted to Vern Poythress and have leaned heavily on the insights found in his helpful book “The Returning King,” especially pages 16-25.

Throughout the apocalyptic vision, the theme of spiritual warfare is continually drawn in picturesque images, detailing how the kingdom of darkness wars against God and His people. The symbolism is rife with meaning, and a comparative analysis of the imagery reveals a kind of satanic counterfeiting of God, or an aping of the divine. This mimicry is, to be sure, a gross perversion of the Almighty, but it's not so dissimilar so as to preclude drawing parallels.

Chief among the examples is Satan's unholy attempt to model God's triune nature. In order to develop this concept, consider the depiction found in Revelation 13:1:

“And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns and his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name.”

This isn't the first instance of a monster emerging onto the scene. In the previous chapter, a red Dragon bent on devouring the Messiah is depicted in vivid terms (vs. 4-5). Upon failing to kill the Messiah, he directs his anger towards the rest of God's people (vs. 17). After this, the vision suddenly shifts to the Beast. The description and character of this new creature is remarkably similar to that of the Dragon. Like the Dragon, it is a terrifying monster (13:1-8) with seven heads and ten horns, along with an assemblage of crowns. Such striking similarities aren't accidental. The Beast images the Dragon.

But why?

Let's back up.

John identifies the Dragon as “that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray” (12:9). This is helpful since the identity of the creature is made crystal clear. Now when the scene of chapter 12 shifts to that of chapter 13, a curious segue is employed by the apostle. He notes that the Dragon “stood on the shore of the sea.”⁵⁷ It may be reading too much into the statement, but the imagery, when combined with the forthcoming parallels, is reminiscent of the Spirit of God hovering over the waters in Genesis 1:2. The allusion suggests that the Beast is the Dragon's creation. The

⁵⁷ Textual variants occur at this verse, but the one quoted here is probably correct. If it isn't correct, however, the larger point of this section still holds.

Dragon is the one who summons it and grants to it his “power and his throne and great authority” (vs. 2b; see also vs. 4). The two are so closely related that both serve as objects of worship (13:4). This is Satan’s attempt to imitate God the Father by producing a counterfeit “Son,” namely, the Beast.

This counterfeiting is best seen by examining how the Beast mirrors Christ. As already noted, the Beast has ten crowns on his horns (13:1). Christ has “many crowns” on his head (19:12). The Beast has blasphemous names (13:1), while Christ has excellent and majestic names (19:11-13, 16). The Beast utters proud words and blasphemies (13:5), but Christ speaks the truth (19:11, 15). The Beast possesses great power (13:2). Christ possesses power and authority (12:5, 10). Jesus is the Lamb of God, slain for the sins of the world, and the one who rose victorious from the grave (4:6). Curiously, the Beast vaguely counterfeits the resurrection. In 13:3 we are told that one of its heads seemed to have suffered a fatal wound, but the wound was ultimately healed. Addressing the seemingly fatal nature of the wound, Vern Poythress provides some insight. He writes,

“The Beast did not actually die and come to life again. He did not experience an actual resurrection. But he had a wound that one would think *should* have led to his death. His recovery was marvelous and astonishing—so astonishing that it was a big factor in leading people to follow him. Just as the resurrection of Christ is the chief event that astonishes people and draws them to follow him (John 12:32), so here a counterfeit miracle, a counterfeit resurrection, leads to people following the Beast.”⁵⁸

As noted earlier, the Beast is worshiped (13:4) receiving its own songs of praise and admiration. The worshipers cry out, “Who is like the Beast? Who can make war against him?” This is a blasphemous attempt to counterfeit the worship of God. The Psalmist asks, “Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high” (Psalm 113:5)? Or consider the song of Moses when the LORD crushed the Egyptians in the Red Sea: “Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is

⁵⁸ *The Returning King*, pages 18-19.

like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders” (Exodus 15:11)?

The parallels continue.

The followers of the Beast receive a mark identifying them as his own (13:16), and this mark secures various “blessings.” In a similar fashion, Christ seals His people by placing His name, along with His Father’s name, on their foreheads (14:1), which secures a blessed inheritance, as well as the protection of God Almighty.

In accordance with Psalm 2 and Matthew 28, Jesus is given all authority in heaven and on earth—a scepter of divine authority to rule the nations in righteousness. Moreover, by virtue of his death and resurrection, Christ ransomed people from every tribe, tongue and nation (Rev. 5:9; 7:9-12). The Beast wants this as well. He wants to rule over everything. Therefore “authority was given it [the Beast] over every tribe and people and language and nation” (Rev. 13:7). We also know that the Beast makes war with the saints. In the final confrontation where Christ appears on a white horse, ready to destroy the enemies of God, the Beast responds by leading the kings of the earth out against Him (19:19).

Again Poythress is helpful. He writes,

“In this scene, Christ is the divine warrior. He fulfills the Old Testament prophecies that speak of God appearing to fight against the enemies (Zech. 14:1-5; 9:14-17; Isa. 59:16-18; Hab. 3:11-15). Christ is the holy warrior, who judges with justice (Rev. 19:11). The Beast, we infer, is the demonic counterfeit, the unholy warrior from the demonic region of the abyss. As Christ is the head of the holy army, so the Beast is the head of the unholy army.”⁵⁹

Here one might note that Jesus as the second Adam functions as the covenantal head of humanity, thereby serving as the pattern for glorified, human transformation. This is brought out in 1 Corinthians 15:45-49. Just as the descendants of the first Adam shared in his likeness, tragically inheriting sin and bodies of dust, those connected with the second Adam shall be transformed, both physically and

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* Page 19.

spiritually. They shall, as Paul writes, “bear the image of the man of heaven” (vs. 49) and be changed “in the twinkling of an eye” (vs. 52).

Due to the Beast’s desire to rule over all nations (Rev. 13:7-8), he aspires to be another federal head, perhaps even a third Adam, if you will, but one originating from the abyss. But this is sheer folly. Christ is not only the second Adam (1 Cor. 15:47), but the last (1 Cor. 15:45). Anything else is a vain and spurious counterfeit. There is, nevertheless, a transformative connection between the Beast and his followers. They reflect him. Since he’s a grotesque beast—a strange and unnatural combination of lion, bear, leopard, and ten-horned monster (Rev. 13:2)—the nations are therefore likened to beasts (Daniel 2; 7). Individuals aren’t exempt either. While describing a particularly repugnant group of false teachers, Peter says, “But these, like irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed, blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant, will also be destroyed in their destruction” (2 Peter 2:12; see also Daniel 4:16). Sinful humanity degrades into a dehumanized vision of corruption—they become beastly, animalistic, unclean. As the last Adam, Christ Jesus will not only subdue the world of beastly men, but he will conquer the great Beast and establish His kingdom as supreme.

Thus far we have the Dragon imitating God the Father and the Beast mimicking the Son, but what about the Holy Spirit? Here the unholy triad is made complete with the introduction of another diabolical figure, the False Prophet (Rev. 16:13). Following on the heels of the first Beast, we read in Revelation 13:11-14:

“Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed. It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people, and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived.”

We are told that the False Prophet performs great signs (vs. 13), which aren't entirely unlike the miraculous signs performed by the Holy Spirit. We also know that the Holy Spirit draws attention to Christ thereby encouraging worship of the Son. In a similar but perverse fashion, the False Prophet promotes the worship of the Beast (13:12). As the Counselor, the Spirit is connected with Christ, sharing in His work and authority (John 14:16, 18; 2 Corinthians 3:17-18). In some similar way, the False Prophet "exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence" (Rev. 13:12). Lastly, the Holy Spirit illuminates and guides people to the truth (1 John 2:27). In contradistinction, the False Prophet deceives (Rev. 13:4).

Given these parallels, it would seem that Satan not only attempts to occupy the throne of God, but he attempts to mirror the very Godhead itself.

Sinful Men as a Link to the Past: A Note of Caution

Thus far we have examined the underlying presuppositions of atheism along with the peculiar desire of pagan kings to rule as gods. More could be said about such kings,⁶⁰ but we need not delve further.

The purpose of this analysis has been to identify the underlying characteristics of both groups in order to better understand the ideals of Satan, thereby allowing us to reconstruct the nature of the first sin.

So what have we found? What can we say?

When the blatant epistemological autonomy and strident self-sufficiency of atheism are forged with the godless absolutizing of the self and the unfettered pride of despotism, a truly horrific image emerges. We see a person consumed with a sense of their own greatness. They function as the standard by which all else is measured, bowing the knee to no one. They believe they possess the means, as well as the capacity, to stand over everything. Simply put, such a person operates like a god.

⁶⁰ With pagan kings there is: a shift from "God is the measure of all things" to "I am the measure of all things." There is an unquenchable desire for greater power and authority, even absolute power and authority. There is unmitigated pride and self-assurance, as well as the demand for complete and total allegiance to their causes, which includes the violent conquest of other nations.

Charnock writes,

“All sin in its nature is a contempt of the Divine dominion. As every act of obedience is a confirmation of the law, and consequently a subscription of the authority of the Lawgiver (Deut 27:26), so every breach to it is a conspiracy against the sovereignty of the Lawgiver; setting up our will against the will of God is an articing against his authority, as setting up our reason against the methods of God is an articing against his wisdom; the intendment of every act of sin is to wrest the scepter out of God’s hand.”⁶¹

In view of the aforementioned truths, a caution remains. We must be careful not to draw an unfiltered one-to-one correlation between the evil actions of kings (or devout atheists) and Satan’s original idea. This isn’t because Satan’s idea wasn’t equally as heinous, but rather we must keep in mind that he was an upright creature when he conceived the doctrine. His idea was more like an acorn, not a fully mature oak. In other words, his original formulation wouldn’t have been framed in terms of “I want absolute power in order to rape and pillage.” Those desires flow out of an evil heart. Since he was holy, his idea must have been conceived in more congenial terms, at least initially. This is why it is crucial to insist that Satan *thought* his idea was compatible with goodness. But more than that, the idea must have been able to be construed as being potentially good.

Here we’ve brought full circle back to the six pillars of Satan’s idea outlined in chapter two. By exploring “that-which-God-cannot-do,” Satan convinced himself and a host of others that there was something grand to be gained—that there was a great potential to be unlocked. Autonomy whispered in his ear tales of splendor; and as we know, it was a tale he adopted and embraced wholeheartedly.

⁶¹ *The Existence and Attributes of God*, On God’s Dominion. Charnock goes on to say, “All sin, in its nature, is the despoiling God of his sole sovereignty, which was probably the first thing the devil aimed at... It is likely his sin was an affecting equality with God in empire, or a freedom from the sovereign authority of God; because he imprinted such a kind of persuasion on man at his first temptation: ‘Ye shall be as gods’ (Gen 3:5).” His entire train of thought is excellent, and I would encourage the reader to investigate Charnock further.

Chapter Four

Angels as Onlookers



Puzzled Angels?

In the Garden, when Satan won what appeared to be a decisive victory, having enticed Adam to partake of the forbidden fruit, one cannot help but wonder if the elect angels who had stood resilient in the face of the first great apostasy weren't puzzled by the outcome, even troubled. For it bears stressing that when Adam fell, more was at stake than the question of one man's obedience. The all-sufficiency and unique Lordship of God had been called into question by Lucifer. A challenge had gone forth and a rival kingdom had been established. Satan was intent on proving that his new way of life was more glorious and more promising than that of God's. He promised results. And now, in what was no doubt an advancement of darkness, Lucifer's position yielded measurable "fruit." Evidence had been acquired. A sinister "I told you so" echoed in the ears of the elect angels.

The seriousness of the situation was amplified by another fact. Many had chosen to follow Lucifer, and some, if not all of the fallen angels, were former friends—persons whom the elect angels knew and loved. But now they were enemies—terrible enemies. The first great falling away wasn't without felt loss, especially when one considers the parting words of the demons. They probably mocked the faithful angels and cast aspersions on their character. Coups aren't exactly bastions of encouragement.

I suspect that the swell of emotions felt by the elect angels wasn't entirely different than those of our own when a brother or sister in the Lord causes trouble in the church and suddenly leaves in disgust. It is a painful and sometimes disillusioning experience for the faithful

—painful because sin is a grievous thing,⁶² disillusioning because of sin's chaotic nature. It leaves one trying to make sense of the inexplicable.

The cataclysmic events were no doubt jarring. In the case of the elect angels, the problem of evil with all of its emotional and intellectual challenges must have bewildered them to some degree.

Here one might wonder if this is stated too strongly. Sinless creatures, it might be supposed, wouldn't feel puzzled, or troubled, or harbor questions. Their trust would be so rock solid, so perfectly pure, they wouldn't feel uneasy, right? Doesn't John teach that love drives out fear?

Yes, love does drive out fear. And yes, faith would instill assurance and peace. But it doesn't mean the angels were fully aware of the plans of God. They had unanswered questions. It also doesn't mean the angels were emotionally passive, as if they were a dispassionate host of celestial stoics. Their trust remained firm, but as creatures under trial they had to choose whom they would trust. And trust requires faith. Behind their faith swirled a vast web of beliefs and convictions. But with each belief, and with each conviction, Satan's idea was hovering nearby, calling it into question, pressing on it, tempting them to see things from another perspective. If we are going to take seriously Lucifer's successful sales pitch which drew away a host of angels, I cannot see how we can think otherwise.

That being said, our perspective about such matters will turn on a couple key suppositions. If we believe that the angels were confirmed in holiness immediately following the trial of Satan, then we will tend to think of them as being perfectly undisturbed by the devil's suggestions. I don't mean to suggest that they wouldn't loathe sin, but that their thoughts would be so completely anchored in holiness, uncertainty and uneasiness wouldn't assail them.

Similarly, if we believe that the angels were wholly untroubled by the future, knowing the plans of God, then we will be less inclined to imagine the angels feeling puzzled by God's dealings with Satan. In other words, if they were aware of the script of history, then the

⁶² It would also seem that the degree of sorrow is increased when the heart of the one grieving is holy. So in the case of the elect angels, their sorrow must have been acutely felt.

elements of suspense and surprise, even tension, would be largely factored out of the emotional equation. The story of redemption wouldn't be quite as intense. It would be like watching a movie for the second time.

So which way is it? Are the angels equally as concerned with the problem of evil as we are? Or are they not bothered by such questions?

Angelic Assurance

I have long ago learned to turn to Edwards when I'm grappling with a tough theological question. Time and time again, he's proven immensely helpful. Few equal the rigor and depth of his expositions. Just about the time I think I'm asking a fresh question, he'll not only address it, but answer it with considerable insight. The subject of angels is no exception.

Regarding our present issue, Edwards has much to say. In a section entitled "Miscellaneous Observations," Edwards, perhaps more than anywhere else,⁶³ explores the subject of angels, and primarily that of their confirmation and fall. Under a heading entitled *Angels confirmed*, he begins with this sentence:

"The angels that stood are doubtless confirmed in holiness, and their allegiance to God; so that they never will to sin, and they are out of every danger of it."

After reading the above, the trajectory of Edwards' position appears to be clear. But in a surprising move, he immediately goes on to say:

"But yet I believe God makes use of means to confirm them. They were confirmed by the sight of the terrible destruction that God brought upon the angels that fell. They see what a dreadful thing it is to rebel. They were further confirmed by the manifestation God had made of his displeasure against sin,

⁶³ "The Wisdom of God Displayed in the Way of Salvation" and "Christ Exalted" provides further insight into the perspective of Edwards, though not as extensively.

by the eternal damnation of reprobates among men, and by the amazing discovery of his holy jealousy and justice in the sufferings of Christ... and by the new and greater manifestations of the glory of God, which have been successively made in heaven, and by his dispensations towards the church, and above all, by the work of redemption by Jesus Christ.”⁶⁴

Here it's plain that Edwards widens the scope of the angels' confirmation to a point well beyond the time of Satan's rebellion. Stated simply, their confirmation didn't happen in one fell swoop. God, it is urged, utilized means, and that over an extended period of time.

What a staggering thought! Edwards teaches that the angels were not ultimately confirmed in holiness until the apex of God's response to sin: the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Put bluntly, and in Edwards' own words, “the highest heavens was not a place of such happiness and rest before Christ's ascension as it was afterwards; for the angels were not till then confirmed.”⁶⁵ And again, “But when their time of probation was at an end, and they had the reward of certain confirmation by having eternal life absolutely made certain to them, is in some degree uncertain. However, there are many things that make it look exceedingly probable to me, that whenever this was done, it was through the Son of God, that he was the immediate dispenser of this reward, and that they received it of the Father through him.”⁶⁶

The evidence Edwards presents in defense of his position is varied and detailed; and some of it depends on his own nuanced view of the fall of Satan, which differs in a number of important respects from that of my own.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, while some of the reasons adduced in favor of a delayed confirmation are peculiar to his view of Satan's original sin, a substantial portion of his arguments align nicely with that of my own. In fact, anyone reading carefully through Ephesians

⁶⁴ The Works of Jonathan Edwards, page 604.

⁶⁵ Ibid, page 607.

⁶⁶ Ibid, page 612.

⁶⁷ See Appendix A, where I explore Edwards' view and offer a critique. I would, however, urge the reader to first digest my position.

or Colossians will have to wrestle with this issue as there are a number of texts that raise some truly interesting questions about angels.

Let us consider a few.

And Heaven?

Sometimes the Bible jolts us with the unexpected. Colossians 1:16-20 is surely one such place. Paul writes,

“For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”

Did you catch that? It’s in the last verse. It’s a simple addition, but one that causes a double-take. Paul writes that all things will be reconciled to Christ, whether things on earth *or things in heaven*! If that little addition at the end wasn’t startling enough, he notes that the reconciling power is rooted in the peace accomplished through “the blood of the cross.”

We’re certainly accustomed to affirming the reconciling nature of the cross for men, but angels? At first blush, this is hard to understand. What in the world does Paul mean? We know that demons aren’t going to be saved, so it can’t be referencing them in a salvific sense. We also know that the elect angels haven’t sinned, so how could an atonement made on behalf of men apply to them?

Here someone may try to sidestep the issue by interpreting “things in heaven” in non-angelic terms. But this proves difficult. Over and over again, Paul appeals to the heavenly hosts, or angels, using this same basic language (compare Ephesians 1:10, 20, 2:6, 3:10, 15, 6:12).

Moreover “all things” doesn’t leave a lot of wiggle room. The most natural reading points to angels.

So what in the world is being taught? Let’s turn to the good Puritan again. Edwards answers succinctly:

“By this it appears that it was the design of God to so exalt and glorify his Son, that all his intelligent creatures should in every thing be after him, inferior to him, subject to him, and dependent on him, and should have all their fullness, all their supplies from him, and in him.”⁶⁸

He explains further in another place, arguing:

“If this be understood only to extend to men; yet, if it be one thing wherein God wills that his Son should in all things have the preeminence, and that all fullness should dwell in him, that it is by him that men are brought to an union with God; why would it not be another, that by him the angels also are brought to their confirmed union with him, when it is plainly implied in what the apostle says, that it is the Father’s design that Christ should in all things have the preeminence with respect to *the angels* as well as with respect to *men*, and that both angels and men should have all their fullness in him? If they have their *fullness* in him, I do not see how it can be otherwise than that they should have their reward and eternal life and blessedness in him.”⁶⁹

While I must admit to feeling less than sanguine about his answer, as this subject is only touched upon here and there in Scripture (and rather foggily), Edwards makes good sense, especially when a number of related texts are strung together. According to Paul, the death and resurrection of Christ was so monumentally significant that its implications cannot be restricted to the affairs of men. It impacts every square inch of reality. Every molecule! The Lordship of Christ rips through the universe leaving nothing untouched.

⁶⁸ Ibid. Page 615.

⁶⁹ Ibid. Page 613. Emphasis his.

Consider a handful of passages along these lines. Note the scope and universality of Paul's words. Read them with an eye trained on the question of angels. Ask yourself if there's something right about Edwards' perspective.

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." (Eph 1:9-10)

"I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers... that you may know... what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." (Eph 1:16-23)

"But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, 'When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.' (In saying, 'He ascended,' what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)" (Eph 4:7-10)

"For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority." (Col 2:9-10)

"Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of

Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Php 2:9-11)

“Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him. (1 Peter 3:21-22)

“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.’” (Mat 28:18)

I suspect that many will gladly affirm the unique Lordship of Jesus Christ but will nevertheless feel uneasy about making the jump from Christ’s reign to the bestowal of the reward of eternal life unto angels. I can sympathize. And yet, I feel there’s something right and true lurking behind those texts, a truth that does in fact correlate the cross of Christ to both men and angels. Isn’t that, after all, what Colossians 1:19-20 implies?

Now the relationship of the cross to men and angels will no doubt differ greatly, yet there will nevertheless remain a centrality of interest to both. This appears to flow quite naturally from Christ’s having gathered all the spirits in heaven, and all the angels, and all the church on earth into one family and government. He is Head of all. And His fullness extends to all and fills all. All grace is mediated through Him.

With this in mind, here is how Edwards explains the relationship of the cross to men and angels:

“Here we may take occasion to observe the sweet harmony that there is between God’s dispensations, and particularly the analogy and agreement there is between his dealings with the angels and his dealings with mankind; that though one is innocent and the other guilty, the one having eternal life by a covenant of grace, the other by a covenant of works, yet both have eternal life by his Son Jesus Christ God man, and both, through different ways, by the humiliation and sufferings of Christ; the one as the price of life, the other as the greatest

and last trial of their steadfast and persevering obedience. Both have eternal life through different ways, by their adherence, and voluntary submission, and self-dedication to Christ crucified, and he is made the Lord and King of both, and head of communication, influence, and enjoyment of both, and a head of confirmation to both, for as the angels have confirmed life in and by Christ, so have the saints: all that are united in this head have in him a security of perseverance.”⁷⁰

While we may puzzle over some of the details of Edwards’ position, I cannot help but think he’s leaning in the right direction.

To sum up, the angels weren’t immediately confirmed in righteousness but successively grew in their knowledge and assurance while witnessing God’s mighty acts against the power of sin and the kingdom of darkness. Questions were answered. Further insights into God’s glory were displayed. Paradoxes were resolved.

An example might prove helpful.

In Revelation 12:10, Satan is referred to as the accuser because he continually harps on the sins of God’s people. Why would Satan continue to make such a fuss over this? The reason is straightforward: the seeming lack of justice appeared to reveal a failure in God’s character.

Imagine him pointing his finger at God and shouting, “He’s inconsistent! He claims to be just but overlooks the sins of the pitiful humans. He leaves them unpunished! Oh, yes, there are times when he pours out his wrath, but can you not see that he is capricious, acting only when it suits his whims? And just look at how he overlooks the sins of His people. Yes, they shed the blood of bulls and goats, but what difference does the blood of some lowly beast make? It does nothing! It is arbitrary, I tell you, inconsistent and unjust. And yet he claims to be righteous, no!”⁷¹

And on goes the argument.⁷²

⁷⁰ Ibid. Page 615.

⁷¹ See Romans 3:25-26

⁷² Consider the opening chapter of Job. It would seem that Satan enjoyed needling God’s people. And note as well that his accusations were aired in an open fashion within the courts of heaven.

The scary thing about his argument is that it had teeth. Behind the blasphemy, a genuine concern was raised. The elect angels surely wondered how it could be resolved. Justice required God to judge sin. And yet, not only did God overlook it, but He set His love on many, showing mercy and grace, pouring out abundant blessings.

How could He do that?

The answer to this question wouldn't come for a very long time. But when it unfolded in history, the angels rejoiced like they had never rejoiced before, because the tension they once felt melted away in the face of God's amazing solution, thereby creating a greater sense of awe and wonder.⁷³ Grace overwhelmed them.

The Secret Things of the Lord

If what we have said is even remotely true, the faithful angels would have felt a deep sense of suspense, and, by extension, would have been supremely interested in seeing how God was going to refute Satan's claims. A detailed account of the General's battle plans wasn't handed out at the beginning of the war. They had to walk, or fly, or whatever, by faith. One might say that history is both a theater of grace and a theater of war.

That the angels were largely ignorant of God's redemptive plans is stated rather clearly in the Scriptures. In the first place, it would have been odd for Paul to say that God is demonstrating His manifold wisdom to the principalities and powers in the heavenly realms if they were already fully schooled on the subject (Eph 3:10). The point of the passage is that they haven't yet graduated; class is still very much in session.

One need only back up to verse 9 to obtain another line of evidence. Paul remarks that he is bringing to light the plan of the mystery which had been hidden for ages in God. We might note that the term "light" suggests former concealment. Add to this the use of

⁷³ As Edwards has stated, "God may suffer innocent creatures to be in trouble for their greater happiness." Ibid, Page 607. A more pedestrian example might help here. Do we not cheer all the more when a football team makes an amazing and unexpected comeback?

the word “mystery” with “hidden,” and we have something doubly concealed—a hidden mystery!

Now before pointing out, perhaps, the most crucial piece of evidence establishing the hiddenness of God’s redemptive plans, some will no doubt object (and object rightly) that the gospel wasn’t completely veiled. It had been foretold. Men were expected to recognize the coming Messiah. To deny this would be to eviscerate Jesus’ words, as well as the apologetic of the apostles that the Messiah had to suffer and enter glory (Luke 24:25-27, 24:44-47; Acts 3:18-24, 17:3, 26:22-23). While this is true, one must be careful not to diminish other texts which equally maintain the essential hiddenness of the gospel (Romans 16:25-26; Colossians 1:26).

The resolution to this apparent problem is probably best observed in the doxology of Romans. There the apostle Paul writes,

“Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.” (Rom 16:25-27)

Here Paul maintains that the revelation of the mystery was kept secret for long ages. It was hidden, tucked away. Yet we dare not stop there. He goes on to say that it is now disclosed in the prophetic writings, which, it should be noted, aren’t hidden—they’re revealed, written on parchments, meant to be read and understood.

So what is Paul saying?

He’s saying that the mystery was hidden in plain sight. It was all right there, foretold and prefigured in diverse ways for the people.

The coming of the Messiah shed new light on these writings, providing a fresh interpretive grid through which these texts could be viewed. Only after the advent of Christ would men more fully understand the significance of so many texts. Types and shadows point to truths beyond themselves, but these truths are difficult to trace out before the dawn of their fulfillment. This is surely what Paul

has in mind when he talks about the mystery being brought to light. The Son illuminates the meaning.

Here we would do well to recall the words of Peter describing the OT prophets,

“Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look” (1 Peter 1:10-12).

There is another factor to keep in mind. The spiritual dullness of men prevented them from perceiving what they should have understood. Here we are reminded of Jesus’ words to the two on the road to Emmaus, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken” (Luke 24:25)! How many times did the disciples fail to understand Jesus’ words for want of spiritual insight, or puzzle over His statements, shrugging their shoulders, whispering among themselves, “So, uh, what’s that mean?” Did not Jesus chide them for being dull at times?

Not all fell into this camp. One might recall the devout and illuminated Simeon waiting patiently in the Temple for the consolation of Israel (Luke 2:25-32). Yet even Simeon wasn’t fully cognizant of the Lord’s plans, as is evident from his prayer. I’m sure he would have been just as amazed, or nearly as amazed, as the disciples on Easter morning.

So to stress again, it was a mystery hidden in plain sight.

Returning to Ephesians 3:9, Paul writes that the mystery was hidden *in* God. Focus on the word “in.” It was in His mind, and He didn’t reveal it until the appointed time. This thought is reflected in 1 Corinthians 2:7-9 where the apostle applies Isaiah 64:4 to the message they were preaching. He writes,

“But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him’” (1 Cor 2:6-9).

This section of Scripture is often thought to say something about the wonders of heaven awaiting us. But that's not what is in view. The reference to Isaiah is applied to the advent of Christ.

Regarding the nature of this event, the apostle writes that they were imparting a secret and hidden wisdom of God. Interestingly, Paul draws a parallel between the words of Isaiah and the inscrutability of God's plans. In his mind, the two are obviously related, which is to say that the hiddenness was so profound that no one could foresee what was ultimately coming. It didn't even swirl around in the mind of an imaginative child.

It appears entirely agreeable, therefore, given the universality of the apostle's argument, that no one, not even the angels, nor anything else in all creation, knew exactly what was planned. The eventual unveiling came only through the apostles, by the Spirit, at the appointed time. As Paul goes on to say, “God has revealed it to us by his Spirit” (vs. 10).

Given the hiddenness of the mystery and the inscrutability of God's mind (Romans 11:34), along with the ever-watchful eyes of the angels,⁷⁴ Dr. Goodwin sums up the matter nicely when he writes,

“This doctrine of the gospel he kept hid and close in his own breast; not a creature knew it; no, not the angels, who were his nearest courtiers and dearest favorites; it lay hid *in* God... A mystery, which when it should be revealed, should amaze the world, put the angels to school again, as if they had known nothing in comparison of this, wherein they should know over

⁷⁴ Daniel 4:17 refers to “watchers,” which are most likely angelic beings. If this is so, then their tendency to oversee and observe must be such that they can be aptly called watchers.

again all those glorious riches which are in God, and that more perfectly and fully than ever yet.”⁷⁵

Angels Long to Look into These Things

The angels have been perched atop our globe like birds on a branch, craning their necks to see what God will do next. Peter says nothing less (1 Peter 1:12).

Rather curiously, the term used in Peter 1:12, which speaks to the angel’s longing (*epithumeo*) to look into the affairs of God’s redemptive efforts, is a potent word. It means to set one’s heart on something, to lust after, or covet, or desire. When our Lord said that a man commits adultery when he lusts after a woman in his heart, the same Greek word is used. The same is true of the poor man, Lazarus, who was sitting at the gate of the rich man longing to pick up scraps from the rich man’s table (Luke 16:21).

Of course, if the very meaning of everything was at stake, having been called into question by Satan, and if the kingdom of darkness had made impressive gains, spreading its borders across the earth, the intensity of the angel’s interest in God’s response should come as no surprise. What else could be more important?

Here I cannot help but think of my own journey. I have wanted answers to these questions since the age of twenty. It has been fifteen years now, digging, and searching, and wrestling with God, knocking on the doors of Scripture, feeling at times confused and burdened with doubt, while at other times, joyous and overwhelmed with a sense of God’s majesty. To me, it feels like a substantial portion of time. Nearly half of my life. And yet, it is but a drop in the bucket; a mere wisp of time. Oh, to think that the angels have been investigating such matters for eons! A decade of my life isn’t even equivalent to a millennium of theirs. And to think that they are still learning, that it is all wonderfully glorious and exciting, and that the answers they have tasted satisfy their deepest longings (Rev 4-5).

Here I am also reminded of the power of stories. I long for the exotic wonders of another realm, and the grand unfolding of a well-

⁷⁵ Quoted in “The Works of Jonathan Edwards,” page 607.

crafted tale. Isn't that part of the appeal of an epic like *The Lord of the Rings*? Life for the little Hobbits proved to be much greater than they ever anticipated. They journeyed across distant lands, met strange creatures, and interacted with foreign cultures. But it wasn't merely a travelogue allowing them to journal about all the interesting sights. Good and evil canvassed reality, and they were caught up in the struggle, not like a librarian hunched over a book, but as participants being drawn deeper and deeper into its exhilarating currents.

That is our life. It is part of a much larger story; the greatest of stories where the greatest conceivable implications are at stake; where each jot and tittle of our lives is saturated with infinite meaning. Everything down to the eating of food and the drinking from cups proves meaningful. Each decision explodes into a geometry of effects that is being thread together into the boundless tapestry of God's will (Eph 1:11). As Paul writes, "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (Romans 11:36).

Quite naturally, Satan would demur, saying that I am begging the question. Moreover, one can scarcely listen to the evening news for more than ten minutes without being confronted again with the sharp realization that few bow the knee to Christ.

So let's return again to the central question: Is God alone God? Will every knee bow and will every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord?

Yes, that day is coming. God has said so (Phil 2:10). And He has proven that it will be so. Even now.

The question is how?

The Seed of the Woman and the Seed of the Serpent

In order to set the stage for the second half of this work where we'll delve into God's multi-faceted refutation of sin, we must return again to the Garden, to that moment when Adam plunged the human race into sin.

We have said that the elect angels were immensely concerned with the outcome of the first couple's interaction with the Devil. We have noted how the weight of the situation must have been keenly felt, and how the failure of Adam wasn't merely an occasion of slight

disappointment, as if the hosts of heaven would simply shrug their shoulders, click their tongues and move on; rather it carried with it profound war-time implications. The enemy planted his flag in the heart of man. Territory was lost. And perhaps most startling of all was the fact that God allowed it to happen, thereby bolstering, at least on the face of things, the claims of Satan.

Much was at stake for Satan as well. His performance, the veracity of his idea, his personal greatness—all of it was wrapped up in his ability to validate the strength of his position, to show that he was in fact a god. Eyes were fixed on him.

A haughty spirit cannot bear to be humiliated in front of a crowd, so if the humans stood firm, he would have been made to play the fool. He would have been expelled by creatures of inferior stock. The thought of having to scurry away at the command of a man would have been intolerable. So when he seduced Adam, he surely felt stronger than ever, gloating and blaspheming with the coals of pride burning brightly.

But the rejoicing was soon cut short, not by a mighty display of power, nor by a sudden angelic attack; it was cut short by the pronouncement of a cryptic promise. It came when God confronted Adam and Eve. We read:

“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; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel’” (Gen 3:14-15).

Herein marks the announcement of God’s plan—a promise of defeat for Satan, a word of assurance to the angels, and a message of hope for fallen humanity. It is all contained here in kernel form.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Generals fiercely guard their military strategies, not wanting anything to leak out, lest the enemy learn something of their intentions and adjust their plans. But it is not so with the Lord of hosts. He forecasts His moves, and like the hand in Belshazzar’s chamber, Satan’s doom is foretold in no uncertain terms. “He shall bruise your head.” It will happen. Someone born of a woman will

The significance of this passage can scarcely be overstated. In one brief statement, the underlying theme of history is laid bare. Whatever might be said about the history of mankind, whether the specks of some seemingly insignificant incident, or the grand movements of a mighty nation, if this overarching perspective is fundamentally absent, the historian's task of making sense of the human experience will inevitably fail to reflect reality, and as a result, the historian's job of collating facts into a meaningful whole will run astray.⁷⁷ If Genesis 3:15 is true, there is no other way to think about the matter. We exist in a reality that has a history that is rooted in a story that is moving towards a definite end.

Given the importance of this pivotal declaration, some time should be spent reflecting on four truths that spiral out of the text.

Observation One: *Two Kingdoms*

Our history is a clash between two kingdoms.

In Genesis 3:15 the division between these two kingdoms is made explicit. There is "your offspring" and "her offspring;" Satan's kingdom and God's kingdom; the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light (Col 1:13; John 18:36; 1 John 2:15-16).

It would take some time for this concept to fully materialize, but even in its earliest days, a division of allegiances would be clear to both men and angels. Consider Abel. He offered a better sacrifice than Cain thereby showing his commitment to God (Heb 11:4). Satan likely viewed this pious man as the seed of the woman who would try to crush his head. Intent on squelching the threat, he likely influenced Cain to murder Abel (1 John 3:12), thereby exercising one of the powers of sin, namely death (Heb 2:14). Immediately after this incident, we read in Genesis 4:26 that Eve bore another son named

crush you. In a subtle way, this demonstrates that God is not threatened by autonomy.

⁷⁷ For example, is history a materialistic, Neo-Darwinian tale of tooth and claw; or might it be the cyclical view of the Greeks; or perhaps Hegel's endless and anti-climactic story of synthesis; or maybe it's Marx's vision of a triumphant proletariat?

Seth who in turn bore a son named Enosh. Here the Scriptures tell us that “at that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD.” God perpetuated a godly line, thereby revealing the existence and ever-growing reality of His in-breaking kingdom.

Observation Two: *Enmity*

This brings us to our second observation. The relationship between these two kingdoms would be marked by hostility. As God put it, “I will put enmity between you and the woman.”

This enmity isn’t of a casual sort, as if the citizens of each kingdom are at a ballgame rooting for a different team. The antipathy would be nothing less than absolute, resulting in the shedding of blood. It is warlike hostility (Rev 11:7, 12:7, 13:7, 19:11-19). So we need to think in terms of swords and shields, not empty threats, or an unwillingness to attend the same social event.

At the command of God, Joshua and David would annihilate entire cities. Heads of enemy leaders would be chopped off, their bodies hacked to pieces (1 Sam 15:33, 17:51). None of this fell outside of the pale of God’s own just actions. One need only recall the choking cries of the world during the days of Noah, or the fiery destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

While Satan’s motives wouldn’t be propelled by a sense of justice, he nevertheless utilized violence to accomplish his ends. As the writer of Hebrews tells us, “Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth” (Heb 11:35-38).

The nature of this hostility certainly carries with it an emotional component, which is to say that God hates sin and Satan hates holiness. But it runs deeper than that. The emotional component is intrinsically linked to the ideological nature of the enmity. This means that the disagreement isn’t over one issue, or even four issues, but a

totality of issues. It is a conflict of worldviews resulting in real antithesis.

This is why Paul can say, for example, that “the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom 8:7-8). Jesus likewise taught that “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (Mat 6:24, see also John 15:18-19).

This antithesis runs so deep that the children of the Serpent cannot stand to even hear God speak. Recall what Stephen said to the men of the synagogue of the Freedmen, “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered” (Act 7:51-52). Rather ironically, his listeners grew enraged and stoned him to death (Acts 7:54-60).

There will be no terms of compromise in this war, no reconciliation of governments, no fading feelings. God declared that He would crush the head of the serpent, thereby announcing, in pictorial fashion, the final defeat of Satan. The cross would eventually deal the fatal blow. And the devil will be thrown into the lake of fire forever.

So let us be clear. This conflict is total and irreconcilable, and all of humanity occupies one of two camps, which is to say that there are no bleachers in this stadium.

Observation Three: *Reclamation*

Implicit in God's declaration is an unwillingness to forfeit the earth. The concept of repossession would develop and mature over time, culminating, ultimately, in a creative act whereby the very heavens and earth are purified and made new (Isaiah 65:17ff; Rev 21:1ff). This new world isn't designed to be a prairie full of only sweet smelling flowers, but it's specifically crafted for a body of people who

are nothing less than new creations themselves (2 Cor 5:17; Rom 8:20-21). Hinted at in the phrase “seed of the woman,” God is intent on redeeming a people from among the slave market of fallen humanity. As Peter writes in his first epistle, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1Pe 2:9).

The story of redemption is a story of reversals.

Here the words of Satan to Jesus in the wilderness are more than a little provocative and relevant. Taking Him to a very high mountain, Satan bid the Messiah to consider the splendor of the kingdoms of this world. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.” (Matthew 4:9)

Asking Jesus to worship him was absurd.⁷⁸ But was it absurd for him to offer the kingdoms of the world as a reward? Could he legitimately present this to Jesus? Or was it a bald-faced lie?

