

Is it really that easy to come under the power and control of the devil? Could all your Bible knowledge and praying and coming to church, could all that you have done in your earthly life to secure your hold on eternal life just be discarded at a moment's notice and you would be forever lost anyway? Could faithful, well-meaning Christians all of a sudden change and oppose God as His worst enemy? If we've learned anything in this crazy nightmare year we've gone through, it's that we've become much more aware of what we have always taken for granted! Think of Peter, how close he was to Jesus up to this time in the Gospel story. He was among the first of the disciples that our Lord called to follow Him. Peter walked on water because the powerful Word of Christ enabled Him (at least for a brief moment). It was Simon, son of John who spoke up when Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am?" He said clearly and plainly, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." The Son of God even said this man Bar-Jonah was blessed. Of course, Peter was blessed not because he was an exceptional person but because the grace given him by the heavenly Father made it possible for this former fisherman to believe the way he so confidently spoke.

But all that is rendered meaningless in one split-second. You could hear the words of Jesus ringing out like a shot: "Get thee behind me, Satan!" You would wonder when the next disciple would say anything in the midst of that silence, to break the ice or ease the tension. Whew! Another hot one today, huh? There was no getting around it. We can only guess that Peter must have had good intentions to save Jesus from going to

His death, but if he did the devil still was using those good intentions to keep Jesus away from the cross, and that means the Evil One wanted to keep your salvation away from you.

If such an unfortunate thing could happen to the most well-known of Jesus' apostles, then how do you think you are going to fight off Satan? Just how easy is it for the devil to take control, and use your best intentions against you and drag you down with him into eternal judgment? Peter himself, now as an older, wiser Apostle wrote these words to young Christians, "Be sober and watchful, your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour." Not only is this the Word of the Lord, this is also Peter speaking from his own personal experience! Why else do you think that Jesus would command you to pray in the Lord's Prayer: Deliver us from evil? Surely whenever you pray those words, it's your plea to God to save you from the same Satanic attacks that overtook Peter.

Then a real problem comes up. If it's really enough to pray for God's protection, then why don't you feel totally relieved after you've just finished praying the Lord's Prayer? Why then isn't that weight fully lifted from your shoulders? Why do the problems remain in your life? Does that mean that you are at risk of losing your faith because you find yourself worrying about what will happen to you next? Maybe the devil is already working, so you think. My family is ripping apart. I was betrayed by someone I implicitly trusted. All I ever know in my life these days is pain and anger

and contention. Is Satan winning after all? With all these horrible, unavoidable thoughts and questions swirling around your head, then the reasoning seems to be one or the other for you. Either God doesn't care, or there's something wrong with what I'm doing: I'm not good enough, or sincere enough; I'm not doing the right things in order to deserve an answer from God.

But that's not quite right. Yes the problem lies with you and not with God your heavenly Father. It is not His fault that you are so open to Satan's attacks. But at the same time it is most certainly not something that you're doing or not doing. It's just not that simple. For one thing, being more sincere won't do it. Lord knows that the devil let Peter be as sincere as he could be, when he yanked Jesus away and told Him off. Sincerity is not the problem. There's plenty of that to go around. And I'm not here to give you a prescription of practical advice to "devil-proof" your life and take the blues away, even if I were to try to take such principles straight out of the Bible, because there are simply no directions that you could follow so that you could bring joy into your life and healing to your wounds. Sure, you'll hear plenty of preachers try to do just that, but the problem is still going to be there. The good feelings will fade sooner than you'd like. Satan is still poised to attack. He turned Peter against Jesus Himself, and today his sights are pointed right at you.

The issue deep-down is not what you're doing or neglecting to do. It's really about who you are. And what you are is a born sinner. Satan claims you as his willing accomplice, not only when he tempts you to hurt others or act in a selfish and evil way, but also when you worry and when you feel

helpless and overwhelmed. It's true that when such thoughts go through your head, you seem more like a victim than a sinner. Your friends and family try to comfort you, saying that all things work together for the good, and so on, but really the whole time you are hanging on to a false god. Without saying a word, you are actually proclaiming loudly by your actions every day that God your heavenly Father must not be powerful enough to take care of you. You tell yourself you just need to turn everything over to the Lord, yet the sinner that you are inside secretly pulls it all back again because you want to stay in control of it. You hear constantly in our world, "Be yourself, stay true to who you are." But you see, the problem really is yourself and your lack of faith reveals what your sinful nature is all about.

