



# Is the Devil Real?



**D**o you remember Flip Wilson's stock answer for any trouble he got himself into? "The devil made me do it!" How we laughed at his comedic antics. He could portray any kind of bad behavior in his routines because he'd always end with his look of innocence and announce "The devil made me do it!"

While it became Wilson's trademark for a few seasons of fame, unfortunately most of the world have never looked upon the line as much more than just a joke. Those born and raised in Christian heritage nations recognize the expression as one way of abdicating blame for one's behavior. But few really believe in the reality of a devil that could actually influence a person to do evil things. Such is the contradictory teachings among the various Christian denominations and sects.

For most people the devil seems like a fairy-tale character—a grotesque, blood-red creature with horns, a pointed tail and bat wings that carries a pitchfork and inhabits an infernal region of ever-burning flames. Because he is typically depicted so fancifully, it isn't surprising that few take the idea of a devil seriously.

Yet the Bible reveals a powerful, intelligent and

seemingly infinitely influential being who orchestrates the wickedness that dominates the planet. This being appears all the way through the Bible—from Genesis to Revelation. The Bible is the only source to which we can turn to learn about the world of spirit and all agree, whether they believe in a devil or not, that he is spirit.

The Bible tells us in sobering terms that the devil really does exist. It explains that this being and the spirit world are every bit as real as our own. It shows us that Satan is an incredibly powerful spirit being with a pervasive influence over humanity. Not only is he real, but he has a bevy of cohorts known as demons or devils.

## Real-life encounters

Jesus Christ spoke of the devil as a powerful, conscious, real entity. If we accept Jesus as real, as the son of God—and the Bible as including the truthful account of his ministry and teachings—we must also accept the devil as real.

The writers of the four gospels record instances in which Christ confronted Satan and his cohorts, the demons. The gospels show Satan to be the enemy of Christ, determined to thwart and undermine

his work. Just before Jesus began his ministry, Satan tried, through temptation, to turn him aside from his purpose (Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). Failing at every turn, Satan was finally allowed to influence other human beings to execute Jesus (Luke 22:2-4; John 13:2, 27)—making him, as our Messiah and Savior, the atoning sacrifice for the sins of mankind.

The apostle Peter, who experienced his own struggles with Satan (Matthew 16:21-23; Luke 22:31-32), warns us to be on guard against this powerful wicked spirit: “*Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour*” (1 Peter 5:8, NIV). Peter’s warning helps us realize that not only is the devil the enemy of Christ, he is the enemy of all Christ’s followers, seeking to devour them.

### Mankind’s enemy

But we find more to the story of Satan. A central message of the Bible, from beginning to end, is that *the devil is the enemy of all humanity*. As we discover what the Bible says about him, we find him continually intent on mankind’s harm, waging war against human beings in every way possible.

The very name Satan, the name the bible uses most for this evil being, helps reveal his malicious intent. God calls things what they are. Satan is a Hebrew noun meaning “adversary”—the *enemy, opponent, antagonist, foe*. The verb forms of the noun mean to “accuse,” “slander,” and “be an adversary” (*Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5, 1992, “Satan,” p. 985).

The other term the Bible uses to describe this being, *devil*, is also revealing. *Devil* is translated from the Greek word *diabolos*, the root from which we get such words as *diabolic* and *diabolical*, used to describe something wicked or sinister. *Diabolos* means “and accuser, a slanderer” (W.E. Vine, *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 1985, “Devil, Devilish”).

The Bible reveals much more about this evil being’s nature and character. Christ says Satan is “a liar and the father of it” and that “there is no truth in him” (John 8:44).

It is through his lying, deceptive nature that Satan most suc-

cessfully influences mankind. The Bible reveals the enormity of Satan’s lies—that he “*deceives the whole world*” (Revelation 12:9).

What does this mean? What is God telling us when he reveals that this malignant spirit deceives the whole world? Consider the staggering implications of this statement.

The apostle John did not say that Satan *deceived* the world only at some time in the distant past. The word John uses—translated “deceives” in the New King James Version of the Bible—is in the present active tense, meaning that Satan’s deception started in the past and is a continuous, ongoing process that *is not yet finished*. The book of Revelation shows that Satan’s great deception will continue until God miraculously intervenes to put an end to his influence over mankind.

