# Introduction

## Will Peyton Manning be able to get a second Super Bowl ring like his brother? Will Illinois ever fix its budget problems? What happens when we die? If it’s really aerodynamically impossible for bumble bees to fly, how exactly do they pull it off? Who, exactly, is Jesus?

## Some questions are more important than others. I’d argue that questions about spiritual issues are among the most important because they deal with eternity. And I’d also focus on questions about Jesus because he’s not only the most influential person who ever lived – he did more to change the world in three short years than anyone else ever had – and he claimed to be God. While living simply he made the biggest and boldest claims anyone can make.

## There are others who have claimed to be God, but they are almost all institutionalized. Jesus – the one about whom more books have been written, more songs sung, more lives dedicated than anyone else who has ever lived – Jesus claimed to be eternal, he claimed to be the Creator, he claimed to hold the power of your future and mine in his hand. He claimed to be God. The big question is, is he?

## That is what we’re focusing on in this brief series called Amazed. I believe that He is who He claims to be that that in the early days of his public ministry he did a number of things to build an overwhelming case. The quality of his life, the power of his words, the brilliant and unique substance of his teaching, his ability to heal, to raise the dead, his own resurrection from the dead are some of the ways he did this.

## Last week we explored the claims he made about being the fulfillment of the messianic promises found in Isaiah. Today we look at his power over evil. The passage begins in Luke 4:31. Let me read it.

# Luke 4:31f

## And he went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee. And he was teaching them on the Sabbath, 32 and they were astonished at his teaching, for his word possessed authority. 33 And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, 34 “Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.” 35 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent and come out of him!” And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm. 36 And they were all amazed and said to one another, “What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!” 37 And reports about him went out into every place in the surrounding region.

# So here is the context.

## After the people of Nazareth tried to kill Jesus, he headed to Capernaum, another city in Galilee, and set up base there – a location he’ll operate out of until he begins his march into Jerusalem just prior to his death. (That happens around Luke 19).

## On the Sabbath – Saturday – remember, the early church changed the date. They moved the day of worship from Saturday to Sunday in light of Christ’s resurrection. They realized that every pivoted around Jesus. He’d fulfilled the Law, ushered in a New Covenant, put an end to the sacrificial system and more. He was bigger and better than Abraham or Moses. It was all about Him. So, although the Old Testament set up Saturday as the Day of Rest, they moved it to Sunday. However, back in Luke 4 it was still Saturday.

## So, on a Saturday in Capernaum Jesus went into the local synagogue to teach. And, vs. 32, “the people were amazed” – astonished – with his power and authority. He was different than all the other religious teachers.

### Some of this is an indictment of them. We have some of the sermons they preached and, well, it was pretty boring stuff. Many of their messages were based on technical arguments and that they spent lots of time citing their sources - even their footnotes had footnotes.

### Furthermore, most of what they focused on was bizarre. They had developed a layer of laws around God’s Law. The thought was, if God said, “don’t do X” they needed to build a hedge around X that meant you didn’t even get close to X. It was well intentioned but it became bizarre. For instance, God’s Law says, “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Work on six days but not seven.” They spent their time delineating exactly what qualified as work. Was it OK to walk on the Sabbath? If so, how far? If you walked that far should you then sit there and wait? Could you carry anything with you? Could you have things in your pocket? What if you didn’t know something was in your pocket? What if it was only pocket lint? How much pocket lint was OK to carry? These discussions could go on for hours.

### So, some of the reason they thought Jesus was brilliant is because most everyone else was bad. The bar was set pretty low. But some of it was just Jesus. He was altogether better. He was full of the Holy Spirit. He was loving and gracious and shocking, demanding and bold. He told interesting stories that stayed with you, and He focused on things that mattered. He had power. There was an authority in him that they’d never seen before. The picture we get of Jesus is of this shocking mix of holiness, love and power.

## So, there were lots of rabbis, but Jesus was altogether different. And on this particular Sabbath he is in the synagogue in Capernum amazing the people with his teaching when – vs. 33 – he has an encounter with a man who “had the spirit of an unclean demon.”

### “Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.”[[1]](#footnote-1) But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent and come out of him!”[[2]](#footnote-2) And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm.” And the people were all amazed.

