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#215 Should we take the devil seriously?

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

A bit of a twist today as we answer listener's questions that have come in asking: are we meant to take Satan literally? Join Tom Wright as he unravels some of the intricate threads of the New and Old Testaments to uncover the biblical portrayal of the devil. We're looking at some of the questions and looking at biblical passages where Jesus confronts and challenges the forces of darkness, asking what role does the Devil play in affecting ministry and what power does Satan really have? Do we over-think the devil and the supernatural when we avoid heavy metal music, particular pop stars or ban Harry Potter books - where is the line between genuine caution and a kind of 'satanic panic'? What practices should we avoid that should be recognised as 'evil'? And remembering Jesus' ultimate defeat of Satan and death on the cross. Enjoy this thought-provoking discussion that we hope sheds some light on this complex and often misunderstood (or sometimes avoided) topic of 'evil', 'satan' and 'the devil'. Originally Aired: 30 December 2019 More shows, free eBooks & newsletter: premierunbelievable.org • Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast: <https://pod.link/1441656192> Discover More: • For live events: <http://www.unbelievable.live> • For online learning: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/courses> • Support us in the USA: <http://www.premierinsight.org/unbelievableshow> • Support us in the rest of the world: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/donate> The Ask NT Wright Anything Podcast is a production of Premier Unbelievable? in partnership with NTWright Online and SPCK Publishing

Transcript

Before we get into today's episode, I want to let you know about a free e-book for you to download today that you won't want to miss. It's called In Conversation with Jordan Peterson, Atheism, Christianity and the Psychology of Belief. This special e-book was created from an unbelievable podcast with famed Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson.

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This is a limited time offer, so make sure to do it today. That's premierinsight.org forward slash resources. And now it's time for today's podcast.

Welcome to this replay of Ask and T. Wright Anything, where we go back into the archives to bring you the best of the thought and theology of Tom Wright. Answering questions submitted by you, the listener. You can find more episodes as well as many more resources for exploring faith at premierunbelievable.com and registering there will unlock access through the newsletter to updates, free bonus videos and e-books.

That's premierunbelievable.com. And now for today's replay of Ask and T. Wright Anything. The Ask and T. Wright Anything podcast. Well, we've got quite a serious subject on the podcast today.

Satan and the powers of evil. What was that famous line from C.S. Lewis about, I think it begins the screw tape letters about the extent to which we shouldn't believe in. Yeah, he is treading a fine line and he said it seems that Christians go one way or the other.

Either, oh, this is a lot of old mythology, or we get rather obsessively interested. And Lewis, of course, had friends who were into different types of magic. Charles Williams was into sort of white magic and Lewis distinguished white and black magic.

And that comes out in some of his novels as well. And there's a sense that Lewis and some of his friends were more keenly aware of powers other than our own powers, shall we say, than many in the 60s and 70s and 80s would have been. I think that quite finishes with something like the devil is equally pleased by both the materialist and who denies his existence and the magician who thinks he lives.

Yes, that's very good. And that sounds like Lewis, the alliteration of the two M's. I saw a wonderful adaptation of the screw tape letters a couple of years ago in London.

Max McLean, who I know is a great fan of yours as well, a very good actor out in the States and does these one man C.S. Lewis and on that occasion. We once had a tape in the car with the kids of John Cleese reading the screw tape letters. That was wonderful.

Both very funny and very vivid and poignant. Amazing how well it's survived. It's something that was very written in its context of the war years.

It's actually survived remarkably well. Well look, this is all rather good pre-cursory stuff to our discussion today. Because a number of people have written in both on the specific question of Satan, the devil and so on, and the demonic powers and so on, and generally

the powers and principalities that I mentioned in the New Testament as well.

So I thought we'd bring some of these questions together for today's show. And perhaps a good general question to start off with is someone who doesn't leave us their name, but asks what do we know for sure about Satan? There seems a big difference in writings about Satan from the old to the New Testament. There's a lot that is said about Satan particularly in the USA that's not backed up by scripture.

I think most Christian generations, if you go back through history, have had a sort of swinging to and fro between a very vivid awareness of a power of evil, which seems to be out there and active, and then people saying, wait a minute, we're taking this too seriously and we're getting too hung up on it or whatever. There's a very interesting book recently, and you will probably know the author's name on the page. Do you know that? In fact, I don't know.

