

Like Lightning, the Enemy Falls

Scriptures

Isaiah 66.10-16

Psalm 16.1-9

Galatians 6.1-18

Luke 10.1-20

Opening

And Jesus said, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.” Might as well begin there today. That’s an interesting verse. And these have been an interesting few weeks of readings, haven’t they? No walk in the park in this so-called ‘Ordinary Time’ with prophecies of judgment. It feels more like the end of the year than mid-summer, like Advent. Here is the Anglican version of Christmas in July, I suppose.

But let’s begin with the end of this episode because this is the most interesting observation Jesus makes in this story. And this single phrase works like a key, too, opening up his instructions and commission to the seventy and the oracles of judgment which precede it. And Jesus said (upon the return of the seventy from their short-term mission), “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.”

Satan Falling in the Present Moment

Return with me in your pew Bibles to Luke 10 on page 868, and jump towards the end of the episode at verse 18. Here is yet another example of a verse in the Bible where I discover I’ve only understand a fraction of its meaning. There is always a surplus of richness and meaning in the Scriptures and I discover each week how much more there is to see in the Word of God.

I have always interpreted Jesus' statement about Satan's fall from heaven to mean our Enemy's rebellion in heaven *before* the creation of the world. Prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel speak of Lucifer falling from his angelic innocence. Jesus may certainly have invoked the prophets when he spoke of Satan's fall, but a closer look reveals he wasn't speaking solely about Satan's fall in the *ancient* past, but in the recent past. As in these past few days preceding the apostles' rendezvous with the Lord Jesus.

Our English Bible records the Lord saying, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." But the New American Standard Version renders this verse more closely to Luke's original Greek, "I *was watching* Satan fall from heaven like lightning."

Jesus says this right after the seventy apostles returned from the villages of northern Israel, when they celebrated, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name."

Jesus' reply was essentially, "Yes I saw it happening, too, behind the veil of heaven. I saw Satan falling *at the same time* when you confronted evil in my Name." When these 35 pairs (Jesus sent them two by two) returned from the field, they gave their report of confronting the strongholds of evil, and Jesus gave them *his* report from heavenly realms, events that happened simultaneously as they proclaimed the Kingdom of God in Galilean villages.

Interlude

It hasn't been too long since we read and preached on Revelation for consecutive Sundays. The Spirit brought the Apostle John into heaven, pulled the veil back to see events of the future that would take place. Well, Jesus tells his apostles what he saw behind the veil of heaven when they announced the Kingdom of God with words and signs and wonders. Where the Enemy of God held a position of authority in some places, he fell like lightning when the apostles carried out Jesus' work.

With that perspective I want to read this story backwards, as it were, briefly commenting on three features from this story. These themes are the factors which lead to Satan's downfall in these places:

- The Nature of Spiritual Authority
- Hostility and Opposition to Jesus' Kingdom of Peace

- The Urgency of the Invitation

The Nature of Spiritual Authority

First of all, notice that Jesus sends 70, not just the 12 disciples. There's a bit of a debate about whether the number was 72 or 70. Original manuscripts of Luke's Gospel differ on this (footnote in ESV mentions this). I follow most of the scholars who say 70 because there's a strong echo between this moment and another major event in Israel's history. When Israel comes to Mt Sinai after the Exodus, God tells Moses to bring 70 elders to join him on Sinai to come into the presence of God. Later, those same 70 elders receive the same spirit, the spiritual authority given to Moses by God, upon themselves *to share the work of leading* his people.

Just as Moses led an exodus from oppression with the help of 70 elders, so Jesus leads a new exodus with the help of 70 apostles. It's not just the twelve disciples who alone will be the successors of Jesus' ministry. There's a wider circle of spiritual authority.

It's not just pastors and ordained folk who do the work of ministry. We read this passage at ordination services all the time, but I think it belongs at baptism or confirmation services, too. Confirmation isn't just a rite of passage, it's not just a ceremony to say "I'm fully Anglican now." It's a sacrament of strengthening and protection by the Holy Spirit because God sends his Spirit-filled people to take down the strongholds of the Enemy. "I was watching Satan fall like lightning from heaven."

