

God, Jesus, & the Devil

DAVE BAST

C. S. Lewis once wrote that when it comes to the devil, there are two equal but opposite mistakes people make. They either think about the devil far too little or they think about him far too much. When the Apostle Peter rounded out his letter about Christian suffering, he ends it by bringing up something he had not mentioned before. At the end of the day, Peter wrote, we suffer in this world also because we have a real enemy, and he is the devil. That is not all he has to say in his closing chapter, but let's explore today what Peter has to teach us about Satan.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee, and I am here today with Meg Jenista and Dave Bast, and this is our final program looking at 1 Peter; and today we are up to his final, fifth chapter. He has been tracing the theme of suffering throughout this entire letter, and as he brings it in for a landing here, he brings up somebody he did not mention before; that is, the devil.

DAVE BAST

Right; and savvy Christians are going to be aware of this reality. I remember going to City Church in San Francisco, a very fine preacher and pastor there, and he was preaching on this passage of scripture, and he said: You know, the fact that there is a real devil – what that means is, we believe that evil is orchestrated; and I thought, that is good, because there is just way too much evil out there, and it is way too sophisticated not to have some kind of intelligence behind it.

MEG JENISTA

I think what Peter is doing here is the logical bookend to what he does at the beginning of the book and the letter, in which he focuses on the hope that we have in the spiritual realm; and so, when he comes to the conclusion, he kind of book-ends this suffering by the fact that if we have this hope, there is also something happening in the spiritual realm that we are not always aware of, and that is the cosmic conflict between the hope that has been won and the ongoing struggle of the devil to war against that hope; so, all of our suffering falls into the context of this cosmic battle.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and if Peter saw the need to remind his readers of that, it is an equally if not more important reminder for us today because, as C. S. Lewis said, we tend to think about the devil too much or too little, and if you think about your own experience – or at least, if I think of my own experience, anyway – I think I tend to the too little, you know. If we think we have enemies, well, we think there are some people who have it out for us at work or at school or... I am trying to lose weight; I am my own worst enemy; but the devil as the enemy... I do not always think of that on a real active basis; but Peter is saying there is somebody behind suffering and temptation and the hostility you encounter, and he is like a roaring lion. He says that very directly in these verses, and it is a little scary. He says,

^{5:6}“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand that he may lift you up in due time. ⁷Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. ⁸Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. ⁹Resist him, standing firm in the faith because you know that your fellow believers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

MEG JENISTA

I think about this in relationship to a friend of mine who is doing relief work in West Africa, and when she sends prayer updates, she often talks about praying against the devil in this situation because in her cultural context, that reality is just closer to the surface. In the Western world, for example, we have layers upon layers of medicine or politics or economics or all of these other buffers that we can blame or that we can congratulate for what goes well or what goes poorly in our lives. For her, for example childbirth is a matter of prayer, and there is a cosmic battle at work. In the West, most often it is a matter of good obstetrics and hospitalization.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I have actually experienced the same thing talking to our African brothers and sisters. They are very conscious of this. You know, this whole going to two extremes that we tend to do. There are some Christians in the West, even, that see a devil behind every bush, you know. There is a demon of smoking, I have heard people sometimes talk about that. Well, the reason I smoke is because there is a demon that is... or they are always trying to exorcise somebody, and sometimes that has very unfortunate consequences. The other extreme, though, and much more common in our culture is to make this a comic character – a buffoon – you know, a guy running around in red tights with a pitchfork, and we use him in advertising and we name pizzas after him or whatever.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, it is one or the other. It is that, right? Or the other extreme is Hollywood movies like *The Exorcist*, or something, where if they are going to invoke the devil at all, he is going to be really, really terrifying and ghoulish and ghastly, and people are going to be spitting green goo and spinning their heads around; and what that says is: Well, I guess if the devil were around you would know. So, it is either just somebody who is almost like a little river sprite or somebody who could not possibly hurt you, or somebody whose presence would be so overbearing that you could not possibly miss it. The truth is more in the middle. The devil is prowling like a lion, which means you do not see him. That seems to be the point of Peter's image there; you do not see him. He is in the bush just waiting to pounce on you, but he is there, and he does not have to be like some Hollywood movie figure for that to be true.

