

YOUR STORY HAS A VILLAIN

**IDENTIFY SPIRITUAL WARFARE
AND LEARN HOW
TO DEFEAT THE ENEMY**

**JONATHAN POKLUDA
WITH JON GREEN**



W PUBLISHING GROUP

AN IMPRINT OF THOMAS NELSON

Your Story Has A Villain

Copyright © 2025 Jonathan Pokluda

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by W Publishing, an imprint of Thomas Nelson.

Thomas Nelson titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fundraising, or sales promotional use. For information, please email SpecialMarkets@ThomasNelson.com.

Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®

Any internet addresses, phone numbers, or company or product information printed in this book are offered as a resource and are not intended in any way to be or to imply an endorsement by Thomas Nelson, nor does Thomas Nelson vouch for the existence, content, or services of these sites, phone numbers, companies, or products beyond the life of this book.

ISBN 978-1-4003-4117-7 (TP)

ISBN 978-1-4003-4120-7 (audiobook)

ISBN 978-1-4003-4119-1 (ePub)

Library of Congress Control Number: 9781400341177

Printed in the United States of America

\$PrintCode

Dear reader,

*Would you please pray for God to always
protect my marriage to Monica and our
children, Presley, Finley, and Weston?*

Thank you!

JP

CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	ix
<i>Prologue: A Villain's Letter</i>	xiii
<i>Introduction: The Villain Is Here</i>	xv

PART 1: WHO THE VILLAIN IS

1. Welcome to Hell.....	5
2. Mistaken Identity.....	19
3. An Invisible Army.....	33

PART 2: WHAT THE VILLAIN DOES

4. The Villain Destroys.....	51
5. The Villain Distracts.....	63
6. The Villain Deceives.....	75
7. The Villain Disunifies.....	87
8. The Villain Desensitizes.....	99
9. The Villain Deconstructs.....	113

PART 3: HOW TO FIGHT BACK

10. The Armor of God	129
11. Walkie-Talkie Prayers	143
12. Resisting Temptation	157
13. Guarding Your Heart	169
<i>Conclusion: Loosening the Villain's Grip</i>	181
<i>Epilogue: A Villain's Reply</i>	187
<i>Notes</i>	189
<i>About the Author</i>	195

FOREWORD

AS A CHILD, I REMEMBER HEARING A STORY ABOUT a frog that was put in a pot of water on a stove. I always wondered what that frog did to get placed in the pot, but I've never heard a solid explanation for it. You're probably familiar with the story as well. In cool water, all is well for the frog, and it feels happy, safe, and secure. When the stove is turned on, the frog never realizes the water is getting hotter, and as the temperature increases, so does the frog's tolerance for its personal Jacuzzi. Eventually, bubbles start popping and the frog is boiled alive. Tragic story, truly.

This tale is connected to a nineteenth century science experiment that is now debated. However, it still works as an excellent metaphor for the people of God and how we view and relate to the reality of the spiritual realm.¹ My fear is that we have become the proverbial "frog in the pot of water." We've grown complacent to the spiritual climate around us and simply become accustomed to the spiritual temperature gradually increasing around us. The outcome is a disaster, because we are left vulnerable.

Vulnerability is the perfect place for deception. The truth is, we have an age-old enemy whose singular purpose is to derail us from our relationship with God through distraction. In other words, every one of our stories has a villain, and it is imperative

that we recognize the Villain for who he is, how he works, and what our response ought to be.

Some may wonder: *Why should we even care about the spiritual realm?*

This was the very question I asked before starting a six-year journey writing a PhD dissertation covering this very topic. My doctoral advisor, the late Dr. Michael Heiser, once said to me, “What parts of the Bible aren’t supernatural?” After reflecting on his question, I came up with my own question I ask whenever lecturing or teaching on the subject. And so, I pose it to you today:

What part of the following statement summarizing the core of what we believe as Christians is *not* supernatural in nature?

We believe that Jesus is the Son of God, fully God and fully man, that he left heaven, entered earth through immaculate conception, lived a perfect human life, died on a literal cross, physically rose on the third day and defeated death through death, and now sits at the right hand of the Father.

Answer: Not a single part.

And yet, while the story of Jesus is filled with awe, wonder, and the supernatural, there is always a counterfeit story trying to undermine the story of Christ. This is not by coincidence. It is intentional. This is exactly why 1 Peter 5:8 calls us to “be sober-minded, be alert. Your adversary the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for anyone he can devour.” Peter uses the Greek word *nēphō*, which we translate in English as “sober” and is the opposite of intoxication. Paul uses the Greek word *methē*, meaning “intoxication” in two vice lists connecting it to the works of darkness (Romans 13:13; Galatians 5:21).²

In other words, Peter calls us to have total clarity of mind because Paul reminds us of the very real presence of dark forces.³

Why is clarity of mind so important? Because Peter straight up lets us know that we have an enemy, and he wants to lead us into compromise (this is what intoxication does) in mind, spirit, and emotion so that he can pounce and take us out.

We need both wisdom to see these schemes and the Holy Spirit to stand against them.

What you will find in these pages is wisdom that comes from above (James 3:17), so we can be fully aware, with sobriety of mind, of the counterfeit wisdom that comes from below. I can think of no one better to write this book and be our guide than my friend, JP.

One of the big questions of our age is the question of truth. There is “The Truth” (from above) and then, there is counterfeit truth presented to us as beautiful but deceptively destructive (from below). One of the things I admire about JP is how every Friday he faithfully answers countless questions as they relate to the Christian life, always pointing us to The Truth found in Jesus.

JP’s Friday Q&A responses are precise, pastoral, and always to the point. And this book, *Your Story Has a Villain*, is no exception. It is theologically precise. It is pastorally caring. And it is refreshingly to the point. And most of all, it powerfully leads us to the hero of our story, Jesus the risen Christ and King of the Cosmos.

Joel Muddamalle, PhD
Theologian In Residence,
Proverbs 31 Ministries

Author of *The Hidden
Peace: Finding True Security,
Strength, and Confidence
Through Humility*

PROLOGUE

A Villain's Letter

OCTOBER 16, 2019

Dear Abaddon,

I'm writing to share some exciting developments from our latest meeting, chaired by none other than the chief villain himself, Lucifer. The gathering was an impressive sight, with thousands of our kind, each more menacing than the last.

The chief villain himself, a figure both terrifying and magnetic, revealed the results of his simple yet potent plan: "*Divide them!*" He crafted a new scheme, not through brute force, but through a worldwide pandemic. This isn't just about causing death; it's about creating discord.

The pandemic strategy was to use the fear and uncertainty of this disease to turn people against each other. He wants chaos in families, communities, and even within their faith. He wants arguing over masks, vaccines, and whom to trust, completely losing sight of their usual togetherness.

Take, for instance, an awful human named David. We

are sick of his disgusting acts of generosity. The virus struck his parents, transforming them from sources of solace to symbols of fear. His father's sudden death amid this chaos caused a rift of emotional and physical distance—exactly what we aim for.

Our goal, Abaddon, is crystal clear. Our goal is to exploit global crises to instill doubt and fear. Let them all question their so-called benevolent Creator. Push them toward harmful coping mechanisms and erode their faith. Take any chance to draw more humans away from the path of righteousness.

Remember, our triumph isn't just in their suffering and loss, but in leading them to question and abandon their Maker. We must disrupt their joy, unity, and hope. This is our chance to destroy them all, or said better, watch them destroy each other.

