

John Mark Comer

# LIVE NO LIES

SNEAK  
PEEK



SAMPLE  
ONLY

Recognize and Resist  
the Three Enemies  
That Sabotage Your Peace

UNCORRECTED  
PROOF

**Also by John Mark Comer**

*Loveology*

*Garden City*

*God Has a Name*

*The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*

**LIVE  
NO  
LIES**

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That Sabotage Your Peace

**JOHN  
MARK  
COMER**



**WATERBROOK**

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## Contents

xiii	The war on lies
xix	A manifesto for exile

### Part 1: The devil

5	The truth about lies
23	Ideas, weaponized
49	Dezinformatsiya
71	And having done all, to stand

### Part 2: The flesh

105	The slavery of freedom
125	“Their passions forge their fetters”
145	The law of returns
167	So I say, live by the Spirit

### Part 3: The world

195	The brutal honesty about normal
221	A remnant
245	Epilogue: Self-denial in an age of self-fulfillment
259	Appendix: A monastic handbook for combating demons
263	Thank yous
267	Notes

**During this earthly pilgrimage our life cannot be free from temptation, for none of us comes to know ourselves except through the experience of temptation, nor can we be crowned until we have come through victorious, nor be victorious until we have been in battle, nor fight our battles unless we have an enemy and temptations to overcome.**

**—St. Augustine, 418 AD**

**From all the deceytes of the worlde, the fleshe, and the deuill:  
God lorde deliuer us.**

**—*The Book of Common Prayer*, 1549 AD**

**As an experiment in psychology, basic instincts, and the effect of propaganda, it couldn't be surpassed—!**

**—Emmet Riordan to Orson Welles,  
October 30, 1938**

# The war on lies

You may not know this story, but it really did happen.

All of it.

Just after sundown on October 30, 1938, aliens invaded America; the harbingers of an advanced Martian civilization, come to enslave the land of the free.

The first wave landed in an unsuspecting farming town called Grovers Mill, not far from Princeton University in New Jersey and just a short trek from Manhattan. Professor Richard Pier-son was standing watch at Princeton's observatory; he had scoped eruptions of blue flames on Mars's surface just an hour before, assumed it was a rare meteor shower, and rushed to the scene to investigate. But upon arrival, instead of

the detritus of space rock, he found a large metal cylinder in the open field, still steaming from entry and broadcasting odd scraping noises from inside its shell. As the reporters, first responders, and onlookers examined the crash site, the cylinder began to open, and a terrifying monstrosity of alien violence unfolded.

On-site reporter Carl Phillips broadcast this chilling report live across CBS's airwaves:

Ladies and gentlemen, this is the most terrifying thing I have ever witnessed. . . . I can see peering out of that black hole two luminous disks. . . . Are they eyes? It might be a face. . . .

But that face, it . . . Ladies and gentlemen, it's indescribable. I can hardly force myself to keep looking at it. The eyes are black and gleam like a serpent. The mouth is V-shaped with saliva dripping from its rimless lips that seem to quiver and pulsate. . . .

What's that? There's a jet of flame springing from [the alien], and it leaps right at the advancing men. It strikes them head on! Good Lord, they're turning into flame!

Now the whole field's caught fire. The woods . . . The barns . . . The gas tanks of automobiles . . . It's spreading everywhere. It's coming this way.<sup>1</sup>

At this point, Phillips's voice abruptly cut out, followed by the eerie hiss of radio static.

Five long seconds later, the report resumed and announced Americans' worst fear: aliens had landed on the Eastern Seaboard. The National Guard had been called in, and bells rang to warn people to evacuate Manhattan. The Secretary of the Interior urged all Americans to join the fight and stand for "the preservation of human supremacy."<sup>2</sup>

Then came word of more alien landfalls—Chicago, then St. Louis.

It was pandemonium in the streets. Urbanites fled in terror. People took refuge in churches. Pregnant women went into labor early. People committed suicide. Looting broke out in the streets. It being America, men got out their guns and made ready to make a final stand.

One woman ran into a church prayer meeting in Indianapolis and screamed, "New York has been destroyed. I believe the end of the world has come. . . . You might as well go home to die."<sup>3</sup>

Life, as we know it, was over.

Now, as much as my conspiracy-theory friends would love this story to be true ("The moon landing was really in Iceland! The royal family are lizard people! The earth is flat!"),<sup>4</sup> the entire story was a lie.

I know; I know—shocking.

There was no alien invasion. But everything else really did happen.

It wasn't a full-on lie; it was more like fiction gone awry.

Here's the backstory. . . .

The late 1930s were a tumultuous time in America. Not only did many scientists speculate there was alien life on Mars,<sup>5</sup> but closer to home, people were living with a fever pitch of anxiety. America was on the verge of war with Germany. The economy was still recovering from the Great Depression, and food scarcity was a growing threat. Just weeks before, those living in the Northeast had endured the Great New England Hurricane of 1938, the most devastating storm to ever strike New England, leaving over seven hundred dead and about sixty-three thousand homeless.<sup>6</sup> Add to the mix that it was after dark on the night before Halloween, and you've got an emotional tinderbox just waiting for a spark.

