

## **Satan's Punctuality, Power and Purpose**

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WRITTEN AT MENTONE,

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"Then comes the devil, and takes away the Word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved." [Luke 8:12](#).

IT is a great comfort that such multitudes are willing to hear the Word of God. Even though many should turn out to be as the rock, the wayside, or the thorny ground, still it is a cheering circumstance that the Seed can be sown broadcast over so large an acreage. Yet the thoughts excited by the sight of a vast congregation are not all pleasurable—the question most naturally arises—What will come of all this preaching and hearing? Will the heavenly Seed produce a harvest or fall on barren soil? The thoughtful Christian, in considering this question, takes into consideration the condition of the persons addressed and remembers that many are unprepared for the Gospel. So far from being like a field furrowed to receive the Seed, they are like a heavily traveled road.

They hear the Gospel and so far we are hopeful of them, but they have no idea of allowing it to enter their inmost souls. The ground of their hearts is already too much occupied. Other feet will tread there and speedily obliterate the sower's footprints and as for the good Seed, it may lie where it falls—entrance into the inner man it can have none. Nor is this all, the anxious observer remembers that there is yet another difficulty—the arch-enemy of God and man is opposed to the salvation of souls and, therefore, he is present with destructive power wherever the Seed of the Word is being sown.

It is of this we shall now speak—the activity of Satan during the preaching of the Gospel. He is out of sight, but we may not allow him to be out of mind—he does all the more mischief if men sleep. Let us watchfully turn our eyes towards him and prove that we are not ignorant of his devices. Our Divine Lord, in the words before us, reminded His hearers of the devil's punctuality—"then comes the devil," or his power—"and takes away the Word out of their hearts." And of his purpose, which is the prevention of saving faith—"lest they should believe and be saved." At this time, when special services are being held, it may be well to bring these points clearly forward that all may be warned against the Wicked One and so, by the Grace of God, his designs may be frustrated.

I. First observe the Evil One's PUNCTUALITY. No sooner does the Seed fall than the fowls devour it. Our text says "then," that is, then and there "comes the devil." Mark renders it, "Satan comes immediately." Whoever else may loiter, Satan never does. No sooner does a camel fall dead in the wilderness than the vultures appear. Not a bird was visible, nor did it seem possible that there could be one within a radius of many miles, yet speedily there

are specks in the sky and soon the devourers are gorging themselves with flesh! Even thus do the spirits of evil scent their prey from afar and hasten to their destroying work.

The lapse of time might give opportunity for thought and thought might lead to repentance and, therefore, the enemy hurries to prevent the hearer from considering the Truth he has heard. When the Gospel has somewhat affected the hearers, so that in some slight degree it is in their hearts, then swifter than the flight of the eagle is the haste of the devil to take the Word out of their hearts. A little delay might put the case beyond Satanic power, hence the promptness of diabolic activity. O that we were half as quick and active in the service of our Lord! One half as prompt to seize every opportunity for blessing the souls of men!

No doubt Satan acts at times directly upon the thoughts of men. He personally suggested to Judas the selling of his Master and many another black insinuation has he cast into men's minds. Like the foul vulture which constantly feasted itself upon the vitals of Prometheus, so does the devil tear away the good thoughts which would be the life of a man's soul. Insatiably malicious, he cannot endure that a single Divine Truth should bless the heart. Fearful blasphemies, lewd imaginations, gross unbeliefs, or vain frivolities the devil casts into the mind like infernal bombshells to destroy any newborn thought which looks toward Christ and salvation!

At one time he fascinates the mind and another he terrifies it. His one aim is to distract the man's thoughts from the Gospel and prevent its lodging in the conscience and heart. As Satan cannot be everywhere present at one time, he frequently does his evil work by his servants, sending the inferior spirits to act as fowls in devouring the Seed and these, again, employ various agents. With great cunning are the common incidents of life used in the evil business, so that even by things indifferent in themselves, the purposes of the adversary are brought about. The preacher has some specialty in his manner, utterance, or appearance—and this becomes the bird which devours the Seed—the hearer is so taken up with a trifling oddity in the minister that he forgets the Truth of God which was spoken!

An anecdote was related, an illustration employed, or a word used which awakened a memory in the hearer's breast and away went the Word out of his heart to make room for mere vanity. Or if the sermon was preserved to its close, it then encountered a fresh peril—a lost umbrella, an extra pressure in the aisle, a foolish jest overheard in the crowd, or the absurd dress of an unknown person—any one of them may answer the devil's purpose and snatch away the Word. Little does it matter whether the Seed is devoured by black crows or white doves, by great fowls or little sparrows—if it does not abide in the heart, it cannot bring forth fruit and hence the devil arranges that somehow he will take away the Seed at once.

If he never visits a place of worship at any other time, he will be sure to be there when a revival has begun—"then comes the devil." He lets many a pulpit alone, but when an earnest man begins preaching, "Satan comes immediately."

II. Secondly, we will now, for a moment, notice his POWER. "And takes away the Word out of their hearts." It is not said that he tries to do it, but that he actually does so. He sees, he comes and he conquers! The Word is there and the devil takes it away as easily as a bird removes a seed from the wayside. Alas, what a sway has the Evil One over the human mind and how ineffectual is the preacher's work unless a Divine power is put forth with it!