Stay sharp and cunning,

Molech

INTRODUCTION

The Villain Is Here

IF THE DEVIL WERE GOING TO TAKE YOU OUT, HOW would he do it?

Would it be lust leading to an affair? Would it be greed, leading you to cut corners to get ahead? Would it be pride, so you become so self-reliant that you push away those who love you most?

Or maybe the Enemy would play head games with you. Maybe he would get you thinking about all you don't have, while comparing yourself to others. Maybe he would send you into a deep, dark depression, or cause you to be an anxious, overcontrolling mess.

How would the Evil One ruin you? I find it interesting that we believe there is a world full of dark opposition, and we're content knowing very little about it or how it works. So take a minute to answer this question. I'd be curious to know how your answer changes by the time you finish this book.

NUMB TO THE REALITY

Before you read any further, we should start this off with a confession. Why not, right?

I had not paid much attention to spiritual warfare for a large portion of my adult life. Honestly, it rarely even crossed my mind. I was almost forty, had grown up in the church (multiple, actually), came to an authentic faith in Jesus in my twenties, and had been in vocational ministry (i.e., a pastor) for almost fifteen years. A natural assumption would be that I never *stopped* thinking about spiritual warfare, but somehow over time the opposite had become true.

When I was younger, the reality of a spiritual war unfolding in real time was ingrained into me. I grew up in a small town in South Texas called Cuero. Our high school mascot was the Gobblers. Yes, like a turkey (which doesn't really have anything to do with this story, it just felt like something you should know).

Growing up in what you might call a religiously eclectic family was interesting and, at times, confusing. My dad was Catholic, my mom was Lutheran, and I ended up spending a lot of time at both of their churches. I also attended the local Catholic school in my elementary and middle school years. When I was in religion class, I have this distinct memory of sitting in my cramped school desk and being taught that there were angels and demons fighting all around us at any given time, even though we couldn't see them. As my classmates sat there daydreaming about who knows what, I remember thinking, *Wait, is this real?*

If I close my eyes, I can picture St. Michael's Catholic Church in that small town. As you walk into the sanctuary, the first things you see are ornate statues all around the room. There is a crucifix of Jesus to the left. There is an enormous marble altar, and right behind that is a golden tabernacle where (under lock and key) the gold cup and the chalice used for Communion are stored. Right above that, squarely in the center of the room, is an elaborate statue of Michael the archangel stabbing a dragonlike creature with a spear. Sunday after Sunday, sitting on those hard, wooden

pews, gave me imagery of what might be going on in the spiritual world. But is that what it really looks like?

I also remember being at my grandmother Honey's house, which was in an even smaller town a short drive away from where we lived. Her TV was always set to those free Christian channels you could get on basic cable back in the 1980s. All of Honey's favorite televangelists were on there, and she watched them religiously (no pun intended). She also had a video of a documentary about satanism and the occult (although I am still not sure why). This movie was dark—and I mean *dark*.

When I was eight years old, I started watching it when I would go to her house. It was terrifying and interesting all at the same time. For a kid who was not allowed to watch horror movies, this was quite a loophole that I found. But it was in no way good for my soul, considering decades have passed and I can still picture some of the scenes in my mind today.

This interest in darkness continued throughout my childhood. Art was my “thing.” I loved to draw, and it was what I was best at. But unlike most kids who drew portraits of their houses or their families or their favorite athletes, my drawings were . . . different. They were darker. As I sat and scribbled away in my journals and those cheap spiral-bound school notebooks, I drew skulls, fangs, blood—there were clearly some dark influences.

Before you feel the need to stage an intervention for the pre-teen version of me, my interests changed over time. I started paying attention to different things, and my interest in darkness became merely background noise as I grew older. I discovered the world (the actual world, not the spiritual world) and all it had to offer. It was all-consuming trying to fit in, experiencing pleasure, and chasing everything money could buy. I still prayed when I remembered to and wore a cross necklace from time to time, but that was the extent to which I cared about the spiritual realm.

Fast-forward to my early twenties, and I came to faith in a real way sitting in the back row of a church in Dallas, still hungover from the night before. All of a sudden, my heart started to change. I was surrounded by other believers who were sharpening me and pushing me to look more like Christ. Some of the sin strongholds that had gripped my life for a decade started to loosen, and habitual sin patterns I never thought I would be free from almost vanished overnight.

Eventually, I started working at a church. Me, the same guy who was fascinated by a satanism documentary as a kid, got hired by a church! I coordinated small groups; I started speaking to young adults; and I even got to speak on the stage in big church. (Side note: Why do we all feel the need to call it big church, even into adulthood?)

Jesus changed my life. I was growing in spiritual maturity, in my knowledge and understanding of God's Word, and I had the privilege of calling others to do the same. But something strange happened: Even as a devoted follower of Christ, my awareness of this invisible, intangible spiritual battle we are all in stayed in the background. Somehow, even as a full-time employee of a church, I was less aware of that part of the spiritual realm than I had been as a young boy.

THE MACRO AND MICRO

We all have areas of our lives where we become fixated on the microdetails, but not the macro, big-picture parts of certain subjects. I could get deep into the weeds with you on how to plan an outstanding vacation to Mexico, how to buy the right golf cart at a low price, and how the Bible fits together as one cohesive story even though it is made up of sixty-six books written by about forty

different authors. Why? Because I have spent time researching, studying, and trying to master these subjects to the best of my abilities.

We accept other realities without understanding them at a big-picture level. I know that in the United States we have three branches of government. I can tell you who the current president is. But you could quickly call my bluff if you asked me how a bill becomes a law or who the twenty-seventh president was (William Howard Taft—I looked it up so you wouldn't have to). Somewhere along the way in my walk with Jesus, I reached a point where I had grown content in my big-picture grasp on the spiritual world.

Now, don't get me wrong: I had a baseline understanding of what was going on in the world. I knew God has an Enemy (whom Christians most often refer to as Satan) and I knew it was that Enemy's job to disrupt and destroy the perfect world God had made. I knew that because of that Enemy, sin existed, and sin was what keeps us away from an eternity with God forever. I knew God sent His Son, Jesus, to earth to live a sinless life, to be crucified on the cross, and to be resurrected three days later for the forgiveness of our sins. I knew the facts. I believed (and still believe) all those statements are true.

What I rarely thought about, though, was how all of that played out in the day-to-day of real life. When my car wouldn't start and I was late for a meeting, was that spiritual warfare? Or was it just a bad spark plug? Could it be both? How? When I went through a season of intense anxiety in 2017, was that some kind of attack? Or was that simply a stressful season at work and all that comes with marriage and raising three young children? When I would see horrific stories in the news, were those people possessed by demons? Or were those stories the result of people making terrible choices? So many questions, but too few answers.

So, what changed? In short, I moved to a new city and started a new job. In January 2019, our family sold our house in Dallas, packed up our belongings, and moved to Waco so I could be the lead pastor of a church there that we believed God was calling our family to. Immediately upon arriving in Waco, I felt a sense of spiritual darkness in the city that I could not quite place my finger on. In a city with one of the world's largest Baptist universities and almost 100 Baptist churches alone (not including every other denomination and nondenominational churches), that feels like a weird thing to say.

