

The Seen *and the* Unseen War



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 11:11, 12; Rev. 5:5; Matt. 12:25–29; Isa. 27:1; Matt. 11:1–12; Heb. 2:14.*

Memory Text: “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force” *(Matthew 11:12, NKJV).*

Each day we make important choices about lifestyle, relationships, careers, priorities, entertainment, and friends. To truly comprehend the significance of these choices, we need to make sure we understand what they are really about. We need to pull back the curtain and see the unseen, for the Bible teaches that there is an unseen reality that greatly impacts what we do see.

Living in the age of science, we shouldn't have a hard time believing in invisible realities. We who know about X-rays, radio waves, and wireless communication should easily believe in what we cannot see. With every cell phone call we make or receive, or with any satellite communication we watch, we are working on the assumption of unseen realities that make these seen (and heard) experiences real.

Indeed, the great controversy between Christ and Satan forms the unseen background to the world of the seen that we experience every day. This week we will examine texts from Matthew (and elsewhere) that help to reveal these unseen forces and how they impact our lives, and choices, here.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 30.

Matthew 11:11, 12

Scripture is the Word of God, and in it the plan of salvation is made clear. Yet, some texts can be difficult to understand. This, though, should not be surprising. After all, in every aspect of natural life we find things hard to understand. How much more so will it be with parts of the Word of God, which reveal to us spiritual and supernatural truths and realities?

Ellen G. White expressed this concept so clearly: “The very humblest forms of life present a problem that the wisest of philosophers is powerless to explain. Everywhere are wonders beyond our ken. Should we then be surprised to find that in the spiritual world also there are mysteries that we cannot fathom? The difficulty lies solely in the weakness and narrowness of the human mind. God has given us in the Scriptures sufficient evidence of their divine character, and we are not to doubt His word because we cannot understand all the mysteries of His providence.”—*Steps to Christ*, pp. 106, 107.

For instance, one of the most challenging texts in all Scripture is Matthew 11:11, 12: “ ‘Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it’ ” (*NIV*).

Read through the verses. What do you understand about them? What don’t you 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 saying to us here?

What things, even in secular life, remain mysteries to us? Do we stop believing, for instance, in the existence of the sun simply because of the many mysteries about it that we don’t understand? How much more so, then, with questions of faith and the Word of God?

The Frontiers of Darkness

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 sense. The Greek verb *basmati* can mean either “forcefully advancing” or “suffering violence.” And the Greek word *biastes* can mean “forceful or eager men” or “violent men.”

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

Is it possible for followers of Christ to be this aggressive, even forceful, in their pursuit of the kingdom?

Read the following texts. What are they saying that could shed some light on the last question asked above?

Matt. 10:34 _____

Rev. 5:5 _____

Mic. 2:13 _____

Some have argued that the most likely interpretation of Matthew 11:12 is to apply the most common uses of *biazomai* (typically positive) and *biastes* (typically negative), giving us this interpretation: the kingdom of heaven is forcefully advancing with “holy power and magnificent energy that has been pushing back the frontiers of darkness”; and while this is happening, “violent or rapacious men have been trying to plunder it.”—D. A. Carson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary With the New International Version: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), pp. 266, 267.

This interpretation appears to ring true to the wider Gospel of Matthew. In fact, this interpretation also captures the bigger picture, that of the struggle between light and darkness, between Christ and Satan, a theme that permeates the Bible but is made explicit in the New Testament. There is indeed a war, seen and unseen, in which we are all involved, in which we all take a side, in which we all experience every day, regardless of how much we do or do not understand what’s going on. This is what living amid the great controversy is all about.

The “Warfare Worldview”

Whatever the ultimate meaning of Matthew 11:12, as we saw yesterday, it does help to reveal the reality of the great controversy. It depicts a struggle, a battle, and—as we know from other Bible texts—this battle is, at the core, the one between Christ and Satan.

What do the following texts tell us about in view of the reality of the great controversy?

Matt. 12:25–29 _____

Isa. 27:1 _____

1 John 5:19 _____

Rom. 16:20 _____

Gen. 3:14–19 _____

Eph. 2:2, 6:10–13 _____

These are just a few of many more texts, both in the Old and New Testament, that refer to what one contemporary (non-Adventist) theologian has called the “Warfare Worldview,” the idea that there is a battle going on between supernatural powers in the cosmos, a warfare in which we are all in one way or another involved. This notion, of course, is not new to Seventh-day Adventists. It has been part of our theology from the earliest days of our church; indeed, our pioneers held to it even before our church itself was officially formed.

