

Strong and Stronger

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

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Jesus told the following parable. “When a strong man guards his own palace, his goods are in peace. But when a stronger than he comes upon him and overcomes him, he takes from him all his armor in which he trusted, and divides his spoils.” Luke 11:21, 22. What did He mean by this parable? Who is the “strong man,” and who is the “stronger man”? What about the “peace” that is mentioned, and what is the “armor” that is removed? All of these are good questions to address.

A look at the previous verses reveals the context of this engaging parable, one which has deep relevance for us today. Go back to verse 14 of this chapter. “And He was casting out a demon, and it was mute. So it was, when the demon had gone out, that the mute spoke; and the multitudes marveled. But some of them said, 'He casts out demons by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.' And others, testing Him, sought from Him a sign from heaven.

“But He, knowing their thoughts, said to them: 'Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and a house divided against a house falls. If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? Because you say I cast out demons by Beelzebub. And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.'” Luke 11:14-20.

Thereafter follows the parable in which Jesus referred to the palace of the strong man being invaded by a stronger who despoils him and removes his armor. It is clear then from the context that Jesus is speaking of Satan and his kingdom. Satan is the “strong man” of the parable. This world, or more specifically the heart of the natural man, is his “palace” over which he rules. His armor is deception and the attractions of this life.

Does all of this square with what the rest of the Bible reveals? Yes, indeed. The Bible reveals a real and personal devil, a being who was once one of the top angels of heaven, an “anointed covering cherub.” Here's what the Scriptures say: “You were the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God. You were the anointed cherub who covers; I established you. You were on the holy mountain of God. You walked back and forth in the midst of fiery stones. You were perfect in your ways, from the day you were created, till iniquity was found in you. Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty.” Ezekiel 28:12-15.

What does the word “anointed” mean in Hebrew? It is “messiah.” It suggests being commissioned for a mission. What does the term “covering cherub” refer to? It suggests that Satan was once one of the angels, known then as Lucifer, who stood closest to the throne of God. He was beautiful, talented and wise. But he chose to cherish thoughts of pride and evil ambition, and thus became Satan, the arch-enemy of God. He is a very real being, make no mistake about it. It makes him happy that people draw cartoons suggesting a creature with horns and a forked tail. He's glad to have people fictionalize and mythologize him. It makes his work even easier.

He claims this earth as his own. When Adam and Eve were created, they were given “dominion” of this world. They were placed in charge of the earth, but when they disobeyed God and ate of the forbidden fruit, they handed the keys to this world to Satan.

He is the “strong man” of the parable. Though he is an angel fallen, God generously allowed His enemy to retain many of his supernatural powers. I think that's amazing! He is given the title in Scripture “prince of the power of the air,” designating his control, when allowed by God, to produce deadly hurricanes, tornadoes and typhoons which wreak destruction. We've seen a lot of these lately. Within certain divine limits, he has control over the elements of the earth, causing disaster by land and sea. In Isaiah 14:16 we are told that it is Satan who produces the deadly earthquakes, one of which struck just this week in Turkey, a 7.2 event that claimed the lives of many. As of this writing about 450 have perished in this catastrophe.

He laid claim to being the ruler of this earth when appearing in the council of heaven recorded in the first chapter of Job. He claimed to be the ruler of this world when tempting Christ. “Again the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, 'All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me.’” Matthew 4:8, 9.

Satan is the “strong man.” His powers far exceed our mortal minds and human strength. We are no match for him. Even Eve, in her perfection, was led astray and deceived by this master criminal. He was successful in artfully deceiving one third of the angels of heaven to his side and to their destruction.

Satan uses implements which are not in God's toolbox. He uses flattery, deceit and insinuation. His method is not an honest and “upfront” approach. He didn't at first tell the angels above that it was his purpose to effect a rebellion against God and overthrow His throne. At first he presented himself as being on God's side, but asked questions which led his hearers to doubt the fairness and authority of God's government. He didn't come to Eve with the statement, “You've heard about a fallen angel. I am that fallen angel and I am here to ask you to join me in the rebellion against God.” No, it was a sly and deceptive approach he used in seducing Eve.

He is pictured in Revelation chapter 12 as a dragon, whose tail drew away one-third of the “stars of heaven,” a symbolic term denoting the angels. For quite a while I've pondered the implication of the dragon's tail being the implement by which the angels fell. Where do you find the tail of an animal? You find an animal's tail behind his back. It is this “behind the back” technique that Satan

used in heaven, and when he found it worked so well, he employed it in tempting Eve. It was deceitful; it was artful; it was clever; it was a lie.

