

I was speaking at a pastors conference once about youth ministry. I had spent 45 minutes encouraging the pastors to think outside the box and - even more importantly - to trust their youth leaders. Some of the youth leaders had shared with me that they had tried to bring in "rock music" (by which they meant Christian worship bands like ours here at Catalyst), but their pastors often shut them down. I made a plea - if they want to bring in a rock band, let them try it!

There was a Q&A afterwards and immediately a pastor asked a question: "Why should I let rock music into my church if the beat of rock music summons demons?"

If that question surprises you, then you didn't grow up in the Church in the late 80s/early 90s loving rock music. Everyone from Kansas to AC/DC to yes the Rolling Stones was accused of being Satanic.

And why rock music? Well the arguments get pretty complicated (and hilarious), but they're all ultimately rooted in a particularly origin story of the Devil that pretty much standardized in our culture:

The Devil was once an angel named Lucifer who was basically second in command of Heaven (some say he was the music leader, which is why he's so into rock n roll). For some reason, he decided he should be God instead, so he led a rebellion, tried to take over heaven, and was cast into Hell. All this happened before anything else was created.

I'm guessing that sounds at least vaguely familiar to most of us. But here's the fascinating thing: that story isn't in the Bible anywhere. Bits and pieces of it are, but the whole thing isn't anywhere.

And that's actually sort of a big deal. Because we should take the Devil seriously. But the Devil's mission isn't to get us all hooked on sick guitar licks and double-kick drum. The Devil's mission is to deceive us, to convince us that we are not worthy of God's grace and to convince us that others aren't either.

But to see that, we're going to have to figure out what the Bible actually does say about Satan.

So today's going to be fun. Because even more than being about the Devil, it's about the God who overcomes him with the light of truth - the truth that we're all loved and all given impossible, infinite grace that no one - not even the Devil - can take from us.

Message

This is the last week of our series called *Empathy for the Devil*. We've met some of the worst villains in the Bible and asked, "Why did they do what they did?" We're not looking to apologize or make excuses for them. We simply want to practice some empathy - put ourselves in their shoes. Because ultimately, we'll discover we're more like them than we thought, and reflecting on their sin will illuminate the seeds of those same sins in our own lives.

Turn with me to Revelation 12. We couldn't very well do a series called "Empathy for the Devil" and not talk about Satan. So let's dive right into Satan's story: the story of an angel who started a war in Heaven - that much of the story IS true. We find the story of Satan's war in Revelation 12.

Now, the book of Revelation can be pretty confusing and scary. It's packed with symbols. But take a couple of deep breaths and we're going to dive into this story. Of particular note for our purposes is WHEN this war takes place.

Then I witnessed in heaven an event of great significance. I saw a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon beneath her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant, and she cried out because of her labor pains and the agony of giving birth.

Then I witnessed in heaven another significant event. I saw a large red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, with seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept away one-third of the stars in the sky, and he threw them to the earth. He stood in front of the woman as she was about to give birth, ready to devour her baby as soon as it was born.

She gave birth to a son who was to rule all nations with an iron rod. And her child was snatched away from the dragon and was caught up to God and to his throne. And the woman fled into the wilderness, where God had prepared a place to care for her for 1,260 days.

Then there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon and his angels. And the dragon lost the battle, and he and his angels were forced out of heaven. This great dragon—the ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, the one deceiving the whole world—was thrown down to the earth with all his angels. -- Revelation 12:1-9

A woman who has a child. A dragon who is specifically identified as Satan. It becomes clear pretty quickly that the child is Jesus. The woman is sort of a mashup of Israel and Mary - she is the mother of God.

The dragon wants to devour the child, but he is instead 'caught up to heaven'.

It's after this event the dragon goes to war and is cast out of heaven.

There is so much going on in this short vision, but for our purposes this morning, here's what matters: the Revelation locates Satan's rebellion *after Jesus ascended to Heaven*.

