

The Cosmic Conflict Over God’s Character



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Ezek. 28:12–17, Isa. 14:12–15, Job 1:6–12, Zech. 3:1–5, 1 John 4:10, 2 Tim. 4:8, Ezek. 36:23–27.*

Memory Text: “And I heard another out of the altar say, Even so Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are thy judgments” (*Revelation 16:7*).

Seventh-day Adventists understand reality through the biblical concept of the “great controversy between Christ and Satan.” To use a term from philosophy, the great controversy is the metanarrative—the grand, overarching story that helps to explain our world and the things that happen in it.

Central to this controversy is the sanctuary, which, as we have seen, presents a recurrent theme that runs from the beginning to the end of salvation history: Redemption of humanity through the death of Jesus. Properly understood, the sanctuary message also helps to illustrate God’s character, which Satan has been attacking since the great controversy first began in heaven.

This week we will study some milestones in the great conflict between Christ and Satan that reveal the truth about God’s character and that expose Satan’s lies.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 21.*

Revolt in the Heavenly Sanctuary

Read Ezekiel 28:12–17 and Isaiah 14:12–15. What do these verses teach about Lucifer’s fall?

At first glance, Ezekiel 28:12 seems to be talking about only an earthly monarch. Several aspects, however, suggest that this verse is really referring to Satan.

For starters, this being is referred to as the anointed cherub “who covers” (*Ezek. 28:14, NKJV*), which recalls the Most Holy Place of the earthly sanctuary, where two cherubim covered the ark and the presence of the Lord (*Exod. 37:7–9*). This celestial being also walked in the midst of the fiery stones; that is, on the “holy mountain of God” (*Ezek. 28:14*) and in the center of “Eden, the garden of God” (*Ezek. 28:13, NKJV*)—both of which are sanctuary images. The covering of precious stones described in verse 13 contains nine stones that are also found in the high priestly breast garment (*Exod. 39:10–13*), indicating another reference to the sanctuary.

After having described the surpassing splendor of the cherub, the text moves to his moral fall. His glory went to his head. His beauty made his heart haughty, his splendor corrupted his wisdom, and his “trading”—which probably refers to his slandering of the character of God and stirring up rebellion—made him violent.

Also, arrogant earthly powers seek to move from earth toward heaven. In Isaiah 14:12–15, the “son of the morning” (Latin *lucifere*, from which comes the name Lucifer) goes in a different direction: he falls from heaven to earth, indicating his supernatural rather than earthly origin. Other phrases like “throne above the stars of God,” “mount of the congregation” in the far north, and “Most High” reinforce the impression that this is a celestial being. While verses 12 and 13 are in past tense, verse 15 suddenly changes to the future. This change in time signals that there was first a fall from heaven to earth (*Isa. 14:12*) and that there will be a second fall, from earth to Sheol (the grave), sometime in the future (*Isa. 14:15*). This does not refer to any Babylonian king; it is, instead, a clear reference to Lucifer.

A perfect being created by a perfect God falls into sin? What does this tell us about the reality of moral freedom in God’s universe? And what does such freedom reveal to us about God’s character?

The Accusations

After his fall from heaven, Satan attempted to distort and slander God’s character. He did this in Eden (*Gen. 3:1–5*), in the midst of the first “sanctuary” on earth. Satan brought his rebellion, which originated in the heavenly sanctuary, down to the earthly sanctuary of Eden. After initiating contact with Eve through the medium of the serpent, he openly planted the idea in her mind that God was depriving both Adam and her of something that would be good for them, that He was holding something back that they should have. In this way, however subtly, he was misrepresenting God’s character.

The fall of Adam and Eve set Satan temporarily on the throne of this world. Several texts suggest that Satan had gained access to the heavenly court again, but now as the “ruler of this world” (*John 12:31, NKJV*) as one who possesses the earth but does not own it, much like a thief.

Read Job 1:6–12 and Zechariah 3:1–5. How is the great controversy revealed in these texts?