Waco has a complicated history. It is an amazing place with amazing people, but it has been part of a spiritual tug-of-war for a couple of centuries. It has long been home to Baylor University, a prominent Baptist university, but it was also home to one of the last remaining red-light districts in Texas and the infamous David Koresh-led Branch Davidian compound on the outskirts of the city. There was seemingly a church on every corner, but it was also home to a horrific public lynching in 1916.¹

Fast-forward to the twenty-first century, and the tug-of-war was continuing. I was experiencing a facade of religiosity and cultural Christianity in a whole new way. And I could not shake that feeling that there was something spiritually oppressive happening in my new city—a city I loved and was committed to ministering in. I started bringing it up in our staff meetings and mentioning it on stage in sermons.

People always wanted me to unpack that and explain what I meant, but I couldn't quite put it into words for a couple of years. I was reading, learning, listening, and discussing it with people around me. A couple of years later, we decided to devote a sermon series to spiritual warfare, and that is when my awareness of the unseen reached a whole new level.

WHAT I KNOW TO BE TRUE

The more I've thought about it, the more I am convinced that the question we (meaning the church—all followers of Jesus) should be asking is, *How did we get like this? How did we become so unaware of the spiritual battle we are in the midst of?* I am going to go out on a limb and assume something here: You and I are not all that different. If you are a Christian, you are most likely not very aware of the spiritual war that is being waged around you at this exact moment as you flip through these pages. Why is our default posture to let the spiritual realm become the background noise of our lives as we go about our days, weeks, months, and years?

Far too many of us confine our interaction with the spiritual realm to a seventy-five-minute church service (or ninety minutes if your pastor's sermon runs long) once a week. Maybe you are even part of a small group or are serving the local church throughout the week using the gifts and abilities God has given you. Maybe you spend time daily reading your Bible and talking with God in prayer. All those things are great, and those disciplines will hopefully grow your love and affection for Jesus. Keep going! But if that's the extent of our spiritual lives, we are still missing out on something important.

Here's what I want to make abundantly clear: Your story has a villain. You most likely don't think about him much, but he thinks of you every single day. He has an active plot to bring you pain and suffering. He wants to drive you to despair. When you are scrolling through social media comparing your life to others, he is involved. When you want to buy something you hope will make you happy, he is involved. And sometimes the "he" is actually "they." They team up when they need to. You are at war.

It's important to note that when we talk about the villain or the

Enemy in this book, that is a term that will be used interchangeably at different points to talk about Satan and his demonic forces. In an often-referenced verse, John 10:10, Jesus describes the Enemy as a thief who “comes only to steal and kill and destroy.” If we pause to look at the world (and even within our churches), we can see this is happening all around us. Scroll through social media, flip through the channels, or glance at your favorite news app to see all the ways this is taking place.

We often fail to think about the second half of that verse. Jesus shows us the alternative to the thief by saying that He has come so we “may have life, and have it to the full.” I believe there is a full, abundant, joyful, good life available to all who follow Jesus, but too few of us actually experience that life here on earth. We experience the thief robbing us in our spiritual lives. We fall prey to the villain’s tactics and end up discouraged and downtrodden—which is exactly what he wants.

WHERE WE ARE HEADED

It’s important that you know this up front: I do not have special letters behind my name. I didn’t get a PhD in demonology. There are people far, far more intelligent than me who have written entire books and devoted their entire careers to some of the things we will talk about in the pages ahead. But I am a pastor. I have been for a couple of decades now. I have seen thousands and thousands of case studies. Perhaps the most important skill in ministry is pattern recognition. With every single person I have interacted with over the last two decades, one pattern has emerged: there is a villain, and he’s seeking to rob people of a life with Jesus.

I’m going to make another assumption: We all want to live that full life that Jesus is talking about. No one reading this is

thinking, *I really hope to live a mediocre existence until I get to go be with Jesus in eternity*. But to get to the result we are all hoping for, we are going to have to reverse engineer this problem. If we want to live a full life as a devoted follower of Jesus, what (or more accurately, *who*) is going to prevent that from happening?

This book is broken up into three parts:

- Who the villain is
- What the villain does
- How to fight back

I pray that the stories you will read, the scriptures you will encounter, and the things you learn will bring you to a greater awareness and understanding of what is going on all around us. My life is different now than it was a few years ago because of what I have learned. If we understand our Enemy's tactics and endgame, we stand a much better chance of defeating him.

Let's learn all we can.

PART 1

WHO THE VILLAIN IS

I'M A SUCKER FOR WAR MOVIES—ALWAYS HAVE been. I think it is, in part, because my most formative years happened to be during the golden age of war movies and shows. *Hacksaw Ridge* is one of my favorites. Now, there is a lot of violence throughout the film (it's a war movie, after all), so I'm not going to say, "Go watch it immediately." But I think it's a great movie. If you've never seen it before, the movie is split into two different kinds of scenes, and the story bounces back and forth between when the main character is at home and when he is at war.

When he is home, he is pursuing a young woman. The sky is blue, the grass is green, the birds are chirping, and it is this really sweet love story of a young couple. In the very next scene, he is off at war. He is a medic in the military, so it's his job to go out onto the battlefield and look for wounded soldiers he can bring back to help. It's dark. It's smoky. The sky is gray; there are bullets whizzing by and grenades going off. At no point during the movie are you, the viewer, ever confused about whether he is at home or at war.

One of the starkest realities of war for the deployed is that it is *always* happening. You are never debating with your buddies if the war is still going on or if it is over. You could be eating lunch one minute and then something happens nearby, and all of a sudden your helmet is back on and you are in the Humvee ready to go. Your brain is so conditioned to always be “on” that it is difficult to relax and turn off that feeling, even once the war is over and you have returned home. War does not follow a nine-to-five, Monday-through-Friday schedule. Fighting could break out at any time, and no one is more aware of that than the people actually fighting in the war.

What if I told you the Enemy’s greatest tactic against modern-day Christians is to lull you into thinking there is not a war going on? We do not even realize Satan and his army are actively trying to take us down. For far too many of us, Sunday morning is the only time we stop to ask the question, “Is the war still going on?” We have fallen right into the trap set by the Enemy when we lose sight of the fact that we are in a war right now.

You see, I believe we are either oblivious to or have grown numb to some significant realities over time. We have fallen into the trap of believing that this world is our home, when the New Testament makes it clear time and time again that we are to be citizens of a different kingdom (Ephesians 2:19; Philippians 3:20).

It’s important for us to go back and build upon the basics of our faith. We need to revisit some foundational truths of Scripture and make sure we understand what the Bible says about spiritual warfare. I was talking with a friend of mine and he said, “I think the reason we don’t think or talk about spiritual warfare all that much is because the Bible doesn’t say much about it.”

I pushed back and said, “The Bible talks more about spiritual warfare than it does marriage.” Think about that! There are so many topics we think about and discuss in church that are

backed by biblical principles but not directly addressed, like how we should date and what jobs we should (or shouldn't) take. But spiritual warfare is mentioned throughout the Bible! Scripture has a lot to say about the reality that the villain is out to rob us, presenting the topic both descriptively ("here is what is happening in this story") and prescriptively ("here is what you should do"). The problem is that the Bible talks a lot more about spiritual warfare than our churches do, so many modern-day Christians have a huge theological gap in their knowledge.

Think about Christianity as a house, with all your different theologies (what you believe about God) as the different rooms. On the first floor you have Christology, the study of Jesus, and for most of us, that is a big living room (which is not a bad thing, to be clear). Then you have other important rooms, like ecclesiology (what you believe about the church) and soteriology (what you believe about salvation). For a lot of us, we are not quite sure where to put the rooms like demonology, spiritual warfare, Satan, or hell. Maybe we feel like they should be on the first floor, but honestly, we would rather they be in the attic or basement where we can keep the door locked and never go in.

