

The Devil and Satan: What Does the Bible Say?*

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The following two articles are the opening statements from a debate between Pastor Jeffrey Fletcher of the Church of God General Conference (Abrahamic Faith) Morrow, Georgia, and Mr. Duncan Heaster, a Christadelphian. It was held at Hitchin Town Hall, Herts, UK on June 27, 1989.

The topic is of special interest to both Christadelphians and members of the Church of God (Abrahamic Faith). Opposite views over the “personality” or “non-personality” of Satan represents perhaps the most significant difference between these two movements, both of which trace their heritage to the Adventist revival and which are otherwise aligned on major issues in opposition to “orthodoxy.” It should be said, however, that a minority of current members of the Church of God share the Christadelphian point of view on this subject.

The Christian world generally believes that there is a being or a monster called the Devil or Satan who is responsible for the problems which we have in our lives and in this world, and for the sin which we commit. Now I find it a great shame that the Church of God of the Abrahamic Faith, despite having worked out very many true doctrines from the teaching of the Bible, seems to be astray on this particular point. I hope to show tonight that the Bible clearly teaches that God is all-powerful and that there is no opposing supernatural being at work in this universe. As far as I am concerned, if you believe that there is, you are questioning the supremacy of God Almighty.

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That is why I believe that it is important enough to stand up here tonight and talk about it. I further hope to show that angels cannot sin. There is no such thing, as far as I am concerned, as a fallen angel.

Sin comes from within, I am going to suggest, not from anything outside us. As for the words “devil” and “satan,” I am going to suggest, and I do not think that Pastor Fletcher will necessarily disagree with me, that the word “satan” means “an adversary” and “devil” means “false accuser.” That is what they mean as words and I am going to try to show that they are sometimes used, especially the word “devil,” to figuratively describe our evil desires, the sin which is within us.

We are told in Hebrews 2:14 that Jesus Christ destroyed the devil by his death, and I would submit to you therefore that unless we have a correct understanding of the devil, we cannot understand the work or nature of Jesus Christ.

In the world generally, or in the so-called Christian world, there is the idea that the good things in life come from God and the bad things from the Devil or Satan. This is not a new idea; it is not even a Christian idea. The Babylonians, for example, believed that there were two gods, a god of good and of light, and a god of evil and of darkness, and that those two were locked in mortal combat. Cyrus, the great king of Babylon, believed just that. So God says, “I am the Lord, and there is none else; there is no God beside me . . . I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things” (Isa. 45:5-7). God creates peace and He creates evil — no question about it. God is the author, the creator of evil. God says “there is no god beside me,” talking to Cyrus and the people of Babylon, and the word “god” there, the Hebrew word “*el*,” means “strength or source of power.” He is saying that there is no strength, no source of power besides Him in this universe; and that is the position which I am defending tonight.

So for some more examples of God bringing evil into people’s lives and onto this world. First of all, please note that there is a distinction between sin, which is our problem, our fault, and evil or calamity. In Amos 3:6 it says that if there is evil in a city, then God has done it. If there is an earthquake somewhere, it is no good saying, “Ah, this is the work of the Devil!” No, God has done it. Micah 1:12 says “evil came down from the Lord unto the gate of Jerusalem.” Job was a righteous man who lost the things which he had in this life, and what did he say? “The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away” (Job 1:21). He did not say, “God gave but Satan took away.” And he said to his wife, “Shall we receive good at the hand of God and shall we not receive evil?” (2:10). At the end of the book, his friends “comforted him over all the evil

that the Lord had brought him” (42:11). So then God is the source of evil, the source of the problems that we have in this world and in our lives. “For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth . . . If ye endure chastening . . . afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them that are exercised thereby.” The trials which God gives us lead to our spiritual growth. Now if we are going to say, “Well, the problems in life, they come from Satan or the Devil,” it seems to me setting the Word of God against itself. It seems a contradiction that the Devil, who is supposed to be a sinful being, should go around doing things which lead to the peaceable fruit of righteousness being developed.

So then, if we have trials and problems in our lives and there is evil in the world (and we are well aware, of course, that this is the case), if we accept that evil comes from God, then we can pray to God to do something about the problems, to take them away, and if He doesn’t, then we know that they are sent from God for our spiritual good. But if you believe that the Devil or Satan, some evil being, is causing your problems, then there is no way of coming to terms with the problems of life, with disabilities or illness or sudden death or calamity. It is just hard luck! If the Devil has it in for you, if he is some fallen angel as Pastor Fletcher tells me he believes he is, then really there is no way of coming to terms with such problems.