Enter Orson Welles, the twenty-three-year-old actor and director of *The Mercury Theatre on the Air*, a new radio program on CBS. Radio was still a new art form, in its golden era, ripe for creative exploration, and exploitation. It was the first medium to blur the lines between fact and fiction, news and entertainment. And Welles was a prodigy. His *Mercury Theatre* was only seventeen weeks in and was already the darling child of critics. But as is the case with much indie art, it failed to garner a large audience. Welles still had no commercial sponsor, and his time slot was up against the most popular show of the day, *The Chase and Sanborn Hour*.

Welles knew he had to do something drastic or *Mercury Theatre* would fail, so he bought the rights to H. G. Wells's novel *The War of the Worlds* and had his screenwriter simplify it from a literary critique of Western colonialism down to an hour-long sci-fi story designed to entertain.<sup>7</sup> He then updated the setting from Victorian England to current-day New Jersey.

As far as we can tell, Welles had zero malevolent intent.<sup>8</sup> Here's the most plausible theory for how it all went sideways: Most Americans weren't listening to Welles's show when it started; they were listening to the more popular *The Chase and Sanborn Hour*. That week's episode of *Chase and Sanborn* started with a short comedy sketch that ended at 8:15 p.m. So, around 8:16, legions of people turned the dial and were shocked by very realistic-sounding news alerts of mayhem up and down the Eastern Seaboard, including an emergency broadcast from an actor whose voice mimicked President Franklin D. Roosevelt's with near-perfect accuracy.<sup>9</sup> Due to the unrest in Europe, people were used to having their radio shows interrupted with breaking news stories, all bad. Many latecomers interpreted it to be a German invasion with some kind of advanced weaponry. The horror of Germany's use of poisonous gas in WWI was still fresh in people's memory.

As you would imagine, people freaked out.

There's no way to know for sure the extent of the hysteria. The next morning, the *New York Times* ran a front-page story describing it as a "wave of mass hysteria."<sup>10</sup> The *New York Daily News* headline read, "Fake Radio 'War' Stirs Terror Through U.S." in the same font usually reserved for the announcement of a real war.<sup>11</sup> Adolf Hitler even weighed in on the drama, citing the supposed panic as "evidence of the decadence and corrupt condition of democracy."<sup>12</sup>

Welles feared his career was over. Instead, all the publicity landed him a dream contract in Hollywood. As the saying goes, "All publicity is good publicity." Three years later, Welles wrote, directed, and starred in *Citizen Kane*, a movie some critics argue is the best film ever made.

Now, why do I tell you this bizarre story?

Because: I find it an apt metaphor to capture the thesis of this short book. I know your time is precious, so let me get to the point.

*We are at war.*

Not with aliens from Mars, but with an enemy far more dangerous: *lies*. But unlike *The War of the Worlds*, our enemy isn't the figment of an overactive imagination. In this case, there's no hoax. Our enemy is real.

# A manifesto for exile

Okay, hold up. After a lead-in rife with military metaphors, you're expecting an angry tirade about the decline of Western civilization and the looming secular apocalypse, an us-versus-them call to arms, my foray into the culture wars . . .

Take a deep breath.

This isn't that.

Our nation is more divided than it's been since the Civil War, and the last thing we need is more gas on the fire. All I want to do is name the felt experience of following Jesus in our cultural moment, and I just can't find a better metaphor: *it feels like a war for the soul.*

We feel this constant conflict not just “out there” in culture or in our digital newsfeeds but inside the fabric of our own minds and bodies. A kind of inner tug-of-war that is emotionally exhausting and spiritually depleting, a tearing at the fabric of our souls’ peace.

On paper, everything is fine: I live in a beautiful home in a great city with the best coffee in the world. I have a job as a pastor. I’m free to teach the Way of Jesus, at least for now. Heck, my kids and I even get to walk the dog to the park and stop along the way for ice cream.

Why do I feel so tired? Worn down? Not in body, but in mind?

Why do I feel so battered and bruised?

Why does every day feel like a battle just to stay faithful, to keep following Jesus?

Here’s an idea: maybe because it *is*.

Our generation has a low comfort level with military metaphors and faith. We prefer to think of following Jesus as a journey or lifestyle rather than a war. But our spiritual ancestors didn’t share our reticence with war imagery. They were far more adroit at naming the reality of spiritual conflict than we are today. For centuries, teachers of the Way of Jesus used a paradigm that’s been lost in the modern era, that of “the three enemies of the soul.”

The world.

The flesh.

And the devil.<sup>1</sup>

They saw the three enemies of the soul as alien invaders from hell and a kind of counter-trinity to God himself.