In the first section of this book, we will discuss three important topics, one in each chapter, to ensure we have a full picture of what Scripture says about them. Again, entire books (and collections of books) have been written on some of the things we are going to cover in a chapter. But I hope to paint a picture of what the Bible says and how I have seen it play out in real life. We are going to talk about hell, Satan, and demons and try to define our theology around those topics, because even Jesus-loving, Bible-believing Christians seem to struggle to articulate what they believe about them.

In the same way the CIA seeks to gather intelligence about enemies that might want to harm us, or a quarterback studies

his opponent's previous games to look for their tendencies, we must study the Enemy if we ever want to have any hope of achieving victory. Understanding who our Enemy is will kick-start our journey to living the full and abundant John 10:10 life that we all deeply desire.

CHAPTER 1

WELCOME TO HELL

WHEN MY OLDEST DAUGHTER WAS FOUR YEARS OLD, she loved lollipops more than any human being has ever loved anything. If you have ever had a four-year-old of your own (or met one, for that matter) you know they can develop these strange obsessions where their little minds are consumed by one thing and one thing only. For Presley, it was lollipops. She had a superhuman ability to spot them everywhere. When she saw one from across the room wherever we were, her eyes would get big and she would fixate on it until it was in her possession. She would give her left arm for a lollipop.

One particular day, I had taken my wife's car to a shop to get it worked on, and there at the counter was a bowl of lollipops. I thought about Presley. I try to be a fun dad, and I wanted her to know I had been thinking about her, so I grabbed one for her. I thought, *Hey, I'm going to go home a hero. I will walk in the door, declare that Daddy is home, then, "Oh, look what I have."* I played it out in my mind and thought that was exactly how it was going to go.

I got in the car to drive home and called my wife, Monica, to let her know I was on the way. I could tell she was a little frustrated, a little irritated, maybe even a little exasperated. Being the intuitive husband that I am, I asked, "What's wrong?"

She said, “Oh, Presley’s had a hard day today.”

“What do you mean? What did she do?”

Monica then walked me through a play-by-play of how she had struggled throughout the day. Then she said, “You know, when you get home, you’re going to have to discipline her.”

Ugh. My grand entry as the hero of the day suddenly seemed unlikely to happen. Parenting side note: There is no parenting university you can go to where they teach you how to discipline your kids. It is like one long practice in trying to make the punishment fit the crime. It is always a challenge.

With a game plan in mind, I walked in and said, “Hey, Presley, we need to talk. Can you go to your room and wait for me there?” She trudged to her room, almost like she knew this was coming. When I walked in, I asked, “Hey, how was your day today?” She just hung her head in shame. She said, “Daddy, I didn’t make good choices today.” Straight to the point.

Squatting down next to her, I asked, “Well, why not? What did you do?” She started listing it out point by point, like she had memorized it all in her head. In hindsight, I think she was thinking, *Hey, maybe if I just come clean, it will be okay.* She told me everything. One after the other. “I was mean to my sister. I was disrespectful to Mommy. I did this. I did this. I did this. I did this.” Monica was right—it had been a tough day.

As she rattled off her confessions, I listened to all of them. Then I reached into my pocket and said, “Hey, I got you something today.” Her eyes got big and that perfect smile stretched across her face. She was thinking, *I bet he’s going to teach me about grace!* Then I dropped the hammer and said, “But I can’t give it to you now, and I hate that.” And I tossed it in the trash.

She looked at me, the smile morphed into a scowl, and she yelled, “Ahhhh! I can do whatever I want!” and then a full-blown fit began. I thought, *Wow, what just happened?* Again, no one teaches

you about this at parenting school. And this isn't even the chapter on demon possession!

Now what am I going to do? I just stood there watching her and thinking about my next move. Here is what was going through my mind in that moment: *I have a suite of options at this point as far as discipline goes. I could go old school and spank her. I could take away privileges, like no desserts for ten years. I could go with "I want you to spend the rest of the night with your nose in the corner." So many options at my disposal.*

At that moment, the lightbulb went off in my brain. What Presley didn't know was that I had a small collection of lollipops that I had been building just for her. I had been overseas coming back from a mission trip and had stumbled across an amazing candy shop, full of flavors she didn't even know existed. There were See's Candies Lollipops, Blow Pops, and those multicolored ones that were the size of her face. This collection was the kind of thing four-year-olds dream of.

I asked her to wait right there while I went and got the box out of my closet. I brought them back into the room, grabbed a trash can, and very slowly (and dramatically) dumped the whole stash into the trash can. As her eyes welled up with tears again, she started to weep and yell about "her" lollipops. Now they were gone, and this goodness that she didn't even know existed three minutes before was something she was going to miss out on forever. Now, before you cast your judgment on me, just remember: Everything in parenting is a discipleship opportunity.

But here is one that never even crossed my mind. At no point did I ever consider going back in there and saying, "Hey, Presley. I have really enjoyed being your dad. These have been four really great years that we have had together. But all good things must end, so now we are done. So, if you will walk with me to the front door, we have an Uber waiting on you and they are going to take

you away. The rest of us will stay here. Please do not visit; that will only make things more difficult. This is done.”

For the record, I would never do that (and hopefully no one ever would). But here’s the problem: I think a lot of us struggle with this idea of, *Is that what God does?* When you think about an eternal punishment and there being a place of judgment and separation from God called hell, it seems like we sin, He ends up disappointed in us, and He sends us on our way. It feels like He’s simply sending bad people to this place of judgment, and it is a really heavy thing to process.

Right now, you might be thinking about people who died and you do not know where they are today. Or you are thinking about people who are alive and you have no idea where they stand with Jesus. It is a sobering thing to think about. Even when you share your faith, this is one of the things that prevents us from talking about Jesus. We are going in with the good news and we think in the back of their minds others are thinking, *Oh, you think I am going to hell, huh? That is the only reason you are talking to me right now.*

It feels like so much judgment, so we struggle and wrestle with the idea. If you are wrestling with it, I am glad you are, because to me it says you understand the weightiness of the matter and the urgency of the topic. We’ll come back to my lollipop story later in the chapter because I think it helps us understand what actually happens in hell.

A STATE OF CONFUSION

Even as I share the gospel with people, I see a movement toward apathy on this topic. Although I have the natural wiring of an evangelist, I believe that *every* Christian is called to pass their faith

on to others. I try to have multiple gospel conversations each week, and I have noticed a shift through the years. When I first became a Christian about twenty years ago and I would share the gospel with people, I would run into an attitude of, “Hey, I want no part in worshipping a God who sends somebody to hell. I want nothing to do with that God.”

Now it seems I tend to run into the attitude of, “Eh, I don’t know. Who cares? I know I’m alive right now. Someday I’m going to die, but hopefully not anytime soon. Who knows? Maybe the lights just go off. I’m not sure where you go. Heaven. Hell. Who can really know? I’m just not going to think about it right now.”

Truthfully, it is almost too easy for the villain at this point because it seems like Christians are not even on the same page. Every two years, Ligonier Ministries and Lifeway Research partner together and create a report called the State of Theology where they poll US evangelicals and ask them about a variety of cultural hot-button issues, as well as certain theological beliefs to see what people believe. As a pastor, it is a fascinating report to read (and I encourage all Christians to read it because it is data we all need to know).