Some believe that it was nothing more than a lie. After all, isn’t Satan a liar *par excellence*? And doesn’t Psalm 24:1 tell us that “The earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein”?

Yes, Satan is a liar. And yes, the earth is the Lord’s. Nevertheless, as with so many biblical doctrines, we must allow the totality of the biblical data to nuance specific texts.⁷⁹ Unlike the first Adam, the second Adam, Jesus Christ, overcomes Satan’s temptations and subdues the foul beast, thereby reclaiming all rights to the world. As the God-man, this king will eradicate evil and expand his kingdom to the four corners of the globe, effectively driving out Satan’s presence. In the end, every enemy will be made Christ’s footstool (Heb 10:12-13), and the world will be made right.

Observation Four: *Ignominy*

⁷⁸ Although, when we pause to consider the cross and all it would entail, the offer of Satan, which would circumvent such a path, served to tempt Christ.

⁷⁹ God as Creator owns the deed to the world. But the world is infected and occupied by foreign armies. It is this latter fact that allows Satan to, in a very real sense, offer the kingdoms of the world to Christ.

The serpent is going to be crushed, and it's going to be done in a way that demeans him. This is seen in the curse God pronounces upon the serpent. In the text, we read, "On your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life" (Gen 3:14).

Humiliation is bound up with the idea of being made to crawl along the ground in defeat, to eat of the dust. It is a phrase designed for one's enemies.

Similar expressions are used elsewhere in Scripture. While invoking blessings on the Davidic throne, the psalmist declares, "May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth! May desert tribes bow down before him, and his enemies lick the dust" (Psa 72:8-9)!

A similar thought is expressed in the seventh chapter of Micah,

"The nations shall see and be ashamed of all their might; they shall lay their hands on their mouths; their ears shall be deaf; they shall lick the dust like a serpent, like the crawling things of the earth; they shall come trembling out of their strongholds; they shall turn in dread to the LORD our God, and they shall be in fear of you." (Mic 7:16-17; See also Isaiah 49:23; Psalm 44:25).

With his usual insight, Keil-Delitzsch explains the matter this way,

"Going upon the belly was a mark of the deepest degradation... Although this punishment fell literally upon the serpent, it also affected the tempter in a figurative and symbolical sense. He became the object of the utmost contempt and abhorrence; and the serpent still keeps the revolting image of Satan perpetually before the eye."⁸⁰

It is this theme of "deepest degradation" that most threatens the proud. Suffering defeat is an unpleasant thing, but there is no greater humiliation than for a haughty spirit to suffer the sting of defeat while being made to look like a fool. As Martin Luther once quipped, "The best way to drive out the devil, if he will not yield to texts of Scripture, is to jeer and flout him, for he cannot bear scorn."

⁸⁰ Commentary on the Old Testament, volume one, page 99.

The proud cannot bear to be mocked. It is for this reason that God causes the devil to lick the dust.

The Unfolding Plan

In all of this (the engagement between the kingdoms, the redemptive plan, the strategy of abasement), one must not imagine that God's response to Satan will be restricted to one pride-decimating moment. The crushing blow promised in Genesis certainly centers on the Messiah's death, but the history of redemption is littered with micro examples. At each turn of the unfolding drama, significant truths are taught. Lessons are displayed through both individuals and nations, singular defeats as well as grand victories. Nothing is insignificant in this story. The details form a whole; the threads compose a tapestry.

We must not forget Ephesians 3:10. God is displaying his manifold wisdom to the universe. He is going to cut Satan down, not through the strength of his might, which would be easy enough, but by exposing the utter folly and bankruptcy of sin. This tactic requires tremendous wisdom; for the strategist not only has to conceive of a plan whereby Satan's very best is turned against him, but they must be able to execute it to perfection. That is the mark of true greatness.

And wonderfully, that is God's plan.

The Consent of all the Parts

We are now ready to focus our attention on God's response. In so doing, it should be noted that our investigation into the nature of Satan's original sin has not come to an end. While the focus of our study will certainly shift, an important point remains. As is the case with nearly all theories, a good test of their accuracy rests in their explanatory power. How well does the theory account for all the facts? Does it bring greater clarity, or does it feel like it's trying to push a square peg through a round hole?

Near the beginning of this work, I outlined Satan's rationale by dividing his position into six categories. Through the power of autonomy, Lucifer believed he could attain attributes mirroring and exceeding those of God. We labeled the convictions as follows:

- Satanic Omnipotence
- Satanic Omniscience
- Satanic Creation
- Satanic Joy
- Satanic Authority
- Satanic Glory

If we have accurately identified the contours of Lucifer's position, and if God is intent on demonstrating the folly of his position, then one would expect to find a refutation of each point in the architecture of history. Interestingly, that is exactly what we find. Through the varieties of life and the clash of kingdoms, God exposes the gaping holes in Satan's armor. So, for example, if Satan believes he can trump God's will through a power called autonomy, God demonstrates the glories of His sovereign will by turning Satan's own designs against him. If Satan believes there are pleasures to be found through sin, God uncovers their bitter taste. If Satan believes there is wisdom to be found outside of God, the Lord proves that only foolishness is gained. If Satan believes that he can attain new heights of glory, God reveals that ignominy alone awaits those who boast in themselves. God is not mocked. He will not give His glory to another. All the supposed glories of sin will be exposed as fraudulent, and He will vindicate the absolute truth of Isaiah 45:22, "I am God, and there is no other."

So in the second part of this work, our task will be twofold. On the one hand, our objective will be to highlight the terrible implications of sin and examine God's marvelous response to it. On the other hand, the terrible implications of sin, as well as God's marvelous response, begs to be understood in light of the theory advanced in this book. Naturally, the theory doesn't explain everything. Far from it! Rather it provides an important, crucial lens.

Allow me to expand upon this further.

As I have wrestled with this subject, two things have especially drawn me towards the perspective advanced in this work. The first has already been mentioned. It arose out of the simple question: How could the pride of one angel convince others to commit treason?

One might say that got the juices flowing.

The second contributing factor is of a different type, and while I have hinted at it here and there, it's yet to be stated formally. This point emerges out of the big picture of God's dealings with sin. There's something peculiar about the manner in which God has dealt with Satan's kingdom. The word that keeps coming to mind is ironic. It's as if the Scriptures are saying time and time again, "Can you not see the irony of sin?"

Now irony is a carefully crafted art. Where it occurs with frequency and with obvious design, one must ask what the author is up to. So it is with God. Throughout redemptive history, the nature of sin is exposed in a mockingly ironical fashion; autonomy is shown to purchase the exact opposite of what it promises. In the case of the six tenets of Satan, Scripture is replete with poignant examples. Without an overarching perspective, these instances might appear to be nothing more than isolated occurrences, or interesting moments where the folly of sin is made evident. But it is much more than this. The story of redemption is a direct and personal response to the Serpent and his seed. And since Satan is the chief advocate of sin, it only makes sense that the various threads of ironic refutation nestled throughout Scripture share a common purpose. God is both confounding and uncovering the blunder of sin, which was, and is Satan's awful doctrine.

If this is correct, we have a deep and unifying theme running through the Scriptures, one that stretches from the beginning of Genesis to the last chapters of Revelation. So while the Bible may certainly be a love letter, it is also a stern polemic. It is about God's love *and* God's glory. It is a tale of triumph and defeat.

With this in mind, let us now consider God's glorious acts and say with Jethro, "Now I know that the LORD is greater than all the gods" (Exodus 18:11a).

Part II

God Responds

Chapter Five

The Wages of Sin



It's reported that while attending a Sunday service on a wintery day, Sir Isaac Newton left in his study a favorite little dog named Diamond. Apparently, a candle had been left lit upon his desk, situated near a pile of papers containing many years of scientific labor. When Sir Isaac returned home, he found his research reduced to ashes. The candle had been inadvertently knocked over by his little dog.

In one fateful moment, his work was irredeemably lost. When the reality of the situation hit him, Sir Isaac turned to his beloved dog and exclaimed, "Oh, Diamond, Diamond, little do you know the mischief you have caused me!"⁸¹

For Diamond, it was impossible for him to grasp the magnitude of the loss. In many ways, we are like that dog. Sin is infinitely offensive, and because of our smallness, and our callused hearts, we fail to grasp its seriousness. But on the other hand, our Master has not left us without some very definite knowledge of sin's potency. Instead of saying, "Oh, Adam, Adam, little do you know the mischief you have caused me," God declared, "Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:17b-19).

By cursing the ground, the physical realm has become a tutor, an instructor intent on illuminating the gravity of man's rebellion. Man has been made to feel the weight of his sin. As a result, the earth no

⁸¹ *The Life of Sir Isaac Newton*, by Sir David Brewster, page 203.

longer proves hospitable, but is filled with every kind of trouble, producing no end of grief. And perhaps most remarkable of all, man experiences the due penalty of sin *within* himself, as the icy grip of death infects both body and soul.

The curse would be our first great lesson about sin's true nature.

A Larger Perspective

But it isn't a lesson meant only for men. When the interests of the angels are borne in mind, one cannot help but wonder if the curse isn't also a direct response to the claims of Satan. Didn't Satan tell Eve, "You will not surely die"?

That was the promise of the Serpent. At the time of the temptation, this statement was designed not only to call God's word into question, but it was, as would be expected if Satan was peddling another gospel, offering a new way of life. We might call this the satanic promise: "Follow me and you will find abundant life!"

Men have long adopted this as the supreme goal, following their own godless desires, indulging in that which God has forbidden, believing that they will be all the happier. In so doing, men are essentially saying, "I want to live apart from God because sin will prove better."

God's response to Adam, and by extension, His response to humanity, is designed to refute this belief. By subjecting the created order to futility, and by allowing sin to work its toxic power in the heart of man, it's as if God is shining a bright light on the satanic lie, saying, "So you really think you'll find life? Do you really think sin is a small thing? Let us see."

We might say that the curse is multi-layered in its purposes. It functions on different levels, addressing sin from a number of important angles.

The question is how?

Subjected to Futility

When driven out of the Garden, the reality of sin's dire consequences were immediately felt by our first parents. Besides the gnawing anxiety and uncertainty of an alien landscape, one far harsher than the lush quarters of the Garden, the need to scavenge for food became paramount. No longer could they simply reach out and pluck a plump fruit off a low hanging branch. Everyday tasks proved frustrating and exhausting. Insects pestered them at night. Blisters formed on their tender feet. Thorns cut them. Muscles ached.

But that was only the beginning. Imagine Adam lying on the ground, shivering with fever, nausea overwhelming him, his body weak with discomfort as he fights off a flu virus for the first time. There is Eve, watching with fear and concern, trying to keep her husband warm, unsure what has stricken him. Or picture Adam watching in horror as his wife claws at the ground, screaming as the contractions intensify. Would he not stand there, watching helplessly, even breathlessly, horrified at the process of childbirth?

The ravaging effects of sin would take time to fully mature. Imagine the first deformity, the first person maimed by a bear, the first poisonous spider bite, the first tornado ripping apart a village, the first earthquake, the first drowning, the first person born blind, or deaf, or unable to speak. Imagine the first rotten tooth, the first cancerous lump, the first amputation, the first stillborn baby, the first seizure; the first drought, the first famine, the first death by starvation, the first bulging disk, the first compound fracture, the first asthma attack. Picture the first person to contract cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, Alzheimer's, malaria, tuberculosis, or any of the thousands of other maladies detailed in medical journals.

On and on it goes, horror after horror.

Nature has become something akin to a ravenous lion. It is beautiful and majestic in its own right, but not at all safe.

Here I am reminded of what John Stuart Mill once wrote while reflecting on nature's cruel bent. Drawing a striking parallel with men, he says,

"In sober truth, nearly all the things which men are hanged or imprisoned for doing to one another, are nature's every day performances. Killing, the most criminal act recognized by human laws, Nature does once to every being that lives; and in

a large proportion of cases, after protracted tortures such as only the greatest monsters whom we read of ever purposely inflicted on their living fellow-creatures. If, by an arbitrary reservation, we refuse to account anything murder but what abridges a certain term supposed to be allotted to human life, nature also does this to all but a small percentage of lives, and does it in all the modes, violent or insidious, in which the worst human beings take the lives of one another. Nature impales men, breaks them as if on the wheel, casts them to be devoured by wild beasts, burns them to death, crushes them with stones like the first Christian martyr, starves them with hunger, freezes them with cold, poisons them by the quick or slow venom of her exhalations, and has hundreds of other hideous deaths' in reserve, such as the ingenious cruelty of a Nabis or a Domitian never surpassed... Next to taking life... is taking the means by which we live; and nature does this, too, on the largest scale and with the most callous indifference. A single hurricane destroys the hopes of a season; a flight of locusts, or an inundation, desolates a district; a trifling chemical change in an edible root starves a million of people... Everything, in short, which the worst men commit either against life or property is perpetuated on a larger scale by natural agents.”⁸²

Portraits of Moral Evil

But why?

Why is creation, as Paul writes in the eighth chapter of Romans, subjected to futility and bound to corruption by God (Romans 8:20-22)? What, after all, has the ground done? Or the sky? Or the animals? They didn't sin. So why are they twisted out of shape and made to afflict us?

The reason is profoundly simple, and it can be summed up in one sentence:

⁸² *Nature, the Utility of Religion, and Theism*, pages 28-30.

God has placed the natural world under a curse so that the physical horrors felt and seen by men would become vivid pictures of the horror of moral evil.⁸³

That's it.

If you want to know how bad sin really is, if you want to gain some true sense of its moral repugnance, reflect on physical evil, for it is an epistle of spiritual realities. In much the same way that the heavens declare the glory of God (Psalm 19), so too, but with a different design, natural evil highlights the devastating nature of sin.

Pedagogy

Men do not naturally sit around and worry over their sin. They do not lament their condition, nor do they discern its due penalty. And if they do perceive some degree of fault, they either exonerate themselves with a wave of the hand, or minimize it greatly, brushing it under a rug.

The curse is a partial remedy to this. When a man experiences pain, or suffers in the face of a great tragedy, he cries out against it. He feels in the very depths of his being a hatred of the thing. He wants it gone.

In that very moment, he is being vividly shown how he should feel about his sin. Do you hate it when an earthquake levels your home? Then you understand how you should feel about sin. Do you hate it when the doctor comes to you with bad news? Then you've just learned how you should feel about sin. When your car breaks down on vacation, can you not see that your outrage is meant to tell you something about your sin?

It's interesting that when Jesus addressed the significance of a tower falling and killing eighteen people, He explained that those who died in the accident were no worse than all the others living in Jerusalem. But then in a surprising move, He went on to say, "No, I

⁸³ I am indebted to John Piper for this statement. One of the greatest sermons he has ever preached, in my opinion, boldly tackles this theme. It is entitled "The Triumph of the Gospel in the New Heavens and the New Earth."

tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:5). Consider likewise Jesus’ curious response to the paralytic lowered through the roof, “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven” (Matthew 9:5). Moments later, Jesus tells him to rise, pick up his mat, and go home.

Whether the sudden tragedy of a collapsed building, or the infirmity of disease, each can be traced back to sin and the curse. Both stand behind our troubles, ultimately. As sinners, these events should cause us to reflect afresh on our spiritual condition. They should drive us towards repentance.⁸⁴

In a moving story told at a conference, John Piper recounted the prayer of a mother. By way of background, this particular mother had a seven-year-old son with serious health problems. His mind was like that of a six-month-old, and he would seizure every few seconds, straightening and twitching in his wheelchair. The doctors had done everything they knew to do, and the church likewise prayed and did all they knew to do. But the child remained the same, likely destined to spend the rest of its earthly life in this terrible state.

During the prayer meeting, John Piper overheard her say something incredible. Amazed, he immediately wrote it down not wanting to forget a single word. The prayer uttered by this saintly woman is a model for us all. Here is what she prayed: “Dear Lord, help me to feel the horror of sin the way I feel the horror of my son’s disability.”

After recounting the incident, Piper exclaimed, “Now I just wanted to leap and say, ‘She gets it! Oh, how deeply she gets it!’”⁸⁵

But do we get it? Or is the curse some nebulous concept disconnected from our consciousness, as though the troubles we face on this planet are mere happenchance, or just the way things are?⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Of course, it is worth stressing that individual maladies are not necessarily the result of immediate, personal disobedience (John 9:1-3).

⁸⁵ This story is told in “The Triumph of the Gospel in the New Heavens and New Earth,” 2007.

⁸⁶ Far too many Christians fail to provide a biblical answer to the problem of natural evil. The highly educated seem to be especially prone to offering sub-par explanations. Here I am reminded of something Paul Copan once said during an interview. While discussing the problem of natural evil, he said, “The question of natural disasters is a troubling one, because here we know that

Cries for Justice

It's commonplace for men to blame God for natural evil. Whether the Oxford scholar or the blue-collar employee, the temptation is to look at a natural disaster and cast aspersions on God's character. "How dare God allow such suffering," it is said. "How dare He inflict such senseless agony on innocent people." For many, natural evil provides an opportunity to indict God. "Let's put God on the stand and judge Him! The evidence is everywhere!"

While such accusations could be multiplied at length, I'll cite two fairly potent examples for the sake of illustration.

The first comes from well-known atheist Sam Harris. While debating Dr. William Lane Craig at Notre Dame about objective morality, he said this,

"We're told that God is loving and kind and just and intrinsically good, but when someone like myself points out the rather obvious and compelling evidence that God is cruel and unjust because He visits suffering on innocent people of a scope and scale that would embarrass the most ambitious psychopath, we're told that God is mysterious... We're being offered a psychopathic and psychotic moral attitude [if we

moral agents aren't involved in bringing evil upon others. They're not abusing their freedom and bringing havoc into the lives of other people. But rather this seems, as insurance claims will put it, 'Acts of God,' that are bringing havoc into the lives of people... How do we make sense of this? A couple things to keep in mind. Things like tornadoes and hurricanes; these actually serve a purpose... a general purpose to help stabilize the earth's temperatures, so that things don't become drastically imbalanced. And so this makes for a habitable earth, rather than one that becomes rapidly uninhabitable. Also even earthquakes. Without tectonic plate shifting and mountain building and the creation of soil through erosion; if we didn't have tectonic plate shifting, then all the soil would erode off of the continents and no plant life could grow on these continents. So there is a benefit that comes to human beings, but that also means earthquakes are going to be part of that" (*Good God and Evil World*). This is a woefully inadequate explanation. Let us be clear. Our approach to natural evil must be anchored in the Scriptures. For if Christianity is true, which it is, then the biblical answer will provide the most rational explanation.

consider God's morality]. It's psychotic because this is completely delusional. There's no reason to believe that we live in a universe ruled by an invisible monster Yahweh. It is psychopathic because this is a total detachment from the well-being of human beings. This so easily rationalizes the slaughter of children."⁸⁷

Perhaps the most caustic and well-known quote comes from Richard Dawkins. Based on his reading of the Scriptures, and his understanding of God's dealings in the world, Dawkins says the following,

"The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."⁸⁸

Such scathing indictments may not reflect the sentiments of most, as many would hesitate to articulate their feelings so forthrightly, yet there is nevertheless a lingering frustration that murmurs, "How dare God do this? How dare He rule so callously?"

For those who point their finger at God and call him a moral monster, they often fail to grasp the irony of the situation. If things like famines, and earthquakes, and tsunamis stem from the curse, and if such natural evils are meant to tell us something about the horror of sin, people are, in essence, blaming God for their own moral failings, since sin purchases tragedy.

The irony actually runs deeper. When men condemn God, are they not tightening the noose around their own necks? They're invoking a standard of righteousness by which to judge their Maker. But when the tables are turned, and they are shown that it was human sin that cursed the earth, could not God redirect their indictments back on them? Didn't Jesus say, "Judge not, that you be not judged."

⁸⁷ William Lane Craig and Sam Harris debate the topic "Is Good from God." 2011, Notre Dame.

⁸⁸ *The God Delusion*, page 31.

For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you” (Matthew 7:1-2)?

So if someone condemns God for allowing natural evil, and it is then shown that it is they who are ultimately responsible for the calamity, could not God indict them with their own judgment? Along these lines, Paul writes, “Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God” (Rom 2:1-3)?

It will be a terrifying moment when the books are opened and men are judged. Their mouths will be stopped, and they will not be able to call God’s judgment into question, for it will often agree with their former criticisms.

To Dust You Shall Return

If ever there was something that should serve to refute Satan’s promise of life, it is death. “The wages of sin,” says the Scriptures, “is death” (Romans 6:23). Not life, but death. Every man and woman born into this world will personally experience the outworking of sin. They will die. It’s inevitable.⁸⁹

While studies vary, estimates show that 150,000 people perish each day. That is 56 million individuals each year. In order to grasp the magnitude of such loss, try to picture every person dying in New York and California. Imagine the streets vacant one year from now. No pedestrians. No occupied homes. Everything is empty. That’s how many hearts stop. And it happens year after year.

Our world is a factory farm of death.

This morbid fact isn’t without its own lesson. As each candle of life is snuffed out, it’s as if the grave is shouting, “Sin fails! It fails to impart life!”

⁸⁹ Save for a handful of exceptions like Elijah.

Try to imagine things from the perspective of the angels. They have been watching men die for countless centuries. In each and every case, man is not able to summon the strength to overcome death's deadly sting. Sooner or later, they fall.

What a powerful apologetic this must be for the angels. Satan's boast has been discounted literally billions of times. It is a second-by-second refutation. Whatever means Satan might employ, he cannot impart one ounce of life apart from God. It is a source of power completely unavailable to him.

But why is that? What is it about sin that leads inexorably to death? The answer to this question illuminates a crucial aspect of the debate that likely raged among the angels.

The Source of all Blessings

The apostle John writes, "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4). In another place, he recorded Jesus' famous words, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

God is the source of all life. Not only is He is the Creator, but He is the Sustainer. As Paul declared to the Athenians, "In Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28; Colossians 1:17).

One of the great truths about God is that He is self-existent. He isn't dependent on anything. He has life *in Himself*. It's part of His very essence. Older theologians often described this attribute as aseity. It is that property by which God exists of and from Himself.

Only God possesses aseity.

But as we know, this has been disputed.

Satan argued that life could be attained apart from God. If you picture a large circle and write in the center of that circle "God is life," Satan believed that this picture of reality was inaccurate. He argued that life could be found outside the circle. He believed he could step out beyond its border and experience a new, different kind of life. But if history teaches us anything, it teaches us that this is utterly false.

Here we are confronted with a vital truth, and it is one that strikes at the center of the great debate. Crucial to Satan's entire position is the supposition that there is something good to be found by indulging

in that-which-God-cannot-do. He thought he could tap into other realms of opportunity found outside of God—other circles filled with godless potential. The crucial error in his thinking is that God is the *absolute* source of goodness. There's nothing good outside the circle. In fact, *anything* outside the circle proves to be the *opposite* of what lies within.

This is very important.

If God is the fountain of all life, and if sin leads to separation from God, then sin will necessarily prove antithetical since it is inherently not God-like. It yields the opposite. This is why Jesus can say, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Like a branch severed from a vine, it will inevitably wither up and die. This is exactly what Jesus says in John 15:6, "If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned." This same principle is taught in Romans 11. When gentiles who were dead in their transgressions and sins were made alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:1-3), they were grafted into the "nourishing root of the olive tree" (Romans 11:17). Union with Christ results in life. But for those Jews who disbelieved, they were cut off and left on the ground to wither (Romans 11:20).

If every last drop of life is found in God and flows out of God, it follows that nothing but death remains for those who detach themselves from the fountain. As Christ said to the woman at the well, "Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14; see also Revelation 22:1-2). If you drink from the cup of sin, your mouth will be filled with sand (Jeremiah 2:13).

This antithesis follows consistently across the board. For example, God provides rest (Matthew 11:28; Hebrews 4:9), therefore sin leads to laborious toil and frustration (Gen 3:17-19). God provides peace (Phil 4:7), therefore sin yields anxiety and turmoil (1 Peter 2:11; Deut 28:20). In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3), therefore sin results in foolishness (Rom 1:22). God is light (John 8:12), therefore sin is darkness (Acts 26:18). God is truth (John 14:6), therefore sin is falsehood (John 8:44). God is love (1 John 4:8), therefore sin is unrighteous hatred (1 John 2:9). God is

holy (Lev 19:2), therefore sin is unholy (1 Tim 1:9). God is a God of hope (Romans 15:13), therefore sin yields hopelessness (Eph 2:12). Pleasures are found at God's right hand (Psalm 16:11), therefore hell is a place of pain and suffering. God's kingdom is filled with joy (Romans 14:17), therefore sin entails frustration and despair (Romans 6:21). God is pure (Habakkuk 1:13), therefore the mind of the sinful man is impure (Titus 1:15).

James tells us that "every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (James 1:17). If this is so, and it is, then we can turn it on its head and say, "Every despicable and evil thing comes from below, arising from the father of lies who embodies sin."

This perspective helps us better understand the hardening effects of judicial abandonment. In the first chapter of Romans, God is said to give truth suppressors over to their sin (1:24-26). One might say that God distances Himself. In so doing, the sinner is further removed from the preserving effects of grace. As a result, the degenerative nature of sin blossoms causing wickedness to abound all the more. This hardening follows as naturally as darkness from the absence of light. In the same way that darkness cannot produce a ray of light, sin cannot impart a drop of life.

Choose Ye This Day

I cannot help but wonder if the angels who stood firm did not articulate this fact, urging the soon-to-be demons that nothing good would be obtained by abandoning their Creator; that the nature of Satan's spurious claim was all-encompassing, leaving only a black hole. Might they have said, "There is a way that seems right to an angel, but in the end it leads to death?" (See Proverbs 14:12)

Whatever may or may not have been debated, our history is saturated with lessons detailing this cardinal truth; for when this concept is brought into focus, an interesting cord in the biblical narrative is brought to light.

In much the same way that Adam and Eve were faced with the decision of life and death, the Promised Land offered similar prospects for the Israelites. In fact, the nation of Israel functioned as a kind of recapitulation of Adam; with the Promised Land serving as a picture of Eden, designed to be spread throughout the world.

Addressing the choice facing the Israelites, Moses writes,

“See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them” (Deut 30:15-20).

The reality of this truth is expressed vividly and persistently throughout the prophets. One cannot read very far without realizing that nothing but destruction and death awaits those who turn away from the Living God. The sheer repetition should impress this upon us, and yet, time and again, Christians forget such things and act shocked when rebellion is met with disaster.

King Uzziah learned this lesson firsthand. The Chronicler tells us, “But when he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was unfaithful to the LORD his God and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense” (2 Ch 26:16). When the priests intercepted him and pleaded with him to refrain, King Uzziah became angry and ignored their entreaties. After the confrontation, we’re told that leprosy broke out on his forehead—a

symbol not only of uncleanness, but a shocking reminder of sin's withering nature. The Chronicler then writes, "And King Uzziah was a leper to the day of his death, and being a leper lived in a separate house, for he was excluded from the house of the LORD" (2 Ch 26:21).

Consider as well Jesus' earthly ministry. If ever there was a time when the principles of life and death were juxtaposed it was during Jesus' ministry. The blind and diseased were continually brought to Him. Not infrequently, these problems were the result of demonic oppression. Some were made mute (Matthew 9:32-33); some blind (Matthew 12:22); others suffered terrible seizures (Matthew 17:15-18); while yet others were driven to insanity and compulsive behavior, even to the point of cutting themselves (Luke 8:27-29). Physical deformities also resulted from the presence of evil spirits. Luke recounts a woman who was bent over and unable to straighten her back for eighteen years. When Jesus healed her, He attributed the affliction to Satan (Luke 13:10-17).

In each instance, Satan's presence twisted the person. This is not a coincidence. Satan is Beelzebub, the lord of the flies. Like flies drawn to a rotting carcass, Satan and his demons swarm around death and carry its disease to all those they touch.

In stark contrast, Jesus entered history as the light of the world, as life itself. With love and compassion, He reversed the works of Satan, revealing His power over the darkness. The blind received sight. The lame were made to walk. The leper was made clean. And even those who would dare touch his garments in faith were healed (Mark 5:30). There was nothing the demons could do but tremble and obey His commands. The domain of darkness was powerless in the face of the light. It had to flee.

While watching their Lord dispel Satan's crippling effects, this must have been a time of great clarity for the angels. While they had no doubt learned this lesson already, there was, nevertheless, a powerful manifestation of this fact in the life of Christ; a clarity that shone with unparalleled glory when He conquered death by rising from the grave. Paul says that it was Christ "who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Tim 1:10; Hebrews 2:14-15). It is no accident that in the New Heavens and the

New Earth there is a river of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, where on each side stands the tree of life, yielding its fruit each month, providing healing for the nations (Rev 22:1-2). In contrast, death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire, along with all those whose names are not written in the Book of Life. This is, as John writes, the second death (Rev 21:14).

The Reality of Mortality

Physicist and atheist, Alan Lightman, was the first of four MIT professors to address the question of the meaning of life at a 2011 *Veritas Forum* event. Standing before a throng of students and faculty, he shuffled a few papers, thanked the audience for their attendance, and then said the following,

“I’m 62 years old. Over the last decade, I’ve had more and more evidence of my mortality. I’ve lost hearing in the high frequencies. I forget names of people. I forget words I want to use in my writing. I used to be a runner, and I have had to stop running a couple years ago because my knees were getting bad. No matter how hard I concentrate on improving my hearing or my memory or my knees, my mental thoughts cannot reverse the changes in my body. And I am reminded that all of us, and I, are material beings. Our consciousness and our self-awareness create an illusion that we are made out of some special substance; that we have some kind of ego-power; some “I-ness;” some unique existence. But in fact, we are nothing but bones, tissues, gelatinous membranes, neurons, electrical impulses, and chemicals. We are material. We are stuff... We are a bunch of atoms, like trees and like donuts. And when we die, those atoms will be scattered back into soil, air, and water. True, for a brief period of time my atoms have a special arrangement, particularly in my brain, that leads to consciousness, thought and self-awareness. But that special arrangement will soon be scattered and rearranged, and this physical thing that is me will be gone. And in my case, I hope in another thirty years, if I’m lucky. Coming to terms

with our materiality is the most difficult challenge that we have in our existence.”⁹⁰

It’s safe to say that Dr. Lightman, while referencing our “materiality,” was thinking of man’s mortality. That is the perennial question for him. What is man to do with the knowledge that he is going to die?

A healthy man may avoid the clutches of disease if he possesses an especially stout constitution, but what a man cannot escape is the gradual embrace of death. Something tragic happens in the curve of human maturation. We are born as babes and toddle our way to adulthood where we typically enjoy the apex of health. We enjoy this briefly, but then sadly, and almost imperceptibly at first, the gradual decline towards deterioration clicks into gear. Life begins to wither away. And as men take note of their condition, they cannot help but think about the meaning and purpose of life. They may fill their schedules and clutter their minds, never pausing long enough to consider their mortality, but when an open casket is set before them, the reality of death pushes all else aside and focuses their mind in a way that no scholarly volume could ever duplicate.

The First Gray Hair

Imagine Adam looking into a quiet pond at his reflection, noticing for the first time a wrinkle, or a newly sprouted streak of gray hair. What did he think? And what did he say when those signs of aging continued to multiply? Adam and Eve certainly knew these strange developments were connected with death, but could they have really anticipated what was in store for them? Could they have envisioned where it was all heading, what it would feel like at the end?

Nearly every Saturday I deliver the mail to a place called the McKinney House, a home established for the elderly requiring assistance. Entering the facility, one is greeted by an open living area, a space furnished with sofas, chairs, a TV, and a piano. As I sort out the mail, sliding letters into a nearby wall unit, I cannot help but glance

⁹⁰ *Life, the Universe, and MIT*, Professor Alan Lightman.

over my shoulder at the men and women situated in the room. Some are hunched over in their wheelchairs, bent in silence. One sits in a reclined position, hands raised slightly, shaking uncontrollably. Some wander slowly about with blank stares. Others sit quietly in their seats, content to look at nothing in particular. In an adjacent room, several women are playing a game of Scrabble. They're obviously struggling to spell simple words like "cat" or "bat."

We may talk about aging well, or say that someone is "aging gracefully," and while there's truth in those words, the slow and persistent advance of decay is awful—In fact, it is an enemy (1 Cor 15:26). It's an assassin creeping within our bodies, lurking in the shadows of our health, tearing us down bit by bit. Like the guinea worms of the West Indies, death feeds on us and pushes its way out in a boil of symptoms. Muscles atrophy. Joints begin to ache. Vision blurs. Arteries clog. Teeth break. Hair falls out. Skin discolors and wrinkles. And that's only the beginning. As the body deteriorates, severe weakness sets in. Vitality is lost. The once vibrant and capable become feeble. Dementia sets in, memories are lost. And soon the most basic tasks of life become impossible. Others must feed you and wash you.

Everyone is being shown the failure of sin in a profoundly personal way. We learn that sin debases a man, even humiliates him. When a person cannot even control his bowels, all of his youthful pride is dispelled, sucked away by the life-stealing nature of sin.

Sin truly affects the whole man. Nothing is left unscathed. Is there any part of the human body that can escape the process of decay? Everything from the bottom of a man's foot to the top of his balding head changes for the worse. Women may paint their faces or cover their bodies with fine apparel, but it is done so in vain, ultimately. It's a cover-up job, an attempt to merely hide the inevitable. In this, we see that sin is uncontrollable. You cannot place it on a leash. You cannot swallow a pill to curb it. Neither can you bargain with it.

The Path of Life and the Path of Death

A corpse really does say it all.

When a man's health finally fails and death takes hold, the person is torn apart at the level of spirit and flesh. The human shell left behind begins to rot, takes on a foul odor, and harbors disease, requiring it to be swiftly disposed, hidden from sight.

Oh, how we recoil at death. Having been made in the image of God, we instinctively recognize the horror of it. We naturally gasp and take a step back. This recognition runs so deep that some become physically ill when they witness death firsthand. It's as if everything within us shudders and quakes. It's as if our soul is crouching in the corner of our body, unable to cope with the magnitude of the situation. Mankind wasn't made to deal with this. Death is unnatural.

And, oh, how deeply we grieve the loss of a loved one. When Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden, their removal pictured separation from God, and by extension, life itself. We experience the pain of separation when we are estranged from one another, but even more so when someone dies. Sin separates, it alienates. It causes us to weep. And through it all, through all the tears and havoc of physical evil, Satan's lie is vividly portrayed, set before the watching world so that everyone can see its folly.

Satan said that you will not surely die.

He was dead wrong.

Is it any wonder that W.G.T. Shedd, a 19th theologian, described sin as "the suicidal action of the human will"?

Sin and death are cruel taskmasters enslaving men all the days of their lives, filling them with fear and gloom. This is precisely what Hebrews 2:14-15 says. While exalting in the excellencies of Christ, the author writes,

"Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself [Christ] likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."

Death is frightful and horrific. But praise be to the Lord Jesus Christ who conquered death through death!

As we conclude, consider afresh Psalm one. Does it not teach us about the war that has been raging for countless centuries, and how

there are two paths, ultimately, one leading to life and the other to death? Does it not talk about trusting in God's Word in much the same way that Adam should have trusted in God's Word? And does it not speak of the two seeds, the wicked and the righteous, and how the wicked will finally perish, thereby showing God's justice, as well the penalty of sin?

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” (Psalm 1:1-6)

Chapter Six

The Irony and Absurdity of Sin



It's a striking comparison.

In the fourth chapter of 1 Kings, we're told that Solomon was king over all Israel and that "Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea. They ate and drank and were happy" (vs. 20). It was a time of great prosperity. Food was plentiful. Nations esteemed the throne. And "Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, all the days of Solomon" (vs. 25). Happiness abounded in those days, for the Lord, as He had promised, had blessed them.

Fast forward to the days of Isaiah the prophet, to that time when the Babylonians were ravaging the land, slamming a rod against the backs of God's people. Judah's armies fell. The people were murdered and displaced, and perhaps most startling of all, the Temple was trampled under the boots of foreigners.

What caused the scene to shift so profoundly? The answer, of course, is sin. The people forgot the Lord their God and turned away from Him, indulging in the false religions of their pagan neighbors. Whether stated openly or quietly affirmed in their hearts, Israel believed that the grass was greener elsewhere. They believed they would experience greater joy by following their own godless desires.

With this in mind, compare the scene in 1 Kings with a section in Isaiah. As a messenger of judgment, the prophet declared,

"The LORD said: Because the daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet, therefore the Lord will strike with a scab the heads of the daughters of Zion, and the LORD will lay bare their secret

parts. In that day the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands, and the crescents; the pendants, the bracelets, and the scarves; the headdresses, the armlets, the sashes, the perfume boxes, and the amulets; the signet rings and nose rings; the festal robes, the mantles, the cloaks, and the handbags; the mirrors, the linen garments, the turbans, and the veils. Instead of perfume there will be rottenness; and instead of a belt, a rope; and instead of well-set hair, baldness; and instead of a rich robe, a skirt of sackcloth; and branding instead of beauty.” (Isa 3:16-24)

If anything is evident in this pronouncement, it is that the happiness and security enjoyed under the reign of Solomon has long disappeared. What is particularly interesting, and more than a little curious, is how the Lord’s judgment impacted the women. We see a reversal of fortunes, an ironic twist where their pride—which was expressed outwardly through their attire, and even their posture—purchased the exact opposite of their intended aim. These were Cosmo girls, women concerned only with the latest fashion. They idolized their faces and worshiped their bodies. By yearning after these things with all their heart, mind, and strength, they showed what they most desired. Their actions revealed what was their greatest and most fulfilling pursuit—what they believed would bring them the most pleasure. The irony is that by idolizing the self, all the glories they most prized and hoped to achieve were turned upside down. They received the exact opposite. Instead of flashing beautifully flowing hair, they were made bald. Instead of carrying the scent of a sweet perfume, the stench of rottenness clung to them. Instead of radiating silky youthful skin, their faces were covered with hideous scabs.

Here we see a clear example of the irony of sin. And rather than serving as an isolated instance, the concept undergirding this judgment saturates reality. As we will see, it permeates the entirety of history and sheds light on the meaning of life.

Satanic “Joy”

Happiness is the thirst of every soul. The perennial question, however, is where such happiness is to be found. There was a time before the fall of man, and before the great angelic rebellion, when everyone agreed on the answer. It's embedded in the following imperative, "Bless the LORD, you His angels, who excel in strength, who do His will, heeding the voice of His word. Bless the LORD, all you His hosts, you ministers of His, who do His pleasure" (Psalm 103:20-21, NKJV). Joy was found in God by both enjoying Him and His works (vs. 22), as well as by obeying His will—for in so doing, they shared in their Master's joy (Matthew 25:21).

The challenge to this way of life came when Lucifer argued that new joys and new pleasures could be found outside of God's will. Through the power of sin, he proposed that doors of unexplored potential were just waiting to be opened. Following in his footsteps, men have bought into this promise and have turned away from God, intent on finding greater happiness by doing things their own way. The quest for joy now has a radically new orientation. God is considered irrelevant at best.

