

The Seen and the Unseen War



SABBATH—APRIL 23

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Matthew 11:11, 12; Revelation 5:5; Matthew 12:25–29; Isaiah 27:1; Matthew 11:1–12; Hebrews 2:14.

MEMORY VERSE: “ ‘And from the time John the Baptist began preaching until now, the Kingdom of Heaven has been forcefully [with great power] advancing [moving forward], and violent people are attacking it’ ” (Matthew 11:12, NLT).

EACH DAY WE MAKE IMPORTANT CHOICES about lifestyle, relationships, careers, what is important to us, how to have fun, and friends. To fully understand the importance of these choices, we need to make sure we understand what they are really about. The Bible teaches that there are unseen forces that greatly influence what we do see. So, we need to pull back the “curtain” from the world we can see in order to see the unseen.

Living in the age of science, we should not have a hard time believing in unseen forces. With every cell phone call we make or receive, or with any satellite communication we watch, we also deal with unseen forces that make these seen (and heard) experiences real.

Really, the great controversy (war between Christ and Satan) is happening all around us. It is going on unseen in the background to the world of the seen that we experience every day. This week we will examine verses from Matthew (and elsewhere) that help to show these unseen forces and how they influence our lives and choices.

MATTHEW 11:11, 12

The Holy Bible is the Word of God. In it the plan of salvation is made clear. Yes, some verses can be hard to understand. But this should not be surprising. After all, in every part of natural life we find things hard to understand. How much more so will it be with parts of the Word of God, which shows us spiritual and heavenly truths?

Ellen G. White explains this idea so clearly: “The very humblest forms of life present a problem that the wisest of philosophers¹ cannot explain. Everywhere are wonders beyond our understanding. Should we then be surprised to find that in the spiritual world also there are mysteries that we cannot understand? The problem lies in the weakness and narrowness of the human mind. God has given us plenty of proof in the Bible about His character [thoughts; feelings; actions]. We are not to doubt His word just because we cannot understand all the mysteries of His leading.”—Adapted from *Steps to Christ*, pages 106, 107.

For example, one of the most challenging verses in all the Bible is Matthew 11:11, 12: “ ‘What I’m [I am] about to tell you is true. No one more important than John the Baptist has ever been born. But the least important person in the kingdom of heaven is more important than he is. Since the days of John the Baptist, the kingdom of heaven has been advancing with force. And forceful people are taking hold of it’ ” (NirV).

Read through the verses. What do you understand about them? What do you *not* understand?

Some translations of verse 12 read: “From the days of John the Baptist until the present, the kingdom from heaven has been forcefully advancing, and violent people have been attacking it” (ISV). “And from the time John the Baptist began preaching until now, the Kingdom of Heaven has been forcefully advancing, and violent people are attacking it” (NLT).

What is Jesus trying to tell us here?

What things, even in everyday life, remain mysteries to us? For example, do we stop believing that there is a sun because there are many mysteries about it that we do not understand? How much more so, then, with questions of faith and the Word of God?



“We are not to doubt God’s word just because we cannot understand all the mysteries of His leading.”

DEFINITIONS

1. philosophers—individuals who study ideas about knowledge, truth, the nature and meaning of life, and so on.

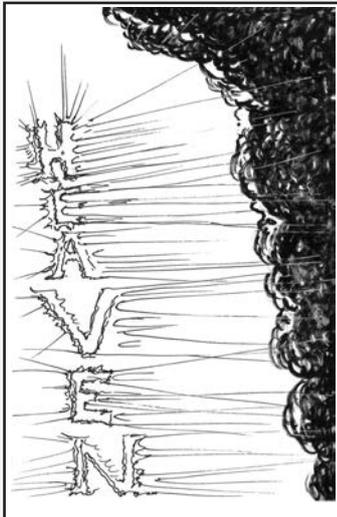
THE BORDERS (EDGES) OF DARKNESS (Matthew 10:34)

Bible students through the ages have struggled with Matthew 11:12 because the words that describe the kingdom and the people here can be used in either a positive or negative way. The Greek word *basmati* can mean either “forcefully advancing [pushing forward]” or “suffering violence.” And the Greek word *biastes* can mean “forceful [strong; ambitious] or eager men” or “violent [harmful] men.”

