

MISOPHIDIA

If you watched *The Passion of the Christ*, you may well remember the opening sequence. Jesus is in Gethsemane. The garden shrouded in fog. He is in an agony of prayer. Satan lurks in the shadows as Jesus prays, casting doubt on Jesus' identity, his purpose, and the possibility of one man's death atoning for the world's sin.

A snake slithers out from under Satan's robes and stalks the Christ. As the scene reaches its climax, Jesus stands resolute, locks eyes with Satan and violently stomps on the snake, crushing it with his heel.

The snake is a cinematic addition to the biblical record. The Gospels give clear hints about Satan's presence during the events surrounding Jesus' death. Jesus told those who came to arrest him, for instance, "...this hour and the power of darkness are yours" (Luke 22:53, NASV). He was talking about more than the time of night. Dark spiritual forces moved at will. But the Gospels do not tell us anything about a snake. Film director Mel Gibson includes it as a powerful metaphor of Satan's attempt to destroy Jesus.

The image is ancient, rooted in Scripture. It goes all the way back to the creation narratives: the origins of the universe, our world and all that is in it, the creation of humankind and their catastrophic fall into sin.

Adam and Eve live innocently in Eden, God's garden. They have everything they need and everything's the way it should be. And a snake was there, in that first garden – Satan masked as a reptile, insinuating his lies:

- that God's goodness can't be trusted
- that we are bulletproof – there are no consequences for disobedience
- that we can be like God – we can decide for ourselves about right and wrong.

Inverting God's order, Satan used a snake – a creature – to deceive Eve, humankind's co-regent over creation. Adam chose submission to Eve's initiative over obedience to God. And in a calamitous disaster, our first parents plunged the entire world into the chaos of sin. Guilt-ridden, shame-filled, Adam and Eve hid from God.

When God showed up, the lies were exposed. He asked, "What have you done?" Adam and Eve responded with finger-pointing and blame-shifting.

There would be consequences for Adam and Eve, each unique to their gender. Eve would suffer in childbearing and in her closest relationship with her husband. Adam would suffer in his work – his search for significance. They had consequences but they were not cursed.

The earth itself would be cursed because of what they did. All creation would suffer because it's co-regents had relinquished their authority to Satan.

But first, God had words for the snake – Gen. 3:14-15.

God did not interrogate the snake like he had Adam and Eve. He didn't invite him to give an account of himself. The enmity between God and his fallen Cherub was already ancient. God was not interested in anything Satan had to say.

The snake itself would bear consequences for having been Satan's tool. It had been the most crafty (*'arum*) of all the creatures (Gen. 3:1). In an obvious Hebrew play on words, the snake would now be the most cursed (*'arur*). Snakes would belly-crawl and eat dust. The consequence was a humiliation. Isaiah informs us that this state of humiliation continues even when Christ rules the earth. He writes: "The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food" (Isaiah 65:25).

There would also be an alienation: "...I will put enmity between you and the woman and

between her offspring and hers.”

How many of you are ophidiophobic? Ophidiophobia is fear of snakes. Once when the boys and I were grouse hunting out west I heard an angry buzzing in thick brush. My dog had stumbled onto a rattlesnake. My heart started pumping pure adrenalin. I was yelling at the dog to get back. The dog was trying to point the snake, and I was trying to get a clear shot at the snake without hitting the dog.

Humankind has not known many ophidiophiles – snake lovers. People who like snakes are decidedly in the minority.

But something more is going on here than our natural aversion to snakes. Look at v. 15 again.

God speaks to the serpent, but addresses Satan who energizes and animates the serpent. The enmity between the snake and his seed and the woman and her seed runs deeper than humankind’s fear of snakes. The crushing of head and heel implies more than snake bites and snake stomping.

Jewish Rabbis understood this. They saw in this passage an anticipation of God’s promised Messiah who would deal Satan the deadly blow that would lead to his eternal destruction.

The church fathers saw this as well. From very early in church history this verse has been called the *protoevangelium*, the “first Gospel.” Moses wrote beyond what he understood. God’s Holy Spirit inspired the words. The seed of the woman would find its ultimate referent in Jesus, the Christ child. Satan’s primal hatred at God would reach its peak when Jesus came to earth, born of a woman.

