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An Overview of the Origin of Satan

David Reim

Part II: The Allowed Activities of Satan

As we explore in greater detail Satan’s activities in the world, many of them will seem very frightening to us. He is, after all, a fierce and deadly foe that we should never take lightly. At the same time, Satan is still a creature who is under the power of God. He cannot do the slightest thing without God’s consent. We take great comfort in the fact that all of Satan’s activities are *allowed* by God. If God allows them, then some good must come out of them.

Although Satan is under God’s power at all times, he is nevertheless a very real threat and danger to us. Therefore, the Lord leads His people to heed the apostle’s call to “put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand” (Eph. 6:11-13).

Satan as the Adversary

The apostle Peter urges us: “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). Satan truly is our greatest adversary. In fact, that is what the name Satan means. “Satan” is simply a transliteration from Hebrew into both Greek and English. The Hebrew word שָׂטָן means *adversary* or *opponent*. It is used of human adversaries in 1 Samuel 29:4; 2 Samuel 19:22; 1 Kings 5:4; 1 Kings 11:14, 23, 25; and Psalm 109:6. Even the Angel of the Lord was called a “satan” when He stood in the road as an adversary to Balaam (Num. 22:22). When the Old Testament refers to the devil as “Satan,” the Hebrew word is generally used with the article (שָׂטָן). Satan is *the* adversary. Examples of this usage occur repeatedly in Job 1 and 2 and Zechariah 3. The only exception (שָׂטָן with no article) seems to be the occurrence in 1 Chronicles 21:1.

In New Testament passages “Satan” (σατανᾶς), according to the Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich lexicon, is used only as a proper name for “the adversary,” the devil. The transliterated form in Greek is usually used with the article, although exceptions do occur in Matthew 4:10, Mark 3:23, Luke 22:3 and 2 Corinthians 12:7.

Satan appears as the adversary of man right from the start. As revealed to us from the first book of the Bible to the last, Satan has been opposed to God and has demonstrated that opposition chiefly in trying to bring eternal ruin and destruction on the people God made and their relationship with Him.

In Revelation 12 Satan is described as “a great, fiery red dragon” who tried to devour Jesus, the Child of the woman (v. 3). When he failed at that, he came down to attack the people of the earth. We read in verse 12: “Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time.” Satan especially focused his attacks on the Church. We read on in verse 13: “Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male Child.” God protected the woman (a reference to His Church, perhaps the Old Testament Church especially) so that Satan could not harm her. “And the dragon was enra ged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ”(v. 17).

What Revelation in the form of apocalyptic vision portrays of Satan as adversary can be seen in the reality of his attacks, the nature and purpose of which are revealed throughout the pages of Scripture and all of history. The very first appearance of Satan as our adversary was in the Garden of Eden. If we are ever tempted to think lightly of Satan’s power and not be on our guard against him, we should consider this account carefully. Here we see the real power and danger of this adversary. In a moment he was able to deceive two perfect people, created in God’s own image and living in perfect harmony with God. He succeeded in leading them to doubt and question God’s goodness and to disobey God’s command. With one temptation he plunged the entire perfect world into chaos and ruin and especially sin, which brings with it every type of pain and sorrow felt in the world and causes death itself, both temporal and eternal.

If Satan can succeed in doing all that with two perfect people created in God’s image, consider how easier it must be for him to attack and destroy us, who already have a sinful human nature and live in a sinful and corrupt world. Satan is surely our great adversary, whose goal is to destroy our faith and bring a permanent end to our relationship with God. He has many fearful ways of doing so.

Our Adversary Attacks Us Physically with His Power

The story of Job gives us a vivid and sobering window into the power of Satan at work against us. We notice especially his various ways of attacking and destroying personal possessions and physical health, all in the determined attempt to get to the person’s soul. The story begins with Job set forth as the outstanding example of a “blameless and upright” man “who feared God and shunned evil” (Job 1:1). In fact, God Himself declared in conversation with Satan (v. 8), “Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth?” That godly man would be the very one Satan set his sights on to destroy. He was determined to get Job to curse God.

Satan can move nations and kings against us

When God gave Satan permission to attack the possessions and family members of Job’s household, he chose a day when all ten of Job’s children were together in one house. Then the bad news began to come. According to Job 1:14-15 a servant reported to Job, “The oxen were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them, when the Sabeans raided them and took them away – indeed they have killed the servants with the edge of the sword; and I alone have escaped to tell you!” Before that servant had finished his report, another came in, bringing more bad news: “The Chaldeans formed three bands, raided the camels and took them away, yes, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; and I alone have escaped to tell you!” (v. 17)

It was not unusual for evil men, tribes and nations to go out in raiding parties and capture people and possessions for themselves, even as it happens today that people steal, hurt and kill to

get what they want. At that time, however, Satan was able to move both the Sabaeans and Chaldeans to come and raid these possessions of Job on the same day. When we think about all the details Satan had to orchestrate to make his plan come to pass, we gain a better insight into the considerable extent of Satan's power.

The extent of this power should not come as a complete surprise, for God reveals that all unbelievers are under Satan's control. In Ephesians 2:1-2 we read, "And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, **according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience.**" Until God rescued us by giving us faith in His Son, we too were under "the power of darkness" (Col. 1:13). Notice that Paul was sent to the Gentiles in order to "open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God" (Acts 26:18). Since all unbelievers are under his power, Satan can certainly use them as his instruments of opposition against those who believe in Christ.

God reveals that in the New Testament era the persecution of Christians was instigated by Satan. In Revelation 2:10 Jesus tells the believers in Smyrna, "Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days." Likewise, the believers in Pergamos were being persecuted, and some even put to death, because they lived "where Satan's throne is" (Rev. 2:13). The beast from the sea in Revelation 13 has been understood as the powers of world governments fighting against God's Church. Verse 2 specifically says that "the dragon gave him his power, his throne, and great authority." Verse 7 says in reference to the same beast of the sea, "It was granted to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them." In Revelation 16:13-14 we also read, "I saw three unclean spirits like frogs coming out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet. For they are spirits of demons, performing signs, which go out to the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty."

It is not difficult to see that evil rulers like Nero, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Saddam Hussein and many others have been controlled and driven by Satan. No doubt, Satan is at work in and through notorious criminals like Al Capone, Charles Manson or the Green River murderer. He has completely filled their hearts with evil. However, it is also true that any time an unbeliever does anything to harm another, he shows that he too is under "the power of Satan."

Satan can use the forces of nature against us

We return to the story of Job. Before the second servant had finished his report, another came and said to Job, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them; and I alone have escaped to tell you" (Job 1:16). Whether this was mere lightning which started fires or actual fire falling from God Himself, Satan was able to cause it to come when and where he wanted in order to destroy Job's flocks and servants.

Again in verses 18-19 we hear that another servant came and reported, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, and suddenly a great wind came from across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; and I alone have escaped to tell you!" Satan was able to bring that wind, perhaps even a tornado, in the exact place he wanted, with the intent to destroy this particular house and kill all of Job's children. This storm was timed in such a way that Satan could bring the worst news to Job last. It was also important for Satan's purposes that one servant be allowed to escape from each catastrophe, so that the bad news might come to Job in rapid succession.

Without God's Word specifying it to be true in every case, we cannot say with absolute certainty that a specific storm or catastrophe is brought on by Satan. But knowing that Satan has such power, we draw the valid conclusion that he is behind some of the many destructive fires,

floods, tornados, hurricanes and other disasters, which have destroyed property and lives in the world today.

Satan can inflict us directly

As the account of Job continues, we become aware that, when allowed to do so, Satan can directly inflict bodily harm on individuals. After God gave the go-ahead, Satan “struck Job with painful boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head” (Job 2:7). During the ministry of Christ a similar situation had occurred in which Satan inflicted bodily harm upon a woman for 18 years. A “spirit of infirmity” (Luke 13:11) had kept her in a bent position, unable to straighten up. After healing her on the Sabbath, Jesus made it known that it was Satan who had bound this “daughter of Abraham” for the past 18 years (v. 16). The apostle Paul likewise referred to his “thorn in the flesh” as “a messenger of Satan to buffet me” (2 Cor. 12:7). In Acts 10:38 Peter told Cornelius that Jesus “went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil.” The gospel accounts, in fact, contain many examples of Satan and his demon servants taking possession of people’s bodies to inflict harm on them and those around them. What Scripture says about demonic possession offers considerable material to warrant a separate study beyond the scope of this essay.

In Revelation 9:11 Satan is given the names Abaddon in Hebrew and Apollyon in Greek. Both of these names mean *destroyer*. We can see in the story of Job how accurate those names really are. He is seeking to destroy and devour everything good. His ultimate goal, however, is the destruction of our faith. Note that Satan’s stated purpose in inflicting Job was to get him to “curse God to His face” (Job 1:11, 2:5). Satan’s goals have not changed over the course of time. He still uses his power in the same ways today not only to cause torment and sorrow, but especially to lead people to doubt God’s goodness and faithfulness, to curse God and to forsake Him.

In that endeavor he has been quite successful. How many times haven’t you heard the age-old reason for rejecting God: “If God is a loving God, why do so many evil things happen in the world?” “I just can’t believe in or love a God who allows so much evil and so much suffering.” Satan has convinced many that there must not be a God. Or, they contend, if there is a God, either He is not good and loving, or He is not almighty. Either He does not care about people’s troubles, or He must be powerless to prevent them.

The cross of Christ is clear and certain proof that God really does care. He loves us so dearly that He gave His only begotten Son for us. What God told Moses is certainly true for us as well: “I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them” (Exod. 3:7-8). The history of Job offers its own proof that God is almighty and does have power over Satan. Satan could not do anything to Job unless God gave him permission. And even then God set limits on what Satan could do. At first God said, “All that he has is in your power; only do not lay a hand on his person” (Job 1:12). The second time God gave permission to Satan to strike Job’s body with the limitation that he “spare his life” (Job 2:6). This is a powerful reminder that whatever Satan purposes to do, he must answer to God and be controlled by Him.

The harm Satan inflicts on people physically can only extend to and affect their experience of earthly life in this world. He may indeed cause great pain, suffering and loss of bodily function, but such physical harm will be overturned in the glorious resurrection to come, even as Job himself confessed (19:25-27). Satan knows that far greater and permanent destruction will take place if he can succeed in his various attempts to destroy the souls of men.

Our Adversary Attacks Us Spiritually with His Deception

Satan, the master of deception, is more than a fierce “dragon” who destroys with his power. Satan is still the “serpent of old” who seeks to deceive. Jesus called Satan “a liar and the father” of lies and said, “There is no truth in him” (John 8:44). Revelation 12:9 has identified

Satan as the one “who deceives the whole world.” Satan is both the originator and the master of deception.

