

## Subtlety

*“Now the serpent was more subtle than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made” (Genesis 3:1).*

Let’s not allow familiarity with this text steal from us the shock that the author intends. Immediately after the lovely Creation account with its innocent human creatures, we learn that something else is going on, wickedness. There’s something very bad in God’s “very good” creation. There’s a “serpent” who is—the third word into this verse—*aroom*, a Hebrew word that can be translated crafty or shrewd or, as here, subtle. He is cunning, insidious, malevolent, but not overtly. His subtle wickedness requires great discernment to realize the evil he’s up to. If there’s one easily missed characteristic of today’s society, it’s that it’s saturated with the serpent’s subtle wickedness. Following are some examples to illustrate what most of us aren’t even aware of, although this matter is supremely important.

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1. A certain evangelical seminary professor explains that the Book of Joshua is “deeply problematic” because it presents God [so she claims] as demanding genocide. And genocide in today’s social-justice-sensitive culture is abhorrent. She thinks she needs to protect God from accusations of injustice. So, to soften the harshness of the text, she alleges that the texts saying that all the Canaanites, including women and children, were put to death are not actually historically true. Those texts, she avers, are “hyperbole for rhetorical purposes.” Hyperbole? In other words, according to this now widely believed view among O.T. scholars, a view she’s parroting, Joshua exaggerated what really happened to make it seem that they were mighty conquerors when, in fact, they weren’t. In other words, the Scriptures reveal spiritual truths, but the texts aren’t necessarily really true. So, let’s ask, what else in the Bible is “exaggeration”? A recent 6-day creation? A global Flood? Israelites walking thru the Red Sea on dry land with a wall of water on the right and on the left? As the Bible is ultimately God’s Word, then this “exaggeration” is really God lying to us. And so this teaching impugns God and steals from His Word the authority He vested in it. Subtly, little by little, the Serpent steals authority from the Scriptures because authority is the *requirement* that we live according to them.
2. Another evangelical church leader explains that the Bible contains, here and there, truths that conform to what modern science either has established or relies on. He finds example after example of how various Scripture verses have parallels in what science has discovered about nature. In other words, he argues, there’s no conflict between Scripture and science; the two are just different ways of presenting truths about our world. So, he implies, there’s perfect harmony or agreement between the Bible and modern science. In other words, what science teaches about origins (Darwinian evolution and billions of years) is valid truth and not to be ignored or disputed just because it derives from science. The Serpent wants us to dishonor God with an idolatrous understanding of origins and a humanistic worldview. This is another of Satan’s attacks on God’s Word, so subtle that other evangelical theologians hearing this missed it.
3. In Job, the issue the Serpent raised was, Isn’t Job pious only because of the prosperity with which God blessed him? And the answer at the end was, No. When the wealth and health and security and comforts were taken away, Job nevertheless remained faithful to God. The Serpent’s issue there is subtle. And that same issue is testing us in the Western world today: Are we “Christian” only because of, or despite, our prosperity and peace and soft life? In other words, Do we love God for who God is, or only for what He gives (the forgiveness of sins on top of an easy life)? This is probably too subtle for most church-goers. The Serpent has not taken away our prosperity, etc, to see what would happen to our faith (although he may intend doing just that). Instead, that crafty one has, according to my thinking, heaped wealth and comforts upon us for God to see how real—or false—our faith is. In Scripture, wealth is dangerous; so the Serpent loaded us up with it deliberately to make us susceptible to a weak or phony faith. He is shrewd as well as subtle.
4. Many evangelical church leaders now claim that Allah, the supposed god of Islam, is the same Being as the God of Israel, the God of Scripture. Some say that, even if Allah isn’t the same Person, God has allowed Islam as a testimony or witness in this vast world to His existence and Person. The Serpent is cunning. He caused to emerge a bogus religion based on a counterfeit holy book that contains just enough agreement with Scripture, and with just enough references to Jesus, to deceive even evangelical theologians. Why do we fail to see how subtly the Serpent has subverted Christianity with this counterfeit? To recognize a counterfeit it’s necessary to know the real thing. We need to understand Scripture better.
5. The Serpent surreptitiously took control of the Church in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. To this day, very few are aware what happened. With the Reformation a millennium later, the Church emerged from that grip. Satan then countered that movement of the Spirit not with the so-called Counter-Reformation in the Roman Catholic Church, nor with the teachings of Darwin and his successors in secular society, but by making the “world” so enticing and so thrilling that no one—not even