Here's what I find interesting about this group of 70. We don't learn their names. But we know they travel into spiritual battle *together*, two by two. Our pictures of spiritual authority have become so distorted in our time.

Think how the phrase 'celebrity pastor' sounds when you read Jesus' commission to 70 *anonymous* apostles, sent in pairs. American Christians have followed so-called solo celebrity pastors, then we're saddened when time and again "celebrity pastors" succumb to the way of sin. Satan's strongholds don't fall when apostles want fame and notoriety. Satan's strongholds don't fall when apostles go it alone.

When spiritual strongholds fall, you often see God working in pairs. God gave Aaron to Moses in the downfall of Egyptian power. Paul and Silas were singing hymns together in jail when the Lord

brought an earthquake, setting the captives free. Iron sharpens iron, not only in spiritual friendship, but serving and proclaiming the Gospel together in places of spiritual darkness.

And there's much to be said for quietly growing strong in the Lord in obscurity. (The older I become the more I'm drawn to obscure saints. Stories you don't often hear, names that don't sell a lot of books, spiritual leaders who were meek and weak. One of my spiritual heroes is a little Serbian priest named Elder Thaddeus. I've mentioned him before, but we can never hear stories of saints like him too often.

Thaddeus suffered continual health in his younger years, only eating a diet of bread, onions, and cucumbers because of weak stomach. He battled pulmonary problems his whole life. When he became a monk, he was a liability in the practical needs of his monastery. He was first assigned to guard the monastery vineyards, but he often fell asleep and robbers came in and stole the grapes. He was then assigned to guard flocks of sheep and goats. Again he fell asleep and when he awoke, he saw only one old goat. He was reassigned a third time to take care of the cows. It was not sleep, but reading that distracted the young Thaddeus this time. No matter, the cows were off to another pasture. After this the abbot sent him to work in the kitchen.

He was often sick, weak, and consumed with anxious thoughts. Thaddeus suffered two nervous breakdowns, mental suffering that doctors could not heal, but an affliction the Holy Spirit would heal in time. With meekness, humility, and dependence he learned to submit every thought to the lordship of Christ. Through his suffering, he became strong in the unseen warfare of the soul. He became abbot of Vitovnica monastery and because he acquired such power of spiritual perception, streams of ordinary Christian pilgrims began seeking Thaddeus' counsel in the 1980s, especially parents seeking wisdom in the rearing of children. From morning to night, he counseled people. Buses would come from cities because so many people were spiritually hungry and thirsty for peace. He suffered two heart attacks in the 90s because he received so many pilgrims and their problems. Still he kept going, offering the peace of Christ in his weakness. That is spiritual authority that comes from the Holy Spirit and humility. And that kind of authority overcomes the Enemy's grip on the saints of God.

Hostility and Opposition to Jesus' Kingdom of Peace

When we read this story of the seventy backwards, we also see that apostles enduring opposition and open hostility led to signs and wonders. "I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves." How's that for a disclaimer?

Jesus prepares them for hostility and rejection. It is not a matter of if, but when. But when rejected or attacked, we do not fight evil with evil. Hateful words cannot silence toxic speech. We bear witness of a King whose Kingdom is peace. This kingdom has sent us to do heal in Jesus' Name what is diseased and bruised and broken.

The desert fathers would teach us that when we encounter a deep-seated anger or hostility from another person, we ought to remember that the real adversary is *not* the person in front of us. The source of hostility is the unseen, evil spirit of anger, division, or dissension provoking that person's mind or soul. Don't get me wrong, we are all responsible for our actions. But Jesus ever teaches us to see the real Enemy we are fighting.

Which means that the weapons of this conflict are not airtight arguments, but the Gospel of grace, peace, and healing in the Name of Jesus. It is the Name of Jesus that cast down the demons that afflicted the towns and villages of Galilee. It is the Name of Jesus that should be our constant cry in prayer over our city, our ZIP codes, our neighborhoods. Yes, there will be opposition and even hostility; yes, our culture is becoming and *will become* more secular; but remember the first word an apostle declares on his or her mission: Peace be to this house.