Satan did not appear to Eve in a vile, malicious form, which would have given away his true identity as the evil enemy who wanted to destroy her. She surely would have avoided him then. Though he appeared in a way that may seem strange to us, to Eve he appeared and acted as one who only wanted what was good for her. Satan has a way of making his evil plans and schemes look desirable, right, good and even holy. He does not appear as the evil adversary, but as a kind and good helper, even as “an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14), one who is interested in helping us to know the truth and find freedom and happiness. Yet with his deception he seeks to undermine the truth of the Bible, to rob men of their freedom in the gospel and to plunge them into eternal sorrow and condemnation.

Satan twists the truth just enough so that it seems believable and yet is corrupted enough to lead us away from God. Have you noticed how most errors and lies contain some element of truth? In Eden Satan used God’s command not to eat of the tree in the midst of the garden, but he made it sound unfair and unreasonable: “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?’” (Gen. 3:1) Satan also tempted Eve with the partial truth that “in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (v. 5). Satan, we notice, did not tell her that, unlike God who *knows* good and evil, Adam and Eve would actually *become* evil through the disobedience of God’s command.

Satan uses his power to aid his deception. For example, he performs miracles, or at least the appearance of miracles, to make his lies and deception more convincing. “The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish” (2 Thess. 2:9-10). Is it not also Satan who appears to work wonders through witches, sorcerers and mediums? (Cf. Simon in Acts 8:9-11) Today there is a growing fascination with all types of witchcraft. Satan is busy in deceiving many. Perhaps it is also Satan working through many of the so called “miracle workers” in the charismatic churches, fulfilling what Jesus said in Matthew 24:24: “False christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.”

Satan uses people who seem to be wise and caring to spread his deceptions. Scientists, who are recognized for competence in their area of expertise and gain the trust and respect of others, are the unwitting instruments Satan uses to spread the lie of evolution. Doctors and psychologists, who likewise have gained recognition and a following for their understanding of the human body and mind, are helping to spread Satan’s lies about how to achieve happiness and wholeness of the body and the mind. They promote the secular ideas of self-esteem and thus draw the focus of attention away from God to self. They seek to overcome guilt by the outright denial of sin and the blaming of others. So also, Satan can use the public school system and the universities to indoctrinate children and students in the lies of humanism, New Age, self-esteem and multiculturalism, which proposes the acceptance of all cultures, lifestyles and religions.

Revelation 9 portrays Satan as a “star fallen from heaven to the earth.” He was given the “key to the bottomless pit.” When he opened the bottomless pit, dark smoke came up out of the pit and blocked the light of the sun. Then a swarm of fearsome locusts came out of the smoke and attacked the people of the earth. Could this imagery be a vivid symbol of the overall effect of Satan’s lies? Like a thick screen of smoke blotting out the sun, the lies of Satan blot out the light of God’s Word and that of Christ Himself, who is the Light of the world. The locusts may be symbolic of the swarm of human assistants and deceiving spirits,¹ whom Satan uses to spread his deception and false teachings. The locusts in Revelation 9 had appealing features, like “crowns of something like gold, and their faces were like the faces of men. They had hair like women’s hair” (vv. 7-8). But they also had the sting and tail of a scorpion, and “their teeth were like lion’s

teeth.” They devour and destroy, just like their master does and also like the ravenous wolf in sheep’s clothing (Matt. 7:15).

In all of Satan’s deceptions we see once again that Satan remains under the limiting power of God. Satan cannot do more than God allows. In the vision of Revelation 9 we recognize the wonderful assurance that the fearful locusts are only authorized to harm and torment those “who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads” (Rev. 9:4). They can not hide God’s Word from God’s elect, because Jesus’ sheep hear His voice and follow only Him and remain safe and secure in His Father’s hand (John 10:27-29).

Satan Maintains His Rule over the Unbelievers

Satan is very zealous to keep his hold on the world of unbelievers and maintain his position as the “ruler of this world” (John 14:30).

Satan takes the Word out of their hearts to prevent people from coming to faith. In His parable of the sower and the seed Jesus explained, “And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts” (Mark 4:15). With his smoke screen of deception Satan raises all sorts of arguments, objections and reasons why people should not believe the “foolishness” of the gospel. A university professor once stated in a public address, “We know too much to believe the Bible.” His statement is actually fulfilled in light of 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, especially verse 21: “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.”

The Apostle Paul explains, “But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them” (2 Cor. 4:4). Satan has truly blinded the unbelievers so that they cannot see the truth. He is so good at keeping people in the dark that many of those under his rule do not even acknowledge his existence. He has completely deceived them into thinking that they are the master of their own destiny and that they serve no one but themselves, while in reality they are firmly under Satan’s power and control. The above passage from 2 Corinthians, however, is both a reminder of our original condition in the unconverted state and a reminder that God has removed that former blindness from us and kept Satan from darkening the eyes of His elect.

Satan tries to hinder the spread of the Word. Since he knows the power of the gospel and its divine intent, he tries to stop it wherever he can. Paul told the Thessalonians, “Therefore we wanted to come to you – even I, Paul, time and again – but Satan hindered us” (1 Thess. 2:18). The severe persecution of Christians was not only an attempt to lead them to deny their Lord, but also an attempt to silence the spread of the gospel. The Jewish council tried to silence the disciples many times with threats and beatings. They “commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus” (Acts 5:40). Bibles have been banned and burned in many societies. The Counter Reformation and the Inquisition tried vigorously to silence the newly revived gospel. Muslims to this day use extreme measures to stop the spread of Christianity. James Elliot and three other dedicated missionaries had a burning desire to bring the gospel to the isolated and hostile tribe of Auca Indians in South America. Just when they seemed to be making some progress in approaching the tribe as friends, a group of frightened natives killed all four missionaries.

Thankfully, God shows that He is still in control. Jesus promised that His Church will be built upon the testimony of Him and “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). Satan does all to hold unbelievers in his power, but whenever God calls His elect to faith, nothing can stop His Spirit from the victory of conversion. God’s Word enters their hearts and becomes the effective power to “turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God.”

When Satan tried to stop the spread of the gospel, his plans backfired and the gospel spread even more. In the face of threats by the chief priests, God made the apostles even more determined to preach the Word. The persecution that broke out in Jerusalem to get rid of all who followed “the Way” only caused believers to disperse into the world and take the gospel with them. The blood of the martyrs became the seed of the Church. The Counter Reformation failed to stop the spread of the Reformation. God’s Word marched on into the world. The murder of the missionaries by the band of Auca Indians had the opposite effect than the one Satan intended. It immediately opened up the way for the gospel of Christ to reach that lost tribe.

God calls His elect and builds His Church, but all who “loved darkness rather than light” (John 3:19) and “did not like to retain God in their knowledge” (Rom. 1:28) have willingly continued to live in the deception of Satan and in service to him. They cannot claim ignorance or say they were helpless in Satan’s power. They had the testimony of God’s creation, the truth of God’s Word and the proclamation of the saints, “so that they are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20).

Satan Seeks Believers whom He May Devour

Satan is not content to simply keep what is already his. Like a roaring lion, he prowls around, seeking believers to devour. Or as the book of Job describes him, he is “going to and fro on the earth, and walking back and forth on it” (1:7). Picture the lion watching and waiting for a weak or young gazelle to stray too far from the herd and then making his move to pounce on it. Satan too is going about on the earth, watching and waiting for any believer who foolishly gives him an opportunity for his attack. God’s Word clearly shows that Satan has many tricks up his sleeve to lure believers away from the safety of the fold.

Satan uses the world to lead believers to doubt God. Satan was not done with Job when he inflicted him with painful boils all over his body. Job was in utter misery. He bore the sorrow of losing everything he possessed, including his ten children whom he loved dearly and on whose behalf he prayed and ministered regularly (Job 1:5). He was in agony from the boils. He sat in ashes and scraped himself with pieces of pottery to try to find some relief, no doubt causing open wounds to fester. He expressed his misery in these words: “And now my soul is poured out because of my plight; the days of affliction take hold of me. My bones are pierced in me at night, and my gnawing pains take no rest” (30:16-17).

When Job was suffering all this pain and loss, Satan unleashed his worldly allies against Job. His own wife was the first to turn against him; she told Job to “curse God and die” (2:9). There were more to follow. In later chapters we hear Job describe how all the people who once looked up to him and honored him now despised and rejected him. The lowest members of society now mocked and jeered at him. Even his three so-called friends tried to accuse him of evil and corrupted the counsel of God with their words. Satan had not been able to shake Job’s faith with all of his direct attacks against Job’s family, possessions and body, but in part through the influence of these human agents of false counsel, Job was led to the brink of utter despair and to the point of doubting and accusing God of being unfair (see especially chapters 29-31).

The tactics of our adversary have not changed over the centuries of human existence. Satan continues to unleash his hoards against us today in the attempt to lead us to doubt and question God. They may be relatives, friends, neighbors, classmates, teachers, coworkers or bosses. They may mock our belief in God. They may despise and shun us because of our faith in God’s Word and our faithfulness to God’s will. They try to confuse Christians and lead them to doubt God’s promises or His presence or reality. Thus many young people, though baptized and raised in Christian families, are lured in by the deception that abounds in colleges, universities and the secular world and consequently are misled to forsake their faith in God and His Word.

Satan uses the world to tempt us to sin. The world also presents the believer with countless temptations to steer him away from God into various sins. The world flaunts its sinful pleasures before our faces and makes each one look like a good time and a great way of life.

Sexual sins are flaunted and pursued everywhere around us. Confessing Christians are lured away from the grace of God by the enticement to live in open or habitual sin and become impenitent in doing so. The “deceitfulness of riches” (Mark 4:19) tantalizes us daily on every side with its allure to have a love of money – a desire deadly to the soul, since the love of money has the power to “drown men in destruction and perdition” (1 Tim. 6:9).

Satan Works within the Visible Church

One would expect Satan to be working through the unbelieving world to attack God’s Church. Satan, however, has also managed to infiltrate the visible church and launch his most deadly attack to ruin the souls of many who outwardly confess Christ. Satan has deceived many into thinking that they are good and faithful children of God, while in reality through their own unbelief they are in Satan’s kingdom. They will continue calling Jesus “Lord, Lord” and doing great things in His name until the Day of Judgment, when they find out that Jesus never knew them (Matt. 7:21-23).

In the Jewish church many rejected Jesus as an impostor, and their assembly changed from a place where God was worshiped into the “synagogue of Satan” (Rev. 2:9, 3:9). It didn’t take long for the devil to find his way into the New Testament church as well. Just as Jesus taught in the parable, Satan has managed to “sow tares among the wheat” in God’s kingdom here on earth (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43). The “tares” are Satan’s followers who through a hypocritical confession exist together with God’s children in the visible church.