I want to stress that sin comes from inside us. It is our fault that we sin. Of course, it would be lovely, wouldn’t it, if it wasn’t our fault that we sinned? We could go and sin and say, “well, of course, it wasn’t my fault, it was the Devil’s fault, this chap outside me, it is his fault, blame it on him.” And I do not need to remind you, do I, of people who have done terrible things and said, “Well, it was the Devil that got into me and made me do it”? And, quite rightly, we say that that is no excuse, is it? And of course it is not.

We are told that “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). Sin leads to death. Why do we die? Because we sin. If it is not our fault that we sin, if it is the devil’s fault, well then, he should be punished. This being, whoever he is who is out there making us sin, he should be got hold of and punished and we should be left alone. But no, we sin and therefore we, individually, die.

If you have a Bible, I would like you to open it at Mark chapter 7. If you cannot see a Bible I would seriously suggest that you look over someone’s shoulder because this is absolutely vital to what we are talking about tonight. Mark 7 (I will read some phrases between verses 15 and 23): “There is *nothing* from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: . . . for from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, . . . pride, foolishness: All these evil things come

from within, and defile the man.” Now, if we are told that there is something outside us (like a person called “the Devil”) which gets inside us and makes us sin, well, I am sorry, but you have to do some explaining away of Mark 7. There is *nothing* from outside a man that can get inside him and defile him, because from within, out of the heart of man, come *all*, all these evil things. That is why, at the time of the flood, “the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (Gen. 8:21). The imagination of the human heart is evil. James 1:14 tells us how we are tempted. It says “every man is tempted [by some big monster out there?] when he is drawn away of his own lust [of his own evil desires] and enticed.” We are tempted by our own — *our own* — lusts, our own evil desires — not by anything outside us, not by anything that doesn’t belong to us. “From whence come wars and fightings among you?” James asks (4:1). And what is the answer? From the big evil devil monster outside? No. “Come they not hence, even of your lusts?” James says: of our own evil desires.

The book of Romans is all about sin and its origin and how to overcome it. And it seems highly significant to me that in that book there is scarcely a mention of the Devil and Satan. I believe that the word Satan does crop up once, but in the context of talking about where sin comes from, Satan and the Devil are not mentioned.

In the same way, “The Devil” is a New Testament concept. If there is this big person out there making us sin, I would have thought it would have been mentioned a lot more in the Old Testament. But there is a very profound and interesting silence about that. If you go to the time of the Judges, or the time of Israel in the wilderness, where the people were sinning a great deal, there is no mention of the Devil or Satan being responsible for their sin. Israel was warned time and again not to turn back from the Lord, not to turn away from the ways of God. But God did not warn them about some big monster or person, a Satan or a Devil, who was going to get inside them and make them sin, or cause them to fall away from God. He did not warn them about that at all. He said, “watch yourselves and apply yourselves to my word” (e.g. Deut. 27:9, 10; Joshua 22:5) so that you will not fall away.

Paul says, “In me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing: . . . For the good that I would I do not” (Rom. 7:18-21). Then he says, “If I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.” He does not say, “Oh, it’s not my fault I sin; it is the Devil’s, it’s that man outside me.” No, he says, “It is not I that do it, but *sin* that *dwelleth* in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present in me.” So he says that the opposition

to his being spiritual comes from things that he calls “sin dwelling within me,” “my body . . . evil present with me.”

Jeremiah 17:9 says the heart of man is so desperately wicked that we can’t understand how deceitful our own heart is.

We can understand then why the Bible is making such a big thing about telling us how evil we are. “The heart of the sons of men is full of evil” (Ecc. 9:3). And, interestingly, Ephesians 4:18 gives the reason why men are alienated from God. Paul says, “through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart.” So it is because of our blind hearts, the ignorance that is in mankind, inside us, that men are alienated from God.

We read in Galatians 5:19 about the works of the flesh; our sins are the works of our flesh, and it is our flesh which is the problem.

So then, we have a sinful human nature, every one of us, as did the Lord Jesus Christ. That is not because the Devil put it there; it is because we are by nature like that. David says, “I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps. 51:5).

