

## First Peter No. 27 “Resisting the Devil”

1 Peter 5:6-9

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Remember, we are in a long section in which Peter has been considering the suffering being endured by his persecuted Christian brethren. We don't know the details – precisely why they were being put upon or in what their suffering consisted – but we know that it was persecution; that is, they were suffering *because they were Christians*. The Christian faith was deeply controversial in the first century and for several centuries thereafter. Wherever it was found it attracted aggressive opposition. Most recently we considered Peter's emphasis on humility as the essential virtue, not only of the church's leaders but of all Christians since, as he put it, there were suffering *under the mighty hand of God*. Like it or not, this trial was something that God had ordered for them. They needed to submit to God's will and should do so in the confidence that he would exalt his people in due time. But now he says something else about their troubles. They may be the will of God, but they are also the sinister intrigues of the Devil and his kingdom. Like it or not, the same thing in our lives can be both from God and Satan. As Luther reminds us Satan is at the last “God's devil,” that is, even his effort to destroy Christ's kingdom is used by God to accomplish his perfect will in the world and in the lives of his people. Satan may have intended these trials for evil, but God intended them for good!

### Text Comments

- v. 8 The exhortation to be sober-minded or clear-headed, and to be alert, is common in the NT and especially in two contexts. First, we are to be alert in view of the coming return of Christ who will reward the faithful and punish those who are not ready. Second, we must be alert to the attacks upon our faith and godliness that arise either from our own sinful desires, or from the world, or from the devil and his demons. The Lord is warning us not to be spiritually drowsy and lethargic, unaware of what is going on around us or within us.

“Prowls around” reminds us of Job 1:7 where we read that the Devil, by his own admission, had been “roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it.” What was he doing on his trip through the earth? Well, he was looking for someone to devour. This world, Paul says, is Satan's kingdom. He is its prince. He has real authority here, though his authority is not to be compared with God's. *He is always on the lookout for opportunities to harm Christians!*

- v. 9 The idea is not that misery loves company, but that any good soldier is nerved and strengthened by the idea that everyone else in the army is fighting as manfully as he, everyone else is being tested in the same way, that he or she is not alone in the struggle.

Peter has just encouraged his readers by reminding them of God's tender and faithful interest in them and concern for their welfare. But that does not mean they can relax. There is another who is also interested in them, but with a very different purpose. The Devil is always seeking their harm, their destruction. They must be watchful and ready to resist him at all times. Christians have an adversary in this world, a powerful being intent on doing them harm. Only eternity will reveal how much of the trouble that Christians experienced, how many of their failures, how many of their sorrows were the direct result of the Devil's efforts to harm them and by harming them to strike a

blow against the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. He can't get to Jesus Christ any longer – and failed in his efforts when he could – but he can get to us, Christ's people, and he does. The Gospels seem to make it clear that the Satan and the demons know that they will not win this war, but such is their bitter malevolence that they are determined to take as many with them as they can when they are finally defeated. Think of Hitler's orders to his henchmen at the very end of the war to destroy as much of Germany as could be destroyed before it fell into enemy hands.

Now the Bible is, at one and the same time, forthcoming and reticent about Satan and his demons and their influence in the world. Holy Scripture certainly emphasizes the malignant role that these fallen angels play in the life of mankind. Satan – also called the Devil, Apollyon, Beelzebub, Belial, and “the ancient serpent” – is described as “the accuser of the brethren,” “our enemy,” “the evil one,” “the father of lies and the murderer of men's souls,” “the prince of demons,” “the prince of this world,” “the ruler of the kingdom of the air,” and “the tempter.”

He is said to “rage against men,” “to work in the sons of disobedience,” “to blind the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ,” “to turn men away from God to serve him,” “to make men captive to do his will,” “to deceive the nations,” “to sow tares in the field of this world,” “to obstruct the witness of the gospel (1 Thessalonians 2:18),” “to masquerade as an angel of light” so as to deceive the church and lead her into error, “to inspire false religions (1 Corinthians 10:20),” “to make war against the saints,” “to throw Christians into prison,” “to oppress with physical and mental illness,” to lie and murder, and to hold in his hand the power of death (Hebrews 2:14).

