

Satan's Devices

by George Whitefield

"Lest Satan should get an advantage over us; for we are not ignorant of his devices." II Corinthians 2:11

The occasion of these words was as follows: In the church of Corinth there was an unhappy person, who had committed such incest, as was not so much as named among the Gentiles, in taking his father's wife; but either on account of his wealth, power, or some such reasons, like many notorious offenders now-adays, he had not been exposed to the censures of the church. St. Paul, therefore, in his first epistle, severely chides them for this neglect of discipline, and commands them, "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when they were gathered together, to deliver such a one, whoever he was, to Satan, for the destruction of the flesh, that his Spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord;" that is, they should solemnly excommunicate him; which was then commonly attended with some bodily disease.

The Corinthians, being obedient to the Apostle, as dear children, no sooner received this reproof, but they submitted to it, and cast the offending party out of the church. But whilst they were endeavoring to amend one fault, they unhappily ran into another; and as they formerly had been too mild and remiss, so now they behaved towards him with too much severity and resentment.

The Apostle, therefore, in this chapter, reproves this, and tells them, that "sufficient to the offender's shame, was the punishment which had been inflicted of many:" that he had now suffered enough; and that, therefore, lest he should be tempted to say with Cain, "My punishment is greater than I can bear;" or to use the Apostle's own words, "Lest he should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow;" they ought, now he had given proof of his repentance, to forgive him, to confirm their love towards him, and to restore him in the spirit of meekness; "Lest Satan, (to whose buffetings he was now given, by tempting him to despair) should get an advantage over us:" and so, by representing you as merciless and cruel, cause that holy name to be blasphemed, by which you are called; "for we are not ignorant of his devices:" we know very well how many subtle ways he has to draw aside and beguile unguarded unthinking men.

Thus then, stand the words in relation to the context; but as Satan has many devices, and as his quiver is full of other poisonous darts, besides those which he shoots at us to drive us to despair, I shall, in the following discourse,

FIRST, Briefly observe who we are to understand by Satan. And,

SECONDLY, Point out to you, what are the chief devices he generally makes use of to draw off converts from Christ, and also prescribe some remedies against them.

FIRST, Who are we to understand by Satan?

The word Satan, in its original signification, meant an adversary; and in its general acceptance, is made use of, to point out to us the chief of the devils, who, for striving to be as God, was cast down from heaven, and is now permitted, "with the rest of his spiritual wickednesses in high places, to walk up and down, seeking whom he may devour." We hear of him immediately after the creation, when in the shape of a serpent, he lay in wait to deceive our first parents. He is called Satan, in the book of Job, where we are told, that "when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, Satan also came amongst them." As the scripture also speaketh in the book of Chronicles; "and Satan moved David to number the people." In the New Testament he goes under different denominations; sometimes he is called the evil One, because he is evil in himself, and tempts us to evil. Sometimes, "the Prince of the power of the air;" and, "the Spirit that now ruleth in the children of disobedience;" because he resides chiefly in the air, and through the whole world: and all that are not born of God, are said to lie in him.

He is an enemy to God and goodness; he is a hater of all truth. Why else did he slander God in paradise? Why did he tell Eve, "You shall not surely die?" And why did he promise to give all the kingdoms of the world, and the glories of them, to Jesus Christ, if he would fall down and worship him?

He is full of malice, envy, and revenge: For what other motives could induce him to molest innocent man in paradise? And why is he still so restless in his attempts to destroy us, who have done him no wrong?

He is a being of great power, as appears in his being able to act on the imagination of our blessed Lord, so as to represent to him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glories of them, in a moment of time. As also in carrying his sacred body through the air up to a pinnacle of the temple; and his driving a herd of swine so furiously into the deep. Nay, so great is his might, that, I doubt not, was God to let him use his full strength, but he could turn the earth upside down, or pull the sun from its orb.

But what he is most remarkable for is, his subtlety: for not having power given him from above, to take us by force, he is obliged to wait for opportunities to betray us, and to catch us by guile. He, therefore, made use of the serpent, which was subtle above all the beasts of the field, in order to tempt our first parents; and accordingly he is said, in the New Testament, "To lie in wait to deceive;" and, in the words of the text, the Apostle says, "We are not ignorant of his devices:" thereby implying, that we are more in danger of being seduced by his policy, than over-borne by his power.