So, does this verse mean that the meek and mild kingdom of heaven is suffering violence (harm), and that violent people are attacking it? Or is the kingdom of heaven forcefully advancing in a positive way, and are the forceful men seizing it really followers of Christ?

Is it possible for followers of Christ to be this forceful while advancing God’s kingdom?

Read Matthew 10:34; Revelation 5:5; and Micah 2:13. What are these verses saying that could shed some light on the last question asked above?



“The kingdom of heaven has been pushing back the edges of darkness.”

Some have argued that the best way to interpret Matthew 11:12 is to use the most common meanings of *biazomai* (which are positive) and *biastes* (which are negative). Doing this gives us this interpretation: the kingdom of heaven is forcefully advancing with “holy power and magnificent [great] energy. It has been pushing back the frontiers [borders; edges] of darkness. [While this is happening,] violent [destructive] men have been trying to rob it.”—Adapted from D. A. Carson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary With the New International Version: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), pages 266, 267.

This interpretation captures the bigger picture of the gospel theme (idea) found in the book of Matthew, showing the struggle between light and darkness and between Christ and Satan. This theme is found everywhere in the Bible. But it is made clearest in the New Testament. There is indeed a war, seen and unseen. We are all involved in this war. And we all take a side in this war. And even if we do not understand all that happens in the war, we all experience it every day.

THE WORLDWIDE WAR BETWEEN CHRIST AND SATAN (Matthew 12:25–29)

We saw yesterday how hard it is to understand what Matthew 11:12 means. But difficult as that verse is, it does help to show how real the great war between Christ and Satan is.

What do Matthew 12:25–29; Isaiah 27:1; 1 John 5:19; Romans 16:20; Genesis 3:14–19; Ephesians 2:2; and Ephesians 6:10–13 tell us about how real the great war is between Christ and Satan?

These are just a few of many more texts, both in the Old and New Testament, that refer to what one contemporary (current) non-Adventist Bible thinker has called the “Warfare Worldview.” At the center of this view is the idea that there is a battle going on between supernatural² powers in the cosmos.³ In one way or another, it is a warfare in which we are all involved. This notion, of course, is not new to Seventh-day Adventists. It has been part of our theology (beliefs and teachings about God) from the earliest days of our church. Indeed, our pioneers held to it even before our church itself was first formed.

In what real ways do you see this struggle between Christ and Satan in your own life? How is it being played out in the choices you must make and in the temptations you face? This war is real, and it is going on all around us. How can understanding this fact help you to make the right choices and to keep away from temptation?

DEFINITIONS

2. supernatural—unable to be explained by science or the laws of nature: of, or relating to, or seeming to come from God or the powers of darkness.

3. cosmos—the universe, especially when it is understood as an ordered system.

WHEN THE BATTLE GETS DIRTIER (Matthew 11:1–12)

As we already have seen, the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:12 show the fact that the kingdom of God is not going to be established without a struggle or fight. That fight is the great controversy. It has been, and still is, going on. It will continue until sin, Satan, and the lost finally are destroyed. And, at times, that fight can, and does, get very dirty along the way.

We can see how real the great controversy is and just how dirty it can become, according to what Jesus Himself said in Matthew 11:12.



The great controversy (the war between Christ and Satan) will continue until sin, Satan, and the lost are finally destroyed.

Read Matthew 11:1–12. In what real ways do you see the great controversy going on around you? How does the great controversy help us to make sense of what is happening here?

First of all, who do we think leads the rulers to put John in jail? We can see here how Satan both tries to stop John and to discourage faith in Jesus. After all, if John the Baptist ends up in jail, what could one hope for Jesus Himself?

Then, too, there is no doubt that Satan could have led the followers of Jesus and John to ask themselves the question: If this Jesus of Nazareth can do so many wonderful things, and has so much power, then why is He letting such a faithful and good man as John, His cousin, waste away in jail?