It was Satan who tempted Eve and so led Adam to sin and the race to fall into sin and death. It was Satan who accused Job and afflicted him with physical and mental misery and who, however mysteriously, sought possession of the body of Moses (Jude 9). It was Satan who incited David to sin by numbering the people; it was Satan who accused Joshua the high priest of sin (Zechariah 3:1), who tempted Jesus to sin, who crippled a woman for eighteen years, who incited Peter to contradict Jesus' teaching about his approaching death, who put it into Judas' heart to betray Jesus, who requested permission to sift Peter like wheat and so tempted him to deny Jesus, it was Satan who filled Ananias' heart to lie against the Holy Spirit, and it was Satan who tormented Paul with a thorn in the flesh. [This summary from Reymond, *Systematic Theology*, 659-660] And here, it is Satan who sought to devour these saints and so, Peter's implication is clear, it was Satan who stood behind the opposition and persecution that they were suffering.

Sometimes the Bible speaks of the demons as a collective force for evil in the world, as when we read of “the powers of this dark world,” “principalities and powers” or “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” And we read in a most intriguing reference in Daniel of particular demons having some special role in the life of particular nations. Remember in Daniel 10 the reference to “the prince of the kingdom of Persia” having resisted Gabriel and delayed him from coming to Daniel's aid. What does such a statement mean about the operations of the kingdom of the Evil One? Who can say, but obviously like other dimension of human life, politics and political power is also an arena of satanic activity.

We are even told something of their method of working. The Devil is a deceiver, an accuser, a tempter. We read of his wiles and schemes and traps. It was his cunning, his craftiness that beguiled Eve in the garden and led to the fall. And we are told that he often disguises himself as an angel of light and so recommends evil to human minds as something that is good. In other words, his chief

method of working in the world seems to be to persuade people to believe lies. As an aside, it is said that he has two chief lies, two lies above all his others. The first is the one he told Eve: “you surely shall not die.” He teaches men and women to believe that their sins are not serious and that they have nothing to fear from the wrath of God. And his second, as the accuser of the brethren, once his first lie has failed, is to convince believers that their sins are too great, too offensive to God for them to be forgiven. And is it not the case that we are always struggling somewhere between those two lies – we are taking our sins far too lightly or we are taking them to be greater than the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Of course, we are taught in many ways that Christ has conquered the Devil and that his power and evil reign are subject to the will of the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus, the seed of the woman, has, in the language of the most ancient promise in the Bible, crushed the head of the serpent, or, perhaps more accurately, as Paul writes in Romans 16:20, he has, by his death and resurrection, made it certain that he *will soon and finally* crush Satan under our feet. The battle has been fought and won, it remains only to do what commanders call the “mopping up,” bitter though that fighting can be! Christ came, we read, to “destroy the works of the Devil,” and to that end the Lord Jesus “tied the strong man up and plundered his house” and “disarmed the powers and authorities, exposing them openly, triumphing over them by the cross.” And so, we read that “the ruler of this world has been judged,” “will be driven out,” his dominion, authority, and power will be destroyed (1 Corinthians 15:24-26) and so, finally, the Devil himself will be subjected to eternal judgment (Hebrews 2:14-15). In Revelation 20 we read that the lake of fire is reserved for the Devil and his servants.

So, it cannot be denied that the Bible speaks clearly and emphatically about Satan’s role and the role of his subordinates in opposing the kingdom of God in the world and seeking the harm and the failure of Christ’s people in the world. They cause mayhem of every kind. It is clear that a great deal of evil happens at his instigation and that his power is always at work in the world, ranging itself against the purposes of God and seeking the destruction of men’s souls. We have the impression, in Holy Scripture, that the Devil is no one’s friend, his rebellion against God and his own failure to best the Lord Christ in mortal combat have poisoned his heart against everyone. He is a cruel master who seeks only harm, even for those who do his bidding. All of that we know and it is, obviously, a dimension of reality in this world that is of the greatest importance, however ignorant of it most men and women may be and however often even Christians forget it. The Devil and his devils clearly are a force to be reckoned with. Much that is evil and destructive and harmful comes from them and results from their actions among the world of men, even if, at the last, they are doomed and are subject to the rule of Christ. It is the working of Satan, no doubt, that is at least a partial explanation of the virulence of human evil – the brutality and inhumanity of man. Would, for example, there ever have been a holocaust were there no Satan? Would human beings have embraced evil as often or as readily or as enthusiastically as they have without the encouragement of the evil kingdom? Who can say for sure, but we may doubt it, given the fact that the Devil is the prince of this world and given the fact that he is seeking to do evil to everyone with all of his great power.

