



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Satan and the Powers  
(*Apocalyptic Vision*,  
pp. 29-36)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Terrible Judgement  
(*Apocalyptic Vision*,  
pp. 64-67)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics  
Baylor University  
One Bear Place #97361  
Waco, TX 76798-7361  
Phone 1-866-298-2325  
[www.ChristianEthics.ws](http://www.ChristianEthics.ws)

© 2010 The Center for Christian Ethics

# Satan and the Powers

In apocalyptic writings we meet a cast of fallen characters—Satan, demons, and other nefarious beings—that indicate spiritual realities, earthly officeholders, or structures of power. How did we come to inhabit a world controlled by such powers? Where is God in the mix?

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: Acts 26:9-18; Ephesians 3:7-13 and 6:10-12

### Meditation†

Apocalyptic...can't be composed or spoken by the powers that be, because they are the sustainers of "the way things are" whose operation justifies itself by crowning itself as "the ways things ought to be" and whose greatest virtue is in being "realistic." Thinking through what we mean when we say "realistic" is where apocalyptic begins. If these powers are the boot that... presses down upon the human face forever, apocalyptic is the speech of that human face. Apocalyptic denies, in spite of all the appearances to the contrary, the "forever" part.

For both the very human wielder of the boot and the very human face beneath it, apocalyptic has a way of curing deafness and educating the mind.

*David Dark*

### Reflection

Notice how Luke sets the stage: after Festus, a new Judean governor, invites King Agrippa to consider the strange case of Paul, Agrippa and Bernice (his sister turned consort) arrive "with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city" (Acts 25:23). Paul is brought to them in prison chains. Confronting these powerful Roman leaders, the Apostle adds an apocalyptic (and political) twist not present in the other records of his story: his ministry has cosmic dimensions, for in a vision God sent him to the Gentiles "to open their eyes so that they may turn from *darkness* to light and from *the power of Satan* to God" to be redeemed (26:18).

Paul and other New Testament writers use terms like "principalities," "powers," "authorities," "rulers," "kings," "angels," "demons," "spirits," "thrones," and "dominions" to refer "sometimes to *heavenly, spiritual realities* and sometimes to *earthly officeholders or structures of power*," Susan Garrett observes. "Often, both were meant at once. For example, when Paul wrote that the 'rulers of this world' had not understood God's secret wisdom or else they would not have crucified Jesus (1 Corinthians 2:7-8), he was apparently referring *both* to the human 'rulers of this world' who killed Jesus *and* to the spiritual forces that drove them."

"Christians today often interpret biblical language about the 'principalities and powers' by understanding them either as entities wholly separable from humans (and, indeed, from this world) or incarnated in the earthly officeholders and structures of power that govern our day-to-day existence," Garrett writes. "In the latter view, many of the principalities and powers were created to serve good purposes, but all are prone to making sinful demands, especially the



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2010 The Center for Christian Ethics

purposes, but all are prone to making sinful demands, especially the demand—exemplified by Satan in his tempting of Jesus in the wilderness—that humans regard them as ultimate and give homage to them instead of to God.”

Garrett summarizes how Christ strengthens us to resist the powers distorted by sin, and shows that he is their Lord.

- ▶ *Jesus heals our blindness, gradually or at once, to see when the power of sin seduces us with its deceptive promises.*
- ▶ *Jesus undergirds us when death buffets us and torments us.*
- ▶ *When we fail morally, Jesus forgives us, enabling us to triumph over the forces that tempt us to despair.*
- ▶ *Jesus empowers us to love and serve ones whom we have wronged or hated, to forgive ones who have wronged us, and to call those wrongs to mind no more.*

### Study Questions

1. In Acts 26:18, Ephesians 3:10 and 6:11-12, and Romans 13:1-7, do the words “Satan,” “powers,” and “authorities” refer to *spirit-beings*, to *social entities and norms of behavior*, or to both?
2. Why is it dangerous, according to Susan Garrett, to “interpret the principalities and powers [in the New Testament] exclusively as wicked spirit-beings”? Why is it important to see them also as social institutions and norms that are damaged by sin? Discuss how “principalities and powers” might refer to both spirit-beings and social structures.
3. Must the idea of spirit-beings be dismissed as pre-scientific?
4. Why might someone think Gislebertus’ sculpture *The Last Judgment* is offensive? Do you agree?

### Departing Hymn: “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence” (vv. 1, 3, and 4)

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,  
and with fear and trembling stand;  
ponder nothing earthly minded,  
for with blessing in His hand,  
Christ our God to earth descendeth,  
our full homage to demand.

Rank on rank the host of heaven  
spreads its vanguard on the way,  
as the Light of light descendeth  
from the realms of endless day,  
that the powers of hell may vanish  
as the darkness clears away.

At his feet the six winged seraph;  
cherubim, with sleepless eye,  
veil their faces to the Presence,  
as with ceaseless voice they cry,  
Alleluia! Alleluia!  
Alleluia! Lord Most High.

*Liturgy of St. James* (5<sup>th</sup> C.); trans. Gerard Moultrie (1864)

Tune: PICARDY

† David Dark, *Everyday Apocalypse: the Sacred Revealed in Radiohead, the Simpsons and other Pop Culture Icons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), 10.