Also, who do we think is putting the doubts in John's head? *Why am I here? Why does Jesus not free me?* So, no wonder John asks, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" (Matthew 11:3, NKJV). Remember, this is the same John who baptized Jesus, who saw the "Spirit of God coming down on him [Jesus] like a dove" (Matthew 3:16, NIV). And it is he who heard the voice from heaven declare: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17, NKJV). But now, with all that has happened, John starts to doubt. Of course, as bad as John's problem is, it is going to get worse. This only could continue to feed more doubt (Mark 6:25–28).

Is anything causing you to doubt now? If so, what can you think of and pray about that will push the doubt away? What wonderful reasons can those thoughts and prayers give you for trusting in the goodness of God?

A LOST CAUSE (Hebrews 2:14)

All through history, humans have been involved in wars. Something in human nature causes the people of one group to want to steal from and kill those of another. Katherine Tait wrote a book about her father, the British philosopher Bertrand Russell. She wrote about her father's feelings of worry at the start of World War I. English people were celebrating in the streets of England when the war started with Germany. "My father had grown up with the Victorian belief that the whole world would, in its own good time, get better and better. Then, suddenly, he found his own beloved countrymen dancing in the streets at the thought of killing a great many of their fellow human beings who happened to speak German."—Adapted from *My Father Bertrand Russell* (England: Thoemmes Press, 1997), page 45. This is how humans with their fallen natures have acted all through history.

In most of the wars that humans have fought against one another, no one knew the end result. People went to battle not knowing if they would be on the winning or losing side.

In the "Warfare Worldview" of our universe, we have one great big advantage. We know which side has already won. Christ has won the greatest victory for us. After the Cross, no question remains about who is the Victor and who can share in the fruits of that victory. Satan's cause is really a lost one.

What do Hebrews 2:14; 1 Corinthians 15:20–27; Revelation 12:12; and Revelation 20:10 tell us about the final result of the great controversy?

Satan lost the war in heaven. And he lost the war on earth, too. But with hatred he still looks for all whom he may destroy (read 1 Peter 5:8). Christ's victory may be complete. But the battle still goes on. Our only protection is to put ourselves, mind and body, on the winning side. And we do that by the choices we make every day. Are we making choices that put us on the winning side, where the victory is sure for us? Or are we on the losing side, where defeat is certain? Our eternal future hangs on the answer to this question.



Christ has won a great victory for us. Our only protection against Satan is to put ourselves, mind and body, on the winning side.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: Who among us does not know how real the great controversy is? We know about this war because we feel it inside us every day. We live in a broken world, a world filled with worry and pain. It is a world where a serpent is not limited to one tree in the middle of a garden. Instead, it is a world overrun with serpents. It is a world full of the whispers of temptation that come in all kinds of ways to so easily trap those who are not watchful in faith and in prayer. No wonder Jesus said, “Watch and pray,” so that we may not fall into the traps of sin. And of all the traps, perhaps the most dangerous one for the Christian is believing the lie that says, “When you fall into temptation, you have gone too far. There is no God of grace [mercy and forgiveness] who will welcome you back into His arms.” Who has not at one time or another heard that voice whispering in his or her ears? In one way, that feeling is right. When you fall into temptation, even once, you have gone too far to ever get yourself back. That is exactly why Jesus came, and won the victory for us where we all have failed. He offers His triumph to us. This is what the whole gospel is about: Jesus winning for us in the great controversy what we could never win for ourselves. But at the same time, we have to choose—daily, hourly, moment by moment—to put ourselves on His side. And we do that by obeying His Word (the Bible) and by claiming the promises of victory that it gives to us. And the whole time we are to depend only on what He has done to make our salvation sure.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 What are some of the other real things that we cannot see? Again, how should this help to open our minds to other forces and powers that are unseen? How can our knowledge of these unseen things help us to understand how real the great controversy is?
- 2 Many Christians do not believe in or have any idea about the great controversy. What reasons might they have for not seeing it? What arguments against it might they throw out at you? And how would you answer them? If you were to give someone a study on the great controversy, what verses would you use?
- 3 How do you deal with the question of why we are still here so long after Jesus won the victory at the cross? After His death and return to life and to heaven, why did Jesus not just come back and destroy the devil once and for all?