In an effort to explain this ungodly impulse, one could explore the meaning of the word "flesh," talk about man's spiritual deadness, or meditate on the first petal in Dort's Tulip.⁹¹ While such studies would prove fruitful, a simpler point is being sought here.

It might be put it like this:

Men choose to live apart from God because they believe that sin is more enjoyable than holiness.

Whether the haughty women of Zion, or carousing drunkards, or money-hungry tycoons, or sports-idolizing enthusiasts, each pursues their particular vice with great devotion, seeking happiness through their particular sin of choice.

Here the Scriptures remind us: "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life" (Gal

⁹¹ I would especially recommend Martin Luther's famous work *The Bondage of the Will*. John Calvin is equally as erudite in his *Institutes*.

6:7-8). When it comes to the matter of pleasure, God is allowing sin to play out on the stage of history in order to reveal its true nature. As we saw in the previous chapter, sin doesn't result in life but death. The irony is palpable. Similarly, the scope of our interests are presently being broadened to the concept of happiness itself. In so doing, we are asking the question: Is sin better than holiness? Does it lead to greater joy and pleasure? Is there something to Satan's claim?

As men run about the globe sinning in every conceivable way, even mixing unrighteousness like artists blending paints, God uses the canvas of human experience to expose the failure of Satan's claim. He does this, as we have been stressing, in an ironic fashion. For it's one thing to show that sin doesn't lead to greater happiness, but it's another thing to demonstrate that sin actually secures the opposite of what it seeks—that it invariably leads to sorrow, pain, and grief. This heightens the glory of God, for, as Jonathan Edwards writes, “The wisdom of God greatly and remarkably appears in so exceedingly baffling and confounding all the subtlety of the old serpent. Power never appears so conspicuous as when opposed and conquering opposition. The same may be said of wisdom; it never appears so brightly, and with such advantage, as when opposed by the subtlety of some very crafty enemy; and in baffling and confounding that subtlety.”⁹²

In order to illustrate the point, let's consider eight sinful behaviors to see how this irony looks on the ground of everyday human experience.

A Checklist of Failure

Money

Oscar Wilde is reported to have said, “When I was young I thought that money was the most important thing in life; now that I am old I know that it is.”

⁹² *The Wisdom of God displayed in the way of Salvation*, Section VII, Volume 2, page 151.

If ever there has been an object of worship in the West it has been the almighty dollar. Men crave it, strategize ways to accumulate it, hoard it, flaunt it, die for it, and live for it. They may not literally present offerings to it, but they will sacrifice their own families, casting all aside in order to add another zero to their bank account. Money is, for such people, simply a very thin, green idol. This is why Jesus can say, “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (Mat 6:24).

The irony is that when men devote themselves to the pursuit of money, thinking that it will bring them true satisfaction, they soon find that it multiplies their grief. Paul writes,

“But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.” (1Ti 6:9-10)

Instead of procuring life and happiness, Paul says that those who lust after wealth suffer ruin and destruction and pierce themselves with many pains. This doesn’t exactly sound like a good time. But as with all sin, the person’s heart is blinded and their minds are clouded, and instead of recognizing the folly of the harmful desire, they run headlong, thinking that if they could somehow just earn a little more, if they could but buy the next item on their wishlist, they would truly be happy. But like a thirsty man lost at sea, they foolishly drink the salt water, and by so doing, their thirst is multiplied, and they are never quenched. Solomon long ago observed this when he wrote, “Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income” (Ecc 5:10 NIV).

This is certainly ironic.

There is another ironic aspect to greed. Jim Elliot, missionary to the Waodoni people in Ecuador, famously said, “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose.” Men in their lust for gold forget that hearses don’t pull U-hauls. Along

these lines, Jesus told a parable of a certain rich man with godless aspirations. He said,

“The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:16-21; see also Ecc 6:1-2).

Men foolishly set their eyes on the here and now as if eternity isn't awaiting them after death. How is it that the greatest CEOs miss this? They store up treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves steal, but they fail to see where the greatest possible returns can be secured, and secured indefinitely (Matthew 6:19-20). Moses understood this. Refusing to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, he forsook his high position in order to be numbered among the people of God, for, as the author of Hebrews writes, “He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward” (Heb 11:26). Or to say it a bit differently, “What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul” (Matthew 16:25a)?

It would be wrong, however, to suppose that godliness is an outright enemy of gain in this life. As the rich young ruler walked away from Christ, unwilling to commit everything to the Lord, Peter spoke of their forsaking everything to follow Jesus. In response, Jesus explained, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life” (Mark 10:29-30). While this shouldn't be understood in a crass health and wealth kind of way, as if Jesus intends for us to claim BMWs or

yachts, it does mean that the people of God enjoy certain covenantal blessings.

Anorexia and Gluttony

Although there are a number of contributing factors, a crucial component of anorexia is a nearly all-consuming preoccupation with self. The afflicted girl desires to be thin and beautiful, and she will forgo eating a healthy amount of food in order to achieve her perceived ideal. The bitter irony is that as she continues to reduce her caloric intake, intent on getting rid of that “unsightly fat,” her beauty fades. Her face becomes gaunt. Her bones protrude. Her skin hangs. Hair starts growing on her face. The attractiveness she once possessed is forfeited for an unhealthy and truly pitiable body.

On the flip side, gluttony defies the comfort of food. Instead of trusting in God, the person seeks satisfaction in what can be eaten. They try to fill their soul with calories, and their god ends up being their belly. Ironically, instead of consuming food for enjoyment, the food ends up consuming them. It becomes a burden—a dehumanizing affliction where the person’s physique becomes horribly misshapen. They struggle to walk. Their joints groan. And in extreme cases, they can’t even rise from their own bed. Others must feed them.

This is surely a picture of the absurdity and irony of sin.

Worry/Anxiety

To my own detriment, this has been a sin I have come to know very well. And it is painfully ironic.

For those who suffer panic attacks, or experience what has been called generalized anxiety disorder, there is, like the anorexic, an extreme focus on the self. Everything turns inward as the worrier becomes obsessed with certain worrisome thoughts. In my own case, and it isn’t uncommon, I fretted over sickness, specifically, throwing up. The terrible irony is that various strongholds begin to take root in your life. You begin to worry excessively over germs. You worry about

food quality. If left unchecked, these things continue to grow and intensify. For some, the inward focus propels them towards agoraphobia.⁹³ Panic attacks rush in. The heart begins to race. Breathing becomes restricted. Tingling sensations shoot up the arm or on one's head. Sheer terror sets in. After this happens, the person almost inevitably becomes a hypochondriac to some degree. But what is particularly striking is how the worrying leads to sickness; for when you worry and fret for hours on end, with your stomach twisted in knots, your body eventually becomes physically ill. You vomit.

Control is the issue. The man or woman struggling with anxiety doesn't want to lose control. Instead of resting in God, the person tries to control the situation through worrying. But again, the irony of this sin is that the very thing the person most wants to avoid—the very control they don't want to lose—is devastated by panic attacks. Worry steals peace and injects chaos into the person's soul, the very thing they are trying so desperately to avoid.

Bitterness

Bitterness is likewise ironic. In the case of those who have been wronged (or think they've been wronged) and nurse a grudge for weeks, or months, or even years, the anger reserved for the offender has a way of consuming the embittered person. They want to punish the one who wronged them, but as they continue to hold on to their anger, refusing to forgive, all the while entertaining vengeful thoughts, they live a tortured existence. The one they love to hate holds them in bondage, strangely enough, driving them ultimately towards depression, and even Satan himself (Eph 4:26-27).

The Conceited and Self-Absorbed

⁹³ Or sometimes claustrophobia, though not in the sense of fearing a small space, per se, but fearing being unable to escape a particular space like a crowded auditorium or plane. The thought, "What if I need to leave?" bombards the mind. "What if I pass out and make a fool of myself?" And so go the thoughts, over and over again, creating fear in the heart, which easily slips into panic.

There are those who so utterly dominate discussions, speaking so fast and with such fervent self-interest, that those listening cannot even begin to get a word in. Or if they do, they're quickly interrupted with the words, "Oh, yes, I've had that happen. I was..." which is just another way of saying, "Enough about you, back to me." Or if somehow the conversation isn't immediately redirected back around to them, they suddenly look distracted or disinterested.

What is it that such people desire? Attention? Yes. But it goes deeper than that. In the case of women, they usually want approval due to hidden insecurities. They have something to prove. Ironically, the very insecurity that unsettles them, resulting in blazing verbiage, usually in the form of bragging about their children, causes others to avoid them. Their friends grow weary.

For some, however, they simply want to brag. They love to elevate themselves and announce their achievements. This too leads to alienation, the very thing that steals a bragger's thunder and pleasure. But even in the case of those with true talent, like a famous athlete or gifted actor, if all they seek is the applause of men, then that is all the reward they will receive—the fleeting and fickle approval of men. The One who truly counts is not impressed and does not applaud (Matthew 6:1-6).

Slothfulness

The man who refuses to work, desiring to live a life of ease and comfort, stretching out on the couch, content with daytime TV and all other manner of trivial occupation, may be too lazy to open a Bible to learn about the folly of such sluggardly behavior. For in so cherishing idleness and excessive relaxation, he does not realize, as the Proverbs warn, that poverty and need will assault him like a thief, or like an armed guard (Prov 6:6-11), thereby stealing his comfort, the very thing he most desires. Ironically, "the hand of the diligent will rule, while the slothful will be put to forced labor" (Prov 12:24). His cravings won't be met (Prov 13:5), his way will be full of thorns (Prov 15:19), and his stomach will soon be empty and hunger will overcome

him (Prov 20:4). Even his own house will rebuke him, says the Teacher: “Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks” (Ecc 10:18).

The Chains of Sin

Many believe that sin grants freedom. No one stands over you, confining you, telling you what you can and can't do. You are your own boss, your own master. Few doctrines are more cardinal to the kingdom of darkness than this. The tragic irony is that sin does not equal freedom but slavery. Stating the matter with brilliant clarity, Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34).

Men believe with all their hearts that holiness is going to cause them to miss out on something good. In their minds, they're going to be restricted, shackled by the killjoy of righteous living. But what they fail to perceive is the destructive and addictive nature of sin. Is the young man glued to the internet playing World of Warcraft for hours on end free? What about the person who finds himself craving after more and more porn? Or what about the alcoholic? Or the power-hungry politician? The junkie? Or the fame-consumed celebrity? This is not freedom but slavery. And it is destructive to the core. As Paul writes to the Romans, “For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death” (Rom 6:19b-21).

I remember speaking to a man who was considering becoming a Christian. Along the way, he asked me, “So what will I do?” Not understanding what he meant exactly, I asked him to clarify. “What will I do for fun?” came his reply. Probing further, it soon became apparent that he didn't want to give up two things: Playboys and bar life. Having counted the cost and found himself unwilling to repent,

he eventually ended up walking away from Christ. Why? He wanted cheap, degrading pictures of women.

I simply ask: Who is the one really shackled here?

Yes, But...

A number of other sins are equally ironic. We could talk about how the lips of the adulteress woman drips honey, “but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword” (Prov 5:3-4). We might recall how sin promises life, but actually leads to death (Rom 5:17). We could note how unbelievers in their pursuit of wisdom apart from God become fools (Rom 1:22). And we could also observe how the haughty, who esteem themselves and seek to magnify their name, are brought low (1 Peter 5:5-6).

While all this is true, someone will no doubt object, saying, “Yes, but are you really going to say that sin isn’t enjoyable? Or that it isn’t fun? I mean, come on. People don’t sin because it’s unpleasant.”

It’s a fair question. On the one hand, there are sins that don’t appear to gush with *intrinsic* pleasure. Take the man who lies in order to avoid blame. He’s certainly trying to avoid pain and humiliation, no doubt, but it isn’t like people sit around in the solitude of their bedrooms speaking untruths in order to get high. The man who likewise erupts in anger at his ailing lawnmower isn’t feeling especially happy. Swearing at it might provide a small measure of enjoyment—a cathartic release of frustration—but such outbursts are mixed at best. On the other hand, consider stealing. Not only does the thief feel a rush while committing the sin, but he obtains an item of value. The same might be said of the college student landing a one-night stand. As the party draws to a close, he leaves with a blonde by his side. While this behavior is in every way sinful, he surely enjoys the excitement and pleasure of sex. We might even say that he’s happier for it, which is to say that he wouldn’t have experienced as much pleasure that night had the girl snubbed him.

Given this small sampling of examples, is there something to Satan’s claim, after all? Has the kingdom of darkness tapped into new sources of pleasure?

Delighting in Darkness

The biblical answer is surprisingly clear. The wicked do in fact delight in sin. A sampling of passages will bear this out.

“Folly is a joy to him who lacks sense...” (Prov 15:21)

“It is as sport to a fool to do mischief...” (Prov 10:23 KJV)

“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?” (Prov 1:22)

“Men of perverted speech, who forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness, who rejoice in doing evil and delight in the perverseness of evil” (Prov 2:12b-14).

“The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.” (2 Thess 2:9-12)

“Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.” (Rev 22:15)

“And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.” (John 3:19)

“An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so...” (Jer 5:30-31)

“Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.” (Rom 1:32)

According to these verses, men delight in darkness, find joy in it, experience pleasure in it, love it, and approve of it. These are strong terms, and they should give us pause. The challenge is how to understand such delights in view of the warring kingdoms. If the dominion of darkness does in fact promise joy, and if it does deliver, doesn't this validate Satan's claim? Could sinners say, “Frankly, I find sin thrilling and enjoyable. Why give it up for inferior pleasures”? Or could not Satan say, “I told you so”?

The Source of all Pleasure

David declared, “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11).

It should be stated from the outset that God is the source and author of all pleasure. We should confidently say with the Psalmist, “No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly” (Psalm 84:11; see also 1 Tim 6:17). Every last drop of goodness and joy originates with God, therefore He can dispense every last drop of goodness and joy to His people. The proof is everywhere. Literally.

In the second chapter of Genesis, we're confronted with an interesting little statement. After placing man in the garden, it says of the trees, “And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food” Gen 2:9). God made the trees enjoyable to look at. When you stand on the edge of a rocky cliff looking out over a vast, rolling forest, your soul sings for joy. The sight brings delight. Or when you stand next to a gnarly, vine-covered tree, you cannot help but marvel. And why? Because God fashioned it to excite your senses and fill you with wonder. The same

is true with the fruit growing on trees. He made us capable of tasting the goodness.

Let's ponder this.

I love well-crafted video games. Since the age of four, I've been popping quarters in arcade machines eager to save humanity from invading aliens. With the advent of the PC and its ever-growing capabilities, video games have come a long way. The 8-bit experiences of long ago have been replaced with stunningly realistic and complex environments. Virtual worlds are created. If you think about these newer games, none of the onscreen visuals occurred by chance. The programmers, and the artists, and the writers, created everything. Nothing *just happened*. Every single color was chosen. Every cloud in the sky was placed there. Every interactive sound was embedded. Everything. If boats float it's because they programmed it. They didn't just say, "Let's make boats float." They determined the exact mechanics and physics. They determined buoyancy. They determined what the water would look like. How it would move. How it would reflect.

The same is true, but on an infinitely greater scale, with God and the universe. He not only created the strawberry, choosing its particular color and texture and shape, but He orchestrated all the complexities of its taste. He made the flavor. But it goes deeper than that. He made us in such a way that when the strawberry hits our tongue, and when its juices flow out, our taste buds connect with the fruit in such a way that it brings us delight. None of this is accidental. It's like the video game. It was intentionally designed. This means that God wanted our faces to light up with pleasure when the fruit is eaten. He designed the good feeling to exist between the two.

The implications are absolutely staggering. When we look around at creation, and when we consider the innumerable joys and pleasures found in it, we must recognize that God made it all. And He made them for us.

Consider how a mother rejoices in holding an infant; how the child actually feels against her skin—the softness, the tender weight. And consider the joy she feels while looking down at the baby's tiny, porcelain face. Do we love such little fingers by chance? Or consider how the sun reflects off a bubbling stream. Not one of the ten million

gleaming reflections is happenchance. They all dance together for our delight, because God made them to dance. When we pet a kitten, our fingers delight to touch its soft hair, because God made it so. When we hold the one we love and kiss them, our inward being shouts for joy. When the artist dips his brush into a vial of red paint, we need to remember that God thought up the color red. So whether the playful puppy, or the crisp morning air, or the singing birds, or the note C#, or the ocean waves, or the still forest, or the satisfying rhythm of poetry, or the myriads of flavors chefs explore for years on end, they all bring us pleasure, because God made them to bring us pleasure. Is it any wonder then that the Psalmist can say, “Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man! For He satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry soul he fills with good things” (Psalm 107:8-9).

In light of this truth, we can see that sin doesn’t create new joys, but rather it twists and perverts existing ones. It’s a leech. Take the womanizer who loves to add notches to his headboard. Is sexual intercourse his own creation? Not at all! Physical intimacy was created by God for mankind, but He made it to be enjoyed within marital bounds. The unbeliever sees this as a restriction and indulges in sex according to his own designs. He may feel many of the same physical things a married man feels, but this is because of common grace. If he were to lean entirely on the power of sin, he would feel no more pleasure than a black hole.

C.S. Lewis captured this beautifully in *The Screwtape Letters*. As the two demons continue to correspond by letter, one writes,

“Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy’s ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same; it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden. Hence we always try to work away from the natural condition of any pleasure to that in which it is least natural, least

redolent of its Maker, and least pleasurable. An ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure is the formula.”⁹⁴

It might still be thought that the man who enjoys multiple women gains something others do not. He taps into forbidden pleasures, as it were; he experiences a similar but peculiar quality found only, or primarily, through sin. One might think of drugs in this respect. Do they not produce immediate and heightened pleasures? Can sugar compete with cocaine?

Let us be cautious here. If we try to reduce sin to something akin to pure drudgery, as if it doesn't produce a measure of immediate gratification, we will have a hard time squaring the overall point with the Scriptures. For when speaking of Moses, the author of Hebrews writes, “By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward” (Heb 11:24-26).

We see in this passage that there are in fact “fleeting pleasures” to sin. They are temporary, because, as we have already noted, they borrow from the capital of God's goodness. The real treasure, as this same passage goes on to say, is found in Christ. There is something much greater to be gained by suffering for Christ in this present age. So yes, the treasures of Egypt would have felt very good. Who wouldn't enjoy building pyramids while being fanned and fed grapes?

While all that is true, sin isn't without its own deleterious bite. The natural man seeks after pleasure and even tastes it for a time, but it soon withers as God withdraws His grace, leaving the person more dissatisfied. This is a tragic irony. The darkened heart cannot help but delight in evil, which inevitably results in greater pain. It's like a man who is irresistibly attracted to the taste of some poisonous brew. The initial gulps bring delight and satisfaction, but the sensation soon turns sour as the poison inflicts its damage.

The Matrix of Joy

⁹⁴ *The Screwtape Letters*, chapter nine.

But let's not grant too much to the initial pleasures of sin, for it would be a mistake to suppose that ungodly behavior satisfies the deep longings of the soul. They don't. And when those desires aren't met, the person is inevitably left feeling dry and empty, and ultimately unfulfilled.

Consider an example. Suppose a young man's heart is dazzled by the sight of a young lady. She is innocent and beautiful and of good Christian character. Intent on winning her heart, the young man sends her flowers and writes her love letters. He is gentle with her and shows he knows what it means to care for another. As the relationship progresses, the young man approaches her father and asks for her hand. Having come to know the uprightness of his daughter's suitor, he happily gives his blessing. In time, after all the wedding plans, and after all the anticipation, the big day arrives. The bride is beautifully dressed, radiant, and glowing. She is given away by her father. Families are united. Vows are made. Dancing and celebration follow. And afterward, the newlyweds leave for their honeymoon. There they become one flesh, and the man receives his reward.

Now imagine another man in a different context. This individual withdraws fifty dollars from his bank account and heads off for the red light district. Upon finding a woman that catches his eye, he works out a deal and they check into a hotel room for an hour. The two become one flesh, and the man likewise receives his reward.⁹⁵

There's a difference, isn't there? One receives pleasure flowing from holiness which results in greater blessings. The other, while pleasurable, is degrading, and as such, misses out on all the attendant blessings, which, when added together, leads to greater happiness and deeper satisfaction.

The contrast is stark and consistent. We will either say with the Psalmist, "Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who greatly delights in his commandments!" (Psalm 112:1b), or we will experience the sting of death, "For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore the fruit of death" (Rom 7:5).

⁹⁵ I am indebted to C.S. Lewis for this illustration.

Another “Yes, But...”

Suppose an apologist from the abyss were to read this chapter. What might he say at this point? I imagine that he would shake his head, grin devilishly, and remark as follows, “Yes, this is all good, isn’t it? The case for holiness seems so clear—except that He’s rigged the whole system. What do I mean? Well, hasn’t He cursed sin? Doesn’t he impose Himself on our pleasures by calling down judgment? Consider Sodom and Gomorrah. They were having a grand old time, drinking and playing, using their bodies as they wished. They loved their coarse joking too. But then God reigned down fire on their city, interrupting their party. So yes, sin is going to result in “disappointment and sorrow.” It’s all tilted in His favor. Haven’t you noticed how He’s plagued sexual freedom by creating STDs? We would get along just fine if He would quit tearing down our delights with his judgments.”

It is, of course, sheer convenience to forget the actual track record of sin. Whole continents have been plunged into the ravages of war because of sin. Untold families have been torn apart. Friendships have been destroyed. Depression, anxiety, and paranoia have driven men and women to slit their wrists. Murderous plots have been carried out. Men have enslaved other men. And if we were to walk the streets of Sodom on a Friday night, we would probably be raped. Our history is one long recording of sin’s failure. So to argue that sin, if left alone, would bring greater happiness is pure fantasy. History is exhibit A.

Now it is certainly true that God does in fact actively judge sin. The people of Israel living in the days of Jeremiah would undoubtedly agree. And yes, God did cause people to feel uncomfortable when the fountains burst forth in the days of Noah. That’s the point. Diseases like syphilis, and herpes, and AIDS, and gonorrhea are potent physical reminders of sin’s destructive nature.

One More Retort

“Ah, but you see,” continues the devilish apologist, “you need to think more deeply about the matter. The whole thing is still rigged. In the end, it is God who will not put up with sin. But why is that? Because it doesn’t comport with His nature? Because it runs contrary to His will? Because He made us? Why curse something that does in fact make us happy? The man who wants to play golf on Sunday morning is deemed a sinner. The woman who likes to show a little skin and enjoys being a tad naughty with men is called a harlot. Why be so pushy about all this? Isn’t that what it all comes down to? God has to have it His way. But before you answer, think further. Imagine with me a sophisticated form of virtual reality, a pod-like container where men and women can plug themselves in and experience every imaginable pleasure at maximum strength, continually. They choose the delight and their minds are made to see and feel it. Sheer ecstasy fills them—complete and utter ecstasy! There are no problems with overindulgence in this fantasy world. Power supplies aren’t a problem. They don’t need to go to work. Nothing. God sustains and engineers it all. Now if that would make men happy, why wouldn’t God do it? Why not simply give men what they want?”

This might seem like an extreme proposition, but it actually illuminates a crucial aspect of life. Whether the man playing golf, or the man plugged into the simulation, both are, in essence, operating out of the same satanic impulse. Autonomous man wants to do things his way. He wants to be his own god, determining what is best, or good, or acceptable according to the dictates of his own self-generated standards. God needs to get out of the way, or He should at least accommodate our desires—or chill out a bit. But in each instance, man is trying to wrest the scepter out of God’s hand. He’s attempting to dethrone God and elevate his desires above those of his Maker. In all this, God’s glory is not perceived as ultimate. Man’s self-indulgence is deemed ultimate (whatever that looks like). It really does go back to the awful idea, for it flows out of the supposition that there is another route to ultimate happiness; it is a way of life that subtly usurps the Lordship of Christ by assuming the rights of deity.

Ultimate joy is found in the kingdom of light. In fact, while describing the kingdom of God, Paul cites joy as one of its chief attributes. He writes, “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of

eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17).

Holiness equals happiness, and it comes through the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22).

The Irony of Holiness

This raises an interesting point. Thus far we have argued that sin doesn’t lead to greater happiness, rather it often purchases the opposite of its intended ends, and tragically so. Irony aptly describes this phenomenon. We have also insisted that joy is rooted in Christ alone. One might be so bold as to suggest a 6th sola here: *Sola Gaudium*!⁹⁶ If you want to experience true and lasting joy, look to Christ.

Interestingly, there’s a sharp irony to this as well. As Christians walking in the Spirit yearn after holiness, they receive (or will receive) wonderful blessings. From the world’s perspective, the Christian approach to receiving these blessings appears absurd. Who would dare think that the meek will be the ones to inherit the earth (Matt 5:5)? Surely a great general or presidential figure will triumph. But not so. In the end, those who are humble, who neither rely on the strength of the sword, nor the might of their strength, will reign on the earth. The same is true with prayer. Kneeling in prayer looks rather weak, but in actuality, tremendous power is unleashed through it (James 5:16), as well as courage (Acts 4:31).

Consider wisdom. Paul tells us, “If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise” (1Co 3:18). The proverbs agree, “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom” (Pro 11:2). If we throw away our autonomous reasoning, we will gain true wisdom and knowledge.

There is also Christ’s yoke. Many look at the commands of Christ and turn away, feeling they’re too oppressive. But listen again to

⁹⁶ Five solas emerged out of the Reformation: *Sola Fide* (Faith Alone), *Sola Gratia* (Grace Alone), *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture Alone), *Solus Christus* (Salvation through Christ Alone), *Soli Deo Gloria* (The Glory of God Alone). Perhaps we should say that joy or happiness is found in Christ alone.

Christ's words, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt 11:28-30; see also 1 John 5:3). Contrary to the world's presuppositions, Christ's yoke provides rest and is an easy burden to bear. Many likewise view obedience to Christ as confining or enslaving. The truth is that through the Son we find true freedom. "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36; 2 Cor 3:17).

We could also talk about how in our losing everything we gain everything (Phil 3:8-11), or how our afflictions are preparing for us an eternal weight of glory (2 Cor 4:16-18), or how the first shall be last and the last first (Luke 13:30), or if we lean not on our own understanding our paths will be made straight (Prov 3:5-6), or how those who humble themselves will be exalted (James 4:10), or how when we are weak, we are strong (2 Cor 12:10), or how persecution brings great reward (Matt 5:10-12). We could delve into all of these, and many others, but suffice it to say that God provides every imaginable joy to those who trust in Him. As Jesus said, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11; 17:3).

Waiting for the King

But let us not forget that "we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered" (Rom 8:36b). The consummation of joy is yet to be experienced as we eagerly await our returning King. The Holy Spirit is our initial deposit, and through Him, we taste heavenly realities now.

The wine of our joy isn't yet full strength though. The troubles of this present age water it down. We are at war, after all. Satan is a ravenous lion looking for people to devour, and God allows him to physically inflict the church (Rev 17:6 and 6:11). This isn't permitted for naught, as we shall see in a forthcoming chapter. God has very wise and holy reasons for the things He does (Eph 3:20-21).

Our age is a dark and evil one, and we are foot soldiers passing through its war-torn embankments. Yet, thankfully, even now the

enemy is made to taste the sorrow and grief of sin, and we, as God's people who share in the sufferings of Christ, experience genuine joy and peace, even in the midst of tears. We must remember Christ's words, "You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned to joy" (John 16:20). As we wait for Him, let us set our "minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Col 3:2-4).

Chapter Seven

The Epistemology of Idolatry



A number of decades ago, a conference was convened in Europe to discuss the nature of worldviews. The objective was to achieve a measure of consensus on what constitutes a worldview. As the meeting progressed, the complexities of the issue became manifest, and in the end, the project was deemed a failure. The reason it failed, as expressed by W.T. Jones, was because “the differences of opinion about worldview reflect differences in our own worldviews.”⁹⁷

For as long as fallen man has been thinking and expressing his thoughts, piling up mountains of scholarly journals and playing with metaphysics long into the night, consensus regarding the truth is as elusive as ever. Aristotle disagreed with Plato. Hume woke Kant from his dogmatic slumber. Modernity gave way to postmodernity. It's all a swirling vortex of conflicting viewpoints. If anything is evident, it is that the history of philosophy, with its many centuries of contemplation, has failed.

The world is a million shades of opinion.

This is no accident. The city of man has erected its library on the foundation of autonomy. Because of this, each human carries under his arm a book entitled, “I am the truth.”

Satanic “Omniscience”

In order to better understand this problem, we need to turn again to the original founder of autonomy, the one who thought he could obtain truth apart from God.

⁹⁷ Quoted by Dr. Scott Oliphant in his lecture, “The Role of Worldviews in Apologetic Dialogue.”

Given a level playing field, Lucifer knew that God would win at Jeopardy every time. But when he considered the prospects of sin and how it could open before him new vistas of knowledge—areas of potential wisdom that God had not, nor could not explore given His character (Jer 32:35)—he believed it would introduce new categories to the game, questions that God would not be able to answer. This, he believed, would greatly elevate his position.

The prospects appeared doubly promising as he contemplated the implications of autonomy. In his mind, he likely thought that it would allow him to redefine the very notion of fact. Facts would be no longer exclusively defined by God. As a result, a Christ-centered worldview no longer seemed necessary. Another worldview could be constructed; a whole new view of reality could take shape. He would explore sin, crack open its secrets, and become a new creator, a creature able to mold reality. Autonomy would insure it. Friedrich Nietzsche understood this well when he wrote,

“The noble type of man regards *himself* as a determiner of values; he does not require to be approved of; he passes the judgment: ‘What is injurious to me is injurious in itself.’ He knows that it is he himself only who confers honour on things; he is a *creator of values*. He honours whatever he recognizes in himself: such morality is self-glorification.”⁹⁸

The pitch for this idea came in the form of a promise. “You too can be God.” By partaking of this unholy sacrament, anyone could become unlawfully divine. It was in a very real sense a revolution of polytheistic proportions; a grandiose gesture where everyone can share in the joys of deity. The universe in all its diversity would no longer be unified under one divine head, but under a multiplicity of divine authorities.

As a result, there are now billions of gods walking around the planet. They are called humans.

The Proliferation of Would be Gods

⁹⁸ *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. Authorized translation, Helen Zimmern, page 228.

Satan's awful idea infects men at the level of their thinking. Instead of acknowledging God as the source of all truth, a radical reorientation has occurred. Men displace their Creator. They kick Him out of their thoughts and absolutize their judgments. Reality is redefined as well. They look at what God has made and say that it is other than it really is. Entire worldviews are constructed—Buddhism, naturalism, Hinduism, and the millions of other idiosyncratic views held by those shopping at grocery stores, walking down sidewalks, and attending movie theaters. Everyone has a worldview, even if it's ill-defined. In this we see that self-deification isn't found only in the palaces of ancient Persia, but in the suburbs of the Midwest.⁹⁹

The implications of this are deep and manifold. Since men function as the final arbiters of truth, they continually judge others according to their own self-imagined standards. They weigh information on the scales of self-determination and only hold to that which accords with their standards. We see this every night on the news. A panel is brought together to discuss a subject. It might be a cultural issue, it might be the latest geo-political development, it might be a brewing war. As the experts wrestle with the subject, opinions are voiced with intense passion. They grow red in the face, shouting, and pointing. But what are their assertions rooted in ultimately? Facts? Many claim as much. But how do they interpret those facts? What is their *philosophy* of fact? What is the criterion by which those so-called facts are judged and understood? Or when they pass moral judgments, how do they determine what is good or evil?

It is certainly true that we have to carefully work through issues and weigh arguments in light of the best evidence. Rational inquiry isn't being denied. What I'm addressing is the fundamental, all-

⁹⁹ The seemingly pious attempts of false religions to worship some kind of god are no less guilty of this crime. Calvin is helpful when he writes, "Mingled vanity and pride appear in this, that when miserable men do seek after God, instead of ascending higher than themselves, as they ought to do, they measure him by their own carnal stupidity, and, neglecting solid inquiry, fly off to indulge their curiosity in vain speculation. Hence, they do not conceive of him in the character in which he is manifested, but imagine him to be whatever their own rashness has devised." (*Institutes*, Book I, chapter IV.I)

encompassing presupposition undergirding unbelieving thought: the rejection of the Lordship of Christ.

When this central truth is rejected or ignored, men choose to believe only what first agrees with their self-determined standards of acceptability. It has to pass the bar of autonomous reasoning. It is as it was in the days of the Judges when “everyone did what was right in their own eyes” (21:25).

Following in the Footsteps of Adam

Men are essentially following in the footsteps of Adam. When God told Adam that he would die if he ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam had to make a decision. Would he believe God, or would he question God's authority? That is the fundamental question.

Through the Serpent's cunning, divine authority was subtly undermined. Adam was tempted to step outside the boundaries of God's sovereign rule and evaluate the matter from another angle, to judge the situation as an “independent” mind. At root, Adam was enticed to join hands with the Serpent and journey out into the realm of autonomy where God's Word isn't savored as the absolute bedrock of knowledge. Instead, he was encouraged to adopt a perspective where the truth is considered an open question, one where God's Word is judged by a standard located outside of God.

Sympathizing with the Devil?

“Yes, but how could it be any other way?” someone may want to ask. “A person can't blindly assume the absolute truthfulness of God's Word, right? Surely we need independent evidence. Especially Adam. Just think of it. Along comes this Serpent fellow, a creature he had never met, and it tells him something he couldn't have known with certainty. Adam might have had a good idea who was telling the truth, but when confronted with a different viewpoint, he had to act as judge over both. He had to decipher what was true. How could he give

the serpent a fair shake if he simply dismissed the notion out of hand, refusing to even consider it? That would be irresponsible, no? Aren't we forced to admit that it would have been a little irresponsible, even if the Serpent's position was in fact wrong?"

A Shift in Ultimates

The concern of the questioner strikes at the heart of the issue, for it's precisely here where the shift in ultimate heart commitments is brought into sharp relief. When it's assumed that God's Word is not absolute, exercising complete jurisdiction over human thought, a subtle shift occurs. The questioner, whether intentionally or not, makes key assumptions about reality; it's riddled with a host of ontological, theological, metaphysical, anthropological, and epistemological presuppositions. A standard is quietly invoked, and it isn't God's. It's something else. And it functions as the final court of appeal.

Dr. Cornelius Van Til agrees when he writes, "When man fell it was therefore his attempt to do without God in every respect. Man sought his ideals of truth, goodness and beauty somewhere beyond God, either directly within himself or in the universe about him. God had interpreted the universe for him, or we may say man had interpreted the universe under the direction of God, but now he sought to interpret the universe without reference to God."¹⁰⁰

Strangely enough, few think to question their own presuppositions and ask whether they're begging the question by assuming the absolute competency of their autonomous intellect. But of course that's the crux. Wannabe gods aren't eager to relinquish their perceived rights.

So it is precisely here where the kingdoms clash, so far as the battlefield of the mind is concerned. The crucial question being fought over is this:

Is God the absolute bedrock of all knowledge?

¹⁰⁰ *Van Til's Apologetic, Readings and Analysis*, page 95.

As children of the devil, men naturally answer in the negative. In their eyes, the one incontrovertible and undeniable fact of reality is the perceived right and power to understand and define the universe as they deem fit. Van Til helpfully summarizes the outlook for us,

“Here are the marks of the natural man in his attitude toward the interpretation of the facts (events) of the world:

- (1) He thinks of himself as the ultimate judge of what can or cannot be. He will not allow any authority to stand above him revealing to him what may or may not have happened in the past or what may or may not happen in the future.
- (2) This assertion or assumption of autonomy on the part of man makes a covert, if not an overt, assertion about the nature of God. God (it is assumed if not asserted) *cannot* be of such a nature as to control any and all phenomena.
- (3) These two assertions or assumptions imply a third: that man’s thought is, in the final analysis, absolutely original. Whatever his ultimate environment may be, the area of interpretation that man makes for himself will be true for him because his thought is in effect legislative with respect to that environment.”¹⁰¹

This goes a long way in describing the world’s present condition. By abandoning their Creator, the world has lost its epistemological footing, and since men are made in the image of God, and are therefore inescapably interested in truth, they seek to gain traction by some other autonomous means. Knowledge needs to be anchored in something. In this respect, the history of philosophy is very much a story about humanity trying to find an alternative epistemological foundation. But the task has proven immensely challenging. God keeps getting in the way.

God Responds

¹⁰¹ Ibid, page 310.

The Lord is not at all impressed with man's wisdom. In fact, He delights in overturning it. In an incredibly relevant section of Scripture, the apostle Paul writes,

“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor 1:18-25).

After having called the philosophers, and the scientists, and the professors to attention, a simple question is asked: Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? It's a striking question. Given its rhetorical framing, it's as if Paul is saying, “Yes, God has made foolish the wisdom of the world!”

But how has God dealt with the world's so-called wisdom?

The Epistemological Irony of Idolatry

Through irony, of course.

In his letter to the Romans, while building a case against sinful humanity, Paul describes the natural man's tendency to suppress the truth. “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Romans 1:21). The human mind is actively affected by sin. To quote it again, they “became futile in their thinking.” The Greek word translated as “futile” is *mataioo*. It

means to render one foolish, morally wicked, idolatrous, vain.¹⁰² When the Lord gives people over to their sin, they are driven deeper into the darkness, and by extension, further away from the truth. Filled with idolatrous pride, these hardened sinners begin to boast. They claim that their way of life and their way of thinking is best, that it is wise. The shocking irony, notes Paul, is that “while claiming to be wise, they became fools” (vs. 22).

So the first thing to note is that in the battle over true wisdom, God loves to expose the world’s wisdom as fraudulent. He says, “I am the LORD, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself, who frustrates the signs of liars and makes fools of diviners, who turns wise men back and makes their knowledge foolish” (Isa 44:24b-25). Like all the other supposed strengths of sin, wisdom and knowledge prove elusive, resulting in a reversal of fortunes. When men line their walls with degrees from ivy league schools, adding impressive letters next to their names, but refuse to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ, they are made foolish, the very thing all their schooling was supposed to cure.

This isn’t to say that one of these highly educated individuals wouldn’t score higher on a test than some uneducated Christian. Clearly, a pagan lawyer, or doctor, knows more in that sense. Rather, the foolishness described here is more fundamental in nature. The very foundations on which man attempts to ground his knowledge prove futile. And so in the end, the educated unbeliever cannot say that he knows anything for sure, since self-defeating agnosticism inevitably dominates unbelieving thought.

A Twisting, Turning Road

In order to demonstrate the veracity of this claim, one would need to dip into a fair bit of sophisticated argumentation. The reader would also need to possess a firm grasp of the relevant debates scattered throughout the history of philosophy.¹⁰³ Since entire volumes, even

¹⁰² *Strong’s Greek Dictionary*, G3154.