From this short description of Satan, we may easily judge whose children they are, who love to make a lie, who speak evil of, and slander their neighbor, and whose hearts are full of pride, subtlety, malice, envy, revenge, and all uncharitableness. Surely they have Satan for their father: for the tempers of Satan they know, and the works of Satan they do. But were they to see either themselves, or Satan as he is, they could not but be terrified at their own likeness, and abhor themselves in dust and ashes.

But, the justice of God in suffering us to be tempted, is vindicated from the following considerations: That we are here in a state of disorder; That he has promised not to suffer us to be tempted above what we are able to bear; and not only so, but to him that overcometh he will give a crown of life.

The holy angels themselves, it should seem, were once put to a trial whether they would be faithful or not. The first Adam was tempted, even in paradise. And Jesus Christ, that second Adam, though he was a son, yet was carried, as our representative, by the Holy Spirit, into the wilderness, to be tempted of the devil. And there is not one single saint in paradise, amongst the goodly fellowship of the prophets, the glorious company of the apostles, the noble army of martyrs, and the spirits of just men made perfect, who, when on earth, was not assaulted by the fiery darts of that wicked one, the devil.

What then has been the common lot of all God's children, and of the angels, nay, of the eternal Son of God himself, we must not think to be exempted from: No, it is sufficient if we are made perfect through temptations, as they were. And, therefore, since we cannot but be tempted, unless we could unmake human nature, instead of repining at our condition, we should rather be inquiring, at what time of our lives Satan most violently assaults us? And what those devices are, which he commonly makes use of, in order to "get an advantage over us?"

As to the first question, what time of life? I answer, we must expect to be tempted by him, in some degree or other, all our lives long. ♦ For this life being a continual warfare, we must never expect to have rest from our spiritual adversary the devil, or to say, our combat with him is finished, ♦ till, with our blessed master, we bow down our heads, and give up the ghost.

But since the time of our conversion, or first entering upon the spiritual life, is the most critical time at which he, for the most part, violently besets us, as well knowing, if he can prevent our setting out, he can lead us captive at his will; and since the wise son of Sirach particularly warns us, when we are going to serve the Lord, to prepare our souls for temptation, I shall, in answer to the other question, pass on to the

SECOND general thing proposed; and point out those devices, which Satan generally makes use of at our first conversion, in order to get an advantage over us.

But let me observe to you, that whatsoever shall be delivered in the following discourse is only designed for such as have actually entered upon the divine life; and not for carnal almost Christians, who have the form of godliness, but never yet felt the power of it in their hearts. This being premised, The

FIRST device I shall mention, which Satan makes use of, is, to drive us to despair.

When God the Father awakens a sinner by the terrors of the law, and by his Holy Spirit convinceth him of sin, in order to lead him to Christ, and show him the necessity of a Redeemer; then Satan generally strikes in, and aggravates those convictions to such a degree, as to make the sinner doubt of finding mercy thro' the Mediator.

Thus, in all his temptations of the Holy Jesus, he chiefly aimed to make him question, whether he was the Son of God? "If thou be the Son of God," do so and so. With many such desponding thoughts, no doubt, he filled the heart of the great St. Paul, when he continued three days, neither eating bread nor drinking water; and therefore he speaks by experience, when he says, in the words of the text, "We are not ignorant of his devices," that he would endeavor to drive the incestuous person to despair.

But let not any of you be influenced by him, to despair of finding mercy. For it is not the greatness or number of our crimes, but impenitence and unbelief, that will prove our ruin: No, were our sins more in number than the hairs of our head, or of a deeper die than the brightest scarlet; yet the merits of the death of Jesus Chris are infinitely greater, and faith in his blood shall make them white as snow.

Answer always, therefore, his despairing suggestions, as your Blessed Lord did, with an "It is written." Tell him, you know that your Redeemer liveth, ever to make intercession for you; that the Lord hath received from him double for all your crimes: And tho' you have sinned much, that is no reason why you should despair, but only why you should love much, having so much forgiven. A

SECOND device that Satan generally makes use of, to get an advantage over young converts, is, to tempt them to presume, or to think more highly of themselves than they ought to think.

When a person ha for some little time tasted the good word of life, and felt the powers of the world to come, he is commonly (as indeed well he may) most highly transported with that sudden change he finds in himself. But then, Satan will not be wanting, at such a time, to puff him up with a high conceit of his own attainments as if he was some great person; and will tempt him to set at nought his brethren, as though he was holier than they.

