

## **Restore Series (7): Overcoming Personal Evil // Steve Sutton**

### **Intro**

We are in the midst of a series called Restore, and we are seeking to understand brokenness and God's gift of restoration.

We have looked at the Old Testament concept of 'shalom', which is a beautiful word meaning: *Wholeness, harmony, wellbeing, healing, and prosperity. It points to a world in which 'nothing is broken, and nothing is missing'*. Shalom is *'things as God intended them to be'*.

The New Testament equivalent of shalom is the Greek word 'sodzo' meaning 'save or saved'. Sodzo means: *Protect, heal, deliver, make whole, make well, rescue, restore.*

Today, look at God delivering, protecting and healing us from the realm of darkness, Devil or Satan and demons.

Undoubtedly this subject will cause a number of responses:

- Fearful and apprehensive
- Skepticism – the Devil is only a symbol of evil (2009 Barna survey – 40% of American Christians believe the

Devil is a symbol of evil and not a real person)

- Affirming – those who have encountered personal evil, either within themselves or others, will particularly have little difficulty accepting that there is a demonic reality
- Uncertain – you are not sure what to believe

Begin with a bit of a journey...

I find it fascinating that in the Old Testament Satan and evil spirits are only mentioned 12 times – the idea of Satan is quite innocuous and vague in the OT.

Understanding the Hebrew term 'Satan' is helpful.

The Hebrew for Satan is 'ha satan', which literally means 'the satan' or 'the adversary' or 'the opposer' 'the obstacle' 'stumbling block'. 'The satan' describes an adversarial role and is not the name of a particular character.

For example, in the Book of Job, 'the satan' approaches God. This 'satan' wasn't a person name like Steve or Louise etc. Unfortunately, our translations of the Bible have turned the OT 'ha satan' into a person:

One day the members of the heavenly court came to present themselves before the Lord, and the Accuser, Satan, came with them. "Where have you come from?" the Lord asked

Satan. Satan answered the Lord, “I have been patrolling the earth, watching everything that’s going on.” **Job 1:6-7**

However, when we step into the New Testament, the Satan takes a commanding role and does appear as a personality. There are 568 references in the NT to the Devil and demons. Satan is portrayed, at least by some of the NT writers as the arch nemesis of Jesus who are engaged in a cosmic battle between good and evil.

**How did this shift of thinking about Satan come about?  
How come there’s so little about Satan in the OT and so much about Satan in the NT?**

Scholars suggest three things occurred during the time between the time of writing of the Old and New Testaments:

- **The Jews were processing what it meant to be monotheistic** that is to hold to a belief in one God. If this one God is good and powerful how do we account for all the evil in the world? If God is good, God cannot be the author or the initiator of evil. As they were working through this tension they surmised that evil must have emerged from someone else.
- **The Jews were interacting with other religions and philosophies**, which tended to hold to a belief in the

existence of devils and demons. So in a sense, the changing Jewish concept of Satan was influenced by other religions. This teaches us a valuable lesson: faith and theology never develop in a vacuum; they are always engaged and in conversation with context.

- **The Jews were trying to come to terms with their own suffering and pain.** They were looking for a rationale to explain their profound suffering and oppression. They had traditionally thought that their suffering was God's punishment for their disobedience. But this view no longer made sense to them. They observed other nations who were also disobedient but didn't experiencing suffering like they did and they needed to locate a cause for their pain.

These three factors converged to create a Judaism that at the time of Jesus held the widespread view that:

Satan was a person and the Prince of demons; this Satan was the ruler of the world who was actively seeking world domination. They believed that every individual was stalked by demons, which waited for a moment of weakness in order to strike. They also believed that physical and mental illness were the result of demon possession.

Like much of the ancient world, Israel lived in an enchanted world filled with angels and demons, monsters and ghosts. The veil between the natural realm and the spiritual realm was thin. The natural world was easily penetrated by the enchanted.

In the West we live in a largely disenchanting world governed by rationalism, science and technology. Supernatural phenomenon has largely been dismissed by our secular age. Even Christians are now skeptical and perhaps even embarrassed by the Bible's emphasis on Satan and demons.

**But a belief in Satan certainly helped ancient people explain the cause of brokenness, sickness and torment in their lives and also explain the evil that existed in the world.**

Whatever we think – the devil and demons were real for those who lived in the ancient world. It was into this enchanted context that Jesus came and the NT was written.

With that in mind, let's quickly scan the NT to see what we find...

Greek NT – Devil = diabolos = again means ‘the adversary’ but the word also means ‘the accuser’ and ‘the one who sows discord or division’.