¹⁰³ Along these lines, I would recommend Lee Hardy’s insightful lectures, “The History of Modern Thought,” and John Frame’s course on the “History of Philosophy and Christian Thought.” John Frame’s volume “The Doctrine of

series of volumes, produced by greater lights than myself have been written on this subject, we can but only move quickly towards a conclusion, leaving scores of questions and objections unanswered. That being said, I've paid a fair bit of attention to this issue, reflecting on the matter for over ten years now. Having long ago become convinced that the basic tenets of Van Til's apologetic known as presuppositionalism is most faithful to the biblical data, I am something of a Vantillian.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, that particular school of apologetics will flavor what follows. I say this for the sake of disclosure. If perchance you're scratching your head, asking yourself what all this means, simply ignore the labels, and, as the old saying goes, put on your thinking cap. I'll try to present the argument as plainly and as cogently as I know how.¹⁰⁵

The "What if" problem

We said earlier that the history of philosophy is very much a story about men trying to anchor knowledge in something secure. They want to know how they know, and why such knowledge is reliable. Here we're not talking about something like sports facts. Rather, we're talking about the very foundations of knowledge itself. Take for example the existence of the external world. How do you know that

the Knowledge of God" is superb, as is Richard L. Pratt's "Every Thought Captive." The amount of literature that could be digested is vast, so the above serves as merely a sampling of potential resources.

¹⁰⁴ That being said, I am not an incurable fanboy, which is to say that I think there are areas where things could be improved. In fact, much has been improved upon since the days of the good professor, or at least clarified. Alvin Plantinga, while not exactly a Vantillian, has contributed much in the area of epistemology. His work should not be ignored. Here I would point the reader to Kelly Clark's helpful introductory volume, "Return to Reason," as well as James Anderson's excellent essay, "If Knowledge then God: The Epistemological Theistic Arguments of Plantinga and Van Til."

¹⁰⁵ I would also heartily recommend that if you're a novice to take some time to think and read further. The amount of audio material that can be obtained for free these days is astonishing. Avail yourself of them. For a good one-stop spot that reviews and recommends such material, check out the website: www.soundofdoctrine.com. It is my website.

you aren't a brain in a vat being stimulated to see and experience the world as we presently see it? If you were going to prove that this isn't so, how would you go about doing it? Would you appeal to something in the environment? But that's part of the illusion. Would you appeal to your thoughts? But again, you're being made to think in a particular way. So how would you pull back the curtain in order to see things as they *really* are?

The short answer is that you can't. You're a brain in a vat, unable to break free.

Hollywood has made its fair share of movies playing off this philosophical conundrum; the most popular of which has been *The Matrix*. As you may recall, Neo finds out that the world in which he lives isn't at all real, not as he thinks of real, anyway. A highly sophisticated computer is feeding off human bodies. The computer creates an imaginary world called *The Matrix* where the human inhabitants live, and move, and play. Their minds are made to think they're living in a normal, physical environment. But it's all an illusion. Their life is a grand parlor trick.

This problem may seem like nothing more than a silly gimmick—something to be dismissed out of hand—but it touches on a serious issue. It's what I will call here the "What if?" problem. Is it possible that we are living in something like a *Matrix*? If so, then what is true reality like? How could we get at it?

Let's take another example. Rene Descartes, the man who famously wrote, "I think, therefore I am," wrestled with similar enigmas. Adopting a skeptical frame of mind, he asked whether it was possible if we are presently living out an extremely vivid dream. All of us have experienced these kinds of dreams, so what if our present life is just that? How would we know whether or not this is the case? And if it is the case, then what would it say about our present knowledge? Would it be an illusion? Yes. Or take a more potent and truly diabolical example, what if God isn't actually good, but is rather an evil fiend tricking us into thinking he is in fact good, only to intensify the horror later when he unveils his true character? Is that possible? Is this terrible thought an *absolute* impossibility? Surely one must concede that it's not *utterly* impossible.

Let's press this further. How many different scenarios like the ones listed above could be imagined? Many, no doubt. And one might say that there could be an unimaginable number of scenarios—states of affairs that our minds are incapable of grasping. Maybe we are like ants and algebra. No matter the effort, they cannot comprehend mathematics. In the same way, perhaps reality is ultimately inscrutable to us. Or maybe there's a crucial piece of information, let's say information X, that if understood would cause an entire paradigm shift to occur in our understanding of the universe. Is that possible? Of course.

Here's the problem facing us. Since we can't be certain that one of these scenarios doesn't actually reflect the true state of affairs, then we can't be certain we truly understand reality. In fact, we aren't able to determine the relative likelihood that one of the aforementioned scenarios is true. Calculating the probability requires us to be in possession of the background information—the very thing that is in question! In this respect, the “What if?” problem leaves us scratching our heads, unable to quantify the possibility of anything. Everything appears to be equally probable and improbable.

As a result, agnosticism rules the day, causing knowledge to crash on the rocks of possibility and ignorance. In the end, chance becomes ultimate—a self-defeating, chaotic, and impersonal form that swallows up certainty.¹⁰⁶

True Reality... Out There

The chasm, therefore, existing between ourselves (the subject) and the world lying outside ourselves (the object), has been a sharp thorn

¹⁰⁶ Here someone might say, “This is still nothing more than a mind game, a fun idea meant for sci-fi thrillers, but not real life. So forget the rabid skepticism. I'm just going to believe what is obvious to me, which is good old common sense.” If you are living in God's world, then yes, there will be a common sense understanding of reality that coheres with the true nature of things. But if not, the decision to ignore the pull of skepticism proves arbitrary. After all, some think the common sense view of reality is Platonism, others existentialism, others naturalistic materialism, or Hinduism, and so on. “Common sense” equally falls prey to the “What if” problem.

in the side of philosophy. The relentless agnosticism outlined above fuels the problem, as no one is able to really get at true reality. We are in one way or another locked up in ourselves. The recognition of this fact has left an indelible impression on the history of philosophy.¹⁰⁷

Here one might recall Plato's world of the forms/ideas. He believed there was something more real beyond our present world, a realm inaccessible to us in our present state. Immanuel Kant tried to weave his way through this riddle as well, but in the end demarcated reality into the phenomenal realm (the way we see the world) and the noumenal realm (the way things really are), thereby maintaining a rift in knowledge. Both of these thinkers in their own ways recognized the chasm that exists between our perception of reality and true reality. The problem is that if reality extends beyond our grasp, then our present knowledge cannot be anchored in anything solid. Agnosticism rears its ugly head and certainty proves illusory.

No one, probably, understood this more clearly than the Scottish philosopher David Hume. Through a careful inquiry into the nature of human understanding, Hume masterfully deconstructed the empirical approach to knowledge. With razor sharp logic, he challenged causality itself, especially the process known as induction. He noted that we form beliefs based on perceived causal connections. If something happens over and over again, we draw inferences based on the assurance that the same thing will happen again. But, as he argues, there is no rational reason why this must be so. In the end, this observation yields skepticism. Human sense perception isn't, in the final analysis, trustworthy.

The emotional impact of this position weighed heavily on him. He recognized that if he was correct (and he could see no fruitful way

¹⁰⁷ "Any epistemology," writes Dr. Frame, "must do justice to subject, object, and criterion. When, like the majority of famous philosophers, people try to do epistemology without God, they must find an absolute somewhere else than in God. For such people it is tempting to try to make absolute, that is, to deify, one of the three elements of human knowledge—the subject (subjectivism), the object (empiricism), or the law (rationalism)—and to call the other two elements into question. In such epistemological systems, there is no God to guarantee that the three elements will cohere, and so the philosopher must be prepared to make choices among those elements when there are, as in his assumption there will be, irresolvable conflicts." *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, page 110.

out), then agnosticism was inescapably man's lot. In a candid moment, while reflecting on the apparent disparity between his rational conclusions and his inability to live consistently with those conclusions, he wrote,

"Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favor shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me? And on whom have I any influence, or who have any influence on me? I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environ'd with the deepest darkness, and utterly deprived of the use of every member and faculty.

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.

Here then I find myself absolutely and necessarily determined to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life. But notwithstanding that my natural propensity, and the course of my animal spirits and passions reduce me to this indolent belief in the general maxims of the world, I still feel such remains of my former disposition, that I am ready to throw all my books and papers into the fire, and resolve never more to renounce the pleasures of life for the sake of reasoning and philosophy."¹⁰⁸

The Enlightenment has failed, and in its wake, the dominant mood of secular society has become that of subjectivism. Everything is ultimately relative. The individual perspective reigns supreme. The

¹⁰⁸ *A Treatise of Human Nature*, page 269.

“discipline of epistemology,” says Andrew Fellows, “is dead. No longer is any truth to be found. Objectivity is impossible.”¹⁰⁹ This explains why our culture is so quick to talk about truth in entirely personal terms. “It’s true for me,” says one, “but not necessarily true for another. They have their own truth.”

The grand irony is that after two thousand some odd years of careful reflection, autonomous man still cannot answer the most basic questions about life. Not with any certainty, anyway.

“What if” vs. God

The obvious concern at this point is how God provides a way out of this slippery pit. If the “What if?” problem extends to the very corners of our sense perception, how are Christians in a better situation? Couldn’t the ardent postmodernist ask, “Is it possible, dear sir, that God is a horrible demon misleading us?”

If we take this seriously, and I think we should, the emotional turmoil of the “What if?” problem can prove crippling. Doubt begins to infect the soul, and soon peace and assurance are sacrificed on the altar of chance. It’s a psychologically unforgiving monster.

Thankfully, there is a ray of light in this dark dungeon. But as we begin to unpack the solution, we must pay very careful attention to our assumptions, for it’s extremely easy to lose sight of our epistemological foundation. The old Christian hymn, *My Hope is Built on Nothing Less* proves helpful. The last line of each stanza proclaims, “On Christ, the solid rock, I stand; all other ground is sinking sand.” Note that the refrain doesn’t say, “On Christ, the highly probable ‘I took a leap in the dark therefore I’m mildly hopeful that He’s a rock...”

So how do we proceed?

To begin, Paul tells the Colossians that in Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3). Every last granule of wisdom and knowledge, urges Paul, is found in Christ, for, as we have already stressed, Jesus is the very embodiment of “the Truth” (John 14:6). God is by very nature truth. So if you want to know

¹⁰⁹ Lecture series at L’Abri, *Epistemology*, part two.

where the fundamental laws of logic are rooted, they're rooted in God's nature. The same is true with knowledge. The Proverbs say as much in its opening verses, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov 1:7).

Because God is the Creator of everything, all facts have been endowed with meaning by Him. Every connection, every atom, every galaxy. There are no brute (or uninterrupted) facts. Everything has meaning in the mind of God. So as we think God's thoughts after Him, we truly understand reality.

Since God is omniscient, He perfectly and exhaustively knows and understands all facts. It's not as if one could hand a book to God and provide Him with a new source of information. And since He's sovereign, there aren't any rogue molecules just waiting to create an unforeseeable state of affairs in the future. It is all perfectly under His control. And since He is immutable, we need not fear that He will change His mind about the truth, or grow dull in His memory. Lastly, His omniscience, and immutability, and sovereignty, and truthfulness will never fade away, for God is eternal. There has never been a time when the truth hasn't existed nor a time when it will cease.

He is God, and there is no other.

Since we've been made in His image and designed to live in this world and interact with it, He has fashioned us in such a way so as to ensure the reliability of our senses. The world is made specifically for us. Therefore, science is a viable and God-ordained discipline, as is language, philosophy, art, and all the other wonders of life that enrich the human experience (Gen 1:28). God's competency and goodness guarantee it.

Where the Rubber Meets the Road

Having said all this, the postmodernist will roll his eyes and say, "That's all fine and dandy, but how do you know that what you have just outlined is true? You still haven't dealt with the "What if?" problem, How do you know you aren't a brain in a vat made to think such things about a made-up God? Or how do you know that God isn't tricking you?"

Observe the presuppositions at play. In the case of our postmodernist friend, he honors a different ultimate besides that of God. For him possibility itself is lord. By calling everything into question, chance is esteemed as ultimate. God must bow, as it were, before possibility.

But God is absolute, not chance. He is the sovereign Lord of the universe who “works all things out in accordance with the counsel of His will” (Eph 1:11). Even the results of the dice throw belong to Him (Prov 16:33). Therefore, there’s no such thing as pure luck. So when our postmodernist insists on our asking the “What if?” question, he tacitly assumes the ultimacy of his position. He assumes from the outset that the only certainty we can assert with any confidence is that chance is absolute.

“But how can it not be the case?” the postmodernist will retort. “You just can’t assert that God is absolute as if a mere assertion solves the problem. It’s totally begging the question!”

But here is where we need to look at our epistemological footing. How are we to respond to the complaint? Shall we step off the foundation of God’s Word in order to engage the problem? Will we partially step off, leaving one foot on the rock and the other dangling over the void, somehow hoping to meet him halfway? Or will we answer with both feet firmly planted on the rock?

Many are tempted to step off the rock. But if Christianity is true, then the only sure foundation in all of reality is Christ. Conversely, if Christianity is false, then we’re left with rampant agnosticism. Since we’re finite, we have to make a choice where we’ll put our trust. Shall I knowingly choose the faulty foundation of autonomy, or shall I stand on the one thing that can make sense of the faulty foundation? We have to choose an Absolute. There’s no getting around it. So why choose an unmistakably crappy one?

Moreover, it isn’t as if the Christian is breaking an indisputable law when he refuses to play the “What If?” game. In the case of the Postmodernist, it is sheer duplicity to assert that his game is the only viable one in town. Here we see that his commitment to possibility is no less audacious or question-begging than an unwavering commitment to the Lordship to Christ. The difference is that Christ actually provides a rational basis for rationality. The most rational

thing in the world is to look to Christ, the solid Rock. Making dogmatic claims from a foundation of quicksand is downright foolish. Jesus taught as much when He said,

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it” (Matt 7:24-27).

The postmodernist appears at first blush to be objective, the one exercising intellectual responsibility. But it needs to be stressed again that if the Christian is begging the question, so is the postmodernist. His unspoken epistemological commitments, flowing out of autonomy, define reality as much as anything else defines reality, for he is assuming from the start, and as an indisputable fact, that God cannot be God given the human predicament. God’s authority is deemed incoherent.

Could it be a mere coincidence that this happens to reflect the central thesis of Satan’s position?¹¹⁰

The Circularity of Absolutes

The postmodernist and the Christian, or any other form of unbelieving thought, will, therefore, necessarily conflict at the level of absolutes. If Christ isn’t Lord then something else will serve as a substitute authority. Interestingly, this results in a form of circularity where each position cannot help but appeal to its fundamental commitments in order to justify its fundamental commitments.

¹¹⁰ Along these lines, when Satan considered God’s nature and “that-which-God-cannot-do,” he elevated possibility to idolatrous heights. *Might* there be new pleasures to be found? *Might* there be new sources of knowledge and wisdom?

Theologians and philosophers have long recognized this fact. Dr. Bahnsen explains,

“All argumentation about ultimate issues eventually *comes to rest* at the level of the disputant’s presuppositions. If a man has come to the conclusion, and is committed to the truth of a certain view, P, when he is challenged as to P, he will offer supporting argumentation for it, Q and R. But of course, as his opponent will be quick to point out, this simply shifts the argument to Q and R. Why accept them? The proponent of P is now called upon to offer S, T, U, and V as arguments for Q and R. And on and on the process goes... Eventually all argumentation terminates in some logically primitive starting point, a view or premise held as unquestionable.”¹¹¹

A person's logically primitive starting point, or absolute, will function as the all-controlling grid by which all else is judged. It will control one's epistemological outlook, one's manner of argumentation, one's philosophy of fact, and use of evidence. As a result, ultimate circularity necessarily follows. Think of the rationalist, in this respect. The rationalist can only prove the primacy of reason by using rational arguments. Likewise, the empiricist can only prove the primacy of sense experience by some kind of appeal to sense experience. Logic functions in a similar fashion. Try to establish the laws of logic without being logical. It's impossible. All systems of thought, if they attempt to explain ultimate issues, will necessarily prove circular. They cannot help but appeal to their foundational principles.¹¹²

When we come to recognize the unavoidable circularity of absolutes, we might be tempted to toss up our hands in despair, decrying the entire enterprise of rational discourse as nothing more than the exchange of men barking dogmatic assertions. How can anyone adjudicate, after all, between competing claims if their method of adjudication will necessarily reflect the underlying principles of their worldview?

¹¹¹ *Always Ready*, page 72.

¹¹² See chapter five in Dr. Frame's work, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*.

Rather than serving as a foil to the truth, the very fact of absolute circularity reflects the very heart of reality, for it reflects and magnifies the Bible's unswerving commitment to, and explication of, the unique Lordship of Christ.

Think of it this way. If we are in fact living in God's world, and if the God of Abraham is the one and true living God, then it follows that reality will inescapably reflect this truth, for God is absolute truth. Ultimate circularity would be a feature, not a quirk. Therefore, when we're confronted with this puzzling aspect of reality, the Godness of God shines all the more brightly.

Consider a passage in the book of Hebrews by way of illustration. While urging his Jewish audience to remain faithful to Christ, the writer appeals to Abraham in order to underscore the certainty of God's promises. In what might be viewed as a surprising statement, the author describes the establishment of the covenant in the following way:

“For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, ‘Surely I will bless you and multiply you.’ And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us” (Heb 6:13-18).

A covenant is often established by appealing to a higher authority. This adds credibility and ensures that the stipulations will be enforced. In the case of God, however, we are told that there was nothing greater to which He could appeal than Himself. He was the ultimate authority, the very bedrock of security that grounded the covenant. This established the guarantee. So with remarkable clarity,

the unparalleled authority of God is taught in an unflinching way, and it accords perfectly with the nature of absolutes.¹¹³

Absolutes and Idolatry

Let's return to the idea of false absolutes. What we have in the case of unbelieving thought is a curious example of epistemological idolatry. Up until now, we have been describing the unbeliever's ultimate heart commitments in more philosophical terms (absolutes, starting points, ground of knowledge, etc.). But there is a biblical term that better describes the unbeliever's absolute. It is idolatry.

Martin Luther, in his larger catechism discussion of the first commandment, defines idolatry, in part, as that which "your heart clings to and relies upon, that is your God." And again, "That now, I say, upon which you set your heart and put your trust is properly your God."¹¹⁴ G. K. Beale builds on this by adding "whatever your heart clings to or relies on *for ultimate security*" is your God.¹¹⁵ This is quite right. When the unbeliever rejects the all-sufficiency of Christ, it is as if he crafts in his mind an idol and bows down before it, esteeming it more highly than God. He does not love the Lord his God with all his mind (Matt 22:37). He instead loves something else with all his mind, believing that it will provide ultimate security. This is the essence of epistemological idolatry; and so when Satan called God's authority into question, he became a blacksmith peddling idols as much as any ancient Babylonian.

¹¹³ Think of Paul's imperative in 2 Cor 10:5 to take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ. Such all-encompassing statements confirm God's sovereignty and aseity. So while unbelievers may scoff at this biblical command, the believer knows that anything less would indicate penultimacy. Such evidence illustrates the internal consistency of God's Word. And, I might add, it distinguishes Christianity from all the other man-made religions, as men cannot help but "Pelagianize" reality. In other words, God is not absolutely sovereign in their view.

¹¹⁴ *The Larger Catechism*, translated by F. Bente and W.H.T. Dau, published in *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church*.

¹¹⁵ *We Become What We Worship*, page 17.

This explains why idols of the intellect always prove futile. They cannot bear the infinite weight of divinity and inevitably crumble under the pressure. They are false gods.

Here I picture in my mind a small wooden idol carved in the shape of a man, arms extended upward, palms open. Situated above it, hovering ominously, is a tremendous block of granite. In a moment, the massive stone is going to be dropped on the idol, and it will have to catch it. This is what happens when the rightful rule of God is rejected and replaced with something else thought to provide greater intellectual security. A metaphysical idol is fashioned, and as a result, the new absolute is made to carry the weight of ultimacy.¹¹⁶ But it cannot bear the burden, as it is not the infinite, personal, triune God of the universe. Like the wooden idol positioned under the colossal rock, it's smashed when it attempts to sit on the throne; meaning that it inevitably rubs against the grain of reality, thereby yielding contradiction and self-contradiction, which in turn leads to frustration and ruin. The square peg must be crammed through the round hole of reality. Such is the history of philosophy. Ignorance and folly has been manufactured on the anvil of idolatry, not genuine knowledge.¹¹⁷

Dumb, Deaf, and Blind

¹¹⁶ Which is just another way of saying that as an absolute it must look to itself to ground itself, which leads to ultimate circularity.

¹¹⁷ Properly speaking, the unbeliever lives in a frustrating dialectic of rationalism and irrationalism. On the one hand, he knows that he knows some things. Nothing could be more obvious to him. And he is right. He does know some things truly because he is living in God's world. And yet, his philosophical framework cannot make sense of such knowledge. In fact, it works against it. Think again of the quote from Hume. His rational mind told him that he couldn't know anything for certain. Unable to live with that conclusion, he found comfort in the simple pleasures of life. Atheistic scientists often display a similar tendency. Someone like Dawkins continues to cling to science because, as he likes to stress, it produces tangible results. It works. But of course it does. He's living in God's world. The problem is that his materialistic worldview undermines the scientific objectivity and stability of his cherished discipline. But instead of chucking materialistic naturalism, he continues to cling to it, believing that it's the only viable option. It's "science in the gaps." This trust is every bit as religious as the faith of a monk. Human autonomy and materialism operate as functional idols.

This shouldn't come as a surprise. Since idols are dumb, deaf, and blind, those who trust in them become like them. Consider the words of the Psalmist:

“Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.” (Psalm 115:4-8; see also 135:15-18)

Throughout the OT, men regularly fashioned idols as a depiction of their gods. They would craft them, bow down to them, pray to them, and present offerings to them. In a word, they worshiped them.

The prophets, serving as spokesmen of the Lord, regularly chided such behavior, pointing out the utter folly of idolatry. Judgment extended well beyond mockery though. The Lord made the idol worshipers reflect the vanity and emptiness of their false gods. Since the idols couldn't see, the people's eyes were blinded to truth. Since the idols couldn't hear, the idolaters became dull of hearing, unable to understand and heed the Lord's instructions. In effect, their minds were darkened.

The theme of reflecting what we worship runs through the Scriptures. Isaiah is particularly forceful. In chapter 42:17-20, the link between those who trust in idols and their becoming deaf and blind is crystallized. He writes,

“They are turned back and utterly put to shame, who trust in carved idols, who say to metal images, ‘You are our gods.’ Hear, you deaf, and look, you blind, that you may see! Who is blind but my servant [Israel], or deaf as my messenger [Israel] whom I send? Who is blind as my dedicated one, or blind as the servant of the LORD? He sees many things, but does not observe them; his ears are open, but he does not hear.”

And again in an extended passage in Isaiah, where we see the Lord giving people over to the emptiness of their idols, we read,

“All who fashion idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit. Their witnesses [the idols] neither see nor know, that they may be put to shame... The ironsmith takes a cutting tool and works it over the coals. He fashions it with hammers and works it with his strong arm. He becomes hungry, and his strength fails; he drinks no water and is faint. The carpenter stretches a line; he marks it out with a pencil. He shapes it with planes and marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, ‘Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!’ And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, ‘Deliver me, for you are my god!’ They know not, nor do they discern, for he has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they cannot understand. No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, ‘Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals; I roasted meat and have eaten. And shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?’ He feeds on ashes; a deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, ‘Is there not a lie in my right hand?’” (44:9, 12-19)

In his excellent work, *We Become What We Worship*, Dr. Beale sums up the matter nicely,

“What God’s people had revered in Isaiah’s time, they had come to be like, and this likeness was spiritually destructive to them. This is an ironic punishment, since the people thought

that their worship of the idols would lead to enhanced life and prosperity, but in reality it resulted in further deterioration of their spiritual life and ultimately their material prosperity... Their punishment was ironically patterned after their sin: You like idols? If so, then you are going to become like your idols, and this likeness will devastate you.”¹¹⁸

The sophisticated man of the 21st century may think he’s above the foolishness of idol worship, having never bowed before a crudely fashioned idol, but he is every bit as guilty as the unlearned tribesman who prostrates himself before a carved image, and he shares no less in its blinding and deleterious effects. A suit and tie make little difference when it comes to idolatry (1 Cor 2:14).¹¹⁹

The Foolishness of the Cross

So far as it has functioned as a system of truth, aiming to unlock new vistas of knowledge and wisdom, Satan’s awful idea has failed spectacularly, save in one very important respect. While seeking to rip the scepter out of God’s hand, God’s Truth has been made to shine all the brighter. Error has caused the watching angels to view it from many diverse angles, some of which would have been hard, if not impossible, to see outside of this grand conflict. The watching world has scrutinized the matter more fully, digging deeper into the subject, meditating upon it at length. Sometimes a single beam of light

¹¹⁸ *We Become What We Worship*, page 49.

¹¹⁹ The very words used in Scripture to describe idols prove highly instructive as well. G. K. Beale writes, “One word for idols is the noun *gillulim*, which comes from a Hebrew root meaning ‘roll.’ The noun form can mean either ‘pellets of dung’ or ‘shapeless, loggy things.’ Either way, ‘loggy’ or ‘dungy,’ the word expressed the utmost contempt, and conveyed a double entendre, since the one would inevitably suggest the other.” He goes on to discuss 2 Kings 17:15 and how the idols there are *bebel* (vanity, emptiness). “The point” he writes, is that our lives become vain and empty when we commit ourselves to vain idols of this world...” Lastly, he mentions *mipleset*, or “thing of horror” or “thing of shuddering.” He says, “To worship such idols will bring only horror and dismay, not the peaceful bliss that is hoped for.” *We Become What We Worship*, pages 307-308.

stretching across the floor of a dark room illuminates a section more acutely than had the room been free from all trace of shadow. So if Satan's "insight" is viewed as a discovery of truth, then it has achieved very great ends. Through the folly of competing paradigms, the glory and wisdom of God has been elevated more highly, confounding the subtleties of the Serpent in an ironical and humiliating fashion, confounding his so-called wisdom.

But as glorious as overturning the world's wisdom might be, the irony has been thickened by means of the cross. In the passage cited earlier from 1 Corinthians, where Paul asks, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" he immediately amplifies the thought by writing, "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe" (1:21). The word "for" connects verse 21 with verse 20 thereby establishing a flow of thought. He teaches that the wisdom of the world is made foolish through "the folly of what we preach." This means that there must be something about the apostolic message that strikes at the heart of the world's wisdom.

Let's look again.

In verse 21, Paul teaches that the world did not know God through its wisdom. This ignorance wasn't a coincidence. He says, "For since, *in the wisdom of God*, the world did not know God through wisdom." Man's inability to unlock the meaning of the universe through autonomous means is part of God's design. The physical realm, in combination with man's sinful mind, will not yield ultimate truth. It is true that the heavens pour forth speech day after day (Psalm 19:1-5; Rom 1:18-21), but this falls far short of unveiling the mind of God. More needs to be disclosed.

This "something more" is hinted at in our passage. Rather than allowing the world to unearth the deep things of God through its cherished means, thereby bolstering its already bloated sense of excellence, Paul writes that it "pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe." The truth came in a very particular way—it came through "the folly of what we preach," namely, "the word of the cross" (vs. 18). True wisdom is found in the gospel.

For those who wear the spectacles of darkness this appears incredibly foolish. How is it, after all, that the deepest truths of reality are found in a Jewish carpenter who walked the hills of Galilee? Or how can anyone take seriously the words of a man who died a shameful death on a Roman cross?

“Look there!” someone exclaims. “See that man on the cross, the one sandwiched between the thieves?”

“Do you mean the naked and battered figure in the middle being mocked by those Jewish leaders? Yes, I see him.”

“He is the Truth,” I tell you. “The very Truth itself.”

The other glances oddly, “Surely, you jest.”

“I do not.”

“The man hanging there is hardly a king, let alone the King of kings.”

“Well, I can assure you that He is a King.”

“Sure he is...”

The message of the cross, urges Paul, is foolishness to those who are perishing. Jews demand signs, Greeks demand wisdom, “But we preach Christ crucified,” Paul exclaims, “a stumbling block to Jews and folly to the Gentiles” (vs. 23).

It has pleased God to utterly confound the sensibilities of the world by means of a crucified Savior; to provide the answer to humanity’s deepest longings in the most unlikely of ways—in the most pride-abasing fashion. If they had eyes to see and ears to hear, they would behold the glories of Him who died; they would understand the depths of their foolishness and gain some sense of the horror of their sin. But in seeing they do not see. For them, the cross is a joke. In one important respect, God is well-pleased with this, for, as Jesus prayed, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children” (Mat 11:25).

God the Father intentionally deepens the irony by calling sinners to His Son where they come face-to-face with the depths of their sin and their need to completely transform their thinking. Nothing short of a revolution will do, since the presuppositions of autonomy run counter to the lordship of Christ. This is why Paul can write, “Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this

age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, 'He catches the wise in their craftiness,' and again, 'The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile'" (1 Cor 3:18-20).

The problem, as we have been stressing, is that the idolatry of autonomy renders the individual unable to correctly discern not only their need, but how in Christ there is true wisdom (1 Cor 1:24, 30).¹²⁰ One might say that there's not even enough wisdom found outside the sphere of Christ for the sinner to fully identify the folly of their position. They are trapped in their idolatry, blinded by the god of this world so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Cor 4:4). This is why God must remove the veil.

In the same way that God caused the light to shine in the darkness (Gen 1:2-4), He must shine the light of His grace directly into the heart of the rebel in order to give the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:6). "We preach Christ crucified," declares Paul, "a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:23-24).

Effectual Calling and the Epistemological Gap

Ultimately, the epistemological gap between competing absolutes cannot be bridged by the natural man since he cherishes his own as supreme. He is like a paranoid schizophrenic—he interprets everything in the light of his delusion. If you bring him evidence that his phone isn't being tapped, he'll reinterpret the data in a way that comports with his deepest belief. If pressed, he may even say, "You're in on it! I knew you were!" As George McDonald once said, "To explain truth to him who loves it not is to give more plentiful material for misinterpretation."¹²¹

¹²⁰ *Sola Sapientia*; or all wisdom is found in Christ alone.

¹²¹ Sometime read through the book of John or Acts with the psychology of unbelief in mind. It is amazing how often evidence is ignored or twisted. For the Gospel of John, consider: John 2:23-24; 3:1-20; 5:16-18; 5:30-47; 6:25-7:1; 7:1-44; 7:45-52; 8:12-59; 9:16-17, 22, 34; 10:19-21, 25-27; 11:45-46, 47-53;

The only way to break through the “paranoia” is for God to step in. Natural revelation provides objective knowledge (Rom 1) thereby implanting within him a true sense of the divine.¹²² This grants knowledge sufficient to establish culpability, but sadly the information is suppressed and twisted (Rom 1:18). Therefore, God has to soften the heart and provide the sinner with new eyes, so that he may come to his senses and “escape from the snare of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will” (2 Tim 2:26 NIV).¹²³

The Collision of “Would-be” Gods

The promise that we can all be gods might seem appealing. Who among the children of Adam, after all, doesn’t feel the allure of doing things their own way? But as we have seen, the consequences are dire. Not only does autonomy undermine knowledge and plunge the sinner into the labyrinth of nihilism, but it inexorably leads to conflict. What happens, after all, when two would-be gods find themselves in a state of disagreement, standing face-to-face, neither wanting to step aside to allow the other to pass? What then? Shall they discuss the matter? Will they engage in rational discourse? What if one of these gods has decided that rational discourse is overrated, perhaps a bit too sluggish? Suppose he values violence and finds it expedient. What then? Will the other god try to talk sense into the person? If so, then it becomes a game of persuasion—a game where one god attempts to alter the other god’s ideals. But what if the violent man says, “Ah, yes, I see that you want to me bow down to your standards, but alas, you are a lesser god in my eyes, and one I don’t feel especially compelled to acknowledge”?

12:37-43; 14:7; 15:18-19; 16:8-9; 18:37-38; 19:7, 11-12; 20:24. For the book of Acts consider: 2:13-14; 4:2, 13-18; 5:17, 33-34; 6:9-14; 7:51, 54, 9:23; 13:6-8, 44-45, 50; 14:1-2, 11-18, 19; 16:19; 17:5, 13, 17; 18:6; 19:9, 23-29; 22:21-22; 24:1-27; 26:24; 28:24.

¹²² Alvin Plantinga has done some tremendous work in this area showing how the knowledge of God is what he calls properly basic. See his challenging but insightful book *Warranted Christian Belief*. For an easier read see Kelly Clark’s *Return to Reason*.

¹²³ Here again we see how the sovereignty of God can alone contend with the “What if?” problem. God is greater than chance, delusion, ignorance, doubt, or anything else claiming to be greater than His grace and power.

This is part of the great failure of Satan's promise. If everyone is granted ultimacy, chaos ensues. Like the capricious gods of ancient Rome, humans pursue their own ends, crafting a grandiose soap opera in the process. Each wants to do things their way, but when others demur, they're genuinely shocked when other would-be gods don't want to follow their program. Through their actions, they shout, "No, I am God! Not you!"

The result is war (James 4:2). Gather any number of would-be gods together and sooner or later you'll experience conflict. It happens on the national stage, in board rooms, among neighbors, families—anywhere people bump into one another. They want things to go their way. And there's really no sound way to adjudicate the desires of differing gods. A group of would-be gods might agree on a set of laws, but these are transient, always shifting with the tides of power.

The real horror emerges when such gods embrace the Satanic promise with gusto. Here we see the subjugation of women, enslavement, the expulsion of ethnicities, political corruption, the slaughter of children, murder, torture, terrorism, and any number of other incomprehensible outbursts of evil. When men believe they are ultimate, answering to no one, the rules of the game become unbearable.

There Can Be Only One

In order for would-be gods to be truly in charge, they must stand over all the other gods. This highlights an inescapable fact of reality. There can be only one God, ultimately. It's unavoidable. It's the nature of absolutes.

The irony is that when men forsake God as their Father, they unwittingly acquire another, but one that is abusive and wicked. They thought that anarchy would ensure their ultimacy. But the awful truth is that even among anarchists there always emerges a leader. As for the world, theirs is Satan, a truly tyrannical being who doesn't care one bit about their well-being. Satan fills his children with hatred and uses them for his own evil ends, sacrificing them with cruel intent. He cripples them for malevolent purposes, twisting and degrading as he

pleases. There is no love in this father. Only evil. And since he possesses more power than they do, he rules over them with an iron fist, much like the violent dictators that have long been a blight on the earth.

Chapter Eight

The Weakness of God and the Overthrow of Satan

Part I



Haman's Noose

On the night before his meeting with King Xerxes, Haman the Agagite had a seventy-five-foot tall gallows built exclusively for the neck of Mordecai, a faithful Jew who would not bow the knee in his presence.

Through Haman's cunning, an edict had been sent out spelling the demise of the Jews. The outlying provinces were to “kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, woman and little children—on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods” (Esther 3:13 NIV).

It was a time of great mourning and fasting for God's people. Their doom loomed on the horizon.

One can almost picture Haman in his bed, listening to the sound of sawing and hammering as the gallows were being built. I imagine him replaying the image of Mordecai refusing to pay homage to him amid the kneeling crowd. He no doubt pictured the obstinate Jew swinging in the noonday light, a noose cinched tightly around his neck, a spectacle for all to see.

The sweet irony is that the very gallows built for Mordecai would soon be used against him. For when the king learned of Haman's plot through the courage of Esther, one of the king's eunuchs said, “A gallows seventy-five feet high stands by Haman's house. He made it for Mordecai, who spoke up to help the king” (Esther 7:9 NIV). Pleased with the suggestion, the king declared, “Hang him on it!” And as the

Scriptures report with dripping irony, “So they hanged Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai” (7:10).

The Gallows of History

God loves to reverse the schemes of the wicked.

Daniel’s opponents certainly understood this. In the early morning hours, when king Darius found Daniel in good health and without so much as a scratch, having spent the night in a den of ravenous lions, we read that “At the king’s command, the men who had falsely accused Daniel were brought in and thrown into the lion’s den, along with their wives and children. And before they reached the floor of the den, the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones” (Daniel 6:24).

This kind of ironic reversal is often portrayed in the Psalms. Writing of the wicked, David says, “Behold, the wicked man conceives evil and is pregnant with mischief and gives birth to lies. He makes a pit, digging it out, and falls into the hole that he has made. His mischief returns upon his own head, and on his own skull his violence descends” (Psalm 7:14-16). And again in Psalm 57:6, “They set a net for my steps; my soul was bowed down. They dug a pit in my way, but they have fallen into it themselves.”

Defeating an enemy is a glorious thing. But the glory is made to shine more brightly when an enemy falls prey to his own devices. This is partly what causes us to cheer all the more loudly when we read Esther. The ironic twist heightens the villain’s downfall.

Insofar as our history is a contest between two kingdoms, it is a tale not unlike that of Haman. At the very center of God’s dealings with Satan, we see the Serpent’s most potent weapons turned against him. One might say that history creaks with the sound of a taut rope swinging in the wind of God’s providence. Satan fashions a noose for the neck of God’s glory, but he instead is hung from it.

The place where all this culminates is the cross. That’s where the Serpent’s head is definitively crushed. But before we delve into the subject, we need to revisit the concept dubbed “Satanic omnipotence.” In so doing, we will be in a better position to appreciate how God flips

Satan's purposes around, thereby exalting His name while reigning down shame on the Serpent's head.

Satanic "Omnipotence"

Lucifer believed that there was a power available to him by doing "That-which-God-cannot-do." Theologically speaking, it is called sin. The concept appeared to promise a new kind of power, even a unique type of power, since it was something never before utilized. It tempted the angel to imagine what he could accomplish through it. It was, he reasoned, something which God almighty couldn't even do. So it appeared to be, by very definition, supra-omnipotent.

Moreover, this new power, it seemed to Satan, would allow an individual to usurp God's will, thereby enabling them to sidestep God's sovereign, providential control, which would effectively deify the creature's will, thereby making them a god. Men and angels would be their own masters, not God; and that, perhaps more than anything else, appeared to promise the most potential. The power of autonomy would ensure the ultimacy of one's own will; the individual could carve out a path of reality as they determined, exploring the dark side of reality, as it were, a realm of unknown possibilities.

This, it seemed to the angel, appeared extraordinarily powerful.

The Power of Darkness

So is it powerful?

At this point, it might be tempting to shout out in true Sunday school fashion, "No!" But that would be incorrect. The reality is that sin is exceedingly powerful, so much so that Satan is called the "god of this age," a title hearkening to his ungodly influence and power.

Just think of the extent of sin's corruption. It has infected everything. Even the crowning pinnacle of God's creation on earth, mankind, is twisted and made subject to the will of Satan (2 Tim 2:25-26).