# Satan and the Powers

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

### Teaching Goals

1. To recognize how New Testament authors use terms such as “Satan,” “authorities,” and “powers,” to refer to fallen spiritual beings, to social structures distorted by sin, or to both.
2. To consider objections to interpreting such apocalyptic language today as referring only to spiritual beings, or only to social institutions and norms of behavior.
3. To consider why some Christians find medieval depictions of Satan and the powers to be offensive.

### Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide.

Distribute copies of *Apocalyptic Vision (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus and suggested articles before meeting. For the departing hymn “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence” locate the familiar tune PICARDY in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

### Begin with a Story

In “Terrible Judgment,” Heidi Hornik describes Gislebertus’ famous twelfth-century sculpture depicting the Judgment. Below an inscription—“Let fear strike those whom earthly error binds, for their fate is shown by the horror of these figures.”—is a horrific image of the judgment of the damned: “An angel with a trumpet summons all creatures to judgment. Humankind’s pitiful weakness and littleness are distilled in terror-stricken, weeping, doll-like forms. Angels and devils fight at the scales where souls are being weighed as each tries to manipulate the scale for or against a soul. There are hideous demons on the right side whose legs end in claws. The devil is leaning from the dragon mouth of Hell and drags souls in. Above him, a howling demon crams souls head first into a furnace.”

Hornik recounts how the sculpture was defaced during the Age of Enlightenment, a time of increasing trust in the power of universal human reason to produce social progress. “By 1766, the apocalyptic imagery...was considered offensive and it was covered with plaster,” she writes. “Since the head of Christ projected outwards, in order to create a level plastered surface it was broken off.” (*Apocalyptic Vision*, p. 66)

Are we not still tempted to ‘clean up’ the gospel story by occluding Satan and the demonic powers? In this study Susan Garrett helps us to better understand the cast of fallen characters we encounter so frequently in apocalyptic writings.

### Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for discernment to fathom the “cosmic powers of this present darkness” (Ephesians 6:12), the fallen powers in God’s good creation.

### Scripture Reading

Ask a three group members to read Acts 26:9-18 and Ephesians 3:7-13 and 6:10-12 from a modern translation. Encourage the group to listen for the apocalyptic theme in these passages.

### Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

## Reflection

The first study in this series, “The Church as a Company of Nomads,” addressed the proper interpretation of the biblical apocalyptic writings and warned against their abuse. This discussion focuses on one form of misuse—excessive fascination with spirit-beings. Susan Garrett stakes out a middle position, interpreting the scriptural language of principalities and powers as referring both to spiritual realities and to earthly officeholders or structures of power.

## Study Questions

1. Notice how context is crucial for interpreting these terms. For instance, in Acts 26:18 “darkness” (*skotos*) and “the power of Satan” (*exousias tou Satana*) may refer to both a spiritual being and the fallen social systems that serve Satan’s ends. “Authorities” (*exousai*) in Romans 13:1-7 refers to earthly officeholders who exercise proper authority in a righteous manner. In Ephesians 3:10 the “authorities” (*exousiais*) in heavenly places might be angels or demons. In Ephesians 6:11-12, the classic verses on spiritual warfare, “authorities” (*exousias*) seem to be fallen spirit-beings who may ‘attack’ us through false, unjust, and violent social systems.
2. In overemphasizing “the invisible, spiritual side of the powers” in the New Testament, Susan Garrett warns we may “downplay or ignore their worldly dimension.” If we ignore “the systemic dimension of the powers,” she continues, we may make “the dangerous assumption that, once we are saved, all is right with us. We can safely pass the buck because the evil has been expelled from *our* individual souls.”  
Garrett describes the “bi-directional working” of the powers and principalities in biblical apocalyptic literature: “actions of the unseen characters influence events among mortals and vice versa. In Luke’s Gospel, for example, Jesus remarks to those who arrest him, ‘But this is your hour, and the authority of darkness’ (Luke 22:53, my translation). Jesus is implying that the actions of his human adversaries are controlled by none other than the Prince of Darkness. Or, to give another example, when Michael battles the dragon and casts him out of heaven (in Revelation 12), voices proclaim that the victory was achieved by the blood of Jesus and the testimony of the martyrs, and that Satan’s expulsion means still more suffering for the followers of Jesus (Revelation 12:9-17). Unseen forces influence or even control what happens in the mundane realm, and what happens in the mundane realm reciprocally affects the unseen forces.”
3. How would we have to describe science in order to rule spirit-beings out of existence as pre-scientific? Modern science typically operates with methodological naturalism—the view that *scientific explanations will mention only natural entities and events*. Of course, if we think that spirits (human or otherwise) are part of nature, then they would not be ruled out at all, but could still figure into scientific explanations. We might go further and be materialists—the view that *all natural entities are material rather than spiritual*. Materialism would rule out all spirits (human or otherwise) as pre-scientific. Thus, the issue is not about how science typically works, but about what sorts of things exist. And it is difficult to see how we might rule out the spirit-beings in apocalyptic literature without ruling out, at the same time and for the same reasons, human spirits.
4. We take offense at a work of art when we find it to be morally outrageous—perhaps because it belittles or trivializes what is good, or because it honors or makes important what is evil. Do you think Gislebertus has done something like this by the way he depicts the Last Judgment in his sculpture?

## Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.