That's the word we've been given by the Lord Jesus. We do not offer some generic or vague peace, but peace in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Or to use the Jewish term for peace, 'shalom.' Shalom begins in the heart, receiving peace and reconciliation with God. But God's shalom brings peace all around you, especially to the poor, the disadvantaged, the despairing, the downtrodden. When we exchange the peace of Christ every Sunday, it's both real and sacramental in that moment, and it's also a dress rehearsal for apostles in the week to come—to bring the peace of Christ in our neighborhoods and wherever we go in this city.

Maybe the Lord will call you to speak those very same words to someone this week, "Peace of Christ to you." Or maybe you offer the peace of Christ without words. However and wherever you go, whatever you speak or do, we come offering the peace of Christ.

The Urgency of the Invitation

Finally, we consider the urgency of the apostles' work. Throughout their commission, Jesus communicates simplicity and urgency. This short-term mission probably would have lasted about a month's time, but this would be the last time Jesus passed through the region before he goes to the cross. Thus the simple, urgent commission: "Carry no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals, and

greet no one on the road.” That last one rings the chimes of introverts. They’re like, ‘The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God! You mean Jesus says I don’t have to talk to everyone?’

Actually, yes, but for different reasons than you think. Greetings of fellow travelers along the road would be normal, social codes in Middle Eastern life. Basically these greetings were required small talk, but small talk that could take up a lot of time. Jesus tells his apostles, ‘don’t waste your time with social courtesies.’ You know, why? Because Satan holds a seat of comfort in these places where I’m sending you. He’s holding hearts and minds and souls captive.

Now these instructions were specific to this short-term mission, so that doesn't mean we have to always be in a hurry. Jesus gives specific commission to *these 70* for *this* mission. When Jesus sends the 12 disciples after his resurrection, the Great Commission sounds a bit different. But there is also the sense from the Lord’s instructions here that we don’t have endless opportunities to respond to the Gospel. Remember—this was the final time Jesus was passing through Galilee before he went to the cross. No one is assured of tomorrow. This is why the writer of the Hebrews also said, ‘Today is the day of salvation.’

If we have been entrusted with the Gospel; if we have been baptized, sealed, and confirmed with the Holy Spirit, we are sent forth with an urgent message—to receive peace and healing in the Name of the Lord Jesus. I wonder if we ought to be speaking of peace and healing in our time as much as we speak about ‘being saved.’ To be saved *is* to know peace and healing in Jesus Christ. And I think it’s pretty obvious the Enemy’s greatest strongholds in our time are the evil spirits of division, dissension, and brokenness in personal relationships. We know that the Name of Jesus Christ can break the power of these evil spirits and heal what is broken.

What this means for apostles in our time is that we must be people concerned with what matters most in life. If we are living our lives at a surface level, afraid of conversations about what matters most, which is life and peace with Jesus Christ, then we need to ask the Lord to fill us with boldness of his Holy Spirit. What conversations might I need to have in my family for the sake of peace and healing? How might I become more available to non-believing friends and offer the peace of Christ, first in my presence and also with my words?

If we live with Gospel boldness, we very well might hear and see the downfall of spiritual strongholds in *this* time in this place. Jesus said, “I *was watching* Satan fall like lightning.” Jesus is the Author of our salvation, yet it is his good pleasure to include us in his Kingdom mission, bringing peace and healing to his world.

To Christ Alone Belongs the Vision of Victory

But you know what's most beautiful part in Jesus' vision of Satan's fall from heaven? No one else could have handled it. They would have become proud and sought glory for themselves, which would lead to *their* fall. Only Jesus could see that heavenly vision and remain humble, seeking the glory of his Father more than the glory of this victory. Which is why Jesus said, "Do not rejoice that the demons are subject to you, but that your names are written in the book of heaven." For it is not spiritual authority that gives us meaning, but life with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is how we are healed; this is how we receive eternal peace. Not to us, O Lord, not to us; but to your Name be glory forevermore. Amen.