We go on now to think why angels cannot sin. We will start off in Psalm 103. Please look at that Psalm yourself. “The Lord hath prepared His throne in the heavens; and His kingdom ruleth over all” (Ps. 103:19-21). He is saying that in heaven God is the King, God is in control. People seem to have this idea that up in heaven there is God and His angels and then there is this Devil, this person, and his followers, his so-called angels. It says in Psalm 103 that God is the king in heaven and there “His kingdom ruleth over all. Bless the Lord, ye His angels, that excel in strength, that do His commandments, hearkening unto the voice of His word. Bless the Lord, all ye His hosts, ye ministers of His, that do His pleasure.” I want you to notice the times it says “all,” and in the other verses we are going to quote you will see the same thing. *All* the angels obey God. They obey the words of God and they are God’s ministers. They do His pleasure, they do His will. “Praise ye Him, all His angels: . . . all His hosts” (Ps. 148:2). All the angels of God are praising Him. If you want a New Testament example, Hebrews 1:14 says that the angels are “*All* ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation.” *All* the angels are obedient to God.

Now if there are in fact some angels who are sinners and sinful and other angels who are obedient, I would have thought the Bible would make that distinction abundantly plain. And yet, when you read in the Bible about angels, you don’t get any other impression apart from the fact that there is only one type of angel, in the sense of a supernatural being. For example, in 2 Peter 2:11, Peter is talking about how we should deport ourselves, and he

says, “Angels, which are greater in power and might [than men] bring not railing accusation against [anybody].” He doesn’t say, “Well of course, the good angels, etc etc,” he just says “angels,” because as far as the supernatural beings called “angels” are concerned, there is only one type of them and they are righteous.

Then we come to Luke 20:35-36. Here Jesus says, “They which shall be accounted worthy to obtain . . . the resurrection [entering God’s kingdom] . . . can die no more: for they are equal unto the angels; and are the children of God.” It says there that the reward of the righteous is to be given eternal life, which is to be made equal to the angels. Therefore, it follows that angels can’t die. I think that point is agreed upon. And yet Paul says in Romans 6:23 “the wages of sin is death” and it is a fundamental principle of God that sin leads to death. Now it says in Luke 20:35-36 that angels cannot die. If angels cannot die, they therefore cannot sin, because if you sin, you die, and it says there that angels do not die.

I think even more worrying is that it says there that the reward of the righteous is to be made equal to the angels. Now, if angels can sin, it means that when we are given our reward, eternal life, entrance into God’s kingdom, we will still be able to sin, if we are made like the angels and angels can sin. And so by definition, we can’t have eternal life, because if you have the possibility of sinning, you have the possibility of dying because sin leads to death. Therefore, you haven’t got eternal life. If we are going to be told tonight that angels can sin, well then, I think we have to have a good careful look at all those verses and interpret them, I don’t know how, but in a totally different light.

In passing, I would point out that this word “angels” can be a bit confusing. As a word, it means “messengers” or “agents” and sometimes it is used of men. For example, John the Baptist was described as the “messenger” to proclaim the way of Christ (Mark 1:2). He was the messenger, the angel, of the Lord of Hosts, of the covenant. It says that John sent “messengers” to Jesus; he sent angels (same word) to Jesus (Luke 7:24). And yet, what I am saying is that the supernatural angels of God cannot sin. I don’t deny that the word “angels” is used of men and, of course, men are capable of sinning.

Furthermore, I believe that it is not possible that there should be evil in heaven, in the sense of sin. Habakkuk 1:13 says God is “of purer eyes than to behold evil.” “Neither shall evil dwell with thee. The foolish shall not stand” before God’s eyes (Ps. 5:4, 5). And in the Lord’s prayer: “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). God’s will is done in heaven. That rather contradicts the idea of angels

sinning, rebellions against God and all this kind of thing going on up in heaven when we are told that God's will is done in heaven and that God cannot behold evil — in the sense of sin — at all.

So then, we come to how these words “satan” and “devil” are used. As I have said, the word “satan” just means an “adversary,” and if you are going to tell me that Satan and the Devil is some being, an evil being who causes us to sin, then whenever you come across satan and devil in the Bible you have to say, “Ah, yes, that's right, this evil being outside me, this fallen angel that is responsible for sin.” Well, let's see how the Bible uses these words. “The Lord stirred up an adversary [same Hebrew word elsewhere translated as “satan”] unto Solomon, Hadad the Edomite . . . And God stirred up another adversary [another satan], Rezon . . . he was an adversary [a satan] to Israel” (1 Kings 11:14, 23, 25). It doesn't mean that God stirred up this monster, or this person, who was some great being outside us, some fallen angel. No, He stirred up a person, an ordinary man.