That is significantly different from the story we tell - that Satan went to war before the creation of the world. What's going on? Well, Revelation 12 goes on to give us a clue. Immediately after Satan is cast to Earth, the heavens erupt into worship (of course they do! Satan's not there anymore!):

Then I heard a loud voice shouting across the heavens, “It has come at last— salvation and power and the Kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ.

For the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down to earth— the one who accuses them before our God day and night.

And they have defeated him by the blood of the Lamb and by their testimony. And they did not love their lives so much that they were afraid to die.

Therefore, rejoice, O heavens! And you who live in the heavens, rejoice! But terror will come on the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you in great anger, knowing that he has little time.” -- Revelation 12:10-12

We'll return to that last part in a moment. But the Revelation calls Satan 'the accuser of our brothers and sisters - the one who accuses them before our God day and night.'

If you think Satan was a cranky worship leader, this doesn't make a lot of sense. But if you were an Ancient Hebrew, steeped in the Old Testament, this would be very exciting for you.

Because the word Satan isn't a name - it's actually a title. In Hebrew, it means 'Accuser'. It referred to a person in the royal court. The Accuser worked for the king and brought charges on behalf of the crown against citizens of the kingdom. Today, we call that person the District Attorney.

God, as the king of all creation, had an Accuser - in Hebrew called 'the Satan'. And his role in the Old Testament was to test humanity, to see whether we were actually faithful to our king. The Satan would record our sins and then accuse us before God - bring formal charges of sinfulness, unfaithfulness.

Here's one of three places we see this in the Old Testament, from the prophet Zechariah:

Then the angel showed me Jeshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD. The Accuser, Satan, was there at the angel's right hand, making accusations against Jeshua. And the LORD said to Satan, “I, the LORD, reject your accusations, Satan. Yes, the LORD, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebukes you. This man is like a burning stick that has been snatched from the fire.” -- Zechariah 3:1-2

This is the Hebrew equivalent of a Law & Order episode, where a criminal stands accused and guilty before the judge, only to have the judge forgive the offense and choose not to punish.

From everything the Bible actually says about Satan, this is as best we can tell what his role was: to test humanity for faithfulness and report failures of faith - sin - to God.

But then... something happens. God comes to earth as a human. God lives and dies and is raised in such a way that sin is forgiven once and for all. And as Paul says in his letter to the Romans,

Now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death. -- Romans 8:1-2

There is now no condemnation. There is now no accusation. Because Jesus has been faithful *for* us. Jesus offers us *his* faithfulness. And when we embrace Jesus' life, when we commit ourselves to his way, then the Accuser has nothing left to say about us.

The way Revelation puts it is that, in the wake of Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the Accuser is thrown down. There's nothing left for him to do in Heaven.

Okay, let's pause and take a breath. That's a lot, and very different from the story we're used to.

And if we're being honest, it seems a little bit trite. A little petty. Satan is mad that he's out of a job? That's worth going to war in Heaven?

But put yourself for a moment in the Satan's place. For eternity he has served faithfully as God's Accuser. He has tested humanity again and again. He has witnessed every sin, every failure. While everyone else rests comfortably in heaven, he is in the mud of the earth with all us who were given paradise but rejected it to make war on each other.

How could he not look down his nose at us? How could he feel anything but contempt for all us ungrateful sinners, spitting again and again on the precious gifts God gives us?

And then God comes to us himself. God comes to show us in person the way to life. Do we listen? No. We crucify him. We beat and torture him to death.

And then it turns out, *this was the plan all along*. That God's agenda was to make room in heaven for all us ungrateful sinners.

Maybe that goes beyond getting your feelings hurt. There's something that seems *wrong* about that. Sinners don't deserve salvation. The wicked deserve to be punished, not rescued.

How can we say God is just if God forgives rather than punishes? How can we say God is good if God lets the wicked into paradise?

Is it possible that Satan went to war to save Heaven... from God?

That's not as strange as it might sound at first. Because what we're really talking about at this point is grace - and grace is, ironically, scandalous for those who consider themselves to be close to God.

