



Chapter 1

Still Prowling the World

“YOU’D LIKE FOR me to perform an exorcism? On your *wife*?”

The gentleman seated before me nodded solemnly.

And I had a bit of explaining to do.

I was doing a series of classes at a conference, sharing some of the material I was planning to use in this book. People attending the conference came to my class to hear about “spiritual warfare for doubters and the disenchanted,” a class for Christians who were finding it increasingly awkward or difficult to talk about the Devil and spiritual warfare.

The gentleman asking me to perform an exorcism on his wife had missed that part of the title and class description. All he’d seen in the title were the words “spiritual warfare.” And he’d assumed since I was teaching about “spiritual warfare” I would be someone who knew a thing or two about exorcism. So he had approached me to share some marital struggles along with a request to cast out an evil spirit from his wife.

Awkwardly, I explained to this man, who seemed legitimately distraught, that my class about spiritual warfare was for people who weren't all that sure the Devil existed, at least not in a literal, personal sense, that the class was for people who doubted that spiritual warfare involved things like, well, things like spousal exorcisms.

"So, you can't help me?" the man asked, slowly comprehending. "No sir," I said, "not in that way. But I can pray for you and your wife. Can I do that for you?" He agreed. I laid my hand on his shoulder and prayed for him, his wife, and their marriage. When I'd finished my prayer he looked up at me with tears in his eyes. "Thank you," he said, clearly moved. I was moved too. I hadn't been able to perform an exorcism, but I'd done what I could. And it seemed to help.

When you tell people you're writing a book about the Devil you find yourself in a lot of strange and awkward conversations. As you can imagine, people have shared with me some pretty wild stuff. And while I don't dismiss any of those stories, I do think it would be helpful here at the start to say a few things about the audience I have in mind for this book, along with how we'll be talking about the Devil. If just to avoid future requests for spousal exorcisms.

I have written this book mainly for Christians who have a lot of questions and doubts about things like demon possession and exorcism. These doubting and disenchanted Christians often describe themselves with a bewildering array of labels—labels such as liberal, progressive, emergent, post-fundamentalist, or post-evangelical. A common thread running through these labels is an eagerness to embrace science, a faith that unapologetically embraces the current scientific consensus in biology, geology, cosmology, and every other scientific discipline.

Now, a scientifically educated and sophisticated faith is a wonderful thing, but scientific literacy has a price. Embracing science can cause us to doubt the spookier aspects of faith. Science can increase our disenchantment, making beliefs in angels, demons, and

exorcisms seem superstitious and quaint, like a retreat to the Dark Ages when we burned witches and thought the sun revolved around the earth.

So faith is affected by an embrace of science, but doubts and disenchantment aren't the only things that characterize liberal and progressive Christians. Beyond scientific literacy, progressive and liberal Christians tend to cultivate a socially conscious and politically engaged faith focused upon fighting injustices in the world. And there's a reason these two things—scientific literacy and social consciousness—go hand-in-hand among liberal and progressive Christians: when you struggle with doubts and disenchantment concerning the supernatural, your faith becomes focused upon the world you can see and touch, the earth and all her inhabitants. By increasing our focus on the material *earth*, rather than on unseen *heaven*, doubt and disenchantment push us toward more ecologically and socially conscious expressions of faith. Consequently, when it comes to a subject like spiritual warfare, the spookier elements of evil are traded in for evils that can be seen and physically rectified. For instance, you might harbor doubts about demon possession, but you can dig a well in Africa so that a village can have access to clean drinking water. You may not believe in evil spirits, but you can fight the evil of sex trafficking. You may not know what it means to “resist the Devil,” but you can resist economic systems that exploit the poor.

You get the idea. There's plenty of evil to go around, so if you doubt supernatural and spooky evil, it's not like you're left twiddling your thumbs. You've still got plenty of work to do in the world.

That's the main audience I have in mind for this book. I wrote this book for doubting and disenchanted Christians who find it hard, awkward, or silly to talk about things like the Devil or spiritual warfare and who tend to see their fight against evil as the political fight for justice in the world. I embrace that vision of justice, but I'm also going to explain why it's important for these Christians to start talking more about Old Scratch.

A Little Improv

Of course, liberal and progressive Christians aren't the only Christians concerned about social justice, oppression, poverty, violence, and economic exploitation. And if the surveys are correct that the majority of Christians doubt the literal existence of the Devil, progressive Christians aren't the only believers who bring some skepticism into any conversation about the Devil and spiritual warfare. So while I have a particular reader in mind for this book I'm also casting a very wide net.

And to cast the net even wider I want to say a few more things to readers who actually do believe in demon possession and exorcism, readers who don't struggle with doubts or disenchantment. Can a book like this—a “Devil for Doubters” book—be of any use to that man who asked me to perform an exorcism?

