

*"Immensely practical book."*

Katie J. McCoy, author of *To Be a Woman*



# Make My Church Safe

*A Guide to the Best Practices to Protect Children &  
Secure Your Congregation from Harm*

**SAM RAINER**

In this immensely practical book, Sam Rainer answers both the “why” and the “how” of making your church a safe place for the most vulnerable in your care. *Make My Church Safe* provides specific policies and procedures that every church leader can implement—chapters 5 and 6 alone are worth the entire book! I hope every pastor and seminary student will read this timely and crucial work.

KATIE J. MCCOY, author of *To Be a Woman*

If there is anything a church should be, it’s *safe*. However, media reports of sexual abuse, financial misappropriation, and failures of leadership are an everyday occurrence. How can ministry leaders make sure that their church doesn’t make the nightly news? Sam Rainer gives readers practical and timely advice for how to make sure their faith community protects every person who enters their doors.

RYAN BURGE, associate professor of political science, Eastern Illinois University

*Make My Church Safe* is a great and necessary resource for church leaders. This book goes beyond protecting churches from school shooters and sexual predators to enable church leaders to understand the reality of spiritual warfare, the inevitability of “Black Swan” events, the importance of securing the church campus, and the protection and equipping of children in a dangerous world. Rainer also emphasizes that church safety is every member’s responsibility, and a Kingdom-first mindset. I highly recommend this resource for churches and church leaders.

EDWARD E. MOODY, JR., executive director of the National Association of Free Will Baptists



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*A Tyndale nonfiction imprint*

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*Make My Church Safe: A Guide to the Best Practices to Protect Children and Secure Your Congregation from Harm*

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INTRODUCTION

## A DUAL CALLING

“They are not doing *anything*. The problem is being swept under the rug.”

The director of a long-standing and successful church preschool ministry was calling for advice.

“This child is a potential danger to himself and to others around him.”

She described a challenging situation—a preschooler who reacted violently in unpredictable ways. When he acted out, he was difficult to restrain. The teachers were concerned his behavior would continue to escalate and he might harm another child.

The preschool director had reported the behavior to the lead pastor multiple times. She wanted to create an intervention plan for the child and inform the right people about the problem. At their most recent meeting, she had pleaded with the pastor for permission to act. But he had reminded her in subtle ways that the child’s grandfather was an elder in the

church and a major financial contributor. The director was well aware of the grandfather's stature in the congregation. She was also aware of his reputation as a bully who used his wealth to leverage relationships in the church and the community.

"I'm stuck," she said. "At some point, this child will do something that will require us to make a report beyond our internal systems. Whether it's Child Protective Services or—"

"And people will blame you for not taking action earlier," I added.

"Exactly. I've been in this role for thirty years. I know how to deal with problematic children. I'm now caring for preschoolers whose parents were in my classes when I started."

She was right. She was knowledgeable, experienced, and cool under fire. The church and the community loved her. During her three decades of service, thousands of children had come through her program. The preschool ministry was one of the best parts of the church, and it was how many in the community knew the church was there. There was a long waiting list for admission, and family and friends packed the sanctuary for every preschool event.

But this situation was unlike anything she had ever encountered. The new pastor was playing favorites with certain elders, and the child's grandfather was part of a group attempting to rework the rules of church governance to give the elders more power and access to budget funds. The preschool director was not the only one affected by the changes, but her issues were particularly acute because children were involved.

“We have to prioritize safety,” she said. “Yes, our reputation is at stake, but I’m most concerned about the children. This problem is solvable.”

I watched as she folded her hands as if she were about to pray, but she looked straight ahead with fierce determination. “There are so many real dangers in the world,” she continued. “We cannot invite them into our church.”

