

Spiritual D-Day

There are two important dates that mark the beginning of the end of World War II. The first is D-Day (June 6, 1944), when the Allies' invasion of Europe on the beaches of Normandy caught the Germans somewhat by surprise as they expected the attack to be at the French port of Calais. D-day was terribly costly, over 12 thousand allied soldiers were killed while not nearly that many of the enemy. For awhile, especially on Omaha beach, it surely appeared the operation had been a failure. Yet I understand that most military historians consider it the decisive battle which turned the tide of the war and led to the liberation of Europe and the ultimate defeat of Hitler.

The other important date is V-Day, Victory in Europe day, (May 8, 1945) the day terms of surrender were signed in Berlin, the Allied victory was officially announced and millions celebrated around the world, just one day after Hitler's own death. In between those two dates there were still many battles to be fought, many occupied territories to liberate, many prisoners of war to be set free. In between these two dates, the enemy had been fatally wounded, his defeat was sure, but he had not yet surrendered, he was still alive and still capable of inflicting great harm. In many ways these physical battles that led to victory in WWII provide a helpful picture for the spiritual battle against evil.

The scriptures refer to life as a spiritual battle more real than any physical battle ever fought on earth. And it is important, as spiritual warriors in the army of Christ, that we understand the strategic battle that occurred at the Cross. One way for us to understand the cross is to see it as a kind of spiritual D-Day in the war between Christ and Satan: more about this later. But first, it will be helpful to begin by asking who is this enemy of ours, Satan anyway? And why are we at war with him?

The Bible gives surprisingly little information about Satan. But it gives just enough information to avoid making the two most common critical mistakes. The first mistake is not to believe he exists at all. Satan is referred to in Scripture by his various names over fifty times. More importantly, Jesus refers to Satan as an evil reality that is actively involved in our destruction (Mark 4:15; Luke 22:31). Scripture instructs us to be aware of his schemes and devices (2 Corinthians 2:11, Ephesians 6:11). As true and alarming as all this is, it is just as important we do not make a second mistake with respect to Satan, to become preoccupied with him and his evil realm. We humans are too easily fascinated with the occult. Jesus would have us focus on the gospel, the victory, more than the opponent. It is important to be aware of the weeds in one's lawn and pull them, but the best way to have a healthy lawn is to water and feed the grass.

There are various names for Satan each indicating an aspect of his evil character. The name “Satan” literally means adversary. He stands against God and people and he is rightfully referred to as the Accuser (Revelation 12:10). He is called the devil, which means slanderer, for he is a deceiver and the father of lies (John 8:44). He is called the prince of this world (John 12:31), the ruler of the air (Ephesians 2:2) indicating a temporary, limited authority in this world. He is described as a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8), a warring dragon (Revelation 12) and a deceiving serpent (Genesis 3:1; Revelation 20:2), indicating he is dangerous, able and intent on doing us harm. Perhaps his best name is the one Jesus uses in his prayer in John 17. He is the Evil One (17:15). In him there is no truth or goodness at all.

The most well known literary picture of Satan is found in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* where he is portrayed with power and evil glory. C. S. Lewis felt Milton’s portrayal of Satan in such majestic terms was a disservice to his readers, tempting the reader to admire Satan. Lewis protested that there is nothing admirable about evil. In his science fiction novel, *Perelandra*, a fanciful variation on the Adam and Eve story, Lewis gives a very different estimation of Satan. A character in the story, Weston, is possessed by Satan. In a reenactment of the biblical story of Eve’s temptation, when Weston tries to seduce the Green Lady (Eve), he uses great intellectual and poetic rhetoric.