# Let me pause here to acknowledge that some of you are thinking, “Oh no, he is going to talk about demons. I didn’t see this coming. It’s the 21st century and I am about to hear a reasonably sane looking person talk about demons. This is a surprise.”

## I understand that sentiment. But there isn’t any way around this topic. Demons and angels come up a lot in the Gospels so we are going to wrestle this down even though some of you are troubled. That was my reaction thirty years ago. I remember a conversation in John McGehee’s basement. I had recently come to faith, I was excited, I was telling him about it and trying to get him to make the same decision. He said, “No. This is not for me. I can’t buy it.” And the thing he raised as an objection was that the New Testament was full of demons. “Every time someone gets a cold they cast a demon out of them. I can’t go there. I believe in science not demons.” And I remember thinking, “Oh yeah. I never really got that part sorted out.”

## I’ve shared my story before. It took me a while after hearing the Gospel to make a decision to follow Christ. I couldn’t bring myself to move forward but I couldn’t walk away, so I kept circling. I had lots of questions. This went on for about two years before things came together and I realized I did believe. I realized: 1) I believed in God; 2) I knew that I fell short of his standards. In fact, I not only couldn’t keep his standards, I couldn’t keep my own; 3) I was aware that there was no one like Jesus. No one lived like he did. No one did what he did. No one said what he said; and 4) no one else was stepping up to die in my place. I was not going to get a better offer. So, I stepped over the line. It wasn’t that I had everything worked out. I still had questions – and I still do! – but I stepped over the line. I prayed, asking Christ to be my Savior and I got plugged into a small group, signed up to get baptized, did my best to race forward.

## But, over the next months I was occasionally reminded of the things I hadn’t worked through, questions I didn’t have answers for or things (like demons) that I didn’t want to believe and in some cases found embarrassing. “Demons? Seriously? This isn’t the Dark Ages. We’re enlightened now. We don’t believe in demons, but Jesus is casting them out of people. What am I going to do about demons?”

## So, if you’re conflicted here, I get that. I actually think there is more receptivity to the spiritual world today than there was thirty years ago. According to the latest polls I’ve seen, 79 percent of people believe in angels and 69 percent believe in the devil.[[3]](#footnote-3) Those numbers are higher than I would have thought. But as society has grown more aware of the limitations of Modernity – as people realize that there are things science cannot weigh in on – and as we are exposed to other worldviews, more people are willing to embrace a spiritual dimension than before. I think it’s easier to accept a text like today’s today than it was thirty years ago. I had a hard time thirty years ago. So I can relate to those of you who are skittish at the moment. But I do think it’s meant to be understood as the description of an actual event.

# Let me take you to 30,000 feet and give you your options as it relates to evil and Satan. For starters, there are a handful of camps to choose from. (A spectrum here)

## One: Evil Does Not Exist.

### At one end of the spectrum are those who contend there is no such thing as evil because there is no such thing as right or wrong. There are no moral absolutes. Good and evil are terms used to describe social constructs that most people accept but which are ultimately arbitrary because we are alone in the universe. It’s all random chance. There are physical standards but no moral ones. There is no god or standard to declare some things good and some things bad.

### Nietzsche helped popularize this position and it has more adherents than you might imagine. If you listen carefully to news journalists you’ll see that they almost never call anything evil. Someone goes into a grade school and guns down a couple dozen six year olds and they are referred to as “the shooter” or “the gunman,” never the killer or murderer, let alone an evil person. The situation will be described as tragic but not evil. There are a significant number of people who do not want to use the term because they do not like where that line of thought leads.[[4]](#footnote-4) If you say that something is evil you end up with absolute standards which they do not want to admit to.[[5]](#footnote-5)

## Two: Evil does exist but….

### A bit to the right of the “Evil Doesn’t Exist” group is the “Evil exists but I’m not really prepared to talk about it at any length.” I know it when I see it but I have no idea where it came from and I’m not prepared to defend my position. Those in this camp often embrace a generic spirituality that is not very developed, but they argue that some things are self-evident and evil is one of them. I think they are right about the self-evident part. Paul makes a related argument in Romans 1 – God has written certain things on our heart. But those in this camp usually have a fairly tepid view of evil. It’s not a biblical one. They affirm the idea that things go wrong – that good can be corrupted, be defective – but generally balk at the suggestion that evil exists on its own. They do not affirm ontological evil, evil as an entity, and certainly don’t sign on for personal evil.[[6]](#footnote-6)

