

# Great Deceiver

by Rev. Michael Newman

## The Spiritual Battle

A few years ago a young man stopped by my office to give me an update about a trip he was planning to take with his dad. This was going to be a very special trip. For years there was tension between the son and his father. But in recent years they had been working hard to get back on track. They were seeing counselors, evaluating the past, and taking a hard look at their own flaws and failures. Finally, they started to talk again; issues were being addressed and resolved. There was some successful healing taking place, so they decided to take another step in their growing and deepening bond together. They made a plan to get away for some father-son time. They booked a flight, packed their golf clubs, and headed to the airport. The son confided in me before the trip that this was going to be a very important time. He was planning to take some crucial steps in putting the past behind him, asking for a new beginning, and expressing his love to his dad.

When he stopped by my office to tell me about the trip, I was eager to hear how their time together went. He said to me, "We never made it."

I was shocked! Never made it? "What happened?" I asked.

The young man told me a story of amazing complications and foul-ups. They got to the airport on time, but the plane was delayed. After the plane arrived and the passengers were boarded, a mechanical difficulty on the plane was discovered. Every passenger had to get off the plane, board a bus, and be transported to another waiting aircraft. My friend and his dad joined the rest of the passengers in this transportation odyssey. As the airline attendants checked the identification of each passenger boarding the new plane, the father reached for his wallet to get his ID. The wallet was gone! He realized that it must have fallen out of his pocket on the bus. The bus had already driven away, so an attendant asked an airline worker to call the driver and have someone check for the wallet. My friend and his dad waited. After half an hour, while already impatient passengers got even more impatient, the bus people called back. They couldn't find the wallet. That left my friend's dad with no money, no identification, and no ability to fly. Airline personnel retrieved their luggage, and father and son drove back home.

I couldn't believe it. All that progress in their relationship. All that preparation for a very meaningful trip—one that would serve as a marking point in life. All that for nothing. My first reaction was to say to the young man, "The devil really worked hard on that one. He didn't want you and your dad to take any steps to get closer."

I was a bit surprised at my friend's reaction. He said, "The devil? I never thought of that." He told me he just got aggravated at the endless hassles. "Typical travel craziness in Chicago," he said. He didn't connect it at all to an attempt by Satan to derail lives that were growing into a God-pleasing and God-glorifying relationship.

He didn't think about the spiritual battle that was taking place behind the scenes.

## Not Just Flesh and Blood

The Bible gives important information about what is really happening in our day-to-day lives.

Ephesians 6:10-12 says,

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

These verses contain important words from the apostle Paul to people making their way through the very treacherous journey of life. He was letting them know there is a lot more going on behind the scenes than meets the eye. It's not just ticket snafus and coincidental breakdowns. It's not just fluke temptations and typical aggravation. There is a spiritual battle raging every day. And that spiritual battle directly impacts your life.

I want to be clear: I'm not advocating a “devil made me do it” attitude for every foul up, tragedy, or hurt that takes place in life. Our sinful flesh leads the way in wreaking plenty of havoc and doing loads of damage in life. But it is of critical importance the truth of Ephesians chapter six is not overlooked. Our battle is not against flesh and blood. The powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms are at work. And their goal is to mess up anything of God in your life. Their goal is to destroy you.

## How It All Started

Revelation chapter 12 gives an insightful summary of what Satan is up to. Verses one through eight open the chapter with a picture of the devil marshaling his forces in order to destroy the Savior Jesus who was about to be born. God's protective action intervened for the baby and mother.

Verse seven describes the heavenly warfare between Satan and his angels and Michael the archangel and his forces. Verse eight says the devil “was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them (i.e. the evil angel allies) in heaven.”

People wonder how Satan and his angels began their evil quest. These verses give us the information. More important, however, is the insight these verses give us about three key truths of Satan's work: Satan's activity, his attitude, and his aim.

Verse nine makes his activity clear: “And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.”