Oh, okay, well, when you send this out, you can find the author's name. Reviving old Scratch is an old nickname for the devil, and this man who I met at a conference, and I'm sorry, I'm losing names at the moment, he worked as an assistant prison chaplain and found that in the prison communities in America, and especially among long-term prisoners, there was a vivid awareness of old Scratch. That's old Scratch at work, and he as a liberal theologian had not really believed in a devil.

Yeah, we all do sort of evil things, and maybe there's a sort of cumulative effect, but that's about it, and found that he had to come to terms with it, and that was, I found a very interesting reflection. Now, the thing that I always say when people ask me in general about this, is that if you believe in a good creator God, then evil is technically speaking absurd. It ought not to fit.

It isn't that we have a perfect cosmos, and here, by the way, is a devil in the middle of it, because that's how God wanted it. No, God didn't want it like that. But therefore, we ought to expect that we wouldn't be able to understand fully what evil powers are, because they don't belong.

They don't fit. They're not meant to be here. It's like having the wrong stuff in the engine of your car.

It's messing you up, and it shouldn't be there. That wasn't what the manufacturer intended. And if it's got there somehow, we are not told how or why it's got there, although I do very much inclined to the view of my late friend Walter Wink, that when people worship that which is not God, which is what we call idolatry, then we give to those bits of God's good creation a power which they shouldn't have, and sometimes they say, thank you very much.

Now, we will exercise this power. This is our power which we give to them. That's one

way in towards a partial explanation.

I wouldn't say it's a whole explanation. Of course, Western culture has lots of stuff which is quintessentially in Milton, say, about the devil as the leader of a pack of fallen angels who were cross with what God was going to do with Adam and Eve, so they decided to quit heaven. Was it their decision or did he jump or was he pushed or something? And then better to rule in heaven than rule in hell and serve in heaven and all that.

But this means that the perception that many people have had of a dark evil force, which sometimes can appear very personalised and sometimes appear to take over human beings and work through them, this is a reflection, one of many, of the fact that some things are out of joint in God's good world and that God wants them to be back in joint and that then ultimately the victory of the cross of Jesus is the victory over the powers of darkness, though that then needs to be implemented. So all these things need to be said and they need to be held in balance. I feel like we need to do justice though to this question, which is what do we know about Satan? And I suppose the first question to ask is do you think there is, if you like, a principle personality in essence? When I was writing my book about Jesus, Jesus and the victory of God, I struggled with how to refer to this being and eventually I decided to use the phrase the Satan because it's a Hebrewism.

Satan means the accuser, which is why, for instance, when Satan enters into Judas, what does Judas do? He goes and accuses Jesus as it were. He's like the assistant to the prosecutor and that's what the Satan means. So it's not just he did something bad, it's very specific.

And that then goes back to the idea, which again you find the beginning of the book of Job, that the Satan is part of the heavenly court whose job is to be the Director of Public Prosecutions and who so enjoys his job that he actually wants to lure people into doing things for which he can then prosecute them. How you explain that, different theologians had different things, because all of this is inference from what we see going on. So I want to say that the Satan is what I would call subpersonal.

It's a sort of a being that is less than fully personal. In other words, it's not a sort of equal and opposite God versus Satan. Satan is lesser than humans as well, and nevertheless very powerful.

I mean, an interesting follow-up question to this, Eric in Washington says, why is the devil and the demon so prominent in the New Testament, yet rarely mentioned in the Old Testament what changed? Was it because the appearance of God incarnate made that battle more real, perhaps brought the demons out of the world? I think that's precisely right. When you showed me that question yesterday and I thought, yes, I think that's what's going on, because interestingly, it's not only the New Testament is opposed to the Old, it's the Gospels as opposed to Paul and the rest. Paul and the rest are aware of dark powers that can do bad stuff, and I, Paul, wanted to come again and again, but

the Satan hindered us.

In other words, yep, there is, to Corinthians, we're not ignorant of his devices. Satan has got plans and tried to do things, and we've spotted him. That's what he's up to, and we're not going to let him get away with it, which is very well saying that in theory.

But yes, it seems to me when Jesus is baptized and is announced as, publicly as it were, as the Son of God, in all senses, messianic and all the other senses, and then he comes into Galilee saying it's time for God to become king, who is the false king whose rule is being usurped, and the answer is, it is the dark, the dark Lord. That's why all those stories in Tolkien and Lewis about the rightful king coming back, etc. That's where they get their power from.