Every church has a dual calling when it comes to the evils of the world: *ensure safety* and *confront danger*. The church must be a place where every person is protected from harm. The church is also called to send people out to preach the gospel in dangerous places. Churches are not islands in the community, set up to isolate believers from the ills of society. The walls of the church are not a protective barrier to keep out community problems. Instead, the church is a vehicle engineered by God to send people into the neighborhood and the wider world to confront the darkness and rescue lost sheep.

Internal safety creates a strong platform for people to become courageous gospel ambassadors. A safe church is a threat to the enemy of our souls. An unsafe church undermines the gospel and is thus an asset to the enemy.

The purpose of this book is to help train churches in this dual calling. Every church should be a safe space for everyone who comes in. Every church should also be equipping people to confront the powers of darkness and help those in trouble. Unfortunately, far too many churches are unsafe internally, while at the same time they’re unwilling to confront external dangers. An unsafe church creates a toxic environment that

works against the gospel. A safe church is battle-ready to combat the worst of the world's problems.

"I will do the right thing, even if it costs me personally," the preschool director told me. She was willing to sacrifice everything for the children and families she served. Like an experienced shepherd, she was ready to stand against any danger that came near her little ones.

### **The Safety of the Shepherd**

Too often, in our Sunday school stories of the Good Shepherd, Jesus is depicted as an *idyllic* figure—charming and simple, often watching his sheep in unspoiled and rustic settings. But the Good Shepherd isn't idyllic; he is a down-to-earth, down-in-the-dirt, lay-down-his-life-for-the-sheep *ideal* shepherd, willing to grapple with all dangers. He is the standard of perfection when it comes to caring for his flock.

Sheep are mentioned more than any other type of livestock in the Bible, and the occupation of a shepherd is a common one in biblical stories. Abel, Moses, David, and Amos were all shepherds, and shepherds were some of the first people to see Jesus after his birth.<sup>1</sup> God's people are often described as sheep. In Genesis 48:15 and Psalm 23:1, God himself is described as a shepherd, and Micah portrays the coming Messiah as a shepherd.<sup>2</sup> In the Gospels, Jesus says of himself, "I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me."<sup>3</sup>

Shepherds in the first century were common, but of low standing. They slept beside their sheep and kept constant

watch over them. Not surprisingly, shepherds smelled like sheep. Caring for sheep meant rescuing them from all sorts of predicaments. For the most part, sheep are slow and defenseless. They need a shepherd. We, too, like sheep, need an outside source of protection. Whether we realize it or not, we are entirely dependent on God.

Sheep are not only defenseless, but they are also valuable. Their wool, skins, and meat were all important commodities in the agrarian culture of Jesus' day. Sheep were a common target for thieves because they were worth the effort to steal. This truth is also at the heart of the gospel.

I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures. The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep.

JOHN 10:9-11

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one can snatch them away from me, for my Father has given them to me, and he is more powerful than anyone else. No one can snatch them from the Father's hand.

JOHN 10:27-29

The Good Shepherd is always “close beside” you (Psalm 23:4). Whatever you experience, God experiences it with you. He is always there, through bad weather and danger from wild animals. When one sheep is lost, Jesus is quick to pursue it. Even one wayward sheep makes the flock incomplete.

Our safety in the Good Shepherd is rooted in his transcending power and glory. Life with the Good Shepherd is comforting, not because he fulfills our desires, but because we find our purpose in fulfilling his desires. We should not “look out for number one,”<sup>4</sup> but instead look to the one in whom our “real life is hidden.” Self-centeredness, self-promotion, and self-aggrandizement create a culture in which the most vulnerable are overlooked and even abused. We will always fail when we live for ourselves. But if we center our lives on serving and pleasing God, he will never fail us.

The key to understanding the safety found in the Good Shepherd is recognizing the connection between Psalm 22 and Psalm 23. The benefits of Psalm 23 do not happen without the sacrifice of Psalm 22. There is no “You are close beside me” in Psalm 23:4 without the “They have pierced my hands and feet” of Psalm 22:16. There are no “green meadows” in Psalm 23:2 without the “My God, why have you abandoned me?” of Psalm 22:1. Jesus is the sacrificial lamb of Psalm 22; and through his sacrifice he becomes the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23. The Suffering Servant becomes the Caring Shepherd.