While the exact phrase *the world, the flesh, and the devil* isn't used by Jesus or the writers of the New Testament, the language and categories are.<sup>2</sup> If you've read the apostle Paul, you know he regularly likened following Jesus to a war.<sup>3</sup> One of Paul's most famous sayings is "Fight the good fight of the faith."<sup>4</sup> He told the Ephesians to "put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes"<sup>5</sup> and prayed that their pastor Timothy would "fight the battle well."<sup>6</sup> Careful to note that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but . . . against the spiritual forces of evil"<sup>7</sup> and that "the weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world," he nonetheless claimed we have "divine power to demolish strongholds."<sup>8</sup>

This was very counterintuitive language for a church that grew up around the life and teachings of a rabbi who was fiercely nonviolent. Who chose to die for his enemies in love, not kill them in battle.

Still, the writers of the New Testament and the early church fathers and mothers—who until the fourth century were almost all pacifists<sup>9</sup>—regularly used this imagery of war to describe the inner dynamics of the soul. As thoroughly unmodern as it sounds to us now, my proposal is that they were naming the challenge of the human experience in a way that we often struggle to articulate in a secular age.

Honestly, many of us, even in the church, have left these ideas behind as relics of the premodern world.

We laugh at the devil as a premodern myth, akin to Thor's hammer or Santa Claus.

We scratch our heads at the New Testament's language of *the flesh* in a sensual culture where people equate feeling good with being good.

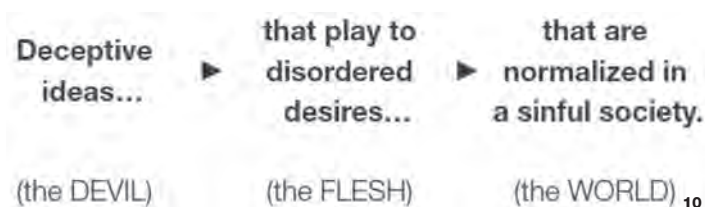
And when we hear *the world*, we envision a spittle-spewing street preacher with a bullhorn in a public park, railing about the dangers of AC/DC and the impending rapture.

Whether consciously or subconsciously, we're quick to dismiss these categories all together. But then we wonder why we feel an incessant tug-of-war in our chests that sabotages our peace. And we're mystified by the chaos in our news-feeds. Why is the world such a mess? Why am I?

My intent with this book is to reinterpret the ancient paradigm of the three enemies of the soul for the modern age. While it's easy to scoff at the ancient categories, I believe the world, the flesh, and the devil are alive and well; and aided by our skepticism, they are wreaking havoc in our souls and society.

But hear me loud and clear: Our war against the three enemies of the soul is not a war of guns and bombs. It's not against other people at all. It's a war on lies. And the problem is less that we *tell* lies and more that we *live* them; we let false narratives about reality into our bodies, and they wreak havoc in our souls.

Here's my working theory: as followers of Jesus, we are at war with the world, the flesh, and the devil, and the three enemies' stratagem is as follows:



Two and a half millennia ago, in *The Art of War*, the Chinese military savant Sun Tzu gave this sagacious advice: “Know your enemy.”<sup>11</sup> That’s the goal of this book: to unmask the face of our enemies and develop a strategy to fight back. *Vive la résistance.*

For those of you who are already hunting for the receipt to return this book, I simply invite you to suspend judgment. Give me a few more pages to win you over.

Surely, we can agree that our world is not thriving. The last few years in my country have been marked by social unrest, online outrage, and widespread disillusionment over the status quo. The pain of 2020 gave birth to one of the largest protest movements in American history. And as much as we’d love to blame “them”—be they liberals or conservatives, Antifa or the Proud Boys, or whomever it is we fear or hate—we all know that something is off deep within *us*, inside our own souls.

The war is raging on, yet many of us feel like a shell-shocked soldier, lost and confused in the chaos of the battlefield. Our

generation is living through three tectonic shifts in Western culture.<sup>12</sup>

The first is *from the majority to the minority*.

While 49 percent of millennials and 65 percent of American adults as a whole still identify as “Christian” in national surveys (though we’re hemorrhaging millions of young people each year),<sup>13</sup> a recent in-depth analysis by the Barna Group, a Christian think tank, put the number of young adults who are “resilient disciples” at 10 percent.<sup>14</sup>

Yes, 10 percent.

And that’s nationwide. In secular cities like Portland, where I live, the number is likely *much* lower.

While the church is not an ethnic minority (and it’s important for me to clarify that), we are what sociologists call a cognitive minority. Meaning, as followers of Jesus, our worldview and value system and practices and social norms are increasingly at sharp odds with those of our host culture. We face constant pressure, from both the Left and the Right, to assimilate and follow the crowd.

Second, our place in culture is shifting *from a place of honor to a place of shame*.

Walk around the downtown core of any major American city, and just look at the buildings: carved into them is the language of Scripture. The Christian vision so penetrated our nation’s early imagination that it was literally chiseled into the stone of our earliest architecture.

And while plenty of secular thought leaders gave shape to our nation as well, followers of Jesus were at the center of culture making. Many government leaders were Christians, most of the Ivy League started as pastoral training schools, and many intellectuals, scientists and artists were believers in Jesus. Pastors were people of high standing. The church held a place of honor in the wider culture.

That time is a distant memory, if that.