However, for his own pleasure rather than enjoy such lofty pursuits he preferred instead to sit around and pull birds apart and torture them. As Lewis writes, Weston *had no more wish to employ these things (intellectual and artistic abilities) in his off-duty hours than a soldier has to do bayonet practice when he is on leave.*

Though there is no uncertainty in Scripture about Satan's character, there is much uncertainty about his origin. In Job (1:6) he appears in the courts of God with other angelic beings. Paul indicates (1 Timothy 3:6) that at some time in his history, Satan came under judgment because of pride. There is a reference found in Ezekiel (28:12-19) which some feel is a double reference to both the King of Tyre and Satan. And of course there is that fascinating peek into the spiritual realm in Daniel (10:13) where arch angel Michael refers to doing battle with the Prince of Persia which may be Satan. These verses and perhaps others give some information on who Satan is and his possible origin, but they are not nearly sufficient to provide an adequate understanding. It seems God does not think such information is important for us to know, and we are probably wise not to add our own speculations to the fragmentary knowledge given.

A fascinating but very cryptic reference to Satan is found in Revelation 12. There he is depicted as a terrible dragon in pursuit of a pregnant woman.

He is intent in devouring her child as soon as it is born. She gives birth to a son who is to rule the nations. The child is immediately snatched up to the throne of God and the woman taken to the desert and protected. What follows is a great war in heaven between Michael and all the angels against the dragon and his angels. The dragon loses and Satan is hurled out of heaven with his angels. There are various interpretations of this chapter (as well as the entire book) but this great war seems, to me at least, to refer to the victory of Christ over Satan at the cross because of what is said following Satan's defeat. *Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short."*

The text goes on to say the dragon, even though he has been defeated, continues to make war against the offspring of the Woman, "those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus." I take it that's us. Clearly this is a highly symbolic story but symbols always refer to a reality.

Consider what Jesus himself said about his ministry on earth. In Luke (10:18) when the disciples return after being sent out by Jesus to preach the kingdom, Jesus tells them that while they were preaching he saw Satan fall like lightning to the earth indicating that Jesus seems to understand the disciples' preaching, and presumably our own, can contribute to decisive victories in the spiritual battle against the Evil One. As Jesus approaches the Cross, our D-Day, notice what he says of Satan. "Now is the time... the prince of this world will be driven out" (John 12:31). "For the prince of this world is coming, he has no hold on me" (John 14:30). "The prince of this world now stands condemned" (John 16:11). Jesus characterizes his work on earth as a very real spiritual battle with the Evil One. But the battle began long before Jesus appeared on earth. It all began in the garden where Satan had his first and most devastating victory, leading our first parents into rebellion. As a result of their sin, a battle for the souls of all people began. "I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers: he will crush your head and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15).

From that moment, Satan begins to enter into hearts throughout history intent on destroying Eve's offspring. He enters Cain and murders Abel. He repeatedly inspires the enemies of Israel to attack God's people. He enters Saul to destroy David. Athalia, the mother of king Ahaziah, came within one

baby (Josiah) of destroying the sons of David. These and so many other examples show Satan's determined attempts to stop the royal line, to destroy the seed of Adam, Abraham and David. Failing to prevent the birth of Eve's prophesied offspring, he attacks the baby Jesus himself.

He enters Herod and tries to destroy the holy child forcing. When Jesus emerges to begin his ministry, Satan attacks him in the wilderness, seeking to turn the Second Adam as he had the first Adam. However, failing to turn Jesus away from God, he leaves but, as Luke records (4:13) only until he can find a more opportune time to rejoin the battle. Throughout Jesus' ministry hearts are set against him, especially among the religious leaders of the day. Ironically they accuse Jesus of being empowered by Beelzebub (Matthew 12:24) but Jesus makes it clear it is they who are the sons of the Devil (John 8:44). Satan enters Peter to distract the Lord and turn him away from Jerusalem. Finally in Judas Satan brings Jesus down, so he thought, moving Judas to betray the Lord and assure his demise on the cross. And at that cross it appeared to all that Jesus had been defeated. It appeared to Satan that he had won evil's most glorious victory. Eve's offspring hung on a cross with considerably more than a bruised heel. The Son of King David had finally been crowned as prophesied, but with thorns rather than diadems and surrounded by common thieves as his royal entourage.

Not unlike those stormy and fearful days of D-Day, when to many all seemed hopeless and lost, at Calvary it appeared evil had won. There was only one casualty on the cross, but to see Christ dead on the cross must have been devastating to his followers. Yet, out of the darkness that covered the earth that day, three little words were heard that must have made Satan's heart tremble. "It is finished!"

