Paul’s Portrait of Satan in 2 Corinthians
Satan has the distinct dishonor of being the enemy of the Son of God, and of daring to oppose and tempt Him (Matt. 4:1-11; 16:23; Mark 1:13; 8:33). Near the end of Jesus’ ministry, through Satan’s evil influence, Judas willingly betrayed Jesus to the chief priests and Pharisees (John 13:27; 18:3-5). Often referred to as “the Devil,” Satan schemes against God’s people with evil methods and traps (2 Cor. 2:11; Eph. 6:11; 1 Tim. 3:7; 2 Tim. 2:26). Because of Satan, creation itself appears under bondage to corruption (Rom. 8:22).

Outside of Paul’s letters, the New Testament uses the name “Satan” over 20 times. In his letters, Paul referred to Satan by name 10 times. With several other titles, Paul described Satan as the Devil (Eph. 4:27), the evil one (6:16), the god of this world (2 Cor. 4:4), Belial (6:15), a disguised angel of light (11:14), prince of the power of the air (Eph. 2:2), and the tempter (1 Thess. 3:5).

Paul knew the power Satan had over nonbelievers. When Paul was under arrest in Jerusalem and in his self-defense before King Agrippa, Paul said the risen Lord Jesus challenged him to serve and witness in a new way. Jesus appointed Paul to open the eyes of Jews and Gentiles “that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins” (Acts 26:18, HCSB).

The Enemy’s Work
In 1–2 Corinthians, Paul’s references to Satan’s activities fall into four categories: deceiving, tempting, being subject to the larger purpose of God’s will, and maintaining an evil identity. First, Satan’s basic deceptive nature appears in 2 Corinthians 2:11, where Paul warned the Corinthians that Satan could take advantage or outwit them when they fail in their duty to forgive a divisive fellow Christian. Likewise, Paul captured Satan’s basic deceptive character when he wrote that Satan disguises himself as an “angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14). Satan’s disguise was so effective that some Corinthians agreed with Satan’s unrighteousness, deceptively disguising themselves as Christ’s apostles (v. 13) and opposing Paul’s ministry as an unskilled speaker (v. 6).

Second, Satan’s longstanding role as a tempter appears in the context of Paul’s discussion of sexual relations in marriage (1 Cor. 7:5). Paul advised spouses not to deprive their spouses sexually lest Satan would tempt them toward infidelity through their lack of self-control (see v. 2). Yet, Paul affirmed that no temptation is too strong for God’s faithfulness to provide the believer a way of escape (10:13). Despite his ability to tempt, Satan’s power is not absolute, for God, in His power and grace, limits Satan’s power over believers.

Third, in 1 Corinthians 5:5 and 2 Corinthians 12:7, Paul referred to Satan as functioning as an instrument within God’s larger knowledge and grace (see Job 1–2). Without explaining how God works in difficult and painful situations, Paul affirmed that God’s sovereignty is able to transform Satan’s destructive power into a redemptive conclusion (see 1 Tim. 1:20; Rom. 8:28,38). For Paul, the only positive characteristic of Satan’s work is God’s ability to transform the enemy’s deception, temptation,
and evil into good that ultimately glorifies Him.

Fourth, Paul offered his most noteworthy images of Satan’s evil nature and influence with the two phrases “god of this world” and “Belial” (2 Cor. 4:4; 6:15). In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul discussed his ministry and gospel message as shining light into pagan darkness. However, through the power of the “god of this world,” darkness enveloped those who rejected the gospel, which caused them to perish (see Acts 26:18).

Related to Satan’s evil nature, Paul’s most piercing remark occurs in 2 Corinthians 6:15 where he referred to Satan as “Belial,” a transiterated Hebrew word which meant “worthless” or “wicked.”

“What fellowship does light have with darkness? What agreement does Christ have with Belial?” (2 Cor. 6:14-15, HCSB)—no sharp division between Christ and his believers versus Satan and his evil maneuverings exists in all of Paul’s letters.

The Believers’ Understanding
How the Corinthians understood Paul’s references to Satan is a complicated issue because of the puzzling social makeup of the city and the church. Corinth was a cosmopolitan and polytheistic Roman colony, the capital of Achaia, which in 44 b.c. Julius Caesar had reestablished and populated with Roman freedmen and army veterans. Because of its strategic location near the sea, Corinth was a wealthy city.