## **The Danger of the Mission**

The turning point for me in thinking about church safety occurred at a funeral I officiated for a local family I didn't know. They had contacted our church asking for help with the service.

At one point, I was holding the four-year-old boy whose mother had passed away from an overdose of fentanyl and cocaine. I'll never forget what he said to me.

“Are you going to help bring my mommy back?”

I didn't have any words for him. Only tears.

As a consequence of his mother's death, the boy was placed in a foster home. Thankfully, it was one full of love and support. At about the same time as the funeral, a local newspaper headline caught my attention: “Bradenton Is Opioid Overdose Capital of Florida. And Still No One Knows Why.”<sup>5</sup>

Every year, hundreds of children are removed from their homes in the county where I live. More than half of these situations are directly attributable to substance abuse by their parents or guardians. Most of the children removed are under the age of five. I didn't have the words to reassure that four-year-old boy, but his question prompted me to act. I couldn't bring his mom back, but my wife and I could become foster parents for children in situations like his. So we got our license and began our foster journey.

The foster system in our area is stretched thin. When willing families become licensed, they receive a child placement immediately. My wife and I recently cared for an infant

experiencing the effects of cocaine exposure. When addictive drugs a pregnant mother consumes are passed from her bloodstream through the placenta, her baby may be born dependent on them. Withdrawal can be an awful experience as the tiny child's central nervous system tries to recover.

The Good Shepherd guided my wife and me into a system full of horrors so we could help children find green meadows and peaceful streams.<sup>6</sup> Our home is a safe space. Your church should also be a safe space. But that won't happen unless you take positive action to make it and keep it safe. The world is full of danger, and the church is called to the front lines.

Doing what's right often comes with a level of risk. We see the risk and reward of caring for a child in need in the story of Moses. When Pharaoh's daughter opened a basket that she found floating along the banks of the Nile, she saw a baby and said, "This must be one of the Hebrew children"<sup>7</sup>—that is, one of the children that her father, the pharaoh, was determined to kill.<sup>8</sup>

Imagine the desperation of Moses' mother, placing her baby in the papyrus basket and letting him drift away from the safety of her arms.

Imagine the courage of Moses' sister, Miriam. At significant risk to her own safety, she kept watching over the basket. When Moses was found, she became an advocate for him. She stayed close to the crisis to help. She risked everything when she reached out to Pharaoh's daughter.

Imagine the audacity of Pharaoh's daughter. She knew

her father had decreed that all Hebrew baby boys were to be killed, but she exercised her power as a member of the royal family and used her position to do what was right. The child in the basket moved her. A child in need should move all of us to action.

All the women in this story took tremendous risks, but fear didn't stop them from doing the right thing. What if every church were to view the foster care system in their area as a floating papyrus basket? What if, when the people of the church opened the baskets, they had the same response as Pharaoh's daughter? What if more of God's people were willing to take risks to help others in danger? Your church should be a haven of hope for people in need. I fear that our modern version of the Christian calling is too safe. At the same time, I'm concerned that our churches are not safe enough.

### **The Spiritual Battle for Church Safety**

Spiritual warfare is the basis for all conflict in the physical world—every geopolitical conflict, every argument with your spouse or kids, and every bit of melodrama on daytime talk shows. God doesn't want us to be at odds with each other, but Satan loves to distract the world and the church with hostility. Satan's fall from heaven happened because he believed he could be more powerful as God's *enemy* than as his *friend*. Remember, Satan is intelligent but unwise. He is strategic but flawed. He is powerful but defeated. Consider Peter's words of warning in his first letter.

Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Stand firm against him, and be strong in your faith. Remember that your family of believers all over the world is going through the same kind of suffering you are.