But just because you feel helpless, it doesn't mean that you are. For Jesus already knows who you are. He also knows that the devil has declared open season on your soul and that you have painted the target on yourself. Peter was so harshly rebuked that none of those disciples could break that tense silence. They were hushed and embarrassed, helpless to go on. But Jesus Himself added the next word to the halted conversation, and He wasn't going to remark about the weather. Your Savior solves the problem of human nature by going to the source. He says to you today, "Deny yourself." That means, give up on who you are as a sinner. Kill off that devil's accomplice that lives inside you. Do not stand in the way of Jesus while He is offering up His life for you. Rather, He is to be the stumbling block to those who insist on trusting in themselves. But to deny yourself and follow Him is the only way that He can be Lord and Savior of your life.

OK, so how do you do that? Wrong question. Instead, God the Holy Spirit does it all, working in you. It isn't anything that you decide to choose or resolve to improve in your behavior. Jesus simply says, "Deny yourself." That is nothing else but repentance. When you deny yourself, you admit that you are the problem. You are the poor, miserable sinner who lets the devil have his way with your heart. Don't fear. Jesus never leaves you helpless. He has done all the work that you couldn't do on your own. He's the one who took up that cross that you could not carry. He bore that cross alone, He suffered a terrible death and the condemnation of God combined, all in order to protect you from Satan's assaults. One thing's for sure; Jesus didn't come to give you more rules and helpful hints for you to follow in your life. He could have stayed up in heaven to do that. Rather, He walked around on this earth so that He could be punished in your place, then rise from the dead and raise you up with Him.

That's why the devil so desperately wanted Jesus not to go to that cross. The Evil One even went to the extreme of turning the Lord's most outspoken and devoted disciple against Him. The last word Satan ever wanted to hear was "It is finished." But it happened. Your adversary was soundly defeated on that Good Friday. His fate of eternal punishment was sealed from that very moment onward. And on that first Easter day, even before Mary or the disciples got to see Him, the risen victorious Lord descended into hell, as we confess in the Apostles' Creed, to parade in triumph and to rub the devil's nose in his defeat. He has nothing on you anymore, even though he still tries to scare you and works to bring fear and worry back into your life.

Now, words of encouragement and the strength of a support group are certainly fine things, but here during this holy hour you receive a real solution sent straight from heaven. Your baptism is something real that takes away your sin; it kills you as a sinner and destroys you as an ally of the devil, and instead raises you up as a child of God. There's no program that you could follow that would be able to do that. Confession and absolution, which your pastor is obligated to provide for you in private as well as in public, is not just a vague assurance, but again, it's something real given to you. Consider it your baptism reapplied. It's the cross and all its blessings handed to you once again. It's a new, fresh start that God gives you, and not merely the feeling of a new beginning. And Holy Communion is not just a reminder of something in the past, but something real. It's something here and now that is put right into your body that joins you as one with your crucified Savior, and also joins you in one faith with others who publicly confess the same truth. From all these precious gifts you have the forgiveness of sins, and as the catechism teaches, where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

The attacks of the devil are real, and they are powerful, and you are still his target. But you have with you a much stronger Savior who was not turned away from His journey to the cross. As you may recall, Peter was won back after this incident, and then he learned the rest of his life to deny himself and bear the cross. The same applies to you. You are not left to yourself for strength to make it every day, you have been given God's grace to deny yourself instead. And each day as you repent and endure suffering, you have handed to you the forgiveness He

won for you, and the divine motivation to take that forgiveness along with you into your daily calling in life. And when your Redeemer returns with His angels, you can be certain that you will experience all the eternal life and endless joy that He has in store for you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.