

The Great Controversy: The Foundation



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 3:15, Rev. 12:1–17, Isa. 14:4–21, Ezek. 28:12–19, Isa. 53:6, Rom. 1:20–28, John 16:2.*

Memory Text: “ ‘And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel’ ” (*Genesis 3:15, NKJV*).

Key Thought: The great-controversy motif is the overarching concept that gives cohesion to Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Beliefs.

Necessity,” it has been said, “is the mother of invention.” The word *mother*, in this case, means “the source,” “the driving force,” and “the foundation”; in other words, it’s the need, the necessity, for something that moves people to action. For instance, the need for cleaner air is the foundation, the driving force, behind the move for energy sources other than fossil fuels.

Just as with physical inventions, a belief system also needs a foundation or a principle that explains it.

Seventh-day Adventists profess a body of 28 fundamental beliefs. These beliefs have a foundation in a concept that we call the “great controversy.” Each of the 28 fundamentals deals with a particular aspect of this cosmic controversy. The beliefs that will be studied this quarter make the best sense against the backdrop of the great-controversy motif. This week we will look at some of the key points of this foundation.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 6.*

The Controversy and Its Players

All throughout recorded history, people have sensed that humanity is in some sort of battle, a war, a struggle between competing forces. The poet T. S. Eliot wrote, “In all of my years, one thing does not change. / However you disguise it, this thing does not change: / The perpetual struggle of Good and Evil.”—*The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York, San Diego, London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1952), p. 98. However common that understanding, people have radically different views regarding what the conflict is about, who’s involved, what’s at stake, and how it is going to end. As Seventh-day Adventists, however, we have a decidedly supernaturalist perspective regarding this battle, a perspective that comes from our understanding of the Bible and how the Bible depicts what we call “the great controversy between Christ and Satan.”

Study Genesis 3:15 and Revelation 12:1–17. Who are the key players in the controversy? While symbols are sometimes used to depict the players, why do we believe that the powers described here are real, literal beings? What would happen to our whole belief system were we to spiritualize away the reality of the great controversy between Christ and Satan and our role in it?

It is not unusual for people to use terms such as the devil, angels, or even God when they mean something very different from the meaning usually attached to those words. For example, there are some whose interest in the use of the word *God* focuses only on the function that the word performs in human language and society; they have no interest in whether “God,” in any form, exists.

Whatever the symbols used to describe them, the Bible teaches that these figures are real entities engaged in a real conflict. That’s how we, as Seventh-day Adventists, understand them. Most of the doctrines studied this quarter will not make sense if the players identified in the controversy are not taken literally, which often puts us decidedly at odds with the prevailing culture.

In fact, while secularism has taken many shapes and forms over the last two centuries, nothing characterizes secularism more than the push to eliminate all “otherworldly” language from human discourse. With the success of science, people in some cultures are more and more inclined to think about issues scientifically. Angels and demons do not fare well in the scientific mode of thinking. Hence, contemporary culture is witnessing a gradual demise of belief in the supernatural.

How strongly is your own culture impacted by the scientific, secular worldview? How much have you been impacted by it? Against what aspects of this worldview must we particularly guard?

Lucifer's Fall

Although the Bible does not explicitly tell us the issues involved in the controversy between God and Satan, they can be inferred from some pertinent scriptural passages, such as Isaiah 14:4–21 and Ezekiel 28:12–19. In their original settings, these passages represented pagan kings of Tyre and Babylon; but, when read carefully, they provide details that go beyond these ancient, Near Eastern rulers. Indeed, they point to the origin, position, and fall of Satan.

In 1 Timothy 3:6, Paul warns against ordaining a new convert, cautioning that such an act might cause the person to become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. How does Paul's statement throw light on the two passages above, and in what way do these three passages together help us to understand some issues in the controversy?