Satan is the deceiver. In John 8:44b, Jesus described the devil's central activity: “He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”

Satan wants to lead you astray. Jesus said that lying is the devil's native language. This activity of lying, deception, promoting errant beliefs, spreading half-truths, and justifying wrongs brings a result that Satan most delights in: separating you from a saving walk with Jesus. His lies, Jesus said, result in murder.

The last part of Revelation 12:12b reveals Satan's attitude: “But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”

The devil is angry. He is “filled with fury.” Literally, the Bible says the “devil was thrown down to you, having great rage.” He tries to cover up his true colors. The devil tries to hide his hateful attitude. In 2 Corinthians 11:14b it says, “Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.” But that is only more deception. It is definitely a disguise because Satan's attitude is anger, rage, and fury to the core. And that is what he wants to take out on you. He wants you to suffer the wretchedness of separation from God that he is suffering. Misery loves company. Satan wants you to be his company in eternal death.

Verses 13-16 continue the warfare account of Revelation chapter 12. These verses show that Satan's attention is turned toward the whole church—all believers. The woman that symbolized Mary in the beginning of the chapter now represents all who trusted Christ because of the Child she bore. Verse 17a reveals Satan's aim as we wait for Christ to return: “Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”

If you believe in Jesus or are even contemplating a walk of faith, Satan has you as his target. He has declared war on your life. His aim is to take aim at you. That's the truth that 1 Peter 5:8 reinforces: “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”

You may have seen Satan portrayed as that little guy on people's shoulders who is innocently trying to convince everyone to loosen up and have some fun. "Why get so uptight?" some people claim. "The devil is just trying to give you a little excitement, a little action in your life."

Nothing could be further from the truth. A prowling and roaring lion is not looking for a party to go to. It's looking for prey to kill and devour. That is the devil's aim: to kill and devour any person he can ensnare. This is no game. It is life and death.

Satan's activity, attitude, and aim add up to an attempt to work eternal hurt in the lives of every one on earth. His misery would love to have lots of company. His ways are senseless. They are chaotic. They're mean. Those are the devil's true colors!

## **Is All This Meant to Scare You?**

If you're getting frightened about all this, hold on. The danger of giving the devil too much attention is that he can get you to believe that he is an equal counterpart of God. That's another one of Satan's lies. The Bible says in 1 John 3:8b, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil." That's what Jesus did when He died on the cross and rose from death. In fact, Satan's work has been exposed. In 2 Corinthians 2:11b it says, "We are not ignorant of his (Satan's) designs."

The purpose of this booklet is to bring you the truth about some of the devil's lies so that you can be aware of what is really going on in your life, and with that awareness, as Ephesians chapter six says, "You may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil."

What are some of the devil's schemes? What do you need to be on the watch for? First, he'll try to attack your standing with God. Second, he'll attempt to screw up your life as a servant of God on this earth. Third, he'll try to drain you of the eternal hope you have in your Savior. Let's take a look at these crafty lies of the great deceiver.

## **Your Standing with God**

In Matthew chapter four, Satan tried to lure a tired and hungry Jesus to miraculously make bread out of stones in the desert. The deceiver wanted to shift Jesus' trust from God's plan and power to His own. Jesus didn't fall for it, but sometimes we may. As life stretches you thin and wears you out, you may start to believe you need to take things into your own hands. You may wonder if God really cares about you. You may question if you really matter to God. You may think you are on your own, a random accident in the chaotic swirl of cosmic particles moving through a haphazard universe. All it may take is one look at the pile on your dining room table, or inside that storage room that you've been neglecting, or even at some serious issues in your life. You may wonder about your standing with God.

But if you feel like your life is random and meaningless, you've uncovered one of Satan's lies. Your life is not merely disarray and uncertainty. It is not just luck and coincidence. You see, Jesus Christ fought for your life in an intentional and purposeful way when He gave His life on the cross for you. When Jesus battled sin, death, and the devil, and then stood in victory at the resurrection, He showed the importance of your life. He made it clear your life is precious to God and part of a wonderful and gracious plan. You are His creation—one worth investing His life in as you move through this world. Even when it appears your life is out of control, God declares: "For I know the plans I have for you ... plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jeremiah 29:11).