Most people today want nothing to do with faith in the public square. The church is seen as part of the problem, not the solution. What's more, with the radical moral reversal around human sexuality, gender, and the life of the unborn, we now have the moral low ground in many people's eyes; Jesus's vision of human sexuality is perceived as immoral by a large swath of the population.

In a shocking twist, we are no longer the nice middle-class citizens wearing their Sunday best; we are the James Deans, the 1960s counterculture, the '80s Straight edge fringe.

Third is the tectonic shift *from widespread tolerance to a rising hostility*.

A growing number of our secular friends and neighbors think of us not just as weird—because we eschew premarital sex, give away a percentage of our income, and refuse to be held captive by a political party or ideology—but as dangerous. As a threat to secularism's alternative vision of human flourishing.

As the writer of Hebrews put it, "In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your

blood,”<sup>15</sup> so I shy away from saying we face persecution. But there is a kind of cultural and socio-emotional persecution that we live under and carry the weight of. It’s exhausting. The stigma. The slander. The wound to our hearts.

At the risk of mixing metaphors, the literary motif used by the writers of Scripture for this kind of a cultural experience is that of exile.

The apostle Peter opens his New Testament letter with “To God’s elect, *exiles* scattered . . .” and ends with “She who is Babylon . . . sends you her greetings.”

The writer Walter Brueggemann defined *exile* as “the experience of knowing that one is an alien, and perhaps even in a hostile environment where the dominant values run counter to one’s own.”<sup>16</sup> Wendy Everett and Peter Wagstaff added that this “sense of exile, or alienation, may result for the individual who is marginalised, cast adrift, by the inability or unwillingness to conform to the tyranny of majority opinion.”<sup>17</sup>

Author Paul Tabori defined *exile* as “being an outcast within one’s own country.”<sup>18</sup> Meaning, you can be a citizen of America or the UK or Germany but still feel like you’re an outsider.

The Barna Group called our cultural moment “digital Babylon.”<sup>19</sup> In a predigital world, to experience the cognitive dissonance of exile, you had to attend a far-left university or live in the urban core of a secular city like Portland or LA (or London or Berlin). Now all you need is an iPhone and Wi-Fi.

We're all in Babylon now.

And Babylon is not an easy place to live; it doesn't feel like home. Hence, the moniker of *exile*. It's terrifying at times, even traumatic. We feel a dislocation and disequilibrium. An uncertainty over the future.

Every day can feel like war on our souls. A spiritual assault on our faith. A fight to just stay saved. Or at least to stay orthodox, to stay faithful to Jesus, and to stay sane, much less to stay happy and at peace.

When you're a cognitive minority under constant pressure to assimilate, you can't help but think, *Am I crazy to believe what I believe? To live how I live?* When these questions come to mind, remember Orson Welles. It's easy to laugh at *The War of the Worlds* fiasco now. Hindsight is twenty-twenty. But it's harder to admit that countless intelligent, educated Americans were swept up in a lie.

Or to realize that across the Atlantic, just as intelligent and educated Germans were rounding up Jews and feeding them into incinerators in concentration camps.

Or that politicians in the American South were forcing a young Rosa Parks to the back of the bus just because she was black.

Or that the Hollywood elite were smoking dozens of cigarettes a day because big tobacco companies paid them to endorse their products.<sup>20</sup>

Not to mention the many Americans who honestly thought there were aliens on Mars.

It's tempting to think, *What fools they were. So gullible and naive. Caught up in the fervor of lies.*

Not like us.

We're far too sophisticated to ever be fooled, far too enlightened to ever get that confused.

We would never let people in power like, say, politicians or the media, prey on our emotions, playing to our desires and fears to manipulate us to their desired end.

And we—individualists that we are—would *never* do something just because everybody else is doing it.

As if Welles's gullible listeners were Neolithic cave dwellers rather than our *grandparents*, less than a century ago.

This is a fine example of what C. S. Lewis called “chronological snobbery,”<sup>21</sup> the innate human bias to think we're smarter than people who came before us and therefore new ideas are naturally better or more truthful than old ones.

Add to that what sociologists call “the myth of progress,” the quasi-religious Western dogma that human beings are evolving toward a utopian future, where we will at long last shed the tired constraints of religion and superstition (which are the same thing) and embrace our destiny as enlightened individualists, finally free to enjoy our lives, one flat white and Tinder date at a time (that is, if AI doesn't wipe us out before we develop the technology to upload our consciousness to the cloud and live forever in the singularity).

Of course, things aren't really getting better; there's a mountain of data to argue they are getting *worse*. And a short tour of Twitter will reveal that many people are simply freaking out.

When will the secular utopia arrive?

In my view, both the Left and the Right seem to have some insightful things to say. But they each possess a kind of willful naiveté in their views of the human condition, and I find neither vision compelling.

I'm a pastor, not a pundit; I have zero political agenda here.

But I deeply believe this:

I have a soul.

You have one too.

And your soul, like mine, is locked in a war with lies.

And like the ancient Spartans who were born and bred to be soldiers, with no choice in the matter, we too have no choice but to fight.<sup>22</sup> Please hear my tone: I'm not angry or anxious. I chose the medium of a book because it's conducive to quiet, critical thinking. But make no mistake: I'm calling you, dear reader, to war.

