

DIABOLICAL VANISHING ACT

NEWS: [COMMENTARY](#)



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*The following excerpt is adapted from author Matt Walsh's latest book, **Church of Cowards: A Wake-Up Call to Complacent Christians**.*

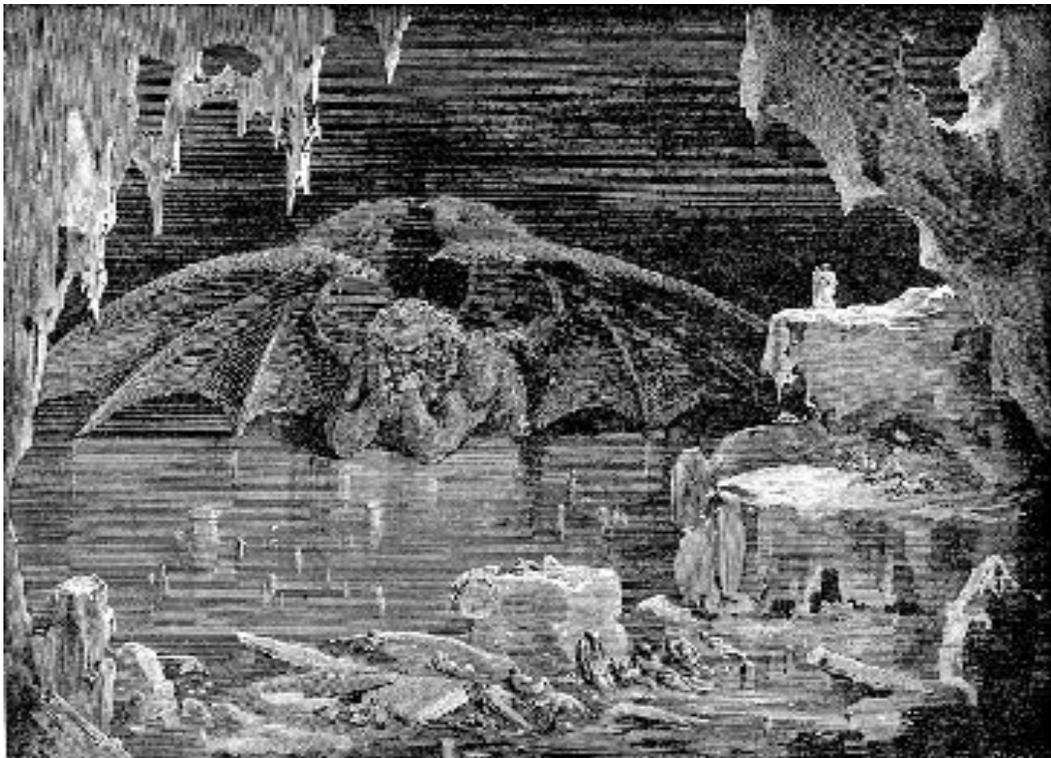
"Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." 1 Peter 5:8



Matt Walsh

I do not want to spend an exorbitant amount of time discussing the Devil, as I agree with C.S. Lewis that it is an error to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in demons. I hope this essay is not excessive or unhealthy. But I also agree with Lewis that the other error we can make, an equal and opposite one, is to disbelieve in demons entirely. It is this error, and not the former, that most Christians in America seem to be making. This error is key in putting us on the wide road to destruction, because it tells us that there is no destruction. That is certainly a most attractive delusion, and perhaps the easiest to fall into, because the person we are disbelieving wants us to disbelieve him. It is difficult to ignore someone if he is sitting in the room next to you and does not want to be ignored. It is not difficult if he is hiding under the bed.