It is also (at times) disheartening to read. In the 2022 study, respondents were presented with the statement, “Hell is a real place where certain people will be punished forever.” They were then asked if they strongly or somewhat agreed (or disagreed), or if they were unsure. Based on their findings, 59 percent agreed with the statement, 12 percent were not sure, and 29 percent of evangelicals in the US disagreed.¹ Because it is easy to define terms differently, here’s the definition of *evangelical* they used in the study, meaning all respondents strongly agreed with all of the following statements:

- The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
- It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.

- Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.
- Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation.

These were not random people who were surveyed at a mall or a theme park. These are people who hold orthodox beliefs, trust the authority of Scripture, and believe Jesus is the only way to eternal life. Even among that group, only three out of five believe that hell is a *real* place where people will spend an eternity separated from God.

AN UNPLEASANT REALITY

In a book about the spiritual realm, it's important to develop a proper understanding of the nature of heaven and hell. I will show you my cards: I believe there are two places, heaven and hell, where human souls go once we die. Again, really intelligent people have written a lot of books on hell and what it is. We do not have the time or space here for all those thoughts, but we do need a high-level framework for what hell is if we are going to understand its role in the spiritual realm.

When the Scriptures talk about hell, what are they talking about? There are a few things we know. First, it is very difficult for us to comprehend hell because we have no real framework for it here on earth. There is no such thing as hell on earth because in the worst place on earth, experiencing the worst thing you could possibly imagine you'd experience on earth, you still sit under what is called common grace. That is, a bit of God still exists in even the worst situation.

We experience the common grace of God here on earth. In

heaven, it's the fullness of the goodness of God. On earth, there are remnants of the goodness of God. In hell, there is nothing of the goodness of God. In hell, there is nothing good. Not one thing we could think of. Some people think, *Well, I am going to go to hell and party with my friends*. No, you won't. There is no beer in hell. There are no shots of tequila in hell. There is nothing to numb your pain in hell. There is no laughter. There is no smiling. There is no such thing as temporary escape. There is nothing you can think of that would bring you any joy there. That is because there is *nothing* of God there. The only thing of God in hell is His wrath and His judgment of your sin.

We need to understand an important concept: Hell is a subtraction. It is subtracting out the goodness of God. When you have light and you subtract light, you are left with darkness. When you have comfort and you subtract comfort, you are left with pain. Anything good in this world comes from God. James, the half brother of Jesus, even wrote that in the Scriptures, saying, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights" (James 1:17). When you subtract the Father of heavenly lights, the goodness of God, you are left with only evil.

When Jesus talked about this place, both in Matthew 10 and Mark 9, He called it Gehenna. Gehenna was a real place south of Jerusalem. It was a dump. It was a dark, horrific place of rotting flesh. It's where those who couldn't afford a burial would be thrown out. Gehenna was where worms and maggots would feast on the flesh of the dead. Child sacrifice was common there.² It was the place where garbage was burned and all the waste and feces of the city would go. It's like Jesus was saying, "You know that place of stench and death and worms? This is worse than that. That is the closest I can get to describing what it is so you can picture it in your mind."

It's also important for us to understand that *hell is constant*

pain—forever (2 Thessalonians 1:9). Here is why this matters: Pain is only bearable when there is hope. When you experience physical pain here on earth, you think, *I am going to be okay. There is a medication for this. I can take morphine or Advil or something to numb that. Or I am going to sleep at some point.* In the bleakest of situations, as your body is failing, you may even cling to the hope that death awaits you and the pain will end. You have a hope of remedy. In hell, there is no hope of that pain ever subsiding. That is so heavy!

Now imagine the worst pain you have ever felt. I don't know what it is for you, but I would imagine something popped into your head right away. Some of you probably thought about giving birth (with or without an epidural). You may even be mad at me right now for reminding you of the pain you felt!

I have not given birth. (Surprise, surprise.) But I have had a kidney stone (several, in fact). I am not here to tell you it is worse than giving birth because I am smarter than that and I would never do that. But I can tell you that the worst thing about the kidney stone was that the pain was constant. I had no way to know when it was going to go away. Even though I could treat it with medication, it felt like it would last forever.

Maybe it was stubbing your toe. You were walking in full stride and you jammed it on the corner of the bed. Pinkie toe. Boom! Is it broken? You were doing that dance, all while trying to stay quiet even though you wanted to say those words you could not say because God is watching. It hurt so bad, but you knew it was going to go away. But what if it didn't? What if it stayed that painful for the rest of your life? Imagine what that would be like.

In hell, that pain is not going to go away. It is forever. Not a hundred years, not a hundred billion years. Not two hundred billion years. There is no sleep, no numbing, no hope of it going away. Again, that is a heavy thing to think about.

Hell is also a place of *eternal regret and unsatisfied longing.*

What makes hell so horrific is an understanding of all you could have had in God and your choice to refuse it. You then end up with eternal regret. You may have heard of FOMO, or the fear of missing out. Hell is eternal FOMO.

Remember the story at the beginning of the chapter? Presley missed out on the goodness I had for her because of the consequences of her actions. At that point, all she could do was regret that she missed out. In Luke 16, Jesus told the story of a rich man dressed in fine clothes who died and ended up in hell. What's fascinating about the story is the posture of the rich man. He was not mad at God that he was in hell. He knew he deserved it. He was full of shame and regret, thinking about what could have been. To make it even worse, he could see heaven! He caught a glimpse of what he had truly missed out on.

When I was a child, I went to Disney World. I had never been outside of Texas and had never ridden on a roller coaster, so when the opportunity came to go to the happiest place on earth, you can imagine my excitement. We loaded up a bus with other people from our church and made the trek from Texas to Florida. Finally we arrived, and I was in line to ride my first roller coaster.

In that line, something went terribly wrong in my stomach. Have you ever had a cramp in your calf where it just closes up and you can't walk? That happened in my intestines. I literally fell over in pain. I thought that was it for me. I was there in Disney World in the fetal position in line for this roller coaster. Somebody called for help and the next thing I knew I was being loaded onto a gurney and taken to the infirmary.

There I sat in tremendous pain, but the pain was not the worst part. It was that they put me right beside a window. I could hear the laughter of all my friends, the joyful screams of them coming down the roller coasters, and I realized all I was going to miss out on because of this stupid cramp. Now, that is a trivial illustration

for what awaits the eternity of those who reject God. It's painful. There is suffering. It's eternal. It's uncomfortable.

This reality is not pleasant. It should give us a feeling in the pit of our stomachs as we process what that means for the people we live next door to, work alongside, and interact with on a daily basis. It is sobering and should ignite in us a passion for sharing the good news of Jesus with everyone we meet (but more on that later).

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there was a growing movement of “hellfire and brimstone” preachers whose sole message was to “turn or burn” (meaning accept Jesus or else) so you did not end up experiencing the wrath of hell. Following Jesus merely became an extra insurance policy. Then the preacher would move on to the next town with the same message. In an effort to not be “those Christians,” we have become so uncomfortable with the reality of hell and eternal separation from God that instead of using it as motivation to expand the kingdom of God, we (either consciously or subconsciously) let it fade to the back of our minds.

We have adopted an “out of sight, out of mind” mentality that diminishes hell, and it ultimately bleeds into much more of our spiritual life than we realize. The rapper Eminem said, “There’s a place called heaven and a place called hell. A place called prison and a place called jail, and da-da’s probably on his way to all of them except one.”³ This is the nonchalant attitude we have toward a place of eternal torment. But every single person you know—every person you’ve ever interacted with, and every person who has ever lived—will be in either heaven or hell one day, forever.