### Is the world deceived?

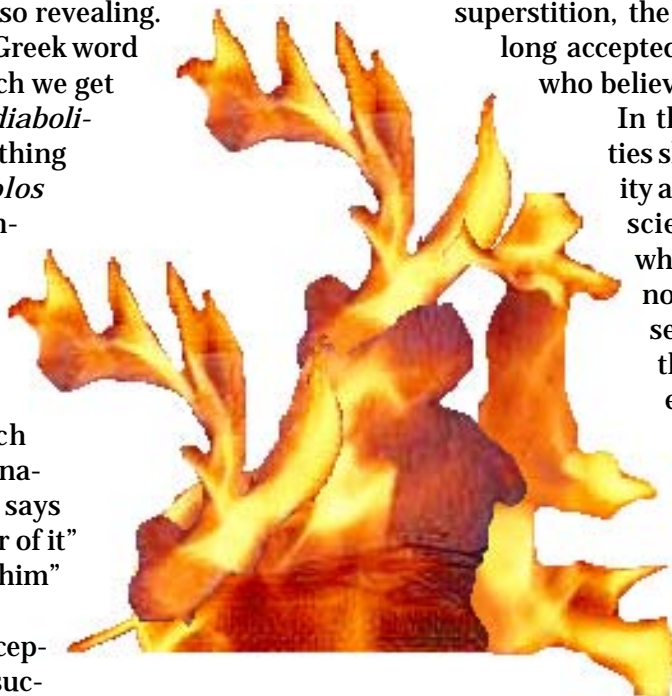
If you were the devil and wanted to deceive the entire world, how would you approach such a challenge?

You first would probably convince people that you don’t exist and that the only source of information that reveals your motives and methods is little more than a collection of fables that have nothing to do with their lives.

We’ve seen exactly that. Starting several centuries ago, and prompted by the theories of such men as Charles Darwin—who introduced a way to explain creation without a creator—many people began directly challenging the authority and inspiration of the Bible. They began to ridicule, as mere myth and superstition, the existence of a spirit world, long accepted without question by those who believed the Bible.

In the world’s leading universities skeptics challenged the validity and accuracy of the Bible, and scientific reasoning—much of which rejects anything that cannot be detected by the physical senses—became the order of the day. Generations of leaders were taught to discard anything that could not be measured by scientific methods.

Then came two world wars. Two successive generations saw their fathers, husbands and sons lost on bloody battlefields in



far-flung corners of the world, with neither war gaining a lasting peace. Civilian casualties, too, were appalling, with millions of lives snuffed out. Numbed by such wholesale mass destruction of lives and property, many lost their belief in God, thinking that an all-powerful Supreme Being would never allow such carnage and suffering.

Thus, in only a few generations, belief in an almighty, all-loving God and trust in the Bible as his revelation to mankind were shattered.

In our modern world, although many people still claim to believe in God, few take their stated belief seriously enough to let it guide their lives. The Bible is consistently one of the world's best-selling books, yet it is one of the least read and least understood. Most people think the Bible and the spirit world have nothing to do with them and their lives.

Although religion should be the source of an understanding of God and the spirit world, it is too often only another source of confusion and disagreement. For example, Christianity is the professed religion of approximately one third of the world's population and is the largest single religion. But it is splintered into thousands of sects and denominations, many of them claiming to represent the true teachings of the Bible and Jesus.

Never in human history, of course, have professing Christians comprised a majority of the world's population. Most people during the last two millennia have followed a bewildering array of deities, gurus and religious teachers. Some have believed in God, others in various good and evil spirits or no God and spirit world at all.

Obviously these incompatible and often opposite beliefs cannot all be right. God is not the author of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33). The effect of so much religious confusion and division is exactly what one would expect of a being whose aim is to "deceive the whole world" (Revelation 12:9). Many people do not believe in the devil at all, and many of those who do aren't sure what they should believe, since so many religious teachings are confused and contradictory.

Most people are deeply sincere in their beliefs. But, since the beliefs of so many professing Christians contradict the beliefs of other professing Christians, they cannot all be right. Many of them are sincere, but *sincerely wrong*. They, along with the rest of the world, *have been deceived*. So what are the implications to professing Christians of Satan's deception and its resulting confusion?

Christ challenged people in his day who were sincere yet deluded: ". . . *Why do you call me 'Lord,*

*Lord, and do not do the things which I say?'*" (Luke 6:46). He cautioned his followers to be aware of religious deception. "*Take heed that no one deceives you,*" he warned (Matthew 24:4). He prophesied that religious leaders would arise who would claim to represent him but in fact they would be impostors who would "deceive many" (verse 5).

Rather than a source of information and understanding about the great malevolent spirit that is the enemy of mankind, religion has actually been one of the major tools the devil has used to deceive people.

