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# On the Way to a Place of Prayer

How Should Christians Deal with Demons?

**Scripture:** Acts 16:16-18

**Sermon Series:** *The Acts of Jesus Today*

**Topic:** Demon Possession, Satan & Demons



## **Acts 16:16-18 (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup> As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. <sup>17</sup> She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." <sup>18</sup> And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

## Introduction

Satan and his demons are always seeking to wreck what God is working in the world and in our lives. Wherever the kingdom of God is advancing, the kingdom of darkness is attacking. Whenever you are seeking to grow in Christ, the devil and his demons will seek to destroy that growth. *If you set your face to seek Jesus, then you must be prepared for the enemy to seek to turn your face away toward anything and everything.* Paul and his companions were on their way to a place of prayer when they bumped into a girl who had a demon.

Last week we left Paul and Barnabas in the city of Antioch, which is in northern Syria, about 250 miles north of Jerusalem. They had traveled there to deliver the news of the first church council, which was held in Jerusalem. The council had been convened to settle the question of whether or not Gentiles had to obey Jewish law in order to be saved.

The council concluded that Gentiles were not required to keep the law in order to be saved. Peter testified that God poured out the gift of the Holy Spirit upon Gentiles who believed in Jesus through faith (15:7-9). *Faith in Jesus is the only requirement for salvation.* Paul and Barnabas confirmed this same truth had been manifested in their ministry among Gentiles. James affirmed from the Scripture (i.e. our Old Testament, quoting Amos 9:11-12) that God had from of old planned to include Gentiles in His saving and redemptive work in the world.

However, in order to keep the church unified, the council decided that Gentiles ought not do anything to intentionally offend their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ. Thus, in order to maintain table fellowship and personal communion between Jews and Gentiles, Gentiles ought to avoid 1) all forms of sexual immorality, 2) meat sacrificed to idols, 3) meat that came from animals that have been strangled, and 4) eating or drinking blood. The Jewish and Gentile Christians agreed to this; they were both “of one accord” (Acts 15:25).

This was good news to the Gentile believers in Antioch as well as to all Gentiles everywhere. The decision of the council brought joy to Christians (15:31). The church grew and was blessed and new believers were *added* to Christ *daily* (16:5). Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch “preaching and teaching” along with many other preachers and teachers also (15:34-35).

### **A Second Mission Trip (15:36-41)**

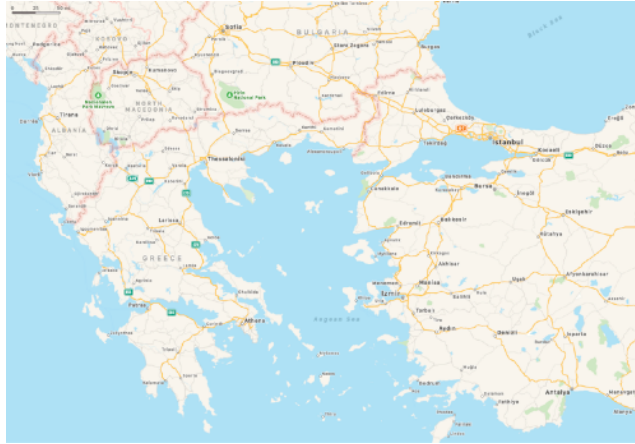
After a some time, Paul wanted to return to the churches in Asia that he and Barnabas had planted on their first mission trip and see how they were doing. Barnabas agreed with the idea. They disagreed on whom should travel with them, which we covered a few weeks ago. Thus, Barnabas and John Mark went off to Cyprus in the south, while Paul and Silas went northwest through Asia Minor. After being “*forbidden*” by the Holy Spirit of Jesus<sup>1</sup> from preaching there, they were led by Him into Europe, into Greece, specifically to the city of Phillipi (16:6-7, 10).

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<sup>1</sup> For the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Jesus see Rom. 8:9; Gal. 4:6; Phil. 1:19; 1 Pet. 1:11.