Satan spreads false doctrine in the church. Satan seeks to destroy the souls of men by corrupting the Word of God which they hear. In the prophecy written to Timothy the apostle Paul reveals that false teaching has its origin from Satan: “Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron” (1 Tim. 4:1-2).

False teachers do not appear as the enemies of God who seek to destroy believers. They come “in sheep’s clothing,” that is, they seem very kind, decent and moral and present themselves as followers of the Bible and have a way of making their teachings sound good and right. Let us not be deceived, for “inwardly they are ravenous wolves” who do the bidding of their leader and destroy the flock of God. Every false teaching is a very serious threat to the Christian’s faith. Hence we need to “test the spirits, whether they are of God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). All of them are doing the work of Satan, even though they may think and claim that they are doing the work of God.

We cannot conclusively assert or determine that all false prophets are unbelievers. Satan is able to use even well meaning but ignorant believers to do his work of deception. Consider how Peter unwittingly became a tool of Satan in his protest that Jesus not go the way of the cross (Matt. 16:21-23). How many believers today through their own ignorance or misconception of the truth have misled or misguided other believers? Truly Satan is a master of deception.

Satan sets up his Antichrist in the church. Perhaps Satan’s most pervasive work of destructive influence was the establishment of the Antichrist, one of his greatest allies, on the throne of the church. This is the one called “the man of sin ... the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped.” At the same time, by Satan’s efforts to put him in place and work through him, this man of sin “sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God” (2 Thess. 2:3-4). This surely is the Antichrist (1 John 2:18, 4:3), the one who seeks to take the place of Christ by establishing an alternate way of salvation other than through faith in Jesus Christ alone for the forgiveness of sins.

We have reason to believe that Revelation 13:11-18 describes this ally of Satan as the “beast coming up out of the earth,” having “two horns like a lamb” (v. 11). Although the beast had the appearance of a lamb (namely that of Jesus Himself), he “spoke like a dragon.” His words were not from God but from Satan. His way of salvation was no way at all, for there is no

other way to God except through Jesus Christ. He was given power from Satan and ‘performs great signs’ (Rev. 13:13-14 and 2 Thess. 2:9). “And he deceives those who dwell on the earth by those signs which he was granted to do.” From his throne within the visible church he has produced many people who appear to be very pious and godly, but in reality they are ungodly and are headed for hell, because they place their trust in their own good works and merits rather than in Christ’s merits and atonement alone.

“The old evil Foe now means deadly woe; deep guile and great might are his dread arms in fight; on earth is not his equal” (Hymn 262:1). He is a fearsome, deadly adversary. May we never think lightly of any of his attacks, especially the deception he brings through the lies of false teaching. Every false teaching has its origin from the devil and is destructive both to our personal faith and our confession of the gospel. Thus God gives us such frequent and urgent warning to avoid it and keep away from those who teach it.

Although Satan has caused significant damage through the intrusion of false teaching, we see once again that he is not almighty. He can only do what God allows. Satan cannot force people to believe any error. He will be able to deceive only those who refuse to submit to the truth of God’s Word. As a warning so applicable to our own day God tells us, “The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables” (2 Tim. 4:3-4). Satan will be allowed to deceive only those who do not care enough to study God’s Word so as to know the truth. The Antichrist will be able to deceive so many only ‘because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved’ (2 Thess. 2:10). But as Jesus foretold for our comfort and hope, false christs and false prophets will not be able to deceive the elect (Matt. 24:24). God has promised to keep His own so that no one, not even Satan, can snatch them out of His hand (John 10:28-30).

Satan Enters the Heart

In his war against God and the people of God Satan has been able to enter men’s hearts and lead them to sin against their Lord. In 1 Chronicles 21:1 we are told, “Now Satan stood up against Israel and moved David to number Israel.” On the day before Jesus died, “Satan entered Judas,” moving him to make a deal with the chief priests to betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver (Luke 22:3-6). And Satan filled Ananias’ heart “to lie to the Holy Spirit” (Acts 5:3). In these examples from Bible history we note that Satan effectively persuaded the heart of one called to lead God’s people and also the hearts of two who at least were outwardly identified with the followers of Christ.

What a dreadful foe we face, who can enter our own hearts to exploit the weakness of our flesh and lead us to commit sin. But we also realize that Satan cannot make anyone sin. Satan could not force Adam and Eve to doubt God or disobey His command. They chose of their own free will to listen to Satan and disregard what God said. David, Judas and Ananias likewise were willing participants who chose to follow Satan’s temptation.

Over against us Satan takes advantage of the sinful desires already at work in our own hearts. He pries at the crack of anger until the door is opened for violence to erupt. He blows on the spark of lust until it bursts into the flames of fornication and adultery. God reveals what happens in our own hearts when He says in James 1:14-15: “But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.”

Judas already had greed in his heart. He showed it by stealing from the money box (John 12:6). Satan was able to exploit his love of money and lead him to seek his own wealth at the expense of betraying his Lord. Nevertheless, it was Judas who made that fateful choice. David was enjoying a time of peace and prosperity after God gave him victory over all his enemies. That’s when pride began to fill David’s heart. He preferred to glory in his own greatness rather than give praise and glory to God. That gave Satan the opportunity to move the king to number

Israel and see how great a nation he had built. This David did, even though his commander Joab warned against it. Still, it was David who dismissed the good advice and let Satan and his own pride determine what his heart was going to do.

Controlling one's heart has always been the requirement God has placed on individuals as an obligation of obedience and holiness. God warned Cain directly of this very thing when Cain had allowed anger to enter his heart. God said to him, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it" (Gen. 4:6-7). Cain did not rule over it. He let his anger fester, and Satan took the opportunity to push that anger into a violent hatred that led to the murder of Abel.

What sin lies hidden in your heart? Is it pride? Lust? The love of money? Anger or resentment? Satan is eager to bring those inner sins to light in your words and actions. You and I should rule over each desire by turning to the Lord in repentance. As soon as we see those sins rising up in our own hearts and in our own thoughts, we should diffuse them of their power by repenting of them daily. God instructs us: "Do not let the sun go down on your wrath," so that you do not "give place to the devil" (Eph. 4:26-27). Let us remember that these are the things which Satan wants us to do. If we follow the sinful desires of our hearts rather than having our hearts cleansed of those desires, we are following the dangerous path of Satan. Our only recourse is to repent and cling to Christ for His forgiveness and His strength to resist those sins.

Now we know all too well that we do not always rule over sinful desires when they arise within us. All too often we listen to Satan and give in to his temptation. That's when our tempter changes his role.

Satan Becomes our Prosecutor

The name Satan can also indicate an adversary in a judicial sense. He hopes to be our prosecuting attorney or *accuser* before God. The word devil also means a slanderer or accuser.

His first attempt to accuse us takes place before God. In Revelation 12:10 Satan is identified as "the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night." That role of Satan is also pictured quite vividly in Zechariah 3:1-5. There we see "Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right side to oppose him."² The Hebrew word for "oppose him" (Qal inf. cst., suff. 3sm לִשְׂטָן) is also translated "accuse him" and has the same root as the name Satan. To the one who opposed and accused Joshua God said, "The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?" Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel" (verses 2-3 NIV).

What a dramatic scene Scripture gives us. Joshua was the high priest at the time when the Jews had returned to rebuild Jerusalem after the captivity in Babylon. The prophet Zechariah was granted the vision of seeing Joshua standing before the Angel of the LORD, while clothed in filthy garments. Don't miss the imagery; he was standing before the Holy Lord Himself, covered as he was with filthy, disgusting sins. As the high priest he was to be God's representative to the people and represent the people to God. Now Satan was right there at his side to accuse him. One can almost hear Satan speaking to God the Judge: "Look at this man! Here is your chosen man, anointed to be your High Priest, the one who represents you to the people. And he is a filthy sinner! He represents a nation of filthy sinners. As holy God you rightly judged these people for their sins and sent them into captivity. Now that they have returned, they are still guilty before you. They are repeat offenders. Surely as a just judge you need to damn them all.

For once, Satan is not lying. On the basis of God's own law he has a case when he rightly accuses us all in the same way. But he does not get very far with his accusations. We note how the Lord responded in verse 2: "The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?" Instead of condemning His guilty people for their sins, the Lord God rebuked Satan, because He had

chosen Jerusalem. They were the people of the covenant He had made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They were the remnant that God plucked from the fire of judgment. God was being faithful to His covenant, despite the sins committed by His people.

In the next verses of Zechariah 3 God revealed what He did to acquit His guilty people. The Angel of the LORD, that is the pre-incarnate Christ, gave the command, "Take off his filthy clothes" (v. 4, NIV). Then He said to Joshua, "See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you." What a glorious picture of the gospel of Christ. He takes away our sins and gives us His own perfect righteousness, which makes us acceptable before God. When we are in Christ by faith, Satan cannot accuse us of one single sin. We stand before God acquitted. Satan is judged and condemned, and we are set free. "The accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 12:10-11a).

Satan is not ready to give up as the accuser just yet. If he cannot accuse us before God, he will try to accuse us within our own conscience. He whispers into our ear: "How can you consider yourself a child of God? Look at yourself! Look at your filthy sins! Do you think God would really have you as His child? God may be a forgiving God, but you are beyond the hope of His grace." Satan has succeeded in drowning many in the despair of a conscience tormented with guilt. Judas was driven to such despair when he went out and hanged himself.

Satan cannot overturn the promises of God, however. Whenever Satan accuses you in that dreadful way, turn again to the certainty of what God tells you. Remember that He is faithful: "If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself" (2 Tim. 2:13). When you despair of your sins, take God's Word to heart: "'Come now, and let us reason together,' says the LORD, 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool'" (Isa. 1:18). "Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more" (Rom. 5:20). "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief" (1 Tim. 1:15). The promises and assurances abound to us throughout His Word. God is faithful, and every promise He makes is sure. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Our Sure Defense

It is confusing to some that, on the one hand, God gives many sure promises that He will preserve His own and keep Satan from harming them. He promises that nothing in all of creation "shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38 - 39). Jesus likewise assures that "My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand" (John 10:29). Yet, on the other hand, God warns about the danger of falling away through false teaching or through the temptation to doubt or commit sin. He also tells us that "in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons" (1 Tim. 4:1) and that "some have already turned aside after Satan" (1 Tim. 5:15). He speaks about the great apostasy or "falling away" (2 Thess. 2:3), which we are seeing in our day.³

How can both be true – that God will keep His elect by preserving their faith and yet believers can also lose their faith and fall away from Christ? Here we must acknowledge the difference between the doctrines of law and gospel. The promise of God's preservation is given to comfort Christians who are concerned or worried about losing their faith. What a comfort it truly is that we are in the hands of the Almighty God, so that not even Satan can snatch any of us out of His hand.