A 2009 survey found that a majority of Christians believe — "strongly" or at least "somewhat" — that Satan is "not a living being but a symbol of evil." Another 8% don't know what they believe. Almost 10% only disagree "somewhat" with the idea that Satan is not real. That leaves just a quarter of American Christians who, according to this poll, totally accept the biblical teaching on this subject. It seems that most Christians would tend to side with Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor, who, in a 2014 interview with Religion News Service, said that the Devil is merely a "force for death." On the question of his literal existence, the prominent minister and theologian is agnostic. United Church of Christ pastor Paul Lance recently informed his flock that the Devil is a "superstition."



Depiction of Satan from Dante's *Inferno*

But the United Church of Christ is nothing more than a heresy factory these days, so it probably isn't fair to hold that pastor up as an example. Indeed, most priests and pastors of

other denominations will not be as direct in their denial of Satan's existence. It is, rather, an implicit denial. A denial by omission. Whether or not they personally believe in some sort of Devil, they largely refrain from discussing him in their sermons. And whether their congregations answer "yes" or "no" when some survey taker asks about this evil spirit, most of them think and live as though the Devil of scripture is nothing but a symbolic illustration or a kind of fictional mascot. For them, Satan is to evil what Tony the Tiger is to Frosted Flakes.

Satan in the Bible

In truth he is much more than that. **Scripture is unambiguous about the reality of Satan, his aims and his fate.** We first meet Satan in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1) precipitating the Fall of all mankind by tempting Eve to defy God. In St. Augustine's view, the first reference to demons comes even before the serpent in the Garden.

He argued that the angels must have been made on the first day of Creation when God created the light, "saw that it was good" and "separated [it] from the darkness." Given that this occurs before the formation of the sun and all the stars, Augustine took this to be the light of goodness, which was divided from the darkness of evil after Satan and his legions rebel.

"Michael Casts Out All of the Fallen Angels,"
Gustav Doré, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

Ezekiel tells us of an "anointed guardian cherub" who was made good and "blameless," but became "unrighteous." In Ezekiel 28:16, God says to Satan, "So I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God, and I destroyed you, O guardian cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire." Job 4:18 refers to this same event: "Behold He put no trust in His servant; and His angels He charged with folly."



The New Testament is full of clear — and often terrifying — references to a personal demonic being who commands an army of evil spirits. It is no surprise that the powers of Hell should have come into greater focus when Our Lord was walking on the earth in physical form. As God burst into our realm, so did the forces of evil to meet Him.

Saint Paul underscores the point with urgency: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand" (Ephesians 6:12-13). Saint Peter says that the angels who "sinned" were put in "chains of darkness to be held for judgment" (2 Peter 2:4).

We should not take the demons' "chains" to mean that they are confined to one corner of the universe, where they can do us no harm. The Bible is clear that Satan is active in our world. The "gloomy darkness" is this world, of which, according to Christ, Satan is the "ruler" (John 12:31). In fact, Christ interacts with Satan and his minions throughout the gospel accounts. He is shown driving out demons at various points, most notably in Mark 5:1-13, a passage that deserves to be quoted in full:



"Satan Descends Upon Earth," Gustav Doré John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him. This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God's name don't torture me!" For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you impure spirit!" Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"

"My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many." And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. The demons begged Jesus, "Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them." He gave them permission, and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

Here we learn that demons can enter into a human body, that they are numerous and that thousands may occupy one body at a time. We also get a glimpse of the horror of Hell: These demonic creatures would rather be cast into a herd of swine than be sent back to the fires of eternal torment. It is a disturbing and confounding passage, yet it pales in comparison to Satan's first appearance in the New Testament.

Lessons From the Temptation of Christ

We are told that before He began His public ministry, Jesus retreated for 40 days into the desert, days where he encountered



"Christ in the Desert," Ivan Kramskoi

Satan. Luke 4:3–13 describes the episode this way:

The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone.'"

The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and

splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. If you worship me, it will all be yours."