### How did Satan gain influence?

Satan has seduced humanity for thousands of years. But when—and how—did his influence begin? How did he gain his firm foothold in human thinking? What is it about him and his methods that allows him to deceive not just a handful, but virtually the entire human race?

The story begins with the very origins of humankind. As stated in the book of Genesis, God created



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our first human parents, Adam and Eve, and provided a beautiful garden paradise in an area called Eden as their home (Genesis 1:26-27; 2:7-8). There he began personally instructing them (Genesis 2:16-17), laying the foundation for them to develop a close relationship with him.

But something happened that suddenly derailed that relationship. *“Now the serpent [the devil, Rev. 12:9; 20:2] was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God really say, “You must not eat from any tree in the garden”?’”* (Genesis 3:1, NIV).

God had told Adam and Eve they could eat of all the trees in the garden except one—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:16-17). He warned them they would perish if they ate of its fruit.

Satan, appearing in the form of a serpent, came privately to Eve and subtly contradicted what God had told her and her husband. *“Then the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil’”* (Genesis 3:4-5).

Eve believed the serpent. She ate the fruit and shared it with Adam. Together Adam and Eve set in motion a tragic pattern that mankind has followed ever since: choosing to decide their own way—which is in reality nothing more than falling prey to Satan’s deceptive influence (1 John 3:10)—rather than the truth of God. Life for man would never be the same. *Sin*—rebellion against God’s instructions—had entered the world (Romans 5:12). Mankind would now reap its tragic fruit.

Satan, who accused God of lying, was himself shown to be a liar. Rather than leading to life and becoming as wise and understanding as God like Satan had promised, the way of disobedience Adam and Eve chose would lead only to confusion and death.

Adam’s and Eve’s surrender to Satan’s influence was the beginning of “this present evil age” (Galatians 1:4). Satan managed to inject his cunning deceptions into the relationship between God and God’s human children. By convincing Eve that God was lying to them about the consequences of partaking of the forbidden fruit, Satan showed early in human history that he is the *adversary* of both God and humanity, the ultimate *false accuser* and *slanderer*—the meanings of his biblical names.

## The footsteps of a different god

The Bible makes it clear that civilizations and societies are influenced by Satan. John writes that *“the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one”* (1 John 5:19). The entirety of civilization has been seduced by this cunning being through his persuasive deception and insidious lies.

The result has been thousands of years of human anguish, misery and suffering. Deceived by his lies, humans have willingly adopted Satan’s way of life rather than God’s way. The result of following Satan’s way, which through his deception appears appealing and natural to most people, is predictable: *“There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death”* (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25, NIV).

Satan’s deception is so complete, so pervasive, that the Bible calls him “the *god* of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4). The apostle Paul, in the original Greek, identifies him as the *theos*—the god, the one who is worshipped—of this *eon*, this age, this period in history.

Consider the magnitude of Satan’s influence over humanity—that most of mankind unwittingly worships and follows *the devil* as its god. That is the incredible truth revealed in your Bible! Understanding that reality explains so many of the trou-

bling paradoxes we see in the world around us.

Paul explained that, as a result of Satan’s hold on humanity, most people do not believe the truth of the Bible. They do not understand the gospel—the good news—of God’s plan for mankind. *“But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them”* (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).

## God is still in control

Although the Bible identifies Satan as the “prince of the power of the air” and the ruler of this world (Ephesians 2:2; John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), God maintains overall control as “Lord of heaven and earth” (Matthew 11:25). He gives the devil considerable latitude in what he does, but God retains the right and power to intervene.

The biblical record shows that God sparingly uses his power to intervene, often letting the natural course of events work out his purpose and plan for

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mankind. Remember that Jesus told Pontius Pilate, *“You could have no power at all . . . unless it had been given you from above”* (John 19:11).

“The God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the all-glorious Father” is the main subject of Ephesians 1 (verses 3 and 17, Revised English Bible). His throne is *“far above all government and authority, all power and dominion, and any title of sovereignty that commands allegiance, not only in this age but also in the age to come. He put all things in subjection beneath his [Jesus’] feet . . .”* (verses 21-22, REB).

Israel’s King David recognized God’s sovereignty: *“The Lord has established his throne in heaven, his kingly power over the whole world”* (Psalm 103:19, REB) and *“The Lord looks down from his sanctuary on high; from heaven he surveys the earth”* (Psalm 102:19, REB).