Christians!—could refrain from participating. All thru the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Serpent has been loading our Western culture so heavily with distractions and idolatrous pursuits (including a counterfeit American civic religion), a sense of liberty that's really license, that the Church has no idea anything is even wrong. "Missing? Is something missing? What's missing?" The Holy Spirit is missing! Obedience to God's Word is missing. Repentance and transformation of character is missing. We assume that God loves us so much that nothing is needed but "belief" in Jesus. We attend "worship" services and suppose that by doing that, God is totally pleased with us. So we can live as we please and enjoy this modern American life. Let me be explicit here: Today's expansive culture and life-style is the Serpent's strategy to keep us indifferent to the demands of Scripture. It's all too subtle for an undiscerning Church.

6. Imperceptibly, a shift has occurred within evangelicalism. Hardly anyone has noticed because it has so gradually developed. It's this: Christians today only hold to "beliefs," as that word is understood today, viz., mental assent, agreement with a biblical or theological proposition. We have a religion that's been intellectualized. So we aren't embarrassed or even defensive at holding a secular (pagan) worldview or pursuing a secular (pagan) lifestyle, as long as we keep the right information (our "beliefs") in mind. We're so assimilated into the modern American culture we're unaware even how we should be or live, though it's right there in Scripture. Something as profound as this, yet so silent, could only be the subtle work of the Serpent.

7. Now common in evangelicalism is the notion that "worship" is our duty to God. So we now have "worship services" led by "praise teams," and we lift arms to heaven in uplifting songs. But this isn't biblical worship. In Scripture, worship is our desire for God. It's our heart's attitude toward Him, to know Him, to love Him, and to be with Him and do His will. Biblical worship is life-transforming. The "worship" we offer instead entails no personal sacrifice, no voluntary submissive obedience to His Word, and no repentance or sanctification. Our modern version of worship is crassly narcissistic. It borders on the attempt to manipulate God if not to seek from Him merit and confirm us in self-righteousness, if not merely to enjoy theatrics. With this kind of worship, we suppose that we satisfy whatever responsibilities God expects of us, so we can ignore the obligations clearly revealed in Scripture. Where did this pagan notion that religiously-oriented people should meet together to "worship" a god come from? The Serpent, of course.

8. In the Western world all thru the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Serpent busied himself effecting a sexual revolution. Revisionists in our culture changed marriage to be sentimental bonding. That opened the door to gay marriage. Lawyers made divorce "no-fault," opening the door to sequential marriages, which is legalized, socially accepted adultery. Pharmacologists developed birth control pills so that sexual intercourse didn't carry a risk of pregnancy. That opened the door to casual, non-marital sex. Lawyers and politicians made abortion legal, in case pregnancy did happen. Endocrinologists and surgeons developed sex-change, opening the door to the most flagrant denial of God having a will for our persons. Technologists and engineers developed the Internet, making pornography freely available to all. Who's responsible? Who even asks? Subtle, in the extreme, is this frontal assault on God's Word.

9. One more item: The Serpent has convinced our secular intellectual elites that there's no such thing as objective truth. That notion has infiltrated the Church, so that church-goers now are convinced that, whatever their particular interpretation of a Scripture passage may be, it is valid and true. We have lost the sense that Scripture has an objective meaning that can be adduced by the rules of hermeneutics and careful exegesis. So Scripture now means "what I want it to mean. If you want it to mean something else, that's OK too." If Scripture can mean, well, anything, then it really has no meaning, and it's not binding truth. We're adrift on a sea of nonsense. The subtle and crafty Serpent is prying us loose from God's Word.

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I need to clarify several points raised above. Regarding (1), the Book of Joshua documents the faithfulness of God in returning the Israelites to the Land He promised them as well as the faithful obedience of that 2<sup>nd</sup> generation leaving Egypt in fulfilling God's will. God owns the Land and He promised it to His chosen people. The corrupt Canaanites were both trespassing and defiling the Land, and they had to be expelled or, refusing to leave, be annihilated. God owns all humans and has the absolute right to dispose of them as He pleases, according to His holy will, justice, and wisdom. He wiped out all humanity except one righteous man and his family at the great Flood, and He will do it again in the future when Jesus returns. Justice is not what we suppose it should be, but all that God does (Deuteronomy 32:4). If we find God's Word offensive, it's because of either overweening pride or unbiblical participation in the groupthink of humanistic intellectuals.