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here. For it is written:

'He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered, "It is said: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

It is important to note how Luke begins his account of the temptation. He says that Christ "was led" to the desert by the Holy Spirit "to be tempted by the Devil." We are meant to understand that Jesus was not caught off guard by any of this. It was no sneak attack by Satan — at least not a successful ambush. Our Lord went out there to meet him and engage with him. And He did actually engage. He could have swatted the Devil away like a fly. He could have denied the Evil One permission to approach Him in the first place. Instead, He talks to him. He seems almost to humor him.

I think there must be at least two reasons for this: First, Jesus was wholly human and wholly divine. To be human, He had to drink fully from the cup of human experience. And there is no experience more human than temptation. Second, I think it was strategic. Jesus revealed and exposed Satan to us. He drew the snake out from under the rock so that we could learn something about him and how he operates.

What did we learn? Well, we learned foremost that the Devil is real. He does exist. He is operating in this world. Jesus leaves us no room to be mistaken about the situation. He is almost shouting to us from the pages of Scripture, saying, "Look, you fools! Wake up! Here he is, doing his dastardly work." I have heard some people speculate that Christ's temptation was an internal, not external, event. In this view Satan is just a personification of Christ's mental and spiritual struggle against His own dark urges. But Christ had no dark urges. We who are merely human experience temptation internally because we are fallen and corrupted. There are little cracks in our soul through which evil can enter and do its work inside of us. Dostoevsky wrote that the battlefield where God and the devil fight is the heart of man.

Indeed, my heart is a battlefield, where my lower nature constantly wars against my higher nature. God guides me one way, but Satan entices me to go the opposite direction.



Matt Walsh: "Yet the Sacred Heart of Jesus is not a place where the Devil can operate."

Yet the Sacred Heart of Jesus is not a place where the Devil can operate. Christ has no flaws for the Enemy to use as a foothold. He is uncorrupted and unfallen. Satan tempted Christ externally because that was his only option. You and I may feel enticed within ourselves to commit evil so that, for us, "temptation" means "the desire to do evil." Jesus, though, cannot be enticed to evil. He can have no desire to sin. Sin can only work on Christ from the outside, and then only so far as He permits. And Christ permitted sin to do quite a number on Him. He permitted it to nail Him to the cross. But sin never touched His heart. It never defiled Him from within, as it has done to me and to you. So Christ's temptation can only be read exactly as it is written. Satan, a real creature, approached Jesus Christ and, in his insatiable pride, tried to tempt the Son of God.

Next, we learn about the categories of temptation that Satan will use against us. Satan tempted Christ to turn stones into bread, appealing to appetite. Then Satan tempted Christ to worship him, the Devil, in exchange for all of the wealth and power in the world, appealing to the desire for wealth and power. Then, appealing to pride, Satan tempted Christ to fling Himself off a precipice so that the angels would come and rescue Him, thus demonstrating His magnificence and glory to the masses. It seems that Satan seeks to make us gluttons, materialists, or egoists. He will settle for just one, but often he has no problem convincing us to be all three.

Next, we learn how to handle these salvos from the Devil. Christ responded to each temptation by quoting scripture. This, again, was for our benefit. Our Lord didn't need to get into a theological debate with Satan. He didn't need to provide the Devil with any exegetical justifications for His actions. But He, the Word, leans on the Word, because that is what we must do when the Devil comes knocking on our door. Jesus is warning us not to rely on our own understanding, our own will, or our own strength when the forces of darkness are scheming

against us. All we can do or should do is cleave to God, His Word, and His Righteousness. The Devil cannot carry us away when we are hugging tightly to the Lord. He cannot claim us when we are huddled under the cross.

"Fall of the Rebel Angels," Agostino Fasolato



The Fruits of Evil

That is why it is important to acknowledge the reality of the Devil. It is not that Lucifer deserves any sort of respect or recognition. It is rather that he cannot be resisted unless he has been recognized. William Lane Craig says that the primary work of demons, their main activity from now until the end-times, is to "destroy the servants of God." Their second goal, according to Craig, is to blind unbelievers to the truth of the gospel. But it is apparent that Satan likes to combine these tactics. The Prince of Darkness would prefer to have everyone in the dark. He has set off a giant smoke screen in our culture, obscuring our view of everything — especially of himself. It is hard enough to fight an enemy you cannot see. It is impossible to fight an enemy you don't think exists.

