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God's Tests

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NINE

God's Restraining Power Over Satan

In this chapter and the next, we will continue exploring the concept of God's restraining power over Satan. Throughout Scripture, God demonstrates repeatedly that He has plenty of ability to restrain the "god of this world" any time He desires.

Let's consider an initial example found in a passage that is familiar to most churchgoers. Speaking through the prophet Malachi, the Lord was reproving His people for withholding their tithes and offerings. He actually accused them of robbing Him! As a result of their disobedience, they were "cursed with a curse." The "fruits of the ground" were being destroyed, and the "vine in the field" was "casting its grapes" (Mal. 3:9, 11). If they would repent, however, and begin once again to pay their tithes and offerings, the Lord promised:

I will...pour out a blessing until there is no more need. Then *I will rebuke the devourer for you*, so that it may not destroy the fruits of the ground; nor will your vine in the field cast its grapes (Mal. 3:10b-11, emphasis added).

Who was the devourer? Scripture doesn't say. We are only told the devourer was destroying crops, and that God would rebuke it if Israel repented. If God was speaking of Satan or one of his evil spirits, then we *could* say (as some would) that Israel "opened the door to the devil through disobedience." If, however, we mean that God had no sovereign part in the matter, we are entirely incorrect. We would be much more accurate if we said that the Israelites opened the door to God's discipline through disobedience, and God consequently disciplined them by permitting Satan to afflict them.

If God played no sovereign role in this particular incident, then apparently He and Satan switched roles. Satan was punishing disobedient people, and at the same time God was apparently unconcerned because He was doing nothing! That idea is, of course, absurd.

When God Restrained Satan in the Life of Job

Another clear example of God's restraining power over Satan is found in the story of Job. As we read of the initial heavenly conversation about Job, it becomes abundantly clear that Satan can do nothing to harm Job unless God permits him:

Then Satan answered the Lord, “Does Job fear God for nothing? Hast Thou not *made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side?* Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth Thy hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse Thee to Thy face.” Then the Lord said to Satan, “Behold, *all that he has is in your power [literally hand], only do not put forth your hand on him*” (Job 1:9-12, emphasis added).

God had been protecting Job, having placed a hedge about him. But as a result of Satan’s challenge, God lifted that protective hedge to some degree, limitedly permitting Satan to afflict Job, yet not allowing Satan to afflict Job’s health.

After Job’s first set of trials, Satan again accused Job before God. This time he claimed that if Job were to lose his health, then he would surely curse God. Consequently, the Lord permitted Satan to afflict Job’s body, yet restrained him from actually killing him (see Job 2:3-6).

So in Job’s story we observe God’s restraining power over Satan demonstrated three times, as He (1) restrained Satan from doing anything, then (2) permitted him to afflict Job in every way except physical sickness, and finally (3) allowed him to steal Job’s health. Clearly, Satan could do nothing except what God permitted.

Of course, Job’s story occurred *after* the fall of Adam; therefore, *if* Satan usurped Adam’s authority (and notice I said *if*), then he had Adam’s authority when he afflicted Job. This again proves that even *if* Satan did gain some authority on the earth as a result of Adam’s fall, he never gained unlimited control and was completely subject to God.

Sadly, in an attempt to “defend God’s loving character,” some argue that Job “opened the door to Satan through fear,” based upon Job’s statement in Job 3:25: “For what I fear comes upon me.” Fear, however, was not the reason for Job’s trials—as is clearly revealed from an honest examination of the first two chapters of Job. Later in this book, when we look more fully at the life of Job, I’ll prove beyond any doubt that Job did not “open the door to Satan through fear.”

God’s Restraining Power over Satan in Peter’s Life

In the New Testament, we have a very clear example of God’s restraining power over Satan. Found in Luke’s Gospel, this account is somewhat similar to Job’s story. There, just a short time before Jesus was betrayed, He said to Peter:

Simon, Simon, behold, *Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat*; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers (Luke 22:31-32, emphasis added).

A note in the margin of my Bible lists an alternate translation that reads, “Satan has *obtained by asking* to sift you like wheat.” Either translation indicates Satan had to obtain permission before he sifted Peter.

God permitted Satan to sift Peter like wheat for a reason, and you can be certain that God was motivated by love. Those who have not yet learned of the positive results of trials or who are blind to God’s divine purposes will scoff at that idea, yet it is completely biblical. And clearly, once again, God is sovereign over Satan. Satan could do nothing to Peter unless he received permission from God, just as in Job’s case.