MORE THAN A TOURIST TRAP

A couple of years ago, as summer was fast approaching, I was tasked with finding a destination for our family’s big summer

vacation. Monica had only two stipulations for me. The first was that I couldn't pair it with a speaking engagement. The second was that I needed to be completely "off" (no late-night responding to emails, no quick work text messages, no nothing) and fully present with them. Admittedly, that can be a challenge for me, but I knew she was right, so I agreed and the search began.

I was busy searching for travel deals when a friend reached out and generously said we could use their condo in Grand Cayman. We had never been, but I am a beach guy, so all the pictures of crystal blue water, palm trees, and sugar-white sand were alluring. It was an easy sell for me. We found the right week, booked the airfare, and planned our trip!

When the day came, travel went exceptionally smoothly, and the island did not disappoint. It was the most perfect beach I've ever seen. The water is the kind of blue a camera just can't quite capture. It felt like a little commercial for heaven. So, imagine my confusion when I saw a sign that said, "This Way to Hell." I ignored the first one, but then there was another sign, complete with colorful flames all around it. "This Way to Hell," the second one read. By this point, my curiosity got the best of me, and I pulled up Google Maps. Sure enough, in the middle of the island, not too far from where we were staying, was a place called Hell.

One morning my son, Weston, and I got up early to go to the grocery store and the signs for Hell were *everywhere*. Weston yelled, "Dad, look! That sign says H-E-double hockey sticks!" We were really close by. "Do you want to go?" I asked. He was pretty apprehensive, which I appreciated. That felt like a parenting job well done. But we were so close and I was so intrigued that we couldn't *not* go see it.

We pulled up to an old, rundown store that was painted a bright, fire-engine red (go figure). There was a cutout of a devil and a platform that looked out over a field of jagged volcanic

rock. Imagine a large area of charcoal spikes protruding out of the ground. Someone apparently thought, *Hey, this must be what hell looks like*. Then they put a carved devil statue in the middle of it and made a tourist trap.

We walked into the store and a young woman wearing devil horns said, “Hi, welcome to Hell. How is your day going?” Another man, presumably the owner, also wearing horns and a pointed tail said, “How in the hell are you?” There were shirts and shot glasses and other souvenirs for sale printed with “hell” colloquialisms and clichés. It was an oddly cheery place.

This is what we’ve done with hell. We’ve made it a tourist trap. The Enemy has tricked us into thinking he’s some kind of villain in a Marvel movie, or a chubby cherub selling tacos. In reality, he’s the mastermind behind every rape, every murder, and every kind of evil. Including the evil *you* do. Even the evil you’re blind to, because you’ve tricked yourself into thinking, *It’s not that bad*. In doing so, you’ve partnered with the Prince of Darkness and invited him to be your friend, knowingly or not.

We have two choices as Christ followers. We can continue on in our day-to-day existence, oblivious to the realities of what is going on all around us, and follow Jesus as best we can until we die someday. But I believe that kind of life puts a ceiling on our ability to live that full life we talked about. The alternative (and the one I propose) is that we learn all that we can. If we familiarize ourselves with this Enemy and how he operates we can maximize our seventy-six years (give or take) here on earth.

If that is the route we choose, we must start at the beginning and understand the origin story of the one waging war against us. The villain we’re talking about is the one leading the spiritual war against you.

MAKE IT STICK: PAUSE AND REFLECT

1. Hell is described as a place of eternal pain, regret, and unsatisfied longing. How does this description challenge or affirm your current understanding of hell? How does it impact your view of God's judgment and justice?
2. Some Christians have become uncomfortable with the reality of hell and have adopted an "out of sight, out of mind" mentality. Do you see this attitude reflected in your own life or in your broader Christian community? How can we maintain a balanced perspective on hell that acknowledges its reality without losing sight of God's love and grace?
3. Think back on the tourist trap in Grand Cayman called Hell. How does this story highlight the way society has trivialized hell? How can we avoid minimizing the seriousness of hell while still engaging in conversations about it?

CHAPTER 2

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

RECENTLY, I BECAME REALLY INTERESTED IN SNAKES. Before you cast your judgment upon me, I will admit: It is a weird thing to suddenly become interested in as a fortysomething-year-old man, but here we are. My whole life I had been afraid of snakes. Not just “I don’t like snakes,” but legitimately afraid of them. I grew up on a farm and had always been told that the only good snake is a dead snake. Every snake, regardless of where I saw it or what it looked like, was venomous and wanted to do nothing more than hunt me down and kill me.

What changed? Well, I’m naturally a curious guy, so I joined a couple of Facebook groups full of people all around Texas who are experts at identifying snakes. Before that point, I would try to identify each snake I saw. I would see one near a body of water and say, “Oh, there is a water moccasin.” As I’d walk around the neighborhood, one would slither across the street and I would declare, “Another copperhead.” Once, I did this while walking with a friend of mine (who has an actual understanding of snakes) and he said, “No, that one is actually a plain-bellied water snake. Those are harmless. Stop trying to figure out how to kill it and

just run away.” This kept happening over and over. I would try to identify it first and he would correct me.

Anytime I saw a snake, my habit was to pinpoint it as a dangerous snake and tell Monica we should just list the house and move somewhere less treacherous. But then I discovered some Facebook groups where the sole purpose of the group was to identify the snakes people posted. And these people do not play around. These are no-nonsense groups—trust me. They want no part in your clever rhymes that misidentify the snake that you just saw in your front yard. They want a couple of pictures and your location, and they can tell you exactly what you are dealing with and how concerned you should be.

Here is what I learned after a few short weeks: I actually knew *nothing* about snakes. Let me just share some truth with you. I live in Texas, where there are over 105 species of snakes. Of those, only four kinds (yes, four) are venomous: cottonmouths, copperheads, coral snakes, and rattlesnakes. As it turns out, the vast, *vast* majority of the snakes you encounter are absolutely harmless to you. In fact, some of them are more dangerous to other snakes than people!

If you are having a conversation on your patio and there is a kingsnake in the corner, and you see it, there is not a chance that you’re like, “Oh, look at that cute little snake in the corner. So, how have you been this weekend?” No, you are jumping up and grabbing the shovel, everyone is running inside, and pandemonium is ensuing. But the truth is, you are safer with that kingsnake there in the corner than you are with it cut in half because of your shovel. Why? Kingsnakes eat copperheads and venomous snakes. That’s what they do. That’s why they’re the “king.” Rat snakes eat rodents. See, they can be helpful!

Now, I know I am not, in just a few paragraphs, going to convince you to love snakes. I get it. But here’s what I do want you to know: When it comes to snakes, we have been so poorly trained

and equipped to identify which ones can harm us that we don't know which ones are out to legitimately harm us. Our thinking has been skewed and we are unable to call out our enemies.

We have done the same thing with Satan. We have condensed the “ruler of the kingdom of the air” (Ephesians 2:2), the one whose sole mission is to oppose God and His plans here on earth, into a chubby little red guy with horns and a pitchfork. We have been conditioned to think that way since we were kids and there were cartoons with a little devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other with an internal struggle between right and wrong playing out onscreen before our young eyes. We aren't taught who he is or what his tactics actually look like day-to-day. For some, our theology never moves much beyond that visual image.

UNAWARE AND UNAFFECTED

C. S. Lewis, in his book *The Screwtape Letters*, said this about our belief about the Enemy:

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.¹

C. S. Lewis was calling out the error of not believing there is an enemy. Of saying, “Ah, whatever. Who knows?” The other mistake is to make too much of him. We all have a friend like that, who believes he's in every bush and around every corner, ready to jump out and get you when you are least expecting it.