Another important aspect of the Devil’s character seen in the NT is ‘the Tempter’. This is important because it suggests that the Devil can entice but can’t enforce, influence but not impose.

The NT wastes no time in introducing us to the diabolos and the tempter. Immediately we find Jesus in a conversation with the Devil, straight after his baptism it tells us:

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil. For forty days and forty nights he fasted and became very hungry. During that time the devil came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread.” **Matthew 4:1-3**

The story continues with Jesus resisting temptation and the Devil leaving him for a more opportune time.

The Gospels then paint a picture of Jesus regularly casting evil spirits out of people. **If Jesus was nothing else he was an exorcist:**

**Matthew 4:24** News about him spread as far as Syria, and people soon began bringing to him all who were sick. And whatever their sickness or disease, or if they were demon possessed or epileptic or paralyzed — he healed them all.

This theme is repeated consistently throughout the Gospels.

**A summary of Jesus ministry is found in Acts 10:38:**

And you know that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. Then Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. **Acts 10:38**

**The disciples continue the ministry of Jesus and in the book of Acts we see key leaders of the church such as Philip and Paul casting out evil spirits:**

Crowds listened intently to Philip because they were eager to hear his message and see the miraculous signs he did. Many evil spirits were cast out, screaming as they left their victims. **Acts 8:6-7**

**The teaching of Paul, James, Peter and John in their Epistles all reference the Devil:**

**Paul Ephesians 6:10-12**

Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.

**James 4:7**

So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

**1 Peter 5:8**

Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.

**1 John 3:8**

... the Son of God came to destroy the works of the devil.

It's hard for us to discount the Devil given the large number of references. Whether we view 'the satan' or the devil as a personification of evil or merely a symbol of evil, what we can all agree on is there are forces at work that are resistant to good.

**For me the best text for helping us understand Satan and overcoming evil in our own lives is found in the story of Peter in Matthew 16:21-23:**

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

This story provides us with great insight. Remember that ‘the satan’ ‘ha satan’ of the OT is ‘the adversary’, ‘the opposer’, ‘the obstacle’ or ‘stumbling block’.

**Peter is acting as a stumbling block to Jesus – what is he resisting?**

He is resisting the way of the Cross, which is the way of self-giving, self-sacrificial love.

**The Devil at its most basic, fundamental level is our own dark side** – it is that which is in us that resists, opposes or works against love. Ha satan is that within us that resists shalom and sodzo. Spiritual warfare is a battle fought with love and for love.

“... the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.” **Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn**

Hate is the adversary (the satan) of love

Being exclusive is the adversary (the satan) of inclusion

Fights/arguments/conflict are the adversary (the satan) of harmony

Stinginess is the adversary (the satan) of generosity

Pride is the adversary (the satan) of humility

Anxiety and worry is the adversary (the satan) of peace of mind

Unforgiveness is the adversary (the satan) of forgiveness

Whenever we give space to those things that are resistant to good, to love, to shalom, to sodzo – we give space to ‘ha satan’.

To confront or address our dark side I suggest we engage with the practice of Prayer Ministry. Find someone we trust, who holds confidence to process our inner darkness:

- **Recognise that Jesus has won the victory** – the Gospels demonstrate that Jesus is Lord over all evil – the resurrection is proof that evil does not win
- **Accept responsibility** – don’t blame. We’ve been blaming the devil since the Garden of Eden for our decisions and God never accepts it as an excuse
- **Confess your faults** to one another that you might be healed (confess = to agree with God) – be specific
- **Repent** – change our minds about what we think and turn our backs on the way we have been living
- **Renounce** – speak off ones self whatever darkness we have permitted

In their book *The Birth of Satan: Tracing the Devil's Biblical Roots* a comprehensive work on the biblical, theological and historical of Satan and evil, Wray & Mobley conclude their research with the following:

'Is Satan real? The theological and scriptural arguments for and against the existence of Satan are vast and as formidable as are the variations in personal beliefs concerning Satan. Yet whether Satan is to be taken as a metaphor, as a symbolic, or literal being, Satan is real in the sense that evil is real... When we dismiss the biblical Satan as a primitive or outdated concept, when we effectively edit him out of the theological equation and ignore the truths of the stories about him, we run the risk of missing the great lessons the biblical writers were trying to impart. They did not explain away evil, for evil was then, as is now, a reality that cannot be denied. **And yet, in the final analysis, the Bible reassures us that God is on our side, that the Devil can be resisted, that love wins out in the end.**' (The Birth of Satan: Tracing the Devil's Biblical Roots, T.J. Wray & G Mobley)

These concluding words are a great reassurance for us.