But even with all of Satan's efforts to remain undercover, still it seems counterintuitive that Christians in our day would deny his existence. There is, after all, so much evidence of that fact. G. K. Chesterton observed that original sin is one of the only empirically provable Christian doctrines. The existence of demonic spirits would seem to be another. Indeed, denying the Devil in modern society is like denying germs in a sick ward or wind in a hurricane. The thing itself may be invisible to our eyes, but we are surrounded by its effects. We cannot see its form, but we can see its fruits.

All you have to do is turn on the news or go online. The Devil is always in the headlines, though not by name. Every year brings new school shootings and other mass casualty events. There is terrorism. There is oppression and persecution across the globe. There are unspeakable crimes against children, especially those committed by clergy.

The sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church is a giant, blinking neon sign announcing to all the world: "The Devil Exists." It is simply not possible that men could be so evil on their

own. An infamous grand jury report in 2017 detailed some of the alleged behavior of priests in Pennsylvania. The only word you can use to describe the content of that report is "demonic." In one alleged case, a boy was forced to stand naked, posing like Christ on the cross while priests took pictures and added them to a collection of child pornography that they produced and distributed on the campus of the church. These priests would mark boys who were being groomed for abuse by giving them gold crosses to wear.

In another case, a priest raped a young girl and arranged for her to get an abortion. His bishop heard about the situation and wrote a letter of condolence — to the priest.

In another case, a priest molested a boy over the course of two years, admitted to church officials that he had engaged in naked "horseplay" with the child, and yet was allowed to continue in ministry for seven more years.

In another case, a priest raped a little girl while he was visiting her in the hospital.

In another case, a priest forced a boy to give him oral sex and then washed the boy's mouth with holy water.

In another case, a priest molested a 12-year-old boy and admitted his crime to a church official, but the diocese ruled that the abuse wouldn't "necessarily be a horrendous trauma" to the victim.

Most cases of abuse in the church are probably not as horrific as the ones described above. But these sensational examples show us the truly diabolical nature of the crimes. You can see the Devil leaping from the pages when you read them. And it's not surprising that clergy would fall so deeply under demonic influence. I believe it was St. Athanasius who first said, "The floor of Hell is paved with the skulls of bishops." Saint John Chrysostom is purported to have said, "The road to Hell is paved



Photo of gold cross that would be given to altar boys targeted by a ring of predator priests in the Pittsburgh diocese, to mark them as vulnerable to sexual grooming and abuse

with the bones of priests and monks, and the skulls of bishops are the lamp posts that light the path."

Religious leaders will attract special attention from Satan. If they are weak, he will topple them with ease. The higher on the ladder they have climbed, the farther they will fall. It takes an angel to make a demon, after all. That is another Christian doctrine that seems to be verified by experience. Christians believe that demons were made from the stuff of angels, and Lucifer, before his fall, was higher in the angelic hierarchy than any of them. The principle at work here is simple: Terribly beautiful things become terribly ugly when corrupted. Men in positions of great power will either be heroes or villains, without

much room in between. Men who climb the closest to God can end up being the farthest away if they are not careful.



David and Louise Turpin, convicted and sentenced for torturing and abusing their 13 children (*CBS News*)

Of course, there are many other examples of demonic evil in the world. For better or worse, our 24-hour news cycle keeps us abreast of all of it. There was the married couple in California who tortured, abused and starved their 13 children. There was the man in Georgia convicted of murder after purposefully leaving his toddler to die in a hot car. There was the mother in Texas who was sentenced to 40 years in jail for trying to sell her two-year-old daughter into sex slavery. And on and on. These cases of the darkest and bleakest sorts of evil should bring Satan clearly into view. Who can look at such acts and doubt the influence of the demonic?