## The Characters of Chapter 16

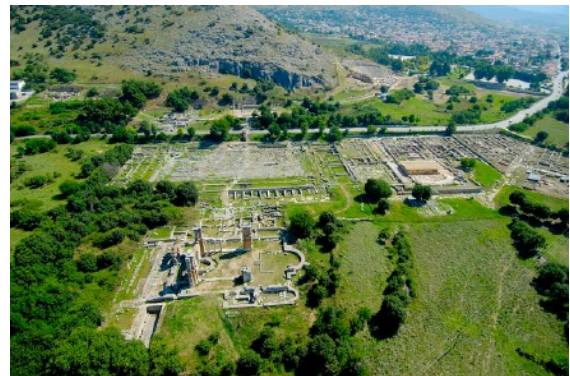
In this chapter, chapter 16, Luke joins Paul and Silas on their journey. This is indicated by the shift in pronoun from “they” to “we” in v.10. Luke introduces us to a young man named **Timothy** (16:1-4), who begins traveling with Paul and later will become a pastor in the church in Ephesus; to a rich woman named **Lydia** who (along with her family) was the first convert in the city of Phillipi; to an **unnamed slave girl** from whom Paul would cast out a demon; and the **prison warden** who (along with his family) also became a believer in Jesus. Today, we’ll focus our attention on the the slave girl.



## The City of Phillipi

The city of Phillipi is located in the western portion of Greece along the coast. It was established in 356 B.C. by Philip II of Mecedon. It became a prominent Roman colony that was later (after 31 B.C.) used as a retirement city for military veterans.<sup>2</sup> It may have had a population of about 2,000 people, all of whom appear to have been Gentiles.

Evidently there was no significant number of Jews living in the city since there was no synagogue. In order to form a synagogue, ten Jewish men were required.<sup>3</sup> Luke reports that on the first Sabbath day in the city, Paul and his companions “*went outside the city gate to the riverside where they supposed there was a place of prayer*” (16:13). Apparently there was no synagogue to visit or else they would have gone there first as was their custom, but they were able to discover that some people prayed and worshiped God outside the city gate.



## An Encounter with a Slave Girl (v.16)

As Paul, Silas, Luke, and Timothy made their way to a supposed place of prayer, they

<sup>2</sup> John B. Polhill, Acts, vol. 26 The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 347.

<sup>3</sup> William J. Larkin, “Acts,” in *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, ed. Grant R. Osborne, vol. 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 236.

...were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling.  
Acts 16:16 (ESV)

This poor girl is in a terrible situation. She was being exploited by physical and spiritual powers. She is a slave and thus under the physical power of her "owners" (the plural indicating that there were at least two). She was also under the spiritual power of a demonic influence. She was doubly enslaved.

## A Spirit of Divination

Luke tells us that she "**had a spirit of divination.**" This translates the Greek πνεῦμα πύθωνα (*pneuma pythōna*), which literally is "a spirit of Python." Python was the dragon or large snake that supposedly guarded the temple and oracle at Delphi.<sup>4</sup> According to Greek mythology the god Apollo was believed to have killed the Python<sup>5</sup> and some accounts indicate that he then spoke to people through the body of the snake.<sup>6</sup> **Pythia** then came to be the name of the high priestess of the oracle who spoke on behalf of the god Apollo.

For this reason, the word came to mean a **ventriloquist**, since it was the voice of Apollo speaking through the snake and/or the oracle. Thus, the word was associated with demon-possession since the "ventriloquist was thought to have such a spirit living in his or her belly."<sup>7</sup>

The oracle of Delphi was always associated with revealing events of the future, therefore the word Python or Pythia became synonymous with "a spirit of soothsaying"<sup>8</sup> or one who was able at foretelling future events. The Greeks and Romans placed great stock in these people. In fact, before military expeditions Roman emperors and generals would habitually consult one who had "a pythian spirit" in order to gain advantage in the upcoming battle.<sup>9</sup> The "pythian spirit" or "the spirit of python" came to refer to any person who was spiritually connected to the god Apollo and by him could reveal the future. *In actuality these people were connecting themselves to demons.* Such was the case with this slave girl.