You may remember Peter said to Christ, “Oh, don't go up to Jerusalem, don't be crucified,” and Christ turned and said to Peter, “Get thee behind me, Satan . . . thou savourest not the things that be of God but those that be of man” (Matt. 16:22, 23). So Peter was called a Satan. Christ turned and said to Peter: “Get thee behind me Satan.” He was not talking to this fallen angel who people say is called Satan; he was talking to a man called Peter. And because the word “satan” just means “an adversary,” we can have God described as a satan, as an adversary, which shows that in essence there is nothing necessarily sinful about the word in itself — no sinful connotations.

You may know that Samuel, Kings and Chronicles are parallel accounts of the same incidents, just as the four Gospels are accounts of the same incidents in different language. In 2 Samuel 24:1 “the Lord . . . moved David against Israel to say, Go, take a census of Israel.” In 1 Chronicles 21:1 Satan stood up against Israel and provoked David to number Israel. Satan provoked David to take a census, and in the other passage, it said that God provoked him to take a census. So then, God acted as a satan. “With thy strong hand Thou [that is, God] opposeth Thyself against me” said Job (30:21). “You act as a satan against me,” Job was saying.

And so it is with the word “devil.” In John 6:70 Christ said, “Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil? He spake of Judas Iscariot” who was a man. He did not speak of this being who is supposed to be a fallen angel, who is supposed to cause sin and all that kind of thing. He spoke of a man, Judas.

In 1 Timothy 3:11 the wives of church leaders must not be “slanderers” — the same word translated “devil.” The word devil, “diabolos,” means “a false accuser, an enemy, a slanderer.” In Titus 2:3 the aged women should not be false accusers — should not be devils. “In the last days . . . men shall be . . . false accusers (devils)” (2 Tim. 3:1, 3). As a word, “devil” does not necessarily mean some fallen angel or some evil being.

Now I want to show that those words “devil” and “satan” can be used figuratively to describe our evil desires. In Hebrews 2:14, “Forasmuch then as the children [that’s us] are partakers of flesh and blood, he [Jesus] also himself likewise partook of the same; that through [his] death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil.” In Romans 6:23, “the wages of sin is death.” So “devil” and “sin” are parallel expressions here. Similarly, James 1:14 (we have looked at it already) says that everyone is tempted by their lusts, by their evil desires leading them away, so they conceive sin and sin brings death. James 1 says that our evil desires bring sin, bring death. Hebrews 2 says that the devil brings death. So then the devil is the same as sin or our evil desires.

Again in Hebrews 2:14 we are told that Jesus had our nature in order to destroy the devil. Romans 8:3 says, “God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh [that is, in our human nature] condemned sin in the flesh.” Now Hebrews 2 says that Christ was of our nature to destroy the devil; Romans 8 says that Christ was of our nature to destroy sin in the flesh. So “sin in the flesh” is the same, I suggest, as the “devil.” On that point, just to sidetrack for a minute, I think that is another important difference that Christadelphians have with the Church of God. We believe that Christ was tempted like us. As we are told in Hebrews 4:15, “He was tempted in all points like as we are.” How are we tempted? “Every man is tempted when he is drawn away by his evil desires” (James 1:14, NIV). So Christ had to have our evil desires. He had the possibility of sinning, or else he could not have been tempted like us. If he was not tempted, we have no salvation. And it was because he had our nature (as it says in Hebrews 2) that he was able to destroy the devil, because he had our temptations within him and yet he overcame them. We may return to that point later.

Hebrews 9:26 says that Christ “appeared [or he was manifested] to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.” Hebrews 2 says that Christ was manifested to destroy the devil. Hebrews 9 says that Christ was manifested to put away sin. In Romans 6:6 Christ destroyed “the body of sin” — this sinful nature that we have — in prospect, by his death on the cross. 1 John 3:8 says that “He that committeth sin is of the devil” and yet James 1 says, as we

have said already, that every man is tempted “when he is drawn away of his own evil desires” and the evil desires lead to sin, then to death. 1 John 3 says that if you commit sin you are of the devil. James says that if you commit sin you are of your evil desires. John goes on in 1 John 3:8: “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.” Now if what I am saying is correct and the devil means our evil desires then the works of our evil desires are our sins — the things our evil desires do. And that is confirmed if you go back to verse 5 which says that Jesus “was manifested to take away our sins.” Verse 8 says, “the Son of God was manifested to destroy the works of the devil.” So the works of the devil are the same as our sins.

