

Like a Flash of Lightning¹

Introduction

Have you ever seen Satan fall from heaven? What do you think Jesus might have meant when he said these words? What did it look like when Satan fell from heaven?

On the surface, it seems so simple. When I used to work in construction installing windows, I saw a guy fall off a ladder once. He was leaning out a bit farther than he should have to try to cut some caulking, and the ladder just began to slip, so he sort of jumped away from it. He managed to land on his feet, and he was fine, but it could have been worse. He could have been really hurt, and we would have had to go to the hospital. Is this the kind of scenario that Jesus had in mind when he said that Satan fell from heaven?

I'm not sure. Maybe there are some other questions that we need to ask first. Like, what caused Satan to fall? And what was Satan doing in heaven in the first place? Isn't Satan the great enemy of God?

Scholars are divided about what Jesus meant by this saying. Part of the problem is: the Bible doesn't really have a lot to say about Satan, or the fall of Satan. The Christian tradition has conflated stories about Lucifer with Satan and the Devil, but the Bible doesn't actually say make this point. The Bible doesn't say much about Satan at all.

So was Jesus talking about a one-time event in the past? Some apocryphal stories (2 Enoch) tell of a war in heaven, a war between the angels who remain loyal to God, led by Michael, and the rebellious angels, led by Lucifer, whose name means morning star." Isaiah seems to mention this same story, when he says in chapter 14,

How you are fallen from heaven,
O Day Star, son of Dawn!
How you are cut down to the ground,
you who laid the nations low!
You said in your heart,
‘I will ascend to heaven;
I will raise my throne
above the stars of God;

So is this battle what Jesus was referring to when he said he watched Satan fall?

Or maybe he was prophesying about a future event. Was Jesus looking forward to the future defeat of Satan, depicted in the book of Revelation? Perhaps Jesus was so certain of the outcome that he could speak about it as a past event, even though it was still in the future.

Other scholars are less inclined to view the fall of Satan as a single event. Maybe the fall of Satan is a perpetual event: in the grand scheme of the cosmos, Satan is always falling from Heaven. Or maybe it's a repeating cycle: Satan falls from heaven over and over again. Every time Satan says in his heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God," then God puts Satan back in his place.

What could Jesus have meant when he said that he saw Satan fall from heaven?

1 This sermon was partially inspired by Brian Volck's blog post at <http://www.eklesiaproject.org/blog/2016/06/snaring-satan>

Hebrew / OT Understanding of (the) Satan

Before we try to unpack this passage, we need to remember that the ancient Hebrews and the people of Jesus' time had a different picture of the cosmos than we do. This isn't to say that they were somehow wrong, and we are right. But it's also not saying that they were right and we are wrong. It's just that we have different pictures. So, if we want to understand the truth of the story, we need to try to understand it on their terms. Only then can we try to figure out how to express that same truth today.

The ancient Hebrews understood Satan as having a rightful place in the heavenly court. The word "satan" literally means, "adversary" or "accuser." It is a legal term. It's probably better to think of it as a title. *The satan*. The prosecutor.

We can see this most clearly in the book of Job. Why is the satan going around looking for people to test? Well, because that's the task that God has given the satan. In the same way, why does Canada have lawyers who act as the prosecution and police officers who investigate crime? In order to maintain justice. This is the job of the satan, the chief prosecutor: to bring the accusation of wrongdoing to the heavenly courtroom, where God, the judge, decides whether a crime has actually been committed. If the accused is found to be guilty, then God (the judge) pronounces a sentence.

In this picture of the world, the satan is not God's great enemy, but in fact God's partner. The satan is God's agent of justice.

But the problem, from a human perspective, is that the satan has a suspicious mind, and he sees crimes against God everywhere. He is perhaps too good at his job, and, in his zeal to bring accusations, the satan has become the great enemy of humanity. That is why you will never see a positive reference to the satan in the bible. The satan is against us, constantly trying to accuse us before God.

The satan is not God's adversary, but humanity's.

The Mission of the Seventy(-Two)

With this in mind, let's look again at Luke chapter 10.

In the previous chapter, Jesus had just sent out twelve disciples on a similar mission. Twelve was an important number in that culture. It was the number of the original tribes of Israel, and it represented the people of God. The twelve had returned successfully, and now Jesus was sending out another group. Many of our earliest manuscripts say seventy, but many others say seventy-two. Every commentary I read discusses this point. Does it matter?

Well, in the same way that the number twelve was important, the number seven was also important. The number seven represented wholeness, completeness, or perfection. We see this number all throughout scripture, notably, in Genesis, in the seven days of creation and later, in Revelation, we read about the seven spirits of God. And ten. Ten is the number that represents humanity. So when you multiply seven by ten, you get seventy: which can either symbolize the whole of humanity, or perfect humanity.

In Genesis chapter 10, the number of nations which descended from Noah was seventy, or seventy-two according to the Septuagint. And according to one legend from outside the Bible, after the collapse of the Tower of Babel there were seventy-two languages in the world. When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, it took seventy translators, and for that reason it is called the Septuagint.

In Numbers chapter 11, Moses called seventy elders to receive the Spirit and prophesy. But two others

that Moses didn't call, Eldad and Medad, were back at the camp and they were already prophesying. The leaders complained to Moses about these two unauthorized prophets. But Moses said to them: "I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!" So the seventy became seventy-two.

The number seventy(-two) tells us that there is a radical democratization going on in this passage. We see a movement from Jesus to the twelve to the seventy(-two). It symbolizes all the tribes of the earth, not just the twelve tribes of Israel. The number seventy(-two) causes us to remember Moses words: "I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them." And then we are immediately cast into the future, to Pentecost: when the Lord did indeed pour his Spirit out on all nations.