An Example From the Book of Revelation

A fourth example, also from the New Testament, is found in Revelation 20:

And I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and *bound him for a thousand years*, and threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, that he should not deceive the nations any longer, *until the thousand years were completed*; after these things he must be released for a short time.... And when the thousand years are completed, Satan will be *released from prison*, and will come out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth.... And they came up on the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, and fire came down from heaven and devoured them. *And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone*, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever (Rev. 20:1-3, 7-10, emphasis added).

Notice that it will require only one angel to bind Satan and completely stop his work for one thousand years. Under the influence of certain teachers, I at one time thought that God could do this at the beginning of the Millennium because that is when “Adam’s lease on the earth expires.” In other words, God (supposedly) gave Adam authority on the earth for a certain time period. When Adam abdicated his authority, Satan got a “time-limited lease.” Up until the expiration date of that lease, God supposedly *couldn’t* stop Satan because Satan had a legal right to do anything he wanted.

That kind of logic is faulty, however, for several reasons. Foremost, because we see so many other examples (after Adam’s fall) of how God restrained Satan’s activities on the earth. By an overwhelming weight of scriptural evidence, we see that God is quite able to hinder the work of Satan.

The second reason is deduced from the fact that, after 1,000 years, God will release Satan again for a short period. Does this mean that Adam’s lease will once again become operative for a short time after the Millennium and, therefore, God will be legally obligated to loose Satan for a little while again? Would God prefer to keep the devil in prison even beyond the 1,000 years, but won’t be able to because Satan has a legal right to come out?

No, what this scripture reveals to us is that God has a divine purpose in permitting Satan to do what He permits him to do. And what is that?

Before Satan is bound, we read that he “deceived the nations” (Rev. 20:3). After he is released from his thousand-year prison term, he once again “deceives the nations” (Rev. 20:8)—this time into thinking that they can overthrow the rule of Christ in Jerusalem.

God obviously will have a divine purpose in releasing Satan from his prison, and that is to deceive the nations to attempt a siege against Jerusalem. And there they will meet with judgment.

Please note that I did not say that God *wills* that people be deceived so that they will be judged. We know that God wants every person to be saved (see 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9). God loves every human being, and He sent His Son to pay the price for everyone’s sins (see 1 John 2:2).

However, we also know that God has given every person a free will, and that He has decreed that the only people who will be saved are those who, under the drawing of the Spirit, choose to repent and believe in Jesus. Keep in mind that, *in order for God to determine who has chosen Jesus, there must be something else for people to choose.*

If Jesus was the only available choice, then He wouldn’t be someone whom you *could* choose. Imagine an election in which there was only one candidate. It really wouldn’t be an

election, would it? That kind of “election” would be similar to the situation that would exist if there was no choice other than Jesus.

So we see that Satan serves a divine purpose in God’s eternal plan, as the alternate choice for humankind. God has permitted Satan to exist on the earth so that He can determine who will be qualified to live in His presence for eternity and who must perish in hell. The Bible makes it clear that if a person is not serving Jesus, then he is serving the devil (see 1 Tim. 5:15; 1 John 3:10).

Both God and Satan are vying for the hearts of men. God is drawing everyone to Himself by several means: through His creation (anyone who wants to can see that there must be a Creator), through people’s consciences, and by the witness of the Holy Spirit through His church (see John 15:26-27). Satan is drawing men to himself (away from God) through temptation and deception, and God permits Satan to do just that. Again, if there were no alternative to following Jesus, how would God know who truly wanted to serve Jesus?

Why People are Deceived by Satan

Have you ever marveled at unbelievers who go about their lives without regard to God? They take no notice of Him, even though He is seen everywhere through His creation. I’m looking out my window right now, and I can’t help but think of God. When I look at His creation, I am awed. God has amassed evidence in front of us all that reveals His existence, His power, and His character. Consequently, every person is without excuse before God, just as Scripture says (see Rom. 1:18-21).

As I’m writing this, it is springtime, and the tulips and daffodils are in full bloom. I wonder, *How does God turn soil into flowers? How can He get all those beautiful colors out of the ground?* Furthermore, *How can He make apples from the same soil by which He also makes tomatoes and bananas?* I marvel at people who don’t marvel.

We don’t have to look any further than our own bodies to learn something about God. We are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14). Yet unbelievers go about day to day and never acknowledge God. They seemingly have no concern for how He feels about their words, thoughts, and actions, while eternity is rushing toward them like a freight train without brakes.

How can people be so blind? The answer is that *they are deceived by Satan*. They are every bit as deceived as the people whom Satan will delude into thinking they can overthrow the government of Jesus at the end of the Millennium. Paul said in 2 Cor. 4:3 that “the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.”