The warning of the law is still very real. It is given to battle against our flesh, which would sit back in ease and indifference with no concern for the threats of Satan's attacks. If it were impossible for us to fall from faith, then there would be no need for all the warnings about Satan and his tactics. There would be no reason to watch out for him at all.

It is true that God has defeated Satan for us. Jesus Christ has crushed the head of our #1 enemy. Jesus shared in our flesh and blood ‘that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil’ (Heb. 2:14). Through baptism we have been connected to Christ, buried with Him, raised again and clothed in Him and His righteousness (Rom. 6:1-14 and Gal. 3:26-27). Christ’s victory over Satan has become our victory. Satan has been bound in chains and reserved for the Day of Judgment.

However, it is also true that God allows Satan a certain amount of leeway. We are still involved in a fierce battle, of which we constantly need to be aware. As he did with Peter, Satan would love to ‘sift you as wheat’ (Luke 22:31). Today he has a daunting number of allies and weapons with which to attack us. Thus we need to be actively resisting Satan daily. We need to be sober and vigilant, always watching out for the adversary.

Unfortunately, we face the problem that we are very weak. We cannot defend ourselves against Satan on our own. Thankfully, God has given us a sure defense. He shows us how we can stand against the wiles of the devil with victory guaranteed. In Ephesians 6:10-20 the Lord directs His believers to ‘put on the whole armor of God’ (v. 11). The armor here described proves to be invincible, but it will do us no good if we do not wear it daily.

Each piece of God’s armor serves a vital role in our spiritual defenses, beginning with the ‘belt’ portrayed in verse 14: **“Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth.”** Truth comes only from God’s Word, for His **“Word is truth”** (John 17:17). The truth of God’s Word is the first thing we need to wear as our battle gear against the enemy. Everything else hinges on that. The only way to put on this belt of truth is through a steadfast dependence on the Word, which we strive to hear, read, study and apply to ourselves. Continue in God’s Word, Jesus says, **“and you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free”** (John 8:31-32). With the belt of truth firmly in place we will not fall prey to any of the lies, deceptions and false teachings of Satan.

As the next piece of armor in our good fight of faith, we are to **“put on the breastplate of righteousness.”** That is, we wear Christ’s righteousness as our righteousness before God. We put on the breastplate of His righteousness when we are baptized into Christ and so have ‘put on Christ’ (Gal. 3:27). We continue to wear Christ’s righteousness as our constant protection when we live a life of daily contrition and repentance in confessing our sins and receiving God’s full and free forgiveness by faith. With Christ’s righteousness as your covering you are able to withstand the devil’s accusations against you unscathed.

You are also to **“shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace.”** The ‘gospel of peace’ fills you and me with such joy and peace with God that we will not be hindered by the opposition of the world. In the gospel we rely on and hang on to Christ, no matter what the world thinks of us or does to us. And through that same gospel we are moved by God to spread the good news of peace to others, which in turn strengthens us even more.

“Above all,” God says, **“take the shield of faith.”** With your shield of faith ‘you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one.’ How do we put on faith as protective armor? The Lord says through the same writer Paul, **“Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God”** (Rom. 10:17). As we continue hearing the Word, the Spirit will keep us in the faith.

“And take the helmet of salvation.” There is only one salvation, won by Christ alone and given to us by the Holy Spirit. We keep this one salvation as the helmet on our heads by being renewed in it daily. Be reassured through the gospel that Christ’s merit is all that we need. Be reminded that there is nothing we can add; our own works do not contribute in the slightest to what Christ has done. When we have assurance of this salvation daily in God’s Word, then we will not be misled to ‘turn away ... to another gospel, which is not another’ (Gal. 1:6-9).

Finally, we not only put on the armor of defense. God equips us with a weapon to attack the devil and rout him. We take up **“the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”** Notice how every piece of this armor is related to using the Word or comes from the Word.

God's Word is our defense and our weapon of attack against the devil and all his evil cohorts. With the Word of God you can "resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). When Satan tempted Jesus for forty days in the wilderness, Jesus defeated him every time with "It is written." As Luther said in the Reformation hymn, "One little word can fell him." It is in Jesus Christ and His Word that all the promises of protection are given. All who neglect the Word of God in their lives become easy prey for the devil. All who love Christ by faith and continue in His Word will be safe. As we put on the armor of God daily, the Savior through His Word will keep us safe, just as He promised.

In Ephesians 6 Paul also reminds us that we are not alone in the battle against our adversary. In verse 18 the apostle urges us to pray for one another. By gathering together with our fellow believers and praying with each other and for each other, we receive great strength in this battle.

*"With might of ours can naught be done,
Soon were our loss effected;
But for us fights the Valiant One,
Whom God Himself elected.
Ask ye, Who is this? Jesus Christ it is,
Of Sabaoth Lord, and there's none other God;
He holds the field forever." (TLH 262:2)*

Satan as God's Unwilling Servant

Luther is reported to have said, "The devil is God's devil." God not only limits the damage Satan can do; He actually makes use of the activities of Satan to further His own purpose and plan. As much as Satan rages in his fury against God, ultimately he is still God's servant. In an amazing and wonderful way everything Satan does will serve God's plan and carry out His will.

The greatest example of this fact is how God made use of Satan in his attacks against Jesus. Satan promoted the hatred of the chief priests and Pharisees against Jesus. They were doing the devil's will when they conspired to kill Him. And so Jesus said, "I know that you are Abraham's descendants, but you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. I speak what I have seen with My Father, and you do what you have seen with your father.... You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning" (John 8:37-38, 44). Satan even struck an apparent victory in leading one of Jesus' own disciples to betray Jesus. Yet all the schemes and raging of Satan against God and His Son only ended in the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation for the world. God's plan took into account, foretold⁴ and made use of the fury of the evil one.

We can identify at least three divine purposes which God carries out through Satan's activities. While Satan wreaks havoc in the world, God is using it 1) to bring His judgment upon the unbelievers, 2) to warn others and call them to repentance and 3) to strengthen and purify the faith of His saints.

God Brings Judgment on the Wicked through Satan

One fascinating account showing such purposes at work is found in 1 Kings 22. Ahab was the most wicked king of Israel. He killed the prophets of God. He supported 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah and led the people into idolatrous worship. His wife Jezebel devised an evil scheme to murder Naboth and give Ahab the chance to take his vineyard. God singled Ahab out with this indictment: "There was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do wickedness in the sight of the Lord, because Jezebel his wife stirred him up" (1 Kings 21:25). Because of his great wickedness God pronounced His judgment upon Ahab and his house and used Satan to carry out that judgment.

In what would be the final days of his life, Ahab wanted Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, to help him in battle against the king of Syria. Jehoshaphat, in contradiction to God's will, was willing to help and even suggested that Ahab inquire of the LORD (Jehovah). Ahab gathered 400 prophets, who all told him in reply to his inquiry, "Go up, for the Lord [Adonai] will deliver it into the hand of the king" (1 Kings 22:6). Jehoshaphat was perhaps being cautious when he asked, "Is there not still a prophet of the LORD here, that we may inquire of Him?" Ahab said, "There is still one man, Micaiah the son of Imlah, by whom we may inquire of the LORD: but I hate him, because he does not prophesy good concerning me, but evil" (v. 8). Nevertheless, the prophet Micaiah was summoned.

All the prophets were gathered together before the two Jewish kings, and again all 400 of them assured Ahab that Jehovah would be with him in battle. Then Ahab asked Micaiah, "Shall we go to war against Ramoth Gilead, or shall we refrain?" The prophet answered Ahab, "Go and prosper, for the LORD will deliver it into the hand of the king!" Since Ahab could not believe that Micaiah was actually speaking a prophecy that was favorable to him, he said, "How many times shall I make you swear that you tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD?" (v. 16)

At this point in the account we hear the report of a revelation God had given to Micaiah. This revelation gives the reader a view into heaven and the plan and working of God. Micaiah said, "Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by, on His right hand and on His left. And the LORD said, 'Who will persuade Ahab to go up, that he may fall at Ramoth Gilead?' So one spoke in this manner, and another spoke in that manner. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, and said, 'I will persuade him.' The LORD said to him, 'In what way?' So he said, 'I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And the LORD said, 'You shall persuade him, and also prevail. Go out and do so.' Therefore look! The LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these prophets of yours, and the LORD has declared disaster against you" (vv. 19-23).

Verse 23 contains a very shocking statement: "The LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these prophets of yours." This lying spirit could hardly have been one of the holy angels. Neither God nor His angels can lie. The lying spirit God sent to work through the false prophets was one of the demons, if not Satan himself. Before the battle took place, God revealed this truth to Ahab through Micaiah. But Ahab chose to believe the 400 false prophets (see vv. 27-28). He ordered Micaiah to be thrown in prison and fed with the bread of affliction until Ahab returned "in peace." Ahab must have been a little nervous though, for he made a plan to disguise himself during the battle. Yet God's Word came true. A random arrow struck King Ahab in the joint of his armor. He needed help to stand in his chariot and watch his army go down in defeat. He eventually died from the wound that evening. On that day in accord with His promise God allowed Satan to work through the false prophets and deceive Ahab into going to a battle that would end his life. There God brought about His judgment upon Ahab.

The chapter on the Antichrist (2 Thess. 2) gives us another example. We noted earlier that many will be deceived by the Antichrist and perish "because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved" (v. 10). We note also verses 11-12: "And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness." The "strong delusion" from God would be the lying signs and wonders that Satan would work through the Antichrist. Thus while Satan was working his worst, God was using it as His judgment upon those who rejected the truth in exchange for their own pursuit of unrighteousness.

The book of Revelation offers a unique picture of God working His victorious control over all things in this world. Throughout the book He has foretold many fearful judgments which would come upon the earth in the New Testament era before the end of time. Many of the judgments are wrought directly by Satan. Yet it is always clear that God allows Satan and his allies to do these things as His judgment upon those who reject Him in unbelief. While the

believers certainly suffer persecution and other trials, they are always kept safe in God's hand and repeatedly portrayed as winning the final victory and standing before God in glorious robes in heaven. God's power and rule, as revealed in Revelation and the rest of Scripture, ultimately mean that we will be victorious in Him over our adversary.