Oh yes it can!

A lot Christians who believe in the Devil tend to think that spiritual warfare is almost exclusively about demon possession and exorcism. But as I hope to show you, that vision of spiritual warfare has more to do with Hollywood movies than the battle we see between Jesus and Satan in the Bible. When it comes to the Devil, if you're thinking primarily about possession and exorcism you need to widen your view.

To help you do that, let me make a suggestion. When it comes to thinking about faith, I'm a big believer in the fundamental rule of comedy improv: *Yes, and*. When you're in an improv scene and your partner gives you a premise—“Ouch, my head hurts!”—you don't block her with a negation: “No it doesn't. Your head doesn't hurt.” Blocking—leading with a *No*—kills the whole scene. Leading with a *No* drains the forward momentum, and the scene has nowhere to go. So the Golden Rule of Improv is: *Yes, and*. You lead with *Yes*, you lead with affirmation. But you don't end there. You don't merely agree. “Yes, I wholeheartedly concur, your head hurts.” That doesn't help either. The *Yes* must be followed by an *and*. You

add your own premise to move the scene forward. “Ouch, my head hurts!” your improv partner says, rubbing her head. In response you wag your finger and adopt a scolding tone, “How many times have I warned you that riding elephants is dangerous!” You’ve affirmed your partner and have added your own twist, handing back to her something more to work with. No longer blocked by *No*, a whole world opens up before you and the audience, a world to discover and explore for the enjoyment of all. Why were you riding elephants that day? Everyone wants to know!

Yes, and. For readers who believe in demons and exorcism, that’s the posture I’d like for you to have as you read this book. There’s no need to pick and choose between different visions of spiritual warfare. This isn’t a contest or a debate. No need for a blocking *No*. Yes, you might think there is something *more* that needs to be said about spiritual warfare. That’s great. Just add that to the mix. *Yes, and.* But this book will expand and enrich, theologically and biblically, how you think about the Devil, demons, and spiritual warfare. Especially if all you think spiritual warfare involves is demon possession and exorcism. Again, that narrow focus is missing the most important lessons the Bible teaches us about tangling with Old Scratch. So I hope you’ll be delighted, surprised, and deeply edified by what I have to share with you.

Naming the Devil

Finally, before we get into the thick of the book we need to get clear about what we are talking about when we make reference to the Devil and Satan.

If the surveys are to be believed, many Christians tend to think of the Devil as a “symbol of evil” rather than as a literal fallen angel. However, there are a couple of problems with thinking about the Devil as a “symbol of evil.”

First, many might assume that *symbol* means *pretend* or *make-believe*. But symbols aren’t pretend, they’re pointing to something

real, something happening in the world. So that's the first thing we need to get clear about. Fallen angel or symbol, the Devil is real.

Okay, great, the Devil is real. But what, exactly, are we naming in the world when we speak of the Devil? Here we want to stay close to the Bible because “symbol of evil” isn't the way the Bible describes Satan. The proper name “Satan” comes from the Hebrew *ha satan*, a word that simply means “adversary.” Everyone can and has acted at some point as “a satan.” Even God's actions are described as “satanic” in the Old Testament.¹ In the New Testament, Satan is also called *diabolos* translated as “devil,” but also as “accuser” or “adversary.”

Basically, a satan is more of a relationship than a person. Anything that is facing you in an antagonistic or adversarial way—working against you as an opponent or enemy—is standing before you as *ha satan*, as an adversary, as a satan. In the Bible, Satan and the Devil are interchangeable names for the personification of all that is adversarial to the kingdom and people of God, the personified Enemy of God.

Now, does “Satan” or “the Devil” name a literal, supernatural *person*, or does “Satan” name a symbolic *personification* of all the forces in the world antagonistic to the kingdom of God? Depending upon your doubts and disenchantment we could have a long conversation about that question. But for our purposes we simply need to agree on the biblical vision of Satan and the Devil. Biblically, Satan names that which is working against God and God's kingdom in the world.

Satanic Board Games (Non-Ouija Edition)

When I talk about Satan or the Devil in this book I'm pointing to that which is *adversarial to the kingdom of God*. And while Christians might disagree about the exact nature of the forces arrayed against

1. For example, see Numbers 22:22, when God sends an angel to block the path of the prophet Balaam (ESV): “But God's anger was kindled because he went, and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the way as his *adversary* [in Hebrew *satan*].” And yes, this the same Balaam of talking donkey fame.

the kingdom, we recognize these forces as real and active in the world, forces that need to be fought and resisted. That struggle and that fight is what I'm calling "spiritual warfare." In this book, "spiritual warfare" is shorthand for the Christ-shaped pushback against all the forces in the world working antagonistically against the kingdom of God.