Those words would have seemed more appropriate had they come from the lips of Satan. It certainly did appear that Jesus was finished. But Satan did not say these words. Jesus did. Ironically the Great Deceiver had deceived himself. He thought the Cross was his idea. But the Cross had been the secret strategy for victory from the very beginning, even before Eden. Satan, who had worked so hard to bring about Christ's death, would discover too late that this death would bring about his own demise. Like those unsuspecting German soldiers, ill positioned by bad intelligence and over confident of victory, Satan was unaware that the Cross was Christ's secret crossing of the huge gulf between God and man. The cross was crucial to win the war. Then, after the decisive victory over sin at the Cross, Christ went on to conquer death and liberate those held captive by it.

The Cross was our spiritual D-Day, when Satan and all his forces were essentially defeated. But the war is not nearly over yet. Our V-Day is yet to

come. There are yet millions whose lives remain the occupied territory of Satan. They are in bondage to sin, to guilt and to the fear of death. And so the Church, God's allied force, has much work yet to do, liberating captive people. As we occupy new territories, we bring with us the good news of D-Day, how Christ has already defeated Satan and already won freedom for all people. The Scriptures are filled with the shout of victory.

Since the children have flesh and blood he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death--that is, the devil-- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. (Hebrews 2:14,15)

Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where O death is your victory? Where O death is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15: 54-56)

He has disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (Colossians 2:15).

But even as we bring the news of freedom and victory to captive souls, we must not forget. The enemy, though fatally wounded, still seeks to destroy us. The Revelation passage that describes the great victory of Christ also warns of the guerilla warfare of the devil. "Then the dragon went off to make war against the rest of her offspring--those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (Revelation 12:17.) It is because of the

continual threat of our mortally wounded adversary that Peter warns, “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

Many believers worry about Satan possessing people or of demonic attacks. While I would never deny the possibility, but I think the occurrence of such things are exaggerated and sensationalized. Nevertheless, Satan is more than able to work his evil will through people who yield their hearts to his influence. The scriptures are a manual for spiritual combat strategy, giving plenty of intelligence concerning our enemy. He can snatch away the very Word of God if our hearts are closed to it (Matthew 13:19). He can pose as an angel of light to gain his evil ends (2 Corinthians 11:13). He may even produce counterfeit works, miracles, signs and wonders to legitimize his otherwise illegitimate enterprises (2 Thess 1:9,10). But most of all Satan is a liar. What he does best is distort truth, especially the truth of the gospel.

At work among the Galatian believers he sowed the seeds of legalism, subtly suggesting the lie that the death of Christ is not sufficient to save. Satan pursues an entirely different strategy at Corinth, encouraging them not to be self-righteous but to believe the lie it is okay to be self-indulgent. Since we are saved by grace, why should we worry about holiness and purity and integrity? To the Thessalonians Satan’s lie is fanaticism. Since Christ is

coming back soon, why worry about working. Let us relax until he comes. To the Colossians his strategy is not to persecute believers but to pervert what they believe by mixing the Gospel with the deceptions of worldly wisdom and philosophy. Satan is a master at deception and distortion, calling evil good and good evil, luring us to our destruction with whatever bait is most attractive to us. He has lost the war, but he does not intend to go down without a fight, taking as many as he can with him.

As the song says, *He is our ancient foe who seeks to work us woe.* But the truth is our adversary is a defeated foe. The victory at the Cross belongs not to the Evil One, but to God, to Christ and to Man. The Cross is our D-Day. And we look forward to our VE Day, the return of our conquering hero, the lion of the tribe of Judah, with eyes like blazing fire and on his head many crowns, who is dressed in a robe dipped in blood and is leading the armies of heaven. We await the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And while we wait, we occupy territory once held by the enemy, that all might be liberated from the sting of sin, the fear of death, and all will know the love of God for all men. Let me end by quoting the end of Martin Luther's hymn:

*And though this world with demons filled should threaten to undo us;
We will not fear, for God has willed his truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim--we tremble not for him.
His rage we can endure for lo his doom is sure; one little word shall fell him.*