At least three issues are raised in the texts cited above: pride, autonomy, and independence. The Old Testament portrays a created, dependent being aspiring to be self-sufficient and independent. But independence is always independence from something or somebody. First John 3:8 says that the devil has sinned from the beginning; 1 John 3:4 defines *sin* as “lawlessness.” It follows, then, that Satan’s sin—which manifested itself as a quest for independence and autonomy—represented a desire to be freed from the “restraints” of God and His laws. Thus, by refusing to allow himself to be brought under the authority of God’s law, Satan showed that he wanted to live under a different set of conditions. This rebellion would also imply that the system of laws in heaven was not ideal, that something was, indeed, wrong with it. But because God’s law is a reflection of God’s character, a defect in the law would amount to a defect in God’s character. In short, Satan’s rebellion was as much against God Himself as it was against anything else.

***Pride, autonomy, independence.* What images do these words conjure up in your own mind? In what ways are all of us in danger of falling into the traps, which are sometimes very subtle, that pride, autonomy, and independence can set for us? After all, under the right conditions, what’s wrong with any of these concepts?**

God's Weapon

“And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (*Gen. 3:15*). In what way is the great controversy revealed in this text?

The cryptic language of Genesis 3:15, in which the controversy is here predicted, gives us a hint of God's rules of engagement in this conflict. We can see that the conflict, which had just begun on earth between the serpent and the woman, was going to take shape by involving the followers of the initial contestants: the “seed” of the woman and the “seed” of the serpent. In due course, as we know, the conflict would climax into a mortal clash between Satan and a male descendant of the woman, Jesus of Nazareth. God's weapon of choice was Jesus, who would come to fight on behalf of the woman, suffer “bruises,” but ultimately deliver a deadly blow to the serpent. To be the weapon of choice was an act of sacrifice by Jesus, an act of selfless love.

How do the following texts help us to understand some of the issues involved in the great controversy? How is the plan of salvation central to it?

Compare *Gen. 4:4* with *Heb. 11:4* _____

Compare *Gen. 12:3, 22:18* with *Gal. 3:16* _____

Compare *Exod. 25:8* with *Heb. 4:2* _____

Compare *Isa. 53:6* with *Rom. 5:8* _____

Matt. 16:18, 18:16–20 _____

Heb. 8:1, 2 _____

Satan's Fight

If you looked carefully at yesterday's study, you would have seen a progression of how God manifested Himself and His truth in the midst of the great controversy. God worked through the patriarchal and Israelite sanctuary services, through Christ's sacrificial atoning death, through the church, and through Christ's own ministry in the heavenly sanctuary.

Satan, however, has worked tirelessly to try to undermine the Lord's plans. So much of the great controversy has been, and is now, fought over these very issues.

For instance, the sacrificial system practiced by the patriarchs, and in Israel's sanctuary service, was designed by God to remind humankind of the Creator and to keep the hope of redemption alive.

How did Satan seek to usurp and destroy the truth about the plan of salvation, especially as revealed in the sacrificial system? *See Rom. 1:20–28; Deut. 32:17, 18.*

Of course, the incarnation of Christ, His ministry on earth, and His atoning sacrificial death on the cross were the central parts of how God chose to defeat Satan in the great controversy. The death of Christ would guarantee the undoing of Satan, who had worked tirelessly against Him.

What do these texts (*Matt. 2:1–18, 4:1–11, 16:21–23, 27:39–42*) tell us about the ways in which Satan worked against Jesus?

After His death and resurrection, Christ established His church on earth to proclaim to lost humanity the good news of salvation. From the inception of the church, Satan has determined to weaken and destroy it. The following passages show some of Satan's tactics against the church (*see Acts 5:17, 18; 7:54–60; 2 Thess. 2:1–4; 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Pet. 2:1; Rev. 12:13–17*).

Meanwhile, the book of Hebrews tells of a real sanctuary in heaven where Christ entered after His ascension (*Heb. 4:14–16, 9:24*), performing a priestly function on behalf of sinful humanity (*Heb. 7:27*). In Daniel 8:11–14, we can see Satan's activity in connection with Christ's priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary and his attempt to usurp that ministry.

It's one thing to read 1 Peter 5:8, 9 and have an intellectual understanding of its warning; it's another to actually live out that warning in your daily life. How do you, in reality, resist the devil? How often during a single day are you aware of Satan's efforts against you?

