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#28 Satan and the powers of evil

December 30, 2019



Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Are we supposed to believe in a literal Satan? What do the New and Old Testament say about the devil? In what ways does Jesus counter the forces of evil in his ministry and at the cross?

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Transcript

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[Music] - Hello, and welcome to your Fortnite-ly theology Fest here on the show, which brings you the Thornton theology of Nty Right.

Presented by myself Justin Briley, theology and apologetics editor for Premier Christian Radio, and brought to you in partnership with SBCK and Nty Right Online. And on this final show of 2019, Tom tackling a serious subject, Satan and the powers of evil. And don't forget, if you'd like to register to ask a question yourself and indeed to get all the latest updates and bonus content from the programme, do go to our website askentyrite.com. Excited to tell you again that Nty Right is going to be joining me for Unbelievable the Conference 2020 on Saturday the 9th of May in central London.

So do make sure to ring-fence that in your diary, and we will be bringing you all the details of how you can book in later on in January. Also something important to announce, so we've never asked you for any contributions on the show. But if the Ask

Nty Right Anything podcast and videos have encouraged you, then would you please consider investing in the show for 2020? Your financial support helps to cover our ongoing production costs and enables us to reach more people with Tom's thought and theology.

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And really excited, we've been able to produce this exclusively for the Ask Nty Right Anything podcast. In this ebook, Tom responds to 12 tough questions on biblical inerrancy, atonement, life after death, the return of Christ, female ministry, and much more. So you can read his answers to some of the most significant questions that have been posed on this show in the past year.

Again, anything you can give to support the show helps us to continue it strong into 2020 and enables us to help more people make sense of faith and grow in Christian confidence. So to give and to receive that free ebook, go to the website, askentyrite.com and click on Give. Time to get into today's show.

Well, we 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 obsessive interest.

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 quote finishes with something like, "The devil is equally pleased by both the materialist and who denies his existence and the magician who invokes it." Yes, yes, yes. Something about that, that's very good.

And that sounds like Lewis, the alliteration of the two M's, yes, yes. Anyway, I saw a wonderful adaptation of the Screwtape Letters a couple of years ago in London. And really? Max McLean, who I know is a great fan of yours as well.

But really a very good actor out in the States and does these one man CSU is in, but on that occasion, say. We once had a tape in the car with the kids of John Cleese reading the Screwtape Letters. Yes, wonderful.

That was wonderful. Both very funny and very vivid and poignant. And it's amazing how well it's survived.

It was something that was very written in its context a little while 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 demonic powers and so on. And generally, the powers and principalities that are 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. But there's a lot that is said about Satan, particularly in the USA, that's not backed up by scripture. So, yeah.

Yes, 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, whatever. There's a very interesting book recently, and you will probably know the author's name called "Reviving Old Scratch." Do you know that? I'm quite a don't.

Oh, okay. Well, when you send this out, you can find the author's name. "Reviving Old Scratch." Okay.

"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, 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. You know, yeah, 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, as 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 not to be, 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 part. 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 crossed 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 a rule in hell than 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 that sense? In my... 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, the prosecutor, 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 have 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 never the less very powerful.

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 bought the demons out of the world?" I think that's precisely right. When you were showing me that question yesterday and I thought, "Ah, 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 two Corinthians, "We're not ignorant of his devices. Satan has got plans and trying 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 probably 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 having demons cast out of them when, of course, of course, they're not messes.

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 of?" 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, etc. 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." And boom, boom, boom, boom. 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 he took them around and showed 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. Interesting. Partly it would appear because of people opening themselves up because of the internet.

To all kinds of different spiritual practices. I would 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. Sure. 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 11th, 13th 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 neutralize 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.

Right. And I just thought, I'm glad this isn't my ministry. And we went into the church on the stroke of midnight in 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 them? Because obviously, if there are treatments which are, in a sense, psychological, they need one approach.

And 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, et cetera. And I would myself be very open-minded one way or the other.

It would be perfectly possible somebody would come and, you know, 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 an naughty girl, and I might say, actually, something bad's gone on here, you know. Trace back the history and find that they were playing with Ouija Bourns 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, you know. But of course, yeah, as you say, great sensitivity and judgment needed, because we can't just simply go to the nearest traveling sort of person who claims to be able to cast out things. Exactly.

And this is why in the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church, at least in quite possibly other churches, people who are hard to exercise, that's called a Ministry of Deliverance in whatever form, have to be authorized by the bishop, that this is not something which somebody can just jump up and do themselves, or shouldn't be. I hope you're enjoying today's show and the videos that we make available on the website. Do please consider investing in the show.

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Again, that's askentiright.com and click on Give. 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/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 moment. One of the end aspects of this was a lot of people were very upset with some hardcore heavy metal music, which there were allegations where 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 are saying, "Okay, we can accept that that happens, but we don't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater here and say it." And there is today, of course, a reaction, for instance, against the Harry Potter stories. And people say, "Well, there are 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 they're a deeply Christian story 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, prayerfully, 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 humans aside. And it is partly socio-cultural as well.

It's not just individuals, and which is why, and I think Thomas Mann's novel, Dr. Faustus, was exactly about this, 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. Yeah.

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 save Father, save me from this? No, for this hour, for this purpose I've come to this hour, 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 Jai'ana or Luke an 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 or whatever. 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.

And 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. Yeah. 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 tone. 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 it takes 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, etc." 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 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 strategy.

And elsewhere he talks about captivity being led captive. There's this sense in which... Well, that's Ephesians 4 where 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. Of course.

Paul, who was a... 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. Okay.

How long have we got this? This is the whole... Two minutes. 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 where's till suffering?" And like 1 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.

The titanic said, "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. Great stuff. Thank you so much, Tom.

Another tremendous episode. Thank you. Hope that helped with some of those questions.

Good question. Aire of Ty, Win, James, Josh, and others. Thank you very much for being with us for this edition of the podcast.

Thank you. We'll see you again next time. Thank you.

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