Take heed therefore, and let us beware of this device of our spiritual adversary; for as before honor is humility, so a haughty spirit generally goes before a fall; and God is obliged, when under such circumstances, to send us some humbling visitation, or permit us to fall, as he did Peter into some grievous sin, that we may learn not to be too high minded.

To check therefore all suggestions to spiritual pride, let us consider, that we did not apprehend Christ, but were apprehended of him. That we have nothing but what we have received. That the free grace of God has alone made the difference between us and others; and, was God to leave us to the deceitfulness of our own hearts but one moment, we should become weak and wicked, like other men. We should farther consider, that being proud of grace, is the most ready way to lose it. "For God resisteth the proud, and giveth more grace only to the humble." And were we endowed with the perfections of the seraphim; yet if we were proud of those perfections, they would but render us more accomplished devils. Above all, we should pray earnestly to Almighty God, that we may learn of Jesus Christ, to be lowly in heart. That his grace, through the subtlety and deceivableness of Satan, may not be our poison. But that we may always think soberly of ourselves, as we ought to think. A

THIRD device I shall mention, which Satan generally makes use of, "to get an advantage over us," is to tempt us to uneasiness, and to have hard thoughts of God, when we are dead and barren in prayer.

Though this is a term not understood by the natural man, yet, whosoever there are amongst you, who have passed through the pangs of the new birth, they know full well what I mean, when I talk of deadness and dryness in prayer. And, I doubt not, but many of you, amongst whom I am not preaching the kingdom of God, are at this very time laboring under it.

For, when persons are first awakened to the divine life, because grace is weak and nature strong, God is often pleased to vouchsafe them some extraordinary illuminations of his Holy Spirit; but when they are grown to be more perfect men in Christ, then he frequently seems to leave them to themselves; and not only so, but permits a horrible deadness and dread to overwhelm them; at which times Satan will not be wanting to vex and tempt them to impatience, to the great discomfort of their souls.

But be not afraid; for this is no more than your blessed Redeemer, that spotless Lamb of God, has undergone before you: witness his bitter agony in the garden, when his soul was exceeding sorrowful, even unto death. When he sweat great drops of blood, falling on the ground; when the sense of the Divinity was drawn from him; and Satan, in all probability, was permitted to set all his terrors in array before him.

Rejoice, therefore, my brethren, when you fall into the like circumstances; as knowing, that you are therein partakers of the sufferings of Jesus Christ. Consider, that it is necessary such inward trials should come, to wean us from the immoderate love of sensible devotion, and teach us to follow Christ, not merely for his loaves, but out of a principle of love and obedience. In patience, therefore, possess your souls, and be not terrified by Satan's suggestions. Still persevere in seeking Jesus in the use of means, though it be sorrowing; and though through barrenness of soul, you may go mourning all the day long. Consider that the spouse is with you, though behind the curtain; as he was with Mary, at the sepulcher, though she knew it not. That he was withdrawn but for a little while, to make his next visit more welcome. That though he may now seem to frown and look back on you, as he did on the Syrophonecian woman; yet if you, like her, or blind Bartimeus, cry out so much the more earnestly, "Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on us;" he will be made known unto you again, either in the temple, by breaking of bread, or some other way.

But amongst all the devices that Satan makes use of, "to get an advantage over us," there is none in which he is more successful, or by which he grieves the children of God worse, than a

FOURTH device I am going to mention, his troubling you with blasphemous, profane, unbelieving thoughts; and sometimes to such a degree, that they are as tormenting as the rack.

Some indeed are apt to impute all such evil thoughts to a disorder of body. But those who know any thing of the spiritual life, can inform you, with greater certainty, that for the generality, they proceed from that wicked one, the devil; who, no doubt, has power given him from above, as well now as formerly, to disorder the body, as he did Job's, that he may, with the more secrecy and success, work upon, ruffle and torment the soul.

You that have felt his fiery darts, can subscribe to the truth of this, and by fatal experience can tell, how often he has bid you, "curse God and die," and darted into your thoughts a thousand blasphemous suggestions, even in your most secret and solemn retirements; the bar looking back on which makes your very hearts to tremble.

I appeal to your own consciences; Have not some of you, when you have been lifting up holy hands in prayer, been pestered with such a crowd of the most horrid insinuations, that you have been often tempted to rise off from your knees, and been made to believe your prayers were an abomination to the Lord? Nay, when, with the rest of your Christian brethren, you have crowded round the holy table, and taken the sacred symbols of Christ's most blessed body and blood into your hands, instead of remembering the death of your Savior, have you not employed in driving out evil thoughts, as Abraham was in driving away the birds, that came to devour his sacrifice; and thereby have been terrified, lest you have eat and drank your own damnation?