And so immediately in the synagogue we get demon-possessed people shrieking at Jesus. We get dark plots, Pharisees and Herodians, who are not natural friends, getting together to plot. And it's as though when Jesus says this is the time, the opposition thinks, oh no, we've got to stop this.

And that's the story that Mark particularly is telling, I think. Of course, the problem is that, very often in especially modern culture, people do run off in all different directions with this sort of theology, and unfortunately it can result in abuses as well, where people are being having demons cast out of them when actually it's something else. And perhaps a question that ties in with this, Josh in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania says, in our modern western world, what are we to make of Jesus casting out demons? And in some cases multiple demons out of one person, could these not be some sort of mental disorder he was actually curing them off? Yeah, and the answer is, there seems to be a continuum.

And again, we're back with this thing that it's either supernatural or natural, but there's a great disjunct between them. That's an 18th century fallacy, and I want to say, these run into one another, and Jesus cured people of all sorts of illnesses and diseases, which is, by the way, the main explanation for why great crowds followed him, et cetera. And in that process, what he's doing is putting right that which is out of joint in these characters, and what sort of out of jointness it is doesn't matter that much.

I remember when I was at seminary many years ago, there was a big fuss because some people somewhere in Yorkshire, I think, had a ministry of, or thought they had a ministry of exorcism, and all sorts of things were going on, and about 20 famous theologians wrote to the times to say, this is completely wrong, and we don't believe in any of this stuff. Whereupon then, there was a commission of some sort set up, and I remember the then Bishop of Oxford talking about, he was on the commission, as he had been one of those who said, this is all a load of all nonsense. And somebody who worked in a really dark bit of one of our inner urban areas had said to the commission, you need to come and stay with me for a week, and you took them around and show them what was

actually going on and all sorts of things, and then we had a big session on it in my seminary.

And the Bishop of Oxford, as I wouldn't say, was converted, but realized there was stuff happening that his worldview had no means of explaining, couldn't accommodate. So I want to say there is something, like Scott Peck, who is a funny old character who knows the road less traveled, but he wrote his book, *People of the Lie*, and that was about evil and about the fact that, though there are many stages of a psychological evil, there is something a bit extra which you meet in some cases, not always where people think it's going on, but some cases which do not admit of any other explanation other than some force that's been let loose. It's interesting, I've heard from a few different sources recently that the Vatican have said, for instance, that there has been more demand in the last decade or so for exorcism than they've ever experienced before.

Partly it would appear because of people opening themselves up because of the internet to all kinds of different spiritual practices. I wouldn't be surprised. I mean, when I was Bishop of Durham, I had three priests in the diocese who very much below the radar were available for help in cases, whether it was of a house that seemed to be haunted or whatever it was, and they were very discreet and very wise and very experienced and very kind of boots on the ground not being fanciful, but there were things that were going on here and there.

And I remember one of them, I was with that parish one Easter vigil, and we walked round the parish church before the service, sort of 11.30 at night on Easter Eve, and then the priest showed me, in the palm of the hand, was a tape from a cassette tape, which had been strewn all the way around the church, and which this priest was convinced was a local Satanist group that had probably recorded, I know the Lord's Prayer backwards, or something like that, or curses, and we're trying to neutralise the Easter effect, and we tossed it into the bonfire, but the priest then made me look and a hand was burnt. It was singed where this tape had been. On his palm.

Yep. And I just thought, I'm glad this isn't my ministry, and we went into church on the stroke of midnight and St. Christ's Risenallelujah, celebrating the victories. I mean, this stuff is out there, and even if people say, oh, it's all a bit of silly fun and you shouldn't do it, but it doesn't really mean anything, I want to say.

It looks as though we're playing with fire here. So where do we bring the balance in then? Because obviously, if there are treatments which are, in a sense, psychological, they need one approach, but equally we don't want to dismiss the spiritual element. And that's where real discernment is required, which is a matter of both prayer and wise medical experience, etc.

And I would myself be very open-minded one way or the other. It would be perfectly possible. Somebody would come, I think my son is demon-possessed, and I might want

to say, actually, I think you're being fanciful.

Other people would say, we don't know what's wrong with our child. She's just a naughty girl. And I might say, actually, it's something bad's gone on here.