Perhaps from the striking manner in which it was stated, a little of the Truth of God abides in the memory, but the enemy takes it quite out of the heart—and so the main part, the all-important part of our work is undone! We may be foolish enough to aim at the head only, but he who is crafty beyond all craft deals with the heart. Anyone may win the intellect—if Satan can keep the affections he is quite content. To the man's heart the good Seed is lost, the fowls have devoured it. It has become to him nothing, having no power over him, no life in him. Not a trace is left—no more than there would be a mark remaining of seed cast on the wayside after the birds had taken it away—so effectual is the work of the Prince of the Power of the Air.

When Satan thinks it worth his while to come, and come immediately, he means business and he takes care that his errand shall not fail. His power is partly derived from his natural wisdom. Fallen as he now is, he was once an angel of light and his superlative faculties, though perverted, defiled and dimmed by the blighting influence of sin, are still vastly superior to those of the human beings upon whom he tries his arts. He is more than a match for preacher and hearer united if the Holy Spirit is not there to baffle him. He has also acquired fresh cunning by long practice in his accursed business! He knows the human heart better than anyone, except its Maker. For thousands of years he has studied the anatomy of our nature and is conversant with our weaker points. We are all young and inexperienced compared with this ancient tempter—all narrow in our views and limited in our experience compared with this serpent who is more subtle than all the beasts of the field—what wonder that he takes away the Word which is sown in hard hearts!

Moreover, he derives his chief power from the man's condition of soul. It is easy for birds to pick up Seed which lies exposed on a hard path. If the soil had been good and the Seed had entered it, he would have had far greater difficulty, he might even have been foiled. But a hard heart does the devil's work for him in great measure. He need not use violence or craft—there lies the unreceived Word upon the surface of the soul and he takes it away. The power of the Evil One largely springs from our own evil. Let us pray the Lord to renew the heart that the testimony of Jesus may be accepted heartily and may never be taken away. Great is the need for such prayer!

Our adversary is no imaginary being, his existence is real, his presence constant, his power immense, his activity indefatigable. Lord, match him and overmatch him! Drive away this foulest of fowls! Break up the soil of the soul and let Your Truth truly live and graciously grow within us!

III. Our short sermon closes with the third point, which is the devil's PURPOSE. He is a sound theologian and knows that salvation is by believing in the Lord Jesus and, therefore, he fears above all things lest men should "believe and be saved." The substance of the Gospel lies in those few words, "believe and be saved," and in proportion as Satan

hates that Gospel, we ought to prize it. He is not so much afraid of works as of faith. If he can lead men to work, or feel, or do anything in the place of believing, he is content. But it is believing that he dreads, because God has coupled it with being saved.

Every hearer should know this and be instructed to turn all his attention to the point which the devil considers to be worthy of his whole activity. If the Destroyer labors to prevent the heart's believing, the wise will have their wits about them and regard faith as the one thing necessary. "Lest they should believe and be saved" Satan takes away the Word out of their hearts. Here also is wisdom—wisdom hidden within the enemy's cunning. If the Gospel remains in contact with the heart, its tendency is to produce faith. The Seed abiding in the soil springs up and brings forth fruit and so will the Gospel display its living power if it dwells within the man and, therefore, the devil hastens to take it away.

The Word of God is the sword of the Spirit and the devil does not like to see it lie near the sinner for fear it should wound him. He dreads the influence of Truth upon the conscience and if he cannot prevent a man's hearing it, he labors to prevent his meditating upon it. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God"—to obliterate that which has been heard is the Satanic method of preventing faith. Here, again, is a practical word for the ear of prudence—let us keep the Gospel as much as possible near the mind of the unconverted—let us sow and sow again, in the hope that some grain may take root.

Countrymen were known in planting certain seeds to put in "one for the worm, and one for the crow, and then a third which would surely grow," and we must do the same. In the book of Jeremiah the Lord describes His own action thus—"I spoke unto you rising up early and speaking, but you heard not; and I called, but you answered not." Surely, if the Lord Himself has thus continued to speak to an unanswering race, we need not murmur if much of our preaching should appear to be in vain! There is life in the Seed of the Gospel and it will grow if it can be put into the soil of the heart! Let us, therefore, have faith in it and never dream of obtaining a crop except by the old-fashioned way of sowing good Seed. The devil evidently hates the Word—let us, then, keep to it and sow it everywhere!

Reader or Hearer, you have often heard the Gospel—have you heard it in vain? Then the devil has had more to do with you than you have dreamed! Is the thought a pleasant one? The presence of the devil is defiling and degrading and he has been hovering over you as the birds over the high-road and lighting upon you to steal away the Word. Think of this! You are missing, by your unbelief, fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ—and instead thereof you are having fellowship with Satan!

Is not this horrible? Instead of the Holy Spirit dwelling in you as He dwells in all Believers, the Prince of Darkness is making you his resort, coming and going at his pleasure into your mind! You remember Jacob's dream of a ladder and angels ascending and descending from himself to Heaven? Your life experience may be set forth by another ladder which descends into the dark abyss—and up and down its rungs, foul spirits come and go to yourself! Does this startle you? The Lord grant it may! Do you desire a change? May the Holy Spirit turn your heart into good ground and then shall the Seed of Divine Grace grow in you and produce faith in the Lord Jesus!