

VIOLENCE AGAINST THE KINGDOM

Genesis 3:1-5 The Fall

³ Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?”

² The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, ³ but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

⁴ “You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. ⁵ “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

Matthew 11:7-12

⁷ As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.”

¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹² But from the days of John the Baptist until now, the reign of heaven, and violent men are trying to snatch it away.

MESSAGE:

Someone once asked me, “If you had to describe what the Bible was all about in one sentence, what would you say?” Well, the first thing I said was that it was foolish of them to expect me to say anything in only one sentence! But I thought about it awhile and told them that if I had to reduce it all to one sentence it would be something like this: “The Bible is the story of how God is building his kingdom in a fallen world.” The Old Testament assured people that the Kingdom of God was coming and the New Testament assured them that the Kingdom of God had arrived. Mark records that the first words Jesus spoke were: “*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.*” (Mark 1:15) At first, people rejoiced that the kingdom had come and eagerly welcomed Jesus as its King. But it soon became clear that Jesus was a very different kind of king and the kingdom he brought was a very different kind of kingdom than the one they had expected.

In the first place, Jesus’ kingdom wasn’t a physical kingdom—you couldn’t see it or touch it. It had no geography—you couldn’t tell where it started and where it ended. According to the King, it existed only in the human mind. Jesus said, “*The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or*

'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you." What kind of kingdom existed only inside its subjects? That was strange. Even more strange was the fact that the way things worked in the Kingdom of God were the exact opposite of how things worked in the world. For example, things that were regarded as curses in the world were considered blessings in the Kingdom of God—things like poverty and mourning and being persecuted. Instead of hating your enemies you were supposed to love them and pray for them. The way to rise in the Kingdom of God was to sink to the bottom of the world. Jesus said, *"Whoever would be greatest among you must be the slave of all."* This was an odd king and a peculiar kingdom!

Then, Jesus and his Kingdom began to be attacked. Jesus' herald, John the Baptist, was beheaded. As Jesus went about healing the sick and casting demons out of those who were possessed, the religious leaders became enraged and accused him of being in league with Satan. They began to make plans to destroy him. When his disciples asked him why this was happening, Jesus told them: *"From the time of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of God has suffered violence, and violent men try to snatch it away."* The violence reached its climax in Jerusalem, the city of peace, when the King was tortured and crucified.

But even after he was killed the violence continued. The King's followers were persecuted and tormented by Roman emperors. The emperor Marcus Aurelius launched an empire-wide program against Christians, decreeing that any of them who refused to worship the emperor by burning incense to him should be tortured and crucified just as their king had been. But a peculiar thing began to happen: the more the Kingdom was attacked, the more it grew. The more that Christians were persecuted and killed, the more people became Christian. The numbers grew like topsy to the point where it came to be said that the Christians had turned the world upside down.

And the persecution continues in today's world as well. In Moslem countries like Saudi Arabia, you can be thrown in jail for telling people about Jesus Christ. In Indonesia, you can be executed for it. In China, house churches are routinely raided. And the persecution isn't limited to foreign countries. Contempt for Christianity is common among the faculties of American universities and not infrequently finds its way into the classroom. Professors who wouldn't dream of speaking a word against Hinduism or Islam feel free to bash Christianity. In prestigious seminaries like Harvard Divinity School the Bible is taught mainly as myth.

The King had told his disciples that all this would happen. In the Garden of Gethsemane he had warned his disciples: *"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first."*

Why does the Kingdom of God provoke such a violent reaction? Why does a Kingdom that espouses peace and mercy and forgiveness and love give rise to such hatred and anger? The answer is that the Kingdom is opposed by the ruler of another kingdom. His name is Satan and he is a malignant creature who hates the Kingdom of God and does everything he can to destroy it. He is driven by rage because ever since he was cast out of heaven he knows that his time is short and that when it is up he will be cast into a lake of fire. His main weapon is the lie, for according to Jesus he is "...a liar and the father of lies." He wants to take as many souls along with him into destruction as he possibly can and so he attacks the Kingdom of God through every agent he can recruit.

That is our enemy. He is the inspiration, the energy, and the moving force behind every act of violence that has ever been perpetrated against the Kingdom of God. The lies of

the heretic, the contempt of the intellectual, the godless musings of the atheist, the soothing blasphemies of the humanist—all these find their origin in the prince of this world.

And we are no match for him. “No one on earth his equal.” Armed with archangelic power and superhuman cleverness, Satan knows how to hit us at our weakest point and at our weakest moment. He can turn our minds from God to Mammon and from Christ to antichrist in the blink of an eye. We can be thinking pious, God-pleasing thoughts one moment, and wallowing in sinful thoughts the next. Consider Herod, for example. We are told that he, “...feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man.” He even, “...liked to listen to him.” Yet at the whimsical request of an adolescent girl whose dancing pleased him, he had the holy man's head sheared from his body and brought to her on a plate. Such is the power of our enemy.

One of Satan's most effective ploys is to convince us that he doesn't exist. That he is an outworn myth, a boogiemer. I say “effective,” because if your enemy is invisible to you, he has you pretty much at his mercy. When someone becomes convinced that there is no Satan, no evil force that is at work to steal his faith and prey upon his soul—he is like an ostrich burying his head in the sand. (By the way—do ostriches really do that?)

No, my friends, the Scriptures are clear on the existence of Satan and his legions. From the Garden of Eden to the Book of Revelation, he is at work inciting violence against the Kingdom of God. Both God the Father and Jesus the Christ are clear about who Satan is and what he aspires to do.

What he aspires to do is very simple: he wants to rob you of your faith that Jesus Christ is the Son of God Who came to save sinners. Satan is perfectly happy to have you believe anything you like, as long as you don't believe that Jesus Christ came to save you from sin, death and the devil. If you believe that, Satan can't touch you—you are beyond his reach. If you think of Satan as a vicious pit bull who wants to get his teeth in your throat, then the Gospel is a chain that binds him to a post where he can't reach you. Only by abandoning your faith in Jesus Christ do you turn him loose.

Faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior is all we need to stay out of Satan's reach. And our faith is kept alive by God's Spirit working through God's Word. Jesus has promised that if we continue in His Word, we will know the truth, and the truth will keep us free. That is why Satan is always attacking God's Word. He persuaded Adam and Eve to give up eternity in paradise by planting a seed of doubt in Eve's mind about God's Word. “Did God really say...?” is the eternal taunt of our enemy, whether he speaks through the mouth of a serpent or through the mouth of a professor of theology at Harvard. “Surely God wouldn't have said *that!* He didn't *really* mean *that!* He just *couldn't* have meant that people of the same sex shouldn't get married. What could possibly be wrong with that? He couldn't have meant that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, and that nobody comes to the Father except through Him! Surely there are many different roads to God. We've learned a lot since Jesus was on the earth and we know better than that now!

So Satan continually injects the dissonant note of doubt into the perfect harmony of God's word. But as long as we retain our faith in its truth, Satan's siren song will fall on deaf ears. There is no one on earth who is his equal in power, intelligence, cleverness and motivation, yet one little word can fell him: the Word of God.

The Kingdom of God will always suffer violence because it is such a threat to worldly powers and the power of the prince of darkness. The word of God will always be attacked because it is the means through which the Kingdom stands and grows. But thanks be to God, His Word abounds to everyone who is willing to read or listen to it. Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." To which we reply, "*Speak, Lord, for your servants listen.*"

Amen.