Here, however, is the important point: Why are those people deceived? The answer is because *they want to be deceived, because their hearts are so wicked*. Read how the apostle Paul described unbelievers in his letter to the Ephesians:

The Gentiles...walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the *ignorance* that is in them, *because of the hardness of their heart*; and they, having become *callous*, have given themselves over to sensuality, for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness (Eph. 4:17b-19, emphasis added).

The unsaved are willfully ignorant because their hearts are hard. Satan can only deceive those people who will allow him to deceive them, those who desire to believe his lies. They love darkness, just as Jesus told us (see John 3:19). In addition, Satan cannot stop any person from being born again if that person decides to repent and believe in Jesus. So no one can

accuse God of unfairness when He permits Satan to deceive people. No one *has* to remain deceived.

Obviously, through Satan, God is testing humanity. Satan must be permitted to do something or else there would be no test. It would be like the Garden of Eden without the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. There must be an alternative that draws people away from God in order for God to determine who is willfully coming toward Him.

I hope you are grasping this concept. Jesus will be reigning over the earth for 1,000 years during His millennial reign. During that 1,000 years, there will be no alternative to serving Jesus. The Bible says that Jesus will rule with “a rod of iron” (Rev. 19:15). At the end of that thousand-year period, God will release Satan from prison to deceive evil people whose hearts are inclined to hate Jesus yet who have been feigning obedience to Him. The true condition of their hearts will be openly manifested when Satan is released.

Satan won’t be able to deceive everyone at that time—only those whose hearts are *already inclined* toward rebellion. They will be wide open to his deception when he is released and will naturally do what they have been wishing they could do for a long time. The only reason they will not have tried to overthrow the government of Jesus before Satan’s release is because they will know they would never succeed, even though they might love to see it happen. Once Satan deceives those who don’t want to submit to Christ’s rule, however, it will become abundantly clear who loves Jesus and who hates Him. Then God can righteously judge them, which He will do.

The exact scenario is being played out right now on a larger scale. If Satan were not here to deceive the hearts of people who don’t want Christ to rule their lives, those people would outwardly obey God, yet inwardly long for the chance to rebel. Such people are certainly not fit to live forever in God’s kingdom. Because they are deceived, however, the attitude of their hearts is manifested in their daily words and deeds, and they are storing up judgment for themselves. God gives them a lifetime to repent of their rebellion. If they do, He will give them a new nature through Christ along with freedom from bondage to sin and Satan.

Paul affirmed this very concept in his second letter to the Thessalonians. Writing about the antichrist during the time of the Tribulation Period, he wrote:

And then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming; that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with the *deception* of wickedness for those who perish, *because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. And for this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness* (2 Thes. 2:8-12, emphasis added).

In one sentence, Paul stated practically everything I’ve been trying to explain. Notice that these people already had the opportunity to “receive the love of the truth so as to be saved,” yet they chose not to “believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.” God will allow Satan (through the antichrist) to work false signs and wonders in order to deceive those who are Christ-rejecters, “in order that they all may be judged.”

God’s Grand Design

No doubt the greatest example of how God used Satan to accomplish His own divine purposes occurred when God permitted Satan to inspire evil men to crucify Jesus:

Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age, nor of *the rulers of this age*, who are passing away; but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of *the rulers of this age* has understood; for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory (1 Cor. 2:6-8, emphasis added).

Who are the “rulers” about whom Paul is writing? Many think that Paul was speaking, not of earthly rulers, but of demonic rulers—the wicked spirits who motivate evil leaders on the earth.¹ Moffat's translation speaks of these rulers as the “dethroned powers who rule this world.”

My point is that if Satan had known what was going to be accomplished on the cross according to God's predestined plan, he would never have motivated anyone to crucify Jesus. Satan ignorantly played right into God's hands, and redemption was accomplished for us through Christ's sacrifice! Once again, God used Satan, as evil as he is, to help Him accomplish His own divine purpose.

Are you beginning to see that God has a grand design for all that has happened and all that is yet to happen? The fall of humanity was not something that caught God by surprise, requiring Him to form a hastily designed plan to repair what caught him off guard! God's purpose and grace have been “granted us in Christ Jesus from *all eternity*” (2 Tim. 1:9, emphasis added). God has had everything under His sovereign control from before the time of creation.

If you've read this far, that is probably an indication that you've passed God's *initial* test of repenting of your sins and turning to Jesus. That was, however, just the first step that you took towards becoming more like Jesus. Many more steps must follow, and they all involve God's tests.

¹ The Greek word translated here as “rulers” is often used in the New Testament in reference to demonic spiritual rulers, as well as human rulers.