These texts give us a glimpse of the heavenly side of the great controversy. Satan presents Job’s righteousness as simply self-serving: if I am good, God will bless me. The implication is that Job doesn’t serve God because God is worthy but because it’s in Job’s best interests. Once it becomes clear that serving God won’t bring blessing, Job will abandon his faith.

In the case of the high priest Joshua (a sanctuary motif) and of other believers (*see Rev. 12:10*), Ellen G. White says that Satan “is accusing the children of God, and making their case appear as desperate as possible. He presents before the Lord their evil doings and their defects.”—*Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 167.

In both cases, though, the real issue is the justice of God. The question behind all accusations is whether or not God is fair and just in His dealings. God’s character is on trial. Is it fair when God saves sinners? Is God just when He declares the unrighteous to be righteous? If He is just, He must punish the unrighteous; if He is gracious, He must forgive them. How can God be both?

If God were only a God of justice, what would be your fate, and why would you deserve it?

Vindication at the Cross

From the very beginning, God left no doubt that He would invalidate Satan’s accusations and demonstrate His ultimate love and justice. His justice demands that there be payment of the penalty for humanity’s sin. His love seeks to restore humanity into fellowship with Him. How could God manifest both?

How did God demonstrate both His love and justice? *1 John 4:10, Rom. 3:21–26.*

God’s character of love and justice has been revealed in its fullest manifestation by the death of Christ. God loved us and sent His Son to be the atoning Sacrifice for our sins (*1 John 4:10, John 3:16*). By paying in Himself the penalty for violating the law, God showed His justice: the demands of the law had to be met. They were met at the cross, but in the person of Jesus.

At the same time, by this act of justice, God was also able to reveal His grace and love, because Jesus’ death was substitutionary. He died for us, in our stead, so that we don’t have to face that death ourselves. This is the amazing provision of the gospel, that God Himself would bear in Himself the punishment that His own justice demanded, the punishment that legitimately belonged to us.

Romans 3:21–26 is a biblical jewel on the theme of God’s righteousness and the redemption in Jesus Christ. Christ’s sacrificial death is a demonstration of God’s righteousness so “that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (*Rom. 3:26, NASB*).

Again, sanctuary imagery provides the framework for Christ’s death. In previous weeks, we have seen that His death is a perfect, substitutionary sacrifice and that Christ is the “atonement cover” (*Rom. 3:25*). In short, both Testaments reveal that Christ’s mission was typified by the earthly sanctuary service.

“With intense interest the unfallen worlds had watched to see Jehovah arise, and sweep away the inhabitants of the earth. . . . But instead of destroying the world, God sent His Son to save it. . . . At the very crisis, when Satan seemed about to triumph, the Son of God came with the embassy of divine grace.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 37. What does this quote tell you about the character of God?

Vindication in the Judgment

As Scripture has shown, God’s judgment is good news for those of us who believe in Him, who trust in Him, and who are loyal to Him, even though “we cannot answer the charges of Satan against us.” —Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 472. However, the judgment is not only for us. It also serves the purpose of vindicating God before the entire universe.

How is God’s character presented in the following texts about judgment? *Ps. 96:10, 13; 2 Tim. 4:8; Rev. 16:5, 7; 19:2.*

God’s character will be revealed in His judgment. What Abraham had already understood will, in the end, be manifest to all humanity: “‘Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?’ ” (*Gen. 18:25, NASB*). The different phases of judgment, with their open-book investigation, make sure that the angels (in the pre-Advent judgment) and the righteous (in the millennial judgment) can prove and be reassured that God is just in His dealings with humanity and that He has been merciful in each case.

Read *Philippians 2:5–11*. What amazing event do these verses depict?

Verses 9–11 predict the exaltation of Christ. The main two actions express the same thought: Jesus is Lord, and all creation will acknowledge Him as such. First, “every knee should bow” (*vs. 10, NASB*). The bowing of the knee is a customary act for recognizing the authority of a person. Here it refers to rendering homage to Christ and recognizing His supreme sovereignty. The dimension of the homage is universal. “In heaven and on earth and under the earth” (*NASB*) comprises every living being: the supernatural beings in heaven, the living on earth, and the resurrected dead. Those who will pay homage don’t seem to be limited to the saved. Everyone will acknowledge His lordship, even the lost.