## Three: Evil Exists but demons do not.

### The third camp – and this was my position shortly after coming to faith – contends that good and evil are absolutes and there is a spiritual dimension that is real, but those here avoid discussions about demons. The topic is embarrassing.[[7]](#footnote-7) Some here focus on systemic evil[[8]](#footnote-8) - the corruption of society, evil systems. Others want to argue that what people 2,000 years ago attributed to demons we now understand to be mental illness or epilepsy.[[9]](#footnote-9)

### For the most part, those in this camp are unable to explain how they pick and choose – why they are willing to believe in a supernatural God, and maybe even affirm that angels announced the birth of Christ – but not willing to believe other accounts about the supernatural realm, like this one.

## Four: Evil Exists & Demons are Real, but are uncommon.

### The classic Evangelical view is that evil exists and demons (and angels) exist, but they are not behind every tree. Those in this camp affirm that we are in a spiritual battle, but suspect demonic activity less often than those in the last camp.

### The argument is that there is very little mention about demons in the Old Testament or in the New outside of the Gospels. Most of what we hear about demons happens around Jesus because when he showed up everything was different. He was on the attack. He was bringing the kingdom and was at war. In the rest of the New Testament the focus is less on demons and more on our own sin. So, we should not be surprised by demonic activity but we shouldn’t suspect it at every juncture.

## Five: The final view is the Classic Pentecostal position.

### This is basically the same as the Evangelical View except the spiritual battles happen a lot more often. Those in this camp are much quicker to suspect that the problems they face are the result of a spiritual attack.

### Of course you also have a lunatic fringe that ascribes virtually everything that goes wrong to Satan. The car won’t start? It’s an attack. Garbage disposal stopped working? There is a demon in it. Those who hold these views have the best TV shows. If you are going to watch a TV preacher you probably want him or her in this camp because there is a lot more drama.

# I started in camp two. When I came to faith I moved to camp three and then later I moved into camp four.[[10]](#footnote-10) I’m not happy believing in demons. Who would be? And it’s not a major part of my day. But I made the move for a few reasons:

## First, the testimony of people I respect, especially those living or ministering outside the West, where our enemy is more overt in his tactics.

### Satan is not dumb. He can do a lot more damage if people do not believe in him than if they do. So, here is the west – where many are hard core materialists, his tactics are more clandestine.[[11]](#footnote-11)

### For what it’s worth I’ll also mention the experiences of Dr. Scott Peck, a psychiatrist who burst onto the scene back in the 80s with his book *The Road Less Travelled*. He wrote a subsequent book called *People of the Lie* in which he talks about realizing that some of the people he was treating were not mentally ill, they were evil, possessed. He said that he went to meetings where people were trying to cast demons out of people who, in his medical opinion were simply mentally ill. But that there were other times when he was watching doctors and therapists treating people as if they were mentally ill when he said, there is evil in this room.

## Second, my own experiences. My interaction with evil is limited. I’m pretty sure most of the trouble I get into is because of my own dark heart. Some is ignorance but most is my pride and greed and lust and anger. But some feels more like an attack – it feels personal.

## So, I believe in evil in part because of my experiences or the experiences of those I trust. But the chief reason I believe in evil is because Jesus did. I do not know of any credible way to read the New Testament other than to suggest that Jesus was in a battle with evil.[[12]](#footnote-12) It’s a book with a lot of supra-natural claims. If we take Satan and evil out of it I’m not sure how it holds together.

# What we find in the Bible is not a systematic development of a doctrine of evil or Satan or demons, but a handful of claims are made.

## Evil is real and personal. Evil has a name. It’s not simply a force.

### Satan is referred to as Satan fifty-two times in the Bible, as the Devil thirty-five times and with a bunch of other names as well: the prince of demons (Mt. 12:24); the ruler of this world. (Jn. 12:31); and the prince of the power of the air (Eph. 2:2). He is “the god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4), the evil one (Jn. 17:15), and a roaring lion (I Peter 5:8). In the book of Revelation he is a great red dragon and the ancient serpent. Demons are mentioned in 19 of the 27 New Testament books. In Jude 6 and I Timothy 5 we are given a bit of their background. Evil is real and personal.