God Calls People to Repentance through Satan's Work

In the previous example of God's judgment upon king Ahab we also recognize a strong warning and call to repentance which the Lord gave to king Jehoshaphat and many people in Israel. There are several passages in Scripture which reveal how God uses catastrophes as a call to repentance. Most notably, we consider what Jesus said about a massacre in Galilee and the collapse of a tower on 18 people: "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3, 5). While God uses Satan to bring about His judgment upon the wicked, at the same time He uses the outcome of Satan's work to warn the rest and call them to repent of their sins and cling to Christ as their Savior. If they do not heed the Lord's call, they too will perish in His judgment.

God working such a purpose through Satan is demonstrated in the story of Satan moving David to number Israel (1 Chron. 21:1). Satan seemed to score a great victory for his cause, as he led David to sin and brought about the consequence of the Lord slaying 70,000 of His own people. However, on further examination we see that the victory was the Lord's. In a parallel account in 2 Samuel 24 we read, "Again the anger of the Lord was aroused against Israel, and He moved David against them to say, 'Go number Israel and Judah'" (v. 1). God was clearly at work in the course and outcome of this event.

This seems to present us with another difficult passage. It says that *God* moved David to the sin of numbering Israel. How can that be? How can God move anyone to sin? James tells us, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone" (James 1:13). God did not tempt David to sin, even as the parallel account in 1 Chronicles 21 indicates. Satan actually was the one who tempted David.

It helps to understand that God takes full responsibility. When God allows something to happen, then He is responsible for that action, just as surely as if He had done it Himself. That is the very truth made clear in the story of Job. Satan had said to God, "Stretch out Your hand and touch all that he has, and he will surely curse You to Your face!" (Job 1:11) In effect God did stretch out His hand against Job by allowing Satan to work his harm. Satan did all the work, for the account clearly says that "Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and struck Job" (2:7). Nevertheless, we know that God was responsible, in that He said to Satan, "Still he holds fast to his integrity, although you incited Me against him, to destroy him without cause" (2:3). Also in His conversation with Job in the last chapters, God pointed out that it was His judgment and decision that Job was questioning (40:8).

So also with David, when God allowed Satan to tempt David to sin, in effect it was the same as if God Himself had tempted him. Satan had his own agenda; he wanted to bring David down and work his destruction in Israel. But God took control, making use of Satan's actions to serve His greater purpose.

What exactly was God's plan? Why would He want Satan to tempt one of His own? The answer comes in the examination of the results, because God's plans always come to fulfillment. First of all, we are told initially that "the anger of the Lord was aroused against Israel" (2 Sam. 24:1). Israel's sin and rebellion had called for God's righteous judgment. In this case, however, God did not use Satan to carry out His judgment. The Angel of the LORD went forth and brought the plague which killed 70,000 men throughout the land of Israel. But as 1 Chronicles 21 clearly reveals, God did use Satan to set up the event which led to this judgment. Secondly, David was beginning to succumb to the sin of pride. To deal with that problem in David's heart and life, God allowed Satan to tempt David, so that his pride carried out a sinful act. Under those circumstances God intended to purge the sin of the king and bring David to repentance. When the census was done, "David's heart condemned him after he had numbered the people. So David

said to the LORD, 'I have sinned greatly in what I have done; but now, I pray, O LORD, take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have done very foolishly'" (2 Sam. 24:10).

Because God still had more to accomplish, He gave David the choice of his chastisement. He could choose either three years of famine or three months of being routed by his enemies or 3 days of plague at the hand of God. David responded, "I am in great distress. Please let me fall into the hand of the LORD, for His mercies are very great." The plague went throughout all the tribes of Israel, and the Angel of the LORD had just begun to destroy Jerusalem. Then 'David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell on their faces. And David said to God, 'Was it not I who commanded the people to be numbered? I am the one who has sinned and done evil indeed; but these sheep, what have they done? Let Your hand, I pray, O LORD my God, be against me and my father's house, but not against Your people that they should be plagued'" (1 Chron. 21:16 - 17). That is when God told David through the prophet Gad to go and erect an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. David wanted to buy Ornan's threshing floor to build the altar. Ornan offered to give it all to David, but David said, "No, but I will surely buy it for the full price, for I will not take what is yours for the LORD, nor offer burnt offerings with that which costs me nothing." David did buy the threshing floor and offered his sacrifices on the altar which he built. Then God "commanded the Angel, and He returned His sword to its sheath" (v. 27).

The objectives God fulfilled and the great blessings God planned and worked out through Satan's temptation of David were indeed many. He brought His just judgment upon Israel's rebellion. He humbled David in his pride and brought him to repentance and renewal of his faith. All the elders joined David in sackcloth and repentance, as I'm sure many Israelites did in their own homes. God brought many people in Israel to repentance and renewal of faith. More than that, this inspired account stands as God's Word today, so that it may continue to lead God's people to humble repentance and faith for the rest of time.⁵ And the final outcome of this event at the threshing floor of Ornan was to be one more great and marvelous result that God brought about through Satan's work. This very place, where God in His mercy heard David's plea and brought an end to the destruction, became the site where the Temple was built. God chose this location as the place where men would call upon Him to extend His mercy and grace to help in every time of need. On this place God made His presence and His name known in Israel, and from this place His salvation was proclaimed. Centuries later in a second temple on this very site, the Son of God, who once was the destroying Angel, now stood and taught the people all about God's mercy and salvation in Him. And on another mountain very near this place Jesus gave the ultimate sacrifice that would end God's judgment forever for all who trust in Him.

"Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." We too can echo the exclamation of Paul in Romans and join the Psalm writer, king David, in the same response to the wonders of God's grace, wisdom and power: "I will extol You, my God, O King; and I will bless Your name forever and ever. Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; and His greatness is unsearchable. The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works. The Lord is righteous in all His ways, gracious in all His works. The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth. The Lord preserves all who love Him, but all the wicked He will destroy. My mouth shall speak the praise of the Lord, and all flesh shall bless His holy name forever and ever" (Ps. 145, selected verses).

There is another glorious way in which God uses Satan's work to fulfill His own purposes.

God Makes Use of Satan's Work as He Strengthens and Purifies the Faith of His Saints

Let us consider one last time the account of Job. While it shows the fearful power of Satan working to torment and destroy, there is tremendous comfort to be found in the way God handled Job's afflictions. We have already noted how Satan could not step beyond the limits God

had set. More than that, Satan would not be able to steal the heart and soul of Job away from God.

Notice how Job's faith was always in God's complete control. God allowed Satan to go only so far. Then, just when Job's faith was beginning to falter, God came to restore His child. God rebuked Job and brought him to repentance for his arrogance of questioning God. In one of His most majestic and awe-inspiring speeches God reminded Job and all of us that He has the overwhelming power and wisdom to guide and control all things. That same power and wisdom is working for us to make sure that each believer will not 'be tempted beyond what [he is] able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that [he] may be able to bear it' (1 Cor. 10:13).

God kept Job in his faith at all times. He did not allow Satan to overcome him and destroy his faith. God did allow Satan to torment him, however, in order to strengthen Job even more. Through Satan's affliction God put Job through the refining fire, so that his faith, "being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 1:7). Job, who already had a great faith, came out of the ordeal with a far greater appreciation of God's wisdom and power. Consequently, he gained a stronger trust in his Lord, repented of his sin and gave glory to God. Who knows what pride and other sin God spared Job from having by putting him through this test? In the course of his ordeal Job's three friends were also confronted with the need to repent. And countless people since have gained great insight into the power and wisdom of God and the way God uses trials to test and strengthen His children. We are blessed richly today because of what God allowed Satan to do to afflict Job. For example, we learn the folly of doubting or questioning God and the victory of trusting Him completely. All this and doubtless much more God had planned and accomplished by incorporating Satan's evil schemes to bring about so much good.

The overview Scripture gives of Satan's origin and his allowed activities is really an insight into how God does rule ALL things for benefit of the Church. He is the King of all. We often see the apparent victories of Satan in the world, only to be troubled and depressed by them. But on further investigation we see that in every case God wins the greater victory and His good will is always done. Satan tried to exalt himself above God. Instead he became an unwilling servant of God. In the end Satan will be cast into the lake of fire, where he will burn forever together with all the evil angels and the people who follow him rather than our gracious Lord. For those of us who have been called by God to faith in His Son, we can only watch in wonder and amazement. What an undeserved privilege we have to be able to call this great God our own and to hear Him say to us, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are Mine" (Isa. 43:1).

These truths are presented with the prayer of the Apostle Paul "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which 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 principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (Eph. 1:17-23).

May we also learn to confess: "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor? Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him? For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:33-36).

Endnotes

¹ Cf. the connection between false teachings and demonic spirits in 1 Timothy 4:1-2: ‘Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron.’

² The translation quoted here is NKJ, which renders לְשֹׂטְנוֹ as ‘oppose,’ whereas the NIV renders the Hebrew form as ‘accuse.’

³ Cf. also what Jesus foretold in Matthew 24:10-11.

⁴ For example, cf. Genesis 3:15: “...you shall bruise His heel.”

⁵ “For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope” (Ro. 15:4). Cf. also 1 Corinthians 10:6-13.

‘O BLESSED MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION’

God Has Reconciled Us To Himself Through Jesus Christ

Steven Sippert

Whether we saw the movie or not, Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ* certainly grabbed our attention and made us take notice of the attitudes and opinions people have toward the crucifixion of Jesus. In some cases there may have been opportunity for us to witness to the truth – to talk to the moviegoer and show him from the Bible the actual reason why Jesus died. Surely such an explanation is necessary in our day, when so many people are confused or misguided or ignorant of the good news that Jesus lived and died for them, in their place, to bring them peace with God.

The confusion is only made worse when the mainline church bodies drift farther and farther away from the core Christian truth that a person is saved by faith in Christ’s redemptive work and the forgiveness of sins which the Savior won for him and for all. On the Saturday after the public debut of *The Passion*, the Eau Claire *Leader-Telegram* ran the following article in its religion section: ‘Mel Gibson’s controversial new film is sparking debates. Not all believers share his traditional view that Jesus died to atone for sin.’ The article made the claim that atonement theology has been the traditional belief of Christianity through the ages, but not necessarily the teaching of the New Testament Scriptures. Atonement theology, according to the liberal perspective, is nothing more than a theory and a misinterpretation of Paul’s writings.¹ Speaking from a conservative perspective, Siegbert Becker noted twenty years ago that ‘modern theology has much to say about the love and mercy of the Lord and his constant willingness to forgive. Yet at the same time it calls the theology of the cross an out-of-date ‘blood religion,’ and it characterizes the God who sent his Son to Calvary by the determinate counsel of his will as a blood-thirsty tyrant who demands his shylockian pound of flesh before he forgives. A spokesman for that kind of theology has said that a God whose forgiveness must be purchased and a Father who must be reconciled to his children is not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.’² If people turn to liberal theology for an explanation of our Savior’s death, they are not going to hear what God did through Christ to free them from their guilt and give them reconciliation with Him.