You don't have to cave in to the devil's deception. You can trust that Jesus walks with you and is unfolding His blessing and grace in your life—all the way to everlasting life in heaven. Of course, this doesn't mean your life will be easy. Every moment will not be pleasant. On the contrary, you will endure difficult times, perplexing events, and even some brutal challenges. But you don't have to fear. Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27). He replaces fear with His love for you. And your Savior fights for you. Every moment—the future included—is in the realm of His love and care. When you tremble in confusion and wonder if your life is up for grabs, the Word of God reassures that "Perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18b). That is how Jesus counteracts the confusion and fear of the lie that your life is a random and arbitrary ride through a chaotic world: He shows you His perfect love. Through Jesus' death and resurrection for you, through the forgiveness of your sins, through God's reach into your life through Baptism, His Word of help and guidance in the Bible, and the presence of His Son in the Lord's Supper, God shows you that your life is precious, important, and filled with purpose.

## Your Life as God's Servant

But Satan has another lie for you. He will try to foul up your life as a servant of God on this earth. He'll whisper, "Life shouldn't be a challenge. There should be no hardship. You should be able to lay back and enjoy it all. Life is supposed to get easier." That's what the devil presented to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He said, "Go ahead and eat that fruit. Disobey God's plan. If you do, "you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5b). "There's an easier way," Satan hissed. "It shouldn't be so complicated. Life is supposed to get easier."

This lie plays with your emotions and energy levels. If life doesn't get easier, then is God disappointing you? Is He abandoning you? As life that is broken by sin keeps moving ahead and is hard, Satan whispers in your ear, "Maybe God isn't faithful. Maybe life isn't worth living. Suffering shouldn't happen. It can result in nothing good."

If you really believe life is supposed to get easier, you may end up living in bitterness and disillusionment, guilt and anger, disappointed with God and pushing Him away. And that's exactly the way the devil wants your life to be.

Life didn't get easier for Jesus. But because of His suffering, death, and resurrection, He accomplished the most worthwhile feat in history. He rescued humanity from destruction. Jesus captured the real essence of life when He said, "But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:26b-28).

Life this side of heaven isn't designed to get easier. Jesus even said, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33b). Yes, there are joyful blessings in this world, but God doesn't have us here for simple enjoyment alone. He has us in this world for an important mission. We are here to shine the light of Jesus to a dark world in need. When the going gets tough, it isn't time to give up or to think God has failed us. It's time to remember our mission and to reconnect with our source of strength and encouragement: Jesus Christ.

Each one of us may be led to places that we may not want to go. Life may be very hard. You may not feel like tackling the challenges before you. But Jesus came to serve you and give His life for you. In Him you are a new creation. And as a new creation, you are God's servant. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "We are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:20a). We are blessed to be servants of God on this earth. Hardship doesn't put that in doubt; it confirms this high calling. God values us enough to give us challenging tasks. He is caring enough to give us all we need to meet each challenge.

It's natural for us to hope there will be some ease in life. And God is gracious. He gives us rest and replenishment along the way. But what an amazing gift we have received from God in the most certain hope of all: every day, by His grace, life can be lived the way it's supposed to be: serving the One who served us with His grace and love.

## Your Eternal Hope

As soon as you realize that life is about serving others in the Name of Jesus, the devil may try to trip you up with another lie. "There's so much to do," he says. "You have to get caught up!"

Please realize I believe in efficiency. Responsibility for tasks is critical. Organization is good. But you and I live in an environment that cries out, "Get the job done!" And in this environment, Satan tries to convince you it all depends on you to make sure everything gets accomplished. When this happens, your hope in the grace of God gets diverted from Him to how well you can check items off your to-do list.

