

Believers and Deceivers
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I've got good news and I've got bad news. The good news is this: you were created to overcome! The bad news is this: overcoming means there will be some things to overcome.

Becoming a Christian does not exempt us from the problems of life. Serving God does not mean we have no more battles to fight. There are battles to fight and things to overcome in everyone's life.

Everyone in the Bible had things to overcome.

- Noah had to go through the flood
- Daniel had to go into the lion's den
- Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego had to go through the fire
- Jonah had the whale
- David had to overcome Goliath
- Moses had to overcome his fear of public speaking
- Gideon had to overcome his low self esteem
- Peter had to overcome the fact that he denied Christ 3 times
- Thomas had to overcome his doubt

Get the point? Everyone has something to overcome.

Last week I preached an Easter message and today we are getting back to our series Forward in Faith. So far, we've spoken on what it means to follow Christ, the blessings of obeying Christ, how to reach others for Christ, how to behold Christ in worship so that we are transformed into the image of Christ and Pastor Deb preached 2 excellent messages on the importance of abiding in Christ.

Two weeks ago I began to teach on the topic of resisting the devil – spiritual warfare. When we receive Jesus as our Savior – we are born again and are now new creations in Christ. But we have an enemy – Satan – who wants to keep us from being saved in the first place, but when we are saved – He wants to keep us from growing in Christ – from becoming a mature disciple of Christ. So he constantly resists every step we take to grow in Christ. He resists you going to church – reading your Bible – praying – giving – serving – He resists your praise and worship – he resists you sharing your faith. So you must learn to resist the resistance! In that sermon I concentrated on overcoming passivity. I spent a lot of time teaching on James 4:7 which says:

Submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

Complete surrender to God is the only way to complete victory over the enemy. Then last week I preached an Easter message.

I want to follow up the Easter sermon with a message based on Matthew 27 and 28 that deals with what happened after the crucifixion. After Jesus was crucified, we hear about a man named Joseph from Arimathea whom the Bible describes as rich and a disciple of Christ. Contrary to what many people believe – you can be rich and a disciple. In fact, it was his money that enabled Joseph to do what he did next.

He went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away... The next day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. "Sir," they said, "we remember that while He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.'

So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, His disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that He has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first."

"Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it...

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; He has risen, just as He said. Come and see the place where He lay..."

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," He said. They came to Him, clasped His feet and worshiped Him.

Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see Me." While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened.

When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole Him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

The title of my sermon today is Believers and Deceivers.

Throughout this story you have a mix of believers and deceivers. All through this story we find both truth and lies. That's because there is an enemy of the cross named Satan and his major device is deception.

Just look at all the ways deception was involved in these last days of Christ:

- Satan deceived Judas into betraying Christ.
- People were deceived to ask that Barabbas be released, not Jesus.
- Satan used the religious leaders to spread the deception that the disciples stole the body of Christ.

In this story we see religious leaders who should have been believers but who turned out to be deceivers. And we find soldiers who crucified Jesus who you would think would be deceivers, but they turn into believers.

First, let's look at the Deceivers. In the Matthew passage – the Jewish leaders accused Jesus of being a deceiver and they accused His followers of being deceived. In actuality they were deceived and they became deceivers.

When Jesus resurrected, His enemies came up with a story to deceive people about what happened. They said that the guards fell asleep and the disciples stole the body. This explanation would normally end with a guard being executed for falling asleep while on duty. That's why the leaders said, "If the governor hears about it, we will cover for you so you don't get in trouble."

The fact that the guards were posted actually worked against them because the body was not stolen and Jesus actually did rise from the dead! The guards actually saw the stone rolled away and the angel who sat on it. The stone was not rolled back to let Jesus out, but to let the others see that the tomb was empty.

But on the day Jesus resurrected people tried to explain it away. And 2,000 years later people are still trying to explain it away. That's because there is a great deceiver named Satan who wants to keep people from the knowledge of the truth. And he does that through his biggest tool – deception.

Deception is a tool of the enemy to cause someone to believe as true something that is not actually true. According to John 8:44

There is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

If the devil's lips are moving, he's lying! He lies about God – he lies about you. And Satan deceives people about himself! One of the Satan's deceptions is the big lie is that he does not exist – or demons existed at one time in ancient history but they somehow disappeared off the earth.

George Barna's research shows that 60% of adults believe that Satan is not a living being but is a symbol of evil. Here's the really bad news: 46% of born-again Christians deny Satan's existence. It is sad to me that so many Christians do not believe there is a real devil and real demons. That's because a very big part of Jesus' ministry was devoted to casting out demons. I don't think He'd waste time on something that didn't exist.

The other big lie is that Satan is as powerful as God and can overpower Christians any time he wants. This lie keeps people terrorized. We need a true picture of Satan and his demons. We don't need to fall into the error of either underestimating or overestimating Satan's power. We must know that truth of 1 John 4:4

Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.

Satan is not God's equal. God always has been greater, is now, and always will be greater. And the greater One is in you and you have authority over Satan. Still – we need to stay on alert to Satan and demonic attacks.

The devil fights with all kinds of schemes. Ephesians 6:10-11 says:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.

Satan uses the same methods he always has. The first thing he does is cast doubt on the word of God. That happened all the way back in the Garden of Eden when Satan said to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:1 *Did God really say...?* Then he twisted God's words to deceive them. And Satan does the same thing today to cause you to doubt God's word.

The deceptions used by the religious leaders of Jesus' day shows the different ways Satan deceives. In Matthew 27:40 they said-

Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!