Now everything—absolutely everything—in this conversation depends upon what we mean by "kingdom of God." Get that wrong and everything goes wrong, because you can't name a force as *adversarial* until you define what you're moving against and toward. It's *yin* and *yang*. You need to have a goal in mind before you name your obstacles and opponents—even if the game is *cooperative*, you're still going to run into a satan. It's called *conflict*.

For example, I've played a lot of cooperative board games with my family, games where players are not trying to beat each other, but work together. Unlike competitive "I Win/You Lose" games, like checkers or chess, cooperative games have a Win/Win dynamic, games like *Forbidden Island* where all the players work together to escape an island before it sinks into the ocean. But cooperation in games like *Forbidden Island* is no easy thing. That's the challenge of these games, why we like to test ourselves by playing them. To put it rather weirdly, there has to be a *satanic* aspect to the cooperative game, or we wouldn't play it. There are tons of dynamics working *against* our cooperation: ego, impatience, conflict over best strategies. We even have to forgive each other. That's what makes the games so challenging and rewarding, the fact that we had to *overcome* so much, that we had to *struggle* so hard to cooperate. And beyond the effort that it takes to work together, in these games, the players are struggling to overcome some impersonal and implacable force in the game that's working against the team, thwarting us from reaching our goals. When my family and I play *Forbidden Island* it's us, as a team, against that diabolical island.

All that to say, I understand that lots of us would rather avoid all this talk about satans, adversaries, and warfare. It all seems so dark

and hostile. We'd much rather focus our faith on positive things, things like love, grace, and inclusion, but that's a deeply ironic and confused desire. Why can't we just focus on the *positive*? Because positive doesn't have any meaning without its *relationship* to something negative. The journey toward love doesn't make any sense without an associated struggle against hate. The heroism of mercy isn't heroic if there aren't temptations toward vengeance and revenge. A call for inclusion doesn't make any sense if no one is being excluded. It's simple logic. Fighting for justice assumes injustice. Protecting victims assumes people are being victimized.

Shall I say it again? *The Devil is real.*

I'd love to have a Christianity full of rainbows and daisies, full of love and inclusion. But there are forces working against love and inclusion in the world, and some of those forces are at work in my own heart and mind. We call those forces *hate* and *exclusion*, to say nothing about everything else that is tearing the world to shreds, pushing the loving and gracious rule of God out of the world.

Hate is the satan of love.

Exclusion is the satan of inclusion.

War is the satan of peace.

Oppression is the satan of justice.

Tearing down is the satan of building up.

Competition is the satan of cooperation.

Revenge is the satan of mercy.

Harm is the satan of care.

Hostility is the satan of reconciliation.

There is a satan to the kingdom of God.

If you follow Jesus, you know there is *anti*-Jesus. If you've read the Gospels you know Jesus was fighting a huge battle against formidable forces, forces that ultimately killed him—that's what I mean by *anti-Jesus*. And throughout that struggle—and this is the critical point can we can't ever, ever forget—Jesus never becomes anti-Jesus. Unlike us, Jesus never takes the bait, never becomes Satan to fight Satan. And repeatedly in the Gospels, Jesus pulls his followers away

from becoming anti-Jesus. *Peter*, Jesus says in the garden of Gethsemane, *put your sword away*. All the way to the cross, Jesus stays Jesus. Jesus never returns evil for evil, violence for violence, curse for curse, blow for blow, eye for eye or tooth for tooth. Jesus never becomes anti-Jesus. And neither should we.

But if anything should convince a Christian that Satan exists—as person or personification—it has to be the crucifixion of Jesus. Something—something from the very start—was *against* Jesus. And the Bible calls that force Satan.

And that anti-Jesus force is still very much at work in the world—and in my own heart.

So, yes, by all means let's stay positive and keep focused on Jesus. Let's talk about love and grace. But let's also admit that we have to talk about Satan. We have to talk about what Jesus was fighting for. And against. And why he was killed.

There are forces adversarial to love and grace in the world, and I don't care all that much if you think those forces are due to Beelzebub, a dark tendency of human psychology, or the Second Law of Thermodynamics. If God is love and if love is at the heart of the kingdom of God, that love is a heroic act of resistance in a world governed by hate, violence, and indifference.

Jesus, the exact representation of the invisible God, entered the world full of grace, mercy, and love. And for that he was tortured and crucified.

Does the Devil exist? As in *literally*?

I don't know. Maybe. I wouldn't rule it out. But I do know this: Something killed Jesus. Something real. And the Bible named it: Satan. The Devil. Old Scratch. The adversary to the kingdom of God.

And the Bible warns us that Satan is still out there, still prowling the world, like a lion, looking for someone to devour.