Trace back the history and find that they were playing with Ouija boards or whatever, and something has just taken hold. And I think that sense of the complexity, which I've mentioned before, of human life, there are many dimensions and there are many unseen dimensions to life, whether it's in hauntings or whatever, which we have no rational means of explaining, so. But of course, as you say, great sensitivity and... Sure.

Judgment needed, because we can't just simply go to the nearest traveling sort of person who claims to be able to cast out. Exactly. And this is why, in the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church, at least, and quite possibly other churches, people who are to exercise, let's call the Ministry of Deliverance in whatever form, have to be authorised by the bishop, that this is not something which somebody can just jump up and do themselves, or shouldn't be.

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Thank you for your support. Let's go to Ty in Ontario, Canada, who says, what's your opinion? I mean, we covered some of this, but I think we could bring out some new bits. What's your opinion on how the Bible portrays the devil, the spiritual powers of darkness, their tactics, and their abilities slash limitations, especially in a modern context.

And Ty says, I'm finding it troublesome balancing whether or not to under emphasize them or overemphasize them, especially coming from a North American charismatic faith tradition in light of things like the satanic panic of the 80s and 90s, which still exists today. Sorry for the long question, says Ty. So, yeah, it's another question of how, where do we draw that line and how do we sensibly... I hadn't heard that phrase satanic panic before, but I do recall in the 80s and 90s that there were some people, some of whom not all were part of the then charismatic... One of the aspects of this was a lot of people

were very upset with sort of some hardcore heavy metal music, which there were allegations where that you could, if you played it backwards, it had spelt out these demonic things.

Now, I think a lot of that was proved to be a bit hysterical and actually people running off with their imagination and so on. But at the same time, I think people like Ty saying, okay, we can accept that that happens, but we don't want to throw the baby out with the bathroom or tree over and say... And there is today, of course, a reaction, for instance, against the Harry Potter stories, and people say, well, they're wizards, they're doing magic. And I think, take a rolling, I don't know if she's even aware of that, but would just say, no, you're misreading the stories.

Again and again, the point of the Harry Potter stories is that the most powerful thing in the universe is self-giving love. I think there are deeply Christian stories in many ways. I totally agree.

And if you object to them, you might as well object to Narnia as well. Well, of course, some people have done. But yes, and I think that's where a sort of fear of the supernatural, unless it is obviously God, is driving it.

So there are many confusions, but it is, of course, an area that, in the nature of the cases I explained before, we should expect to be confused about because it doesn't fit with an easy, here we are in a box view of the universe. But then maybe one of the things we need to learn from the poets and the musicians and so on, is that our world is open-ended, is multidimensional. So that I would say it is a matter of discernment.

In any church, there should be at least a small ministry team, even if it's just two or three, who together will address, preferably, issues that come up in the congregation or in the surrounding area, and decide and discern, and maybe bring in, ecumenically, bring in other local pastors and say, could you come and pray with us about this and see if we can get some discernment on whether this is a problem that we need to address in this particular way, or whether this is simply one, simply one where we call in the psychiatrists or whatever, or whether it's both. And such as I know about that area implies that there is a range of stuff that can go wrong in human society, and it is partly socio-cultural as well. It's not just individuals, which is why, and I think Thomas Mann's novel, Dr. Faustus, was exactly about this, that his thesis really was that Hitler's Germany as a whole was playing Faust, that Faust had made a pact with the devil, that on pain that he would never love, he was going to be given ultimate power and all the rest of it.

And Mann is really describing the Germany he loves as having become totally demon-possessed. When in Connecticut says, what's the power of evil you often refer to, including at the time of the crucifixion, and how is that related to Satan, the accuser? And you've already said that in a way that the powers of evil were gathering around

Jesus, and it was all leading up to this moment at the cross. And I think perhaps you, especially among others, have re-emphasized that aspect of atonement, which is that idea of the defeat, the victory over the powers of evil.

Yes, and I think that's very central in the New Testament. John 12, Jesus looking ahead to the cross and saying, now is my soul troubled, should I say Father, save me from this? No, for this purpose I've come to this, Father, glorify your name. But he then says, after the voice from heaven, now is the judgment of this world.

Now is the ruler of this world cast out, and if I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself. In other words, Jesus believes, according to John 12, that what he's about to do in going to his death will be the means by which the ruler of this world, who seems to be the usurping dark force, call it the Satan, if you like, is actually going to be kicked out of that status, and God is going to become king in a whole new way through the death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus himself. Similarly in Luke, Jesus says when they arrest him, this is your hour and the power of darkness.