MEG JENISTA

I look at C. S. Lewis' great work, *The Screwtape Letters*, and the idea that the senior devil is giving lessons to the apprentice devil; and his instruction is not go out and make your man sin terribly. It is simply distract him with a whole bunch of little things all along the way, and even that could be the work of spiritual forces and of the devil. It is not just the big stuff that the devil made me do. It can be lots of distractions all along the way, and even that is a part of the cosmic struggle that we are engaged in.

Dave Bast:

Well, you know, it also pays to remember the one occasion in the New Testament when Jesus explicitly sort of condemned Satan by name, and guess who was involved in that story?!

MEG JENISTA

Oh, that is right!

DAVE BAST

Who is now writing this letter? Peter was trying to distract Jesus – there it is – from the cross...

MEG JENISTA

Right; oh, I am sure that is not true.

DAVE BAST

And Jesus said: Get behind me, Satan. So, we can somehow unwittingly be the agent of Satan's machinations.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The amazing thing about that story, too, Dave, is that in all of the Gospels, where Jesus says to Peter: Get behind Me, Satan; just a couple of verses earlier, Peter had gotten something right and Jesus, in a couple of the Gospels said: Oh, blessed are you, Simon, son of John. You know, on this rock I will build my Church. So, Peter goes from the rock on which the Church is built to Satan in about 90 seconds; and he had no idea that the devil was that close by, tempting him to, indeed, distract Jesus from the cross, in this case, which was very serious, but similar things happen all the time, Peter says.

DAVE BAST

I guess the point is, this is a lot more sophisticated. It is a lot less cartoonish and it is a very real and very terrible enemy that we face, and he may manipulate things so that we face physical persecution or dungeon, fire, and sword, you know, to terrify us and make us deny Christ, or he may be very subtle and insinuate himself, and even use our own words or thoughts. The question is: What do we do about this enemy? That is what we want to look at next.

Segment 2

MEG JENISTA

This is *Groundwork*, where together we are digging into 1 Peter to think about our calling to Christian suffering. I am Meg Jenista; I am here with Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee. We were talking about how Peter introduces the character of the devil at the beginning of Chapter 5, and this might be bad news; it might be enough to break the spirits of the Christian Church, except for the fact that Peter has something else to say.

DAVE BAST

Right; and his counsel is quite simple. He uses this image – this figure of speech – the devil goes about as a roaring lion looking to devour people; and in the first segment as we dealt with that, we agree there is a real power of evil – a real spiritual power. We deny that truth at our peril, but I love the idea that this image suggests that maybe much of Satan’s strength or power is bluff; a lion roars, so I am told, to try to frighten its prey, and maybe make them seize up in panic; and what Peter does say quite clearly is: If you resist the devil – if you stand against him – if you stand firm... You know, it is not like the movies, again, the Dracula movies where you have to have a crucifix; it is just be firm in your faith and he will flee; he will run away if you just kind of call his bluff.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; the devil is an enemy. He is prowling. All of these things are true, but Peter knows the greater truth and he brackets in this passage these words about the devil with that wider hope: He is an enemy; but he is a defeated enemy. He still has some kicks left. I mean, the whole New Testament makes it clear that until Jesus comes again, we are not going to be finished struggling with sin and temptation, but the good news is we have somebody who cares for us and on whom we can cast our anxieties, and that, of course, is Jesus, and that is a powerful piece of good news.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is a wonderful thing to remember, that the Lord of the universe actually cares for me and for you. I think it is singular there. It is not just talking generally or collectively. It is talking about each of us as individuals is known and cared for by the Lord. It is a wonderful, kind of strengthening thing. Nobody knew the attacks of the devil better than Jesus did. I mean, we have that story, too.

MEG JENISTA

Absolutely; the temptation of Christ, in which he was set apart from people for forty days, and he heard the great temptation of the devil speaking into his life, asking him to give up his kingdom and his purpose for very simple things like bread that he might be able to accomplish the kingdom without suffering. Those are still the temptations that we face; to settle for something less than God’s best, and to sacrifice God’s intention in order to accomplish his purpose, maybe more simply.