It was the same “behind the back” strategy used by Absalom in seeking the destruction of the kingdom of his father, King David. Absalom seethed in anger over the incident involving Amnon's shameful treatment of Tamar. Remember that King David had several wives, and therefore his offspring were a mixture of full and half siblings. Amnon was Absalom's half-brother; David was the father of both, but they had different mothers. Tamar was Absalom's full sister. When Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar, Absalom expected his father, the king, to take quick and decisive action. He did not. The Bible says that he was “very angry,” but didn't do anything. He didn't lift so much as a royal finger. He didn't even speak out against Amnon's behavior. How could he? The whole kingdom was aware of David's sin in the Bathsheba situation. How could David effectively deal with his son Amnon in the matter of immorality, when he had not too long before this slipped off the moral path himself? His mouth was stopped in being an effective parent because of his own transgression. That's what sin does. That's why it's so important that sin not be in our lives.

Absalom boiled inside and sought an occasion to bring down both his half-brother Amnon and his father David. He was successful in murdering Amnon, and went on to try to dethrone his father and establish himself as Israel's next king. But how to do it? How to go about it? Look at what happened, as recorded in II Samuel 15, and see in this story an illustration of how Satan chiseled away at the foundation of God's throne; how his “behind the back” technique, how the “dragon's tail,” drew away the subjects of his father's kingdom. That's exactly what Lucifer had done in heaven. And by the way, there are a number of other parallels between Absalom and Lucifer. Was not Absalom accounted to be the most handsome man in the kingdom? Was not his beauty (the treasured locks of his hair) the eventual cause of his demise?

Here's what we read in II Samuel 15: “After this it happened that Absalom provided himself with chariots and horses, and fifty men to run before him. Now Absalom would rise early (oh, the energy of sin!) and stand beside the way to the gate. So it was, whenever anyone who had a lawsuit came to the king for a decision, that Absalom would call to him and say, 'what city are you from' And he would say, 'Your servant is from such and such a tribe of Israel.' Then Absalom would say to him, 'Look, your case is good and right; but there is no deputy of the king to hear you.' (In other word, “My father's not a very good administrator; he's not running the government very well.”) Moreover Absalom would say, 'Oh, that I were made judge in the land, and everyone who has any suit or cause would come to me; then I would give him justice.' And so it was, whenever anyone came near him to bow down to him, that he would put out his hand and take him and kiss him. In this manner Absalom acted toward all Israel who came to the king for judgment. So Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel.” II Samuel 15:1-6.

That was working behind his father's back, wasn't it! So Absalom endeavored through flattery and deceit to win the hearts of David's subjects. The dragon's tail was in full swing. This is the way Lucifer has always worked, and he's very good at it. He is the “strong man” who is guarding his palace. What did the text say about the condition of things in that state of affairs? It says, “When

a strong man guards his own palace, his goods are in peace.” That seems like a strange statement! The Bible says that when Satan is in charge, he maintains a form of “peace” in his palace. What about this peace? How can Satan be the author of peace?

It is this way. When a person allows Satan access to his heart there is a type of peace, a semblance of peace in their life. That is, when someone does not invite Jesus to take control; if someone does not surrender his or her heart to Jesus, it is inevitable that Satan will be in charge. We are not able to rule our own hearts. Either Jesus is in control by our permission or, by default, Satan is. When Satan, the “strong man” is in control, it is true that there can be a type of “peace” that one experiences. That person is floating down the stream of life, not struggling against temptation. They are not battling any spiritual battles; they just do what they want and give into the desires of the flesh. That's the current philosophy being advanced: “Do what thou wilt.” The voice of conscience is turned down so low it is inaudible. In this mode, Satan has control. They might be heading toward a deadly waterfall, but while they're floating along, they feel a type of peace. Although this is not the lasting and permanent peace that Jesus gives, but there is a type of peace that a person can have in their life when Satan is unchallenged.

When a person falls under conviction and realizes that he or she is in trouble and needs help and calls out to the Savior, then there is a conflict in the heart. Then there is war. Jesus addressed this very point. He said, “Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.” Matthew 10:34, 38, 39.

Here we have an apparent contradiction. The angels sang when Jesus was born, “Peace on earth, good will to men.” But Jesus said, as we just read, “I did not come to bring peace.” How do we reconcile these two statements? The answer is that the peace that the devil gives produces sleep. It is a peace that exists only because it masks the truth of the real issues. This is the peace of one who is mesmerized while walking toward the edge of a cliff. It's not a real peace.

The peace that Jesus brings is genuine peace, everlasting peace. He is the Prince of Peace, the King Shalom of Whom we studied a few weeks ago. His peace transcends external circumstances. His peace will take us through to the kingdom. But until that day we enter Canaan, there will be conflict in the Christian's life. The “peace” that he or she had experienced before conviction's arrows prodded the heart will be removed. That's okay! It's an evidence that God is at work! It was when Paul was stopped on the Damascus road that Jesus spoke to him and said, “It's hard to kick against the goads.” There was a conflict raging. Before all this, Saul (later called Paul) thought that he was pretty good. He thought he was okay. He was the archetype of the Pharisee who prayed in the temple, touting his own righteousness. Then he met Jesus and saw his real need.