The gentile ruler Nebuchadnezzar eventually came to see these same truths after God humbled him for seven years. *“His [God’s] sovereignty is everlasting and his Kingdom endures throughout all generations,”* said the king. *“All who dwell on earth count for nothing [by comparison]; he does as he pleases with the host of heaven [the angelic kingdom] and with those who dwell on earth”* (Daniel 4:34-35, REB; compare 5:21).

The first two chapters of Job show the earthly authority of the devil and how it fits into God’s supremacy over the universe. Although the patriarch Job suffered immense tragedies because of the devil’s activities, the narrative shows that in no case could Satan do anything that God did not allow. God remains in control.

### **Satan appears as an ‘Angel of Light’**

If you could see and meet the devil face to face, what would he look like? He is commonly depicted as a cartoon character in a red suit with a pitchfork or as a hideous-looking ghoul.

But neither of these characterizations is anywhere close to the truth. In reality, if you were to meet the devil, you would find him attractive, engaging and persuasive. Though he is really the prince of darkness, Satan successfully *presents* himself as “an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14).

Satan is a master of misrepresentation. He is the world’s greatest advertiser, packaging his product so it seems attractive and appealing while in reality it is deathly poisonous. He wants his clients to see him as good, beneficent and trustworthy. He wants his product—sin and rejection of God—to appear enticing and inviting, and he is usually quite successful.

Satan never presents sin as it really is. He never



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presents both sides of the story, pro and con. He presents only what he wants us to see, something that appears fun and exciting. He wants us to focus on *pleasure*, on what *feels or looks good* at the moment. He wants long-term consequences to be the last thing on our minds while he entices us to sin.

The vast majority of people have lost sight of the real connection between *cause and effect*. We rarely hear or see that concept mentioned, much less discussed. Instead we hear people clamor for quick fixes to every problem, ease for every discomfort and a pill for every ailment. We seldom stop to consider the long-term consequences of our actions.

Our approach is shortsighted and foolish. *“Do not be deceived,”* cautions Paul. *“God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow”* (Galatians 6:7, NRSV).

We live in a world that pays little attention to the long-term results of sin. We don’t think through the consequences of our words and deeds, and we’re constantly under pressure from a society that is built on Satan’s standards and values rather than God’s.

It's neither easy nor popular, considering the culture surrounding us, to adopt a different set of values and standards—those that God reveals. As Jesus said: *“If the world hates you, you know that it hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world . . . the world hates you”* (John 15:18-19). God's way will never be popular in this day and age.

Nevertheless, most people appear supremely confident that their ways are pleasing to God. They defend their religious beliefs and practices as being perfectly satisfactory and acceptable in God's eyes. They *assume* that all, or mostly all, teachers and churches bearing the Christian name teach the truth. Few indeed stop to consider that Satan's great deception is not only worldwide, but *has deeply infiltrated Christianity*.

Notice the context of Paul's words when he writes that Satan appears as “an angel of light.” In 2 Corinthians 11:13-15 Paul warns of *“false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ.”* We shouldn't be surprised at this, writes Paul, because *“Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.”*

Is that possible? How could people who claim to represent Christ be Satan's “ministers,” his servants, used by the devil to spread deception?

Jesus himself repeatedly warns of this very thing! He predicted that many would appropriate his name but deny him by their actions. He said they would “call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ but *not do the things which I say*” (Luke 6:46).

Jesus and his true apostles spoke of *false apostles, false prophets and false brethren*. He warns: *“Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name . . . and will deceive many”* (Matthew 24:4-5, 11-12). He knew that false teachers would arise who would teach a distorted, corrupted version of Christianity. That deception began in the first century, when Paul wrote that some were already teaching a *“different gospel”* and *“pervert[ing] the gospel of Christ”* (Galatians 1:6-7).

To carry out his purpose, Satan uses some people to deceive other people. This is especially true when

they are motivated by personal ambition to be teachers of spiritual matters but lack a proper understanding of the scriptures. Satan simply takes advantage of that desire and seduces susceptible individuals to represent Christ falsely, though often sincerely, while advancing the devil's own deceptive, disguised agenda.

Lest you be misled by this greatest of all of Satan's deceptions, you need to be sure that your beliefs are based firmly on the Bible.

### Satan's great deception

As the master manipulator of mankind, Satan has many methods and tools at his disposal.

In a sense, his immediate goal—keeping mankind separate from God—is relatively easy. As humans we are naturally inclined to focus on our own selfish wants. As Paul puts it, “those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires” (Romans 8:5, NIV). Those whose minds are focused on themselves are, whether they realize it or not, *“hostile to God”* (verse 7, NIV).



