

The Controversy (War Between Christ and Satan) Continues



SABBATH—JANUARY 23

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: 1 Samuel 17:43–51; 2 Samuel 11:1–17; 1 Kings 18:21–39; 2 Kings 19:21–34; Esther 3:8–11; Nehemiah 1.

MEMORY VERSE: “I also told them how the gracious hand of my God was helping me. And I told them what the king had said to me. They replied, ‘Let’s [Let us] start rebuilding.’ So they began that good work” (Nehemiah 2:18, NIV).

WHEN WE COMPARE THE LIVES OF DAVID, ELIJAH, HEZEKIAH, ESTHER, AND NEHEMIAH, the same themes or subjects come up: God is able to use “unimportant” people to turn back the tide of evil. Through some of these stories we can learn that, despite tremendous obstacles, we do not need to become weak in the face of powerful evil. Instead, we can stand strong, but only with the power of God. He is always faithful to His covenant (agreement) promises. These promises were fulfilled for us in Jesus. When God’s people continue in His strength, they will find that the forces of evil are not powerful enough to succeed over them.

The focus, and the challenge, is for us to be glad in His saving power. This does not always make sense in the midst of the real challenges that we sometimes find ourselves in. They are often challenges that are so much bigger than ourselves. Feeling joy in God’s saving power before He rescues us is an act of faith and worship. Because of what Christ has done for us, trusting in God’s faithfulness is the most sensible thing we can do.

DAVID, GOLIATH, AND BATHSHEBA (1 Samuel 17:43–51)

Life is not easy to understand. That is because, as humans, we are difficult to understand. For example, we are made in the image of God, the Creator of the universe. But we have all rebelled against God and His way. No wonder that our ability to do both good and evil can reach high levels. And it is not just that some people gain great levels of “goodness” while others drop to the deepest lows of evil. Instead, both high and low levels can be reached by the same person! The great news is that some who, at one time, were at the lowest have, by God’s grace (forgiveness; mercy), done great things for Him and for people. Of course, the opposite can happen too. For example, those at the highest levels can fall to the lowest. Satan is real. The great controversy is real. And unless connected to the Lord, even the best of us can fall into Satan’s trap (1 Peter 5:8).

Read 1 Samuel 17:43–51. What words came out of David’s mouth that are so important to understanding his victory? Then read 2 Samuel 11:1–17. What sharp difference do we find here in the same man? What made the difference?

The same David who defeated the giant Goliath is the David who was defeated by his own lust and overconfidence. How many women did David already have? And he sees one more, *a married* woman, and suddenly where is all the talk about “the battle is the LORD’S” (1 Samuel 17:47) or “that there is a God in Israel” (1 Samuel 17:46)? David needed to know that the battle was not in the war zone in the Valley of Elah. Instead, it was in the hidden corner of his own heart. This is where the great controversy goes on in each of us.

But soon David came to his senses after this terrible fall with Bathsheba. He had enough grief and guilt to last a lifetime. David’s sorrow led him to write Psalm 51. In this psalm, David pleads for a clean heart (Psalm 51:10) and for the return of his fellowship with God (Psalm 51:11, 12). In the great war between Christ and Satan, powerful men are just as open to weakness as the person of the lowest class. But still, God is willing to work with all who truly repent (turn from sin).

Think about yourself right now, about your victories, your disappointments, and your failures. How can you use lessons from these stories of your life for whatever situation you face, *right now*?



Unless connected to the Lord, even the best of us can fall into Satan’s trap.

TO TURN THEIR HEARTS (1 Kings 18:21–39)



God turns the hearts of the people back to Him even before the miracle happens.

Elijah the Tishbite has to be one of the most colorful characters in the Bible. We first meet him standing before a surprised king and telling him there will be no rain for the next three years (1 Kings 17:1). It was not easy to reach a king or to escape from him. But Elijah with his leather belt (2 Kings 1:8) just slips through the guards, delivers God's message, and then runs to the mountains, about twelve kilometers (about seven miles) away.

These were sorry times for the northern kingdom of Israel. Most had forgotten the Lord God (1 Kings 19:10). And they worshiped false gods such as Baal instead. To say that it would not rain was a direct challenge to Baal. People believed that Baal would bring rain to help crops grow.