In another example, Acts 5:3, Peter says to Ananias, “why hath Satan filled thine heart?” Now you might think “Ah, he’s in trouble there — it talks about Satan filling your heart.” Then in verse 4 Peter says, “why hast thou *conceived this thing in thine heart?*” So conceiving something in your heart is the same as Satan filling your heart. Now if you conceive something, it begins inside you. If a woman conceives a child, it doesn’t exist outside her; it begins inside her. So in the same way Ananias conceived that thing in his heart. It is the same as Satan filling his heart. And of course James 1 says that evil desires, our lusts, *conceive* (the same figure) and bring forth sin which brings forth death. So then Satan filling Ananias’ heart was the same as him conceiving in his heart a sinful thought, which we are told we do because of our evil desires inside us.

You may say, “The Bible does talk as if the Devil is a person.” And you are quite right. It talks in Hebrews 2:14 about “him that hath the power of death, that is the devil.” Now anyone who reads the Bible even a little bit will be aware that the Bible does use the language of personification. It speaks about an abstract idea, or an idea shall we say, as if it is a person. In Proverbs 9:1 “Wisdom has builded her house.” It does not mean that wisdom is a woman, nor that she is a builder of houses. It is a personification. So is “the wages of sin is death,” as if sin is a paymaster paying out wages — death, death, death. We know that this is a figure. It is a personification. And because the devil, the “diabolos,” often represents our evil desires, and you cannot have abstract diabolism, that is you cannot have diabolism, the evil desires that are in a man’s heart, existing separately from a man, that is why, I suggest, the devil is personified. Our evil desires are personified. In the same way Paul says in Romans 7 that we have two beings fighting inside us, the man of flesh (the devil if you like) and the man of the spirit. And yet we know we have not got two literal people fighting inside us.

The words “devil” and “satan,” I suggest, are also used to describe the wicked world order in which we live. Ephesians 6 talks about how the social, the political, the religious hierarchies of mankind are spoken of in terms of the devil. The “devil” and “satan” in the New Testament often refer, if you look at the passages carefully, to the political and the social power of the Jewish or the Roman system of things. So we read of the devil casting believers into prison. It means the Roman authorities casting people into prison in their persecutions. We read (Rev. 2:13) of the church in Pergamos sitting, or being located, where Satan’s seat, or throne, was, i.e. the place of governorship of the Roman colony that was in that place. The Roman administration was the “satan.” You cannot say that satan himself, if he exists, had his throne in Pergamos. I assume we don’t believe that. Maybe Pastor Fletcher does.

Individual sin is defined as a transgression of God’s law (1 John 3:4). But sin expressed collectively as a political and a social force opposed to God is more powerful than individuals, and it is that collective power that is sometimes personified as a powerful being called the devil. Iran has called the United States “the great satan.” We know that they mean by that “the great adversary,” the adversary to their cause. And that is how, I believe, the words “satan” and “devil” are used in the Scriptures.

So then I submit that it is impossible for an angel to sin, that God is in supreme control, that “satan” means an adversary, “devil” means false accuser and that sometimes they are used figuratively to describe our evil desires and also the world which is motivated by them. Now I do not claim to be good at parables or anything like that but here’s something which may help you. Imagine that you are a caretaker and you are appointed to a new job and you go to your building, and your employer says “here is the master key.” You go around saying, “I’ll check this before I start work,” and you open a few doors and they open easily and you think “shall I bother checking a few more?” and you do, just in case. Put it in — hard to turn the next one — just got it. Better check another one just to make sure this is the master key. Do another couple and they are fine. You go to sleep that night and you think “that’s fine, I’ve got this master key.” The next day you go around the building and you have a good time on most of the doors but sometimes you come to a door which you just can’t open. The lock will not move. You can probably see what I am coming around to saying — that in this question of the devil and satan we need the master key. We need the understanding of this subject which enables us to read the Bible and to understand *every* reference to satan and the devil which we come across. I suggest, and you may think I am just

being big-headed, but I humbly suggest that the Christadelphians do offer you the master key, and what the Church of God of the Abrahamic Faith claims to believe does not offer you that master key.

I would suggest a couple of passages that are like the difficult locks for their key to turn. As I have said, Pergamos — where Satan's throne was — this literal being dwelling there on a throne in Pergamos — it's pretty difficult to make the key open that one. Or Alexander, "delivered to Satan that he might learn not to blaspheme" (1 Tim. 1:20), as if Satan is doing Christians a favour by teaching them to be spiritual. Or, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5:5, "deliver this man to Satan that his spirit may be saved." Now if Satan is some monster or somebody bent on committing evil and sin, how then can he be described as doing things like that?