DAVE BAST

Right, yes; deviate from the will of God; and Jesus resisted by quoting the Bible because he knew the word.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, we often return again and again to C. S. Lewis here on *Groundwork*, but Lewis also was the one who said: Who really knows the full force of a hurricane's wind? Who really knows that? He said: The person who tumbles over as soon as it hits 35 miles per hour or the one who keeps their feet even when the wind is blowing 100 miles per hour? Well, the person who really appreciates the strength of the wind is the one who never falls, and Lewis says that makes Jesus the truest, realest in the universe because he withstood everything the devil could throw at him and he never fell. Nobody knows temptation's power better than Jesus, and he is the one who cares for you. He is the one who stands with you. So, talk about having the right person on your side, as Martin Luther put in that great hymn, A Mighty Fortress... the right man is on our side; boy, is he.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us, we will not fear, for God has willed his truth to triumph through us. So, Martin Luther, I think, once threw an inkwell at the devil. He saw him so real assaulting him with temptation; but again, I do not think we should be filled with fear. The proper Christian response to the reality of these spiritual forces of darkness is just to stand firm in our faith. I mentioned a while ago the vampire movie; you know, the classic scene, you hold a crucifix... we do not have to do that. We have the Lord Jesus living within us, although I will note that the ancient Church father, St. Athanasius said the quickest way to rout a demon is with the sign of the cross. Now, there is some ancient wisdom that Protestants do not generally practice. We do not use that particular thing, but the early Christians thought it was very powerful.

MEG JENISTA

So what are some ways that we decline the devil's call in our life in order to engage more fully and to accept the work that Jesus Christ has done on our behalf?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, I think one of the things that can happen here is that when Peter mentions the devil and when he mentions Jesus in that same context - the one who cares for you - what he is reminding us is that we are part of a grand story. We are not just random, bit players who are independent agents. We are all part of a story; and there is something about even that line about he cares for us that evokes a narrative somehow. Things do not just happen randomly. People are not just randomly cruel or randomly kind. If you are kind and gentle and respectful, as Peter talked about earlier in this letter, there is a reason; because you are part of Jesus' story. If there is a devil to resist, who has been prowling since the Garden of Eden, there is a reason. He is a player in this grand story; and there is something wonderful to know in a world that often does rough us up, as Peter has been talking about, just for being believers in Jesus, it is good to know there is a story going on here, and it has a really, really good ending as well, that we already know about.

MEG JENISTA

We do not have to go far in this scripture text to find bits and pieces of that story because that is exactly what Peter started with in 1 Peter 1:

³Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for in his great mercy he gave us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead; ⁴that all of this is the inheritance that we hold onto; the hope that we have. Because the devil is real, but because the devil has not won.

DAVE BAST

Well, and he ends, again, by alluding to the same story; and I think we need to focus just a little bit more on this idea because today, especially in Western society and culture, we live in a world that is suspicious of all big stories, and this story in particular. So, let's talk about that in just a bit.

Segment 3

Scott Hoezee;

You are listening to *Groundwork*. I am Scott Hoezee, and I am here with Meg Jenista and Dave Bast as we bring to a conclusion here our look in this recent series at 1 Peter. We are at the very end of Peter's letter in 1 Peter Chapter 5, and we were saying a moment ago, a lot of people resist grand narratives. One of the things we have talked about is that Peter seems to have a sense here that this is part of a story. The suffering we endure, the reason we are kind with each other in the community of the faith, the reason we endure hardship is because life is finally a story. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end; but a lot of people today resist that. I think of the very popular and also very funny, but the very popular sitcom, *Seinfeld*, which was on years ago, but is still on in reruns every day. It was a show that said it was a show about nothing. There is no plot. There is no character development. There is no consistent story line week to week. It is a show about nothing, and a lot of people said: That is a pretty appropriate show for a post-modern world. People think that life is generally a story about nothing.

MEG JENISTA

The ethicist, Stanley Hauerwas, says that the story that tells us we have no story except the story we chose when we had no story is a lie.

DAVE BAST

Come again?