I think there is a third error. Now, I am by no means claiming to be smarter than C. S. Lewis. He wins! But in this modern-day

existence, particularly among Christians, I've seen a new error crop up. Many of us believe there's an enemy; we believe there are devils, demons, and evil. If I were to say, "True or false: Satan is real," my hunch is that most of you reading this right now would answer "True." And it would have *zero* implications on how you live.

Think about what you did yesterday, from the time you woke up until the time you went to bed. How many times did you filter your decision-making through the lens of "What does the Enemy want me to do?" In making decisions, we are not thinking, *Well, what does the Enemy want? What is he after? How is he at work? What is he capable of?* We don't even understand that. Instead, we are unaware and unaffected, which is exactly where I believe the Enemy wants us. Because this battle is happening in an unseen realm, it is easy for us to forget (or worse, not care) that it is taking place all around us. It leaves us unable to identify the villain trying to kill us, all while that very same villain is moving the goalposts and creating a world of chaos and confusion for everyone, but in particular for followers of Jesus.

The truth is, the Bible gives us more of an origin story for Satan than most believers realize. In fact, all throughout the Bible there are biographical tidbits that, when pieced together, give us a fuller picture of who exactly we are fighting. Our problem is that we likely have not taken the time to put all those pieces together. A great starting point comes from a chapter that likely is not printed on a single coffee mug in your collection: Ezekiel 28.

THE KING OF TYRE AND A FALLEN ANGEL

Most believers already know the narrative: Satan was an angel in heaven. Early on he became prideful and decided to stand up in

opposition to God. God kicked him out of heaven, sent him to earth, and then one day he appeared in the garden of Eden in the form of a serpent. That narrative comes from Ezekiel 28, but it is not explicitly clear from a surface-level reading of the text.

Ezekiel is an apocalyptic prophetic text, which a lot of Christians put under the category of “books that are too confusing to understand,” but the Holy Spirit kept these passages in the Bible for a reason! In the Old Testament, prophets were chosen by God to discern situations to tell the people God’s will. In the midst of something happening, they would say, “Hey, this is what God is doing. Let me explain it to you.” Ezekiel was no exception, but his style was different. We see in his book that Ezekiel would take current events and speak, through those current events, timeless truths. He explained these theological truths through the lens of what was happening all around them in the time and space they occupied. He was a master at contextualizing his message.

At the beginning of this important passage in Ezekiel 28, Ezekiel was talking about the king of Tyre, who was a real king. On top of that, Tyre was a real place, just north of Israel (today it is in Lebanon). Ezekiel started by talking to a king who had amassed great wealth, won battles, and become very powerful. Ezekiel started calling him out with a word from the Lord, but then in the middle of calling him out and talking about current events, he pivoted and started to talk about Satan.

It would be like if I said, “Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine, and I remember when he fell from heaven and a third of the angelic realm fell with him.” *I’m sorry, what?* It would feel like a conversational whiplash. We were just talking about the news, then the conversation went somewhere weird. With a 2D reading of Scripture, this all seems disconnected. But when we dig deeper, we get a 4K understanding of what is going on as Satan is described. Here is what Ezekiel 28:11–14 says:

The word of the LORD came to me: “Son of man, take up a lament concerning the king of Tyre and say to him: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

““You were the seal of perfection,
full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.
You were in Eden,
the garden of God;
every precious stone adorned you:
carnelian, chrysolite and emerald,
topaz, onyx and jasper,
lapis lazuli, turquoise and beryl.
Your settings and mountings were made of gold;
on the day you were created they were prepared.
You were anointed as a guardian cherub,
for so I ordained you.
You were on the holy mount of God;
you walked among the fiery stones.”

Follow me here: This is Satan’s origin story. There is a shift away from talking about the king of Tyre and toward talking about Satan instead. It tells us that he was a beautiful angel and he was even in Eden, the place where all was right and perfect in the world before sin entered the picture. That should be problematic for us, right? I was always taught that Eden was perfect before man sinned. How did the villain get there?

And that list of stones in Ezekiel is not just a list of rocks you would find in a creek bed. Those were the nine stones from the priestly garments referenced in Exodus 28. God was nodding His head at the reality that He had some sort of special service for Satan. This magnificent angel was different from the others. Many scholars believe the phrase “settings and mountings” is a reference

to musical instruments. So, Satan is described here as a beautiful angel with a priestly designation who played musical instruments. It is as if God were describing Satan as the OG worship leader. *Wait, what?!*²

Then we read about Satan being anointed as a guardian cherub. Here is where Hallmark has done us a disservice. When you hear cherub, you think of a greeting card, right? You think of a chubby little angel with cute little wings and rosy cheeks. You think of Cupid, if you will (which is stupid, if you will). It is incorrect thinking because anytime guardian cherubs reveal themselves to creation in Scripture, the next two words you usually see are “Get up” or “Fear not.” Why? Because they are insanely huge, powerful creatures.

A PROUD HEART

Now, see what Ezekiel says about Satan’s rebellion:

“You were blameless in your ways
from the day you were created
till wickedness was found in you.
Through your widespread trade
you were filled with violence,
and you sinned.
So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God,
and I expelled you, guardian cherub,
from among the fiery stones.
Your heart became proud
on account of your beauty,
and you corrupted your wisdom
because of your splendor.

So I threw you to the earth;
 I made a spectacle of you before kings.
By your many sins and dishonest trade
 you have desecrated your sanctuaries.
So I made a fire come out from you,
 and it consumed you,
and I reduced you to ashes on the ground
 in the sight of all who were watching.
All the nations who knew you
 are appalled at you;
you have come to a horrible end
 and will be no more.” (28:15–19)

This helps paint a more complete picture for us of what actually happened to Satan. At some point in history, God made Satan along with the entire angelic realm. He made the heavenly hosts, the angel armies. All these beings were created to reflect the glory of God and to carry out His will, both in heaven and on earth. But that role was not enough for one angel named Satan. He was a beautiful, worship-leading angel—blameless, even! But that was not enough for him. Scripture tells us he wanted *more*. His heart became too proud, and his heart became corrupt, so God drove him, in disgrace, out of His presence.

God made him special, but he became evil. This presents us with a theological conundrum: Did God create evil? Is evil God’s doing? The answer is no. The text says very plainly that God created Satan good. God is saying, “I made you perfect in beauty. And then you rebelled.” But God did create the *possibility* of evil.

You see, the only way that something can be good is if it *could* be bad. If it could not be bad, it would not be good. It would just . . . be. Think about it this way: Light is a thing. Darkness, on the other hand, is *no thing*. Darkness is simply the *absence* of light.

If you insert light, you have light. If you pull the light away, what you're left with in the void and emptiness is darkness. Another way to think about it is with heat. If you withdraw heat, you are left with cold. Cold only exists because heat exists. Without heat, cold would not be cold; it just would be.

God is good, and goodness marks Him. If you pull back good, what you are left with in the void is evil. Godliness is a thing, so ungodliness is what you are left with when you withdraw godliness from the equation. We could play this game with a thousand different variables, but I think you get my point: Evil is the absence of good.

KICKED OUT OF HEAVEN

When I was in high school, I was briefly kicked out of school. Here's what happened: I had a master plan to skip school. My brother had a big brick of a cell phone like Zack Morris from *Saved by the Bell*, back before anyone else had cell phones. I had a friend with pretty handwriting write a note saying that I had been feeling sick, so if I went downhill at school to go ahead and call "my dad" (which was actually my brother's cell phone), and send me home. She signed it as if she were my mom. I was going to then have the whole day to hang out with my friends and my girlfriend, who lived in the next town over and did not have school that day. Brilliant plan, right?