But marvel not, as though some strange thing happened unto you; for this has been the common lot of all God's children. We read, even in Job's time, "That when the sons of God came to appear before their Maker, (at public worship) Satan also came amongst them," to disturb their devotions.

And think not that God is angry with you for these distracting, though ever so blasphemous thoughts: No, he knows it is not you, but Satan working in you; and therefore, notwithstanding he may be displeased with, and certainly will punish him; yet he will both pity and reward you. And though it be difficult to make persons in your circumstances to believe so; yet I doubt not but you are more acceptable to God, when performing your holy duties in the midst of such involuntary distractions, than when you are wrapped up by devotion, as it were, into the third heavens; for you are then suffering, as well as doing the will of God at the same time; and, like Nehemiah's servants at the building of the temple, are holding a trowel in one hand, and a sword in the other. Be not driven from the use of any ordinance whatever, on account of those abominable suggestions; for then you let Satan get his desired advantage over you; it being his chief design, by these thoughts, to make you fall out with the means of grace; and to tempt you to believe, you do not please God, for no other reason, than because you do not please yourselves. Rather persevere in the use of the holy communion especially, and all other means whatever; and when these temptations have wrought that resignation in you, for which they were permitted, God will visit you with fresh tokens of his love, as he met Abraham, when he returned from the slaughter of the five kings; and will send an angel from heaven, as he did to his Son, on purpose to strengthen you.

Hitherto we have only observed such devices as Satan makes use of immediately by himself; but there is a

FIFTH I shall mention, which is not the least, tempting us by our carnal friends and relatives.

This is one of the most common, as well as most artful devices he makes use of, to draw young converts from God; for when he cannot prevail over them by himself, he will try what he can do by the influence and mediation of others.

Thus he tempted Eve, that she might tempt Adam. Thus he stirred up Job's wife, to bid him "Curse God and die." And thus he made use of Peter's tongue, to persuade our blessed Lord "to spare himself," and thereby decline those sufferings, by which alone we could be preserved from suffering the vengeance of eternal fire. And thus, in these last days, he often stirs up our most powerful friends and dearest intimates, to dissuade us from going in that narrow way, which alone leadeth unto life eternal.

But our blessed Lord has furnished us with a sufficient answer to all such suggestions. "Get you behind me, my adversaries;" for otherwise they will be an offense unto you; and the only reason why they give such advice is, because they "favor not the things that be of God, but the things that be of men."

Whoever, therefore, among you are resolved to serve the Lord, prepare your souls for many such temptations as these; for it is necessary that such offenses should come, to try your sincerity, to teach us to cease from man, and to see if we will forsake all to follow Christ.

Indeed our modernisers of Christianity would persuade us, that the gospel was calculated only for about two hundred years; and that now there is no need of hating father and mother, or of being persecuted for the sake of Christ and his gospel.

But such persons err, not knowing the scriptures, and the power of godliness in their hearts; for whosoever receives the love of God in the truth of it, will find, that Christ came to send not peace, but a sword upon earth, as much now as ever. That the father-in-law shall be against the daughter-in-law, in these latter, as well as in the primitive times; and that if we will live godly in Christ Jesus, we must, as then, so now, from carnal friends and relations, suffer persecution. But the devil hath a

SIXTH device, which is as dangerous as any of the former, by not tempting us at all, or rather, by withdrawing himself for a while, in order to come upon us at an hour when we think not of it.

Thus it is said, that he left Jesus Christ only for a season; and our blessed Lord has bid us to watch and pray always, that we enter not into temptation; thereby implying, that Satan, whether we think of it or not, is always seeking how he may devour us.

If we would therefore behave like good soldiers of Jesus Christ, we must be always upon our guard, and never pretend to lay down our spiritual weapons of prayer and watching, till our warfare is accomplished by death; for if we do, our spiritual Amalek will quickly prevail against us. What if he has left us? It is only for a season; yet a little while, and, like a roaring lion, with double fury, he will break out upon us again. So great a coward as the devil is, he seldom leaves us at the first onset. As he followed our blessed Lord with one temptation after another, so will he treat his servants. And the reason why he does not renew his attacks, is sometimes, because God knows we are yet weak and unable to bear them, sometimes, because our grand adversary thinks to beset us at a more convenient season.