I PETER 5:8-9

How will Satan attempt to destroy you and your church? The father of lies wants you to be more focused on yourself than on him or God. Satan is fierce, relentless, ruthless, and shrewd. We must be alert and always on guard. Satan is not only against God, but he is also against you. He wants you distracted, detached, or dead. Distracted believers pursue their own goals apart from God. Detached believers are wayward or even absent from the body of Christ. And Satan would love for you to remain dead in your sins.

In Luke 11, when Jesus amazes everyone by driving out a demon, the people openly wonder about the source of Jesus' power. Some claim he must have struck a deal with Satan. Jesus reminds them that a house divided against itself cannot stand.

“But if I am casting out demons by the power of God,” he says, “then the Kingdom of God has arrived among you.”

Then Jesus throws down the gauntlet, saying, “Anyone who isn't with me opposes me, and anyone who isn't working with me is actually working against me.”<sup>10</sup>

Satan wants to destroy you. God wants to save you. The

church should be on the side of salvation and oppose all of Satan's destructive efforts. Satan was defeated the moment he refused to give God glory. As Jesus told his followers, "I saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning! Look, I have given you authority over all the power of the enemy."<sup>11</sup>

What did Satan look like in Genesis 3? A snake. He uses various physical forms to accomplish his spiritual warfare. Why? If we don't know what he looks like, we won't know when we encounter him. Satan wants you to think of him as a creepy creature in a horror film or like the cartoon figure with a pitchfork and horns. Horror makes us cower. Cartoons cause us to drop our guard. But these images are not what Satan actually looks like. While we are looking for horns and a pitchfork, he's showing us a mirror. Satan loves to deceive us by showing us something we like to see; namely, *ourselves*. The powers of darkness are quite adept at leading us astray. They've been doing this since the beginning of time. We are not their first assignment.

But Jesus, speaking of Satan, says, "He has no power over me."<sup>12</sup> So, don't live in fear. Don't be deceived. Live for Christ, and his truth will give you his courage and his power.

## **Your Role in Church Safety**

In writing this book, I hope to give churches a resource to equip their leaders and members for the dual calling of ensuring safety and confronting danger. When we hear the term *church safety*, we often think of active shooters and

sexual predators. These two dangers are real, but they are only part of the threat. We will take a more comprehensive view of church safety here—though the book is designed to be brief and practical, so any church member can use it. I consulted several specialty experts while writing, but I do not intend for the book to be the end-all resource for each area of church safety.

The dual calling of ensuring safety and confronting danger means you have a dual responsibility. Your church should be a safe space for people seeking rescue or refuge. Additionally, your church should be willing to combat the spiritual forces of evil that affect every community. In nine concise chapters, we will discuss how to make the church a place of safety while also being dangerous to the forces of darkness.

Chapter 1 deals with the reality of spiritual warfare. If your church is pursuing God’s mission in the world, you should expect opposition from the powers of darkness. Every obedient believer is a threat to evil, and you must be ready for Satan’s schemes.

Chapter 2 examines the inevitable risks of ministry and how to mitigate the dangers. Because ministry involves *people*, some sort of incident will likely happen at some point in almost every church. Even “Black Swan” events—such as a pandemic or a natural disaster—require basic preparation plans.

Chapter 3 explores the systemic problems of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse. One of the most dreadful aspects of ministry is how to deal with instances of abuse. Every church

needs a clear response pathway and a clear understanding of how to reduce the potential for harmful behavior.

Chapter 4 discusses how to secure a physical campus. This includes the basics of lockdowns, medical emergencies, active shooter planning, crisis prevention, and incident response. Safety procedures in a manual are useless unless everyone knows what they are and how to act on them.

Chapter 5 unpacks the best practices for protecting children from harm and equipping them for safety. This discussion will help children's ministry leaders protect and equip the children under their care.