## Satan was an angel who fell due to pride.

### Satan was created by God to glorify, honor and serve him, but he aspired for more, led a failed coup and was cast out of heaven. One-third of the angels aligned with Satan and fell. They are spiritual beings. They hate us and we do battle against him when we try to take spiritual ground.[[13]](#footnote-13) They work to prevent us from understanding the Gospel, they oppose the work of the church and tempt people to sin.[[14]](#footnote-14)

## Satan – and demons – are powerful, but limited.

### The greater the potential for good the greater the potential for evil. Satan had a lot of freedom and glory, so he is an extremely powerful enemy.[[15]](#footnote-15) But, he is not God’s equal and opposite. He is a creature not a creator. He doesn’t share the attributes of God. He is not all-knowing or all-present.

### It’s important to realize that even though evil exists we are not powerless in its presence. We cannot say, “the Devil made me do it.” For starters we can resist the devil. Secondly, technically, he’s unlikely to even be around. He cannot be in more than one place at a time. I doubt you’ve on his hit list. I’m quite sure I’m not. Now, perhaps one of his lieutenants is involved. But even then, we have free will. We cannot be made to do things.

# Let me be proactive and offer you a few guidelines as it relates to evil and Satan.

## First: Avoid the extremes. In The Screwtape Letters, C.S. Lewis writes:

### “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race could fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence, the other is to believe and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.”

### Don’t forget about them and don’t find them under every rock. When you hear hoof beats, think horses not zebras. Go with what is most likely. But know that zebras – i.e., demons – do exist.

## Second: Avoid the occult.

### Stay away from Ouija boards, tarot cards, voodoo dolls and palm readers. Don’t go to séances or base anything on your horoscope. Most of this stuff is mindless, benign hype – it’s like the sideshow at the circus where the woman changes into a gorilla and back every five minutes. It’s a total sham. But not all of it. Evil is real. Avoid it. In the same way you want to stay out of dark alleys at 2 AM you want to avoid everything associated with the occult.

## Three: Realize that you are in a fight.

### Read Ephesians 6 about the armor of God. Read I Peter 3 about the roaring lion who seeks to devour you. Know what you are up against. Our enemy doesn’t sleep.

## Four: Major on God

### Understand that there is an enemy, but major on God. Do not make Satan or demons the focus on your thought or study. Focus on God. Focus on Christ.

## Five: Pray for protection.

### When I suspect I am bumping into evil spirits – I would say something like this happens to me a few times a year – I pray. I claim the name of Jesus. I repent of my sin and ask for God’s protection for me and my family. I command every spirit that does not love and serve Jesus away from me and my family. I pray against the enemy, his servants, their works and effects, and I ask the Holy Spirit to live in me and fill me up. I do not attempt to move forward under my own power for a second.

## Six: Move forward with respect but not fear.

### Move forward with respect for Satan’s power, but not fear. I think Martin Luther gets it exactly right in his great hymn, A Mighty Fortress is Our God, which we are going to sing in just a minute. I’ll say more then.

## Seven: Be joyful.

### We win. Good wins. God wins. This war has been decided. The enemy has been mortally wounded. He will be utterly defeated.

### I hear people talking as if evil might triumph. No. There are real battles going on and we can lose battles, but the outcome of the war is certain. We need to live in light of the certainty of the final score. Jesus defeated evil and death. Death itself will one day be destroyed. We need not be beaten down!

# OK, so back to the text.

## That was a lot on evil and spiritual warfare because this is not a topic I’ve spoken on recently, but this passage was not designed as a primer on spiritual warfare. The reason Luke includes Christ casting out a demon and restoring this man was to demonstrate that Jesus is more powerful than the forces of darkness.

## The people back then didn’t need to be persuaded that evil existed. They needed to be persuaded that Jesus was God and that he was more powerful than evil. This event shows that.

## Be amazed at Jesus – He is God. He has the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises and He has power over evil and sickness and nature and death.