What happened when Jesus was born? Remember the story? Satan used King Herod in an attempt on Jesus’ life. Herod belonged to Satan’s seed. In the words of Scripture, like all of us, Herod “...followed the ways of this world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air” (Eph. 2:2). The ancient serpent used wily old King Herod to strike at Jesus’ heel.

At the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, Satan personally tried to dissuade and defeat him, tempting him in the wilderness. Throughout his ministry Jesus waged war against Satan and his seed – fallen spirits who demonized people. Jesus dismissed them, banished them, rebuked them, and none could lift a finger against him. Jesus set people free from satanic oppression and Satan was powerless to resist – until it was time for Jesus to offer himself for the sins of the world.

From the Garden of Gethsemane to the cross, Satan raged against Jesus. The hour of his death did indeed belong to the powers of darkness. The snake sunk its fangs into Jesus’ heel, and Jesus died. But the cross – that symbol of weakness, failure and death – would deliver the deadly blow that would crush Satan.

When Jesus died on the cross, Satan had done as much as he could do. It was a hollow triumph, an empty rage. The Bible says that Jesus “...shared in [our] humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (Heb. 2:14-15).

Jesus used Satan’s most powerful weapon against him. He absorbed death, and three days later, he rendered it impotent, rising from the grave.

In Colossians Paul said Jesus “disarmed the powers and authorities [the rulers of this world’s darkness], he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col. 2:15).

We have entered the age in which Satan’s power is broken. He lives with Christ’s heel poised over his head. He’s still free and he still works. The New Testament is filled with warnings against his methods. He prowls like a roaring lion, seeking prey to devour.

Martin Luther, in his great hymn, put it this way:

For still our ancient foe / doth seek to work us woe;
his craft and power are great, / and armed with cruel hate,
on earth is not his equal.

And though this world, with devils filled, / should threaten to undo us,
we will not fear, for God hath willed / his truth to triumph through us.

The Prince of Darkness grim, / we tremble not for him;
his rage we can endure, / for lo, his doom is sure;
one little word shall fell him.

That one little word is Jesus. John wrote: "...the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). We take the threat seriously. We pray, "Deliver us from the evil one." But we don't have to fear him.

Once again, we live between the "already" and the "not yet." Jesus defeated Satan and his seed, "triumphing over them by the cross." We're in the "already." But we still anticipate that day when "...the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan" will be bound and finally destroyed in the Lake of Fire prepared for him and his angels.

That's why the Apostle Paul could look back to Gen 3:15 and encourage Christ-followers in Rome with this promise: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Rom. 16:20). Because of what Christ did on the cross, Satan's "doom is sure."

The Christmas story is whispered in the desolation of the fall, when all in Eden was lost and humankind began its long journey in a cursed country under the bleak reign of a dark lord. God's word to Satan was one bright light of hope in an otherwise bleak landscape of curse and consequence and death.

What a curious text for Christmas.

In late grade school, my friends and I used to roam the hills surrounding the new subdivision where we lived. They were alive with garter snakes and blue-bellied lizards which we used to catch and bring home as trophies, thrilling our mothers and sisters.

Fancying myself as a great hunter in the tradition of the western Indian tribes, I decided to make a spear for killing snakes. I took a 16 penny nail and pounded the point flat with a ball-peen hammer on my dad's bench-top anvil. Then I tied it as securely as I could to an old broomstick. It was, I thought, an excellent weapon, superbly crafted for the task of dispatching reptiles.

It might have been ingenious for a fifth-grader, but I don't think I actually did any damage with it. It impressed my friends, but as a snake-killer, it proved inept.

Gen. 3:15, the *protoevangelium*, teaches us that Jesus, the Christ-child, came to kill a snake. He used nails. He crushed its head by taking the deadly blow to his heel.

"Fear not, then," said the angel, "Let nothing you affright,
This day is born a Savior, of a pure virgin bright,
To free all those who trust in him from Satan's power and might,
O tidings of comfort and joy!"