But, when all of that has been said and been given its due, *there is more that the Bible does not say than that it says*, a great deal concerning the kingdom of the Evil One about which the Bible leaves us completely in the dark. The Bible says nothing about the creation of the angels, nothing specifically, apart from what many take to be allusions in Isaiah and Ezekiel, about the fall of the angels who sinned. God made them good but they became evil and God permitted this and then permitted them to remain evil and to fight against him. How and why this happened we are not told. Nor is it ever explained why there is redemption for human beings but not for angels. More than that

*we are never told precisely what the powers of Satan and the demonic spirits actually are.* We know that they are powerful, but, clearly, they are not divine. They are not omnipresent or omnipotent. It is not clear that they know your thoughts. Rabbi Duncan, who thought a lot about angels and devils, concluded, “No single heart-secret is known to any single devil.” What they can do and what they cannot do is never explained in the Bible. It may be said of God, but it certainly cannot be said of the Devil that “he speaks and it is so.” He doesn’t have *that* kind of power; God’s power. The proof of that is that he can be resisted, even bested by mere human beings, as Peter says here in v. 9. We can render him powerless when he comes against us. Even you and I can do that!

*How* does the Devil insinuate his falsehoods? We do not know. He is not God. He cannot simply create a new thought in the human mind. Being neither omnipresent nor omnipotent there are definite limits to his power. Indeed, can any of us say that he or she has been directly attacked by the Devil himself, or only by one of his subordinates? The Devil, like any other angelic creature, can’t be in more than one place at a time – a brute fact of the nature of all creatures – so it is at least possible you and I, being rather minor players in the drama of human life, have never actually encountered Satan himself. So precisely *how* the Devil lies to us we cannot say; how he convinces people to do his will, how he tempts us we cannot say. Does the Devil and his demons manipulate events so as to deceive us? That seems likely; it is certainly what he did in Job’s case, but the Bible doesn’t explicitly say even this much. How did Satan tempt David to number the people? The Bible doesn’t tell us. Indeed, it draws a veil over the activity of the Devil. It tells us that the Devil is very active in the world and seeks to devour us. But then it hides from us all knowledge of *how* the Devil works, *how* he tempts, *how* he deceives.

This limitation of our knowledge of the Devil and his working is of great practical importance. We are, as a result, not able to understand *how to distinguish* the Devil’s hand in any particular event or tragedy or sin in life or in our own lives. Sometimes in the Bible such things result from our own sin, sometimes from the influence of the world around us, sometimes from the purpose of God to test and try us, and sometimes from the evil designs of the Devil. And, sometimes, from all of those things together at the same time. *But the Bible gives us no spiritual technology by which we might tell who is most responsible for our temptations:* the world, our own flesh, the Devil or a combination of such forces; indeed, in any particular case we cannot say if the Devil had anything to do with it at all. It is clear, in any case, that the Devil can do nothing that God does not permit him to do. He couldn’t have troubled Job had God not given him permission to do so, and sometimes the Devil’s work is actually said to be God’s own work, so much does God use the Devil to test, to try, even to punish his own people for their sins.

Such was the case with David you remember. In Chronicles we read that the Devil tempted David to number the people; in 2 Samuel we read that God incited David to do it. Even as he seeks our harm, Satan, finally, is only serving the interests of God. Like Nebuchadnezzar, whom God used to punish his people, and Cyrus, whom he used to punish Babylon, Satan may think his triumphs are his own doing, but at the last he is only accomplishing God’s will. We have that deep and difficult thought here in 1 Peter as well. These persecutions which these Christians are suffering, which here in chapter 5 are said to be the work of the Devil, are said in chapter 1, verse 7, to have come to test and try and purify their faith. That was certainly not the Devil’s interest or intention, but God used his evil intention to accomplish something very holy and good. Or, as a former minister of mine used to put it, in this way *God uses sin sinlessly.*

What is more, because we know so little of *how* the Devil influences events and human thinking in

the world, we cannot discover some spiritual technology for dealing with the Devil and his demons. In some churches today, you may be given such a technology: how to bind the devil, what words to use in resisting him, with what devices you can make him flee from you, but the Bible never teaches us such things. Indeed, in a way very typical of the Bible, the sense of verse 9 is that *the way one resists the devil is to stand firm in one's faith*. That is the impression we are given everywhere in the Bible. One resists the Devil by resisting temptation, by practicing obedience, by living a faithful Christian life. This can be put in a dramatic image, as Paul does in Ephesians 6, when he imagines the Christian dressed up in armor to stand against the Devil's schemes and to withstand his fiery darts, but when one considers what that imagery of the Christian in full armor amounts to, it turns out to describe a Christian who is living a faithful, godly life of obedience to God's Word and active faith in God's presence and grace. And so, in Revelation 12:10-11, where we read that the saints overcame the Devil by their faithfulness to Christ, and their trust in him, even unto death.