These kinds of activities are strictly forbidden by God and are never to be engaged in, even though you may think "it's just for fun." In God's eyes these are detestable practices, therefore we ought never play with them.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, "The Acts of the Apostles," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: John and Acts*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 462.

<sup>5</sup> Werner Foerster, "Πύθων," ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 917.

<sup>6</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Acts: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 278.

<sup>7</sup> Longnecker, "The Acts of the Apostles," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 462.

<sup>8</sup> Forester, "Πύθων," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 918.

<sup>9</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 351.

<sup>10</sup> See also 1 Sam. 28:8; 2 Kgs. 17:17; Mic. 3:11.

There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD.  
Deuteronomy 18:10-12 (ESV)

All of these practices involve engaging with demons, whether one knows it or not. Thus, many people unknowingly open themselves up to demonic activity and influence, which always leads to suffering and enslavement. Demonic power is real, but there is a tragic cost to attempts to access or employ them. So dangerous is this area that God warned his people upon entering into the Promised Land not to even be curious about these things. He said,

“...do not inquire about their gods, [which were actually demons<sup>11</sup>] saying, ‘How did these nations worship their gods?’” (Deuteronomy 12:30 ESV).

We ought not to even be curious about demonic activity, soothsaying, divination, and fortune-telling. This is a door that needs to remain closed in our lives, and never opened. Stay far away from the demonic. This is not to be toyed with.

### She Brought Her Owners Much Gain

The information that was revealed through this girl was of sufficient value that many people were willing to pay good money for it. The connection to the demon brought her owners “*much gain by fortune-telling.*” These men who owned this girl worshiped money. They were greedy for great gain and they didn’t care if getting it meant making a deal with a demon.

**Demons do not infallibly know the future.** Only God infallibly knows the future (see Isaiah 46:9-10). God alone has declared the end from the beginning (Is. 46-9-10), but much of what He has declared He has written down in the Bible. Demons, like Satan, know the Bible, thus there is much they do accurately know about the future.

For example, when Jesus met the two men in the country of the Gadarenes, who were oppressed by many demons, they cried out, “What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?” (Mt. 8:28-29). These demons knew that the future entails for them a time of judgment and torment but they didn’t know the exact time, so they were asking Jesus if now the time had suddenly come. Only God infallibility knows the future.

**Neither can demons read your mind.** Nothing in the Bible says Satan or any demon has the ability to know our thoughts. Only God knows our thoughts.<sup>12</sup> However, demons are keen students of humans. Evil spirits have been observing humans and opposing the work of God

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<sup>11</sup> Dt. 32:16-17; Ps. 106:35-37.

<sup>12</sup> Ps. 139:2; Mt. 9:4; Acts 15:8.

among humans since the beginning of time. We humans are very predictable. Almost all of us sit in the same seat and certainly in the same area each Sunday. We like routine and patterns. Thus, demons can be very good at predicting certain outcomes.

**Demons are real and they have real power, but not unlimited power.** God alone has unlimited power, but demons does possess real power. However, their abilities are limited and their power is limited. The book of Job teaches us that even the most powerful and leader of all demons, *Satan*, *can do nothing except what God allows him to do.*<sup>13</sup> And since sin is a weakening and debilitating force, most assuredly spiritual beings who *have* sinned are much weaker than spiritual beings who have *not* sinned. Thus, most certainly demons are weaker than angels. As **Christians, we need not fear demons.** Even though they are more powerful than humans, Christians have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us, who is infinitely more powerful than even the greatest of all demons. Thus, the apostle John can say to us,

Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. (1 John 4:4)

He who is in us is the Holy Spirit and He is vastly greater than the devil, his demons, and all his false teachers “who are in the world.” This truth is manifested by what we see Paul do—he cast the demon out! The Holy Spirit in Paul was mightier than the spirit of Python in this slave girl.