The second action is that everyone “should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (*vs. 11, NASB*). In the end, all will acknowledge the justice of God in exalting Christ as Lord. In this way, all creation will acknowledge the character of God, which has been at the center of the great controversy, as just and faithful. Even Satan, the archenemy of Christ, will acknowledge God’s justice and bow to the supremacy of Christ (see Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 670, 671).

The Cosmic Spectacle

During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus utters these amazing words: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (*Matt. 5:16*). With this, He reveals a principle that, though easily misunderstood, is nevertheless seen throughout the Bible. It tells how, as followers of Christ, we can bring glory or shame to God by our actions.

Read Ezekiel 36:23–27. How was God going to vindicate His name in ancient Israel?

These verses comprise one of the classic passages on the new covenant. God desires to work a dramatic transformation among His people. He will cleanse them (*vs. 25*) and grant them a new heart and a new spirit (*vs. 26*) so that they will become a holy people who will follow His commandments. What God wants to accomplish is to justify and sanctify believers so that by their lives they will honor God for who He is and what He does (*vs. 23*).

Of course, the key element in vindicating God’s character before the universe is the Cross. “Satan saw that his disguise was torn away. His administration was laid open before the unfallen angels and before the heavenly universe. He had revealed himself as a murderer. By shedding the blood of the Son of God, he had uprooted himself from the sympathies of the heavenly beings.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 761.

At the same time, the New Testament followers of Christ are called a “spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men” (*1 Cor. 4:9, NKJV*). That is, what we do is being seen not only by other people but by heavenly intelligences, as well. What kind of witness do we present? By our lives we can make known the “manifold wisdom of God . . . to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places” (*Eph. 3:10, NASB*). Or our lives can bring shame and reproach on the name of the Lord whom we profess to serve.

What kind of spectacle, both to other people and to angels, does your life present? Is it one in which God is glorified, or one in which Satan can exult, especially because you profess to be a follower of Jesus?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, “Why Was Sin Permitted?” pp. 33–43, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*; “The Character of God Revealed in Christ,” pp. 737–746, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5.

“There stood in the world One who was a perfect representative of the Father, One whose character and practices refuted Satan’s misrepresentation of God. Satan had charged upon God the attributes he himself possessed. Now in Christ he saw God revealed in His true character—a compassionate, merciful Father, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to Him in repentance, and have eternal life.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 254.

“The mission of Christ, so dimly understood, so faintly comprehended, that called Him from the throne of God to the mystery of the altar of the cross of Calvary, will more and more unfold to the mind, and it will be seen that in the sacrifice of Christ are found the spring and principle of every other mission of love.”—Ellen G. White, *In Heavenly Places*, p. 319.

Discussion Questions:

❶ Dwell on the idea that, by the time the whole great controversy ends, every intelligent creature in the universe, including Satan and the lost, will acknowledge the justice and fairness and righteousness of God in His dealing with sin and rebellion. Though it is a very heavy concept for us to grasp, what does this tell us about the character of God? What does it teach us about the reality of moral freedom and just how sacred and basic freedom is to the kind of universe that God has created?

❷ There are many Christians who deny the existence of Satan, seeing him as merely an ancient superstition held by primitive people who were looking to explain evil and suffering in the world. Think about how great a deception such a view is. It’s hard to imagine what kind of Christianity could deny the reality of a power that is so often revealed in the Bible, especially the New Testament, as a real being. What does this tell us about just how powerfully influenced some churches are by the inroads of modernism and secularism? What can we, as Seventh-day Adventists, learn from the mistakes that we see others making in order that we not fall into the same deception, as well? Without a literal Satan, what happens to the whole great controversy theme?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Revelation 16:7*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand the core of Satan's attack against God in the original revolt in heaven and how God's judgments reflect His love and justice.

