

Coping with the Enemy

Part III - Demon Possession vs. Demon Affliction

“And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them to me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand” (John 10:28-29).

The issues surrounding the subject of Satan are not always clear. There is, in Christendom, a large degree of speculation about the matter. We will attempt to deal with factors that are quite clearly presented in the Scripture and leave the rest to speculation. But what do we know, of a reasonable certainty? We know that Satan exists; that he fell from favor with God and was remanded to the earthly sphere; that he has power to create great chaos and catastrophe on the earth; that he has a certain limited power to affect adversely the lives of the saints; that he is subject ultimately to God; and that he will one day be totally destroyed.

The questions come in the area of the extent of his power, both on the earth as a whole and in the lives of the saints, as well as in their capacity to cope with him. Can a Christian be demon possessed? What is the difference between demon possession and the afflictions of Satan? How does the Christian cope with demon power? Should every believer have the capacity to cast out demons? Does the ability to cast out demons require a high degree of personal faith and piety? Should every believer be able to cast out demons or is it a special gift?

First of all, can a Christian be demon possessed? Can one who is possessed by Christ at the same be possessed by Satan? Perhaps the strongest statement in this regard is found in our text. The translation in the King James allows some degree of ambiguity. *“No man can pluck them out of my Father’s hand.”* Some have thus suggested that while no man can pluck them out of God’s hands Satan might. The Greek text merely says “No one,” thus including Satan himself. The next verse confirms this—*“My Father, which gave them to me, is greater than all; and no one is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand.”* But it should also be pointed out that if Satan is able to snatch us from Christ at his will, we have little hope of success. And if it is dependent on any degree of human fidelity we are in an even more desperate situation. It would certainly be absurd to assume that if Christ is in possession of the citadel, He would give place to Satan in the face of some human weakness. He is certainly no coward who slips out the back door when Satan lays siege to the front.

Of course there are those who have identified with religious organizations, but have never received Christ into their spirits. This is a different matter. But I think a categorical statement is in order here—**Satan is not able to possess the spirit of one who is possessed by Christ.**

So then to what degree is Satan able to affect the believer? He is clearly able to attack the flesh, as he did with Paul, in the form of a “messenger of Satan.” He afflicts the believer in terms of the physical aspects of the human person, as well as the mental (emotional, intellectual), and the circumstantial. Job, of course, is the classic illustration in the Old Testament of the capacity of Satan to wreak havoc in all of the fleshly aspects of the human person, without ever affecting his relationship to God. And Paul is the classic New Testament

example. But why does God allow this? The answer seems to lie in the area of the glory of God. That is, the capacity of the believer to stand firm in the face of all of Satan's opposition reflects the power of God to preserve the spirit of the saints, as He promises. "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to His abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively [living] hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time*" (I Peter 1:3-5). Beyond that, it is difficult to say. No doubt God has many purposes for the afflictions of the saints. Most of them we will have to leave to Him to determine. As Job and Paul have both illustrated to us, their afflictions were not the result of wrong doing or of failure. Of course afflictions are always related to human weakness in one way or another, but we hear the bold word of God—"My strength is made perfect in weakness."

But how then do we distinguish between that which is buffeting of Satan and that which is a normal frailty of the flesh? Essentially it is by the way we perceive the matter. Satan uses human weakness to discourage us. If Satan sees, for example, that a believer has a personality problem of inferiority feelings, that is the area in which he is likely to launch his attacks. He will bring about circumstances that will take advantage of that weakness. The same set of circumstances for someone else might not be a problem at all. Satan's great aim is to bring about discouragement and despair so that one will move away from Christ. There are many things that affect personality that have nothing to do with personal guilt. It is not always a matter of simply trying harder. Personality problems are the result of a large number of factors—genetics, biochemical imbalance, environment—and ought not to be reasons for guilt feelings. However, Satan is sure to use these weaknesses in just such a way as to discourage the believer. Of course, people often assume that one could do better if one would try. This is just simply not always the case. That is not to say, of course, that one should use this as an excuse not to try, but rather as an encouragement not to give up in guilt and despair. On the other hand, to assume, that one's afflictions are the result of personal failure, only adds to the burden.

In coping with this problem, we might use the following principle, **Whatever leads to discouragement or despair or to backing away from Christ may be surely identified as from Satan.** He is attempting to get at us through our weaknesses and to turn us away from our only source of help. So rather than languishing in guilt and despair, one ought to recognize the effort of the enemy and turn it over to Christ.

The injunction of Scripture as per our text, is to "resist." The Greek expression here means "to stand against." It is not ours to beat back the enemy, but merely to stand fast in the midst of the afflictions. "*Resist the Devil... draw nigh to God.*" By standing firm and not allowing the afflictions to drive us away from God, we will survive in the grace of Christ, it is in the humble recognition of our inadequacies that we find God Himself open to us. "*God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.*" when we allow ourselves to be overcome with guilt, the natural tendency is to back away from God, which is exactly what Satan wants us to do.

But how then does all of this relate to demon possession? In discussing the issue of the afflictions of Satan in our flesh, we have sought to show the difference between that and true demon possession. It is the difference between being afflicted by Satan and being possessed by him. But how do we know the difference? What is the difference, for instance, between excessively bad behavior and demon possession? Christians can behave badly—even to the point of neurosis or a psychosis—and still want Christ in their spirits. Sometimes personality problems may resemble demon possession, but are rather physiological or psychological. For example, in the phenomenon called *Tourette's syndrome* which sometimes has the appearance of demon possession inasmuch as the symptoms of that syndrome cause the person to make involuntary outbursts in terms of animal-like noises of weird sounds, or even a spate of vile language. The reason this may be said not to be demon possession is that it has a recognizable physiological base and has often been successfully treated by medication.

There are several specific things that characterize true demon possession. 1) There will be a total repudiation of Christ, resulting often in furious outbursts at the very mention of His name. 2) There is usually an alter-ego expressing itself that is totally out of keeping with the original personality, but is beyond the point of mere “play-acting” which might be attempted in an effort to confirm the diagnosis. The label—demon possession—can be a convenient excuse for bad behavior. Demons respond to the power of God. Often the excessive religious exercises employed in the effort to cast out demons merely reflect the fact that one is not dealing with a true demon, but with bad behavior.

But how do we tell the difference? Probably the most dependable guidepost or criterion is the interest in Christ. If one cares about Christ, and seeks His help, one would not be demon possessed. It is like the question of the “unpardonable sin.” I have often said to people that if they ask the question, they haven't committed the unpardonable sin since they would not care. Only the Holy Spirit can bring a person to a concern about sin.

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