"You have to get caught up!" is a lie that compels people to feverishly burn the midnight oil, never take a break, and refuse to disconnect from their electronic devices. It's a lie that piles guilt on every homemaker who can never get that storage room or closet cleaned out. It's a lie that makes you nervous about driving your newly washed car in the rain or using a room you just cleaned because then you'll get behind again.

Ultimately, it's a lie that hurts you deeply in the life God gives you. It's also a lie that drains you of your eternal hope. The truth is life this side of heaven always has more for us to do. Because we're alive and in relationship with others, laundry piles up, phone messages and e-mails accumulate, and new items keep getting added to our to-do list. The only time we'll

be finished, the only time we'll be caught up on this earth is when we die. But if God has more for us to do, we need to learn to live with not being caught up. Life is a dynamic flow of activity and relationships. But if the devil has his way, he will try to convince you that not being caught up equals failure. He will try to deceive you into believing that if you don't have everything finished, you're a disappointment. You're not successful. You're worthless. You have no reason to have any hope for your sorry life.

What a horrible lie! But it's easy to fall prey to this sneaky scheme. It's tempting to run ourselves into the ground, forsake our families, and become workaholics as we pursue the pipedream of having our inboxes empty, our laundry baskets unfilled, and our task list tossed in the trash. How does God restore your hope when you are running yourself ragged? He counteracts the devil's deception by letting you rest.

When the endless parade of things to do swamped His disciples, Jesus said to them: "Come with Me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" (Mark 6:31b). Rest doesn't simply mean a few extra hours of sleep or a week on a warm beach somewhere. Those are great things! But real rest is soul replenishment. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, restores your soul. He lets you take a break. He helps you see you're not God, and your hope is not in yourself or in how much you get done. Your hope is in your Savior who accomplished all things for you. True rest happens when you see that, contrary to Satan's lie, your value is not based on what you do, but on the price paid for you—the very life of Jesus given on the cross. In Him you are a new creation. You are forgiven. You are embraced with His love. You live a new life and have hope that lasts forever. Jesus gives true soul replenishment.

That is one reason God established a rhythm of rest with His people. Just as God rested when He created the world, He called His people to rest every week, to take a day to remember Him, read His Word, and to be encouraged by fellow believers. God allows us to be gathered as His church to reconnect with our eternal hope.

## **Battling the Great Deceiver**

So, you've almost made it through this complete booklet. Congratulations! Now you can put it down and get on with your day-to-day living, right? Not so quick. Please realize that at every moment the devil will try to lull you into a false sense of security. He will do his best to let you live a normal and uneventful life—all the while loading you up for collapse. Remember, his goal is to destroy you, to pull you away from Jesus, and to make you forget about your purpose in God's kingdom.

Once you complete your reading, the devil will hiss, "You can forget about me now." But beware! It's a lie. That's why I want to give you four basic strategies from God's Word that will help you live in Christ's victory over Satan. These are four gracious blessings from God that will help you remember the spiritual battle that is raging. These strategies will help make sure the great deceiver will not dominate your life even after you close this book.

### **Strategy 1 – Be self-controlled and alert**

1 Peter 5:8 says, "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." This verse is not asking you to get tough in life. It's asking you to receive the Spirit of God for your life.

Remember, self-control is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (see Galatians 5:22-23). The fruits of the Spirit are not qualities you earn or conjure up in your life. They are gifts. They are gifts given by the Spirit. How do you keep the Spirit in your life? One way is constant contact with God's Word. Ephesians 1:13 says, "And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit." God's Word and the Holy Spirit go together. The Holy Spirit testifies to what Jesus said. He brings us the truth of Christ (see John 14:26). In order to have self-control, you need to be hearing and reading the Bible.

How will you be alert and self-controlled when everything in life is wearing down your senses and weakening your spirit? Your key to being alert to Satan's attacks and being self-controlled under temptation is being rooted in God's Word of life.