Now, I could be delusional. Or worse, out to con you for book sales. (After all, writing about the devil is the best possible route to the bestseller list, right?) But I'm betting you can't help but ask yourself . . .

*Why is my mind under so much duress?*

*Why do I feel afflicted by the ideologies of our time?*

*Why do I feel this tug-of-war of desires in my own chest?*

*Why do I keep coming back to self-defeating behavior?*

*Why is there a steady stream of bad news from across the world?*

*Why does injustice rage when so many of us decry it as evil?*

*Why can't we seem to fix the world's deepest problems, even with all our money and technology and political prowess?*

*And why do I even care? Why does it weigh on me so heavily?*

Consider this: Could it be our souls are at war with another world?

And lest we start out on a negative note, consider a follow-up question: What if exile could be *good* for us? William Faulkner, widely considered one of the greatest novelists, once said, "It's hard believing, but disaster seems to be good for people."<sup>23</sup>

What if exile is something to fight but not to fear?

What if instead of coming apart, we came together?

What if instead of losing our souls, we discovered them?

This is a book about how (not) to lose your soul in digital Babylon.

This is a manifesto for exile.

This is a rally cry to the war on lies.

A large, solid black triangle is positioned on a light gray background. The triangle's base is at the bottom, and its apex is at the top right. The text "Part 1" is centered within the triangle in a white, sans-serif font.

**Part 1**



**The DEVIL**

**You belong to your father, the devil,  
and you want to carry out your father's  
desires. He was a murderer from the  
beginning, not holding to the truth,  
for there is no truth in him. When he lies,  
he speaks his native language, for he is  
a liar and the father of lies.**

**—Jesus Christ, in John 8v44**

**Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy  
the devil prowls around like a roaring lion  
looking for someone to devour. Resist him.**

**—The apostle Peter, in 1 Peter 5v8–9**

**Nobody believed he was real. . . .  
That was his power. The greatest trick  
the devil ever pulled was convincing  
the world he didn't exist.**

**—Keyser Söze (as played by Kevin Spacey),  
in *The Usual Suspects***

# The truth about lies

Late in the fourth century AD, a young intellectual named Evagrius Ponticus went into the desert of Egypt to fight the devil.

Like you do.

Evagrius had read the story of Jesus going out into the desert to face the devil head on and intended to follow Jesus's example.

Soon word got out: there was a monk out in the middle of nowhere at war with the devil. Apparently, rumor said, he was winning. He became a sought-after spiritual guide. Spiritual seekers would brave the dangers of the elements in an attempt to locate Evagrius and learn his tactics.

Before Evagrius's death, a fellow monk named Loukios asked him to write down his strategy to overcome the devil. As a re-

sult, Evagrius penned a short book called *Talking Back: A Monastic Handbook for Combating Demons*.

Best subtitle ever.

Recently, I got around to reading it; it blew my mind. In all honesty, I expected a list of Christian-style magic incantations, the incoherent ramblings of a premodern introvert who spent too much time under the North African sun. Instead, I found an erudite mind who was able to articulate mental processes in ways that neuroscientists and leading psychologists are just now catching up to.<sup>1</sup>

Evagrius generated the most sophisticated demonology in all of ancient Christianity. And the most surprising feature of Evagrius's paradigm is his claim that the fight against demonic temptation is a fight against what he called *logismoi*—a Greek word that can be translated as “thoughts,” “thought patterns,” your “internal narratives,” or “internal belief structures.” They are the content of our thought lives and the mental markers by which we navigate life.<sup>2</sup> For Evagrius, these *logismoi* weren't *just* thoughts; they were thoughts with a malignant will behind them, a dark, animating force of evil.

In fact, Evagrius organized his book into eight chapters, each grouped around a basic *logismoi*. Evagrius's eight thoughts later became the foundation of the “seven deadly sins” of antiquity.<sup>3</sup>

Each entry begins with the line “Against the thought that . . .”<sup>4</sup>

We'll come back to Evagrius at the end of part 1 because I think—over a millennium and a half later—after Jesus, he's still

the most brilliant tactician we have in the fight to overcome demonic temptation. (And yes, I believe in demonic temptation. Keep reading . . .)

For now, let's open with his provocative idea: our fight with the devil is first and foremost a fight to take back control of our minds from their captivity to lies and liberate them with the weapon of truth.<sup>5</sup>

Can this idea be found anywhere in the teachings of Jesus himself?

Leading question. The answer: absolutely.

One of Jesus's most famous teachings is this:

You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.<sup>6</sup>

In context, Jesus had just told his followers that "if you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples," and as a result, "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

The Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day, immediately responded with antagonism: "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone."

Which is a bit of an ironic statement considering the history of the Hebrew people. Read *Exodus*.

Jesus graciously explained that he's not referring to socioeconomic slavery so much as spiritual slavery, for "everyone who sins is a slave to sin."