In one of the starkest cases in recent memory, in 2017 a man shot and killed 58 people from his hotel room in Las Vegas. Police investigated the attack for eight months and never found a

motive. It seems as though the man just up and decided to slaughter dozens of human beings one day, and so he did. But nothing is done without motive. The problem is that you can't find the motive for these kinds of things by looking on the surface. If you investigate the problem deeper down, closer to its root, you hear the phrase that Jeremiah accuses Israel of shouting to the Lord, which is the same phrase that tradition attributes to Lucifer when he rebelled against God: "I will not serve."

We cannot find a clear motive for the basest of evils because there is no motive outside of itself. It is evil for evil's sake. Satan goes down because God goes up. Satan swerves left because God swerves right. Satan seeks to be (though, because he lacks God's power, can never truly succeed in being) God's antithesis. He does what is bad because God does what is good. And those who are most firmly in his grasp will act most explicitly with the same diabolical logic.

Lower Things

Atheists will point to all of this evil and use it as evidence against God's existence. They will insist that no truly good or loving God would allow such things to happen. A good God, they say, would reach out His hand and stop evil in its tracks. They do not understand that God made us free and gave us the power to choose. Love, by its nature, requires the consent of the will. God can compel our obedience. But even He cannot force us to love Him. If there is going to be the possibility of love, if we are going to have the power and the choice to love, then there must also be the possibility of hate, and the power and the choice to hate. God can and does intervene in any moment that He chooses to prevent this or that bad thing from happening, but in order to prevent all bad things from happening — in order to rule evil out in principle — He would have to either wipe humanity from the face of the earth or convert us all into automatons. There would be no pain,

no evil, no suffering. But there would be no love, either, and no joy.



God is the objective source and standard of all goodness

But there is another point to be made about evil. Not only does it not disprove God, but in fact it proves Him. For one thing, without God as the objective source of goodness and the standard by which goodness is measured, there is no basis upon which to call anything good, and thus no basis to call anything evil. For another, it is not possible to explain evil as a purely biological phenomenon. If it were, we would see mass murder, terrorism, and cruelty for cruelty's sake among other biological beings on earth. If evil is an offshoot or deformity of evolution, there is no reason why it should affect only the human species. Yet when a lion kills, we do not say that he has murdered. And when a dog copulates with another dog, we do not call it rape. We do not accuse animals of evil because we recognize that they are just doing what they are programmed to do. They are being themselves and acting in a completely natural way. It is all a part of the cycle of life, we say.

But among human beings, the story is very different. We make actual choices. A man can weigh the good path against the

bad path and choose which one to walk. A man, if he is good, can transcend his nature and stretch himself beyond the limits of mere compulsion or instinct. A man can have a strong urge to preserve his own life yet sacrifice it for the sake of love or patriotism. It does not make any sense that evolution would produce in a man the ability, and the willingness, to give up his very existence for something higher. The fact that he reaches for this higher thing would seem to be compelling evidence that something higher than the merely biological exists.

On the other end of the spectrum, a bad man sinks below his nature and operates according to something even baser than compulsion or instinct. He destroys, he hurts, he mocks, he torments, he kills — and all because he thinks that through these actions he can attain some sort of power or freedom. This is not at all like a lion killing a zebra because of its predatory instinct. This is a man choosing to become a monster for reasons that cannot be explained in biological terms. As the good man reaches for the higher thing, the bad man reaches for the lower thing. And just as the former provides evidence for the existence of a higher thing, so the latter provides evidence for the existence of a lower thing.

