

# an UNCOMFORTABLE PARADOX

**T**HE SMALL WIRE CAGE HAD BEEN summarily ripped off, and where before there had been a carefully planted hydrangea, there now was only an untidy crater. An identical devastation was visited upon the new planting of a clematis on the opposite end of the front lawn.

Since our neighbors are not people, but the beasts of the field, we couldn't take the typical stance of blaming neighborhood teenagers. There was only one conclusion: Some time in the dead of the night, one or more of those beasts had taken an inordinate interest in those two plants.

But why? We've planted countless bushes, trees, and flowers—similarly protected—without them being demolished. What was different about these plantings?

The eventual conclusion was that *this* time Linda had added in a layer of fresh compost to the plantings—compost that was so fresh that perhaps the smell of rotting vegetable and fruit scraps was not completely cooked out of the mix. The beast(s)—probably one or both of the huge raccoons we've recently seen roaming about at dusk—had simply bellied up to the salad bar. They weren't after the plants at all, just the rich, fragrant loam surrounding them. As a result, however, each of the plants was left mangled, cast aside, dying.

Never are we more vulnerable to the insistent tugs of the evil one than when we have been richly fertilized by the Spirit. Satan and his fellow angels have a finely tuned radar that alerts them to any believer filled with the delight and exhilaration of time spent with God. Their radar is illumined by that percolating, overflowing effusion of God's Spirit joined with man's. Like a laser they hone in on this incandescent glowing of joy that overwhelms the child of God whenever time has been spent with or for Him.

He hates to lose, and though Satan may have lost the ultimate war for a believer's soul, he takes satisfaction in winning the occasional battle by tearing down whatever has been built up by the Spirit. The toughest day for a pastor is the Monday after an exhilarating Sunday. The moment when an artist is most vulnerable to temptation is when he has applied the final brush stroke and given his creation to the Lord. The weakest hour for the actor is just after the strong performance, and the applause has fallen silent. The most dangerous time for any believer is just after the heart has been pumped full of the exquisite glory of God's presence.

In this Satan has an advantage. The ebb and flow of our spiritual condition comes naturally to those spirits still imprisoned in flesh.

Humans are amphibians—half spirit and half animal. As spirits they belong to the eternal world, but as animals they inhabit time. This means that while their spirit can be directed to an eternal object, their bodies, passions, and imaginations are in continual change. Their nearest approach to constancy is undulation—the repeated return to a level from which they repeatedly fall back, a series of troughs and peaks. If you had watched your patient carefully you would have seen this undulation in every department of his life—his interest in his work, his affection for his friends, his physical appetites, all go up and down. As long as he lives on earth, periods of emotional and bodily richness and liveliness will alternate with periods of numbness and poverty. The dryness and dullness through which your patient is now going are not, as you so fondly suppose, your workmanship; they are merely a natural phenomenon which will do us no good unless you make a good use of it.

C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*  
(the demon Screwtape, writing to his nephew, Wormwood)

Thus ordered is the uncomfortable paradox of the Christian faith. We are called to spend our time on earth rising into the Lord's holiness and grace. We are called to serve Him with gladness, to rejoice in His presence, to dwell where He dwells. Yet doing so attracts the enemy. It can seem at times that it is utter foolishness to fertilize our maturing spirit with the richness of His Spirit.

Even so, we have the ultimate advantage, for the more time we spend in the Lord's presence, the better equipped we become to fend off Satan's attacks. The higher we rise, the more often we seek God's face in all things, the less the enemy can do to us.

He may never give up entirely, but his ultimate impotence before the believer's faith will become his hallmark—and undoing.

Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

Ephesians 6:11-13

Submit therefore  
to God. Resist the  
devil and he will  
flee from you.

James 4:7