*Under Satan's influence, millions of people often spend the Sabbath in pursuit of their own interests rather than in seeking God, regardless of which day they perceive the Sabbath to be. God intends that humanity enjoy all that has been provided in the world, but with God's way, man's priorities are rearranged.*

Quoting from several Psalms, Paul summarizes the spiritual condition of most of humanity: *“There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one . . . Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery are in their paths, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear*

of God before their eyes” (Romans 3:10-18, NRSV).

As a master of persuasion, Satan easily deceives mankind into focusing on anything *but* God. Through the theory of evolution, for example, he has convinced millions that God doesn’t exist. Through hundreds of corrupt religions he has convinced billions of people to worship the sun, moon and stars, animals, nature, deceased ancestors, imaginary gods and goddesses and a bewildering variety of other things—or nothing at all. Even among the many varieties of traditional Christianity we find people divided and bickering over who and what God is, his purpose for us, what he wants us to do and how we should live. The devil has done an effective job of confusing people as to what the Bible really says.

Satan doesn’t care which of these groups people fall into. Whether they believe in no God at all, accept and worship a false god or are deceived into a false view of the true God and his plan for us, Satan still has them where he wants them— *“alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart”* (Ephesians 4:18).

Perhaps this helps us better understand what God means when he tells us that the devil *“deceives the whole world”* (Rev. 12:9).

### How we can resist Satan

In addition to identifying Satan’s methods of deceiving people, God gives us specific guidance to counteract the devil and his influence. God’s Word assures us: *“Resist the devil and he will flee from you”* (James 4:7). This promise, however, is clearly directed toward those willing to “submit to God” (same verse) and is immediately followed with the instruction, *“Draw near to God and he will draw near to you”* (verse 8).

How, then, do we draw near to God? His instruction continues: *“Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded”* (same verse). We must actively seek to eliminate Satan’s way of thinking and behaving from our lives.

Satan, however, is so clever and powerful that no human being can successfully resist his influence without God’s help. Therefore the key to resisting the devil is to sincerely and consistently *draw near and remain close to God*.

Our first step is to allow God to *wash Satan’s influence from our minds*. This takes place through recognizing and acknowledging our sins and repenting of them. The scriptures compare this transformation from Satan’s way of thinking to coming back to life from the dead:

*“And you he made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others”* (Ephesians 2:1-3).

When we begin to truly repent and submit to God from the heart, we begin to take his Word seriously and to obey his instruction and commands. Then his Word, the Bible, begins cleaning up our minds, washing away our evil thoughts and motives. All who genuinely repent—who wholeheartedly surrender their will to God and are baptized so that they may receive the Holy Spirit—are placed by Jesus Christ into his church.

Now notice Christ’s concern for them and how he works with them to remove evil influences from their hearts and minds: Christ *“loved the church and gave himself for her, that he might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that he might present her to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish”* (Ephesians 5:25-27). God’s Word is the instrument Christ uses—through the power of the Holy Spirit—to wash away Satan’s influences from our thinking.

But what can we do about the devil’s attempts to influence us in the future? Here, too, God provides us with a defense: *“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm”* (Ephesians 6:10-13, NRSV).

Paul then lists specific elements of the spiritual armor God makes available to us. He compares the defense of God’s servants against Satan’s influence to a *“belt of truth around your waist”* and a *“breastplate of righteousness”* (verse 14). He describes their combat shoes as *“whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace”* (verse 15). Their shield is their *faith* in God and Christ, *“with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil*

one” (verse 16). Their resolve is protected by “the helmet of *salvation*” (verse 17)—the assurance that in steadfastly serving and pleasing God they will receive eternal life. The one offensive weapon they can use to cut to ribbons Satan’s attitudes and philosophies is the “sword of the Spirit, which is *the Word of God*” (same verse).

Finally, Paul says, “*pray* in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints” (verse 18). These are the essential keys for warding off Satan’s efforts to regain control over “the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error” (2 Peter 2:18).

Is Satan real? Yes, he is very real. The Bible tells us from beginning to end that he is a real, powerful,

intelligent being who has control of the world. To deny his existence means that he has you completely within his power right now.

God has told us who Satan is and how he works. He has also told us how to resist the devil’s influence and escape from his power.

The more our character becomes like God’s perfect nature, the less Satan will feel comfortable in our presence, and the more he will be inclined to flee from us.

Satan will ultimately be removed from the earth. The book of Revelation reveals God’s plans for the future world and the removal of Satan and his influence. We’ll explore God’s miraculous plans in a future issue and article on the coming world tomorrow. 