Feel: Appreciate and see how God's loving character was revealed in Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

Do: Constantly be in the service of the Lord by letting God be the God of his or her life.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The First Revolt in the Heavenly Sanctuary

- A** How do Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 describe Satan before his fall?
- B** What were Satan's original claims against God?
- C** What does it mean that we were created as free moral beings?

II. Feel: God's Vindication on the Cross

- A** What lessons did the Cross teach the angels?
- B** Sin started with pride and was defeated by Jesus' humility. What about pride is so treacherous that even Lucifer, God's perfect creation, could fall into it?
- C** How can God be just and gracious at the same time?

III. Do: The Church and Individual Believers as Players in the Theater of the Universe

- A** How can our faith and obedience vindicate God's character of love?
- B** How can believers in God live to His shame and reproach His name?
- C** Rebellion in heaven was advanced by gossip. How can you stop participating in any form of gossiping?

► **Summary:** By God's actions, He vindicates Himself in front of the entire universe. His moral power of love wins.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1**—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Job 1:6–12, Ezekiel 36:26, 27*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: God wants us to understand the great controversy issues and know the part we play in this spiritual warfare between good and evil, Christ and Satan. We are not spectators but part of the drama; we are on stage. If we stay in close relationship with the living God, we will be partakers of His final victory over evil, which is secured because of His victory on the cross.

Just for Teachers: God actually invites us to understand His decisions in order that we are able to see that He is the God of love and justice (*Rom. 3:4; Pss. 51:4; 34:8; Phil. 2:10, 11*). His authority, word, and character were challenged and ridiculed from the very beginning (*Gen. 3:1–5; see also Isa. 14:12–15, Ezek. 28:11–19*). It is interesting that the Hebrew root *rakal* (used in *Ezekiel 28:16*) can also mean to “go around to gossip or slander,” which reveals Satan’s method of working, such as when he accused God of injustice (Hebrew *‘avelah*). This week’s lesson should help the student of the Bible to understand the issues in the great controversy. In the exploration section, we will focus on the book of Job, which provides significant insight into the spiritual-warfare theme.

Opening Discussion: Four main figures play dominant roles in the book of Job, and their characters are revealed: God, Satan, Job, and his friends. How are these main protagonists categorized in the book? What can one say about each of them?

► **STEP 2**—Explore

Just for Teachers: The book of Job opens with a prologue that describes two heavenly scenes of intense controversy between God and Satan (*1:6–12, 2:1–7*). There is pictured a heavenly assembly before the Sovereign Ruler of the universe in which the sons of God are gathered before Him. Satan, the adversary, “also came among them” (*1:6, NKJV*). The word *also* suggests that he was not a regular member of that group. The immediate context gives the impression that he behaves like the one to whom the earth belongs, “‘roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it’ ” (*vs. 7, NIV*). Satan

is characterized as an intruder; playing the roles of the accuser and the possessor of planet Earth.

Bible Commentary

I. The First Issue: Is God Right While Justifying Sinners? (*Review Job 1:8–11 and Romans 3:26 with your class.*)

Satan does not agree with God pronouncing Job as righteous, and he tackles Him with a seemingly innocent question: “ ‘Does Job fear God for nothing’ ” (1:9, *NIV*)? At first glance, it is directed against Job, but in reality it is an attack on God by attempting to disprove His statement about Job. The real drama turns on the fact that God is for us and proclaims us just. Thus, the main theme of the book of Job is the justice of God (theodicy): Is God just when He is justifying us?

Discussion Question: Why are God’s people seemingly more tested than unbelievers, going through difficult trials in life? What special purpose is there behind such trials?

II. The Second Issue: From What Motives Do Believers Serve God? (*Review Job 1:9, 2:3 with your class.*)

To understand Satan’s cynical question (“ ‘Does Job fear God for nothing?’ ”), which introduces the theme and the plot of the book, it is necessary to study the question’s key expression, “for nothing.” The Hebrew term *chinnam* for this expression occurs four times in the book (1:9, 2:3, 9:17, 22:6). It can be translated also as “gratis,” “without a reason,” “for naught,” “freely,” “for no purpose,” “in vain,” and “without cause.” Satan’s question can be stated thus: does Job serve God disinterestedly? Is his piety unselfish and his devotion wholehearted? Or, expressed differently: does he serve God out of love, i.e., for nothing? Thus, in front of the whole universe, it must be clarified as to what motivates us to serve God. Is it out of fear and in order to escape punishment and death? Is it for the reward of eternal life and many other blessings? Or do we obey Him out of gratitude, because we love Him for His Person, for who He is?