Chapter 6 extends the discussion from the previous chapter to cover how churches can protect and equip students in ways that are age appropriate.

Chapter 7 will help you navigate the aftermath of a moral failure by a church leader. Church safety must include a healing process and an understanding of why the failure occurred. I hope your church never has to experience this pain, but some will, and all churches must be prepared.

Chapter 8 establishes how church safety is each individual church member's responsibility. Church safety won't happen unless every member commits to it. Everyone is responsible for reporting concerns. Don't let a lack of commitment to safety be the gap Satan uses to attack your church.

Chapter 9 points to the Kingdom strength of a safe church. When the church body is unsafe, it is unfit for battle. Safety first is a Kingdom-first mindset. Once a church is made safe internally, the people will be better equipped to

put on the full armor of God to do battle against the powers of darkness.<sup>13</sup> Your church will not be effective in the Kingdom of God unless it is safe for the most vulnerable.

Satan's only real power in this battle is the power we give him. His power is based on our consent and compliance. He cannot overpower Jesus, so he focuses instead on trying to trick, trip up, and torpedo God's people. Do not fall for Satan's deception. Stand with Christ and create a safe church that is dangerous to the powers of darkness.

## THE REALITY OF THIS DARK WORLD

I remember pulling a book titled *This Present Darkness*, by Frank Peretti, off my dad's shelf when I was in third grade. I have no idea why he let me read it. The cover depicted giant bird claws in the sky creeping down like a hovering cloud over a small church. I could tell the novel was going to be scary, but my curiosity compelled me to read it.

Sales of *This Present Darkness* started off slowly, but the book soon became a cultural phenomenon as word of mouth spread about what is often considered the first popular work of Christian horror.<sup>1</sup> The inspiration for the title comes from Ephesians 6:12,<sup>2</sup> a verse in a section of Scripture cautioning believers against trying to battle the spiritual forces of

darkness without God's armor. As the first adult fiction I ever read, it had a tremendous impact on me. Though a work of fiction, it made me realize that the dark world of evil spirits is real.

It might seem odd to start a discussion of church safety by talking about spiritual warfare. Unfortunately, the critical connection between the two is often missed, to the great detriment of our churches. No church will ever be safe if the leaders and members overlook, downplay, or dismiss the reality of spiritual warfare in our day-to-day lives.

We can do our best to live upright lives, and that might even be true of most Christians. But if we ignore the fact that we have a real enemy, the devil, who is constantly trying to drive a wedge between us and our Savior; that he “prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour”;<sup>3</sup> and that, like a real-life lion on the savanna, he's targeting the weak, the wounded, and the vulnerable, we will not be prepared to make our churches both safe to those who seek refuge there and dangerous to the workers of darkness.

Darkness simultaneously repulses and allures us. This dual effect is why we cover our eyes at horror movies but still get a thrill. It's why my eldest daughter loves the Haunted Mansion ride at Disney. It's why people both pursue and fear paranormal activity. The problem is that it's difficult to shut the door to the world of demons once you've opened it. How do you know where to draw the line? Perhaps one telltale sign is a feeling of spiritual oppression. Growing up, I watched

every episode of *The X-Files*. The show was entertaining, but I never thought aliens might abduct me. However, the same show really spooked my wife when she was younger.

I recognize the nuances of these issues. Though I was allowed to read *This Present Darkness*, my parents would have grounded me for years if I had played with a Ouija board. Should Christians watch horror movies? Or read zombie apocalypse books? Should children take the Haunted Mansion ride while visiting the Magic Kingdom? Though questions like these may be important, focusing too much on them can cause us to overlook the bigger issues of spiritual warfare.