Jesus can refer to being led away by the guards and chief priests as the “power of darkness,” or the hour of darkness (Luke 22:52-53). Paul describes the demonic realm in terms of *principalities* and *powers* (Eph 6:12), a spiritual force against which no man could stand, save for wearing the armor of God. He can even describe this era as “this present evil age” (Gal 1:4; Eph 5:16). It's not a surprise then that his entire ministry is framed in terms of releasing people from the “power of Satan” (Acts 26:18). And if we had lived in the days of Noah when the thoughts of men were evil continually, causing violence to abound endlessly, we certainly would have experienced the bitter sting of sin's awful power.

So evil is real, and it's quite powerful.

But it isn't powerful in a productive or creative sense. It isn't beautiful, and it doesn't impart life, nor promote human flourishing. It's altogether destructive and terrifying, capable of perverting good at an alarming rate. Someone may take months crafting an exquisite violin only to have it reduced to ashes in mere moments by a madman. Why is destruction like that? Why is it so easy? The same is true with families, government, church life, the soul, the mind, entertainment, and everything else inhabiting creation. It can all so easily be ruined.

Perhaps the most potent aspect of sin is death itself (Heb 2:14-15), for, through the power of death, life can be radically transformed, both physically and spiritually. A man's entire personality is radically distorted and misshapen into something tragic through sin. At the fundamental level, the unregenerate are said to be “dead in sin” (Eph 2:1). While the human heart continues to beat, his soul is like a breathing carcass. Unlike angels, humans reflect this inward reality bodily, degrading slowly over time until death deals its fatal blow, sucking the spirit out of the earthly tent.

Most startling of all is the fact that physical death can be expedited by others. We call this murder. Men can and do kill for nearly every reason, and in nearly every imaginable way.

Evil is responsible for uncovering this horrific truth, and it is a deadly power.

The Seed and History

Thankfully, sin isn't the only power at work in history. Paul writes in the first chapter of Romans, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation" (Rom 1:16a).

Following on the heels of man's fall into sin, God spoke the first words of gospel hope (Genesis 3:15). As has been noted, this prophetic word is centered on the destruction of the Serpent, which means that in one very important sense, the good news is all about a struggle between opposing forces, a battle where evil thrashes under the foot of God's power, biting and writhing, seeking to somehow destroy the threat.

The conflict begins with God's declaration to the Serpent. This is where the battle lines are drawn. Judgment is pronounced promising eventual defeat. It's as if God is saying to the Serpent: "So you think the power of sin can thwart my plans? Let us see. There is going to be a seed that will crush your head and defeat you. See if you can stop it from happening."¹²⁴

Human history provides a fertile context for the display of God's power over the powers of darkness, and it is a contest centering largely on, if not exclusively, the seed of the woman.

Smite the Seed

This is likely why Abel died.

Jealousy no doubt played a crucial role, but it doesn't tell the whole story. We're told that when Abel's offering was accepted over

¹²⁴ Note again that in Genesis 3:14-15 God is speaking to the Serpent. The promise, no doubt, is meant to encourage and provide hope to fallen man, and in that respect the protoevangelium is anthropocentric, but if we take seriously the satanic presence, the gospel announcement cannot be viewed as anything less than a direct response to Satan himself. In this respect, the gospel is simultaneously grace and judgment, earthly and heavenly, a challenge and a promise. John Murray writes, "It is surely significant... that the first promise of redemptive grace, the first beam of redemptive light that fell upon our fallen first parents, was in terms of the destruction of the tempter." *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, page 49.

his brother's, Cain's face fell and he became very angry (Gen 4:5). Fully granting Cain's blistering indignation, it's not a coincidence that murder immediately follows on the heels of the gospel announcement in Genesis 3:15. If we try to imagine things from the perspective of the kingdom of darkness, the children of Eve would have been objects of unparalleled concern. Since Cain belonged to the Serpent, it would only be natural for Satan to set his sights on the younger brother, Abel. Since death is one of the preeminent powers of sin, it makes sense that Satan would squelch the threat by killing him.

The concept of the seed, however, is both collective (Gen 17:7) and singular (Gal 3:16), and so while Abel was of the godly seed, he was not the one destined to crush the head of the Serpent.

Of course, one failed attempt to assassinate the Messiah would not deter future attempts. At every turn, we see Satan trying to eliminate the seed of the woman to derail the purposes of God.

With this in mind, the lineages found in Scripture aren't recorded to bore us with ancient statistics, as if the fathers were eager to pull out old family albums and tediously explain the happenings of their brothers and cousins. Rather, the line of the seed is chronicled for the purpose of evidence; it's coursing through history, forking and expanding, dying and flourishing, all the while being assaulted with the sword, temptation, and tribulation. We're watching to see if the powers of sin can thwart the plans of God. Can autonomy trump God's will? Can death thwart the promised seed? Will wickedness prevail?

Tracing our finger across the lines of descent, following the ever-expanding branches of Abraham's tree, murderous hatred and warlike hostility is utilized with keen regularity in the conflict between the seeds. We see Esau uttering, "The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob" (Gen 27:41). We see Joseph being thrown into a pit by the hands of his brothers. We see a new king arising in Egypt "who did not know about Joseph" (Ex 1:8), and who, when feeling threatened by the ever-growing numbers of the Jews, subjected the people of God to hard labor, intent on bottling them up. We see that when they continued to multiply, Pharaoh ordered his people to throw every boy born to the Hebrews into the Nile (Ex 1:22). After their release, we see Pharaoh pursuing the

Israelites into the wilderness, bent on annihilating them. And once in the wilderness, we see Amalek bursting onto the scene, attacking the Jews at Rephidim.

On it goes, century after century, blood lust and intrigue, political maneuverings and idolatrous appeals, clear up until the time of the greater Moses, when Herod, like Pharaoh of old, issued an edict commanding that all the male children under two years of age be killed in Bethlehem and the surrounding regions (Matt 2:16), all in the hopes of destroying the child spoken of by the prophet Micah.

Thwarted

In spite of the maneuverings of Satan, the seed of the woman is preserved. Jacob flees and receives a blessing. Through a surprising series of events, Joseph not only survives but is elevated to a lofty position in order to help his people during a severe famine. Moses is likewise kept from the murderous hands of the Egyptians, being sent down the Nile in a basket, where he amazingly ends up in the hands of Pharaoh's daughter. He is raised in the courts of Egypt, thereby preparing him for the crucial days ahead. And so long as Moses' hands remained lifted in the wilderness, Joshua's troops were able to push back the fierce Amalekites, eventually securing a victory and a promise from God that the memory of Amalek would be completely wiped out.

In light of such tribulations and triumphs, the Psalmist declares, "Let Israel now say— 'Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth, yet they have not prevailed against me'" (Psalm 129:1-2). Time and again, the seed is preserved by the hand of God causing His people to shout, as Psalm 129 goes on to say, "The LORD is righteous; He has cut the cords of the wicked" (vs. 4).

Now in all of this, we are concerned primarily with the question of power. We want to know how God combats evil; how He overpowers it; how He shows His strength and the might of His hand, thwarting and usurping the powers of darkness. The temptation here would be to turn immediately to the cross where this power is displayed most poignantly, thereby leaving the intervening centuries

largely undeveloped. That would be a mistake. The period of the Old Testament is rich, and is gloriously preparatory, establishing a variety of theological motifs for the climax. We are being shown how God is going to act when the fullness of time arrives. Ignoring it would promote a kind of theological malnutrition.

The challenge is that the history is vast, and even if one were to dedicate an entire volume to the subject, it would be voluminous.¹²⁵ Glancing to my right, I'm confronted with a shelf full of books, many of which are robust commentaries unpacking and explaining the unfolding drama. It's truly a daunting expanse of time. The thrust of what is to follow, therefore, will consist largely in highlighting a few of the themes that will help us better recognize and appreciate God's dealings with the seed of the Serpent, and by extension, the Serpent himself. Since history is governed by one Lord, and since the Scriptures, while written by many different individuals, are ultimately composed by one Author, it shouldn't come as a surprise to find parallels between the cross and the various manifestations of power leading up to that event. The crushing blow of Genesis 3:15 is adumbrated in a variety of ways throughout the OT signaling how the Seed is going to mortally wound the enemy.

The question is how?

The Seed of the Woman and Pharaoh

I wonder if on the day when Moses was leading his father-in-law's flock along the slopes of mount Horeb if there was a demon watching from afar, listening intently to God's announcement that He was going to rescue the Jews from the hands of the Egyptians. Would an eighty-year-old man living in the dry and desolate region of Midian have been flagged by Satan? Did he commission at least one underling to watch the happenings of this elderly Jew? It's hard to say. But I like to think that there was at least one fallen angel within earshot soaking up the conversation, watching the man Moses remove his sandals and

¹²⁵ See in this respect, *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment: A Biblical Theology*, by James Hamilton Jr. Or G. K. Beale's magisterial volume, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*.

receive news that the people of God would be freed from Egyptian tyranny. And I like to think that the demon heard God say, “I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand compels him. So I will stretch out my hand and strike the Egyptians with all the wonders that I will perform among them. After that, he will let you go.” I then imagine him immediately scurrying off, intent on informing his general that war was coming.

In the conflict between God and Pharaoh, we see one of the greatest, if not *the* greatest display of power in all the OT. It was a truly pivotal moment in redemptive history. In terms of providing a template for the future, the encounter proves paradigmatic. The entire confrontation reveals a crucial component of God’s strategy.

But in order to get at this, we first need to explore the peculiarities of this strategy and show why God chose to manifest the strength of His arm in such a surprising fashion. Afterward, it needs to be asked what this has to do with Satan, or, more specifically, how it is that God’s encounter with Pharaoh can be reasonably projected onto the larger script of history.

Humiliation

Let’s begin with the issue of power. From the standpoint of brute force, the plagues poured out on Egypt were in every way astonishing. But for all their flare, it would be a mistake to think of the miracles as simply fireworks, displays of power meant only to illicit “Oohs” and “Aahs.” The reality is that the confrontation was a carefully crafted response meant to humiliate and mock the powers of Egypt.

In one of the most fascinating and insightful lectures I’ve had the honor of hearing, Dr. John Currid, professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary, masterfully details how God’s interactions with Pharaoh directly assault and humiliate not only the pagan king’s pride and honor, but the Egyptian gods swirling in the background. The perspective is termed polemical theology.

Since Moses was raised and trained “in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22), he possessed a thorough knowledge of their religious customs, their literature, and overall way of life. He was a

man who understood how the enemy thought. So when he penned the book of Exodus, he carefully and artistically recounted the triumph of Yahweh's victory in such a way so as to maximally mock the powers of Egypt. His narrative contains a number of ironic jabs. Since most of us don't sit around reading *The Book of the Dead* for fun, we aren't acquainted with Egyptian culture, and as a result, miss the irony. But for someone well versed in Egyptology like Dr. Currid, his trained eye is able to pick out the subtle threads of irony scattered throughout the Exodus account.

In order to capture something of the polemical element, we need to explore a few examples to illustrate the position.¹²⁶

The Hand of the LORD

Ancient Egyptian texts frequently described the power and authority of the various Pharaohs as having a strong arm or hand, especially in contexts where the enemy is being conquered. One such text describes him as "The one who destroys his enemies with his arm."¹²⁷

Interestingly, when we come to the Exodus account, we find the same motif scattered throughout the narrative, but instead of describing the might of Pharaoh, the concept is applied to God. For example, Exodus 3:20a says, "So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it." In Exodus 7:4 we read, "Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment." And again, "Terror and dread fall upon them; because of the greatness of your [the LORD's] arm" (Ex 15:6a).

In a bold move meant to make a sharp theological point, Moses takes the Pharaonic terminology and applies the concept to God. In so

¹²⁶ I am, of course, greatly indebted to Dr. Currid for the following examples and have relied heavily on his material. To learn more about his viewpoint, I would highly recommend his three-part lecture series entitled, "Crass Plagiarism? The Problem of the Relationship of the Old Testament to the Ancient Near Eastern Literature." It is a true gem.

¹²⁷ See lecture one in Professor Currid's lecture.

doing, he is highlighting that it is the LORD and not Pharaoh who is the true King and God. In light of this, Dr. Currid asks, “What better way for the Exodus writer to describe God’s victory over Pharaoh, and as a result, His superiority, than to use Hebrew derivations, or Hebrew counterparts, to Egyptian expressions that symbolize Egyptian royal power? Doesn’t that just slap Pharaoh in the face?”¹²⁸

Indeed it does.

The Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart

Another recurring theme scattered throughout the Exodus account is the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. When the Israelites had been freed and were journeying in the desert, God tells Moses, “And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD” (Ex 14:4).

In both Hebrew and Egyptian culture, the heart served as the essence of a person; it was the spiritual center of the individual. For the Egyptians, this was especially emphasized. “Indeed,” writes Beale, “these aspects became so emphasized that the heart came to be viewed as the ‘seat of destiny,’ determining one’s life. It is probably because of this apparent autonomy of the heart that it came to be seen as a ‘second being of man, next to and outside him,’ and it even came to be said “that ‘the heart’ of a man [is] his God himself.”

The heart was also viewed as the divine instrument by which a god directed an individual, as well as the organ by which a man could receive and comprehend divine commandments.”¹²⁹

In order to flesh out the implications of this belief, we need to talk about a well-known story in *The Book of the Dead* called *The Papyrus of Ani*. The Egyptians believed that when a person died their hearts would be weighed on the balances of truth and righteousness. In *The Papyrus of Ani*, an Egyptian by the name of Ani dies and enters the afterlife where he must present himself before the seat of

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ *An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart in Exodus 4-14 and Romans 9*, page 133, Trinity Journal 5 NS (1984).

judgment. There Ani sees Thoth, the judge of truth. In this figure's hands rests a balance. On one side of the balance rests a feather. The other side of the scale is empty. That is where Ani's heart will be placed. If Ani's heart is virtuous and pure, it will find balance with the feather. If it is not, then he will be given over to Ammit, a horrific female goddess waiting to devour condemned sinners. Before the moment of testing, Ani pleads with his heart, urging it to speak well of him. On plate three of *The Papyrus of Ani*, he says,

“Oh my heart which I had from my mother! Oh my heart which I had from my mother! O my heart of my different ages! Do not stand up as a witness against me, do not be opposed to me in the tribunal, do not be hostile to me in the presence of the Keeper of the Balance, for you are my Ka which was in my body, the protector who made my members hale... Do not make my name stink to Entourage who make men. Do not tell lies about me in the presence of the god.”

What is interesting is that when Moses speaks of God hardening Pharaoh's heart, he uses a few different words. One of those words is *kābad* or *kābéd*.¹³⁰ It means to make something heavy or weighty. In the case of Pharaoh, this is a devastating critique since it was believed that Pharaoh was a god, the incarnation of Re or Horus. As such, he was thought to be untainted and perfect, sinless. When someone wanted to enter the palace, they would say that they were “invoking this perfect god and exalting his beauty.” But when we read that Pharaoh hardened his heart, and when we learn that it was God's purpose to harden Pharaoh's heart, we are being told that Pharaoh is anything but perfect, let alone sinless. His heart is heavy with unrighteousness, and he is worthy of condemnation.

What is more, the god Re was thought to be sovereign over the hearts of men. Since Pharaoh was supposedly the incarnation of this deity, it naturally followed that the heart of the living Pharaoh was sovereign over creation. But when Yahweh assaults this belief, exercising sway over the king's heart—the very control center of the man—He shows in no uncertain terms who is really Lord over all. God alone is the sovereign of the universe. Not Pharaoh. In this we are

¹³⁰ Ex 8:15, 32; 9:7, 34; 10:1; 14:4.

reminded that “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will” (Prov 21:1).

The Plagues

The polemic continues with all ten plagues. For the sake of space and time, we’ll only touch on two of the plagues.

Consider first the plague of frogs. In Exodus 8:1-4, we read,

“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Go in to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD, “Let my people go, that they may serve me. But if you refuse to let them go, behold, I will plague all your country with frogs. The Nile shall swarm with frogs that shall come up into your house and into your bedroom and on your bed and into the houses of your servants and your people, and into your ovens and your kneading bowls. The frogs shall come up on you and on your people and on all your servants.”’”

It might seem rather strange to us, but ancient Egyptian culture viewed the frog as a symbol of divine power and fertility. One of their gods, Heket, was a female deity with the body of a woman and the head of a frog. According to their tradition, she was the spouse of the creator god Khnum, a being who crafted people on a potter’s wheel; he made them and she blew life into them. Pregnant women sometimes wore amulets depicting the female goddess. They were believed to offer protection. She could supposedly ward off evil spirits during childbirth and provide security during labor. Oddly enough, she was also responsible for frog control. “She was to control,” according to Dr. Currid, “the multiplication of frogs in Egypt by protecting the crocodile population who ate frogs.”

But what happened during this plague? Dr. Currid explains, “Yahweh simply overwhelms Heket and causes her to be impotent in her task. She cannot repel or resist Yahweh’s overpowering regeneration of frogs.”¹³¹ God was essentially producing such a profuse supply of frogs that the symbol of divine power and fertility became a

¹³¹ *Crass Plagiarism?* Lecture three.

curse. It was as if God was saying, “You want fertility? I’ll show you fertility.” In the end, after Pharaoh asked Moses to pray to the Lord to take away the frogs, we read, “And the LORD did according to the word of Moses. The frogs died out in the houses, the courtyards, and the fields. And they gathered them together in heaps, and the land stank” (Ex 8:13-14). God demonstrated that He is the one who is the true giver of life and the true source of power.

Let’s turn to another example. In the plague of darkness, we read, “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt’” (Ex 10:21).

Of all the gods of Egypt, Amun-Ra was the chief deity. He was the sun god, rising in the east each day, symbolizing new life and resurrection. In a song of praise entitled a *Hymn to Amun-Ra*, we catch a sense of his supposed majesty,

“HAIL to thee, Amun-Ra, Lord of the thrones of the earth, the oldest existence, ancient of heaven, support of all things; Chief of the gods, lord of truth; father of the gods, maker of men and beasts and herbs; maker of all things above and below; Deliverer of the sufferer and oppressed, judging the poor; Lord of wisdom, lord of mercy; most loving, opener of every eye, source of joy, in whose goodness the gods rejoice, thou whose name is hidden.”

But, of course, when Moses stretched out his hand and ushered in complete darkness for three days, Amun-Ra was powerless to provide the Egyptians with light. This was true of Pharaoh as well who was thought to be the incarnation of Ra. He couldn’t summon so much as a spark of light. Like everyone else, save the Israelites, he was forced to grope around in the dark. The sun was not under his control.

Most ironic of all, just before the Red Sea crushed the Egyptians, Moses records one little, but very important detail. Exodus 14:27 reads, “So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its normal course when the morning appeared. And as the Egyptians fled into it, the LORD threw the Egyptians into the midst of the sea.” The final blow came at daybreak “when the morning appeared,” that moment in the pursuit when the Egyptians would

have looked at the rising sun in the east and thought of Ra, their sun god. Some probably felt emboldened. But their god was powerless to save them. The waters came crashing down, engulfing them in a torrent of water. As their bodies washed up on the shore, the exclamation point of God's power was made exceedingly evident (Ex 14:30-31).

His Very Great Strength

In response, the people of God sang and danced like never before. And what did they shout about? God's strength. His awesome deeds. His mighty right hand. Listen again to their song.

"Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD, saying, 'I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him. The LORD is a man of war; the LORD is his name. "Pharaoh's chariots and his host he cast into the sea, and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea. The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone. Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power, your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy. In the greatness of your majesty you overthrow your adversaries; you send out your fury; it consumes them like stubble. At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up; the floods stood up in a heap; the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea. The enemy said, 'I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them. I will draw my sword; my hand shall destroy them.' You blew with your wind; the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters. "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders? You stretched out your right hand; the earth swallowed them. "You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode" (Exodus 15:1-13)

From beginning to end, God's power is praised, for He confronted the authorities of Egypt and prevailed over them. They weren't just beaten. They were beaten badly, humiliated and mocked. This is precisely what Exodus 10:2 tells us. The signs were performed so that Moses could tell his children and his grandchildren "how [the LORD] made a mockery of the Egyptians, and how [the LORD] performed [His] signs among them; that you may know that I am the LORD" (NASB).¹³² The signs and wonders had an aim. Everyone knew it including Pharaoh. We know this, because, before the seventh plague, God told Moses to tell Pharaoh,

"But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth" (Exodus 9:16).

This wasn't the first time God outlined His intentions. Before Egypt was struck with plagues, God told Moses, "And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt. But Pharaoh will not heed you, so that I may lay My hand on Egypt and bring my armies and My people, the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great judgments" (7:3-4, NIV). Likewise, near the end of the encounter with Pharaoh when the Israelites were nearly ready to pass through the Red Sea, God assured Moses, "And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen" (Exodus 14:17).¹³³

In all this, we learn that Elijah isn't the only one capable of mocking a false deity. As the prophets of Baal presented their offering, calling upon the name of their god from morning until noon, crying out, "O Baal, answer us!" limping around in frustration, even cutting themselves, Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened" (1 Kings 18:27). Has not God done the same with the Egyptian gods?

¹³² I would think that laughing at the wicked is similar (Psalm 2:4; 37:13).

¹³³ Interestingly, the push into the Promised Land is described in similar terms. See Exodus 34:10.

Cosmic Dimensions

This is why we should draw a link between God's dealings with Pharaoh and the kingdom of darkness. In both Exodus 12:12 and Numbers 33:4, we're told that God executed judgment on all the gods of Egypt. It is easy to draw a parallel between Pharaoh's kingdom and the kingdom of darkness, as he was undoubtedly of the seed of the serpent, but when we also learn that the LORD was humiliating the gods of Egypt, a cosmic dimension is brought to the fore. Satan was intimately involved in the affairs of this pagan king and hell-bent on annihilating the seed of the woman.

Proverbs 15:25a reads, "The LORD tears down the house of the proud." James and Peter express something similar when they write, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5). Pharaoh's house was a very proud house, but the proudest house of them all is the kingdom of darkness itself. It is this kingdom that must be utterly torn down (Dan 2:44-45).

It isn't a stretch to say that God's dealings with Pharaoh sent a direct message to Satan. Pharaoh's defeat was a micro-crushing foreshadowing the ultimate crushing. In this respect, I think we can safely deduce, given God's dealings in Exodus, that the crushing blow of Genesis 3:15 will somehow mock and humiliate the Serpent.¹³⁴

The Seed of the Woman and the Sword

The lessons of the past don't stop with Moses and Pharaoh. Other themes likewise anticipate the nature of the crushing blow. During the days of the Old Covenant, it wasn't uncommon for the people of God

¹³⁴ If we combine Exodus 10:1-2 with Ephesians 3:10 another interesting picture emerges. In the first passage, God intends for his wonders to be remembered throughout Israel's generations. He has a larger audience in mind than simply the Jews living under Pharaoh's rule. In the same way, but on a much larger scale, the wonders poured out on Egypt were intended for a heavenly audience, namely, angels who were doubtless watching the exchange with much interest.

to unsheathe their swords and literally strike down the enemies of God. One can almost hear the maidens in the street singing, "Saul has struck down his thousands, but David his ten thousands" (1 Samuel 18:7)! Abraham knew what it meant to ride on the back of a camel with a raised sword, as did Joshua when he entered the Promised Land, commissioned to destroy entire cities. And Benaiah, son of Jehoiada, was, as the Scriptures record, "a valiant man of Kabzeel, a doer of great deeds. He struck down two ariels of Moab. He also went down and struck down a lion in a pit on a day when snow had fallen. And he struck down an Egyptian, a handsome man. The Egyptian had a spear in his hand, but Benaiah went down to him with a staff and snatched the spear out of the Egyptian's hand and killed him with his own spear. These things did Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, and won a name beside the three mighty men" (2 Sam 23:20-22).

The list could be multiplied at length (Heb 11:32-34). Suffice it to say that on any reading of the OT there is plenty of bloodshed.

Modern man often struggles with the sight of blood. He looks upon the OT and views it with disgust, often calling it barbaric or vindictive. Such is the frame of the liberal mind. He feels as if God needs a lesson in modern diplomacy. Perhaps there needs to be an inter-cosmic Geneva Convention, occupied, no doubt, by a staff of tenderhearted and enlightened thinkers. But, of course, God isn't in need of their counsel.

Two things should be kept in mind. First, there is absolutely nothing wrong with dispensing justice. It is entirely right, and is even the duty of God as Judge to enact justice. When Pharaoh's army is crushed in the Red Sea, or when the walls of Jericho come tumbling down, or when God commands David to conquer the Philistines, there is no room for complaint. Even Satan cannot justifiably argue with the decision. Grace cannot be demanded. So if God chooses to end the life of a condemned sinner by stopping his heart, it is fair. Likewise, if God commissions the Jews to strike down an idolatrous city, it is fair.

Insofar as modern man complains about the use of the sword, he is subtly downplaying the enmity, and by extension, the antithesis. "Why get so cranky about all this sin?" it is thought.

Modern man wants a mediating position. They want a form of justice that conforms to their sensibilities—one that doesn't point a sword in their direction. But, of course, such sentiments inevitably fall right into the lap of the awful idea. In fact, it is merely the awful idea cloaked. They want to function as the final arbiters of truth and righteousness. But instead of coming right out and saying it, they instead gasp and frown and wag their fingers at God's justice.

Secondly, and rather ironically, modern man's aversion to such "barbarism" is quite strange given the implications of their worldview. I don't know if there's a better quote on the planet than G. K. Chesterton's when it comes to pinpointing the inconsistency and savagery of the liberal mind (or "new rebel" as he puts it). He says,

"But the new rebel is a skeptic, and will not entirely trust anything. He has no loyalty; therefore he can never be really a revolutionist. And the fact that he doubts everything really gets in his way when he wants to denounce anything. For all denunciation implies a moral doctrine of some kind; and the modern revolutionist doubts not only the institution he denounces, but the doctrine by which he denounces it. Thus he writes one book complaining that imperial oppression insults the purity of women, and then he writes another book (about the sex problem) in which he insults it himself. He curses the Sultan because Christian girls lose their virginity, and then curses Mrs. Grundy because they keep it. As a politician, he will cry out that war is a waste of life, and then, as a philosopher, that all life is a waste of time. A Russian pessimist will denounce a policeman for killing a peasant, and then prove by the higher philosophical principles that the peasant ought to have killed himself. A man denounces marriage as a lie, and then denounces aristocratic profligates for treating it as a lie. He calls a flag a bauble, and then blames the oppressors of Poland or Ireland because they take away that bauble. The man of this school goes first to a political meeting, where he proves that savages are treated as if they were beasts; then he takes his hat and umbrella and goes on to a scientific meeting, where he proves that they

practically are beasts. In short, the modern revolutionist, being an infinite skeptic, is always engaged in undermining his own mines. In his book on politics he attacks men for trampling on morality; in his book on ethics he attacks morality for trampling on men. Therefore the modern man in revolt has become practically useless for all purposes of revolt. By rebelling against everything he has lost his right to rebel against anything.”¹³⁵

One need only point out that the 20th century has been one of the bloodiest centuries in human history; and it occurred on the watch of modern man.¹³⁶

Now it would be easy to further entangle ourselves with this subject, answering objections and unpacking the intricacies of God’s justice, which is good and necessary and has its place,¹³⁷ but such meanderings would take us too far afield. The reality that we want to highlight is simply this: in the confrontation with the seed of the Serpent, the sword has played a vital role. There has been sharp conflict throughout the ages—bloody conflict—and God has dealt justice to the enemy through violent means. In light of this, I think we can safely infer, based on the use of the sword,¹³⁸ that the crushing blow of Genesis 3:15 will involve, as one would expect—given the imagery of a crushed head—violence, and justice, and the shedding of blood.

The Human Element

¹³⁵ *Orthodoxy*, pages 53-54.

¹³⁶ And what shall we say about those who have been killed while in their mother’s womb? Millions upon millions have died as a result of liberal man’s “sophistication.” He plunges poison into the skulls of the pre-born baby, or rips them apart with medical instruments—and he doesn’t call this barbaric?

¹³⁷ While it isn’t the main concern of the book, I am particularly fond of the insights of Dr. Poythress in his chapter on holy war, which can be found in *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*.

¹³⁸ Or giant hailstones (Joshua 10:11), or fire and brimstone, or torrents of water, for that matter.

Throughout the conflict with the Serpent's seed, God has consistently worked through people to accomplish His ends. Instead of appearing before Pharaoh, or dispatching a battalion of angels to wipe him off the face of the earth, God sent Moses. Instead of marching into the Promised Land and tossing the enemies out with a flick of the wrist, He sent in Joshua. Prophets likewise spoke on behalf of the Lord, and kings in the line of David sat on a throne which pictured the throne of God (1 Ch 29:23).

Divine power is directly mediated through human agents, marking the entirety of redemptive history. In light of this, we can safely say that the crushing blow of Genesis 3:15 will involve, as one would expect given the use of the word "offspring," a man through whom God's power flows.

On the flip side, we would also expect there to be an element of weakness. Even in the case of the strongest of men, they are still just that—they are men. As the Psalmist declares, "For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust" (Psalm 103:14). Man is not the equal of an angel. In fact, I would imagine that 10,000 men cannot equal the power and strength of one angel.

But the weakness channels deeper than our weak frame. When God called Abram to inherit the land, he was seventy-five years old and not exactly a beacon of morality. As for Moses, he fled to the wilderness of Midian after killing an Egyptian, where he tended flocks for forty years. It wasn't until Moses could blow out eighty candles on his birthday cake that the Lord called him to his task. David wasn't the most likely pick either. When Samuel looked upon David's older brother, Eliab, Samuel thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed stands here before the LORD" (1 Sam 16:6). But he wasn't the man. God selected the youngest of the family, the most unlikely candidate, so far as appearances were concerned—an unassuming teenager tending his father's sheep in the pasture. And perhaps most striking of all, the very nation of Israel was anything but mighty and praiseworthy. Listen again to God's description of them,

"Do not say in your heart, after the LORD your God has thrust them out before you, 'It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to possess this land,' whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that

the LORD is driving them out before you. Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. ‘Know, therefore, that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people’” (Deut 9:4-6).

In another place He says,

“It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples” (Deut 7:7).

Not even the Messiah Himself would enter this world with the pomp of royalty. Isaiah writes, “[He] had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2b).

God loves to accomplish great things through human weakness. He doesn’t just take the dust of the world to accomplish His ends, but He takes the dust of the dust to trample snakes. In light of this, we can safely say that the crushing blow of Genesis 3:15 will involve a curious intermingling of divine power and surprising weakness.

With weakness comes suffering.

After describing the Messiah’s unspectacular appearance, Isaiah immediately goes on to say, “He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (Isaiah 53:3). In the conflict with the Serpent, history bursts at the seams with tales of suffering. From the blood of Abel to the tears of Jeremiah, and beyond, the seed of the woman experiences bone-crushing pain. Such is the forecast of Genesis 3:15. The imagery of a snake sinking its venomous fangs into the heel of the Seed beckoned OT saints to imagine how the Messiah would suffer.

A Portrait of the Future

In summary, the following observations, which are admittedly limited and underdeveloped, lead us to conclude that the crushing blow will:

- Involve an ironic reversal whereby the schemes of the wicked one are turned against him.
- Mock and humiliate the Serpent.
- Be violent.
- Be just.
- Be divinely powerful.
- Be mediated through human weakness and suffering.
- Serve to more greatly elevate God's fame and glory.

Sovereignty

Before we close out this chapter and turn our attention to the cross where these points converge and amplify, we need to say a quick word about Satan's freedom. It needs to be stated that evil is not granted free reign in this battle. The God of Abraham is not as the Open Theists conceive Him. God is in control. Complete control.¹³⁹ For all his boasting, Satan submits to the sovereign rule of God, which is to say that when God lays down a prohibition, it will be followed.

Take Job.

Everything that happened to this righteous man came to pass because God allowed it to come to pass. Satan couldn't touch the man since God had placed a hedge around him (Job 1:10). In order for Satan to afflict him, he had to first receive permission (vs. 12).

Peter provides us with a similar example. In Luke 22:31-32, Jesus tells Peter, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your

¹³⁹ For a more thorough treatment of the subject, I would recommend John Frame's *The Doctrine of God*, or Carson's work, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*.

brothers” (NASB). Satan isn’t allowed to do everything he wants when he wants. Restrictions are placed on him. Permission must be granted.

The challenge, therefore, is how to understand the struggle between the dominion of darkness and God’s sovereign control. If we think of Satan as being confined to a box, unable to do anything, then one might wonder how it is that God’s wisdom is displayed to the heavenly realms. It wouldn’t be hard, after all, to beat an enemy that’s chained to a wall and gagged. Likewise, it would be hard to imagine the angels exalting God’s wisdom if the enemy’s power wasn’t genuinely confronted and beaten. Therefore, it appears entirely fitting to say that sufficient space has been granted for Satan to wield his awful idea, an amount of freedom suitable for the intended outcome of Ephesians 3:10.

We need to affirm the *Westminster Confession of Faith* when it states:

“God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.”¹⁴⁰

The interplay between God’s sovereignty and human (or angelic) responsibility is a mysterious doctrine. Both are true, even if we cannot see how they relate exactly. I like to think of it in terms of a young child trying to understand an algebra problem. The youngster, having just learned his ABCs and 123s, happily affirms both letters and numbers. But when presented with the following problem $X+4=7$, he cannot imagine how a letter could be a number. His mind simply cannot wrap itself around the concept. So it is with God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. The answer to the problem is like the letter X.

Both humans and angels possess genuine freedom. We are able to perform, for the most part, exactly what we want to do. So it is with evil men and angels. God grants wide freedom, the kind of freedom

¹⁴⁰ Chapter III.I

that satisfies our concerns in an experientially straightforward manner. As the Confession puts it, violence isn't offered to the will of the creature, nor is the liberty or contingency of secondary causes taken, but rather established.

But let us be clear. Satan believes that autonomy *can* trump God's sovereignty. He believes that by "doing-that-which-God-cannot-do" a thread in the fabric of reality can be pulled apart, thereby unraveling God's purposes. He believes that God *cannot* freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass. So if God would but only press the pause button on final judgment and permit him room to act, the strength of his so-called power would be vindicated.

So when we look at the vast web of history with all its twists and turns, with all its countless millions of creatures making genuine choices, interacting with and beholding the unfolding drama, the stage is perfectly suited for establishing, beyond all doubt, whether or not Satan's awful idea is in fact awful. There will be no grounds on which the wicked can say, "His judgment isn't fair, because I was coerced," or, "I never had an opportunity to display the power of my position."

Chapter Nine

The Weakness of God and the Overthrow of Satan

Part 2



For centuries, Satan's schemes and strategies, while frustrated and combated in a variety of ways, nevertheless enjoyed a certain measure of success. The Jewish kingdom was split. The Davidic line was marred with ungodliness. Pagan nations marched on the Temple. Holy men continued to carry within their bodies the decaying power of sin. And while the promises of God were continually trumpeted through the prophets, many of these spokesmen were slain by their own countrymen. But most importantly, the covenant promises remained largely unfulfilled, standing like signposts on a highway advertising the future. For Satan this was more than welcome. He thought, "Hold the promises down. Thwart them. Trample them with evil. Don't let them come to pass. Stop the crushing blow."

In this chapter, we come finally to that great moment when the Promised One enters the stage of history, intent on fulfilling all that was written. Our interests will focus largely on the events leading up to the cross—as well as the cross itself—where the back of Satan is broken. It is here where God's power is most clearly seen.

In The Fullness of Time

I wonder what first caught the attention of Satan that something big was astir. Perhaps it was the angelic meeting with Zechariah announcing that he and his wife would have a son—a son to be named John—who would "go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of

Elijah” (Luke 1:17, NIV). That, no doubt, sounded an alarm. But that was nothing compared to what occurred in the little town of Nazareth. There Gabriel visited a young peasant girl named Mary, bringing news unimaginable. “You will be with child,” he informed her, “and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:31-33, NIV).

That statement certainly brought the kingdom of darkness to full attention, causing entire legions to be dispatched to the area. But even if the meeting was held in secret, unobserved like Joseph’s dream (Matthew 1:20), the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth wouldn’t have slipped their attention. They would have heard the sound of Mary singing and praising God’s mighty arm and covenantal faithfulness (Luke 1:46-55). They would have heard her say, “For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name” (Luke 1:48b-49a).

“What great things?” they must have thought.

Then at the birth of John, they would have heard the startling utterance of Zachariah when his tongue was finally loosed. This couldn’t have been misinterpreted:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days” (Luke 1:68-75).

The evidence continued to mount until it became unmistakable. Angels appeared to shepherds, announcing good news of great joy (Luke 2:10-12); Simeon, a man who was assured he would see Christ

before the end of his life, held the child in his arms and praised God openly (Luke 2:28-32); and Anna, a prophetess of the tribe of Ashur “gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38, NIV).

The time had clearly come, and the seed of the Serpent acted quickly (Rev 12:4). Herod, a vile and ruthless man, became disturbed at the news of the child’s birth, along with “all Jerusalem with him” (Matthew 2:3). He no doubt had his own diabolical reasons for killing the child, but it’s hard to imagine Satan not playing an influential role in the slaughter. Murder has been a part of the satanic playbook since the beginning. It isn’t a surprise, therefore, to learn that Herod called for the death of all the baby boys in Bethlehem. He was the perfect pawn for the job, and Satan undoubtedly used him.

The promised Seed, however, would live. Having been warned in a dream to flee, Joseph and Mary headed for Egypt. When the evil ruler finally died, they returned to Israel, but withdrew to a district in Galilee, since Archelaus, another dangerous figure, was governing the land of Judea (Matthew 2:19-23).

Confrontation

It shouldn’t come as a surprise, given the absolute fixation Satan would have had on Christ, that immediately following Jesus’ baptism, when the heavens were opened and the Father spoke those astonishing words, “This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased,” that Satan sought Jesus out personally.

If there was any doubt as to Jesus’ true identity, it was completely dispelled at His baptism. The words “This is my Son” spoke not only of Jesus’ relationship with His Father, but it hearkened back to the Davidic covenant and Psalm 2. The statement “You are my Son, today I have begotten you” is formulaic in Scripture, expressing the installment of a king. It is enthronement language.¹⁴¹ In this respect, Jesus’ baptism wasn’t only performed to “fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15), but it marked the beginning of His public ministry.

¹⁴¹ See Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:5, 5:5, as well as Dr. Carson’s excellent J.B. Gay Lectures, *Hard Texts: Why Does Hebrews Cite the OT Like That?*.

Just as David was anointed as king and given the Holy Spirit for empowerment, so too, but in a far greater sense, Jesus began His ministry marked out as the King of kings, walking in the power of the Spirit and ushering in the kingdom of God.¹⁴² Truly this descendant of David was the one ultimately envisioned in Genesis 3:15.