Destinies

“ ‘And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD’ ” (*Josh. 24:15, NKJV*). How does this text reveal what is, in many ways, the most foundational issue in the great controversy?

Prophecy provides us with a view of the closing scenes of the conflict between God and Satan. For a period of 1,260 years (*Dan. 7:25, 12:7, Rev. 11:2, 12:14, 13:5*), Satan sporadically, but persistently, persecuted God’s people. In a final showdown described in Revelation 12 and 13, Satan will employ two earthly powers: a leopardlike beast (*Rev. 13:1–10*) and a two-horned beast (*Rev. 13:11–17*). These beasts will employ all the tactics of Satan that were discussed in yesterday’s lesson.

Revelation 14 is a description of the countermove to Satan’s maneuvers that God will use during the struggle’s final stages in order to bring the struggle to an end. What does Revelation 14:6–13 tell us about the ways in which some of the issues in the great controversy are going to be made manifest?

From God’s perspective, a clear proclamation of the issues involved in the conflict (represented here as being sent by three angels) is necessary before the conflict comes to a close. Humanity needs to be intelligently informed in order for people to make up their minds about the issues.

In the final conflict there will be people who stand loyal to God. In Revelation 14 they are symbolized by the number 144,000, possibly representative of an innumerable people from all the nations of the earth (*Rev. 7:4*). But they remain obedient to the commandments of God in a time of great distress and are wholeheartedly devoted to the worship of their Creator God. They receive the approval of God and are victorious with Him while the impenitent are destroyed in the ensuing harvest (*Rev. 14:14–20*). The point is that one day this great controversy will be over.

One thing about the great controversy: no one can be neutral. You’re either on one side or the other. Anyone can claim to be on the Lord’s side (see *John 16:2*); how do you know, for sure, that you really are? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Further Study: Read Frank B. Holbrook, “The Great Controversy,” pp. 969–1008, in Raoul Dederen (ed.), *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*.

“The Bible is its own expositor. Scripture is to be compared with scripture. The student should learn to view the word as a whole, and to see the relation of its parts. He should gain a knowledge of its grand central theme, of God’s original purpose for the world, of the rise of the great controversy, and of the work of redemption. He should understand the nature of the two principles that are contending for supremacy, and should learn to trace their working through the records of history and prophecy, to the great consummation. He should see how this controversy enters into every phase of human experience; how in every act of life he himself reveals the one or the other of the two antagonistic motives; and how, whether he will or not, he is even now deciding upon which side of the controversy he will be found.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 190.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ In the quotation from the book *Education* given above, Ellen G. White writes that the great controversy enters into every phase of human experience. How true has this been in your own life? Has your understanding of the great-controversy motif been a source of strength or frustration as you cope with the issues of daily living in the world of sin and suffering?
- ❷ Some speak about a “delay” in the second coming of Christ. With the amount of injustice and senseless suffering in the world, it seems that every additional day of life on earth is one too many. Have the class members share their individual perspectives regarding the great-controversy motif from the point of view of the so-called “delay.”
- ❸ How confident can we be about the final resolution of the conflict between good and evil? What gives you assurance that evil will be overcome in the end? What reasons do we have for believing that? How, for instance, does the prophecy of Daniel 2 help to give us assurance about the ultimate outcome?
- ❹ In class, go over your answers to the final question on Thursday. The answer is especially relevant because of our understanding of just who the persecutors are going to be in the last days. How, then, can we be sure we will be on the right side?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Genesis 3:15*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Outline the events of the great controversy between God and Satan and the ways in which they affect every aspect of the Christian's life and belief system.

Feel: Sense the eternal significance of individual choice in this great conflict.

Do: Accept Christ's sacrifice on his or her behalf and cooperate in the sharing of this gospel as an essential part of the great controversy.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Big Picture

A What critical events have happened up to the present date, and what events will take place in the future that will eradicate evil from the cosmos?

B In what ways does the conflict between good and evil affect everything that both Christians and non-Christians do and think during their daily lives?

II. Feel: Choosing for Eternity

A What part do daily decisions play in the shaping of eternal destinies?