And I don't think that's a John, I know Luke and invention, it seems to me, it's not easy to say, it wasn't easy for them to, and I think there's one thing, it isn't that they had good precise language for it and we don't. I think they were feeling in the dark almost literally, and we have to as well, but that there is an accumulation of the dark forces. But now here's the trick, because people have sometimes said, Oh, Tom Wright believes in Christus Victor, or therefore not in substitution order.

Let me just nail that one, because the way in which the victory is won in all four gospels is precisely through Jesus taking the place of the sinner. Here is Barabbas who's supposed to be being killed, and Jesus takes his place. The brigand on the cross says this man has done nothing amiss, whereas we are receiving what we deserve.

There is a sense all through of strange substitution. On the grounds I think that the way that evil is kept in circulation, the way it works, is through people worshiping idols and then their humanness deconstructs and they sin. And the dark powers keep their grip through these sinners, all of us still being sinners.

If Jesus then dies in their place, the power of the dark lord or powers has been broken. So victory through substitution. This is a kind of read my lips moment.

This is how it works. And a very related question here from James in Australia who says, he's seen you discussing the meaning of the cross and quoting Colossians 2, verse 15, Jesus disarming the powers and making a public spectacle of them. And he sees that as all tying into that Christus Victor model of a time.

And so he asks, how do you exegete Colossians 2, 13 to 15? And is that an important passage as a whole for relating both penal substitution and Christus Victor? And you've

already covered it a bit there yourself, but take us to that Colossian. Colossians 2 doesn't itself directly talk about substitution. To get that, I would go to Romans 8, 1 to 4 particularly, which is right at the heart of one of the great passages in the New Testament, where God condemned sin in the flesh of the Messiah.

As a result of which there is no condemnation, that is penal substitution quite clearly, but it takes its place within that overarching Romans 5 to 8, which is all about the kingdom of God, which is all about the victory of God, and it drives it. Colossians 2 is an odd polemic against watch out for people who might lead you astray, watch out for people who will do this and do that and do the other. And part of that is people who might come in and say, oh, you better watch out because the Jewish law is going to condemn you, et cetera.

And Paul says, no, you don't realize God's taken all that condemnation of the law away. He's nailed it to the cross. Now, there is a substitutionary motif inside that, but the point that Paul is making is a military metaphor that he has led the principalities and powers like a defeated rabble in his triumphal procession.

Like what a Caesar would do with the exact vanquished enemies. Exactly. As you get at the end of 2 Corinthians 2, and in various other passages where Paul talks about, you know, in 1 Corinthians 2, he says, the rulers of this age didn't understand what was going on, because if they had, they wouldn't have crucified the Lord of glory.

They were signing their own death warrant. That seems to be a very important struggle. That's where he talks about captivity being led captive.

There's this sense in which he's quoting from Psalm 68. So there's a sense in which, I mean, a lot of people will say at this point, well, Jesus defeats evil at the cross. There's something extraordinary, of cosmic significance that happens in that moment.

But yet we still see evil raining in our world. Of course. And Paul, who lived in the light of the cross, said, there's still the ruler of this age.

Of course, and Paul is writing from prison. Absolutely. Because the rulers of this age have still got him where they want him.

And so there is very much a now and not yet. So what kind of victory was it then? Okay. How long have we got this? This is the whole of the book of Revelation that you want in here.

Because it looks as though, particularly towards the end of the first generation, you see this in some of the little letters so-called as well. Some of the Christians were thinking, well, Jesus won the victory on the cross. So how come we're still suffering? And like first Peter says, don't be surprised because the victory that was won on the cross has to be implemented through the suffering of God's people.

And actually that's Romans 8 as well. When Paul says, provided we suffer with him that we may be glorified with him. And that's not just that you have to go through this nasty time in order to get there.

It's that somehow the sharing of the messianic woes in the present is the means by which the victory of the cross is made manifest in the world. And of course, the history of the church, when read, I think properly, will show this again and again. To tell instead the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

And that's not what people want to hear. People want to hear Jesus did it. So now we have a nice time.

And the answer is no, Jesus did it. So now we know that victory is assured and we go with fear and trembling and prayer into whatever vocation we have. You've been listening to the Ask, Enty, Write, Anything podcast.

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