MEG JENISTA

The story that says we have no story except the story we choose when we had no story is a lie. That all of us are deeply involved and engaged in a story, whether it comes from our culture or our family or our own personal life experiences up to a given point, that none of us are a blank slate; that we all participate in something bigger than ourselves; and I can understand why in the West if you have an individualized culture that is problematic, but I imagine that for Peter's readers and for many of our listeners around the world, the idea of being part of a bigger story gives meaning and sense to their experiences.

DAVE BAST

You know, the rejection – the common rejection now – of the idea that there is any true story – bigger story – really is to say there is no real meaning or purpose in life, other than perhaps trying to grab a little bit of happiness or pleasure or satisfaction, however you may define that; but if there is no meaning or purpose in the larger sense in life, that means the individual episodes or our lives have no meaning or purpose either; and that means, really, that suffering becomes intolerable. It just becomes unbearable.

MEG JENISTA

The alternative to this unbearable, intolerable suffering is what Peter has been offering us throughout this entire epistle, which is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and the opportunity we have to align ourselves with it. The story goes with the creation of the universe and the creator God, who makes each one of us in his image; and then we recognize the fall and the sin and the brokenness that we encounter every day; but slowly, in bits and pieces, we begin to see the redemption of Jesus Christ that was accomplished fully at the cross, infusing and imparting this life with meaning until the day when it all makes sense; when Christ returns and his kingdom is here and it is full and complete glory. So, every step of our own lives has the opportunity of speaking into and engaging that story, whether we choose to encounter a brother or sister in Christ, or even an enemy. As someone who is created in the image of God, we are retelling the story of the creation of the earth. When we engage the fallenness, when we experience the brokenness, and it breaks our hearts, that is right because it breaks the heart of God; and then, when we experience the hope that we have in Jesus Christ; when we share that hope with one another in the community of saints; when we speak justice and peace into the world around us, then we are participating in God's story of redemption until the day when our hope is realized and fulfilled in the kingdom of God. Every episode of our lives has meaning and purpose because every episode of our lives speaks into the story that God is telling.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right. A while back there was a writer, and the New York Times Book Review did a back-page essay kind of sneering at the large crop of autobiographies that people were putting out, saying did we really need Paris Hilton or Donald Trump's ex-wife to write an autobiography; and then at one point this author sort of sneeringly said: Oh, a survey was taken recently in which 75% of the people surveyed thought that they had a life story worth telling, isn't that ridiculous? Well, two weeks later, a very clever letter to the editor appeared in the New York Times Book Review, in which somebody wrote: Your author notes that 75% of people think their life story is worth telling. Do you mean that means that 25% of people think their life story is not worth telling? How tragic! So, this letter writer turned the cynicism of the essayist on its head to say: No, every story matters. Now, I do not know if that letter writer had a Christian viewpoint in mind, but from what you were just saying, Meg, from a Christian viewpoint, every story matters because there is a big story with a beginning, a middle, and an end, and the Gospel is sort of the center and the climax of that story through Jesus. That is what Peter wants to leave his readers with.

DAVE BAST

Right; and he wants us to remember that we are left in the hands of God. Suffering is even a blessing if that is God's will for you. Suffering could be God's will for you. Again, there is an idea that could be wrongly understood, but there is also a sense of comfort. It does not mean that God wants to punish us or that God is trying to put us through the wringer. It means that even if we face these experiences, we are still in his hands; we are still part of his purpose; we still have meaning and we still have value. Life is not just a random series of occurrences that amount to nothing in the end; but it is all being built up and used by this incredible wisdom and power and love of God, and it will lead to glory. You know, the last word is glory; it is benediction; it is doxology; it is praise.

MEG JENISTA

I think this speaks so well into some of my hesitation in studying 1 Peter together, which is that in our Western context we do not often encounter the same level of suffering for being a Christian that our brothers and sisters in Christ do around the world; but as we wrap up, I am reminded that I have an obligation to hear the stories of my brothers and sisters around the world, and to make it possible for them to share their stories, so that together we might participate in Peter's great benediction:

^{5:10}The God of all grace, who calls us to his eternal glory in Christ, after we have suffered a little while, will restore us, will make us strong, firm and steadfast. ¹¹To this God be power forever and ever. Amen.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Amen.

DAVE BAST

Amen.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and do not forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So, tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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