Human reason has failed to understand how in His wondrous work of salvation God has acted according to His characteristic of grace *and* His characteristic of holiness. What is labeled as “blood theology” is in actuality the result of God being true to both characteristics. Because He is holy, He punishes the sinner. Because He is gracious and merciful, He saves the sinner and reconciles the sinner to Himself. That is the core truth which God would have us claim and embrace for ourselves by faith, defend from the intrusion of error, teach diligently to our children and grandchildren, minister to our fellow believers and share freely with the rest of the world.

Reconciliation with God = A Blessed Change in Our Status with God

To appreciate what God did for us and for all and to understand how desperately the world needs to have what God has given us, we trace the sequence of events which brought us from the former status of God’s enemies to the current status of being at peace with God and serving as His ambassadors. This change in our status with God is presented by the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:18-21. As we read this Scripture, we take note of the rich Gospel truths, especially those conveyed by the words underlined (nouns) or boldfaced (verbs) below. Note, however, that words put in italics are a means of the NKJ³ to indicate that a wording is added for complete sentence structure in English or completeness of thought. For example, the italicized word *are* in verse 18 does not reflect an English translation of a linking verb in the original language.

Now all things *are* of God, who has **reconciled** us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ **reconciling** the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore *you* on Christ’s behalf **be reconciled** to God. For He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

To aid our understanding of this Scripture, consider the following observations:

- Reconciliation (used twice) and the corresponding verb **reconcile** (three times) are the words Paul uses here more than any other in this text to describe what God has done for us and given to us.
- Paul is the only NT writer to use this word group in reference to the vertical relationship God has toward people. That word group is found in Romans 5:10-11, Romans 11:15, Ephesians 2:16, and Colossians 1:20-21, where either a verb form of (ἀποκαταλλάσσω or a noun form of καταλλαγή is used.
- The essential definition of the verb form καταλλάσσω has been well put by David Kuske and is very similar to definitions offered by others: “to make or bring about a complete change; when used with a personal object it most often refers to a change in the status of an individual by restoring him or her to a former status. Thus the meaning also to restore friendship between two people who have become enemies or to ‘reconcile.’”⁴

It’s important to realize that God does not change us internally or intrinsically when He provides the reconciliation that we need. The reconciliation comes about while we are “sinners,” in a state of being “ungodly,” and very much His “enemies,”⁵ that is, acting as enemies against Him and deserving to be rejected by Him. We do not change when He carries out His act of reconciliation. Nor should we say that God Himself goes through a change. He, who is changeless, remains true to His grace and true to His holiness. What changes is the status between us and Him. The enmity once there because of sin has been replaced with peace – initially and primarily a peace from God to us. God declares that He is at peace with us because of what He did to atone for our sins.

I propose the outline below as a framework for us to understand Paul's message in 2 Corinthians 5:18-21, to consider the input of parallel and support passages and to apply the truths therein to ourselves and the world.

- I. We were enemies of God because of our sin.
- II. God has reconciled us to Himself through His Son Jesus Christ.
- III. We receive this reconciliation by faith in Christ.
- IV. As believers we also receive from God the ministry of reconciliation.

May the Lord bless our study of His Word with the guidance of the Spirit and lead us to see the glory of His grace and the certainty of His peace.

I. We were enemies of God because of our sin.

Who is to blame for the former state of enmity? With many broken relationships and outbreaks of hostility in this world, blame can be found on both sides. That is not the case between God and the people He made to be His own and live with Him in His image. He showed nothing but goodness and blessing to those He created. However, with no provocation on God's part Adam and Eve chose to rebel against Him. They became His enemies by their sin. Likewise, all who descend from these original ancestors have inherited from them a rebellious, corrupt nature and have continued the war against God, which originated in the Garden of Eden. Because of original sin enmity against God has become our inherent human condition. We too have wronged our Creator by our sins and our sinfulness. In our original state of guilt, ignorance and unbelief, we were not only dead to God; we in our "carnal mind," in the very way our sinful nature thinks, were waging "enmity against God." As the believers once were in Colosse, we too were "alienated" from God by our sins and "enemies" of Him in our "mind by wicked works."⁶ The verdict of Scripture is unmistakable and indisputable. The conflict caused by sin was our fault, not God's.

What God did to remove the conflict and reconcile us to Himself is an unexpected paradox (to our way of thinking), especially when we consider the divine standard given in Proverbs 17:15:⁷

He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the just, both of them alike *are* an abomination to the LORD.

God abhors the practice of injustice and forbids the human judge from ever doing it, which is to say that he may not in his earthly court, as God's representative, declare the guilty to be innocent and condemn the innocent as guilty. Now some may suggest that God at Calvary was contradicting Himself. Or they may suggest that the crucifixion of Christ does not mean what we think it means. What the critics fail to realize, however, is that God is in the unique position of providing atonement to Himself by way of substitution. He is true to His holy nature. He listens to the requirements of His Law and carries out His justice, with Jesus as a willing participant, taking our place under the standards set by His own Law.

God requires in His Law that His people, those who stand in His presence, are to have the same degree of sinless perfection that He has. Nothing less than a perfect record for each individual will suffice to meet the holy standard God has determined. God's Law has placed upon each of us the obligation to obey every command. This obligation does not go away unless it is fulfilled, either by us ... or for us. The first option of keeping the commandments ourselves is utterly hopeless. The second option – Christ obeying His Father in our place – is destined to accomplish for us what we, in our rebellious state of enmity, could not possibly accomplish for ourselves. Consider the Scriptures which apply:

Leviticus 19:2 You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God *am* holy.

Romans 5:19 For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous.

Romans 10:4 Christ *is* the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.⁸

God also requires in His Law that all sins are to be completely punished. What comes to my mind as an attempted explanation is the analogy of monetary debt. A person's debt must be paid; it's only right and fair to the creditor. In fact the creditor would be willing to accept payment from a source other than the one who owes, just so long as the debt is paid in full. I suspect this way of speaking – what works for the bank or the credit card company – comes up short in presenting what God is really doing. God the Father has determined the penalty of our sins to be physical suffering and death, plus the curse of His anger upon the guilty and utter rejection by God – an event in which He forsakes and separates from the person who bears the guilt, an event which is going to transpire in the everlasting judgment of hell. This penalty Paul spells out very succinctly when he applies the truth of Deuteronomy 27:26 and says to the Galatians, "Cursed *is* everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them" (Gal. 3:10). Paul then goes on to say three verses later in Galatians 3:13:

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed *is* everyone who hangs on a tree').⁹

Jesus did more than die a physical death for us. He suffered the curse of hell for us! He suffered the curse of God's anger, what He so sorrowfully called the "cup" that the Father willed Him to drink (Matt. 26:39, 42). This was no stranger whom God was treating as guilty and forsaking at the cross of Calvary. God was punishing His Son for us! The same Son in whom He was "well-pleased!" What a paradox to our reason. What a testimony to the ugly, horrible, condemning nature of our sin! What a tribute to the persistent commitment and vast richness of His love!

II. God has reconciled us to Himself through His Son Jesus Christ.

The concept of reconciliation to God is always presented in Scripture as unilateral. God, the party who was wronged, has decided to restore the broken relationship and provide the guilty party what they don't deserve to have. He resolves the conflict for us in full accord with His holy standards, because He has such unbelievable, unconditional love for us. We can say that and trust it to be true, because His undeserved love applies universally and equally to all people in this world.

In the closing verses of 2 Corinthians 5 the apostle Paul does not elaborate on our need for reconciliation. Nor does he point out God's underlying motive for reconciling the world. Rather he presents the reality and result of it. In verse 19 he explains what he initially presents in verse 18. Also, in verse 21 he states the underlying truth which causes our status with God to change so dramatically.

Now all things *are* of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. [Verse 20 will be treated in part IV.]

For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

We focus on the words underlined above to better appreciate the certainty of what Paul is claiming. He can say that God has provided reconciliation for him¹⁰ and for the Corinthian believers (and we can say it too) because God has reconciled the world to Himself. Everything Jesus did was done for the benefit of and *in the place* of all people. The substitution principle which God applies in Christ serves as the foundation for the debt of all being paid in full (cf. verses 14-15),¹¹ the sins of all being forgiven (v. 19) and the exchange of identity in which He sees us as being "the righteousness of God in Him." Verse 21 helps to explain what has happened to our sins according to verse 19. God has not charged our sins against us (as a debit imputed to our account). Rather He charges them to Christ, whom He "made to be sin for us."

Thus our record, from God's point of view, is entirely clean; not so much as one violation is held against us. All of it is gone from view, because all of it was laid on Christ.¹²

Meanwhile, in the same act of imputation Christ's perfect obedience is credited to us.¹³ It's as though we kept all the commandments and obeyed everything God expected of us. God's practice of imputation (debiting and crediting) is universal and complete. He subtracts from the world the full guilt and penalty of their sins. Their sins become the sins of Christ, whose righteousness is added to their account. His righteousness becomes their righteousness. This exchange of sin for righteousness ultimately explains why Jesus died and suffered such torment on the cross. At Calvary on Good Friday God dealt with all the sins of all the sinners in one place, on one Person. He punished One who was deemed to be guilty, whose innocent suffering was deemed to be the equivalent of all sinners suffering their own punishment. In that supreme act of atonement the matter has been settled and the conflict resolved. All the requirements have been fulfilled. The reason for the enmity has been removed. God is truly and completely at peace with all those who rebelled against Him. Their sins He sees no more.

As Judge presiding over the highest court of all, God has put the world on trial, rendered His justice through Christ and declared all people to be righteous, which is to say that they are more than regarded as "not guilty."¹⁴ He sees them as spotless, perfect – to the same degree that Jesus is spotless and perfect. The proof of the matter is sealed and confirmed in the resurrection of Christ. In his first epistle Paul reminded the Corinthians, "If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!" (1 Cor. 15:17) A savior still dead in the grave would have to mean that we are still guilty in God's eyes. A risen Savior, however, can only mean that we are justified, declared completely righteous, even as Paul told the Romans that the Lord Jesus "was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification" (Rom. 4:25).