Watch carefully over thy heart, O Christian; and whenever thou perceivest thyself to be falling into a spiritual slumber, say to it, as Christ to his disciples, "Arise (my soul) why sleepest thou?" Awake, awake; put on strength, watch and pray, or otherwise the Philistines will be upon thee, and lead thee whither thou wouldst not. Alas! Is this life a time to lie down and slumber in? Arise, and call upon thy God; thy spiritual enemy is not dead, but lurketh in some secret place, seeking a convenient opportunity how he may betray thee. If thou ceasest to strive with him, thou ceasest to be a friend of God; thou ceasest to go in that narrow way which leadeth unto life.

Thus have I endeavored to point out to you some of those devices, that Satan generally makes use of "to get an advantage over us;" many others there are, no doubt, which he often uses.

But these, on account of my youth and want of experience, I cannot yet apprise you of; they who have been listed for many years in their master's service, and fought under his banner against our spiritual Amalek, are able to discover more of his artifices; and, being tempted in all things, like unto their brethren, can, in all things, advise and succor those that are tempted.

In the mean while, let me exhort my young fellow-soldiers, who, like myself, are but just entering the field, and for whose sake this was written, not to be discouraged at the fiery trial wherewith they must be tried, if they would be found faithful servants of Jesus Christ. You see, my dearly beloved brethren, by what has been delivered, that our way through the wilderness of this world to the heavenly Canaan, is beset with thorns, and that there are sons of Anak to be grappled with, ere you can possess the promised land. But let not these, like so many false spies, discourage you from going up to fight the Lord's battles, but say with Caleb and Joshua, "Nay, but we will go up, for we are able to conquer them." Jesus Christ, that great captain of our salvation, has in our stead, and as our representative, baffled the grand enemy of mankind, and we have nothing to do, but manfully to fight under his banner, and to go on from conquering to conquer. Our glory does not consist in being exempted from, but in enduring temptations. "Blessed is the man, (says the apostle) that endureth temptation;": and again, "Brethren, count it all joy, when you fall into divers temptations:" And in that perfect form our blessed Lord has prescribed to us, we are taught to pray, not so much to be delivered from all temptation, as "from the evil" of it. Whilst we are on this side eternity, it must needs be that temptations come; and, no doubt, "Satan has desired to have all of us, to sift us as wheat." But wherefore should we fear? For he that is for us, is by far more powerful, than all that are against us. Jesus Christ, our great High-priest, is exalted to the right hand of God, and there sitteth to make intercession for us, that our faith fail not.

Since then Christ is praying, whom should we fear? And since he has promised to make us more than conquerors, of whom should we be afraid? No, though an host of devils are set in array against us, let us not be afraid; though there should rise up the hottest persecution against us, yet let us put our trust in God. What though Satan, and the rest of his apostate spirits, are powerful, when compared with us; yet, if put in competition with the Almighty, they are as weak as the meanest worms. God has them all reserved in chains of darkness unto the judgment of the great day. So far as he permits them, they shall go, but no farther; and where he pleases, there shall their proud malicious designs be stayed. We read in the gospel, that though a legion of them possessed one man, yet they could not destroy him; nor could they so much as enter into a swine, without first having leave given them from above. It is true, we often find they foil us, when we are assaulted by them; but let us be strong, and very courageous; for, though they bruise our heels, we shall, at length, bruise their heads. Yet a little while, and he that shall come, will come; and then we

shall see all our spiritual enemies put under our feet. What if they do come out against us, like so many great Goliaths; yet, if we can go forth, as the stripling David, in the name and strength of the Lord of hosts, we may say, O Satan, where is thy power? O fallen spirits, where is your victory?

Once more therefore, and to conclude; let us be strong, and very courageous, and let us put on the whole armor of God, that we may be able to stand against the fiery darts of the wicked one. Let us renounce ourselves, and the world, and then we shall take away the armor in which he trusteth, and he will find nothing in us for his temptations to work upon. We shall then prevent his malicious designs; and being willing to suffer ourselves, shall need less sufferings to be sent us from above. Let us have our loins girt about with truth; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation; "praying always with all manner of supplication." Above all things, "Let us take the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God," and "the shield of faith," looking always to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is now sat down at the right hand of God.

To which happy place, may God of his infinite mercy translate us all, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

To whom, with the Father, and the Holy Ghost, three persons and one eternal God, be all honor and glory, now and for evermore. Amen.