Discussion Question: Why are our motives so important that they need to be revealed in the heavenly court?

Activity: Ask members of your class to discuss their own motives as to why they follow God. What role do our motives play in life? What differences do they make?

III. The Third Issue: Whom Do We Trust and Obey? (Review Genesis 2:16, 17; 3:4 and Job 13:15 with your class.)

Job confesses his full trust in the Lord even though he does not understand what is going on in his life. He knows God from his previous experience as a good, loving, and caring God; so, he stays with Him:

“ ‘Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him’ ” (*Job 13:15, NKJV*). And on another occasion, he strongly proclaims his personal faith in a personal God: “ ‘I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another’ ” (*Job 19:25–27, NIV*).

Ultimately, what is really crucial is, Whom do we trust? Do we follow God and His instructions, or do we live according to our own selfish views and Satan’s offers? Our orientation and directions in life are the things that must be clearly revealed in the great controversy.

The prophet Ezekiel announces God’s promise to give His Spirit to His people in order that they may obey His laws (*Ezek. 36:26, 27, NIV*). The heart transplant is needed in order for us to be able to follow God and His precepts. The circumcision of the heart can be performed only by the heavenly Surgeon. This Spirit changes and transforms lives—He is the Indweller, Sanctifier, and re-Creator. He is the transforming Spirit abiding with and in us. The Spirit of God brings new life (*Ezek. 37:1–14*).

God’s law is put into our hearts only by the work of the Holy Spirit. Ezekiel 36:27 literally reads: “I will give my Spirit in you, and I will do that you will walk in my statutes and keep my laws, and you will do” (*author’s translation*). In other words, God says: “I will do that you will do,” which means that God will move us or cause us to obey by His Spirit. The Lord commands obedience, and we must make a decision to obey, but we are unable to follow our decision and obey. However, when we cooperate with God, He gives us His Spirit to make that obedience happen. What God commands of His people, He always helps them to do. What He requires, He provides. Obedience is God’s gift, not our own performance or achievement, and it proves also that God is right.

Discussion Questions: How can God teach us to do His will and lead us by His Spirit? How can you recognize God’s will for your life? Why does David ask, “Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground” (*Ps. 143:10, NIV*)?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: The book of Job sheds light on many important issues besides those already mentioned in this lesson (e.g., God is not the

author of suffering; the Lord is not responsible for evil in the world; whether God's followers are willing to do God's will and die for Him rather than secure their own lives; the sovereignty of God and human freedom). Discuss with your class the practical implications of these many issues.

Activities:

- 1 Discuss with your class David's prayer: "Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me" (*Ps. 51:11, NIV*). Why is the presence of the Holy Spirit so important in our lives?
- 2 When God responded to Job's complaints (*chapters 38–41*), He pointed to the fact that He is the Creator. Why is it so crucial to believe in the biblical Creation? How does belief in Creation help one to cope with such perplexing issues when calamities and tragedies of life strike?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: When Job suffered, his friends visited him even though their theology was wrong. The solidarity we show to those who suffer is the most important thing. What those who suffer need are not our explanations but presence. Discuss with your class those whom you should visit in order to make a difference in their lives.

Activities:

- 1 Discuss with your class the possible motives of people who come to evangelistic meetings or church. Why do people not come? What could we do to change that?
- 2 Visit the elderly people of your congregation and ask them what has given them power and strength to cope with evil and the difficulties of life. Where did they find courage to handle their problems? Ask the same questions of younger people in your church and compare their answers.
- 3 What resources would you recommend to young people in the church to enable them to better understand the great controversy issues?