The fact that the heavenly Father has accepted the life and death of His Son as sufficient provision of our righteousness and sufficient payment for our sins is guaranteed by the fact that Christ is risen from the dead. The fact that God has in one decree declared all sins to be forgiven and all sinners to be righteous is likewise proven by the resurrection of His Son. The principle of substitution did not end at the cross but continued to apply to the event and reality signified by the empty tomb. The Father, who had previously condemned His Son, subsequently *justified* His Son when He raised Him from the dead. By way of substitution it is then true that God justified all sinners whose place Christ has effectively taken. This understanding of a vicarious resurrection is confirmed by Paul in the New Testament (cf. passages cited above) and properly recognized by Lutheran theologians, such as Johann Gerhard, living after Luther:

As God punished our sins in Christ, which sins had been laid upon Him as our Surety (or Substitute) and had been imputed to Him, so also in raising Him from the dead, He by that very deed absolved Him (Christ) from our sins which had been imputed to Him, and consequently He also absolved us in Him.¹⁵

Scripture has not supplied us the exact terminology *Objective Justification* or *Universal Justification*, which we have seen fit to use in various materials put to use in our church body. Nevertheless, the concepts are clearly defined and taught in the New Testament and continually serve as the sure basis of the message we proclaim, the truth we believe and the hope we confess. God's decree of justification is *universal* because it applies equally to all: all sinners are declared righteous because of Christ. God's decree of justification is *objective* because the sins of all have been forgiven in Christ, regardless of whether they know it or not and regardless of whether they believe it or not. This decree of God "happens not when a man comes to faith nor after he has come to faith, but it happened the moment that God accepted the sacrifice of His Son for the reconciliation of the world; it happened in the court of God in heaven, without the knowledge and experience of man, and irrespective of the attitude of man toward it. This act of God is not repeated, even as the redemption by Christ, on which it is based, is not repeated. The justifying sentence of God, by which He did not impute the sins to the people in the world but declared

them just, stands and remains in force, even as a law once passed remains in force until it is abrogated.”¹⁶

Wouldn't it be tragic if Christ's great work of universal atonement and God's decree of universal forgiveness had remained a secret? More than sad, it would have spelled disaster for us, because God's forgiveness of our sins is a gift to be received by us in order to benefit us personally now and in the coming Day of Judgment. Thankfully, we know that God has brought us His forgiveness, His reconciliation of us to Himself; He has announced it to us and caused us to receive it.

III. We receive this reconciliation by faith in Christ.

There is a perennial persistence on the part of man to add a condition to the Gospel and make God's free offer of forgiveness depend on something man does. This tendency runs contrary to the very nature and intent of God's decree, for "as far as the sins of men are concerned, the Gospel does not tell us that God is ready and willing to forgive them if and when a man believes; it does not offer a potential forgiveness of sins; ... the Gospel tells us that when God in Christ reconciled the world unto Himself, He then did not impute the trespasses unto men, He then forgave all their sins to all of them. The act of forgiving is not held in abeyance, but it is finished, it is accomplished, the sins *are* forgiven to all men. Therefore we do not preach of and about forgiveness of sins, but we *preach forgiveness itself*; we offer to men a finished product, not a future possibility" (E.W. Koehler).¹⁷

Koehler's words help to underscore the point of what God is doing with His reconciliation of the world. God declares His universal, objective peace to the individual as that person is confronted with the Gospel – an encounter which offers him up front the full forgiveness of his sins. It is always God's intent that His gift be received by the individual through faith. Faith in Christ for the forgiveness of sins does not make that forgiveness become true for the individual person at the moment of conversion. It is already true and real, to be possessed by the individual as a certainty from God and a dear treasure to claim and use right now in this life. In fact, having the forgiveness of sins is the sure confidence of receiving every other blessing from God. When you know that God has forgiven all your sins, then you also know that He loves you unconditionally. On that same basis (that your sins are forgiven!) you know that He claims and treats you as His own dear child; you know that He provides you with everything you need and much more; and you know that He makes you the heir of everlasting life in heaven. All of it comes as a free gift which attaches so closely and completely to the forgiveness of sins.

In 2 Corinthians 5 Paul does not explicitly delineate the role faith plays in the plan of reconciliation. However, he states quite clearly in Romans 5 what he intimates in the words *be reconciled to God*:

"If when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life."¹¹ And not only *that*, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation" (Rom. 5:10-11).

We note in particular how verse 10 declares the objective reconciliation, which took place through the death of Christ at a time when the believers were enemies of God (also at a time when the believers weren't believers). In verse 11 we recognize how faith is involved. Only as believers in Christ can it be said that "we have now received the reconciliation." What God offers in the Gospel, His reconciliation of us to Himself, we possess by faith; we receive and have this reconciliation by trusting it to be the one and only thing which makes us right with God. Yet even this trust would never have happened if the Holy Spirit had not created in our dead hearts the very faith which receives and continues to possess the forgiveness of sins.

The role faith plays as the instrument of reception is expressed by other Scriptures as well. Peter said in reference to Christ, "To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins" (Acts 10:43). Paul assigned a receiving role to his faith when he said, "I count all things loss ... that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which *is* from the law, but that which *is* through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith" (Phil. 3:8-9). Therefore, when the apostle begs his audience to "be reconciled with God" in 2 Corinthians 5:21, we recognize an appeal for faith as the means of receiving what is offered. Note how the expressions contained in the three supporting passages convey essentially the same thing:

By faith in Christ

... we receive the reconciliation (Rom. 5:11);

... we receive the remission of sins (Acts 10:43);

... we gain Christ and are found in him, having the righteousness from God instead of our own from the law (Phil. 3:8-9).

In the process of contending for the truth, upholding the unconditional Gospel of full and free forgiveness and teaching this doctrine to generations of Christians, confessional Lutheran theology has distinguished between *objective* and *subjective* justification. This distinction is not intended to divide justification into two parts that are separate from each other. God's intent is to use the objective or universal justification of all people, definitively established by Christ and freely declared in the Gospel, as the firm foundation for the subjective or individual justification of each person by faith. The Scriptures which teach objective justification are expressing the certainty of what God did for us (since He did it for all). The Scriptures which teach subjective justification are communicating how the certain gift from God is received, applied and possessed by the individual person. We may not misuse the doctrine of objective justification by allowing a form of universalism to enter in, for we know that only unbelief causes the unbelieving person to lose the forgiveness God offers to him.¹⁸ Rather we affirm the doctrine of objective justification and stress it all the more in our proclamation of the Gospel, so that unbelief may be replaced with faith and subjective justification may become the reality for those who hear our proclamation.

Preparation for this essay not only focused my thinking and understanding on the correlation between objective and subjective justification. It also brought to my attention the careful and scriptural deliberation of this topic carried out by those who have gone before us. In particular I was struck by a quotation made available through Prof. Edmund Reim. Toward the close of his essay, "A History of the Term 'Objective Justification,'" he offered his own translation of the following treatment of justification, written by Paul Althaus in *Die Christliche Wahrheit*.¹⁹

The act by which God justifies takes place in Jesus Christ. Thereby the question is already answered: *When* is man justified? The answer must read: In the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. But God's action in the death and resurrection of Jesus is not a matter of the past, but becomes a present thing for us at every stage in history by the way in which God deals with us in the Gospel, in its preaching, absolution, Sacrament

Here one should not forget that Christ and faith belong together. Only in faith is God's verdict real for us. In this respect God's act of justification is at once "objective" and "subjective." God sends Christ and the Gospel, God grants faith that lays hold on Christ in the Gospel and thereby has this justification. This results in the following answer to the question concerning time: I have this justification (I am justified) when God works faith in me through the Gospel. This "subjective" version of the answer does not imply a conflict with the previously stated "objective" form, but the two belong together. Their unity consists in this that the "objective" answer can be perceived by faith alone, but this faith does not look to its own resources, but only to what it is given, to the "objective" fact. We are justified at the cross; we are justified by faith – these twain belong inseparably together.

IV. As believers we also receive the ministry of reconciliation.

In 2 Corinthians 3 Paul holds up the ministry of the new covenant as having greater glory than the previous ministry of the old covenant. It is, after all, a ministry of the life-giving Spirit, not a ministry of the letter which kills. It is a ministry which conveys the righteousness people need instead of the condemnation they deserve. This greater ministry of the new covenant uses the Gospel to overcome spiritual blindness and reveal who Christ is and what He has done for all people. Everything about this ministry makes it superior to the former ministry which it has indeed replaced. Paul even says about himself and his fellow ministers of the new covenant: “we use great boldness of speech – unlike Moses, *who* put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away” (2 Cor. 3:12-13). Paul also claims about himself and his fellow ministers of the Gospel: “we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us” (2 Cor. 4:7).

The ministry of the new covenant will succeed, even though its message is proclaimed by weak and vulnerable human messengers. This ministry will succeed, because the power of God is at work through the Spirit, not only in the messenger but also in the hearts of those who hear. The Gospel ministry will succeed, because it offers a completed, ready-made package of blessings: reconciliation already established, forgiveness of sins already purchased and eternal life freely given.

The Lord Jesus has determined to use weak, ordinary human messengers – sinners no less, yet reconciled by His blood and sanctified by faith – as the ones chosen and sent to proclaim the reconciliation He won for the world. What Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 resonates with us as the apostolic echo of the Savior’s Great Commission, given to all believers to be carried out world-wide between the ascension of Christ and His second coming.²⁰

Now all things *are* of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore *you* on Christ’ s behalf, be reconciled to God.

While some would argue that Paul is referring to public ministers or the apostles in particular (or even himself primarily, the Apostle to the Gentiles) as those who have received the ministry of reconciliation, we have no compelling reason not to think of the first person plural, the “us” and the “we” above, as said in reference to believers. Those who received the reconciliation of God by faith are sent to share that same reconciliation with others. Those who received God’s peace, offered to them in the Gospel, are to distribute that same peace to all who do not know it. It is a ministry which comes from God as His gift, not a customary practice that we have established for ourselves as our own arrangement or invention. This ministry embraces both the full-time efforts of called workers in the church and the private efforts of believers when they share the Gospel with their families, friends, neighbors, coworkers and any others whom they encounter in this world.

Second Corinthians 5:20 identifies this ministry as doing the work of an ambassador. What a fitting description for the role we are sent to fulfill. When God determines that He is at peace with the world because of Christ, the world blindly goes on in a constant state of ignorance and unbelief. They do not know what Christ has done for them. They do not know the forgiveness of sins which He has provided for them. They are unaware of the banquet of blessings God has prepared for them. Thus the urgent need for messengers to spread the good news. Thus the urgent need for ambassadors to serve, not as negotiators of a treaty yet to be determined, but simply as distributors of God’s peace already provided. We distribute a treaty from God to man, with the terms already set, the reparations of the sin-war already paid, and the

war criminals acquitted, set free and invited to be on God's side and live forever in His kingdom of grace.

Paul says that we are "ambassadors for Christ" who "implore on Christ's behalf," which is to say that we represent Him.²¹ We stand in His place and speak on His behalf to all who do not know Him. It is certainly a more limited form of substitution than the one He carried out in our place to reconcile us to God. Nevertheless, as long as we are declaring His Word, we represent the one who ascended to His heavenly glory, the same Lord and Prophet of the Church who said, "He who hears you hears Me, he who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me" (Luke 10:16).

