

THE GREATEST BATTLE IN HISTORY

Great battles have always fascinated us. Places like Normandy and Gettysburg and the Alamo and Bunker Hill and Waterloo and Troy are etched in our minds because great battles were fought there. Of course battles are fought for many different reasons. The Trojan War was fought over a woman. The Battle of Gettysburg was fought over the issue of whether or not one man had the right to own another. The Battle of Waterloo was fought to stop a megalomaniac by the name of Napoleon from gobbling up what was left of Europe. But the greatest battle of all was not fought over land or empire or women or even a moral principle. The greatest battle of all was fought over the human soul. It was fought between the Savior of the world and the prince of darkness.

That battle is still going on. Our hearts are the battlefield, we are the prize, and, believe it or not, our natural instinct is to award the victory to our enemy rather than to the One who came to deliver us out of his power. You see our minds are clouded by sin and we can't see him for what he really is; we see him as he wants us to see him. As Paul said, the devil appears to us as an angel of light and dazzles our imaginations with all sorts of attractive illusions. Solomon called these illusions: "*ways that seem right to a man, but whose end is death.*" Lacking discernment, we are spiritually blind and helpless and we can't see what is in our own best interest. Therefore we *have no effective defenses against our enemy*. If we can't even see him for what he is, how in the world can we fight him?

The reason we are inclined to join forces with our enemy and fight against the One who came to deliver us out of his clutches is that we are powerfully drawn to the two things our enemy has to offer: sin and death. We are drawn to sin, as an honest look into our own hearts will disclose, and we are fascinated with death, as beautiful tombs like the Taj Mahal and the Great Pyramids clearly demonstrate.

And since our sympathies are with our enemy, the battle for our souls has to be fought in the face of our active opposition to our own best interests. We give aid and comfort to our enemy every chance we get because sin turns us against ourselves.

The primary combatants in this battle are not two armies, but two champions. One is the champion of sin and death and hell; the other is the champion of forgiveness and eternal life and heaven. There can be no truce: the fight is to the death.

The first champion is Satan, the "great red dragon" or "serpent of old" as the Apostle John called him. Now when we hear the name Satan, different images come to mind. A serpent with a forked tongue, a devil in a red suit with a pitchfork, Jack Nicholson. Of course we don't really know what Satan looks like. What we do know from the Scriptures is that he was an angel who led an insurrection in heaven and was cast out along with all the angels who followed him. We also know that he delights in afflicting mankind with misery and death and that he is furious because he knows that the time he will be allowed to do this is short and when his time is up he will be cast into a lake of fire along with all of his demon angels.

It has become fashionable today—even in many churches that call themselves Christian—to deny that Satan really exists. There are those who maintain that he is just an myth, something people in the past believed because they didn't know any better—a boogeyman that mothers used to scared their children when they were misbehaving. That view, however, cannot be reconciled with the Scriptures, which clearly describe Satan as a living being. Jesus himself refers to Satan as a living creature and calls him “the evil one.”

Satan's name is actually a Hebrew word that means “adversary” or “accuser.” Jesus said that his chief weapon is deception, calling him a “liar” with no truth in him. Satan showed his stripes in his words to Eve in the Garden of Eden when he lied to her, persuading her that God did not mean what he had clearly said. From what the Bible tells us about Satan we can be sure of three things:

1. First of all, he is greedy. He wants what is not his, namely the bodies and souls of men, and he will stop at nothing to get them.
2. Second, he is superhumanly intelligent and clever. Never forget that Satan is an angel, albeit a fallen angel, and he possesses powers which far outstrip human powers. Moreover he is highly motivated—by anger and hatred. Put these all together and as Luther wrote in one of our favorite hymns: *“His craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate, no one on earth his equal.”*
3. Finally, Satan is utterly opposed to God and all that God desires for mankind. He mobilized all his resources to pre-empt the coming of our Savior, and once he had come he did everything he could to destroy him and hinder the work he had come to do. He tempted Jesus in the wilderness, he corrupted one of his twelve disciples and finally he set enemies on him to murder him.

This is the champion of sin and death and hell, and he is a formidable adversary. He is smarter than we are, he is stronger than we are, and he is fiercer than we are and if we try to fight him by ourselves we will lose.

Of course it was not God's plan that we should have to face Satan on our own. That is why He sent a champion, His own Son, to do battle with him in our stead. And how exactly did Jesus fight Satan? What strategems did he employ; what power did he bring to bear?