For the next three years the fertility¹ gods are powerless. Then Elijah challenges the king again and asks for a showdown between himself and all the prophets (special messengers or spokespersons) of Baal and the goddess Asherah (goddess of fertility). It is a challenge between one man and 850 (1 Kings 18:17–20).

When the day arrives and the crowds gather at the top of Mount Carmel, Elijah addresses the people: "How long will it take you to make up your minds?" (1 Kings 18:21, NIV). Bulls are chosen and prepared for sacrifice, and the people wait to find out which god is powerful enough to answer by fire from heaven. The bull was the most powerful symbol of the fertility religions in Old Testament Bible times. Surely the gods of fertility would show their strength.

Read 1 Kings 18:21–39. True, the great controversy was the real theme. But what did Elijah really want to happen in Israel? And why is that so important to us today?

First Kings 18:37 says it all. The miracle was really wonderful. But it was not the real issue. The issue was Israel's faithfulness to the covenant (agreement between God and His people). Notice, too, who had turned their hearts. It was the Lord Himself, *even before the miracle itself happened*. God does not force hearts to return to Him. He sends His Holy Spirit. And the people, in acting upon His leading, have to first choose to turn back to Him. They can act upon that choice only in God's strength. It is no different today. It is the power of God alone that keeps the beat of every heart going. But He does not force even one of those beating hearts to follow Him.

DEFINITIONS

1. fertility—the ability to produce children; the ability to cause plants or crops to grow.

WORDS OF REBELLION (WAR AGAINST GOD) (2 Kings 18:28–30)

Hezekiah was king of Judah when the new superpower, Assyria, conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and scattered its people across Mesopotamia² (2 Kings 18:9–12). “The Lord no longer could do anything for the people of the northern kingdom of Israel. So He would scatter His people among the heathen. In this way, His plan for the salvation of all who should choose to accept pardon through the Saviour of the human race must yet be fulfilled. Through the sufferings brought upon Israel, the Lord was preparing the way for His glory [great praise and honor] to be shown to the nations of earth.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, page 292.

A few years later, the Assyrian king Sennacherib turned his attention to Judah and captured all its strong cities. Sennacherib also placed a heavy tax upon the people (2 Kings 18:13–15). Hezekiah emptied the temple and palace treasuries. But the Assyrian king was not satisfied and sent officials to discuss terms of the surrender of Jerusalem.

The Assyrians then make fun of God’s people. They point out that the gods of the nations around them did not save them from Assyria. So what makes the Jews think that their God would do any better? (Read 2 Kings 18:28–30, 33–35.)

Hezekiah then does the only thing he could do. He prays (2 Kings 19:15–19).

Read 2 Kings 19:21–34, especially 2 Kings 19:21, 22. What is God’s message to His people during this terrible crisis (time of suffering and hardship)?

Soon the large Assyrian army camps around the walls of Jerusalem. The frightened people of the city arise one morning, expecting to see the final actions of a conquering army about to destroy the defenses of their city. Instead, they find dead soldiers lying scattered on the ground as far as the eye can see (2 Kings 19:35). The embarrassed Assyrian king goes home, only to be killed by two of his own sons (2 Kings 19:36, 37).

How can we learn, even during the most discouraging and seemingly impossible situations, to trust in the Lord? Why must we always keep the big picture in mind when things do not always end positively for us in this life?



Hezekiah does the only thing he could do. He prays.

DEFINITIONS

2. Mesopotamia—the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, where most of Iraq is located today.

DEATH DECREE (LAW) (Esther 3:8–11)

It is so hard for us today to understand the culture and customs of the Persian Empire during Bible times. This is where the story of Esther begins. One thing is certain (sure): the Lord had used that empire in keeping and fulfilling the covenant promises to the nation of Israel. These are the promises that went back to Abraham (read Genesis 12:1–3; Isaiah 45:1; 2 Chronicles 36:23).

The young Jewish girl Esther found herself as queen. Esther's rise to power was through a route that was different from Joseph's in Egypt or Daniel's in Babylon. But Esther was (as Joseph and Daniel were) just where the Lord wanted her to be. And she was used by God in a powerful way. This teaches us how the great controversy theme can play out in history.

Read Esther 3:8–11. Think of the plans God had for the Jewish people, especially the coming of the Messiah. What would have happened to His plans if this death decree (law) had been successful?

“The king did not realize the far-reaching results that would have followed the passage of this decree. Satan himself was trying to rid the earth of the Jews who had the full knowledge of the true God.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pages 600, 601. And from these same people, too, would come the Savior of the world (Jesus).