## She Followed Paul for Many Days (v.17-18)

Luke tells us that after meeting this girl who had the spirit of divination on the way to a place of prayer, she then followed Paul, Silas, Luke, and Timothy around for many days,

She followed Paul and us, crying out, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” And this she kept doing for many days.  
Acts 16:17-18 (ESV)

She spoke the truth. Paul and his friends were “proclaiming the way of salvation.” Indeed they were “servants of the Most High God.” This begs the question, why? Why was this girl doing this? Why was she following them around like a town crier drawing attention to these new visitors and accurately speaking about them?

One reason is that for this Gentile audience, it was most likely **confusing**. While to us, we understand the message to point to the unique work of Yahweh, God the Father, through Jesus on the cross and in His resurrection. Yet to the polytheistic, Gentile ears of Phillipi it could just as easily have referred to Zeus, who, in their religion, was the highest of the gods, and “the way of salvation” could have just as easily pointed to Caesar, for he proclaimed himself to be

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<sup>13</sup> See Job chapters 1-2.

“the savior of the people.”<sup>14</sup> So this phrase would not necessarily be clarifying, but could rather have been confusing.

Second, it could have been that this demon was attempting to **deceive** people into believing that they were all on the same team and represented the same god. This is very frequently a tactic used by the enemy. He very often uses just enough of the truth to deceive people into believing that he is from the one true God. Remember Paul’s warning to the Christians in Corinth that there were some false teachers among them who claimed to work with Paul.

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds. (2 Corinthians 11:13-15)

Satan and all his demons are skilled at using the truth just enough to give the false impression of authenticity. The wise person must be exceedingly discerning. The wise person must be dependent upon God and by His Holy Spirit “test the spirits” as John commands the people of God.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. (1 John 4:1)

Indeed, and they all have YouTube channels with millions of views. Having a large following does not mean a speaker genuinely comes from God. There are many who claim to have the gift of prophecy or who claim to speak on behalf of God, but the people of God must test them to see if they are genuine. The heart of the test comes down to what a person understands and affirms about Jesus and if what they say is from God actually comes to pass. Lots of religions and spirits will talk about God in general. Almost every religion believes in God. But what kind of God? Does the god one proclaims have anything to do with Jesus? The God of the Bible is the God who sent Jesus to earth from heaven in the flesh to live a sinless life, die an atoning death, and be resurrected victoriously and bodily on the third day. That same God then received His Only Son, Jesus, into heaven and seated Him on His throne with Him at His right hand. There is only one religion that will affirm this truth and this God.

## In the Name of Jesus Christ, Come Out

After “many days” Paul discerned this poor girl was being manipulated by a demon. The demonic voice screaming out through her, day after day, became a source of “great annoyance.” He had had enough of this demonic ventriloquism. This screaming girl, goaded on by this merciless demon, was causing too much trouble for Paul and his friends as they were

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<sup>14</sup> Polhill, Acts, 351.

preaching the gospel of Jesus. So Paul turned around to the girl as she followed him, and he spoke directly to the demonic spirit and said,

Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.  
Acts 16:18 (ESV)

Such is the power and authority of the name of Jesus. All power and authority reside fully and completely in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus said to His disciples, "**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me**" (Mt. 28:18). His name thus represents all of who He is and all the authority He possesses. Paul spoke in accord with the will of Christ and thus the demon departed. "**It came out that very hour.**" Paul did not yell and scream. He simply spoke in accord with the power and authority of the the name of Jesus, and the demon left the girl.

In speaking this way Paul was following a pattern set forth by Jesus. In many instances when Jesus cast out a demon, he simply spoke one sentence such as, "*Be silent, and come out*" (Mk. 1:25) or "*Come out..., you unclean spirit*" (Mk. 5:8). The power to cast out demons comes from the power and authority of the name of Jesus, not from the use of many words spoken by men. Paul was confident in the power of the name of Jesus not in the persuasiveness of his own speech. On behalf of Christ, he commanded, and the demon obeyed.