B Why is it so important to protect everyone's ability to choose between God's way and Satan's way, as well as educate others regarding the eternal choices that God calls them to make?

III. Do: Cooperating With Divine Agencies

A Why is it essential that we accept Christ's sacrifice on a daily basis?

B What opportunities are available to us every day to share the gospel?

C What are the best ways in which to cooperate with heavenly agencies in the sharing of the gospel message during these last days?

► **Summary:** The great conflict between good and evil has affected every life in the universe. The essential issue centers on each person's choice between God and Satan.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Life is a constant warfare between good and evil, Christ and Satan. As we study this conflict and the ways in which it impacts our lives and destinies, the central question to contemplate should be: on whose side should we choose to be—Christ’s or Satan’s?

Just for Teachers: In an age that refuses to acknowledge the need for moral and spiritual allegiance to God, it is essential to recognize that we are engaged in a real spiritual war. Understanding this war and how we shall gain victory in it is the central focus of our lesson this week.

Opening Activity: Gautama, heir to the throne of Kapilavastu in ancient Nepal, was the sole object of his father’s love and concern. The king shielded the prince from any knowledge or experience of pain, suffering, and death. But one day as a teenager, the prince rode out of the palace and for the first time saw the afflictions of old age, sickness, and death. Much distressed, Gautama left the palace, as well as his young wife and child, to wander through the forests, enduring years of self-affliction, fasting, and meditation—until one day he claimed to have found the answer to the question of evil. Thus was born the Buddha, whose essential teaching was this: the answer to the problem of suffering is to be found in the renunciation of all desire.

That is one answer. Hinduism offers another: death is nothing but a door to a new form of life in the endless cycle of reincarnation. In other words, some would deny the reality of sin while others would see death as the normal end of a biological process. But what does the Bible say about the origins of and solution to pain, suffering, and death? *See Gen. 3:1–23, Rom. 5:12, 6:23, Isa. 14:12–15, Rev. 12:1–4, 20:7–15.*

Discuss: From the above verses and other passages, what are pain, suffering, and death results of? Where did sin originate, and how did it result in the conflict known as the great controversy between God and Lucifer? When will the great controversy end, and what will be the final outcome?

► STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

Just for Teachers: Lead the class in a brief review of the great controversy in regard to its nature, origin, contenders, and final conclusion.

I. The Great Controversy: Its Origin

“There was war in heaven” (*Rev. 12:7*). The very phrase is a paradox and a mystery. How can there be war in heaven—the place where God’s throne is located (*Isa. 66:1*) and where absolute holiness, righteousness, love, and peace dwell? The word *war* indicates that there arose in heaven someone who was contrary to God’s will. Revelation 12:7–9 identifies the rebel as the “dragon,” “the great dragon,” and “that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan” (*NKJV*). Further, the same passage says that Satan and his angels fought with “Michael and his angels” (*vs. 7*). Michael, a name used only in apocalyptic passages (*see Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 9; Rev. 12:7*) to represent Christ in direct conflict with Satan, prevailed in the war. This led to the expulsion of Satan and his hosts to the earth, where the old serpent deceived Adam and Eve and plunged the world into sin (*Gen. 3:1–15*). Thus began the great controversy, a cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan, the forces of good and evil.

Consider This: To act contrary to God’s will, as Lucifer did, is an act of war against God’s throne. Why didn’t God simply exterminate sin and Satan at the first signs of the uprising before it turned into a full-scale war that ended in the expulsion of Satan and his rebel angels to earth? What does the answer reveal about God’s justice and mercy?

II. The Great Controversy: Its Nature

Various biblical passages, such as Isaiah 14:12–15, Ezekiel 28:12–17, Genesis 3:1–15, and Revelation 12:1–17, reveal some of the basic aspects of the great controversy.

First, the great controversy is a battle between creature and the Creator over God’s character of love and sovereignty. By its very essence, the Creator-creature relationship has a built-in boundary line. The Creator extends life, love, and fellowship to the creature, and the creature is to respond with love, obedience, and praise. A crossing of this line is rebellion. That was one of Lucifer’s first sins, in addition to envy and unholy ambition. He boasted, “I’ll be like the Most High” (*Isa. 14:14, GW Translation*). The boast led

to arrogance, pride, and lawlessness, all of which culminated in a revolt against God's authority.