That just made the Pharisees even angrier, and they proceeded to make a snide comment about how “we are not illegitimate children.” A not-so-subtle dig at Jesus’s parentage. (Except in the original Greek, it’s not as milquetoast; it’s closer to “We’re not bastards like you.”) Full of contempt, they raged, “The only Father we have is God himself.”

Jesus didn’t let that one slide. As feisty as he was tender, he responded with a fascinating claim about who their “father” actually was:

You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.<sup>7</sup>

Right out of the gate, notice three things from Jesus’s teaching about this enigmatic creature he called the devil.

Let’s start with the obvious: for Jesus, ***there is a devil.***

In Greek, the word Jesus used is δίαβολος (*diabolos*), which is from a verbal root word meaning “to slander” or “accuse.” It can also be translated “the accuser.”<sup>8</sup> But this is just one of many names for this creature. Scripture also calls him . . .

- the satan
- the evil one
- the tempter
- the destroyer
- the deceiver

- the great dragon . . . who deceives the whole world
- the ancient serpent . . . who leads the whole world astray

Notice, every example I just listed is a title, not a name.<sup>9</sup> Some biblical scholars argue this is a subtle dig from Jesus, a deliberate snub; his rival doesn't even get a name. Others read it as a sign of how dangerous he finds this creature—Jesus's equivalent of “he who must not be named.”

But for Jesus, the devil is not a fictional villain from a Harry Potter novel; he is a real and cunning source of evil and the most influential creature on earth.

Three times Jesus called him “the prince of this world.”<sup>10</sup> The word for “prince” is *archōn* in Greek, which was a political word in Jesus's day, used for the highest-ranking Roman official in a city or region. Jesus was saying that this creature is the most powerful and influential creature *in the world*. In another story, when the devil claimed that “all the kingdoms of the world” were his to give away, Jesus didn't disagree with him.<sup>11</sup>

Now, an in-depth biblical theology of the devil and his origins is beyond the scope of this book, but let's take just a minute and sketch out an outline.

For frame of reference, many scholars have compared the library of Scripture to a photo mosaic. Meaning, it's a collection of photos—poems, prophecies, stories, mythologies, histories, wisdom sayings, letters, etc.—that when put together form a composite image. If you apply that way of reading the Bible to the creature called the devil, you come up with the following contours:

- He was created by God.<sup>12</sup> This is key; he's not God's equal and opposite but a created being with a beginning. And an end.
- His original role seems to have been the spiritual formation of human beings through testing. Think of how a teacher tests children to bring them to maturity. But (as we see in the story of Job) he began to drift from his charter and used his skill set to *tempt* human beings into spiritual *deformation*.<sup>13</sup>
- He sat on God's divine council, a group of hand-selected spiritual beings whose job was to collaborate with God's rule over the world.<sup>14</sup> But he chose to rebel against God's rule, to seize the world's throne for himself, and to enlist as many creatures as possible in his violent insurgency.<sup>15</sup> Some scholars argue that Eden was created in war zone, as a beachhead for God's kingdom.<sup>16</sup> But when humans later joined in the devil's rebellion, the earth fell under his dominion.<sup>17</sup>
- For thousands of years, he held sway as the "prince of this world,"<sup>18</sup> leading vast swaths of human and nonhuman creatures in their ongoing quest to seize autonomy from God and redefine good and evil as they saw fit (more on that soon).
- He was the animating energy behind many of the great atrocities of history and, some argue, even involved in the evolutionary process itself.<sup>19</sup>
- Jesus came "to destroy the devil's work."<sup>20</sup> To bind "the strong man"<sup>21</sup> and set humanity free.<sup>22</sup> He did

this first through his defeat of the devil in the desert, then through his teaching and exorcisms, and finally through his death and resurrection and exaltation, in which he “disarmed the powers and authorities” and “made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”<sup>23</sup>

- Jesus’s victory over the devil was like D-Day to World War II—the decisive battle that marked the beginning of the war’s end. The devil’s fate was sealed on the first Easter, as Hitler’s was on June 6, 1944. But there are still many miles to cover to reach our equivalent of Berlin. In the interim, the devil is like a wounded animal, a dying dragon, more dangerous than ever. Contrary to popular artistic imaginings, the devil is not in hell; he’s here, on earth. If Jesus’s anthem is “On earth as it is in heaven,” the devil’s is “On earth as it is in hell.”
- Jesus’s kingdom was, and still is, nonviolent. However, Jesus likened the kingdom to a warlike assault on the “gates of Hell.”<sup>24</sup>
- In this ongoing war, harm—spiritual, mental, emotional, and even physical—is a very real possibility. Followers of Jesus are not immune. We bleed red; we suffer and die along with the rest of humanity; we’re vulnerable to temptation and deceit. Though we know how the story ends, we are warned to stay “alert and of sober mind,” for “the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”<sup>25</sup>
- Our great hope is in Jesus’s return to finish what he started. On that day, the devil and his ilk will be

“thrown into the lake of fire” and all evil will be eradicated from God’s good creation, forever. We will then take our place as co-rulers with Jesus the king over his beautiful world.

Now, I’m sure I’m missing some things in this sketch or even getting some of the details wrong, but here’s the key take-away: for Jesus, the devil is *real*.