Satan will disguise himself as an angel of light.<sup>4</sup> He loves to be a false beacon of hope, drawing people closer through deception before they realize the dangers of the waters around them. The apostle John, in his first letter, advises the church to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God.”<sup>5</sup> Here, John contrasts the Spirit of truth with the spirit of deception.<sup>6</sup> The problem is that counterfeit truth is often attractive. John warns the church of many false prophets who were denying the truth of Jesus. The early church did not have the full text of the Bible that we have today. Teaching was mainly oral, and house churches were spread out and often isolated. These churches relied on emissaries, or special messengers, to pass along doctrinal teaching. Paul sent Timothy and Silas. John sent elders. But sometimes, false emissaries arrived, claiming an authority that was not theirs. Some churches received false letters.

What happens when false teaching enters the church? Bad doctrine makes false promises that do not deliver. Bad doctrine devalues true teaching. Bad doctrine causes people to stop seeking God's will. Why is counterfeit truth so readily accepted? Because it's easy! It makes us feel good in the moment but leaves us without discernment in the long run. Not every sign or wonder is from God. Deuteronomy 13 warns of false signs and false miracles.<sup>7</sup> If supernatural activity doesn't point to God, it is meant to deceive us. If a sign or wonder doesn't cause us to marvel at the character and nature of God, then it is leading us astray. Consuming counterfeit truth is tantamount to cheating on a test in school, except the stakes are much higher. An exam is coming. Christ will return in judgment. The final is comprehensive, and there is no way we can pass if we've cheated our way through life with counterfeit truth.

### **The Dangerous but Limited Power of Darkness**

The spiritual battle between good and evil is more than an academic, metaphysical exercise. The unseen realm has daily practical implications in the seen world. During a revival in Ephesus under the apostle Paul, people burned books of sorcery with an estimated value of millions of dollars.<sup>8</sup> The people knew the impact of these books on their lives. As the late Warren Wiersbe famously noted, "The Christian life is not a playground; it is a battleground, and we must be on our guard at all times."<sup>9</sup> Our church activities are not like

school recess, a respite from the long workweek. The local church is on the front lines of ministry. Though there is no beauty in warfare (spiritual or otherwise), the battling bride of Christ is a magnificent sight to behold. Despite the muck of this world, she remains pure and righteous. She belongs to Christ. She battles on behalf of Christ. She never stops engaging in the mission of reclaiming the captives of darkness. The beautiful bride is a tenacious, battling warrior.

In this battle, we must remember that the darkness is *hostile* but also *limited in power*. Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden because they fell into Satan's trap of deceit. All three parties faced the consequences of this sin. God told Eve that giving birth to children would come through painful labor. He told Adam that the pleasure of work would become painful labor. And when God addressed Satan, he placed him under a curse: "I will cause hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel."<sup>10</sup>

Our battle with evil began in the Garden. Ever since, there has been hostility between humanity and Satan. When God banished Adam and Eve from Eden, this hostility moved out into the world, where Satan's army of darkness has continued to fight throughout every successive generation.

Genesis 3:15, where God declares hostility between us and Satan, is also the first reference to Jesus in the Bible. There we learn that Satan has been defeated from the very beginning of human history. The stricken heel refers to the wounds Jesus

received on the cross. But with that same heel, Jesus gave Satan a fatal blow to the head. In the course of time, through the offspring of Eve, our Savior would emerge on the world scene. God would enter the story of humanity through the incarnation of Christ and ensure the final victory.

Some might be surprised at the violence in the Old Testament. I'm not. Satan knew the prophecies about Jesus, but he didn't know precisely how God would come to earth—or when. So Satan sought to destroy anyone who could potentially be the Savior. In the New Testament, when Jesus the Messiah emerged, Satan worked hard to lure him away from his calling. After Jesus was baptized, he was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, where Satan tempted him in every way. Satan will do everything he can to try to stop the Good News.

It is important to remember that Satan fights from a place of defeat. His attacks can hurt us, but his power is limited. Have you ever wondered why Satan doesn't just use raw power to destroy the church? He can't! If Satan could overpower the body of Christ, he would. Why is Satan limited in power? Because sin decreases strength. This is why Satan relies on deceit and not brute strength. The forces of darkness are real, but they are “securely chained in prisons of darkness.”<sup>11</sup> The powers of darkness are no match for the powers of light. That's why Satan relies on lies.