Regarding (2), there is no harmony between Scripture and modern science, and there cannot be. Yes, a few observations of nature occur in the Bible, such as the uniformity of natural processes, which Science also acknowledges. But Scripture is

transcendent in its origin and truthful in its totality. Modern science is thoroughly anti-theistic, holding tightly to absolute naturalism; it's saturated with wild speculations and fantasies. It is idolatry, and evangelicals who look to it for instruction are like the priests and followers of Baal in the Northern Kingdom.

Regarding (3), Job was righteous because he was trusting in God's Word. Satan's attacks, ever since that episode in the Garden ("Did God really say . . . ?"), almost always focus in one way or another on our response to God's revealed will.

Regarding (4), new documents are being discovered that elucidate Islam's origins. Unlike Christianity, Islam's history is deliberately repressed. That's because it's now known that Islam's origins' narrative is an invented story. As Arab conquests advanced across the Middle East and North Africa in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, conquered nominal Christians who rejected Chalcedon were offered a compromised version of Judaism and Christianity to make their assimilation more comfortable. That's why the Quran alludes heavily to Scripture. But Islam is decidedly anti-Christian and anti-Trinitarian, and it's unalterably opposed to any form of atonement. It repudiates the crucifixion, the resurrection, and any doctrine of God's love. It's an imaginary religion.

Regarding (6 and 7), there's much to say. Worship is fulfilling the 1<sup>st</sup> and greatest commandment, which is to love God with all our being. That kind of love always results in humble submission to His will, as revealed in His Word; in personal sacrifice; and in a changed life.

Belief is loving trust. It always results in . . . the same as worship! Belief and worship are tightly linked; they are two different ways to describe love for God. Both belief and worship are relational terms. They operate within a loving, personal relationship. So trust in Christ is real when we willingly obey Him in something we normally or ordinarily wouldn't do, or when we willingly repent and change our character to be like Him, or when we willingly suffer loss of something or make some significant sacrifice, our own life even. Obedience honors the One we obey and it reflects implicit trust. Likewise, repentance and suffering loss honor God and express trust in Him. Without obedience, repentance and some form of personal sacrifice, trust ("belief") is meaningless.

Trust in a biblical propositional statement is ineffectual because it doesn't involve a personal relationship. We and God are persons, created to be in intimate relationship. Similarly, to trust Christ that when we die we go to heaven is hollow and empty, because we die passively. Our life is taken from us (almost always against our will). That kind of trust involves no personal, active involvement. Of course, God can (and does) know our thoughts, attitudes and desires, so He knows if our "trust" is genuine or not. But obedience, repentance, and personal sacrifice are active and voluntary expressions of a genuine loving relationship.

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The Serpent hates humanity. And he hates God. So his perennial strategy is to influence and make humans so offensive to God that, in justice, God must condemn them. His work of hate is limited only by God's grace, which operates thru the Word. To the extent that we ignore or disobey God's Word, we're easy prey to the Serpent's evil. He doesn't have to be subtle in lands where the Word of God is absent. But in the Western world, he flaunts his cunning, and he's appallingly successful. Why? Because we're indifferent to God's Word. We may gain Bible information in our churches and in our personal study, but we fail to live out that Word in the power of the Holy Spirit. A radical change therefore must occur in the evangelical churches of America or, more precisely, a radical change must occur *in us*, viz., a desire to know Christ and to love Him and serve and obey Him, or else . . . The Serpent wins.

We dwell in a world usurped and ruled (for now, anyway, and only with God's permission) by a wicked being. That first couple in the Garden was tested. And like Job, whom the wicked Serpent so fiercely attacked, we too are being tested, although for us the testing is more subtle. Can we discern the tests and adhere to the God who has revealed Himself and His will to us? Because failing that, by default we take the side of the cunning Serpent and thereby suffer God's indignation. We are ineluctably here on probation. The test isn't merely do we take Jesus as our Savior; that's only our *entry* into the testing arena. So let's be wise and be aware of all that God demands of us in this present existence, and with love and courage faithfully respond as He desires.