Polytheistic in Paul’s day, Corinthians celebrated the Isthmian athletic games with invocations to Poseidon, and worshiped in various pagan temples to Apollo, Asclepius, Aphrodite, and Octavia (Caesar Augustus’s sister). Prior to becoming Christians, some Corinthian believers practiced idol worship (1 Cor. 12:2), and Paul accused pagans of worshiping demons (i.e., pagan gods) by eating food offered to idols (10:20).

According to Acts 18:4, Paul reasoned with both Jews and Greeks on each Sabbath in the Jewish synagogue. Crispus, the ruler of the Corinthian synagogue, and all the people in his house became believers in Jesus. Also, Titius Justus (a Gentile worshiping in the synagogue) and other gentile Corinthians believed in Jesus (Acts 18:7-8). Subsequently, some Jews beat Sosthenes, the succeeding ruler of the synagogue, in the presence of the Roman tribunal (v. 17). Possibly, this was the same Sosthenes, a believer and colleague of Paul, who joined him in writing 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 11).

Into this mixed social context of converted pagans and Jewish Christians at Corinth, Paul referred to the enemy as “Satan,” “Belial,” “disguised angel of light,” and “god of this world.” For Jews, both “Satan” and “Belial” deceived people and opposed God, and, yet, was subjected to God’s sovereignty. Persons living in Paul’s day would have understood the implication of Satan being referred to as “Belial.” First-century Jews in
the Qumran Community said that wicked people followed in the ways of Belial and eventually would be condemned to everlasting fire.8

Some Greeks at Corinth may have understood “this world” within the context of Greek philosophy’s (i.e., Plato) negative appraisal of the material world. The influence of Plato’s philosophy on Greco-Roman religions came to fruition in the growing gnostic religious systems of the first, second, and third centuries A.D. Pagan Corinthians influenced by gnostic ideology could have understood “the god of this age” possibly as the present evil world created by an evil god.10

Paul’s phrase the “god of this world” relates the “present evil age” (Gal. 1:4) which is passing away (1 Cor. 2:6; 7:31) to that which one must not be conformed (Rom. 12:2). The Corinthians—whether Jewish Christian or converted pagans—understood that the rulers of this age (1 Cor. 2:6,8) exemplified opposition to God through their crucifixion of Jesus.11

The god of this world’s opposition to Paul and the gospel message coalesced with unbelieving and blinded minds (2 Cor. 4:4). Such a negative consequence betrays the reality that believers have the privilege of housing “this treasure in earthen vessels” (v. 7, KJV).

**The Inherent Contradictions**

Paul likened the weakness of the body with the evils of this world’s god, while he likened the strength of the inner self to that which is unseen and eternal (2 Cor. 4:4,16,18; 5:1). For those who think they are wise in this world, that supposed wisdom is sheer foolishness (1 Cor.3:18-19), for the form of this world is passing away (7:31).

Although this world and its god(s) display eternally destructive circumstances, consequences, ideas, and behaviors, “the transcendent power belongs to God...so we do not lose heart” (2 Cor. 4:7,16, RSV).

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1. Matt. 4:1,5,8,11; 13:39; 25:41; Luke 4:2,3,6; 8:12; John 6:70; 8:44; 13:2; Acts 10:38; 13:10; Eph. 4:27; 6:11; 1 Tim. 3:6,7; 2 Tim. 2:26; Heb. 2:14; James 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:8; 1 John 3:8,10; Jude 9; Rev. 2:10; 12:9,12,20,2,10.
3. “For if you forgive people their wrongdoing, your heavenly Father will forgive you as well. But if you don’t forgive people, your Father will not forgive your wrongdoing.” (Matt. 6:14-15, HCSB).
4. In the KJV, “Belial” appears several times in the Old Testament. Contemporary translations translate the Hebrew word with terms such as “wicked man,” “worthless man,” “perverted men,” “base fellow,” or “wicked woman.”
7. In the pagan mind, Poseidon ruled as god of the sea; Apollo, god of the sun, oracles, music, and the intellect; Asclepius, god of healing; Aphrodite, legendary for temple prostitutes; and Octavia, the focal point of the Emperor cult.
11. Dominated by “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2), “this age” is the “the dominion of darkness” (Col. 1:13).