# Prayer

# We are going to sing A Mighty Fortress is Our God.

## It’s a song written by Martin Luther, the great Reformer. He laughed at the devil, famously threw things at him – if you go to the castle in Germany where he hung out you can supposedly see a stain where he threw his ink jar at the devil. We’ll leave that for the historians. What I want to highlight here is the balance Luther displays. He recognizes that Satan has power – and we are wise to “give the devil his due” – to respect his power.

## But, Jesus is far greater, and Satan’s loss is certain. He says as much right in the first verse.

### A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing; our helper he amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing. For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe; his craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate, on earth is not his equal.

### Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing, were not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing. Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is he; Lord Sabaoth, his name, from age to age the same, and he must win the battle.

## And there is more. Let’s sing.

# Quotes[[16]](#footnote-16)

1. One thing you will note about demons is that they have a high view of Christ. They know who Jesus is. They believe but do not follow. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Why would Jesus order them to be silent about who he is? Two reasons seem likely: 1) He was not ready for people to understand that He was the Messiah because their views about the Messiah and the Messiah’s mission were quite faulty; 2) he did not want any help from Satan in his mission. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This includes people like Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. See: Gene Edward Veith, “Angels and Demons in Pop Culture, *Tabletalk*, July 2007, p. 62. See also Kevin P. Emmert, “Supreme Court’s Scalia Cites C.S. Lewis in Confessing Belief in the Devil.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. David Mills, Fade to Gray,” *Touchstone*, Sept. 7, 2007, p. 3f [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. We also see this increasingly in higher education. There is no agreement on what is good. The universities police what is legal but few attempt to build strong character because there is no agreement on what good and evil look like. What is good character? [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. One of the critiques of liberalism is that it denies radical evil and is sanguine about human nature and its capacity for good, even perfectibility. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Thoreau once remarked that the ancients – with their gorgons, unicorns, and sphinxes – imagined more than existed, whereas moderns cannot even imagine so much as exists. I confess that as a child of a reductionist age, I used to explain away biblical talk about supernatural “powers.” I would read accounts of demon possession in the Gospels and instead see signs of mental illness and epilepsy. I could not stomach the notion of a world ruled by invisible spirits. I have changed, however, for the simple reason that my reductionist instincts failed to explain the world around me. (Philip Yancey, “Beyond Flesh and Blood,” *Christianity Today*, April 2, 2001, p. 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In his book The Powers That Be, Wallter Wink dismisses the idea of demons but insists that the biblical language about powers and authorities speaks to actual realities that cannot be described by reductionist language of sociology, politics and psychology. (Yancey, ibid). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Walter Wink is here. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I do not argue that we have to believe in demons to be a Christian. Belief in Satan and demons is not part of any of the major creeds. But I do contend that the struggle between Christ and Satan is an integral part of the faith and you cannot remove it without ruthlessly tearing apart the fabric. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Why would demonic activity be more overt there than here? Our enemy is not an idiot. He can do his best work when no one believes he exists. There is no reason to blow his cover. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I could expand this to the entire Bible: 1) Deut 32:17; 2) Isaiah 14; 3) Ezekiel 28; 4) Ps. 106:37: [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “A servant of Christ can no more avoid demons than a gardener can avoid weeds.” Clinton Arnold. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Some people end up overpowered or possessed by them. There are debates over who and how. Are those like the man described in Luke four internally influenced? Externally oppressed? Completely controlled? The language Jesus uses suggests the metaphor of a house. Our body is the house we live in. Some people invite the wrong people over – through their own sin and folly, through occult practices, by failing to “lock the doors and close the windows” – some people become subject to evil spirits. The spirit’s move in, trash the place and take over the house. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. C.S. Lewis wrote about this in Mere Christianity. “The better stuff a creature is made of – the cleverer and stronger and freer it is – then the better it will be if it goes right, but also the worse it will be if it goes wrong. A cow cannot be a very good or very bad; a dog can be both better and worse; a child better and worse still; an ordinary man, still more so; a man of genius, still more so; a superhuman spirit best – or worst – of all.” The Latin phrase for this is *corruptio optima pessima*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Quotes: 1) “If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?” [Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/10420.Aleksandr_Solzhenitsyn); 2) “Men may spurn our appeals, reject our message, oppose our arguments, despise our persons, but they are helpless against our prayers.” [J. Sidlow Baxter](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/151842.J_Sidlow_Baxter) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)