In other words, in the Bible a Christian does not respond differently to a temptation because it comes from the Devil – if you could know that a temptation was coming directly from him – instead of from his own sinful desires or from the world. In fact, though good and spiritual men through the ages have argued that it is sometimes possible to tell whether a temptation originates with the Devil or his demons and not from the world or the flesh, I am not myself convinced of this, precisely because the Bible never teaches us how to make such a distinction, because no matter where the temptation comes from resistance requires the very same things of us, and because the Bible seems everywhere to suggest that the greatest part of the power of any temptation comes from the sin within us, not the suggestion that comes from without.

So, knowing that the devil is a roaring lion prowling about seeking whom he may devour does not in any specific way alter the way we are to live as Christians. It doesn't change our tactics or our strategies. One could, I think, on the strength of the Bible's teaching about the Christian life, argue that it would be lived the same way and the Christian's responsibilities would be the same, and the means of grace in a Christian's life would be the same if there were no Devil at all.

So, what then is the burden of Peter's warning here and of all the material we have in the Bible about Satan and his malevolence and the danger he poses to believers in this world? He doesn't draw from what he says about the Devil that these Christians are to do something different. He doesn't give them a set of new tactics that are designed just for the temptations of the Evil One. He simply warns them of the Devil's prowling and urges them to stand firm in their faith. What then is the point of this warning? Well, taken with the rest of the Bible's teaching, I think Peter's point is two-fold.

*First, the information we are given about the Devil and his malevolent purposes and his vicious and destructive schemes, his hatred of the saints and the kingdom of God, is given to us to place our lives firmly in the midst of the terrible contest between good and evil, life and death that is going on in this world. God, in his Word, is at pains to convince us that this is the environment in which we live.*

We are all disposed to think entirely too banal and simplistic and sentimental thoughts about our lives in this world and to see our lives in altogether too pedestrian and conventional terms. Our own business, our own happiness, our own comfort and well-being, our own personal interests take up almost all our time and attention. Serious devout Christians are guilty of this small-mindedness. We all are too much of the time. Even in thinking as Christians our sights are far too seldom lifted up

above the immediate horizon of our own individual existence and experience. We do not see the role we play on that far larger stage. We can be oblivious to the battle being waged around us every day, to the carnage of that battle as bloodied and battered souls slip away to hell in far larger numbers than to heaven. We do not see the hand of the evil one making human beings miserable, blinding their eyes so that they cannot see truth when it stands right before their eyes.

Why do you suppose, after all, that human evil takes on such monstrous shape, even in an educated, sophisticated world such as ours in our time? And why do you suppose that the most vicious evils of all have been perpetrated by people who claimed to be seeking the good of the human race. Do you remember some years ago when some of the top associates of Pol Pot were asked about the more than two million Cambodians who had been killed by the Khmer Rouge in their so-called “people’s revolution?” These Jean Paul Sartre-trained Marxists could only say that while they were sorry it would be best if everyone would “let bygones be bygones.” How can someone say *that* about two million murders? And, of course, throughout human history men and have found it easy, even natural, to justify one repugnant act of violence against other human beings after another. Think of Stalin’s famous line: the death of one person is a tragedy; the death of a million is a statistic. The brutality of which ordinary human beings are capable simply boggles the mind.

Whether we are talking about mass murder for political purposes, about abortion, about racism, or more pedestrian matters such as government programs around the world that seek to increase revenue by the taxing and regulating of gambling or prostitution or drug use, we have the evidence before us everywhere that the power of evil in the world is ever expanding, that it is very great, and that it has the capacity to blind otherwise intelligent people so completely that they will do terrible harm to other human beings in the confidence that they are actually going them good. How can human beings who agree to a great extent on what is right or wrong, do so much evil and be so blind to that evil? *This is the great question of our day, as it has been of every day before us and as it will be of every day yet to come!*

Perhaps, nowadays, with the shocking carnage of the 20<sup>th</sup> century still fresh in our minds, it should not be necessary to argue for the Devil’s existence. But in our very secular age, it is worth reminding the world that the Bible’s doctrine of evil spiritual beings is entirely worthy of respect and for this reason especially. It helps explain, indeed it alone can explain, the virulence, the indestructible quality, and, at the same time, the insanely self-destructive nature of the evil that human beings are so easily persuaded to do. Where does its power and its suicidal quality come from? And why do we remain so willfully blind to it? Why does man never learn? Why was the 20th century – a century of stunning human achievement and technological advancement – more cruel and more evil than all of the centuries before it? The Bible tells us that there is a warfare to the death underway in this world; mighty powers are arrayed against one another on both sides and will struggle until one side is finally vanquished. Really, when we open our eyes on this world and look at it with an honest heart, what else may we believe, what else really explains what we see, but that there is a Devil, a roaring lion, a crafty and subtle liar and murderer of souls, prowling around seeking whom he may devour?