Explaining Evil Away

Now, we have our modern and secular ways of explaining all of the brutality that surrounds us. Any time an act of great cruelty makes the news, we all shake our heads and solemnly resolve to finally address the mythological "mental health crisis" in America. Evil, we have decided, is a sickness. A mental illness. But as we have so far been unable to locate the evil cortex of the human brain, we are left assuming that the mass murderer, the rapist, the child abuser, and the sadist must be suffering from some sort of neurological mishap. Perhaps it has something to do with

chemicals or synapses or transmitters. Just as despair must be psychological, so must sin.

Christians should — though most do not — reject this explanation. That isn't to say that mental illness is nonexistent or that evil men do not often have psychological problems. It is to say simply that the root of the evil cannot be found within the physiology of a person. Evil begins in the soul as a suggestion or a temptation. A person must choose whether to take the suggestion or not, whether to act on the not. This is how the Devil works on us most of the time. He is a "schemer," as St. Paul says, and he is looking always for an opportunity to lead us into wickedness. And once we have followed him into that dark, he will keep guiding us deeper and deeper into it.

Satan's ultimate goal is to possess us like property in Hell. Sometimes he — or his minions — may come to possess us in a different but related sense while we're still on earth. We cannot make the mistake of believing that demonic possession was unique to biblical times. Even less can we assume that demonic possession in the Bible was really mental illness misdiagnosed. We would do better to consider the possibility that some cases of mental illness in modern society are really demonic possession misdiagnosed. Our Christian ancestors, if they arrived here in a time machine, would immediately guess that a guy who shoots up an elementary school must be under demonic influence. We, on the other hand, do not even consider it a viable possibility. I think the ancients had a clearer view of things — on this point and many others.

As Christians, we have only two options:

1. We can conclude that the apostles, the prophets and Christ Himself were all a bunch of superstitious, hallucinating fools and liars. We can declare the Devil a myth, Hell a deranged



Padre Pio once said that the devils are so numerous that if they all took bodily form, they'd blot out the sun.

fantasy, and all of the cases of demonic possession — both ancient and modern — falsehoods and fabrications. But if that is our opinion, then it makes no sense for us to continue calling ourselves Christians. The atheists would be right, in that case, and the entire thing would be just a collection of ancient fables told by ignorant savages who didn't understand that all human evil is really the result of mental illness.

2. We can accept that demons are real, they are legion, they are prowling through the world seeking to devour our souls, and our struggle truly is not against any earthly force but against the "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). We can believe, and tremble at the thought, that actual supernatural beings are hovering around us and working around the clock to guide us away from the light and into destruction. We can feel helpless against these

beings, who are stronger and smarter than we'll ever be, and we can cling ever closer to God, who is our protection against the armies of Hell. We can take this threat seriously, and stop laughing about it like idiots and children, and we can take our faith seriously, because our faith is the only weapon we have and the only one we need.

Padre Pio once said that the devils are so numerous that if they all took bodily form, they'd blot out the sun. This is a horrific thought. But the true Christian does not deny it just because it is scary. Instead he takes shelter in Christ, and he marches on.

Those are the two choices that present themselves. Or we can settle on the comfortable and cowardly, irrational option that lies between the two. We can continue claiming Christianity, wearing it around like a fashion statement, while taking to heart only the bits and pieces of it that make us feel warm and snugly inside. We can proclaim a Good that triumphed over a nonexistent Evil, a Christ who delivered us from the clutches of a make-believe Devil. We can make a mockery of our faith in front of the entire world and give a false sense of security to the very souls who are most in danger of eternal damnation.

Satan would be okay with option one, but he much prefers we choose this in-between route. If we do, we become agents of Hell on earth even as we deny the reality of Hell. We become dupes of Satan — his favorite Christians. And he hopes we never repent, so that he can make our acquaintance in the afterlife.

Matt Walsh is a nationally recognized writer, podcast host, and speaker. His podcast [The Matt Walsh Show](#) enjoys a huge following. His latest book is [Church of Cowards: A Wake-Up Call to Complacent Christians](#). He lives outside of Baltimore, Maryland, with his wife and four children.