And Satan knew it.

It isn't surprising, therefore, to see the Spirit leading Jesus out into the desert "to be tempted by the devil" (Matthew 4:1). A confrontation was inevitable. Neither is it a coincidence that Satan began his assault by jabbing a finger at Jesus' status, saying, "If you are the Son of God..." (Matthew 4:3, 6). The perpetual drip of Satan's temptations pressed on His unique position. "If you are..."

The conflict in the wilderness marked a crucial turning point. Unlike the first Adam who fell prey to the Serpent's subtleties (as well as the nation of Israel who functioned as a kind of corporate Adam), the second Adam, Jesus Christ, remained faithful. Unlike Adam who failed to fully trust in the authority of God's word, Christ as the very Word (John 1:1) parried Satan's temptations through Scriptural resolve. Unlike Israel who continually grumbled and sinned in the face of testing, Jesus as the true Israel relied on His Father to carry him through.¹⁴³ He was the greater Joshua, conquering not merely the enemy's outpost, but the very enemy himself. And as the divine

¹⁴² Here it is worth noting, as an aside, the literary structure of Matthew's Gospel. Writing to a predominately Jewish audience, he carefully, and subtly, shows how Jesus is the fulfillment of God's patterns laid down in the OT, and especially how Jesus is the greater Moses. Consider only the first few chapters. Both Jesus and Moses were threatened by evil rulers as infants—Pharaoh sought to destroy all the Hebrew boys, as did Herod. When Jesus fled to Egypt, remaining there until the death of Herod, Matthew points out that this fulfilled the prophetic statement, "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Matthew 2:15). Here the history of Israel is recapitulated in the life of Christ, the true Israel of God. Just as Israel wandered in the wilderness and was tested, Jesus is led into the wilderness and is tested (Matthew 4:1-11). Israel remained in the wilderness for forty years, Jesus fasted for forty days (Matthew 4:2). Moses ascended a mountain to receive the words of God, Jesus stands on the side of a mountain and teaches the people God's law (Matthew 5:1ff). Not surprisingly, therefore, Jesus fulfills the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5:17).

¹⁴³ Jesus' quoting exclusively from Deuteronomy isn't coincidental either. A parallel was being established with the wilderness travels of Israel.

warrior, He didn't set his eyes on that small plot of land nestled in the Middle East, but He purposed to recapture that which the Promised Land pictured, and that which the Garden was supposed to envelop, namely, the earth itself. Such is the significance of this encounter.

Kingdom Power

When Christ emerged resilient, the occasion marked the definitive in-breaking of the Kingdom—an in-breaking of unimpeachable power destined to dispel demons, heal the sick, set captives free, and dispense gifts. It began with the command, “Be gone, Satan!” (Matthew 4:10). And when Satan was forced to retreat, the kingdom of darkness no doubt shuddered.

Immediately following this encounter, it isn't surprising to hear Jesus saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Or, as Matthew reports, “And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them” (Matthew 4:23-24, see also Luke 4:14).

In the history of theological discourse, the Kingdom of God has been a notoriously challenging concept to define. But if anything was evident to the demonic strongholds scattered throughout Israel, it was that they stood powerless in the face of its advance. They didn't need a theologian to tell them that the Kingdom surged with power.

On more than one occasion, we gain insight into their disquieted fears. In the city of Galilee, when Jesus was teaching in the synagogue, he ran into a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon. Upon seeing Jesus, he cried out in a loud voice, “Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God” (Luke 4:34). Later that evening, when Jesus was healing the sick, we read, “And demons also came out of many, crying, ‘You are the Son of God!’ But he rebuked them and

would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ” (Luke 4:41).

Their fears were soon multiplied when Jesus appointed seventy-two of His followers to go out into the neighboring districts to announce the coming of the Kingdom of God. Upon returning, we hear them saying with joy and astonishment, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name” (Luke 10:17)! At this, Jesus said, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (vs. 18). The statement is bit perplexing; but in view of the disciples having received authority from Christ to overcome the power of the enemy (vs. 19), it appears that Jesus was saying something like this: “While you were expelling the subordinates [the demons], I beheld the master [Satan] falling.”¹⁴⁴

What a frenzied state the kingdom of darkness must have been thrown into. What must they have thought when Jesus continued to speak of His mission in terms of overthrowing Satan?

In the eleventh chapter of Luke, while refuting the spurious claim that He was casting out demons by Beelzebul, Jesus described the assault on darkness in terms of binding and plundering a strong man. He said, “When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe; but when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil” (Luke 11:21-22).

The strong man is none other than Satan himself, and so Jesus is asserting with remarkable clarity that He is going to rip off the enemy’s armor, overcome him, and divide the spoils. These and other such statements (John 12:31-32, 16:11) remind us that “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8b).

And the spiritual enemies of God knew it.

An Enemy Continues to Plot

None of this served to ultimately dampen Satan’s ambitions, causing him to lay down his arms in surrender. In fact, after his defeat

¹⁴⁴ An adaptation of Godet found in William Hendriksen’s commentary on Luke, page 581.

in the wilderness, Luke informs us that “when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time” (Luke 4:13). While Christ’s victory in the wilderness was a genuine triumph, it didn’t spell the end of Satan. He was still on the move, plotting and scheming, looking for another opportunity to derail the Messiah. Not only did he continue to believe in the effectiveness of sin’s power, trusting that the purposes of God could be thwarted, but the Messiah’s vulnerable frame presented him with some interesting options. Jesus was a man like any other man, save for the sinful nature. He grew tired like other men, required food, felt pain, and most importantly of all, his heart pumped blood like the hearts of other men. If it pumped blood, it could be made to stop.

The enemy’s options were, therefore, numerous. If Satan could get the Messiah to sin, the war would be over. If he could disrupt the plans of God, the tide might turn in his favor. Or if he could kill the Messiah, the strength of his arm would be powerfully displayed. Countless thousands of angelic onlookers were watching, eagerly awaiting how the conflict would ultimately resolve.

The life of Christ played like a stadium event. All of history had been building to this moment. It was like the Garden all over again, except that the stakes were now much higher. This was the second Adam, and He was God the Son in the flesh (John 1:1-14).

One must be careful not to overly emphasize Satan’s influence in the Gospel accounts, as if the people were merely puppets under his control. But neither should we think that Satan wasn’t active, stirring up hatred and dissension, enticing unbelievers to lash out in violence. Judas won’t allow us the luxury of thinking that men are perfectly insulated from the suggestions of Satan. The challenge is properly assessing, without indulging in excess or fancy, the various instances of murderous intent littering the Gospel narratives. What are we to make, for example, of the people of Nazareth who drove Jesus out of their town to the lip of a cliff, seeking to throw Him off (Luke 4:28-30)? Did Satan play a role in their extreme hatred? Was this Luke’s way of illustrating an example of Satan’s seeking another opportunity (4:13)? It’s hard to say. If we want to be cautious, it would seem that Satan largely sought to kill the Messiah through the scribes and the Pharisees, Judas, and the governmental powers of Rome.

John the Baptist called the Pharisees and Sadducees a “brood of vipers” (Matthew 3:7; Luke 3:7). Later Jesus said the same (Matthew 12:34, 23:33). It would require considerable effort not to think of these Jewish leaders as belonging to the devil. From the beginning of Christ’s public ministry, clear up until the bitter end, they opposed the Lord’s teachings and continually looked for opportunities to arrest or kill Him (Luke 5:21, 30; 6:2, 6, 11; 11:15-16, 53-54; 20:19; John 5:16, 7:1, 6-8, 30, 32; 8:59, 10:39; 11:53).

Perhaps the most striking moment of convergence with Satan occurred when Judas approached them with plans of betrayal. Luke reports that “Satan entered Judas” (Luke 22:3, see also John 13:27) when the “chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some way to get rid of Jesus” (vs. 2, NIV). When Judas whispered his words of treachery, we read that “they were glad, and agreed to give him money” (Luke 22:5). Such cruel delight wasn’t happenstance. Satan was energizing their emotions.

But Did He Understand God’s Plan?

But why would Satan plot the death of Christ? Didn’t he know that the cross was going to defeat him? Didn’t he hear Jesus tell His disciples “that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31-32; Luke 18:31)? It’s hard to imagine Jesus predicting His death more plainly. And what about that little word “must?” Jesus told them that the Son of Man *must* suffer many things and be killed. He *must* be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes. He *must* rise again. Surely Satan recognized that this was God’s plan.¹⁴⁵

There are those who argue that Satan *did understand* the forthcoming role of the cross in the purposes of God. As will be shown shortly, how we answer this question subtly impacts our view of the triumph and atonement of Christ.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Surely the types and shadows in the OT pointing to Christ’s redeeming work likewise concerned him.

We'll begin with Pastor John Piper. He argues that Satan did comprehend the nature of Jesus' mission. He states the matter as follows,

"Why would Satan do this [seek to kill the Messiah]? Doesn't he know this is suicide? Doesn't he know that he's going to be undone; that he's going to be destroyed? The cross and the resurrection are the breaking of the back of Satan; they're the defanging of Satan; they are the decisive battle that enables him to be thrown into the lake of fire. Doesn't he know this? I think he knew it."¹⁴⁷

Piper offers two reasons for his view, both of which center on Satan's strategy. He first points to the wilderness temptations, noting how Satan tempts the Messiah to preserve His life: turn these stones into bread, eat and live, use your powers to escape hunger, throw yourself off the temple and angels will catch you, show your power and people will follow you.

Piper says, imagining the thought process of Satan,

"Whatever you do don't die! Whatever you do don't suffer! Whatever you do don't use your power to lay your life down.' That's the way Satan began to work."¹⁴⁸

Piper notes another important clue. It's found in Mark 8:31-33. After Jesus says that He must suffer and die, Peter rebukes Christ for

¹⁴⁶ If one were inclined to think of the atonement more in terms of paying a price to Satan (the Ransom theory), for example, then it would be rather odd for Satan to not possess some definite understanding of Jesus' atoning mission. Conversely, if Satan didn't correctly perceive the mission, then it would undermine the Ransom theory as a viable, biblical position. Having said this, see Gregory of Nyssa's twenty-fifth catechism question. While holding to a Ransom theory of the atonement, he nevertheless taught that Satan was deceived, not perceiving the divine nature in Christ. Therefore, when Satan swallowed Christ in the flesh, he also swallowed Christ's divine nature, which choked him, as it were.

¹⁴⁷ *Judas Iscariot, the Suicide of Satan, and the Salvation of the World*, 2007.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

suggesting such a thing. In response, Jesus turns and says, “Get behind me, Satan!”

Why say that to Peter?

Piper argues that Satan, knowing what the suffering will ultimately accomplish, tries to deter the Messiah. Using Peter's aversion as a fitting tool for temptation, Satan attempts to keep Christ from choosing death. Basically, Satan doesn't want Jesus to offer up a sacrificial death.

But if this so, then why does Satan later instigate the death of Christ? Why enter Judas and facilitate the plan? Why commit suicide?

Piper explains,

“I conclude that Satan saw his efforts to divert Jesus from the cross failing. Over and over again, Jesus sets His face like flint to die. No matter what Satan does Jesus is resolute, and there comes a point where he knows, ‘I can’t stop this.’ Now what would you do if you were the arch evil person and your first strategy aborts? Here’s what I would do... I’d try to make it as bad as possible... He [Satan] wanted all the disciples scattered, and he wanted the lashes to be as hard as they could be, and the nails to be as rusty as they could be, and the death to be as slow as it could be. If he can’t stop it, he’ll make it horrible: emotionally horrible, relationally horrible, physically horrible. I think that probably is what happened.”¹⁴⁹

The crucial passage for this view is Mark 8:31-33. Various commentators agree that Satan was lurking behind Peter's words. William Hendriksen writes, “In speaking to Peter, Jesus is actually addressing Satan; or, if one prefers, is addressing whatever in Peter has been perversely influenced by the prince of evil.”¹⁵⁰ William L. Lane is a bit more cautious, writing, “The suggestion that he should refuse the passion may be construed as a temptation coming from Satan himself who desires to thwart the divine plan of salvation.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. For a similar perspective, see Sinclair Ferguson's profoundly helpful lecture *Christus Victor*.

¹⁵⁰ *New Testament Commentary* on Mark, page 328.

¹⁵¹ *NICNT*, Mark, page 304.

In an attempt to sharpen this view, I would add a couple points. First, it is worth noting that Peter is said to have rebuked (*epitimaō*) Jesus. This is fairly strong language. In fact, certain sectors of the early church found the statement a tad embarrassing and attempted to soften Peter's words. As a result, one manuscript trail reads, "But Simon Peter, in order to spare him, spoke to him."¹⁵² The word doesn't mean that, of course. It means (in context) to censure or admonish, to charge sharply. Surely Satan's influence would callous Peter's words, thereby suggesting the stronger reading.

Secondly, this position might add a layer of significance to the sneers of those who mocked Jesus while hanging on the cross. Luke writes, "And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One'" (Luke 23:35)! The soldiers likewise said, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself" (Luke 23:37)! Could it be that Satan was using the taunts of these people to tempt Christ to shed the shame of the cross and show them His power?

Another Perspective

While there is a fair bit to commend this perspective, I'm not convinced it is correct. While I cannot say (nor want to say too strongly) that this view undermines the triumphant nature of the cross, it seems to me that if Satan knew what he was doing when he perpetrated the death of Jesus (and therefore knew he was committing spiritual suicide), then the victorious nature of the cross wouldn't have had the same surprising punch. There wouldn't have been a sudden and poignant realization that his plan was woefully flawed.

This larger contextual concern will hopefully become more apparent at the end of this chapter. Until then, I would argue that the implications of the cross were largely hidden from Satan for the following reasons:

First, Mark 8:31-33 can be understood in a different light. The words, "Get behind me, Satan," could very well be a manner of speaking and not a literal address to Satan. Since Jesus goes on to say,

¹⁵² Ibid, page 295, footnote 76.

“You are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man,” it would seem that Peter was being told that his outlook was worldly in nature and unwittingly demonic. Opposition to Jesus’s mission resonates with the kingdom of darkness, not the kingdom of light. Calvin appears to agree when he writes,

“[When Jesus says, “Get thee behind me, Satan,”] Christ therefore throws his disciple to a distance from him, because, in his inconsiderate zeal, he acted the part of Satan; for he does not simply call him adversary, but gives him the name of the devil, as an expression of the greatest abhorrence.”¹⁵³

While this understanding alleviates some of the pressure, it doesn’t entirely resolve the issue. For if verse 31 didn’t pique Satan’s interest, Jesus’ sharp rebuke certainly did. By highlighting the satanic flavor of Peter’s outlook, the divine plan was underscored with a florescent marker! It’s as if Satan was being told, “You want to fulfill the divine plan? Kill the Messiah.”

While I don’t think Satan influenced Peter in the hopes of keeping the Messiah from embracing the cross, I do think Satan understood that Jesus *must* suffer and die and rise again. As a result, Satan must have wondered why it was necessary for Christ to suffer and die.

If that is so, then wouldn’t Satan try to keep Christ from going to the cross? Wouldn’t it be better to thwart the stated plan?

I’m inclined to say no. And here’s why.

When Jesus said that He must “rise again” (Matthew 20:17-19; Mark 9:31, 10:34, Luke 18:33, Luke 24:7, 24:46), we’re told that the disciples didn’t fully comprehend its meaning (Luke 18:34). Whether the demonic realm experienced the same spiritual torpor is impossible to say. But let’s suppose that they did understand the phrase “rise again” to mean physical resurrection. Others had been raised from the dead during the ministry of Jesus.

Lazarus is one example.

Interestingly, after Lazarus had been raised, we learn that when Jesus was in Bethany, a large crowd of Jews came to see Him, and “not

¹⁵³ *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, cited from Christian Classics Ethereal Library.

only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead” (John 12:9). Immediately after this, John reports, “So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus” (John 12:10-11). If Satan knew that Jesus intended to rise from the dead, it doesn’t follow that he thought of it as his defeat. If the Messiah could die once, he could die twice. With the scribes and Pharisees fully set against Jesus, a stock resurrection wouldn’t change their hearts. Lazarus didn’t. Besides, Jesus taught as much in the parable of the rich man (Luke 16:31). So in all likelihood, Satan probably didn’t feel overly threatened by these words. All the right players, it seemed to him, were on his side.

There was also the matter of Jesus’ going away. On more than one occasion, He spoke as follows, “I will be with you a little longer, and then I am going to Him who sent me. You will seek me and you will not find me. Where I am you cannot come” (John 7:33b-34). It is hard to say how Satan understood these words, but it would seem evident that Jesus was going back to the Father after His death. This could be construed as an innocuous, even advantageous outcome. Jesus was going to leave.

Moreover, Satan knew that Jesus was going to leave for a significant period of time. Various parables teach as much (Luke 19:11ff; Matthew 21:33ff, 22:1ff, 25:14ff). This long expanse of time would include, much to Satan’s glee, death, and wars, and tribulation, and earthquakes, and all other manner of troubles (Matthew 24:1-51). So if Satan thought of Jesus’ resurrection in terms of merely demonstrating another miracle, with sin and death continuing on as usual, he probably didn’t feel overly threatened. There were certainly statements suggesting his defeat (John 12:31, 16:11), but those, like Genesis 3:15, could be swept under the rug of self-confidence.

Speaking of self-confidence, Satan probably thought that Jesus’ predictions of His forthcoming death and resurrection were divine adjustments to the unstoppable power of autonomy. Jesus had been seemingly forced to move about in a covert fashion, so as to avoid coming into contact with hostile Jews (John 7:1, 10; 11:54). Examples like this probably bolstered Satan’s lofty view of himself.

Here it ought to be noted that Satan didn't have John's footnotes telling him that Jesus' hour was not yet come (John 7:30; 8:20¹⁵⁴), which is to say that Satan didn't know that God was actually orchestrating all of these events, having set an exact hour when Satan's leash would be considerably slackened for the purpose of afflicting Christ.¹⁵⁵

Even if we grant that Satan grasped the cross and a number of its theological implications, we must not underestimate the blinding effects of sin and pride. Why is it that communists continue to think that if they could just change one little detail here or there, or if they were the ones to lead the socialist empire, the outcome would be gloriously different? Sin blinds the mind. Moreover, it is hard to comprehend the amount of hatred swirling in the heart of the devil. Pure evil knows no bounds. It is an uncontrollable, warping thing.

Here the monomaniacal passion of Captain Ahab is instructive. Having lost his leg to the white whale, the obsessed captain cannot rest until his adversary is slayed. In one of the more stirring moments of the book, while working his crew into a frenzy, intent on recruiting them to his cause, Ahab reveals something of the unearthly obsession gripping him. He says,

"It was Moby Dick that dismasted me; Moby Dick that brought me to this dead stump I stand on now. Aye, aye," he shouted with a terrific, loud, animal sob, like that of a heart-stricken moose; "Aye, aye! it was that accursed white whale that razeed me; made a poor pegging lubber of me forever and a day!" Then tossing both arms, with measureless imprecations he shouted out: "Aye, aye! and I'll chase him round Good Hope, and round the Horn, and round the Norway Maelstrom, and round perdition's flames before I give him up. And this is what ye have shipped for, men! to chase that white whale on

¹⁵⁴ Although John 7:6-8 might have tipped him. But even here Satan could have construed the words to mean that Jesus was anticipating the inevitable outcome of Satan's schemes.

¹⁵⁵ I feel confident one could carry on this conversation long into the night, pointing to this or that verse in the Gospels and asking how it may or may not have been understood by Satan. At the end of the day, it would seem that there was enough evidence for Satan to understand what was coming, but also enough perplexing information to throw him off the scent.

both sides of land, and over all sides of earth, till he spouts
black blood and rolls fin out.”¹⁵⁶

For the heart that is driven to insanity, hating God more than anything else, the opportunity to make the Son bleed and scream would prove well nigh irresistible. No other pleasure could equal it. And when there is no room for compassion or tenderness in such a heart, let alone love, the options, while varied, are essentially one: If Christ won’t sin, then He must be killed.

Here I believe that Piper is quite right. I would just want to stress the blinding effects of rage in combination with the satanic impulse to oppose anything divine. So to whatever degree Satan comprehended the plan of the cross, I dare say that it was a schizophrenic understanding—a tumult of pride, suspicion, and blind hatred.

Lastly, one might recall what has been said in an earlier chapter concerning the hiddenness of the gospel. If Edwards is correct, and I tend to think he is, then the question is largely moot. The battle plans of the atonement were certainly adumbrated but wrapped in mystery.¹⁵⁷

The Heel of the Cross

So we come finally to the question of the cross and the power of God: How did the crucifixion of the Son of God ultimately defeat the Serpent? In previous chapters, we explored the principal powers of the kingdom of darkness as well as God’s initial dealings with them. We noted that the powers of darkness resided chiefly in:

¹⁵⁶ *Moby Dick*, chapter thirty-six, page 155. It is worth noting that a good case can be made for viewing the White Whale as God in this epic. “In this interpretation,” writes R.C. Sproul, “Ahab’s pursuit of the whale is not a righteous pursuit of God but natural man’s futile attempt in his hatred of God to destroy the omnipotent deity.” See his intriguing article, *The Unholy Pursuit of God in Moby Dick*.

¹⁵⁷ Commenting on Colossians 2:15, F.F. Bruce says, “Had they [the spiritual hostile forces] but realized the truth, those ‘archons of this age’—had they (as Paul puts it in another epistle) known the hidden wisdom of God which decreed the glory of Christ and His people—‘they would not have crucified the Lord of glory’ (1 Cor 2:8).”

- The power of autonomy
- The power of sin/evil
- The power of death
- The power of enslavement

We also noted how God's micro-crushings scattered throughout the OT strongly suggest that the final blow of Genesis 3:15 will:

- Involve an ironic reversal whereby the schemes of the wicked one are turned against him.
- Mock and humiliate the Serpent.
- Be violent.
- Be just.
- Be divinely powerful.
- Be mediated through human weakness and suffering.
- Serve to more greatly elevate God's fame and glory.

When these concepts are laced together and examined in light of the NT, all of the aforementioned micro-crushings converge on one man, being ultimately fulfilled and heightened in Jesus Christ who directly confounds each of Satan's so-called strengths: Christ overcomes Satan through weakness; He defeats death by dying; He turns autonomy on its head by using it for unimaginable good; He breaks the power of sin through grace; conquers evil with love; and He frees His people from the shackles of sin and condemnation.

All that could be said about the wonders of the cross can scarcely be reduced to a few bullets. It will take an eternity of time to fully digest its significance. Even now the human mind is pressed to its uttermost limits and stands in need of grace to illumine the depths of Christ's love (Eph 3:14-21). My purpose, therefore, will be to expand upon the points that directly and clearly contradict the powers of darkness. In so doing, the peculiarities of God's response will provide us with some astonishing insights into the nature of His dispute with Satan. They're so peculiar, in fact, that they beg to be understood in a

larger context. I would urge that it points to the origin of their dispute.¹⁵⁸

Point One: The Joseph Principle

It was a prayer that spoke of power.

Raising their voices to God in prayer (Acts 4:24), John and Peter, along with those with them, petitioned God for courage and kingdom power. “Enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness,” they asked (vs. 29b NIV), and “stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (vs. 30 NIV).

What allowed them to pray for such boldness? Here one could certainly point back to their encounter with the elders and the teachers, and how they were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:8), and how many who heard their message believed (vs. 4), and how they confounded the Sanhedrin with their courage, and how they performed a miraculous healing that couldn’t be denied (vs. 14). But such things wouldn’t get at the root cause. Turning to the beginning of the account, we read that the apostles “were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead” (Acts 4:2). The resurrection, which ultimately led to the outpouring of the Spirit, explains their boldness.

Yet even here we need a wider context. In the middle of their prayer, directly preceding their request for boldness and power, we hear these crucial words, “Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen” (Acts 4:27-28 NIV).

¹⁵⁸ In a section detailing the triumphant nature of Christ’s atonement, George Ladd wrote, “In some unexplained way, the death of Christ constituted an initial defeat of these [evil] powers.” (*A Theology of the New Testament*, page 476). Even if you cannot buy into the larger thesis of the work, this “unexplained way” is, I believe, quite discernible and can be uncovered through a consideration of the forthcoming truths.

Their boldness was rooted in the victory of the cross, and not merely a death and resurrection that made the best of a series of uncontrollable events, but rather, a death and resurrection stemming from the very plans of God; a plan that was, as Peter said in another place, “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). This was the definitive work of their Sovereign Lord, the One who works out all things according to the counsel of His will. This explains their exuberant confidence. Their outlook had been soaked in the deep waters of God’s sovereignty.

Part of the glory and genius of the cross resides in God’s sovereign governance, for it was at the cross where Satan’s autonomy was turned chiefly against him. The very acts which were meant to usurp God’s designs, were in fact part of God’s design, having been foreordained before the foundation of the world to defeat the Serpent.

Just imagine how embarrassing and pride-eviscerating this must have been for Satan. It’s exactly like Haman’s gallows. God took the very thing Satan most prized, his cherished power of autonomy, and He hung him with it.

I love how F.F. Bruce describes this ironic reversal. With poetic force, he writes,

“The very instrument of disgrace and death, by which the hostile forces thought they had Him in their grasp and had conquered Him forever was turned by Him into the instrument of their defeat and captivity. As He was suspended there, bound hand and foot to the wood in apparent weakness, they imagined they had Him at their mercy, and flung themselves upon Him with hostile intent. But, far from suffering their assault without resistance, He grappled with them and mastered them, stripping them of all their armour in which they trusted, and held them aloft in His mighty, outstretched hands, displaying to the universe their helplessness and His own unvanquished strength.”¹⁵⁹

There can be no demonic retort to this. According to both Acts 2:23 and 4:27, wicked men played a vital role in the crucifixion of the Son of God. Their evil acts, spurred on by Satan, served as the divine

¹⁵⁹ NICNT, *Colossians*, page 239-40.

means of its fulfillment. Autonomy was supposed to be a type of power that would secure divine independence, an ability allowing one to step outside the will of God and create a reality of one's own making. But through the cross, it was shown to be completely and utterly impotent. Goliath's head was chopped off with his own sword.

This is the Joseph principle. It's a truth encapsulated in the well-known words, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gen 50:20).

Point Two: The Power of Weakness

"Earthly kings and princes," writes Edwards, "when they are about to engage in any great and difficult work, will put on their strength, and will appear in all their majesty and power, that they may be successful. But when Christ was about to perform the great work of redeeming a lost world, the wisdom of God took an opposite method, and determined that he should be humbled and abased to a mean state, and appear in low circumstances."¹⁶⁰

The Christmas carol composed by Carol Owens underscores this same truth. After asking the question, "How should a king come?" the melodic voices of men and women answer as follows:

"Even a child knows the answer of course,
In a coach of gold with a pure white horse.
In the beautiful city in the prime of the day,
And the trumpets should cry and the crowds make way.
And the flags fly high in the morning sun,
And the people all cheer for the sovereign one.
And everyone knows that's the way that it's done.
That's the way that a King should come."

With repeated emphasis, the earthly pomp of kings is stressed. But near the end of the song, the Gospel emerges. After again asking the question, "How should a king come?" we receive this reply,

¹⁶⁰ *Wisdom Displayed in Salvation*, Section VI.II.

“On a star filled night into Bethlehem,
Rode a weary woman and a worried man.
And the only sound in the cobblestone street,
Was the shuffle and the ring of their donkey's feet.
And a King lay hid in a virgin's womb,
And there were no crowds to see Him come.
At last in a barn in a manger of hay,
He came and God incarnate lay.”

With the incarnation of the Son of God, we behold the most amazing interplay between divine power and human weakness. All throughout the OT, God used humble and fragile means to accomplish His purposes. The culmination of this principle is seen most clearly with the coming of Christ. The King of kings was born in a barn. His mother was a young peasant. Lowly shepherds hailed His arrival. There were no trumpet blasts in the street, no banners, and the only crown that would ever be placed on His head during His earthly ministry would be a crown of thorns.

This would be the perfect way to destroy a proud enemy.

In terms of military strategy, the Lord of hosts had established a pattern of confronting the kingdom of darkness with violent force. Sometimes this came in the form of mighty plagues, sometimes with the edge of the sword, and sometimes an angel of death would kill thousands. This was justice channeled through judgment, and it was right and good. But when Christ was born, the long-standing pattern was uniformly reversed, and Satan's expectations were thrown off balance. Weakness would be His strength, meekness His weapon of choice. As Isaiah said, “He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice” (Isaiah 42:2-3).

Here we must ask ourselves why the cross was chosen as the means by which the propitiatory sacrifice would come. Hebrews tells us that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins (Heb 9:22). Why didn't Christ stand on the edge of a high cliff, bear the sins of the world, and jump off to His death? That would have resulted in death. That would have shed His blood. So why choose the ignominy and torture of the cross?

Here one must remember the words of Paul to the Corinthians, “For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor 1:25). By taking up His cross, it was as if Christ was saying, “I can beat you through sheer strength, as you well know, but I can also beat you through abject weakness.” What more can be said about Christ’s strength if His very weakness can overcome all the powers of hell? What does that say to Satan? What does that say to all the watching angels?

When the mob of soldiers and chief priest came to steal Jesus away in the night, Jesus spoke these startling words, “When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness” (Luke 22:53). All throughout His ministry, Satan’s leash had been fixed to some definite degree. But when the time came for the Son of Man to be lifted up, all hell broke loose. The Serpent was unleashed, and the demons that had been made to flee, being rebuked and cast out, were now permitted to pounce on Christ. They ripped into Him mercilessly, using the cruelest, most excruciating form of torture available in the Roman world. In all this, Christ allowed Himself to be swallowed by evil. Jumping off a cliff simply wouldn’t have produced the same results. Evil wouldn’t have been combated in the same way; for in order to defeat evil in the most humiliating fashion, Christ had to triumph over evil by suffering humiliation. Edwards is very helpful here,

“Consider the weak and seemingly despicable means and weapons that God employs to overthrow Satan. Christ poured the greater contempt upon Satan in the victory that he obtained over him, by reason of the means of his preparing himself for it, and the weapons he has used. Christ chooses to encounter Satan in the human nature, in a poor, frail, afflicted state. He did as David did. David when going against the Philistine refused Saul’s armor, a helmet of brass, a coat of mail, and his sword. No, he puts them all off. Goliath comes mightily armed against David, with a helmet of brass upon his head, a coat of mail weighing five thousand shekels of brass, greaves of brass upon his legs, and a target of brass between his shoulders, a spear, whose staff was like a weaver’s beam, and the spear’s head weighing six hundred shekels of iron.

And besides all this, he had one bearing a shield before him. But David takes nothing but a staff in his hand, and a shepherd's bag and a sling, and he goes against the Philistine. So the weapons that Christ made use of were his poverty, afflictions and reproaches, sufferings and death. His principal weapon was his cross, the instrument of his own reproachful death. These were seemingly weak and despicable instruments to wield against such a giant as Satan. And doubtless the devil disdained them as much as Goliath did David's staves and sling. But with such weapons as these has Christ in a human, weak, mortal nature overthrown and baffled all the craft of hell. Such disgrace and contempt has Christ poured upon Satan."¹⁶¹

Shortly afterwards, he adds, "God shows his great and infinite wisdom in taking this method, to confound the wisdom and subtlety of his enemies. He hereby shows how easily he can do it, and that he is infinitely wiser than they."¹⁶²

This perspective adds greater layers of meaning to the sufferings of Jesus. While hanging on the cross, exposed before the watching world, the rulers, we are told, sneered at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the chosen One" (Luke 23:35b NIV; Mark 15:31-32). The soldiers likewise mocked Him, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself" (vs. 37). They did not perceive the irony of their words, for in remaining fixed to the cross, Jesus was at that moment fulfilling His role of Savior, providing the very provision of salvation they so desperately needed.

But perhaps the greatest moment of irony occurred when the soldiers were beating him and spitting on Him, wrapping a purple cloak around Him (Mark 15:16-20), saying, "Hail, king of the Jews." Ironically, Christ was in fact securing a victory that would mock and overthrow the powers of darkness. With each slap, Christ was silently laying the foundation of their humiliation. Such is the irony of the cross.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Ibid. VII.I

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Here I would heartily recommend D.A. Carson's excellent message, *The Irony of the Cross*, where this theme is explored in stirring detail.

We close this thought with the vision of John in the fifth chapter of Revelation. There we are told about a scroll with writing on both sides, sealed with seven seals. It is a scroll of judgment. When a mighty angel proclaims in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” John reports that no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth could open the scroll and look inside it. When he begins to weep, an elder says, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals” (Rev 5:5). Interestingly, the very next thing John sees is a Lamb that has been slain.

The seeming disparity of this imagery should be keenly felt. The elder speaks of a conquering lion, but when John looks he sees a slain lamb. What kind of strength is this? Can a slain lamb be compared to a lion? Naturally, the metaphors perfectly collate in Christ Jesus, the One who conquered evil through sacrifice. He was the one “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11).

Point Three: The Burial of Death and the Breaking of Sin

It's not a coincidence that death—one of the sharpest swords in Satan's armory—was conquered by death (Heb 2:14). In order to cause the irony to burn most brightly, Christ dealt the crushing blow to Satan through death itself.

But here it must be asked how death defeated him. What did it do? How did it overthrow Satan?

In one sense, even a normal death, that is, a death harboring no redemptive blessings would still convict the devil of a heinous crime. By killing the most innocent man to ever walk the earth, Satan sealed

his condemnation, thereby showing how greatly he deserved to be punished (John 12:31, 16:11). A just man should not be unjustly tried, nor unjustly put to death, and to do so is intolerably wicked.

When the infinite dignity of Christ—who is both perfect God and sinless man—is besmirched, the degree of retribution becomes nearly incalculable. As the writer of Hebrews intimates, “How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace” (Heb 10:29)?

Now in terms of explicit texts detailing how Christ’s death fatally struck the kingdom of darkness, Colossians 2:13-15 ranks among the top. Hebrews 2:14 and 1 John 3:8 would be right there as well. Interestingly, all three share a common thread: the forgiveness of sins.

The context surrounding Hebrews 2:14 (see verse 9) certainly points to suffering (vs. 10), but it does so with an eye trained on Christ’s role as high priest, and specifically, His making “propitiation for the sins of the people” (vs. 17). 1 John 3:8 simply states that Christ came to destroy the works of the devil, but it’s easy to link this with verse 5. There John says, “You know that He appeared to take away sins” (1 John 3:5a). If this is right, then three of the clearest references to the defeat of Satan, insofar as the cross work of Christ is concerned, center on sin and its having been satisfied. Here’s how Colossians describes it:

“When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col 2:13-15 NIV).

The connection between “canceling the charge of our legal indebtedness” and “disarming the powers and authorities” is evident.¹⁶⁴ By nailing sin to the cross—and by extension our guilt—the

¹⁶⁴ For a careful exposition of this passage, especially as it relates to the view of those who see Christ divesting Himself of the principalities and powers, a view

powers of darkness were not only defeated but humiliated. The Greek term *thriambeuo* (“triumphing over”) speaks of a Roman military procession celebrating the defeat of an enemy. Peter O’Brien argues that the term means “to enjoy a triumphal procession,” or “celebrate a victory,” or even to “lead as a conquered enemy in a victory parade.”¹⁶⁵ Clearly, the power of sin is intimately related to the kingdom of darkness, so much so, that if sin is vanquished, the kingdom necessarily topples. It is not hard to understand why. Sin is the means by which Satan is able to exercise dominion over men. It holds them in bondage and condemns them. Before Christ died to free men from the power and penalty of sin, it appeared to be ultimately irreversible, something that could not be tamed, only eradicated through the fires of judgment. But here is the glory of the cross. When Christ became a man, sharing in our flesh and blood, He offered Himself as an atoning sacrifice on behalf of humanity. He became our federal head (Romans 5:12-21) and redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us (Gal 3:13). He bore our sins in His body (1 Peter 2:24). God made Him who knew no sin to be sin (2 Cor 5:21).

No mere man could atone for the sins of the world. Not only would such a person have to atone for his own sins, which he could not do (Heb 7:27), but his death wouldn’t be able to purchase forgiveness for others. Only Christ could offer a sinless sacrifice of infinite worth.

Moreover, only Christ could bear the weight of sin and emerge triumphant. If we imagine the penalty of our sin being imputed to Christ, and His bearing the full weight of the curse on our behalf, and His crying out, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” we might wonder how it was that Christ could stand under such a burden. Why didn’t the weight of sin crush Him? How did His life swallow its sting?

Theologians have long considered this awesome fact. But in many ways, studying the atonement is like peering into a perfectly cut gem; the inner chamber cascades into an infinite regress of refracting lenses, spiraling deeper and deeper, a boundless majesty of wonder.

somewhat common among the Greek fathers, see Peter O’Brien’s comments in *Colossian, Philemon*, World Biblical Commentary, pages 126-127.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, page 128.

Similarly, the heavenly ledger recording the exchange of sin and righteousness—where sin and holiness collide—is too lofty for us. Trying to understand the mechanics of the atonement in engineering terms would be akin to asking for a mathematical equation of creation *ex nihilo*. All we know is that something unimaginably grand happened on the cross in the unseen world of Christ's being.¹⁶⁶ Sin collided with the purity and holiness and infinite love and grace of Christ, and it crumbled into the perfect satisfaction rendered.¹⁶⁷

In short, Christ condemned sin in the flesh (Rom 8:3). The proof is evidenced in the resurrection. Since death had been conquered, the grave couldn't hold Him. Peter announced this on the day of Pentecost, "God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it" (Acts 2:24).

The undeniable truth is that grace is greater than sin. Love conquers evil. Light is greater than darkness. When Christ rose from the dead, Satan's kingdom was broken.

Point Four: Vindicated

Lastly, there is the matter of God's vindication.

¹⁶⁶ Whether and to what extent the spiritual realm was able to perceive such mysterious things, we cannot say. If I had to fancy a guess, I would say that the angels and demons did see something more. Spiritual eyes better behold spiritual things. Think of the darkness that fell across the land while Christ hung on the cross. And think of how the earth shook and the rocks split (27:51). If the physical realm couldn't refrain from responding to the awesome events occurring in the spiritual realm, what wonders behind the scene? I think it is safe to say that the kingdom of darkness knew they were defeated.

¹⁶⁷ Dabney writes, "If we are asked, how this could be, when Christ was not holden forever of death, and experienced none of the remorse, wicked despair, and subjective pollution, attending a lost sinner's second death? We reply: the same penalty, when poured out on Him, could not work all the detailed results, because of His divine nature and immutable holiness. A stick of wood, and an ingot of gold are subjected to the same fire. The wood is permanently consumed: the gold is only melted, because it is a precious metal, incapable of natural oxidation, and it is gathered, undiminished, from the ashes of the furnace. But the fire was the same! And then, the infinite dignity of Christ's person gives to His temporal sufferings a moral value equal to the weight of all the guilt of the world." *Systematic Theology*, page 505.