How interesting that the issue started over worship (read Esther 3:5, 8) and the refusal of a special group of people to follow the laws and customs of the ones in power. The events leading up to the Second Coming will be different from what happened in Esther's time. But the situation facing believers at the end of time will still be the same, and that situation is the great controversy between Christ and Satan. Those who are faithful to God will face something as the Jews here did. We have been warned that, in the closing scenes of earth's history, the death decree will go out, saying that “all who refused to worship the image of the beast [are] to be killed” (Revelation 13:15, NIV). One thing is certain. Although history often repeats itself, we often do not learn the lessons from it that we should.



God used Esther in a powerful way to save His people.

Why is it that we often do not trust those who are different from us? Why *should* the truths of Creation and salvation show us how wrong these feelings are? How can we cleanse our hearts from this terrible fault?

NEHEMIAH (Nehemiah 1)

The story of Nehemiah also comes at a time when the nation of Israel no longer had its own government. Instead it was a remnant (small group) scattered across foreign lands. God, as always, would be faithful to His covenant promises, even when the people failed to keep the covenant.

Read Nehemiah 1. What is the background of his prayer? In what ways does it remind us of Daniel's prayer in Daniel 9:4–19? In both cases, what is the issue? And how does this issue fit with the whole great controversy drama?

Through the grace (kindness) of the king, Nehemiah is given permission to return and rebuild in Jerusalem. On his return, Nehemiah spends the first few days just looking. He tries to survey the city by night, but the piles of rubble are so bad that he does not get far (Nehemiah 2:14). So, he goes outside the walls to survey them from there (Nehemiah 2:15).

Read Nehemiah 2:16–18. How do you think Nehemiah got the leaders to start working on something they had thought impossible? What could Nehemiah teach our church today?

Nehemiah did not at first tell the leaders why he had come. But there were some people who were not happy and did all they could to prevent any work from being done to improve Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:10, 19, 20). When work started on repairing the walls (Nehemiah 3), these foreign leaders “burned with anger” (Nehemiah 4:1, NIV). They made fun of the efforts (Nehemiah 4:2, 3, NKJV). But when they saw that God's people were serious about their work (Nehemiah 4:6), they planned an attack (Nehemiah 4:7, 8).

It would have been so easy to give up. But with all the plans against their work, the Jews continued working. Trusting in God, Nehemiah supervised the rebuilding of the wall and left the threats of his enemies to the hand of God (Nehemiah 6:14, 15).

We all face problems. How do we know when to give up and when to keep going?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: No question, this week’s lesson has taught us how often the Bible shows God’s faithfulness to His people. Of course, in many cases, at the time things were happening, that faithfulness was not always obvious (clear). In the stories we studied, we were able to follow the story from the beginning to the end in ways that some of the characters, such as Uriah the Hittite, could not. Today we are ourselves involved in the great controversy just as surely as the people in the Bible were. And not only them, but there were many others just as real as the ones who did not always have things work out so well. That is why it is so important for us, as Christians, to remember this, especially when times are rough. Here are Paul’s wonderful words: “We don’t [do not] give up. Our bodies are becoming weaker and weaker. But our spirits are being renewed day by day. Our troubles are small. They last only for a short time. But they are earning for us a glory [honor] that will last forever. It is greater than all our troubles. So we don’t [do not] spend all our time looking at what we can see. Instead, we look at what we can’t [cannot] see. What can be seen lasts only a short time. But what can’t [cannot] be seen will last forever” (2 Corinthians 4:16–18, NIV). Here Paul is trying to make us “see” beyond (above) our present life. He also wants to tell us that the hope of our future life in heaven makes this life more than just a cruel joke.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 What are some of the other Bible promises that point to our greatest hope? Gather as many as you can, and bring them to Sabbath School class. What kind of picture do they give to us?
- 2 What made David’s fall so sad was that he had been greatly blessed by God. He had been given much, but he still sinned the way he did. Instead of focusing just on the negative, think about the one positive part of his whole foolish story: God’s grace (forgiveness and mercy), even to someone who had fallen from so high to so low. What does that tell us about just how full the price is that Jesus paid for our salvation? How can we know for sure that God forgives us fully when we repent (turn from sin)? (Remember, it does not matter what we have done, or how far we have fallen into sin.)