Here they are casting doubt on Jesus being the Son of God. And Satan always puts doubts in people's minds about the existence of God and/or Jesus being the Son of God. In Matthew 27:42 they said -

He saved others, but He can't save Himself! He's the King of Israel! Let Him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in Him.

Here they are attacking the power of God to save. And Satan today deceives people into thinking God is powerless. In Matthew 27:43 they said –

He trusts in God; let God deliver Him now if He cares for Him and will have Him, for He said, I am the Son of God.

Here they are attacking whether or not God cared about Jesus. And Satan today deceives people into thinking God does not care about them.

As we saw in our passage today – the religious leaders devised a plan to deceive people about the resurrection of Jesus. And Satan is still deceiving people about that today because he knows the resurrection is the heart of Christianity.

So, there you have the main ways Satan deceives people:

- He attacks God's word
- He attacks the existence of God
- He attacks the power of God and the love of God
- He attacks the resurrection.

That is his work as the great deceiver. 2 Corinthians 4:4 says:

Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe.

That's why we who are believers must have on the belt of truth and be grounded in the word of God. We need to be so familiar with the truth that we easily recognize lies! We need to be so familiar with the Bible that we instantly recognize the devil's deception.

Satan comes against us many ways – but greater is He that is in us and He has given us authority over all the power of the enemy. So how do we fight Satan? We fight with faith. Ephesians 6:16 says:

In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

How many of Satan's arrows? All of them! How do we fight with faith? Ephesians 6:17 goes on to say we fight with ...*the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*

Jesus is our example and that's how He fought and won the good fight of faith against Satan. Jesus won the battle by talking back to Satan. And what did Jesus say? His Father's Words. Over and over He said, "It is written, it is written, it is written!" We also win the battle by talking back to Satan. Over and over we should say, "It is written, it is written, it is written!" 2 Corinthians 10:3-4 says:

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.

The world fights with deception that builds strongholds in our lives. But we have the power to demolish those strongholds! How? 1 John 5:4-5 says:

This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

Now, I know it's easy to blame the devil or the world for our problems, but let me introduce you to your third enemy: yourself!!!! When I speak of self, I speak of what the Bible calls the flesh – which is basically our natural tendency toward

selfishness and self-reliance.

You cannot cast out the flesh – you must die to it!

You cannot cast out spiritual immaturity – you must put away childish things!

You cannot cast out a stronghold of deception – you must renew your mind with the word of God!

You cannot pray for instant maturity or instant sanctification or an instantaneously renewed mind. It takes prayer and faith and action.

We tend to want to blame everything on the devil, but sometimes we are our own biggest enemy. Not every fight is with the devil and not all deception is from the devil. In fact, James 1:22 says:

Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

Deception is caused by not knowing God's Word. Self-deception is caused by not doing the word! We deceive ourselves anytime we know what the Bible says – but we excuse ourselves from obeying it. We say things like:

- Yes, I know the Bible says we should not have sex outside of marriage, but God knows I have needs.
- Yes, I know the Bible says we should give, but God knows I have bills.
- Yes, I know the Bible says we should use our gifts and talents in church, but God knows I'm busy.
- Yes, I know I should submit to authority, but God knows my authorities don't deserve my submission.

And the list goes on and on!

And I want to say, "Really? You really think God is going to give you a pass on obedience?" If you think so, you are deceiving yourself!

In addition to fighting Satan and the world, we must ruthlessly fight to discover the ways we've deceived ourselves and overcome them. It's easier to not deal with your own issues. It's easier to blame others. It's easier to say, "That's just the way I am, deal with it." It may be easier, but the cost is actually higher.

There were deceivers and believers around Jesus at the crucifixion. When we talk about believers in this story – we are not just talking about the 12 disciples. Yes, they were believers, but they all deserted Jesus at the crucifixion. But in the story of the crucifixion and the resurrection, you find some unlikely believers.

First – there is the thief on the cross. Matthew 27:44 tells us that *The robbers who were crucified with Him also heaped insults on him.*

But something happened because Luke 23:39-43 says

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at Him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked Him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with Me in paradise."

Something happened that turned this deceiver into a believer. But not only him. Matthew 27:54 says:

When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely He was the Son of God!"

What caused him to say this? What did the thief and the centurion see that caused them to become believers? They saw the four miracles that occurred at the cross. Matthew 27:45-53 tells us that the veil of the Temple was torn from top to bottom. There was darkness in the middle of the day. Then there was an earthquake. The tombs broke open and saints of God were raised to life.

But the main thing they saw was the unbelievable way that Jesus forgave those who were in the act of crucifying Him. They knew this was not just a normal man. There was something supernatural about Him.

So, are you a believer or have you been deceived by Satan not to believe? Jesus already defeated and disarmed Satan on the cross and it's up to us to believe in Jesus and enforce His victory. Believers fight from the place of victory. We have the upper hand. So don't be afraid of spiritual warfare – this is not a fearful thing. Colossians 2:15 says:

And having disarmed the powers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

So don't be caught off guard when Satan attacks.
 Overcome that deceiver by enforcing the victory Jesus won at the cross!
 Remind Satan you have authority over him.
 Remind Satan he's under your feet!
 Remind him that the gates of hell cannot and will not prevail against us!
 Overcome him by speaking the word of God – the sword of the Spirit:
 No weapon formed against us will prosper!
 Every tongue that rises up against us we condemn!
 This is the heritage of all the saints! This is your heritage!
 We have the truth of God's word!
 We have the power of the blood of Jesus!
 We have the victory won on the cross!
 We have the authority of Jesus name and the armor of God!
 And in the name of Jesus - we choose to be believers, not deceivers!