When a man complains and barks about a subject for a very long time, claiming to possess special insight into a matter, and endeavors with great energy to prove his case, but is later shown to be woefully incorrect, he is shown to be a fool. His reputation is marred. He may sputter and back peddle, but everyone can see the man's error for what it is. The amount of time and energy dedicated to such barking, as well as the degree of passion employed in such complaining, will inevitably heighten the embarrassment. In other words, if a man dedicates the entirety of his life to a subject, and argues vociferously against a certain view, his error will more greatly impugn his reputation.

Now in the case of Satan, he has argued with unparalleled passion against God's righteousness, urging that God unjustly overlooks sin. In terms of duration, his complaint has spanned the ages. Countless centuries have rolled by with him complaining in the background. So in terms of degree and duration, Satan's accusations against God and His saints have been unequaled.

Consider the following by way of reminder. When King David committed adultery with Bathsheba and later learned that she was with child, he conspired to have Uriah killed. Naturally, none of this was hidden from God, so the Lord sent Nathan the prophet to confront David. When David admitted to doing evil, various judgments were laid out. But strikingly, we read these words, "David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the LORD.' And Nathan said to David, 'The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die'" (2 Sam 12:13).

David was spared.

Can we even begin to imagine Satan's caustic accusations and cries of injustice? What would he have said when he heard these words from David, "[God] does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities" (Psalm 103:10)?

"Exactly!" Satan must have cried. "God isn't dealing with you as He should—as He must! He's no better than us!"

To Satan's absolute horror, the cross solved this apparent problem. According to Romans 3:24-26, that Himalayan height where the grand resolution of forgiveness and righteousness intermingle, we learn how this could be so. Paul tells us that believers are justified by

grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation¹⁶⁸ by His blood. “This was to show,” as Paul stresses, “God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom 3:25-26).

Here Paul readily acknowledges the predicament of the OT. God’s righteousness was at stake. This is why the cross is so crucial. It demonstrates God’s righteousness at the present time “so that He might be just.” Don’t miss that. The question isn’t how God could be righteous if He didn’t forgive. Quite the opposite. The crucial issue for Paul was: How could God be righteous if He did forgive sins?

Leon Morris writes,

“Often and often people had sinned. You would expect that a just God would punish them. That is what justice means. Paul is arguing that sinners deserve to be punished for their sin. Sinners have gone on living, just as they were. Now you can argue that this shows God to be merciful, or compassionate, or kind, or forbearing, or loving. But you cannot argue that it shows him to be *just*. Whatever else the absence of punishment of sins shows, it does not show us justice.”¹⁶⁹

With the cross, we see how God can forgive sins while also judging it. By presenting Christ as a propitiatory sacrifice, God provided a means whereby He could justly justify those who place their faith in Christ.

Actually, it can be stated even more strongly.

If God is going to be just, He must justify those who place their faith in Christ. Justice now demands it. And this, it must be stressed, has made Satan, the great accuser of the brethren and blasphemer of God, grow deathly silent (Romans 8:33-39).

Songs of Praise

¹⁶⁸ For a careful treatment of the term, see Leon Morris’ *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, chapters V and VI.

¹⁶⁹ *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance*, page 195.

In light of Christ's matchless victory, is it any wonder that the angels who have been watching the unfolding drama since the very beginning are now boisterously magnifying God's power? All throughout the book of Revelation, we behold visions like the following,

“Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!’ And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!’ And the four living creatures said, ‘Amen!’ and the elders fell down and worshiped” (Rev 5:11-14; see also 4:11; 7:12; 11:17; 12:10; 19:1).

These are words to be proclaimed now. Christ has reversed the power of autonomy, turning it against Satan. Christ has shown the greatness of His strength by beating Satan through weakness. Christ has defeated death through death. Christ has broken the power of sin by allowing Himself to be broken. And Christ has silenced the Serpent by demonstrating the righteousness of God.

The Lord has fulfilled His promise. He has crushed the Serpent's head, and He did it in the most unexpected way: the LORD crushed Satan by crushing His Son.

Ironically, all of this serves to more greatly magnify God's glory, the very thing Satan wanted to steal. So we sing with the angels of God's great power and say with all the faithful, *Sola Potestas*, power is found in Christ alone.¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ Stephen Charnock writes, “The arm of Power was lifted up as high as the designs of Wisdom were laid deep: as this way of redemption could not be contrived but by an Infinite Wisdom, so it could not be accomplished but by an Infinite Power. None but God could shape such a design, and none but God could effect it. The Divine Power in temporal deliverances, and freedom

Chapter Ten

Glory and Shame



We can sing the songs of victory, but we may not stop marching.
The war isn't over yet.

In this last chapter, we want to look at the final aspect of Satan's idea, namely, satanic glory, and consider how God continues to conquer and eradicate the kingdom of darkness. Special attention will be paid to how God heaps ignominy rather than glory upon Satan, along with our continuing role in this divine project. This will take us through the present age ("the last days") up until the coming of Christ and the consummation when evil will be completely eradicated.

Serpent Crushing, Redeemed Slaves

It's an easy verse to miss. Tucked away in the final chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans, sandwiched between his personal greetings and doxological conclusion, we read these words of promise, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Romans 16:20a). It's a fascinating statement, and not a little curious.

The allusion is quite plain. Paul is picking up the language of Genesis 3:15. But instead of referencing Christ, he instead says that Satan is going to be crushed under the feet of the Roman saints. Their heels will *suntribo* the Serpent, which is to say, trample him, or break him into pieces.¹⁷¹ This is a curious application by Paul. If Christ crushed the head of the Serpent, then what possible role is left for us? Wasn't the work of Christ definitive?

from the slavery of human oppressors, vails to that which glitters in redemption; whereby the devil is defeated in his designs, stripped of his spoils, and yoked in his strength." *On the Power of God*, volume 2, page 59.

¹⁷¹ Thayer's Greek definitions

Here we are confronted with an awesome truth that sheds light on the mission of the church; a mission that corresponds to God's strategy of displaying His glory to the principalities and powers in the heavenly realms; a mission that includes *our* stomping on the enemy.

In order to flesh this out, we need to delve into the doctrine of union with Christ. Only by contemplating this astounding truth will our vantage point prove lofty enough to provide a proper perspective.

In Him

With praise-soaked words, Paul writes, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" (Eph 1:3). One of the premier doctrines of the NT is union with Christ.¹⁷² This is that amazing truth of our being so intimately related to Him, so bound up with Him, by grace through faith, that our very identity melds into His (Rom 8:29). We are actually said to be "in Christ." This means, among many things, that the redemptive accomplishments of Christ become those of our own by virtue of our tight-knit identification with Him.

An illustration will help. Since Christ is righteous, his obedience to the Law is imputed to us by virtue of our union with Him. We are reckoned as righteous by God, not because we are perfectly holy in our conduct, but because we are forgiven and hidden in Christ who is perfectly holy. This is the doctrine of justification, and it is set in sharp relief when viewed in its rightful context: the believer's union with Christ.

Amazingly, our union with Christ runs so deep that Christ's redemptive experiences become those of our own. Hendriksen can say "that all of Christ's redemptive experiences are duplicated

¹⁷² Professor Murray boldly writes, "Nothing is more central or basic than union and communion with Christ." And again, "Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation not only in its application but also in its once-for-all accomplishment in the finished work of Christ." *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, page 161.

unredemptively in the believer.”¹⁷³ He goes on to illustrate this by citing a number of examples. He writes,

“The Christian, accordingly, suffered with Christ (Rom 8:17), was crucified with him (Rom 6:6), died with him (Rom 6:8; 2 Tim 2:11), was buried with him (Rom 6:4; Col 2:12), made alive with him (Col 2:13), raised with him (Col 2:12; 3:1), made joint-heirs with him (Rom 8:17), is glorified with him (Rom 8:17), enthroned with him (Col 3:1; Rev 20:4), and reigns with him (2 Tim 2:12; Rev 20:4).”¹⁷⁴

Now if these astonishing truths are duplicated in the lives of the church, then it isn’t nearly so difficult to see how Paul can say that God will crush Satan under the feet of the saints. Since Christ is *the* ultimate Serpent crusher, we who are united to Him share in this activity. We continue to trample the Serpent.¹⁷⁵

A Trampling Church

Herein lies the mission of the church. We don’t often think of it in such terms, but that’s really what missions is all about. The church enters enemy territory in the power of the Spirit with the Gospel on her lips boldly looking to rescue souls.

Interestingly, this is exactly how God defined the ministry of the greatest missionary of the early church. Speaking to Paul on the road to Damascus, the Lord told him,

¹⁷³ *New Testament Commentary*, Philippians, page 169.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ And conversely, Christ continues to trample the Serpent, for, as Paul tells us, “For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). It might seem a bit odd for Paul to highlight the peacefulness of God in the context of smashing the enemy (Romans 16:20). Here our modern minds would do well to consider the fitting relationship between peace and justice and the absence of evil (2 Sam 7:1ff). Because God is a God of peace, evil must be eradicated. There is, therefore, no necessary incongruity between the intent of peace and the engagement of just war.

“I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (Acts 26:16b-18).

Now that the power of sin has been broken, leaving Satan crippled and bound (Rev 20:2-3), the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is commissioned to go out in His name to all the corners of the earth (Matthew 28:18-20). We are to make disciples of all nations. We are to baptize people in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit—which is to say that God has laid claim on these baptized individuals, transferring them from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of His Son (Col 1:13). He places His name on them, saying, as it were, “This one is mine.”

Through this, the second Adam is subduing the earth and “destroying every rule and every authority and power. For He must reign until he has put all His enemies under his feet” (1 Cor 15:24b-25; Heb 10:12-13). This is why our evangelistic task can be described in combative terms. Paul writes,

“For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor 10:3-5).

Our mission is rooted in Christ’s mission. It is a Psalm 2 type of mission. After speaking of Christ’s resurrection (vs. 6), the LORD tells the Son, “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel. Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth” (vs. 8-10). We tell the inhabitants of the earth, as the Psalmist goes on to say, “Serve the

LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (vs. 11-12).

Since we’re ambassadors of Christ commissioned to engage the fortresses of unbelief scattered throughout the earth (2 Cor 5:20), which are none other than Satan’s strongholds, Paul’s bold statement that “we don’t don’t wrestle against flesh and blood but against the rulers and powers and principalities in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12) makes much more sense. The Church is carrying the redeeming light of the cross right into the heart of Satan’s kingdom.¹⁷⁶

The Added Heights of Humiliation

And this, it must be observed, utterly humiliates the enemy; for what could more greatly afflict Satan’s pride than for the very people who once belonged to him, those who were formerly his slaves to now march against him in the power of God? And triumph!

Not long ago, my church received news from a missionary in the Sudan detailing a spiritual breakthrough in a tribe he had been ministering to for quite some time. After much labor and toil, the hard soil of their hearts gave way to a crop of righteousness. Forty-four people had bowed the knee to Christ, and they were now ready to be baptized. Writing with obvious emotion, the missionary described the occasion as follows,

“It was particularly exciting to see elderly men and ladies come forward to consecrate their lives to God through faith in Jesus Christ. I remember surveying the congregation at one point toward the end of the service and catching a sight of glory – beaming faces, glistening heads. The sunlight was streaming into the church through a large gap at the apex of the thatched roof of the country church. It made the residual beads of

¹⁷⁶ It is worth observing here that the land promise of the OT has been transformed in Christ and expanded to include the whole earth (Rom 4:13; Matt 5:5; Eph 6:1-3), which was really God’s intention all along (Gen 1:28). See W.D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, as well as Poythress’ *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*, chapters 6 and 8.

water from baptism look like studded jewels and diamonds on the ebony black skin of my new brothers and sisters in Christ. Ministry is full of hardships, heartaches and setbacks. There are frustrations and concerns that perpetually burden our hearts. But this sight of God's glory over the lives of His recently redeemed people infused something into my heart, a strangely polarized emotion, something between a sigh of relief and a booster cable jolt. As I think about it now, I believe the Lord was communicating divine truths to my tired heart: 'Relax, rest, I will bring to completion the good work I have begun in My people. Mark¹⁷⁷, I will cause My name to be glorified in all the earth!'"

Following the joyous occasion, they marched to three different compounds to destroy long-standing family idols. At the first compound, he spoke to the people "about the exceedingly great power of our God who cast Satan down and triumphed over him through the cross of His Son." Immediately following this, he felt led by the Spirit to do something "Elijah-like." He wrote,

"I sat my rump down on the biggest and most obvious of the compound idols (a 5 inch-wide, 30 inch high carved stick with a notched knob at the top). The people were shocked as I addressed them from my perch. I said, "If the god of this stick is stronger than the true God of heaven and earth, let him come and strike me down! Let him come and defend his idol." Well, I waited... and nothing happened! Then in the suspense of the moment it dawned on them: "The God of the Bible is the real God!" The silence erupted into spontaneous clapping and singing and dancing. I must say, I was praising God, too! Then the men of the church (and not a few zealous ladies!) laid their hands on the idol and cast it down. The idols and charms were removed from the compound, including a goat's head and various amulets, and cast into a raging fire, symbolic of Satan's eternal and infernal demise."

I had the privilege of watching footage of these Sudanese Christians burn their idols. A local pastor who had visited the region

¹⁷⁷ I have changed his name so as to protect his identity.

returned with a recording of these new saints. Sitting in Sunday school, we watched scores of them dance with joy around a bonfire. They held their strange idols in the air and tossed each one into the blazing inferno, praising God with much celebration and prayer.

At one point, when the people were gathered together milling about, several of the children, perhaps six or seven of them, had composed a song. Forming something like a line, these children began to sing of Jesus' triumph over Satan. They sang of His crushing him, and as they sang, they stomped their feet against the ground, accentuating the point.

As their arms swayed and the dust rose, something occurred to me. In that simple act of praise, Satan was being severely mocked. Just think of it. Mere children—children who once belonged to him—children whose parents and grandparents and great grandparents—a lineage stretching to who knows how far back—were now acting out Christ's victory over Satan. Is not the pride of Satan crushed through this? Is not God parading the defeat of the evil one and heaping coals of fire on his head?

Cross Forged Weapons

In order to further punctuate the humiliation of Satan, God has outfitted the church with a peculiar cast of weapons. As His people march across the globe, a sword and scabbard are no longer fixed to their belts. Such weapons have been radically transformed.¹⁷⁸ By virtue

¹⁷⁸ The same is true with holy war. Technically speaking, holy war hasn't been abrogated but rather transformed. One might ask why God's universal rule of justice didn't equally destroy the Israelites in the OT. In other words, why didn't Israel, during the years of conquest, suffer the same penalty as the Canaanites? They weren't any better in certain respects. So how did they escape judgment? Poythress answers, "The OT contains ample indications that God brings the Israelites under His rule by a process of holy war similar to the conquest of Canaan. In the case of the Canaanites, the approach of God and His rule means consecration to utter destruction. In the case of Israel, the approach of God involves the use of substitutes that are consecrated to destruction: the Passover lamb substitutes for the firstborn of Israel, and animal sacrifices substitute for the people more generally." *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*, pages 143-44. The same is no less true in the NT. "As

of our union with Christ, the crushing blow of the cross is channeled through the church. The act that toppled evil continues to flourish, bleeding into us through the power of the Holy Spirit. This fresh reality changes everything.

When we talk about Psalm 2, or when we speak of the unstoppable advance of the church (Matthew 16:18), using words like victory and triumph, it does not mean that the church marches about with kingly apparel, wearing golden crowns or silk robes; rather it fulfills its mission by sharing in the sufferings of Christ. It wins through weakness; it triumphs through sacrifice; it strikes the enemy while kneeling in prayer; it advances in humble reliance on God. Christ's crucified life is our blueprint for battle.

Recall here again the words of Hendriksen. He said that the redemptive acts of Christ are duplicated in the lives of God's people. This is key to understanding our present mission. Like Christ, we too take up the cross and follow Him, becoming like Him in His death and resurrection. This is the principal means by which the enemy is conquered. This is how God heaps ignominy upon ignominy upon Satan.

Sharing in His Sufferings

Because Christ suffered, we suffer. And just as Christ's sufferings weren't suffered in vain, neither do we suffer in vain. Sacrificial love fueled by a white-hot desire to spread God's fame functions as the

Christians," continues Poythress, "we ourselves are victims of holy war. We have been crucified with Christ, and we have died with Christ. Our flesh has been subjected to destruction. But since Christ was raised from the dead, we also enjoy new life." This helps explain why the Gospel shuns physical violence in our present context. Christ's death as a satisfaction for sin is judicially sufficient for the sins of the world (without exception). All men, therefore, are called to repent and escape the coming wrath. The sword does extend to demons, however. Since demons didn't fall within the purview of the cross, they are to be trampled. The sword of the Spirit is to be unsheathed and used against the forces of darkness. Satan is to be resisted. This doesn't mean, however, that we should ever treat the enemy lightly or speak presumptuously or arrogantly (Jude 1:9). But it does mean that we are not to love our demonic enemies like our human enemies.

means by which the kingdom of darkness is combated. So far as the NT is concerned, this concept is known as sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

Of all the doctrines expounded on the Lord's Day, this is one of the most neglected. This isn't to say that the subject of suffering isn't preached. Quite the contrary. Suffering, generally considered, is given ample attention. Where there is sickness, there the subject of suffering will abound. But when was the last time you heard someone ask: What are the sufferings of Christ, and how do I share in them? Or when was the last time you heard someone say, "I'm sharing in the sufferings of Christ"? Someone might describe themselves as a child of Abraham, or a true Jew, or an ambassador of Christ, or talk about being Spirit-filled, or even crucified with Christ, but how often does the biblical concept of "sharing in the sufferings of Christ" directly flavor the everyday speech of saints?

In my experience, it is rare.

But for the apostle Paul, sharing in the sufferings of Christ greatly informed his outlook and expectations. He could scarcely write a letter without touching upon the subject of suffering, and at several key junctures, he spoke freely and pointedly about sharing in Christ's sufferings (1 Thess 1:6; 3:2-3; 2 Cor 1:5; 4:7-18; Rom 8:17; Gal 6:17; Col 1:24; Phil 1:29; 3:8-10. See also 1 Peter 2:21; 4:13). Not only did the concept imbue his thinking, emerging effortlessly in his theological train of thought, but he even yearned for it, stating openly his desire to experience such sufferings.

Writing to the Philippians, we catch of glimpse of his heart:

"Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:8-11).

Here, Paul says, incredibly, that he wants to share in Christ's sufferings, becoming like Him in His death. These are weighty words. Given their obvious importance, it would behoove us to consider what such words mean, and how they are relevant to the present clash with darkness.

The Sufferings of Christ

Theologians differ as to the precise meaning and application of Christ's suffering in the life of the believer. There are those who would argue for a wide application of Christ's suffering. They would urge that all of the struggles of life, so far as the Christian's pursuit towards holiness is concerned, fall under its heading. Professor Jac Muller, commenting on Philippians 3:10-11, says, "Sharing in the sufferings of Christ, is, therefore, more than just suffering for the sake of Christ (in tribulation and persecution), or in imitation of Christ. It means all suffering, bodily or spiritual, which overtakes the believer by virtue of his new manner of life, his 'Christ life' in a world unbelieving and hostile to Christ."¹⁷⁹ He goes on to cite Lightfoot with approval, who says, "It implies all pangs and all afflictions undergone in the struggle against sin either within or without. The agony of Gethsemane, not less than the agony of Calvary, will be reproduced however faintly in the faithful servant of Christ."¹⁸⁰

This view isn't without warrant. In Hebrews 2:10-18, the author, while discoursing on Christ's fitting acquaintance with suffering for the salvation of the saints, links temptation with suffering. He writes, "For because He Himself has suffered when tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted" (Heb 2:18). Clearly, Christ's engagements with temptation fall under the more general rubric "sufferings." And seeing how He was tempted in every way as we are (Heb 4:15), His entire life was a trial. It will not do, therefore, to restrict His sufferings to Calvary alone.

¹⁷⁹ *NICNT*, page 117.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

While this is no doubt true, the general thrust of the data, so far as I can tell, tends to support a more narrow understanding. One might ask, for example, whether or not the loss of a six-month-old child should be understood in terms of sharing in the sufferings of Christ. While such loss is horrifically tragic, it would seem a bit odd for the parents to say, “With the loss of this child, I’m sharing in Christ’s sufferings.”

Only in a remote sense would it be true.

The more precise understanding of sharing in the sufferings of Christ is aptly summarized by Gordon Fee. After conducting a careful examination of Philippians 3:10-11, he summarizes his conclusion as follows:

“Thus Christ’s sufferings do not refer to ‘sufferings in general,’ but to those sufferings that culminated in his death, all of which was for the sake of others. Likewise, it is not just any kind of present suffering to which Paul refers in the preceding phrase, but to those which in particular express participation in *Christ’s* sufferings; and the aim, as well as the character, of such suffering is to ‘become like him in his death,’ which almost certainly means suffering that is in some way on behalf of the gospel, thus for the sake of others, since no other suffering is in conformity to his.”¹⁸¹

According to this understanding, the sufferings of Christ are intrinsically missional—they’re bound up with the Messiah’s redemptive purposes. This means that our sharing in the sufferings of Christ relates more to persecution in the context of the Great Commission (and by extension, combating the kingdom of darkness), than the natural pains associated with a groaning creation. This explains why the vast majority of texts touching upon this subject have in view the type of suffering inherent to missions and the in-breaking kingdom.

This helps illuminate Paul’s somewhat perplexing words to the Colossians when he writes, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s

¹⁸¹ NINCT, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, page 335.

afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col 1:24). Paul’s missional activities, which inevitably involved conflict and persecution (Acts 13:50; 14:19; 2 Cor 11:25; 2 Tim 3:10-11), functioned as an extension of the cross work of Christ—not at all meaning that the cross was deficient in some way, but rather, that the believer becomes a partaker of the afflictions of Christ and embodies the same Serpent-crushing tactics as Christ.¹⁸²

2 Corinthians 4:7-18 is instructive. After cataloging a series of ministerial trials, including their being perplexed and struck down (vs. 7-9), Paul immediately grounds these tribulations in their having been united to Christ. He writes,

“We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you” (2 Cor 4:10-12).

Paul’s words are striking. Both the life and the death of Christ are at work in the believer, flowering in the context of suffering, as if the very troubles of ministry provide the spring rains for its growth. Paul’s life is marked by dying, even dying daily (1 Cor 15:30-31), and he can take up the words of the Psalmist, who says, “For Thy sake we are killed all the day long, we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter” (Rom 8:36).¹⁸³ For Paul (and all those united to Christ), the task of

¹⁸² Commenting on Galatians 6:17, where Paul says that he bears on his body the marks of Jesus, which likely refers to his scars, Herman Ridderbos writes, “They are called marks of *Jesus*, not because Paul received the same wounds in his body which Jesus received, but because in these tokens his fellowship in suffering with Jesus becomes manifest. This demonstrates also that what the believers must suffer at the hands of the world’s enmity is the same thing that Jesus had to undergo—not the same in its fruit, but in its nature. Incidentally, this suffering is more than an affliction for the sake of or in consequence of following Jesus. A certain transfer of suffering from Jesus to the believers takes place by virtue of the fellowship, the corporative and federal oneness existing between them.” *Commentary on Galatians*, page 228.

¹⁸³ Philip Hughes, commenting on 2 Cor 4:10-11, writes, “Christ, it is true, has left the Christian an example of patience and perseverance in suffering (1 Peter

spreading the gospel isn't an activity restricted to what we say (as indispensable as is), but it's an activity involving the whole man; it is a sacrificial activity; a painful activity, one where the power of Christ's life—a power manifested through weakness and suffering—stretches out through the skin of the Christian, and is received through the brandings of persecution. This is why Paul can say, "Therefore I endure all things for the elect's sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory" (2 Tim 2:10).

Recapitulation

Nothing could be more frustrating to Satan than for Christians to pillage his kingdom while mirroring the great Serpent-crusher. But this is exactly what union with Christ entails. God fills each believer with the Holy Spirit and directs them to walk as the Son walked. As a result, since the Father turned autonomy on its head and used evil for a greater good in the life of Christ, He likewise works out all things for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28). Since Christ triumphed through weakness and suffering, we too triumph through weakness and suffering (2 Cor 4:7; 12:9). Since Christ broke the power of sin, God likewise breaks the power of sin in the lives of His people (Rom 6). And since God embarrassed Satan through the death of His Son, we too embarrass the Evil One by walking by faith.

This appears to be the import of a number of passages. In 1 Cor 1:27-29, Paul tells us that "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things

2:21; Heb 12:3); so that they who wish to come after Him must *daily* take up their cross and follow Him (Luke 9:23). But Paul is speaking of something more than example. Between Master and follower there is a certain unity of experience and destiny. There is an inclusiveness of the latter in the former. It was Christ Himself who said, 'A servant is not greater than his lord; if they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you' (John 15:20). There is a fellowship of Christ's sufferings which means a conformity to His death (Phil. 3:10). Martyrdom, for Paul, was not confined to the hour of his death in Rome; it was expressed daily and constantly in his dying-living existence." NICNT, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, page 142.

that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.”

Among the vast throng of proud men, none equal Satan. He embodies the apex of arrogance, believing that he is wiser, and stronger, and worthy of more adulation than God. But in response, God takes the weak things of the world—the despised things—the most unlikely of candidates—and shames Satan through them.

It bears reminding how these “foolish things” were selected for the task. Paul reminds the Corinthians that they were chosen by God (vs. 27). He says, “[It is] because of Him you are in Christ Jesus” (vs. 30). If ever there was a doctrine designed to eviscerate the pride of men, it is the doctrine of predestination. It loudly proclaims to all would-be gods, “You are not Lord, I Am” (Rom 9:15-22). With one humbling revelation, all grounds for boasting are removed (2 Timothy 2 Tim 1:9; Rom 9:11). This is why Paul ends his thought in the first chapter of Corinthians with these words, “As it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’” (vs. 31).

Election smashes pride.

Part of the genius of using such weak vessels to complete the mission is to more greatly illuminate God’s power, which further confounds the devil. In 2 Cor 4:7, Paul considers his failing body and the sublimity of the glory of God (vs. 6). He writes, “But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” What are these jars of clay? They are none other than our fragile, clay-like bodies. We are but simple pieces of earthenware housing great and glorious things. Yet this is the perfect medium for displaying God’s power. If you can take something exceedingly inadequate and accomplish great things through it, the one who utilizes such modest means is more greatly magnified.

Along these lines, Paul tells us that he suffered great hardships in the province of Asia, despairing even of death. “But this happened,” he explains, “that we might not rely on ourselves but on God” (2 Cor 1:9b, NIV).

Similarly, his struggle with his thorn in the flesh was met with these words, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” In response, Paul said, “Therefore I will boast all

the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Cor 12:9).¹⁸⁴

Infuriating Faith

We know that all of this enrages Satan (Rev 12:17; 1 Peter 5:8). But as with nearly everything else we have seen thus far, his rage secures ironic results. The more he beats against the church, killing Christians and inflicting them with pain, the more the church grows (Acts 8:1-4; 12:24). And the more he seeks their demise, desiring to devour them, God’s power and sustaining grace are given greater opportunity to shine. Every challenge and obstacle is used to build character in the lives of God’s people (Rom 5:3-5). Each demonic swipe serves to make the saints more like Christ (Rom 8:29).¹⁸⁵ And as the Christian responds in faith and praise, even in the midst of terrible suffering, the prayers of reliance sting the domain of darkness since such things so greatly mock and irritate them. Unlike the demons, Christians have never seen God, and yet they still love Him (1 Peter 1:8; John 20:29).

Here an incident in the life of William Carey is worth noting. In the year 1812, while Carey was teaching in Calcutta, a fire erupted in the printing room where years of his labor and research were stored. A completed Sanskrit dictionary, part of a Bengal dictionary, two grammar books, and ten translations of the Bible were lost. Various type sets for printing over a dozen languages, as well as a host of other cherished items, were all lost in one dire moment. We’re told that when he returned and surveyed the remains, he wept and said,

“In one short evening the labours of years are consumed. How unsearchable are the ways of God. I had lately brought some things to the utmost perfection of which they seemed capable, and contemplated the missionary establishment with

¹⁸⁴ For a helpful exposition of the role of suffering in the life of Paul, see Thomas R. Schreiner’s volume, *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ*, chapter 4.

¹⁸⁵ It should also be remembered that with each swipe their just condemnation continues to mount (1 Thess 2:16).

perhaps too much self-congratulation. The Lord has laid me low, that I may look more simply to him.”¹⁸⁶

Writing a short time later, we catch a further glimpse of his faith,

“The loss is heavy, but as traveling a road the second time is usually done with greater ease than the first time, so I trust the work will lose nothing of real value. We are not discouraged; indeed the work is already begun again in every language. We are cast down but not in despair.”¹⁸⁷

When a saint responds like this in the face of loss, I cannot help but think that such faith pierces the darkness like a streak of lightning. If demons had teeth, I suspect they would gnash them in frustration.

Recall the eleventh chapter of Hebrews. There we are told that faith is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). Faith is the firm reliance on God as the all-sufficient One, the One whose word can be trusted above all else. This is precisely what Satan and his demons cannot stomach. Faith is foolishness to them. It is something to be mocked and opposed. But God commends and blesses those who rely on Him. He takes people like Abraham, or Noah, or Sarah, or Gideon—weak vessels with a multitude of shortcomings—and He blesses them, securing for them many great promises.

¹⁸⁶ *The One Year Book of Christian History*, pages 142-43.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. Michael Rusten tells what happened next. He writes, “Carey resolved to trust God that from the embers would come a better press and more scholarly translations. Within a few months Carey had set up shop in a warehouse. Little did Carey know that the fire would bring him and his work to the attention of people all over Europe and America as well as India. In just fifty days in England and Scotland alone, about ten thousand pounds were raised for rebuilding Carey’s publishing enterprise. So much money was coming in that Andrew Fuller, Carey’s friend and a leader of his mission in England, told his committee when he returned from a fund-raising trip, ‘We must stop the contributions.’ Many volunteers came to India to help as well. By 1832 Carey’s rebuilt and expanded printing operation had published complete Bibles or portions of the Bible in forty-four languages and dialects!”

Such is the design of God. The demonic path of self-sought praise is met with disastrous results. Instead of obtaining glory, they are bitterly dishonored, being made to taste defeat, not only through Christ, but through the vast multitude of His followers (Heb 11:1-40). It is as John writes in the twelfth chapter of Revelation,

“And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death” (Rev 12:10-11).

Glory Taken and Glory Given

History teaches us a valuable lesson. If you exalt yourself, you will be brought low, “For God opposes the proud” (James 4:6).

Long ago, Satan believed he could attain glory apart from God by carving an idol out of himself. But throughout the long, historical clash between these two kingdoms, God has been opposing Satan’s idea, tearing down the house of the proud, and unveiling its folly for all to see. In the end, this “Babylon” falls in disgrace. The apostle John speaks of the demise of this great demonic city, writing,

“And he called out with a mighty voice, ‘Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place for demons, a haunt for every unclean spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable beast. For all nations have drunk the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality, and the kings of the earth have committed immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxurious living” (Rev 18:2-3).

After another voice erupts from heaven, calling the people of God to come out from this adulterous city, we hear it exclaim,

“Pay her back as she herself has paid back others, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double portion for her in the cup she mixed. As she glorified herself and lived in luxury, so give her a like measure of torment and mourning, since in her heart she says, 'I sit as a queen, I am no widow, and mourning I shall never see.' For this reason her plagues will come in a single day, death and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire; for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her” (Rev 18:6-8).

Here is the great self-exultation and ensuing abasement of Satan. He says, as it were, “I sit as a queen,” thereby glorifying himself. But God responds with judgment, paying him back with a double portion, causing him to drink the dregs of sin, bringing degradation and ruin, the very opposite of glory and honor.

The consummation of God’s judgment is hell. This is that terrible place where sin culminates, where the sinner experiences the full weight of “that-which-God-is-not.” Here there is no glory for the sinner. No pleasure, no joy, no life. Here is where the opposite of God’s nature overflows in a torrent of judgment (Rev 14:10). This is what it means to be flung from His presence (Rev 20:14-15; 2 Thess 1:9). The Lord’s presence is but a distant echo resulting in pure abandonment and wrath. It is a place where our experiences with sin on earth multiply and break free from all restraint. It is a place where anxiety dwells. It is a place where depression overwhelms the sinner; where sorrow engulfs; where confusion reigns; where beauty flees; where guilt, grief, hate, sickness, disunity, clamor, and all other manner of ungodly effects churn. This is the place where the worm never dies, but is always dead (Rev 20:14).¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁸ Distinguishing the torments of hell, Turretin writes, “The negative evils [of hell] are separation from God and Christ and privation of the divine vision: in which is placed the happiness of the saint... a privation of light, joy, glory, felicity and life, and of all the good things whatsoever kind they may be. On the other hand, the positive evils are manifold. These are adumbrated by pains and tortures, by torments, by groans and grief, by cries and wailings, by weeping and gnashing of teeth, by the gnawing worm, by the unquenchable fire and other things of like nature...” *Elencic Theology*, Volume 3, 7th question, section IV.

It is a terrifying reality, and it has been prepared for the devil and his angels (Matt 25:41).

In contradistinction to this, and in contradistinction to Satan's self-adulating quest, glory is reserved for those who draw near to Christ. God not only opposes the proud, as the verse says, but, "He gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6). One of the wonderful truths about God is His willingness, even eagerness, to give good gifts to His children (Matt 7:11). As we have already noted, God has blessed us in Christ with *every* spiritual blessing (Eph 1:3). We have everything! He makes us partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). He makes us sons and daughters (Eph 1:5). He gives us the earth (Matt 5:5). He gives us everlasting and abundant life (John 6:40; 7:38). He makes our names great along with Abraham, or David, or Mary (Matt 26:13; Heb 11:2). Astonishingly, Christ says, "I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise" (Heb 2:12). He not only loves us but dies for us, providing the deepest security a heart could ever want or imagine. Even our present sufferings are achieving for us an eternal glory (2 Cor 4:17).

At the end, when our lowly bodies are raised, we will be changed in the twinkling of an eye and glorified. The Westminster shorter catechism teaches, "At the resurrection, believers, being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged, and acquitted in the day of judgment, and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God for all eternity" (Question 38). It is Christ Jesus Himself who "will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself" (Philippians 3:21). Indeed, God's goal for us is nothing less than glorification (Rom 8:30). Glory is to be obtained.

Listen again to Jesus' prayer,

"The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that

you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:22-24).

Oh, if only Satan would have believed that every last drop of goodness is rooted in God—and rooted in Him alone—and that one saint is made far more glorious in Christ than all the vain ambitions of sinners combined. Oh, if only he would have believed in *Sola Gloria*, that glory is found in Christ alone.

The Mountain Range of God’s Glory

We began this book with a consideration of Satan’s rationale. We noted that at the very center of his awful idea was a desire to obtain supreme glory, to actually experience God’s joy and majesty as God. During our travels through redemptive history, God’s multi-faceted response to Satan has been made manifest in a variety of ways. Certain details have been explored and woven together forming larger panoramas. The pinnacle of these panoramas is God’s glory. That is the uppermost height under which everything else subsists. Every last thread of history, every jot and tittle of life, every movement from the smallest atom to the expanding universe falls under its umbrella.

So, as we close out this section, we would do well to step back and consider the vast mountain range of God’s glory in order to gaze upon the ultimate refutation of Satan; for it is here where the meaning of life and the vindication of God’s glory kiss.

To get at this, we need to ask a very old question.

Why Create the Devil?

Everyone, from philosophers to precocious children, has asked the same perplexing question, “If God knew Lucifer was going to sin, why did He create him?”

The amount of material that could be read on this subject is vast and daunting. Sophisticated theodicies have been written challenging the keenest of minds. One need only pick up Alvin Plantinga’s little

book “God, Freedom and Evil” to realize how complicated this discussion can be. In many ways, these works are important. Complex questions deserve complex answers. And yet, one cannot help but be struck by the Bible’s forthrightness at times. While certain things are certainly hard to understand (2 Peter 3:16), and while the systematizing of theology is the queen of the sciences, God often has a way of saying things plainly. As for the present question, the Bible doesn’t directly supply an answer, but it does address it, and sufficiently so. And to the extent that it sheds light on this subject, to that same extent we will better understand how Satan’s quest for glory has been made a public spectacle.

Let’s begin by altering the question slightly. What if we were to ask, “If God knew Pharaoh was going to harden his heart, why did He create him?”

So framed, there is a clear answer.

Speaking to Moses, the LORD explained why Pharaoh was born, allowed to live, and eventually ascend to the throne. In Exodus 9:16, we read, “But for this purpose I have raised you [Pharaoh] up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.”

The answer is startlingly clear. The reason God raised Pharaoh up was to provide a context whereby He could display His power for the glory of His Name. That’s the plain and simple truth of the passage.

We can say more.

In the verse preceding Exodus 9:16, we learn that God could have easily destroyed Pharaoh. Instead of ten plagues, there could have been one—whether the flies or the angel of death, any of them could have been used to kill the pagan king. Listen to verse 15 in conjunction with verse 16:

“For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.”

Pharaoh could make no claim upon life. God could have cut him off at any point. He could have done it while he was a child, or while he was being formed in his mother’s womb. He could have done it by

causing his parents to die in their youth, or to never meet. He could have done it by causing the nation of Egypt to never flourish, or to never exist. He could have done it by altering the table of nations. He could have done it by ending the human race in the flood. He could have done it by allowing Adam and Eve to perish immediately, leaving the vast record of human history bare. He could have done it by intervening in the Garden, or by not allowing the Serpent to enter that sacred place. And He could have done it by not creating Satan at all.

But He did create Lucifer. And He not only created the angel, but He allowed him to enter the Garden, knowing what would happen.

So why?

A Glory Denied and a Glory Displayed

If Satan was bent on dethroning God, and if he was eager to defame and steal God's glory, then it would make sense for God to allow Satan's awful idea to play out in history. By allowing this proud spirit to pursue his sinful ambitions, God has orchestrated the greatest of twists. If after all these many millennia, it is shown that Satan's sinful schemes, in all their variety, playing out in nearly every conceivable way, have been used to more greatly magnify and display God's glory, not only would the irony thicken to a staggering degree, but the divine apologetic would shine with unparalleled brilliance. Such a display would decisively reveal who is really Lord.

What has just been expressed is essentially the same irony encapsulated at the cross but extended to all of history. In his magisterial letter to the Romans, Paul writes, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). In order for this verse to be true, God would have to be able to oversee and providentially guide every last particle in the universe, not least the machinations of Satan.

Think of that.