## Are Demons Still Active Today?

There are some biblical scholars, such as Rudolf Bultmann<sup>15</sup>, deny that demons exist in the world today and many who hold to a naturalistic worldview would affirm the same. However, if the Bible is trustworthy and presents an accurate picture of the world, then demons and Satan must still exist today for we find them spoken of from the beginning of the Bible all the way through to the end.

The final book, the Revelation of John, includes demons and the activity of Satan and it pictures events that are yet in the future.<sup>16</sup> Thus demons most assuredly exist today and are active in the world around us, whether or not we perceive them directly. Furthermore, consider the warnings that are given to us as believers in Jesus to be on guard against the devil and his fallen angels.

Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:8)

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<sup>15</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 419.

<sup>16</sup> Rev. 9:20; 12:7-9.

Why would Peter write a letter that was to be read by Christians in a large region (Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia) and warn them to be watchful for their adversary the devil if there was no devil for which one ought to be watchful? Why concern himself with writing about the devil's intention to devour if he was not a real threat? Similarly, consider Paul's instruction.

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:11-12)

Why command Christians to get fitted for battle with spiritual armor and weapons if there were no spiritual enemies against whom there would be a battle? Most certainly the devil has **schemes**. He engages today in wicked schemes against the people of God. And not only the devil, but he has with him many other evil, spiritual rulers, authorities, powers, and forces. Christians are to stand against them and the implication is that if we are not rightly prepared and suited up, then we will not be able to stand against them. Thus, the devil and his demons are still at their dark work in the world today.

### **A Scheme of the Devil: Refuse to Forgive**

One of the schemes of the devil is persuade you to refuse to forgive those who hurt you and sin against you, because if you do not, then...

...we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.  
2 Corinthians 2:11 (ESV)

One of Satan's most demonic designs is that he tells you that you ought *not* forgive those who have wronged you and that you are justified in holding on to unresolved anger against those who have offended or sinned against you.

Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. (Ephesians 4:26-27)

Failing to forgive provides opportunity to the devil to have a place in your life. It is not a sin to be angry. God is daily angry at the evil in this world and yet He does not sin.<sup>17</sup> It is right to be angry at evil. However, it is a sin to hold on to unresolved anger for days and weeks and years. Paul's instruction is to let go of anger by the end of the day. His point is this: forgive quickly, reconcile rapidly. If you don't, then you're giving ground to Satan and his demons. His demonic design is to divide and destroy.

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<sup>17</sup> Psalm 7:11.

Clinging to unresolved anger turns into bitterness and unforgiveness. Unforgiveness, when harbored in the heart, will “give opportunity to the devil.” When you are holding onto unforgiveness, bitterness sets in, and soon the devil and his demons have a playground in your mind and in your soul. Soon the lies abound. And the person who has offended you is, in your mind, the worst person on the planet and the most diabolical fiend whose ever set foot in your life. Soon everything they do is interpreted as aggression toward you and as a way hurt you even when they are making attempts at reconciliation.

## How Should Christians Respond?

Christians, be aware of the devil’s wicked ways. The devil and his demons are real and they are the enemies of the children of God. Do not be ignorant of his schemes. Be on guard. Be watchful.

### 1) Know that We Have an Enemy

Do not be ignorant of the fact the we have a spiritual enemy who seeks to destroy us and our faith in our Lord Jesus. Remember Jesus’ prayer for his children just before his crucifixion.

I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. (John 17:15)

We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. (1 John 5:19)

There is such a one called “the evil one” and the “whole world lies in his power.”

### 2) Know that Christ is Greater than our Enemy

And yet, despite his power, he is completely impotent before the resurrected Christ and the Holy Spirit whom Christ has given to all who belong to Him.