In any case, the reality of the Devil puts paid to the nonsense so widely preached today in our culture, championed by modern psychologists such as Carl Rogers and his ilk, that human nature is basically trustworthy and holds within itself the answers to life’s problems. What one needs most of all is simply getting in touch with oneself. Hogwash. Not in this world, not in the face of the evil and the blindness that are so characteristic of human experience in this world. And not with the

Devil its prince and its ruler!

The reality of the evil one confirms the spiritual character of life and of our life in this world. He is part and parcel of a great struggle to the death between good and evil. And that should make us take life a great deal more seriously. And it should help us, Peter thinks, to put our own trials and difficulties in perspective. Life is difficult? Of course, it is! We're living on a battlefield!

*Second, the information we are given about the devil and his malevolent purposes toward us is intended to solemnize us and galvanize us personally in our own spiritual warfare and in our own service to Christ.*

We are less likely to slumber and sleep our way through the Christian life if we remember that there is a powerful being – *beings!* thousands upon thousands of them, apparently – out there who desire our destruction, who hate us and wish us every manner of harm. We are more likely to remain alert and watchful and sober-minded if we remember that someone is seeking to undo our loyalty to Christ, someone much more powerful than ourselves. If it is true that we must respond to temptations from the Devil and to trials that he brings against us in just the same way we would respond to any other temptations and trials – with grace and faith and obedience and humble reliance on the Lord's presence and help – it is also true that knowing the Devil is at work against us is a constant reminder of how much energy and grit and perseverance and biblical wisdom and prayer this battle is going to require of us. It left our Lord utterly exhausted, those years of doing battle with Satan – Satan never attacked anyone as relentlessly as he attacked the Prince of Life – and if we are not often weary because of the commitment we are making to stand firm in our faith and to live a godly and fruitful Christian life, it is probably because we are resisting the Devil too little and succumbing to his wiles too much. It will take a great deal to resist him to very end of one of his attacks, to stand against the temptation to the bitter end until he gives up and moves on to someone else. Have you ever seen those pictures from the more recent great wars of world history, wars that occurred since the invention of the camera; how exhausted soldiers look after a battle? Have you ever read those histories and learned how impossible it was for them to stay awake after a battle, even if the tremendous noise of the battle was still in their ears? It exhausts you; it leaves you spent, and there is that, too, in the Bible.

We make too little, far too little of our lives. We do not see the perpetually violent, vicious moral warfare being waged always and everywhere in our world. But this is the great story of this world and its history. This violent confrontation between good and evil, in which we have a place, in which our lives are to be lived out. In this too we must live by faith and not by sight. How do you imagine your life would appear to you if only *you could see* the evil spirits around you, doing their destructive work everywhere you look? How carefully you would step, how alert you would be, how fearful of giving them an inch!

But there is something more here. We are also more likely to take seriously our responsibility to live worthy of the grace that has been given us, if we know that our every failure to do so is greeted with delight and relish by the Evil one, if our every failure he throws up in the face of our Savior. *He wanted to undo Job precisely to embarrass God.* And his designs on you are no different. He doesn't care about you, really; he cares about the opportunity you provide to strike a blow against Christ himself. "Ha," he laughs at God, "how little your grace accomplished in that Christian's life!"

Is this not the case? And does not Paul tell us in Ephesians 3 that one thing the Lord Christ is after

in our lives is the demonstration of his wisdom and grace to the principalities and powers. We have a role to play in that. Our task in life is not to give comfort to the Lord's enemies! It is manfully to fight our master's battles and all the more when he has already made victory certain for us by his own suffering and death. Just as Peter thinks that it is nerving for Christian soldiers to hear that the rest of the army is under attack and fighting bravely, so it is nerving to hear that we have a vicious enemy that is worthy of our bravest, our best, our noblest effort, an enemy who not only can be bested, but who ought to be bested, who ought not to be given a single inch. The Devil is an ass; we are to treat him like it.

And if that makes life hard and the Christian life more demanding and exhausting, what is that to us? It is finally the proof that we are serving our master faithfully, that the devil continues to take an interest in us! He continues to care to bring us down! As John Knox once wrote in a letter to his mother-in-law: "He is a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour; whom he has devoured he seeks no more."