There's a famous battle described in the Old Testament which anticipates in many of its details the battle between Satan and our Savior. It's a story familiar to everyone and it's our *Old Testament* lesson for today: the story of David and Goliath. Consider Goliath, the giant Philistine who strides up and down the battlefield, shouting curses at God's children and daring them to do singlehanded combat with him because he knows that no soldier can match him for strength and size and ferocity, one-on-one. Is Goliath not a perfect model of Satan—proud, boastful, malevolent, powerful, and filled with rage toward the children of God? And what better picture of ourselves, God's children, than King Saul and his army—trembling in their tents, sick with fear and shame and helpless before their enemy's terrible strength? Finally, what better picture of our Savior than his ancestor David, seemingly small and weak, armed only with faith that the God of Israel would strike down the enemy of his people and give the victory to them through him. And consider how David slays Goliath: he hurls a stone into his skull. Do you recall the prophecy of *Genesis 3:15* in which God promises that a descendent of Eve would crush the head of the serpent? Finally, consider that just as Goliath, the enemy of God's people, was struck

down by a shepherd from Bethlehem, so a thousand years later would Satan, the enemy of God's people, be struck down by a Shepherd from Bethlehem.

Satan's strategy is simple: he entices us to multiply our sins until we despair of salvation and turn ourselves over to him. He even uses God's Law to increase our sins, for as Paul wrote to the Romans, *"The Law was added so that sin might increase."* (Romans 5:20) But what Satan completely underestimated was the power and abundance of God's grace, for as Paul continued, *"But where sin did increase, grace increased all the more, so that just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."* (Romans 5:20-21) **God has more forgiveness than we have sin and we cannot out-sin His willingness to forgive!** Jesus took all of our sins upon himself—past sins, present sins, future sins—and died with them and when he rose from the dead, he left them in the tomb. With Jesus, we have nothing left to despair of and everything to hope for! Since we know that Christ rose from the tomb and left our sins behind, we know that we too will rise from our tombs and leave our sins behind! When Jesus died on the cross He destroyed the power of Satan, crushing his head as surely as David's stone broke Goliath's skull.

In the *Book of Revelation*, God tells us that at that very moment, the moment of Jesus' death on the cross, a loud voice in heaven said: *"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. He was overcome by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony."*

"He was overcome by the blood of the Lamb": Satan lusted after blood and so Jesus gave him blood—his own blood—and that blood washed away all the sins of the world and destroyed Satan's power forever.

"...and by the word of their testimony." When the seventy-two disciples returned from proclaiming God's peace throughout the towns and villages of Israel, Jesus said: *"I saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning."* Whenever and wherever the Gospel is proclaimed and heard and believed, Satan is cast out of human hearts. Such is the power of the Word of God.

And that is where our access to God's power resides: in the Word of God, in the voice of the Good Shepherd. Two thousand years ago, Jesus said: *"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."* And his words are still with us, crushing the head of our adversary and lighting our path to heaven.

Amen.

1 Samuel 17:1-11; 26; 31-32; 40; 45-52

Now the Philistines gathered their forces for war and assembled at Sokoh in Judah. They pitched camp at Ephes Dammim, between Sokoh and Azekah. Saul and the Israelites assembled and camped in the Valley of Elah and drew up their battle line to meet the Philistines. The Philistines occupied one hill and the Israelites another, with the valley between them.

A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp. His height was six cubits and a span. He had a bronze helmet on his head and wore a coat of scale armor of bronze weighing five thousand shekels ; on his legs he wore bronze

greaves, and a bronze javelin was slung on his back. His spear shaft was like a weaver's rod, and its iron point weighed six hundred shekels. His shield bearer went ahead of him. Goliath stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, "Why do you come out and line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not the servants of Saul? Choose a man and have him come down to me. If he is able to fight and kill me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us." Then the Philistine said, "This day I defy the armies of Israel! Give me a man and let us fight each other. "On hearing the Philistine's words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified...David asked the men standing near him, "What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine and removes this disgrace from Israel? Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?"... What David said was overheard and reported to Saul, and Saul sent for him.

David said to Saul, "Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him."... Then he took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd's bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine... David said to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will deliver you into my hands, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel.

All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give all of you into our hands."

As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him. Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell face down on the ground.

So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone; without a sword in his hand he struck down the Philistine and killed him. David ran and stood over him. He took hold of the Philistine's sword and drew it from the sheath. After he killed him, he cut off his head with the sword. When the Philistines saw that their hero was dead, they turned and ran. Then the men of Israel and Judah surged forward with a shout and pursued the Philistines to the entrance of Gath and to the gates of Ekron. Their dead were strewn along the Shaaraim road to Gath and Ekron.

Revelation 19:11-16

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.

On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

Luke 10:17-24

The seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name." He replied, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.

"All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." Then he turned to his disciples and said privately, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see.

For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it."