Not unlike what we saw with Judas last week, the Satanic impulse is, ironically, wanting to protect God from being defiled by unholy people. Satan wants to keep sinners out of Heaven, but that is exactly contrary to God's purposes.

Jesus encountered this satanic attitude again and again during his ministry - and it always came from the most religious people: the scribes and Pharisees. In Matthew 9, we get the story of how Jesus called Matthew, a tax collector, to follow him. In response, Matthew throws a party.

In Jesus' day, tax collectors were considered the worst sinners (because they collected taxes for the occupying Roman authorities. They were anti-God and anti-country.) So you can imagine that the only people who will come to Matthew's dinner party are other disreputable people. And Jesus, of course. Look what happens:

Later, Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. But when the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with such scum?"

When Jesus heard this, he said, "Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do." Then he added, "Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: 'I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.' For I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners." -- Matthew 9:1-13

The religious people can't believe Jesus - a respectable teacher - would sully himself by associating with disgusting sinners. But Jesus says that this is exactly his mission, that this is God's way in the world - to give grace to those who don't deserve it.

And he points out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees - they think they're healthy. They think they've earned God's love and mercy. But they're just as sick as everyone else.

This Satanic impulse to judge, exclude and condemn comes from pride. It comes from assuming we're better than the people around us, that somehow we were worthy of God's grace when they aren't.

Which of course is a lie. None of us is worthy of God's grace - that's *why* it's called grace.

There's an interesting turn in Revelation 12 as well, an important note in the story of Satan. In the Old Testament, Satan is never called 'the devil'. Only 'the Satan', the Accuser.

It's not until the New Testament that Satan gets the title 'devil'. It's a Greek word that means 'deceiver' or 'liar'. It's significant that Satan is only called a devil, a liar *after* Jesus is raised from the dead.

Because before the resurrection, what the Accuser said about us was true. We *were* sinners. We stood guilty before God, every accusation truth.

But something changed when Jesus was raised from the dead. Jesus took our condemnation, our shame, our sin on himself. He swallowed it up and offered us *his* faithfulness, his righteousness. Just like with all Matthew's disreputable friends, Jesus comes to us, eats with us, and invites us to share in his life.

Not because we deserve it. But because he loves us.

Jesus' love precedes Jesus' rescue. Jesus rescues us *because* he loves us. Pure, undeserved grace. For all of us. Each of us. Every one of us.

Now that he has been cast out of Heaven, the Accuser has become the Devil. The prosecutor has become the liar. He knows he's been defeated, so he seeks to take as many of us with him as he can.

How does he do that? By lying to us. By deceiving us.

On the one hand, Satan would have us believe we are unworthy of God's love. That God couldn't possibly love us, that God wouldn't be caught dead with us.

Which is a lie.

On the other hand, Satan would have us believe there's something special about us - how hard we work, how faithful we are. Slowly but surely, he tries to convince us we really *are* worthy of God's love, that maybe we were never really in need of rescue in the first place. Brick by deceitful brick, Satan builds a pedestal and walks us up a little at a time until, like the Pharisees, we're looking down on all those sinners.

This is also a lie. When we put ourselves above the sinners and tax collectors, we're not where God is because God is down there, with them, showing them love and inviting them to new life.

A Christian who refuses to offer God's grace to the world around them is truly Satanic.

Satan cares less about whether you listen to heavy metal than how you treat the people around you.

And if we are to resist the devil, we have to reject all his lies. That means refusing to believe we're worthless, beyond God's reach.

That we are loved by God is the first truth of our existence. Nothing is true before this, and everything that is true about us flows from this first truth.

To reject the devil's lies is likewise to refuse to believe we have done anything to deserve God's love. God's love is a gift, given freely and graciously. And it's given not just to you and me, but to every person in the world.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus demonstrates our value and invites us to imitate him. This table is only for those who can acknowledge they're sick and need the Great Physician.

Assignment + Blessing