Light always overpowers darkness. Jesus has absolute authority over Satan. Jesus gave this authority over demons to the disciples and the early church, and we have this same

authority today. We can come under spiritual attack. Make no mistake, these attacks can hurt us. But demons and the spiritual forces of evil cannot overcome the church.

Satan has known from the beginning that he is defeated. Yet he fights on. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Satan tried to kill him through Herod's horrific plan to murder baby boys. Warned by an angel of the Lord, Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt, and God's sovereign plan continued to unfold.<sup>12</sup> When Satan couldn't kill Jesus, he tried to corrupt him with temptation. But Jesus prevailed.<sup>13</sup> Then, through the words of Peter, one of Jesus' closest friends, Satan tried to convince Jesus that the cross wasn't necessary.<sup>14</sup> Finally, Satan realized he couldn't prevent the cross, so he relished in it as much as he could. If Jesus was going to experience pain, then it might as well be excruciating pain.

Now that the plan of redemption is complete and Jesus has been revealed as the Messiah, Satan wants to keep people away from knowing how to be saved. He thinks if he can deceive people or hinder the spread of the Good News, maybe he can derail the plan.

Why does Satan keep fighting? Why not just give in, cut a deal, or repent? He is such a master of deceit that he has wholly deceived himself. If you've ever tried to help someone who is self-deceived, you know it is virtually impossible to get through to that person. Satan is as deep into deceit as one can go. He has only one goal: to deceive the world. He is hostile, but he is ultimately weak.

## The Power We Give Satan

Satan is absorbed in self-deception, and he wants to drag us down too. Every sin is ultimately rooted in the belief that we know better than God does. Satan is the father of lies, but where did he come from, and how can he be so completely deceived, even about himself? Satan began as Lucifer, the “shining star” and “son of the morning” mentioned in Isaiah 14:12. Lucifer did not produce light—he could only reflect the light of God—but he was so self-deceived that he believed he could be like God.

The prophet Ezekiel writes that Satan was a “mighty angelic guardian” in heaven prior to his fall.<sup>15</sup> Possibly, he was the leader of worship among the angels, but he tried to divert worship to himself. Like a dishonest broker, he was skimming praise from God.

How long was Satan the worship leader before God began creating the heavens and the earth? We don’t know. Millions of years? Perhaps the creation of Adam and Eve caused Satan to become jealous. All we know for sure is that pride took him down.

Apparently he was something to behold. Ezekiel writes, “Your heart was filled with pride because of all your beauty.”<sup>16</sup> How powerful is pride? Consider this: Satan was a *righteous creature* living in a *perfect realm*, and yet pride caused him to fall.

Unlike God, Satan cannot be in all places at once. Thus, he cannot be in all things at all times. But though he isn’t

omnipresent, he has many subordinates at his beck and call. So even though Satan isn't attacking us directly, his army of darkness is equipped and conscripted to tempt and deceive us on his behalf. Remember, our battle is not against flesh and blood. The demons want us focused on the physical world, because it gives them the upper hand when we're not engaged in the spiritual realm. The only real power Satan has is the power we give him. His power is based on our consent. He can't overpower Jesus, so he tries to trick you and me. Don't fall for his schemes. Stand firm, clad in the full armor of God.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Power God Gives Us**

"I will turn out the lights on the third floor," my wife said as we locked up the church following Wednesday night activities.

After finishing on the first floor, I waited for Erin to arrive—which took longer than I expected. Finally, the elevator bell sounded, and as Erin stepped through the doors and into the moonlight, I saw her bloodied face.

"What *happened*?" I said as I ran to her.

She was crying, or so I thought. No, she was laughing.

