



HEROES + HERETICS

Alex Bunn examines the greatest hero and the greatest heretic of all time

HERETIC: SATAN

Heresy is a very unpopular and archaic word, but in fact there are many modern heresies. These are beliefs that contradict popular consensus, or 'orthodoxy' on important issues. Christians often agree with atheist friends on many issues, and want to defend important truths with them. For instance, it is a secular heresy to claim today to say that human rights don't apply in Guantanamo Bay, or that women are of less value than men, and such heresy is roundly opposed. Rightly so. But over other issues non-believers can be dogmatic and intolerant of rival views held by Christians - these are 'secular heresies'. For instance, Christians who claim that life in the womb should be valued and protected unconditionally (the 'sanctity of life' view), can be treated with contempt and suffer discrimination at work.

So the question is not *whether* orthodox and heresy exist,

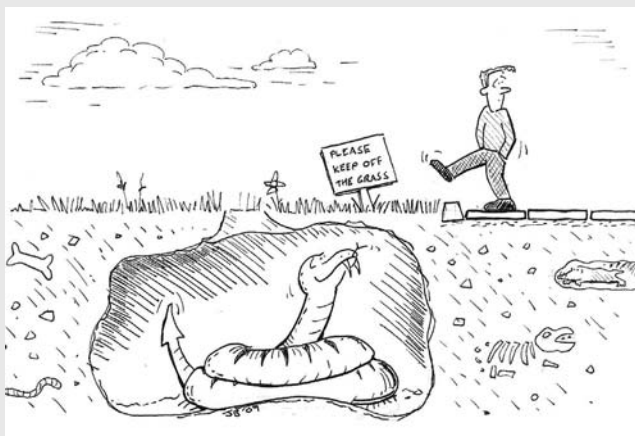
because believers and non-believers both distinguish between key truth and dangerous fallacy. The question then is *which* beliefs are so critical to get right, and are so central to the well-being of a community to justify the intolerance of dissent? In this instalment we will consider the greatest hero and the greatest heretic of all time, Jesus and Satan. Of course a belief in Satan is itself considered a heresy by many now, but we should be aware of his schemes,¹ if only to avoid them. There are several great showdowns with him in Scripture, but let's start with the first.

Satan's tactics are laid bare in the words of the snake to Eve in Genesis 3, and are still familiar today. Firstly, note that Satan gently distorts what God had said: 'Did God *really* say, "You must not eat from any tree in the garden"?'² Indeed God had not said that! Rather the very first statement he makes to

mankind is 'You are *free* to eat from *any* tree in the garden',³ with one single exception. How easy it is to be convinced by the enemy that God is a spoilsport who wants to rob our freedom. We sulk over the rare prohibition against destructive behaviour, rather than delight in the abundance of good things God gives. So the first heresy was the idea that God is a tyrant who wants to rob us of our freedom. It is such a seductive heresy that Eve bought into Satan's lie, and we frequently follow. Eve distorts what God had said, falsely remembering God's warning about the fruit as 'you must not *touch* it, or you will die'.⁴ But God had said no such thing, only that *eating* the fruit would bring death.⁵ Fear was the fruit of the poisonous seed of suspicion that Satan had planted in Eve's mind.

Having sown the seed of distrust, Satan's second approach is direct

contradiction: 'You will *not* surely die'.⁶ Satan argues that there will be no negative consequences. Ever since, he has been known as 'the father of lies',⁷ the great heretic. Once again, the deeper allegation is that God cannot be trusted: 'For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil'.⁸ These are profound yet somewhat ambiguous words. As so often, Satan is *partially right!* When we reject God's commandments intended for good, we will indeed *know* evil in a new way, and how it differs from innocence. But by then it's too late, and you can never un-know sin and the harm it wreaks; once the toothpaste is out of the tube, you can't put it back in again! Adam and Eve soon knew the consequences of sin for themselves: pain, blame and shame, and exclusion from God's life-giving presence. Medics should well appreciate the fateful consequences of mistrusting the maker's instructions, as it makes up much of our trade: existential despair, addictions, broken relationships, shame and stigma, poverty and STIs to name a few. The irony is that the snake, not God, poses the greatest danger to our freedom.



But the good news is that when our gracious God judged the serpent, who had wrought so much havoc with his lies, he promised to raise up a serpent crusher from Eve's offspring,⁹ who would defeat the great heretic once and for all. The Old Testament heroes and even the angels longed for him to be revealed,¹⁰ but we are fortunate enough to know his name: Jesus. Fast forward now to about 30AD, when the serpent crusher was revealed. What can we learn from Jesus? Here are three top tips from the master, from his answers to Satan.

Firstly, **recognise your weakness** and surrender it to God. Luke 3 tells us that Jesus is like a second Adam, who had to contend with Satan's lies all over again, recapitulating

Adam's struggle, but finally defeating him in the place of man. Unlike the Hollywood version, there are no guns, car chases or clash of superhero egos. Quite the opposite; instead a demonstration of obedience to God, even in the vulnerability of human flesh. In the three temptations, Jesus is goaded by Satan to use his 'super-powers', calling down angels or miraculously creating food. But the most extraordinary thing is that Jesus refuses to use his divine power, showing us what obedience looks like as an obedient human. 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'¹¹ was his reply. This is enormously encouraging - it is possible to oppose Satan despite our human weakness. 'Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from

you.’¹² Sometimes we would rather believe that we are too weak and powerless to resist; ‘I just couldn’t help myself’, we tell ourselves, quite falsely. No, weakness given to God is strength enough.

Secondly, **know the truth** that God has revealed, so you can spot the dangerous lie. Do you know how bank clerks spot forgeries? They study normal bank notes minutely so that abnormal ones are recognised instantly. Or how to recognise an abnormal ECG? Doctors who have spent years poring over them have no problem in detecting pathology. Likewise, Jesus’ mind was so soaked in Scripture that he recognised and rejected Satan’s lies boldly: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God’.¹³ Do we spend as much time and effort feeding on Scripture as we do even in the canteen?!

Thirdly, like Jesus, **recognise no rivals** for your obedience and devotion: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only’.¹⁴ Unlike Eve, Jesus did not enter into a conversation with Satan, his love of God was unswerving. Experts warn us not to negotiate with terrorists, who are experts in manipulating us

to their destructive wills. Likewise, Jesus did not negotiate with a snake whose weapons are suspicion, lies, fear and enslavement. How much do we compromise with the enemy of our souls, settling for a cosy cease fire on his terms? We resign ourselves to bad habits and loveless religion. There’s a wonderful but sobering poem about a fly and a cunning spider.¹⁵ The spider had no power over the fly until she flew too close. Her fatal error was to enter into a conversation, slowly spiralling closer and closer to her enemy...you can probably guess the outcome!

How much better to follow our hero Jesus, to recognise our weaknesses, submit them to our Father in heaven who will equip us to resist the great heretic, and escape his clutches. He gives us two freedoms. Freedom *from* suspicion, lies, fear, enslavement and the love of worthless things. And he gives us freedom *to* love and serve wholeheartedly the one true lover of our souls. What a great and merciful God!

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SUMMARY

SATAN’S DANGEROUS LIES

- God wants to take away your freedom
- God cannot be trusted
- Sin has no consequences

JESUS’

LIFE & TEACHING:

- God gives freedom to those who submit to him
- Recognise dangerous lies by knowing the word of God
- Don’t negotiate with Satan

REFERENCES

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8. Genesis 3:5
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11. Luke 4:12
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