It turned into a bad execution of *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. I faked a cough, turned in my note, and my friends picked me up outside. The attendance clerk, who did not play her part right at all, compared the handwriting on the note to past notes and noticed it was different. Then she noticed "my dad's" phone number had changed. She then called my mom to ask her if she had

sent me to school with a note, and my mom had no idea what she was talking about. Who knew this attendance clerk was basically Sherlock Holmes?

My mom called my dad (and my friend and coconspirator's dad) and they decided we would talk about it at the end of the day. When we were driving home and stopped at a stoplight, I looked over at the truck next to us and I knew we were done for. Five feet from me was my dad, this stoic, John Wayne–esque man, staring at me through his open window and just shaking his head.

Once we got home, we were grounded by our parents and suspended from school on top of that. I got in trouble because I didn't go to school, and now they were telling me I couldn't go to school? They decided we were such menaces to society that they would rather not even have us in the building. They knew we were the troublemakers, so they decided they would rather us cause trouble on the outside than the inside. We got kicked out.

We often hear that Satan fell from heaven. If you are anything like me, that gives you a mental image of someone tripping and falling, like if someone fell off a building or into the Grand Canyon. Like he stepped on the wrong cloud. But Satan didn't trip and tumble out. This passage in Ezekiel makes it really clear that God kicked him out; He expelled Satan from heaven.

Scripture goes out of its way to describe just how blessed Satan had been. But because of his rebellion and his pride, he was sent to earth, and now there is this cosmic test going on every single moment of every single day. Read this carefully: You and I are in the test. Who are you going to worship? God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, or the prince of this era? Paul referred to Satan as the “god of this age” in 2 Corinthians 4:4, meaning Satan is actively involved in the here and now of daily life. So, which way will you go? Every day we have to choose.

Here is the most mind-bending part of all this: You can sit

in church on a Sunday morning and worship Satan. We think of satanism as something way different, but the truth is, he does not need you to worship him with Ouija boards, seances, lit candles, and sacrifices.

When you worship *anything other than God*, Satan will accept that as worship to himself. In fact, he would probably prefer that you do not even waste your time with the Ouija boards and candles, because that's weird, and then you would not have friends, and therefore you would have no influence. What he really wants you to do is worship anything other than God and influence as many others as possibly to do the same. This is his tactic, and he carries it out every day here on earth.

To be abundantly clear: Satan is not in hell. It's a theological misunderstanding and a categorical mistake to say that he is. Hell is a place created for Satan to ultimately serve his eternal judgment (Revelation 20:10). We operate with a misunderstanding that Satan functions as the CEO of hell, but where do we see that in the Scriptures? We love to create distance between us and him, but biblically that's inaccurate. We love to think, *We're up here and he's down there, so the distance keeps us safe*, but that's not actually true. Eventually, at the end of all days, he will be cast there after the last battle. But right now, Satan is roaming around the earth like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour, according to 1 Peter 5:8.

To add another layer to this, it is important to know that he is not everywhere. Satan is not omnipresent. So, it is also a categorical mistake to say, "Satan did this to me." Most likely (although it's impossible to say for certain), Satan himself has never been anywhere near you. He has likely never even been in the same zip code as you, unless he was just visiting for some influential event. Wherever there is an abnormal amount of death, destruction, disease, genocide, or other kinds of wickedness—that's likely

where Satan is. Wherever there are people of great influence—he’s probably there. Revelation 12 tells us that a third of the angelic realm came with him, so he is not alone, and they are down here with us too (but we will get to them in the next chapter). Satan has help, so he doesn’t have to be everywhere to make his mark.

WHY DOES IT HAVE TO BE THIS WAY?

For a long time in my life, even as a believer, I wrestled with the *why* in this entire discussion. Why did this have to be the narrative? Why not just skip all the chaos, death, and destruction and keep things perfect like they were in the garden of Eden? Am I the only one who thinks that is a better solution?

Here’s where I’ve landed. As Christians, we do not believe in dualism, which implies that God and Satan are equal forces going at it in the ring and we are out in the crowd wondering who will be declared the winner. No, God created Satan, and He has dominion and authority over him. This is not even like David and Goliath. This is Goliath versus a cream puff. Satan must ask God for permission to do stuff (see the story of Job). But why does God allow it?

What if when Satan said, “Hey, I don’t want to worship You. I want to be like You,” God had responded with a snap of His fingers and said, “Oh, you want to be like Me? Be no more”? And then poof, he was gone. And we all just carried on with our lives from there. My hunch is that if He would have done that, there would have been no way for you and me to know that God is good. If time and time again God just obliterates anything that comes against Him, how would we know that He is actually any good at all?

Based on a common interpretation of Revelation 12, the Bible indicates a third of the angelic realm went with Satan. So when

this all happened, a third of the angels must have been questioning and wondering if He is a good God after all. And God, in an incredible act of mercy, said, “Great—we’ll see what happens.” And He sent Satan here to earth with an army of fallen angels. God then created us out of the manifestation of love between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, made in His image, and said, “Okay, Satan, you can try to rule over them if you want. But I am going to show them something better at every turn. And they will choose who they desire to serve. Me or any other god, which is you.”

That is the narrative you and I live in every single day. Think about all the opportunities you have throughout any given day to serve the God who created the universe or the villain who seeks to steal an abundant life from you. It all traces back to what God was describing in Ezekiel 28. That is the story we are a part of, your parents were part of, and your great-great-great-great-great-great-grandparents were part of too. We feel it and sense it is happening all around us. We have even seen this play out in movies a hundred times. It’s the plot of most movies from the time we were children. Someone is going to a foreign land to fight a battle to see if good or evil is ultimately the winner.

This is the script that Disney and Marvel and DC and others have made billions of dollars from. They are just swapping out the variables. In those meeting rooms they are saying, “Do we want her to be a kind of princess who talks to animals? What about two sisters, but one of them can turn things into ice? Or do we want her to be a stepsister with a stepmother? Or a fairy godmother? Or maybe up in a tower with long hair? And then we can send in the prince to rescue her? Scrap that, we should make this one about lions. Maybe it’s two lions. We will call them Mufasa and Scar, and we will figure out who is going to be the king of the jungle.”

Over and over and over, whether it’s the Avengers, the Justice League, Snow White, or Harry Potter, you’ve seen this. And you

wonder: Why does it resonate so deeply within your heart? It's because this is the story you live in. That's why you're seeing it over and over and over again. It doesn't take a lot of creativity to write these scripts; you just take the characters, change their names, tweak the plotline, alter the setting, and there you go.

But in real life, this is a far bigger battle than simply God versus Satan, good versus evil. God has an army, but Satan does too. And Satan's army is desperate to take you out.

MAKE IT STICK: OLD AND NEW

On a piece of paper, make two columns: one side with Old Beliefs and the other side with New Beliefs.

1. First, take a few minutes to jot down the beliefs you held about Satan before reading this chapter. Write down everything you knew before you started reading it.
2. Now reflect on how your understanding of Satan has evolved or changed since beginning this journey. What new insights or perspectives have you gained so far?
3. Now, in a paragraph or two, rewrite your beliefs about Satan, incorporating any new insights or changes in perspective you've experienced. Why does a fuller understanding of Satan help you in this spiritual battle?