"You need to tell me what's going on," I said.

"I was creeped out by the dark and started running. But I misjudged the location of the elevator door."

She had run full force into a plaster wall and had broken her nose.<sup>18</sup>

How do our minds play such tricks on us? Why does a dark church building feel creepy on a rainy night? Of all places in the world, a church campus should feel secure. What controls our minds controls everything else. But God gives us the power to protect our minds. Ephesians 6:17 reveals that the helmet of salvation is part of our spiritual armor.

We should all be aware that Satan cannot read our minds. He doesn't know *what* we're thinking, but through his deceptive arts he can influence *how* we're thinking.

The spiritual battle for church safety begins in the minds of the congregation. If you don't *think* you can do anything, you won't take action. Satan can't take away your salvation, but he will try to keep your salvation from working for you. What should you do when you're facing a spiritual attack? How can you prepare your mind?

First, don't be afraid. "Fear not" is one of the most common commands in the Bible. You have the power of Christ in you. God is a God of peace, not disorder and chaos.

Second, pray out loud. Demons can't read your mind, but they can hear what you say and they are expert observers. Your prayers don't have to sound like elaborate ritualistic incantations. There's no need to be dramatic—just talk to God. That's what Jesus did. He simply talked to his Father.

Third, use the opportunity to repent of your sins. The power to resist demons comes from the Holy Spirit. During an attack is an excellent time to realign your will with God's.

Repentance can be a big part of that—whether or not your sin has opened a door to the enemy.

Finally, don't focus on the powers of darkness; focus on the truths of Scripture and the power of almighty God. God's power is released through his truth. God's truth is a fixed, objective standard by which all reality is measured. It is not based on our feelings or opinions. Relativism might be popular—until a personal crisis hits. Nobody wants their brain surgeon, for example, to operate based on the shifting standards of relativism. Nobody wants to hear, "Well, when I start the procedure, I'll open your skull and start digging around and see how I feel." No, when facing a serious concern, we want objective standards and absolute truth.

Church safety is certainly a serious concern, and we must approach it on the basis of God's truth—starting with the truth about God himself. If God is the giver of life, then Satan, in his opposition to God, is all about death. If God's Word is true, then Satan's word can only be false—and, therefore, whatever is false leads to death. If God is love, then Satan epitomizes hatred. Thus, all false truths and half-truths are born out of hatred.

Why do some believers fall prey to the mistruths of bad theology? The apostle Peter encourages those who are young in their faith to "crave pure spiritual milk so that you will grow into a full experience of salvation. Cry out for this nourishment, now that you have had a taste of the Lord's kindness."<sup>19</sup> The writer to the Hebrews concurs with this

advice but warns about remaining too long as a spiritual newborn:

You have been believers so long now that you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things about God's word. You are like babies who need milk and cannot eat solid food. For someone who lives on milk is still an infant and doesn't know how to do what is right. Solid food is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong.

So let us stop going over the basic teachings about Christ again and again. Let us go on instead and become mature in our understanding. Surely we don't need to start again with the fundamental importance of repenting from evil deeds and placing our faith in God. . . . God willing, we will move forward to further understanding.<sup>20</sup>

Accepting Christ does not make us mature believers. Accepting Christ makes us spiritual infants. No one should remain in spiritual infancy, never realizing or achieving their purpose. They remain dependent in all the wrong ways and can drag others down with their dependency.

Spiritual growth is critically important. We must learn how to tell the difference between good and bad theology, between a caring shepherd and a charismatic wolf. Truth is

ultimately found in the person of Jesus Christ. To know the truth means that we know the one who is true. Knowing the truth about God hinges upon a right relationship with Jesus, who is divine truth. Jesus is the very truth of God!

The following chapters will demonstrate proactive ways the church can defeat evil by creating safe environments for discipleship. Darkness cannot hold back the movement of light. We're part of a movement that Jesus started, and hell cannot thwart it.