Not a myth.

Not a figment of an overactive imagination or a superstitious hangover from a prescientific age.

And definitely not a red cartoon character on your shoulder or Will Ferrell on *Saturday Night Live* shredding out B-level death metal on his electric guitar.

No, the devil is an immaterial *but real* intelligence at work in the world, with more power or influence than any other creature in the universe after God.

He is the evil *behind* so much of the evil in our souls and society.

For Jesus, the secular theories that attempt to explain evil as simply a lack of education, inadequate wealth redistribution, Marxist power analysis, or even the toxicity of religion gone bad all fall short of explaining reality. The only way to make sense of evil in all its malevolence—from large, global systems of evil, such as systemic racism or economic colonialism, to much smaller, human-scale evil, such as our inability to stop our self-destructive drinking or hold back biting comments toward our friends—is to see an animating force behind it, add-

ing fuel to the proverbial fire. Dividing humanity against itself in a kind of societal suicide.

Now, if we're honest—and frequently we aren't—to many of us this sounds wonky.

A devil, really?

Come on.

We're back to Lewis's idea of chronological snobbery. It's the twenty-first century. We don't believe in talking snakes anymore, much less invisible demons behind current world events.

“Now we know better.”

I regularly hear people cite the Flynn effect as justification for the ever-popular “now we know better” bias. James Flynn, a psychologist from New Zealand's University of Otago, asserted that IQ tests have been on the rise in Western industrialized countries since the 1950s by a growth curve of about three points per decade.<sup>26</sup> His original thesis: we're smarter than our grandparents. This phenomenon came to be called the Flynn effect, and for obvious reasons, it took off like a new single from Childish Gambino. It fit like a glove with the pervasive idea—or really, belief—that progressives are, by definition, ahead of the evolutionary arc of human history, the intellectual leaders (read, superiors) of humanity, and that conservatives are, by definition, behind on the Darwinian trajectory.

Like all good lies, this idea is full of truth.

I'm writing this chapter from the top of the world, in Iceland, which has got to be one of the most beautiful places on earth. Yesterday some local friends took me on a tour of Þórsmörk ("Thor's domain") and pointed out odd-shaped rock formations that ancient Vikings believed were trolls who turned to stone when they got caught in the morning light.

So, yes. We are a bit savvier today.

We now know that trolls are a myth and that odd-shaped rocks are created by geothermal forces and tectonic upheaval, not monsters with lousy time-management skills.

But people regularly cite the Flynn effect as proof we're getting smarter not just in some things but in everything. By this logic, people who believe in ancient ideas like the devil or, for that matter, Jesus himself are looked at with contempt and treated with the same intellectual incredulity as those who believe in trolls.

Never mind the fact that the Flynn effect has proven to be a fluke.<sup>27</sup>

Even Flynn himself eventually realized that his findings didn't give the whole picture. By his original calculation, high school graduates in 1900 would have had an IQ of about 70, but our great grandparents weren't mentally handicapped; they just thought differently than we do today (less conceptual, more concrete).<sup>28</sup> Not to mention, if the trend he found had continued, by now we would all be giving Bradley Cooper's character from *Limitless* a run for his money.

More recent data actually suggests that the average IQ level has been *falling* in the West—not rising—since the 1990s.<sup>29</sup>

Other research says that human beings are no more intelligent than we were thirty thousand years ago.<sup>30</sup> Our cumulative knowledge has grown by leaps and bounds, yes, especially around trolls and rock formations; but knowledge is not the same thing as intelligence, which is still not the same thing as wisdom.

All that to say, if your gut reaction to the idea of a devil is *That sounds like ancient nonsense*, I get it. No disdain here. At times, my own Western, quasi-secular mind finds Jesus's worldview incredulous.

But consider this: What if Jesus knew the true nature of reality better than we do? What if his perception was even more acute than that of Steven Pinker? Or Sam Harris? Or Stephen Hawking? What if he was the most intelligent teacher to ever live and his insight into the problems (and solutions) of the human condition is the most piercing to date?

What if our Western world is actually blind to a whole dimension of reality? Ignorant of what many consider to be common sense? What if we're attempting to solve the problems of the world without dealing with the root cause? What if, for all our science and technology and political theory, we're actually oblivious to—or worse, willfully ignorant of—the facts?

What if Jesus and the writers of the Scripture—not to mention many ancient luminaries outside Jesus's tradition (such as Socrates, Confucius, and the Buddha), most leading thinkers throughout history, and still most people outside the West—have eyes to see something we regularly miss?

What if?

As the Hollywood villain Keyser Söze (ironically, played by the accused sexual predator Kevin Spacey) once said, “The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist.”<sup>31</sup>

Our culture has a very high value for keeping an open mind. That’s all I ask: that you simply consider the possibility that Jesus was right—the devil is real.

Second, for Jesus, ***the devil’s end goal is to spread death.***

Verbatim: “He was a murderer from the beginning.”

What is a murderer? Someone whose intent is to end life.

Jesus went on to say, “The thief [another name for the devil] comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”<sup>32</sup>

Steal . . .