Make no mistake about it, Jesus is the Stronger Man of the parable. Let's look at it again. “When a strong man (Satan) guards his own palace (this earth, or more particularly the heart of one of his subjects), his goods are in peace (that type of superficial peace that Satan can give). But when a Stronger than he comes upon him and overcomes him (that's Jesus), He takes from him all his

armor in which he trusted, and divides his spoils.” Jesus is the “Stronger Man” of the parable. Satan is “strong,” and we are no match for him in our human strength, but Christ is Stronger! He is the Creator God of the universe! Praise God for that! God may have allowed Satan to retain quite a bit of his power, but Christ's power is vastly superior.

What does the Stronger Man do in the parable? He overcomes the one who had previously been in power. What a Gospel promise is this! Who does the overcoming? The “Stronger” One, that is Christ. But we must “open the door,” as Revelation 3 tells us, to allow Him access to our hearts. God graciously calls us “overcomers,” in that we have surrendered to Him and have relied on His power to vanquish the devil. Look at how beautifully the Apostle John expressed this truth. “You are of God, little children, and have overcome them (evil spirits), because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” I John 4:4. Jesus is stronger than the strong one!

When Christ overcomes him, He “takes from him all his armor in which he trusted.” He exposes the lies of Satan; He removes the mist of deception so that the Christian can see clearly the wiles of Satan. He opens our eyes so that we can discern the folly of his ways. He gives to the Christian another set of armor with which to do battle against the evil one. But there is conflict in the Christian life. We're promised nothing else. The Bible calls us to “fight the good fight of faith.” The “rest” comes in Canaan. We can experience that “rest” in our hearts today, but be assured that in our lives there will be conflict. There will be war. The “peace” that had been there when we were at ease in the ways of the world will be gone. Friends and relatives won't understand the changes that have come into your life. Sometimes they will question. Sometimes they will mock. Sometimes they will oppose. This is all part of the battle that takes place when the Stronger dethrones the Strong. But Christ assures victory to anyone willing to allow Him entrance into the “palace” of his heart.

The “strong one” Satan is busy at work today. He's busier than he's ever been, because he knows that his time is short. He's busy in the culture and media of today's world. The kingdom of darkness is rising, rising quickly. The “dark” side is gaining momentum. In a couple of days there will be a time of celebration highlighting the darker side. Some think that Halloween is a harmless and innocent past-time. Kids wear fun costumes and collect candy. But is it possible that many of the things associated with this festival pay homage to the kingdom of darkness? Is it a good thing for Christians to dabble in the things of Satan?

I have never before seen such a proliferation of Halloween merchandise as in the past few years. Many weeks ago blocks of aisles in major stores were dedicated to Halloween stuff. Besides that, there are entire stores dedicated to Halloween costumes and materials. October 31 has taken on a life all its own. While the day of remembrance for Christ's birth (though we don't accept the date of December 25 as actually being the day of His birth) has become taboo, so that in some stores the clerks are forbidden to even say, “Merry Christmas,” those things pertaining to the kingdom of darkness are accentuated and promoted without hindrance.

My wife used to work at Palomar College. The secretaries of the different departments used to have an informal “contest,” in which they vied for the honor of having the office with the best

Christmas decorations. No more. There can be no mention of Christmas, for it contains the name of Christ. But Halloween and the Day of the Dead receive attention and attraction like you wouldn't believe. In some senses the "strong man" is flexing his muscles, knowing that his time is short.

As Seventh-day Adventist Christians, we need to stand firmly on the Bible truth describing what happens when a person dies. Deception regarding this has been and will be to the end a special, favorite tool of the devil, and is the basis for Halloween. It's all about spirits and ghosts, goblins and witches, isn't it? What did he tell Eve in Eden? "You shall not surely die." Satan has successfully introduced that lie into many of the Christian churches, so that many of God's people in other faiths are living under the cloud of deception on this subject. But the Bible is emphatically clear on this matter: "The dead know not anything." Ecclesiastes 9:5. They are at rest, unconsciously in the graves awaiting the grand resurrection. They have nothing at all to do with what happens on earth. In the language of the Bible, they are "sleeping."