The miracle of Pentecost was that Babel was undone: the seventy-two languages were able to understand each other once again. And so when we read the number seventy(-two), in Luke chapter 10, we should hear this as foreshadowing of Pentecost.

The Satan's Fall from Heaven

So what does all this have to do with the Satan's fall from heaven?

When Jesus sent out the seventy(-two), he didn't give them detailed instructions about what to say. But he told them *how* they were to go about their mission. The medium is the message, and the way in which they were to proclaim the kingdom of God was itself the message of the kingdom of God.

Jesus told the seventy(-two) that they must not take anything with them. They were to completely rely on the hospitality of the townspeople. They were not to abuse this hospitality by moving from one house to another in the same town. Rather, they were to stay for a short time, and then move on. They weren't to bring weapons to defend themselves. They were to say, "Peace to this house," and if they were rejected, they did not bring vengeance or a sword.

Here we see the disciples acting exactly opposite to the Satan. They did not bring accusations. They were not adversaries. Instead, they were emissaries of peace.

10:5-6 "Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you."

10:8-9 "Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'"

10:10-11 "But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.'"

Their message was the same, regardless of the response from the town: "The kingdom of God has come near to you." This is a good news message. It is a message of reconciliation, and it begins with pronouncing peace.

The seventy(-two) were sent out into the world to offer peace, and to announce the Kingdom of God. In this way, they unravelled the work of the Satan. They healed the sick. They announced peace. They gratefully received what was offered. They refused to spread slander. They did not turn to scapegoating and violence. And when they returned to Jesus, they were rejoicing because of their success.

In response, Jesus told them that he watched the Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.

Some people think that Jesus was rebuking the disciples for their pride, or warning them. But I don't think Jesus was rebuking them or warning them at all. He was completely rejoicing with them, and he was translating their joy, which was rooted in earthly success, onto a divine plane. "You are happy because you had some success in this mission I sent you on. But I tell you, you did something even greater than you knew. You helped defeat the satan. Henceforth, the satan is cast out of heaven."

I believe that the mission of the seventy(-two) is what brought about the downfall of the satan. As the disciples went around proclaiming peace and announcing the kingdom of God, the accuser no longer had anything to do in heaven.

And yet the satan did not simply go away and die. The satan continued to show up even after Jesus declared that the satan had fallen from heaven.

If you read the book of Luke and it's sequel, the book of Acts, this is actually only the first of six times that the satan is mentioned. There is a reference to the devil in Luke 4, when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, and in Luke 8, in the parables of the sower and the seeds. But this is the first time the satan is actually mentioned.

Because of this, we should see the mission of the seventy(-two) as the beginning (not the end) of the war against the satan. As they went around offering peace and declaring the nearness of God, the satan was cast out of heaven. But the accuser continues to wander the earth, sowing discord and division among humanity. And we continue to fight this war today.

Like a Flash of Lightning

I once watched Satan fall.

A number of years ago, I attended a different church, and I was involved in planning some of the worship services. I had graduated from an undergrad degree in theology, but I was just starting to learn about the peace tradition. At this point, all my knowledge came from books; I had no one to teach me.

So as November 11 came near, I decided to focus on peace in the Sunday worship service. At the time, I didn't even know that Mennonites called this day Peace Sunday! I was figuring it all out for myself. I was young, and I was convinced that I was right. I decided to channel Leo Tolstoy from the 18th International Peace Congress in 1909, and I said that all killing is murder, even if it happens during a war, even if the state orders it. We had an interesting discussion.

After the service, some friends of mine wanted to keep talking so we went out to get something to eat on Whyte ave. But my friend challenged me. I think his grandfather had been a veteran of one of the world wars. Was I really saying that his grandfather was a murderer? I told him that not all soldiers killed, but that if he did kill, yes, it would be murder. I don't remember clearly, but I think I got angry. I know I raised my voice as the conversation went around and around. We talked for so long, but we didn't really get anywhere. I was so right!

Eventually we paid for our food and left. Our cars were parked in the same direction, and we walked down Whyte ave in silence. I was stewing. As we came to the corner where we were to separate, my friend stopped me. I was about to cross the street, and he put his hand on my shoulder. He shook my hand, and it became a hug. It was like a flash of lightning! And I watched Satan – the accuser, the adversary – fall.

Conclusion

As a church, we live in the season of Pentecost, the age of the Spirit. Our time is not the time of the incarnation, or of advent. We do not see and touch Jesus as the first disciples did. Our only access to Jesus is through the Spirit. And this is why the season after Pentecost is the longest season in the church calendar. It is the season in which the Church lives. And just like summer for farmers, Pentecost is the season for work. But what is our work?

Our work is to continue to defeat the satan on earth, just as Jesus defeated the satan in heaven.

The mission of the seventy(-two) was the prelude to Pentecost, and it foreshadowed the purpose of Pentecost. As the Spirit spread from Jesus to the twelve to the seventy-two, even to us and to the ends of the earth, we participate in the overthrow of the satan.

We do not live in the age of the accuser, but in the age of the Spirit, whom Christ called the Comforter and the Advocate. Satan is indeed the great prosecutor, but in the heavenly courtroom, the judge himself has become our defender. The judge has become the counsellor for the defence. *So then what accusation can succeed?* It's a miscarriage of justice at the highest levels – and this is good news for us! It is gospel.

So as we leave and go into our weeks, let us go remembering and proclaiming that the kingdom of God has come near. I know this for sure, because I once watched Satan fall. It was like a flash of lightning.