



18 LESSON CORRESPONDENCE COURSE

Lesson 9

BIBLE TEACHING ABOUT THE DEVIL

It is widely believed that the devil, or Satan, is a supernatural, immortal Prince of Evil, an angel thrown out of heaven, because he once rebelled against Almighty God. There is a devil, of course, because the word is often found in the Bible. But the popular view is not taught there. It actually leads to all kinds of problems.

For example, we read in Hebrews that Jesus “*shared our humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death, that is, the devil. . .*” (Heb. 2:14).

We ask: How could the death of Jesus, in weakness upon the cross, bring about the death of this supernatural being? In any case, according to popular belief, the devil was not destroyed, but is still very active! We read in Luke 20:36 that angels never die. If the devil is an angel, how can he be destroyed?

It is impossible to construct from the Bible a consistent account of the history of the devil, or Satan. If Satan was the one who tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden, in the form of a serpent, this would have to be after he had already rebelled and fallen from heaven. But in the book of Job, which deals with events long afterwards, Satan is found among those who present themselves before the Lord (Hebrew ‘sons of God’), and speaks directly to God! (Job 1:6,7) In these early chapters of Job, ‘Satan’ is not a rebel; on the contrary, he is seen working with God (1:12, 2:6). It is not our present purpose to interpret these chapters in detail, but only to show that the popular idea of the devil does not accord with what the Bible says.

Satan—an adversary

Although in the New Testament both the words ‘devil’ and ‘Satan’ are found, in the Old Testament we read only about ‘Satan’. In Hebrew (the original language of the Old Testament) ‘Satan’ means ‘adversary’. An adversary is a person who acts against someone else, or is an enemy. In this sense the disciple Peter was ‘Satan’ on one occasion, because he spoke against the will of God. He rebuked Jesus for saying that he Jesus must go to Jerusalem to suffer and be killed.

Jesus replied: “*Out of my sight, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men*” (Matthew 16:23). Peter was looking at things from the human point of view. This underlines the words of Paul: “. . . *the sinful mind* (Greek: ‘the mind of the flesh’= human nature) *is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so*” (Romans 8:6). An adversary, or Satan, can be a person or a group of people that try to block the way forward.

The devil—a false accuser

In the Greek of the New Testament the word for ‘devil’ - ‘diabolos’ - has the basic meaning of ‘slanderer’. A slanderer is someone who makes a false and malicious accusation. For example it is used in that sense by Paul: “*Wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers* (Greek: ‘diabolos’” (1 Timothy 3:11).

In the Garden of Eden God said that if Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would die. The serpent said to Eve, “*You will not surely die*” (Gen. 3:4), thus making God a liar. The serpent was therefore a devil. God had given this animal the ability to speak but it was not telling the truth.

In a passage in Hebrews already quoted, the devil is spoken of as having “the power of death”. In the letter of James we find that this power is connected with **sin**:

“*. . . each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.*” (James 1:14,15)

From this two things are clear: (a) temptation comes from within, not from some supernatural being; (b) it is human sin which has the power of death. Within our human nature is the tendency to behave selfishly.

Jesus refers to this in Mark 7:20-23. This is ‘the devil’ that tempts us to act against the will of God. Sometimes in the New Testament, ‘devil’ and ‘Satan’ are used in a similar way to refer to the working of sin. At other times “Satan” carried the sense of the Hebrew word – an adversary, something that opposes somebody or something.

Examples of devils

We have already seen that the serpent in Eden was a ‘devil’—a false accuser. The serpent was an animal created by God (Genesis 3:1) It had the power of speech, which God can give to any of his creatures (for example to an ass, as we see in Numbers 22:28 and 2 Peter 2:16). In the Bible record of the temptation, the serpent spoke to Eve a distortion of the truth; **it was duly punished:** *“Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock . . .”* (Genesis 3:14). The serpent, not some invisible devil, was the culprit. In the whole chapter there is no mention of Satan or a devil (in fact the word does not occur anywhere in Genesis). Instead the Bible teaches clearly that the man and the woman sinned through disobedience. Because of this they were punished by eventual death.

An example of a person being a devil was Judas Iscariot. At the Last Supper Jesus said, *“Have not I chosen you the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!”* He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the twelve, was later to betray him (John 6:70,71).

The ‘devil’ is in fact a figure of speech, a metaphor. It is a symbol of sin in its various forms, whether in individuals or in human organisations, all of which tend to work against the will of God. So far as we can see, in the whole universe God has only one enemy, that is, human nature, and all those things through which it is expressed. The tendency in everyone to disobey the commandments of God is the only ‘devil’. It was this which Jesus overcame and destroyed by his constant obedience to the will of his Father (Hebrews 2:14).

Picture language

The Bible often uses picture language to make its teaching more striking. For example, after Cain murdered Abel, God said to him, *“Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground”* (Genesis 4:10). In another place, sin itself is pictured as a king who rules over all who do not accept Jesus as their Saviour:

*“Therefore do not let sin **reign** in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires . . . For sin shall not be your **master** . . . But thanks be to God that, though you used to be **slaves** of sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted . . . For the **wages** of sin is death.”* (Romans 6:12,14,17,23).

Human organisations which are not governed by godly principles can be said to be devilish or Satanic. To the believers in Smyrna, the Lord Jesus gave the following encouragement and advice:

“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you the devil [no doubt the civil authorities] will put some of you in prison to test you.” (Revelation 2:10).

To those in Pergamos he said, *“I know where you live—where Satan has his throne”* (Revelation 2:13). It would be absurd to think that a supernatural being actually reigned in Pergamos. The explanation is that Pergamos was the centre of a pagan state religion, which persecuted the Christians.

Summary

The Bible uses the expressions ‘devil’ and ‘Satan’ to describe those human desires, actions and organisations which are against the will of God.

The Lord Jesus Christ, who shared our nature and was tempted in every way like us, destroyed the devil by his sinless life. Sin which is not confessed and forgiven leads to eternal death, but through Jesus we have the promise of forgiveness and the prospect of eternal life.

Questions

J1 Where does temptation come from?

J2 What do the words ‘Satan’ and ‘devil’ mean in the original Hebrew and Greek?

Is there anything you would like to challenge in this lesson? Would you like more detail on this subject?