Second, the great controversy is a battle for allegiance. Do we belong to God or Satan? "Instead of seeking to make God supreme in the affections and allegiance of His creatures, it was Lucifer's endeavor to win their service and homage to himself. And coveting the honor which the infinite Father had bestowed upon His Son, this prince of angels aspired to power which it was the prerogative of Christ alone to wield."—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 494.

Third, the great controversy is a universal battle that affects each individual until it ends with Satan's destruction (*Rev. 20:7–10*). Ever since Satan introduced this cosmic conflict into the history of the human race, through the deception of Adam and Eve (*Gen. 3:1–15*), the whole creation has become the battleground of Christ and Satan. No one can escape the battle, and all can avail of the victory available through Christ.

Consider This: A sobering thought: every act of life reveals whose side of the great controversy you are on—Christ's or Satan's. Try to truly grasp the full implication of this thought. Why is it a fatal deception to believe anything less than this reality? Why is there truly no neutral ground in this conflict, and what does that truth say about all involved, whether they be small and great, rich and poor, or free and bonded?

III. The Great Controversy: Its Conclusion

The cosmic conflict has its origin in Satan's accusation that God is arbitrary, His love is false, and His law cannot be kept. Although the conflict in heaven was resolved when Christ crushed its roots and Satan was cast out to earth, the arch-enemy of God continues the conflict on earth, where he hopes to deceive the entire human race and become the ruler of this world. He determined that if he could not own this earth by obtaining the power of creation, he would do so by deceiving the earth's inhabitants and turning them against God. But God did not leave this earth unguarded and, indeed, had a plan to meet such a contingency of the evil one: through His Cross and the Resurrection, Christ has won the final victory over sin and Satan. The conflict, however, awaits its final consummation at the end of the millennium when sin and sinners will be no more and the devil himself will be cast "into the lake of fire" (*Rev. 20:7–10*).

Consider This: In Section Two, we read in Ezekiel 28:12–17 how Lucifer once walked back and forth amid the stones of fire in heaven. Whatever else these stones may signify, one thing is clear. Lucifer walked with impunity among them, unburned and impervious to the flame. He was "fire-proof." But at the final consummation of the great controversy, Satan will be flammable and will burn until he is nonexistent. This contrast contains

a spiritual lesson for us: our God is a consuming fire. So, we have one of two alternatives: allow Him to refine us in the furnace of affliction during this probationary period, purging the dross from our characters until the pure gold of His image shines through, or refuse to yield and endure the refining process in the lake of fire. Both choices burn up the sin in us. But one consumes only the sin and results in eternal life; the other consumes us and ends in eternal death. What protection does God give to us now, as He gave to Daniel's three friends, to fireproof us in the furnace of affliction even as its fires purify and refine?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: The Bible is a great lesson book on the subject of the great controversy between Christ and Satan. Through the failures and triumphs of many of the biblical characters, through the ups and downs in the history of Israel, through the prophetic warnings and blessings, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and through the final events of earth's history, we must believe that God is in control of history and that He will bring those who trust in Him to inevitable triumph.

Application Questions:

- 1 Why is the study of the great controversy important for Christian living?
- 2 Joseph. David. Esther. Peter. Judas. How do these characters illustrate that human beings are very much involved in the great controversy?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: For every human being assaulted by the power of sin and Satan, the Cross is the assurance of triumph. Emphasize this lesson to the class as powerfully as you can.

Activity: Read the following quotation as a class. Discuss Satan's hope for victory and how this hope was dashed. Why does Satan keep persisting even though he knows he must finally die?

“When Jesus was laid in the grave, Satan triumphed. He dared to hope that the Saviour would not take up His life again. He claimed the Lord's body, and set his guard about the tomb, seeking to hold Christ a prisoner. . . . When he saw Christ come forth in triumph, he knew that his kingdom would have an end, and that he must finally die.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 782.