The apostle Paul said a very similar thing: "We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore *you* on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God." God Himself – the One whose holiness was violated by man's sin, the One whose goodness was treated with rebellious enmity – He's the One who appeals through the messengers that the members of the audience,²² any and all who hear the message, should receive the reconciliation, that is, the forgiveness of sins and the peace offered to them.

We noted earlier that the ministry of reconciliation has come in the Great Commission as God's gift to us. He instituted and commanded it. He provides the power which makes it successfully accomplish His plan of salvation. He has also provided the exact message which we are to proclaim. He established that message among us in providing through verbal inspiration the full revelation of the Old and New Testament Scriptures. He has given His Church, the believers, the mandate and responsibility of proclaiming that message to the world.

Through the apostle God has specified our role as His ambassadors who proclaim His message – the "word of reconciliation," which is the good news that freely declares to all people God's forgiveness of their sins. This same apostle Paul, in his missionary efforts as the Lord's ambassador to the Gentiles, has given us a model to follow *in proclaiming the word of reconciliation as the forgiveness of sins*. We especially learn from his encounter with the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. After he confronted the worshippers there with the identity of Jesus as the Christ God had promised, he showed them what Jesus accomplished in His death and resurrection. And he said to them, "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:38-39).²³

What Paul said in Acts 13 is worth emulating today. We do well to proclaim the Gospel as objective, trustworthy fact and distribute God's reconciliation as a ready-made gift. Our proclamation of the Gospel is to be more than a recitation of history. Rather we point to what Jesus did in the past as a certain accomplishment. The atonement made by His life and death is irreversible; it can't be undone – not by the devil, not by anyone. The fact that all sins have been forgiven is established and grounded on the fact that the debt of all sins has been paid and the obligation of obedience has been met. The resurrection of Christ assures it.

To all who are made aware of their sins²⁴ and the enmity caused by their sins, we need not hesitate to present them the Gospel unconditionally. We tell them clearly and confidently that because of Christ doing for them what they can not do for themselves, God has declared them righteous in His eyes, forgiven of all their sins and hereby invited to be forever blessed as His children. If we were to inadvertently not mention the matter of faith in our proclamation, this would not render the message ineffective, not in the slightest. The Spirit can work faith in the heart without the words "faith" or "believe" ever being spoken in the conversation. That is not to say that we can't conclude our proclamation with an invitation to receive what is offered. A fitting conclusion may sound something like this: "Because of Christ and what He did in your place, God is at peace with you. All your sins are forgiven. Believe it!" This invitation at the end, however, would not be the cause of the faith God desires and expects. What God offers in the Gospel will still be the cause of conversion taking place in the heart.

If we faithfully stress the objective, universal truth of the Gospel and the unconditional offer of God's forgiveness, we can't go wrong in our approach and our work as ambassadors who dispense God's peace to the people who so desperately need to receive it. Let's not overlook the language of urgency which Paul has used toward the end of 2 Corinthians 5: "we are ambassadors for Christ as though God were pleading ... we implore [lit. beg]" What God offers to people in the Gospel cannot be rejected without everlasting detriment to the individual. Their opportunity to hear the Gospel will not go on forever. Their time of grace is now; tomorrow may be too late (cf. 2 Cor. 6:2). There is no other way for them to escape judgment and the final condemnation of unbelief. God's reconciliation, provided through Christ and communicated in the Bible, is the only solution and the sure solution.

In the 2004 Spring issue of *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* Forrest Bivens advocates the pursuit of five guiding principles which lead the church to "get the right message out in the right way." What he offers, in my estimation, is worth the consideration and diligent implementation by all who wish to serve faithfully in their calling as ambassadors of Christ. These principles are listed below with some altered wording and additional thoughts included on my part.²⁵

1. As we proclaim the Gospel of Christ, let us continue to employ the rich vocabulary of the Bible and the picture language it uses to portray and emphasize justification.
2. Proclaim Christ unconditionally and present the message of God's forgiveness of sins in its objective, unconditional state.
3. Present the person and work of Christ explicitly in our preaching, teaching, counseling and outreach. Make it clear to others that His perfect life of obedience and His sacrificial death were sufficiently carried out in the place of all and for the benefit of all.
4. Use Law as Law and Gospel as Gospel, with the Gospel as the predominant message we share in the ministry of reconciliation.
5. Trust the Gospel and its message of justification to carry out God's intent in the hearts of all who hear, including ourselves.

Therefore we seek to go forth with renewed gratitude, knowing the great price Jesus paid in our place. We seek to go forth with renewed confidence, knowing the great certainty of the objective message He has given us to share. We also seek to go forth with urgent concern for lost souls, knowing that the reconciliation God has given to us is meant for all to rescue all.

ENDNOTES

¹ To gauge the impact of the liberal viewpoint, consider an excerpt from the *Leader-Telegram* article: "If Jesus didn't die for sin, the ramifications are enormous for Christians. The church's doctrine of original sin is called into question. So too are the meaning of redemption, salvation and Jesus' mission on earth" (written by Susan Hogan/Albach, *Dallas Morning News*, and submitted in the 2-28-04 issue of the *Leader-Telegram*).

² S. Becker, "Universal Justification," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 83 (Winter 1986), p. 13.

³ All Scripture quotations in this essay are taken from the New King James Version.

⁴ D. Kuske, "Objective Justification' in Our Mission Outreach Based on an Exegesis of 2 Corinthians 5:18-19," *WLQ*, Jan. 1980, p. 9.

⁵ The words in quotation marks come from Romans 5:6-11.

⁶ The words in quotation marks reflect a personal application of descriptions given in Rom. 8:7: "...the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be" and Col. 1:21: "And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled."

⁷ In contrast to the Proverbs passage consider what Paul says in Romans 4:5 and 2 Cor. 5:21: “But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.” “He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

⁸ According to the context of Romans 10 the “end of the law for righteousness” means the completion or fulfillment of the law so as to be viewed and declared righteous in God’s sight.

⁹ This passage has the same prepositional phrase “for us” as 2 Cor. 5:21. The original wording ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν indicates substitution: Christ being made “sin” in our place and Christ becoming a “curse” in our place. Gal. 3:13 also applies an OT truth from Deut. 21:23, namely that God’s curse was to be upon the one whose dead body was hung on a tree or wooden pole outside the camp. Thus the crucifixion of Christ as the means of punishment was no coincidence. God was using crucifixion to curse His Son according to the provisions of the OT Law. Cf. also what is said in Matt. 25:41: “Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

¹⁰ Consider Paul’s former background of enmity against God: he rejected Jesus as the Christ, hated him and zealously persecuted Christians. The Corinthians were no better – many of whom were formerly pagans who lived immoral lives in a city known at the time for its debauchery.

¹¹ “The love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all...” The phrase “for all” uses the same preposition found in Gal. 3:13 and 2 Cor. 5:21. The substitutionary sense in v. 14 is very clear: the One (Christ) died in the place of all, with the result that God sees all as having died on the cross for their own sins. As far as God is concerned, we have already been punished (i.e., cursed) for what we did.

¹² Note how Paul’s statement in 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 is similar to Isaiah 53: “He *was* wounded for our transgressions, *He was* bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (vv. 5-6).

¹³ This teaching agrees with the position of our Lutheran Confessions. Regarding the active obedience of Christ, the Formula of Concord says: “His obedience consists not only in his suffering and dying, but also in his spontaneous subjection to the law in our stead and his keeping of the law in so perfect a fashion that, reckoning it to us as righteousness, God forgives us our sins, accounts us holy and righteous, and saves us forever on account of this entire obedience which, by doing and suffering, in life and in death, Christ rendered for us to his heavenly Father” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article III:15, Tappert, p. 541 – underlining mine).

¹⁴ We should recognize the limitations of using a human court as an analogy of God’s court. Our American judicial system, with its presumption of “innocent until proven guilty,” does not through its process of acquittal declare the defendant to be moral or decent or good. He’s simply deemed to be “not guilty” of the alleged crime, with no judgment made on his character, thoughts, words or any other actions he may have done or left undone. Only God’s court can render a judgment that meets the standard of holiness and declares the individual to be perfect.

¹⁵ The English translation of Gerhard’s comments, originally written in Latin, comes from p. 101 of John P. Meyer’s commentary on Second Corinthians, *Ministers of Christ*.

¹⁶ E.W. Koehler, “Objective Justification,” *Concordia Theological Monthly*, April 1945, p. 225.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 226. The italics are part of the original article in the CTM issue, but the underlining seems to have been added later and appears in a compilation of Objective Justification articles put together by Robert D. Preus.

¹⁸ Cf. John 3:18: ‘He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.’ Forgiveness is lost (i.e. not received and possessed) by the one who rejects what the Gospel tells him.

¹⁹ What Edmund Reim translated came from Vol. II, pp. 413-414 of Althaus’ work. The translated excerpt comes from *Quartalschrift*, Vol. 52 (April 1955), pp. 93-94.

²⁰ Cf. Paul’s statement in 2 Cor. 5:18-20 with the words of Christ in Matt. 28:18-20, Mark 16:15-16, Luke 24:46-49 (esp. v. 47) and John 20:19-23.

²¹ The English phrases “for Christ” and “on Christ’s behalf” are the NKJ translation for the same two words in Greek: ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ, which involves the same Greek preposition that expresses substitution in other NT passages previously considered. Paul’s wording in v. 20 calls to mind the image of the emperor sending his legates, or ambassadors, who stand in place of the emperor and represent him to the people he governs.

²² The italicized word *you* in v. 20 does not correspond to an actual 2nd person pronoun in the Greek. The NKJ translators chose to add this word based on the opinion that Paul was addressing the Corinthian church when he wrote ‘be reconciled to God.’ I prefer to think of Paul here as intentionally leaving the audience unspecified. The ambassadors of Christ, with God Himself pleading through them, are saying to their audience in this world, whoever those people may be: ‘Be reconciled God’ (= receive the reconciliation God has provided to you and declared to you).

²³ We can think of v. 38 as the proclamation of objective justification: ‘through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins.’ We can think of v. 39 as the proclamation of subjective justification: “by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.”

²⁴ It is not the intent of this essay to elaborate on the function of the Law in our ministry. We recognize the need to use God’s Law to show people (and ourselves) the guilt and curse of their sins, their inability to take their sins away and their desperate need for a Savior.

²⁵ F. Bivens, ‘Getting the Right Message Out – and Getting It Out the Right Way,’ *WLQ*, Spring 2004, p. 101