Everything is working out for good. *Everything* is done according to His good pleasure (Psalm 115:3; 135:6). *Everything* is accentuating

unto His glory: “For from him and through him and to him,” writes Paul, “are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (Rom 11:36).

Our history harbors a fascinating duality of purposes. In those instances where men and angels rebel against the revealed will of God, their sin tells a pointed story. The awfulness of sin is made evident. We have seen that sin doesn’t secure real happiness. We have seen that it doesn’t promote life. We have seen that it produces pain and misery. We have seen that it steals beauty and inherits shame and negates strength. And we have seen that it leaves the mind in a constant state of frustration and futility. Glory cannot be purchased through sin. So in each instance where sin flourishes in history, it empirically demonstrates the goodness of God’s ways. It shows, by way of contrast, the sharp difference between light and darkness. It shows its folly.¹⁸⁹

But there is another aspect—a deeper aspect—that corresponds to this. By allowing sin to enter history, God’s nature and attributes, which are the essence of His glory, is provided a unique context with which to shine. In fact, without sin, God’s justice, wrath, mercy, and grace would not have been able to radiate with the same effulgence (Rom 9:22-23).¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ Dr. Bruce Little in his lecture, “Evil and the God Who Knows,” mistakenly says, “Because of the moral structure of the universe... there is such a thing as gratuitous evil in this world... [which means that there is] evil that has no purpose. That does not mean that God does not know about it, but that if I were to walk down the aisle and slug one of you hard enough to knock you out or knock a tooth out, I am not willing to say that that happens so that some greater good might come from it. I would simply say that there is evil in this world that has no point to it. Abortion is one. Slavery is another. And you can go on down the line.” Not only is this simply wrong, as all things work together for good (Rom 8:28), but it overlooks the larger point of how history reveals the true nature of sin. Everything is meaningful in God’s eternal decree.

¹⁹⁰ Edwards writes, “One end why God suffered Satan to do what he did in procuring the fall of man was that his Son might be glorified in conquering that strong, subtle, and proud spirit, and triumphing over him. How glorious does Christ Jesus appear in baffling and triumphing over this proud king of darkness, and all the haughty confederate rulers of hell? How glorious a sight is it to see the meek and patient Lamb of God leading that proud, malicious, and mighty enemy in triumph! What songs does this cause in heaven! It was a glorious sight in Israel, who came out with timbrels and with dances, and sang,

In view of this, Satan is caught in a catch-22. In those instances where sin abounds, God can use it for His glory, thereby showing His wrath and power. On the other hand, he can also use sin to more greatly demonstrate his grace and love, which likewise brings Him glory.

Concerning the Egyptians, the LORD says,

“And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen” (Exodus 14:17-18; see also Rom 3:5-8).

Regarding His grace and mercy, Paul teaches,

“Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 5:20-21).

Edwards is very helpful here. In a work entitled, *Wisdom Displayed in Salvation*, he writes,

“By this contrivance for our redemption, God’s greatest dishonor is made an *occasion* of his greatest glory. Sin is a thing by which God is greatly dishonored. The nature of its principle is enmity against God, and contempt of him. And man, by his rebellion, has greatly dishonored God. But this dishonor, by the contrivance of our redemption, is made an occasion of the greatest manifestation of God’s glory that ever

‘Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands.’ But how much more glorious to see the Son of David, the Son of God, carrying the head of the spiritual Goliath, the champion of the armies of hell, in triumph to the heavenly Jerusalem! It is with a principal view to this, that Christ is called, ‘the Lord of hosts, or armies, and a man of war,’ Exo. 15:3. And Psa. 24:8, ‘Who is this king of glory! The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.’” *Wisdom Displayed in Salvation*, V.I. For a similar thought, see Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, volume II, Discourse X, page 59.

was. Sin, the greatest evil, is made an occasion of the greatest good. It is the nature of a principle of sin that it seeks to dethrone God. But this is made an occasion of the greatest manifestation of God's royal majesty and glory that ever was."¹⁹¹

So however Satan might scheme, and however he might appear to gain some measure of victory, God's glory, the very thing he most wants to suppress, is displayed. And most ironic of all, he served as the catalyst for this unimaginable outpouring of glory. Such knowledge must be unbearable to the devil.

So why did God create Lucifer?

To display His glory.

That is the ultimate reason.¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ Section V.I.

¹⁹² For a closer look at this subject, especially as it relates to the question of evil and suffering, see appendix B.

Conclusion

An Awful Idea Exposed and Refuted



In many ways, this book has been all about the LORD's declaration, "I am God, and there is no other" (Isaiah 45:22).

As crucial as it is for humanity to understand and cherish this truth, we have seen that the statement extends equally beyond the walls of the physical realm to the heavenly hosts, both angelic and demonic. With the advent of Satan's awful idea, history has been radically preoccupied with this truth.

For those of us who are more terrestrial in nature, the origin of this dispute remains largely shrouded in mystery. Not a few theologians have burned oil long into the night thinking about this subject. They have pondered the pages of Scripture, intent on pulling back the curtain, even if ever so slightly, just to gain some clue as to what happened so very long ago. The fruit of such labor depends somewhat on the methodology employed. For those who seek explicit texts addressing the issue, they often come away shrugging their shoulders, as there is little, if any, direct evidence to be found. Thinking more can be found, others peer under an assortment of biblical rocks, hoping to unearth clues that can be woven together into a larger picture. It would seem that during the past 100 years or so, the former approach has been largely the norm.

The interests of theology have a way of flowing with the tides of history. As a result, the question of Satan's fall hasn't been an issue of intense concern as of late and has largely been left on the shelf to collect dust. Or, perhaps, it would be more correct to say that the issue has flashed more brightly on the radar of the charismatic camp—a segment of the church not especially known for its systematic

treatments of biblical doctrine.¹⁹³ Whatever might be the reason,¹⁹⁴ this work has attempted to push the discussion forward by adopting a more biblical-theological approach, one rooted broadly in the Reformed tradition.

Here I am reminded of something Douglas Wilson once wrote in a little volume on the subject of baptism. While discussing methodology, he said,

“Many Christians have come to baptistic conclusions because they simply took a Bible and a concordance, and then looked up every incident on baptism in the New Testament. This is objectionable, not because they studied the passages concerned with baptism, but because they did *not* look up all the passages that addressed parents, circumcision, Gentiles, Jews, olive trees, and countless other important areas. In other words, the subject is bigger than it looks.”¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ This isn’t meant as an insult, but simply my own anecdotal appraisal. There are certainly a number of fine scholars in that group, and I wouldn’t want to denigrate them.

¹⁹⁴ In his superb lecture, *Christus Victor*, Sinclair Ferguson outlines three reasons why studies in the atonement, in recent centuries, have failed to adequately cover the satanic crushing element of the cross. He prefaces his three points by saying, “Theologians in the Reformed Tradition... have given relatively little attention to this particular aspect of Christ’s work. The standard textbooks of the Reformed Churches, from Turretin through Hodge to Berkhof, give little attention to the great biblical theme of Christ’s conquest over Satan.” As for the first reason, Ferguson says, “The agenda for the discussion of the work of Jesus Christ was already settled in the twelfth century, following the landmark expositions of the atonement by Anselm... and shortly afterwards by the response Peter Abelard.” Those two essentially framed the discussion, causing theologians to either focus on the objective aspect of the atonement or the subjective aspect. “The second reason for this relative lack of interest in Reformed theology,” says Ferguson, “is that in the development of Reformed theology in the 17th century some shift of interest is apparent. Often this is expressed as a shift of interest from *Historia Salutis*... to *Ordo Salutis*.” The third, and possibly the most important reason, “is the discrediting of the view of some of the early fathers as to how that victory and conquest was accomplished, namely, by the payment of a ransom to Satan.” All of these points are elaborated. Again, I would highly recommend this lecture. It is the best I have ever heard on the subject.

¹⁹⁵ *To A Thousand Generations*, page 11.

Whether one agrees with paedobaptism is neither here nor there. The salient point is that when it comes to studying a complex theological issue, one must beware of myopia. The student of Scripture must consider all of Scripture, even those areas that do not, at first blush, appear to touch upon the subject.

So it is with this subject.

My contention has been that much can be gleaned by not only asking a few fresh questions, but by drawing a connection between the outworking of sin on earth and Satan, and, by extension, God's peculiar method of combating the kingdom of darkness. This allows us to work backwards from the data to the original cause. Like a detective analyzing a crime scene, we have tried to formulate a theory that best explains the data.

Think of the epic series *Star Wars*. When episodes 4, 5, and 6 were first released, we were thrust into the world of Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader. Unaware of Anakin's past, we were nevertheless able to draw a number of conclusions about the man, some more certain than others. We were able to do this by working backwards from the information presented to us. We either drew inferences or made direct deductions. When the first three episodes were later released, the past, while certainly enriched with unexpected twists, didn't entirely surprise us. In fact, we anticipated a number of the events, shrouded as they were.¹⁹⁶

Human history is similar in this respect. While we haven't been given the script of episode one, the ensuing story allows us to confidently sketch a portrait of it. The vast pool of biblical information provides us with a truly rich quantity of material.

In the case of human sin, we have seen that it directly mirrors Satan's original idea. The two are like fire and heat. And in the case of redemptive history, it isn't without great purpose that both Genesis and Revelation—the book ends of the Bible—prominently feature Satan. Human history is undoubtedly framed in the light of his influence.

¹⁹⁶ *The Count of Monte Cristo* might provide an even better example. If you only had the last three-quarters of the book (or movie), think through how much you could discern of the (earlier) betrayal through the peculiar actions of Edmond's vengeance.

These significant features have allowed us to trace God's peculiar response to sin back to Satan and the original dispute arising between them.

If we think of it in terms of the Protestant Reformation we might be helped. While combating the errors of Rome, the Reformers distilled their objections into five *solas*. Similarly, the conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness has revealed a number of perennial truths. Supposing for a moment that we were only allowed to hear from the Protestants, possessing their writings and creeds alone, we could very fairly reconstruct the central tenets of the Roman Catholic Church, and by extension, the Pope. Much could be ascertained. In much the same way, we have noted a number of other *solas* emerging out of God's conflict with sin. We have observed the following six truths:

Sola Vita (Life is found in Christ alone)

Sola Gaudium (Joy is found in Christ alone)

Sola Sapientia (Wisdom is found in Christ alone)

Sola Potestas (Power is found in Christ alone)

Sola Victoria (Victory is found in Christ alone)

Sola Gloria (Glory is found in Christ alone)

Through this we have seen that God has been systematically dismantling an idea called sin. All of the truths above converge on and combat a representative creature, namely, Satan. If this is true, then one need only flip the coin over, as it were, to better understand Satan's original sin, for each point refutes an aspect of the idea. The task simply becomes one of reconstruction.

In the end, my argument is that Satan didn't stumble into sin in the primordial past, nor did he simply commit a singular transgression that could be labeled as sin, but rather, my contention has been that Satan's original sin was sin itself; not merely in its conception, but as a way of life, or a metaphysical ultimate, informing and directing one's outlook and thoughts about the nature of God and reality. This was an idea that could be preached to the angels; an idea, when spun in the right fashion, appeared to promise gain, pleasure, wisdom, and glory. If wielded correctly, this powerful potential known as sin could

even, it was thought, elevate one beyond the ranks of creatureliness to the very throne of divinity itself. This is the promise and lie of sin. And it is this, I believe, which greatly informs us about the meaning of human history.

Every Knee Shall Bow

God's response to this idea has been slowly unfolding over the course of human history. And the story isn't over yet. If anything has been apparent during this long turning of the page towards eternity, it is that God works in ways that utterly amaze and baffle us. One can only wonder what's in store for us. What will the final chapters of history look like? What twists await us? What great manifestations of His glory remain locked up waiting to be revealed? What will the second coming look like?

No one knows exactly, and so the anticipation is great. But one thing we do know is that the kingdom of darkness is going to completely crumble. We know that Christ is going to deliver the kingdom over to God the Father "after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For," as the Scriptures go on to tell us, "He must reign until he has put all His enemies under His feet" (1 Cor 15:24-25).

We know that the last enemy is death itself (vs. 26).

There is something else that is going to happen, something equally as astounding and breathtaking. When the end finally comes, we are told that every knee is going to bow, and every tongue is going to confess that Jesus is Lord (Phil 2:9-11). Not insignificantly, Paul adds that at the name of Jesus every knee is going to bow "in heaven and on the earth and under the earth" (vs. 10). What a sight that will be! For Christians, this scene inspires great hope and joy. But think of all of Christ's enemies. They too are going to bow down and confess His Lordship.

Ponder that.

If our story is fundamentally about a contest between competing authorities—a question of who is really Lord—then this monumental

moment marks the ultimate triumph and victory of Christ. That is the moment when everyone openly acknowledges who alone is King.

But ask yourself a question. What inspires this confession? Is it the vision of God? That surely plays a vital role. But here we must remind ourselves that the demonic angels beheld God in the beginning, and they chose to spurn the Lordship of Christ. Likewise, when the mass of humanity sees the Lord, they will no doubt bow out of fear, and certainly confess His greatness, trembling like demons (James 2:19). But will they confess out of a certain assurance and knowledge that Jesus is *supremely and solely* Lord? Will all the demons and unbelievers, and Satan himself, assent to Christ's *rightful* and *unparalleled* authority? Will their confession include a firm recognition of sin's failure?

I believe it will.

That is what history is presently teaching us. Near incalculable volumes of evidence is currently mounting for the great court hearing when all will be disclosed, weighed, and judged. Every conceivable angle of Satan's treasonous claim will be highlighted and exposed as fraudulent. All the acts, all the currents of time, all the human testimonies, all the grand sweeps and microscopic details will present indisputable evidence. God will shut every mouth. He will refute every argument. All the secrets of men's hearts will be laid bare, and we will know as we are known (1 Cor 13:12).

After this, everyone will know, and *infallibly* know, that Jesus Christ is Lord. And they will confess this from their knees.

Appendix A

An Analysis of Edwards' View of the Fall of Satan

In his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Francis Turretin divides the opinions of theologians, regarding the nature of the first angelic sin, into three camps. He writes,

“There are various opinions about it [the species of the angelic sin] among theologians, especially among the Scholastics. For to say nothing of the licentiousness which is absurdly said to have been their sin, not only by Josephus and Philo with the Jews, but many of the fathers (Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Lactantius and others) from Gen 6:2 (falsely understood); there are two principal opinions among the learned. The first of those who think it was envy and hatred of man arising from the decree revealed to them concerning the advancement of the human nature in Christ above the angelic (who was to take upon him by incarnation not angels, but the seed of Abraham). The other (more common among the Scholastics) is that of those who maintain that it was pride.”

After dismissing the licentious position as an absurdity, Turretin mentions a view rarely expressed today. In fact, I suspect that most Christians aren't aware of this perspective, seeing that (1) this subject is rarely discussed in great detail, and if it is, then (2), the second view, namely, pride, is often considered in isolation from the others.

The first view centers largely on the disclosure of the divine decree to the angels. It reveals that men and women will be united to Christ and thereby elevated above the angels. Believing the task of ministering to humans to be beneath them, certain angels chose to rebel. We might call this the divine disclosure view.

It's hard to find representative voices of this position today. I am sure they exist, but I haven't stumbled across any. More typically, one must travel back in history to find proponents of the theory. For our present purposes, we will examine the view of Jonathan Edwards, as he not only endorses the divine disclosure view, but, given his stature in the Reformed world, and given my having leaned on his writings in

this present volume, he naturally emerges as an excellent candidate for further study.

His position is interesting, to say the least. More than once, while wading through Edwards' thoughts on the subject, I found myself pausing, reflecting for some time on his reasoning. In the end, I cannot say that I find his position persuasive. Nevertheless, it deserves to be considered. Therefore, in what is to follow, I will first outline his view, using largely his own words, and then offer a brief critique, highlighting both the position's strengths and weaknesses.

Edwards' View

In a section entitled *Miscellaneous Observations*, a place where Edwards jots his thoughts down in patchwork fashion, we find him pondering the subject of the fall of the angels. A few quotes will serve to summarize his position.

[320.] "*Devils*. It seems to me probable that the temptation of the angels, which occasioned their rebellion, was that when God was about to create man, or had first created him, God declared his decree to the angels that one of that human nature should be his Son, his best beloved, his greatest favorite, and should be united to his eternal Son: that he should be their Head and King, that they should be given to him and should worship him and be his servants, attendants, and ministers. God having thus declared his great love to the race of mankind, gave the angels the charge of them as ministering spirits to men. Satan, or Lucifer or Beelzebub, being the archangel, one of the highest of the angels, could not bear it, thought it below him, and a great debasing of him. So he conceived rebellion against the Almighty, and drew away a vast company of the heavenly hosts with him."

[939.] "*Occasion of the Fall of the Angels*. We cannot but suppose that it was made known to the angels at their first creation, that they were to be ministering spirits to men and to serve the Son of God in that way, by ministering to them as those that were peculiarly beloved of him, because this was their proper

business for which they were made. This was the end of their creation. It is not to be supposed that seeing they were intelligent creatures that were to answer the end of their beings as voluntary agents, or as willingly falling in with the design of their Creator, that God would make them and not make known to them what they were made for, when he entered into covenant with them and established the conditions of their eternal happiness, especially when they were admiring spectators of the creation of this beloved creature for whose good they were made, and this visible world that God made for his habitation. Seeing God made the angels for a special service, it is reasonable to suppose that the faithfulness of the angels in that special service must be the condition of their reward or wages. If this was the great condition of their reward, then we may infer that it was their violating this law, and refusing and failing of this condition, which was that by which they fell. Hence we may infer that the occasion of their fall was God's revealing this their end and special service to them, and their not complying with it. That must be the occasion of their fall."

Commenting further on how certain angels felt about ministering to the humans, Edwards writes,

[438] "Probably they thought it would be degradation and misery to be ministers to a creature of an inferior nature, whom God was about to create, and subjects and servants to one in that nature, not knowing particularly how it was to be, God having only in general revealed it to them. They thought it would be best for themselves to resist, and endeavor to be independent of God's government and ordering; and, having an appetite to their own honour, it overcame holy dispositions..."¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ Edwards quotes Dr. Goodwin with approval. Dr. Goodwin writes, "A lower degree of accursed pride fell into the heart of the devil himself, whose sin in his first apostatizing from God, is conceived to be a stomaching that man should be one day advanced unto the hypostatical union, and be one person with the Son of God, whose proud angelical nature (then in actual existence, *the highest of creatures*) could not brook."

Edwards even appears to teach that the unveiling of the divine program for humans functioned as the trial of their obedience. In section [937] he says, “Probably the service appointed them [the angels] as the great trial of their obedience, was serving Christ, or ministering to him in his great work that he had undertaken with respect to mankind.” Like Adam and Eve, the angels were presented with a test. They had to choose whether they would submit to and obey God’s word.

It is to be observed that this view does not deny the presence of pride in the fall of Satan. In another place, while commenting on Ezekiel 28, he says, “The iniquity by which he [Satan] fell was *pride*, or his being lifted up by reason of his superlative beauty and brightness.” Edwards even admits that Satan, as a result of the fall, sought to establish his own government, and that “Lucifer aspired to be ‘like the Most High.’” The striking difference between Edward’s view and that of the “pride camp” is the mitigating circumstances surrounding this pride. Satan, as we have seen, thought it beneath him to minister to humans, especially seeing how they were going to be united to Christ and elevated to a lofty position. It is this peculiar difference that sets him (or the position) apart.

What Compelled Edwards Towards This View?

Naturally, one will look in vain for specific scriptural texts supporting this view. Therefore, the only way to arrive at this position is to work backwards from a compilation of texts and concepts; to read between the lines, as it were, and draw inferences from God’s peculiar means of redemption. Whole swaths of biblical theology must be woven together. Here is where Edwards and I share a common conviction and adopt a similar methodology. He looks at God’s methods of combating Satan, especially the nature of Christ’s incarnation and redemptive works, along with the ironic means used to overthrow the devil, and he draws a direct line between these facts and the primordial past.

Two examples will help illustrate the point. After detailing Satan’s rebellion in the face of God’s revelation for humanity, Edwards writes,

“But he [Satan] was cast down from the highest pitch of glory to the lowest hell for it, and himself was made an occasion of bringing to pass which his spirit so rose against, yea, his spite and malice was made an occasion of it, and that same act of his by which he thought he had entirely overthrown the design, and that same person in human nature which they could not bear should rule over them in glory, and should be their King and Head, to communicate happiness to them, by this means proves their King in spite of them, and becomes their Judge; and though they would not be his willing subjects, they shall be his unwilling captives, he shall be their sovereign to make them miserable and pour out his wrath upon them; and mankind whom they so envied and so scorned, are by occasion of them advanced to higher glory and honour, and greater happiness, and more nearly united to God; and though they disdained to be ministering spirits to them, yet now they shall be judged by them as assessors with Jesus Christ.”¹⁹⁸

Similar points are made to this effect throughout his *Miscellaneous Observations* [see 936 and 941]. For Edwards, he sees in Christ’s incarnation a telling sign. Drawing on the details of Jesus’ mission, especially as it relates to the war against sin and Satan, he is driven to the conclusion that this pivotal event is reacting, in some measure, to circumstances precipitating the fall of man. One might say that redemptive history is far too intertwined to posit anything less.

Another interesting quote comes from a section where John 8:44 is considered at some length [1261]. Here Edwards voices his esteem for Zanchius, whom he accounts “the best of the protestant writers in his judgment, and likewise Suarez, the best of the school-men.” He inquires into their investigation of John 8:44 and says, “Christ lays open both the devil’s sin and the sin of the Jews.” Outlining the rationale of these writers, Edwards says,

“The sin of the Jews was this, they would not receive that truth which Christ had delivered to them, as he tells them, ver. 45, “Because I tell you the truth, ye believe me not;” and not

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, section [320].

receiving it, they sought to kill him. Now, if you ask what that truth was which Christ had so much inculcated upon them, you shall see, ver. 25, what it is. They asked him there, *Who he was*; “Even the same,” saith he, “that I have told you from the beginning, THE MESSIAH, THE SON OF GOD. If the Son make you free, you shall be free indeed,” ver. 36. This was the great truth that these Jews would not receive. Now he tells them, likewise, ver. 44, that Satan, their father, the devil, abode not in the truth. He was the first, saith he, that opposed and contradicted this great truth, and would not be subject to God who revealed this, nor would he accept, or embrace, or continue, or stand; he would quit heaven first; and so from hence come to be a murderer, a hater of this man Christ Jesus, and of this kingdom, and of mankind. For he that hateth God, or he that hateth Christ, he is, in what in him lieth, a murderer of him, and he showed it in falling upon man. And they [the exegetes] back it with this reason, why it should be so meant, because, otherwise the devil's sin which he compares them to, had not been so great as theirs. There had not been a likeness between the sin of the one and that of the other; his sin would have been only telling a lie, a lie merely in speech, and theirs had been a refusing that great truth, JESUS CHRIST IS THE MESSIAH AND HEAD; and so the devil's sin would have been less than theirs. Whereas he is made the great father of this great lie, of this great stubbornness to receive Christ, and to contradict this truth; and this, saith he, he hath opposed from the beginning with all his might, and he setteth your hearts at work to kill me.”

Interestingly, Edwards immediately follows this by writing, “But I say I will not stand upon this, because I only deliver it as that which is the opinion of some, and hath some probability.”

For Edwards, his position rests primarily on the nature of God's redemption and his peculiar exposition of Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28. Nevertheless, the fact that he thinks this understanding of John 8 has some probability is telling.

The problem I have with Edwards' view can be divided chiefly into two main points. The first involves his handling of Ezekiel 28. The second focuses more on the explanatory power of his position in contradistinction to that of my own.

Let's take the first point. In section [936], Edwards reflects at length on the typology of the king of Tyrus. He firmly believes that this human individual served as a picture of Satan. With this I agree. In the case of Edwards, however, he leans heavily on the details of the passage and draws a near one-to-one correlation with Lucifer, as if the text of Ezekiel directly illuminates the character, and duties, and position of the angel. Hermeneutically speaking, this is tenuous at best. A number of exegetes responsibly interpret the details in a way that accords with the historical context of Tyrus, with some pointing back to Adam himself. For myself, I cannot say with confidence where I land. The passage is challenging. Nevertheless, Edwards's approach appears suspect.

Seemingly strange truths emerge as well if we adopt Edwards' approach. For example, after exploring the phrase "anointed cherub" and the term "covereth," he writes, respecting the cherub,

"Hence learn that Satan before his fall was the *Messiah* or *Christ*, as he was the *anointed*. The word *anointed* is radically the same in Hebrew as the word *Messiah*: so that in this respect our Jesus is exalted into his place in heaven."

Edwards appears to believe that Lucifer was the most esteemed of all the angels and occupied a special, anointed position, the likes of which was forfeited after his fall and taken up by Jesus Christ Himself. This can be gathered by considering a couple quotes. He writes,

"These things show another thing, wherein Jesus is exalted into the place of Lucifer; that whereas he had the honour to dwell in the holy of holies continually, so Jesus is there entered, not as the high priest of old, but to be there continually, but in this respect is exalted higher than Lucifer ever was..."

And again,

“In another respect also Jesus succeeds Lucifer, *viz.* in being the *covering* cherub. The word translated *cover*, often and commonly signifies *to protect*. It was committed to this archangel especially, to have the care of protecting the beloved race, elect man, that was God’s jewel, his first-fruits, his precious treasure, laid up in God’s ark, or cabinet, hid in the secret of his presence. That was the great business the angels were made for, and therefore was especially committed to the head of the angels. But he fell from his innocence and dignity, and Jesus in his stead becomes the Cherub that covereth, the great Protector and Savior of elect man, that gathereth them as a hen her chickens under his wings.”

Unfortunately, Edwards doesn’t explain himself fully. One can certainly sense a larger network of theological assumptions at play (as there is much that Edwards would surely want to share about his understanding of the Angel of the Lord, and Michael, and the tabernacle as a shadow and copy of heavenly realities), but he doesn’t make the connections here. The text of Ezekiel 28 functions as a direct springboard to past, and as such, it leads Edwards to formulate his overall view in ways consonant with these details; so much so, perhaps, that if this pillar is removed, much is lost. I’m tempted to say that the position would be irreparably damaged.

Whether or to what degree this is the case, the interested reader will have to determine.

Regarding the explanatory power of his view, I think it suffers at a number of crucial points.

(1) If Satan first reacted negatively against God’s unveiling of His plan of redemption, how are we to explain his suddenly believing he could be like the Most High? What would be Satan’s rationale? And why would it be persuasive to other angels? Here he’s facing the same essential problem of the pride view, and may even face greater challenges since conjecture is multiplied.

(2) In this respect, my view draws a much cleaner line between the ideals of the kingdom of darkness on earth and Satan’s original sin. We have seen that the strident autonomy of atheists along with the

impulse of pagan kings towards self-deification provides a direct window to the past. On Edwards's view, we are left saying that Satan, for whatever reason, rebelled against God's plan, and then, for whatever reason, chose to oppose God's kingdom by assuming the rights and powers of deity. This is doubly true if Ezekiel 28 doesn't provide Edwards with the peculiar information needed for his view.

(3) If my view is correct, it better explains how evil arose within the heart of Satan. Sin as a conceptual theory appeared to promise unexplored goods—if one were so inclined to misconstrue the data. If Edwards is correct, Satan's opposition to God's plan is hard to account for.

(4) Lastly, a sweeping consideration of the data leads me away from Edwards' thesis to that of my own. Time and again, autonomy and idolatry feature prominently, if not centrally, in the unfolding human drama. In the same way that Edwards looks at the peculiarities of Christ's incarnation and extrapolates backwards, I look at the overall thrust of history, the *Six Solas*, as it were, and extrapolate backwards to a slightly different conclusion. The awful idea appears to be sin itself, not merely the unsavory reaction of one angel towards God's plan for humans.

But again, this is a matter of considerable judgment, and so I leave it to the reader to discern which, if either, more accurately represents the biblical data.

Appendix B

Satan's Awful Idea and Theodicy

If God knew that Lucifer was going to fall, why did He create him? Our answer has been that God did it for His glory.

That is the ultimate reason.

This is a heavy truth, an infinitely heavy truth, in fact, and if it doesn't cause you to seriously reflect on its import, your heart isn't beating. Behind this answer lies an ocean of doctrine that not only overwhelms the human mind with wonder but absorbs it with questions—even troubling ones. Chief among those, perhaps, is the question of suffering. Why set into motion something that will result in so much unimaginable suffering—even eternal suffering?

It's a jolting thought.

In response, someone will no doubt ask, "How could it be worth it? How could even God's glory justify this?"

This book, in one way or another, has touched upon the issue, seeking to provide a larger framework for understanding history. Nevertheless, much of what has been said has been, as it were, a kind of grappling with the branches of the tree. We are yet to tunnel our way into the root system itself—clear down to bedrock where our shovel fails and we can dig no further—that place where the human mind stands on the very precipice of infinity and knows that it is very small. This is the place where we hear the LORD say, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts'" (Isa 55:8-9).

When it comes to articulating an answer to this question, I know of no better voice than that of Jonathan Edwards. In a section dealing with the doctrine of God's eternal decree, Edwards provides a direct and imminently biblical response. If asked why God created Lucifer, knowing that the creature would fall and introduce evil with all its bitter effects, Edwards would probably reply,

“It is a proper and excellent thing for infinite glory to shine forth; and for the same reason, it is proper that the shining forth of God’s glory should be complete; that is, that all parts of his glory should shine forth, that every beauty should be proportionably effulgent, that the beholder may have a proper notion of God. It is not proper that one glory should be exceedingly manifested, and another not at all; for then the effulgence would not answer the reality. For the same reason it is not proper that one should be manifested exceedingly, and another but very little. It is highly proper that the effulgent glory of God should answer his real excellency; that the splendor should be answerable to the real and essential glory, for the same reason that it is proper and excellent for God to glorify himself at all. Thus it is necessary, that God’s awful majesty, his authority and dreadful greatness, justice, and holiness, should be manifested. But this could not be, unless sin and punishment had been decreed; so that the shining forth of God’s glory would be very imperfect, both because these parts of divine glory would not shine forth as the others do, and also the glory of his goodness, love, and holiness would be faint without them; nay, they could scarcely shine forth at all. If it were not right that God should decree and permit and punish sin, there could be no manifestation of God’s holiness in hatred of sin, or in showing any preference, in his providence, of godliness before it. There would be no manifestation of God’s grace or true goodness, if there was no sin to be pardoned, no misery to be saved from. How much happiness soever he bestowed, his goodness would not be so much prized and admired, and the sense of it not so great, as we have elsewhere shown. We little consider how much the sense of good is heightened by the sense of evil, both moral and natural. And as it is necessary that there should be evil, because the display of the glory of God could not but be imperfect and incomplete without it, so evil is necessary, in order to the highest happiness of the creature, and the completeness of that communication of God, for which he made the world; because the creature’s happiness consists in the knowledge of God, and sense of his love. And if the knowledge of him be imperfect, the happiness of the creature must be proportionably imperfect; and the happiness of the creature would be imperfect upon another account also; for, as

we have said, the sense of good is comparatively dull and flat, without the knowledge of evil.¹⁹⁹

Rather than skirt the issue by appealing to free will, which is the response of many (but which also falls short), Edwards cuts right to the heart of the issue. The single greatest end, indeed, the greatest conceivable excellency, or ultimate good, in all reality, is none other than God's glory. There is no higher ideal. There is no greater treasure to treasure. Therefore, if God were to ultimately magnify anything else other than that which is ultimately worthy of being esteemed, God would be an idolater. He wouldn't want the best. Therefore, God's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Himself forever. This explains why the Scriptures are replete with statements detailing God's ambition to exalt His Name (Isaiah 43:6-7, 25; 48:9-11; Jeremiah 13:11, Psalm 25:11; Ezekiel 14:4, 17-18; 36:22-23, 23; 2 Kings 19:34, 20:6; 1 Samuel 12:20-22; 2 Samuel 7:23; 106:7-8, Romans 9:17; 11:36; Eph 1:4-6; 1 Cor 10:31; 1 Peter 4:11).

Wonderfully, this same passion for the magnification of His glory directly impacts our happiness. This is to say that God's glory does not stand in opposition to our joy. In fact, the two are essentially one. This is the point Edwards makes towards the end of the quote. Our happiness is inexorably bound up with knowing and experiencing God. So in order to achieve this end, which will produce the greatest conceivable joy, God ordained the introduction of evil.²⁰⁰

So far as our earthly pains and toils are concerned, which can be unimaginably horrific, they are, nevertheless, when viewed from the infinite peak of eternity, but a small drop in the ocean of time. This is why Paul can say,

¹⁹⁹ *Concerning the Divine Decrees*, section 10. For a profoundly helpful exposition of this theme, I would heartily recommend listening to John Piper's message *The Echo and Insufficiency of Hell*, or, *The Suffering of Christ and the Sovereignty of God*. Both can be found online at Desiring God. See also D.A. Carson's work *How Long, O Lord?* for a biblically charged exposition of the theme of suffering. Lastly, John Frame in his work *Apologetics to the Glory of God* provides a helpful overview and answer to the problem of evil.

²⁰⁰ Here one might want to say "permitted" or "allowed," which are certainly true and seek to preserve other important truths. But however one slices it, the end result is the same. God ordained it.

“For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Cor 4:17-18).

We may be able to better comprehend and endure the temporary afflictions of this evil age, especially when weighed in the balance of God’s love and promises, but the reality of eternal suffering presents a far weightier challenge. For those who will not share in the eternal spring of God’s joy, but will be forever divorced from it, the situation is different. Here one is tempted to wonder if such a reality is worth it. Doesn’t the awfulness of hell outweigh the magnification of God’s glory? Nearly everyone can think of a close relative who does not know the Lord. Will their condemnation serve to illuminate God’s glory? Yes, it will. But is that not too great a cost? Why not keep it from happening? Why not keep them from being born? Why create at all given this outcome?

Again, is the cost too great?

When all is said and done, there appear to be two fundamentally different ways of dealing with this admittedly challenging issue. One might respond in a way that smells remarkably similar to Satan’s awful idea, or he may not.

Let’s consider both.

If someone objects to God’s plan, urging that the magnification of His glory cannot justify actualizing a reality that includes this kind of suffering, the person is in effect saying, “I wouldn’t do it this way, if I were in charge. I know this isn’t the best way to run the universe. God’s intentions and purposes aren’t perfect. How could they be given such suffering?”

It should be noted that this is merely the awful idea rearing its ugly head again. It’s self-deification creeping in. Not only is the objector claiming to know the beginning from the end—the grand tapestry in all its fullness—not to mention all mysteries—but he is claiming to know what is most valuable, or ultimate, apart from God. He can supposedly see the big picture, weigh out all the variables, and correctly prize that which should be most prized. No mere creature can determine this, and to suppose otherwise is pure arrogance.

Moreover, this implicitly, if not explicitly, de-cherishes the *Most High*. The objector wants to absolutize something else, which inevitably turns out to be his own conception of things. The objector deifies himself.

Here I am reminded of an exchange in the book *The Brothers Karamazov*. There's a powerful section where Ivan is questioning his pious Christian brother, Alyosha, about the problem of evil. I know of no more powerful presentation than the one leveled by Ivan. It is soul-crushingly painful. Ivan sketches out a number of heart-wrenching scenarios, the most potent of which centers on a severely abused and neglected little girl. After presenting the atrocities to Alyosha, pressing them upon him for pages in the book, Alyosha finally cries out, "Why are you trying me? Will you say what you mean at last?"

Ivan responds with a searching question, "Tell me yourself, I challenge you—answer. Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature—that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance—and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions! Tell me, and tell the truth."

Alyosha softly replies, "No, I wouldn't consent."

Ivan is acting the part of the great tempter, not only by calling God's actions into question, but by subtly alluring Alyosha away by asking him to assume the place of God. "What would you do, if you were God?" is the tactic. But that's just the point. We are not God! Indeed, we *cannot* be God. We fall infinitely short. And to think otherwise is simply to fall into the trap of the Evil One.²⁰¹

There is another way to approach this issue, a more faithful and God-honoring way. It is to admit that this is a difficult doctrine to comprehend and that God will do what is perfectly right and good

²⁰¹ Where does such a question end? Would you allow 9-11 to happen? Would you allow your aunt to get cancer? Would you have confused the tongues of men at the tower of Babel? Perhaps you would forgive everyone (demons included) by divine fiat (never mind justice), hand out lollipops, and invite everyone to dance in a big circle? Where does it end? It doesn't. Every last square inch of reality will be called into question by some person or another. Each will think they know what is best.

(Gen 18:25). Along these lines, it's important to remember that this issue isn't unlike the choice to eat of the forbidden fruit in the Garden; or like Job who couldn't comprehend his tragedies; or the angels who surely wondered how God could be both just and the justifier of the wicked; or like Abraham when he was told to sacrifice the child of promise; or the OT saints who wondered why the Messiah continued to tarry; or Peter when he heard that one must drink the blood and eat the flesh of Christ in order to obtain eternal life; or the initial confusion of the disciples when Christ was crucified like a lowly criminal. The unfolding story has long presented (and continues to present) emotionally and intellectually challenging hurdles. But God has also shown time and again that He is good and can be trusted. The cross is the supreme truth of this.²⁰²

As children of God, we must recognize that we are just that. We are children. And children do not always understand the ways of their father. We presently see in a mirror darkly. Someday the larger panorama will be opened more fully, the books will be opened, and we will see God. We will understand more later. Until then, we must walk by faith, just like those who have gone before us.

It is interesting to note that in the book of Revelation, when the culmination of God's plan unfolds with radiant glory, there is going to be an eruption of singing from both angels and glorified saints. The lyrics are telling and prove instructive. Listen again to the song,

“Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed” (Rev 15:3-4; see also 16:5-7; 19:1-2).

²⁰² John Frame, writes, “If God could vindicate his justice and mercy in a situation where such vindication seemed impossible, if he could vindicate them in a way that went far beyond our expectations and understanding, can we not trust him to vindicate himself again? If God is able to provide an answer to the exceptionally difficult Old Testament form of the problem of evil, does it not make sense to assume that he can and will answer our remaining difficulties? Does it not make sense to trust and obey, even in the midst of suffering?” *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, page 184.

Notice what they say. They proclaim, “Just and true are your ways.” While this passage doesn’t directly answer our question, it clearly shows that the essence of the problem will be washed away. The consummation will reveal something that not only dispels our doubt, but elicits praise and instills certainty. God’s goodness will be perfectly vindicated. No one will reluctantly glorify the Lord. His holiness will shine forth in a way that we simply cannot presently comprehend.

So our choice is really twofold, given Edwards’ position. We can either walk by faith, or we can shift towards the awful idea. For those Christians who might be tempted to spurn the ultimate purposes of God, I would like to remind you of the words of Job,

“Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things to wonderful for me to know... My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:3-6, NIV).

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