We had two memorials last week, and I reminded people that the word "cemetery" comes from a Greek word meaning "sleeping place." Here's something to think about. If the word chosen had come from a Latin root, it would be the word "dormitory"! It's too bad that it didn't, because it would be a clear reminder of the truth that the Bible teaches, that our beloved dead are "sleeping" till the resurrection morning. They are not in heaven now. Peter preached to his audience and said, "Let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. David is not ascended into the heavens." Acts 2:29, 34. David, the one described as being the one after God's own heart, is dead and not in heaven. That's clear, isn't it? This issue will come into play in the last days in a very prominent way and only those who are grounded firmly in Bible truth will withstand the devil's masterful deceptions as we near the end of time.

I've been enjoying reading a book from our church library entitled, S. N. Haskell, Man of Action. The book is especially meaningful to me in that it was written by Ella Robinson, a granddaughter of Ellen G. White, and a person whom I had privilege of knowing personally. She was a dear, lovely Christian lady. She wrote that Stephen Haskell was one of our faithful pioneers who spread the messages of the three angels far and wide. When he was just a young man he married his bride, about 20 years his senior, Mary. She was afflicted much of her life with illness and preceded him in death by quite a number of years. Stephen missed her, for he had loved her deeply. One evening soon after Mary's death, Stephen had a strange and distressing experience. He shared it with his friend A. T. Robinson.

I'm quoting now the words of Stephen Haskell. "One night soon after my wife's death, I fell asleep repeating the promises of God, for I felt very lonely. I had not been asleep long when I was awakened by a light in the room. Opening my eyes I saw, standing beside my bed, a bright, shadowy form. I heard a voice speak; 'Stephen, I have come to bring you comfort. I shall ever watch over you to comfort you, for I am nearer to you now than when I lived on earth.' It was Mary's voice, so natural so sweet.

“My first impulse was to reach out my arms to her. But at that moment there sounded clearly in my consciousness, though no audible words were heard, 'The dead know not anything.' I drew back in fear.

“O Stephen, don't you know me?' Love, longing, and pathos were in the voice.

“I gathered all my strength, and answered boldly, 'No!' I never knew you! You are not my Mary. You are an evil spirit sent by Satan to deceive me; and in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, I command you to depart, and to trouble me no more.'

“The spirit vanished. But in the going, for one brief instant, the gentle expression on that face turned to one of baffled rage, the most malignant that I ever saw on the face of any man, or in the pictured likeness of any evil demon. It left me all of a tremble and in deep distress of mind. Why had such an experience come to me? Had I failed somewhere and shown some weakness, that the devil dared to approach me in this manner?

“I prayed and asked God to reveal to me any unknown sin. But instead of the conviction of some unrepented wrong there came into my mind clearly and emphatically, words that I had read many times in the book Early Writings: 'I saw that the saints must have a thorough understanding of present truth, which they will be obliged to maintain from the Scriptures. They must understand the state of the dead; for the spirits of devils will yet appear to them, professing to be beloved relatives or friends, who will declare to them unscriptural doctrines....The people of God must be prepared to withstand these spirits with the Bible truth that the dead know not anything.'” Ella M. Robinson, S. N. Haskell, pp. 128, 129, (emphasis mine).

My friends, we must allow Christ, Who is stronger than the devil, to have access to our hearts. We must invite Him in daily and let Him conquer the strong one, Satan, for we can't defeat him on our own. We can't allow anything to remain in our house, our physical house, that belongs to the kingdom of darkness. Do you know why? Here's what happens if you do. You pray to God for help in a certain situation, maybe for healing or assistance in financial or job concerns. You pray to God for help in the battle against sin. But if you have the things that belong to Satan's kingdom in your house, he mocks you. He taunts the holy angels. He says to them, “They may claim to be Christians, but look at what's on their shelves in their homes. Those things testify that they still belong to me. They bear witness that in their hearts they are really part of my kingdom.” And thus the prayers that might have been answered are not. Blessings that might have been given are withheld. If we think that this is far-fetched, we are naively deceived. The battle that goes on is a very real one.

Anything from Satan's kingdom has to go if you want to be a true Christian. You can't live in both worlds at the same time. You can't serve two masters. Harry Potter books and movies, videos or games that feature the dark side, the Gothic world have no place in the home of the one who follows the Lord and is a citizen of the kingdom of light. It's too late in this world's history to be dabbling with the enemy. We can't afford to listen to his music, because the lyrics are filled with

anti-christian sentiments. His music presents a different view of life than do the Scriptures, the Holy Bible.

The story is told of a school board which was looking for a driver for their school bus. The three candidates for the job were each taken to a road and allowed to drive the school bus. It was a road that wound along a narrow road, with a steep precipice on one side. It was made known that they were looking for the "best" driver. The first driver steered the bus carefully and was able to come within about 12 inches of the edge of the road, without mishap. The second driver took the wheel and navigated the bus to within about 6 inches of the edge, without mishap. The third driver stayed as far away from the edge as possible, toward the middle of the road. Which driver, do you think, was hired?