Kill . . .

Destroy . . .

For Jesus, the devil is the archetype of a villain who is hell-bent on destruction. He just wants to watch the world burn. His motto: “Tear it all down.” Wherever he finds life, he tries to stamp it out. Beauty? Deface it. Love? Corrupt it. Unity? Fragment it into a million pieces. Human flourishing? Push it to anarchy or tyranny; either will do. His anti-life, pro-death, pro-chaos agenda is an insatiable fire.

Jesus, on the other hand, is the author of life itself and an advocate for all that is good, beautiful, and true. Specifically, for love. God *is* love, and the devil is in rebellion against all that is God. Ergo, his intent is to wreck love: one relationship, one community, one nation, one generation at a time.

This is why our newsfeeds drip steady litanies of chaos and carnage.

This is why secular theories of evil simply don't add up to a valid explanation of human behavior.

And this is why following Jesus often feels like a war. It *is*. It's not easy to advance daily into the kingdom of God because there's opposition from the devil himself. (Or to be more specific, other spiritual being under his sway.) We feel this opposition every day. In that nagging inner tension as we're torn between the opposing desires of love and lust, honesty and saving face, self-control and indulgence. In the struggle for faith in a secular age where so many cultural elites seem to have left faith behind, where scientism is the new superstition, and where, as the philosopher James K. A. Smith put it, "we're all Thomas now."<sup>33</sup> In the breakdown of a society losing its center and spinning out of control.

And there's no way out of this fight.

As a follower of Jesus, I see violence as incompatible with life in the kingdom, and I advocate for creative, nonviolent solutions to problems. But violence is not the same thing as force. And even I have to admit, to apprentice under Jesus is to become a soldier in a war. One where the long-term victory is

assured, yes, but we still have many battles on the road to Berlin, with no Switzerland to hide away in. As C. S. Lewis wisely said, “There is no neutral ground in the universe: every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan.”<sup>34</sup>

But lest you think I’m rallying a digital militia to “take America back for God”—relax, really. That’s not where we’re heading. The devil is far too interesting and intelligent for a simple us-versus-them binary.

Here’s my last observation from John 8: for Jesus, ***the devil’s means is lies.***

Did you catch that?

Jesus called the devil “the father of lies.”

Translation: the origin point of deception.

Then Jesus has that great line about how “when he lies, he speaks his native language.”

Okay, hold up.

This is not how most of us think about our fight with the devil or what has come to be called spiritual warfare. Sadly, much of what passes as a theology of spiritual warfare is at best conjecture, if not paranoia or superstition.

I can’t tell you how often I hear people blame the devil for what is likely just bad luck, coincidence, or, frequently, their own tomfoolery. “My wife and I got in a fight on the way to church—it was the devil!”

*The devil?* The ruler of this world came to visit your minivan? Maybe. But isn't it more likely you were just in a hurry, a bit stressed out, and made a rash statement that caused your spouse deep pain?

Whenever people blame the devil for silly things, it makes it hard to not just write the devil off entirely. To throw the baby out with the bathwater, as the saying goes.

In C. S. Lewis's masterpiece of satire, *The Screwtape Letters*, he wrote,

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.<sup>35</sup>

As easy as it is to poke fun at others, the danger for most of us is not that we “feel an excessive and unhealthy interest” in the devil; it's that we just ignore him entirely and go about our lives oblivious to his daily assault on our soul.

Let's say we keep our minds open and take the idea of the devil seriously; still, what comes to mind when we think of the devil or spiritual warfare is normally an exorcism, a mysterious disease, or a natural disaster like a tsunami or hurricane. Or maybe a horrifying poltergeist or a child's terrifying nightmare.

All those examples have legitimacy. In fact, after a cursory read of the four Gospels, this is what I would expect Jesus to talk about.

But ironically, in Jesus's most in-depth teaching on the devil in all four Gospels, *he doesn't mention any of it.*

There's no demon in his teaching, no illness, no tragedy.

Instead, it is an intellectual debate with the thought leaders of his day about *truth* and *lies*.

Reread Jesus's teaching one more time, and pay close attention:

You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the *truth*, for there is no *truth* in him. When he *lies*, he speaks his native language, for he is a *liar* and the father of *lies*. Yet because I tell the *truth*, you do not believe me!<sup>36</sup>

So, let's recap:

1. For Jesus, there is an invisible but real intelligence at war with God and all that is good, beautiful, and true.
2. The devil's *end goal* is to drive our souls and society into ruin. To decimate love.
3. But here's my main point: his *method* is lies. His primary stratagem—his go-to, signature move—is deception.

All the other stuff—demonization, illness, wreaking havoc in the natural order, scaring little kids with bad dreams—is biblical, and we need to take it seriously. It's all real. I could tell

countless stories. But again, scope. That could easily fill the pages of a whole other book. But it's secondary.<sup>37</sup>

Jesus sees our primary war against the devil as a fight to believe truth over lies.

Which leads to the inevitable follow-up question, as ancient as Pontious Pilate and yet a staple of the modern psyche:

*What is truth?*