He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. (1 John 4:4)

The power of righteousness is vastly superior to and stronger than the power of sin. Do not believe Satan’s lie that sin is more powerful than holiness. Those who are in Christ are under no obligation to the flesh to give in to sinful desires.<sup>18</sup> Christ overcame sin with his righteousness. Holiness is far more powerful than sinfulness. As John tells us, “*The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil*” (1 Jn. 3:8). Jesus was victorious over death by being holy. And it is His Holy Spirit whom He has now given to each and every child of His.

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<sup>18</sup> Romans 6:12, 14; 8:12.

Thus, you, Christian, are not obligated to give in to sin. Sin has no claim on you since you are in Christ. Therefore, embrace holiness and put away all sin.

### **3) Know that Christ Has Shared His Authority Over the Devil & Demons with His Children**

When Jesus sent out the Twelve to preach that the kingdom of God had come, he *"gave them power and authority over all demons"* (Lk. 9:1). Then, later, he sent out 72 disciples to preach that God's kingdom had come and he gave them the same power and authority for they returned saying, *"Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name"* (Lk. 10:17). Jesus responded to them, *"Behold, I have given you authority... over all the power of the enemy..."* (Lk. 10:19). That power and authority extended to Philip, who was not an apostle, and who cast demons out of many people in Samaria (Acts 8:7). In our text this morning, we see that Paul had that same ability. And Jesus' final words recorded in Matthew are that he has been given *"all authority in heaven and on earth"* and therefore, his disciples are to go make disciples of every nation and he promises, *"I am with you to the end of the age"* (Mt. 28:20). Thus, Jesus' power and authority abides with his disciples until the end of the age. The end of time has not yet come, thus his power and authority abide with his disciples, with us! Jesus has shared with us his power and authority. This is amazingly wonderful!

### **4) Know that Satan and Demons Can Be Overcome by Christians**

Christians ought not to believe the lie that we must give in to our enemy. By virtue of the Spirit of Christ in us, we can resist and overcome Satan and his demons.

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. (James 4:7-8)

Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith... (1 Peter 5:8-9)

Satan and his demons can be successfully resisted and overcome. If we submit our will to the will of God, then we will not give in to the will of our enemy. If we draw near to God, then God will draw near to us and there we will find the power and strength to successfully resist Satan and his demons. If we resist Satan, then he will flee from you. He hates resistance. Peter pleads with us to resist the devil *"firm in our faith."* Keep believing in our sovereign savior and we will find the strength to overcome the evil one and all his evil demons. The apostle John wrote,

I write to you, young men,  
because you are strong,  
and the word of God abides in you,  
and you have overcome the evil one.  
1 John 2:14 (ESV)

## Conclusion

God is at work in this world, spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth, granting salvation to those who are lost, and purifying His people and 10,000 other things that we don't have time to list. The devil and his demons are actively opposed to all of this. Demons are fallen, evil angels who oppose all that God is doing in the world. Be watchful their sinful, destructive, enslaving work. Stay on guard against his schemes.

Do not give ground to him. Practice righteousness and put away all unrighteousness. Habitual sinning gives the devil and his demons a foothold in your life. Do not give him a place to stand. Turn away from sin and practice righteousness. By the help of the Holy Spirit this is possible.

***Holiness is vastly more powerful than sin and much more pleasant.***

Do not believe the lie that you cannot resist evil. Do not believe the lie that you must give in to your sinful desires. If you are a Christian, then you do not. The Spirit of Christ within you is greater than any sinful desire from within or any demonic spirit from without. Do not fear Satan or his demons. When you confront him, in temptation or a lie or any other form, do what Paul did and say, "In the name of Jesus Christ, go away." When you are alone in the night, speak out loud the mighty name of Jesus and He is with you. Resist evil being strong in the faith in the power and authority of Jesus. In His power and name there is freedom, true lasting freedom. This is what Jesus has purchased for us. Freedom and hope and power and authority over the kingdom of darkness. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good!" (Romans 12:21).