### **Strategy 2 – Cast Your Cares**

1 Peter 5:7 says, "Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you." This strategy means prayer. Do you pray? I'm not just talking about saying grace before meals or reciting a bedtime prayer with your kids. Those are very good practices. But God gives us the gift of prayer. It's the blessing of a constant dialog with our Savior.

Note how Paul emphasized prayer as a key weapon of spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6:18-20:

“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the Gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.”

These verses sum up the “spiritual armor” section of Paul’s writing in Ephesians chapter six. In this short section, Paul mentions prayer four times! He says, “Always keep on praying.” The point is clear: your ongoing dialog with God is critically important to your spiritual survival.

In order to be ready for each day’s battle after you close this booklet, it is important for you to grow as a person who prays continually (see 1 Thessalonians 5:17). Constant conversation with God means He is always in the picture. You’re not driving Him away. You’re inviting Him to stay close—exactly where He wants to be. Prayer is not just for church. It is an intimate dialog with your Savior God who gladly takes your burdens and who tenaciously guards your every step.

### **Strategy 3 – Resist and Stand Firm**

1 Peter 5:9 says, “Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.” Here Peter lifts up community. You can resist and stand firm because you know you are not alone in your suffering. You can be comforted by the fact that everyone else out there isn’t running wild and having a good time. Everyone else isn’t enjoying smooth sailing. No, you have brothers and sisters in the faith who are going through the same things you are.

Are you thinking is there really that kind of closeness and encouragement at church? Maybe, but perhaps not. Churches struggle with conflict, priorities, and keeping things relevant. Churches are not perfect. But the God-established reasons for the church, and your participation in a church community, are critical for your spiritual survival! One reason the church has so many problems is because it is a primary target of Satan. Of course, he’s going to try to make it awful! Of course, he’s going to try to turn you off to it! Of course, he’s going to do his all to eliminate it from your life! But I ask you: will you let him? Or will you relentlessly pursue the community of faith? Will you receive the blessings of fellowship God gives? Will you contribute to the strength of the whole as you participate in the body?

You’ll be able to resist and stand firm as long as you are together with fellow believers.

### **Strategy 4 – Live in God’s Strength and Promise**

Again, we hear from Peter: “And the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast” (1 Peter 5:10). Peter witnessed this personally. After his denial and failure, Jesus graciously restored him. Peter was a living example of God’s strength and promise.

God does not give us imaginary stories to keep our minds occupied while Satan rages. He gives us Himself, His presence. We have the promise that one day the battles will be over. One day the victory proclamation will be heard by all in heaven and on earth and under the earth. One day all will bow at the Name of Jesus (see Philippians 2:10).

The only way I have been able to make it to this point in my life is through God’s strength and promise. That’s also the only way I can face the future. If you take a hard and realistic look at life, it is much too great a burden for anyone. Whether it is living in blessing or difficulty, we’re easy targets for Satan. The only way to make it through life is with the God of all grace. And isn’t it amazing He called us to receive His gifts of forgiveness and everlasting life, to walk with Him as we serve others and share His love, and to live out the most important purpose there can ever be on this earth: making His eternal difference in the lives of others?

That’s a perfect ending for this booklet and a perfect beginning for your life as you face tomorrow. And when that great day comes when we are all together before the throne of the Lamb, I look forward to seeing you. Just think, on that day, what the devil said will finally be true: we will be able to forget about him.

No lie.



As a pastor, Michael Newman has walked and prayed with people in their spiritual journeys for more than 25 years. As author of several books and Bible studies, he also enjoys communicating the gift of hope in Jesus Christ through preaching, teaching, and creative mission outreach. In his personal life, you'll find him hanging out with his family, reading a good book, and running the Texas roads. He currently serves as a mission and ministry facilitator in the Texas District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, working to share God's grace with people who need the Good News as the spiritual battle rages. He and his wife Cindy have been married since 1983. They have two daughters and a granddaughter.



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