In what ways do you see the reality of this struggle expressed in your own life? How is it being played out in the choices you have to make and in the temptations you face? How can your understanding the reality of this conflict help you to make the right choices and to resist temptation?

When the Battle Gets Nasty

As we have already seen, the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:12, however deep, do reveal the fact that the kingdom of God isn't going to be established without a struggle, or without a fight. That fight, we understand, is the great controversy, and it has been and still is raging. It will until the final destruction of sin, Satan, and the lost. And, at times, it can and does get very nasty along the way.

We can see the reality of the great controversy, and just how nasty it can become, in the context in which Jesus Himself said what He did in Matthew 11:12.

Read Matthew 11:1–12. How do we see the reality of the great controversy here being played out on a number of levels? That is, how does the great controversy help us to make sense of what is happening here?

For starters, who do we think inspired the leaders to put John in jail? We can see here Satan's attempt not only to stop John but to discourage faith in Jesus. After all, if John, Jesus' forerunner, met such a fate, what could one hope for Jesus Himself?

Then, too, there's no question that Satan could have made the followers of Jesus and John 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, rot in jail?*

Also, who do we think was putting the doubts in John's head? *Why am I here? Why doesn't He free me?* Hence, no wonder he asked, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" (Matt. 11:3, NKJV). Remember, this is the same John who baptized Jesus, who saw the "Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him" (Matt. 3:16, NKJV) and who heard the voice from heaven declare: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17, NKJV). Now, though, with all that had happened, he becomes filled with doubts. Of course, as bad as John's situation was, it was (at least for the short term) going to get worse, which could only continue to feed more doubt (Mark 6:25–28).

If anything is causing you to doubt now, what can you focus on, dwell on, and pray about that will push the doubt away and help you to realize all the wonderful reasons you have to trust in the goodness of God?

A Lost Cause

All through history, humans have engaged in warfare. Something in human nature causes the people of one group to want to plunder, pillage, and slaughter those of another. In a book about her father, British philosopher Bertrand Russell, Katherine Tait wrote about her father’s concern at the outbreak of World War I regarding the joy in the streets of England at the prospect of war with Germany. “He had grown up with an optimistic Victorian belief in automatic progress, with the confidence that the whole world would, in its own good time, follow the wise course of the English from ancient brutality to civilized self-government. Then, suddenly, he found his own beloved compatriots dancing in the streets at the prospect of slaughtering great numbers of fellow human beings who happened to speak German.”—*My Father Bertrand Russell* (England: Thoemmes Press, 1997), p. 45. Multiply this same idea over history among almost all people, and we see the reality of fallen human nature in one of its most consequential and tragic forms.

Now, in most of these human wars, no one knew the outcome beforehand. People went to battle not knowing if they would be on the winning or losing side.

In the “Warfare Worldview” of our cosmos, we have one great advantage: we know which side has already won. Christ has won the decisive victory for us. After the Cross, no question remained about who is the Victor and who can share in the fruits of that victory. Satan’s cause is, indeed, a lost cause.

What do the following texts tell us about the outcome of the great controversy? *Heb. 2:14, 1 Cor. 15:20–27, Rev. 12:12, 20:10.*

Just as Satan lost the war in heaven, he lost the war on earth, as well. But with hatred and vengeance he’s still seeking all whom he may devour (*see 1 Pet. 5:8*). However complete Christ’s victory, the battle still rages, and our only protection is to place 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 assured for us, or on the losing side, where defeat is certain? On the answer to this question our eternal destiny hangs.

Further Thought: Who among us doesn't know the reality of the great controversy? We know about this war because we feel it inside us on a daily basis. We live in a broken world, a world cursed with anxiety and pain. A world where a serpent isn't limited to one tree in the middle of a garden but where the entire garden has been overrun with serpents. A world full of the whispers of temptation that come in all sorts of ways and that so easily ensnare those who are not diligent in faith and in prayer. No wonder Jesus said: "Watch and pray" lest we fall into the many snares that await us. And, of all the snares, perhaps the most dangerous one for the Christian is believing the lie that says, "When you succumb to temptation, you've gone too far. There is no God of grace who will welcome you back into His arms." Who hasn't at one time or another heard that voice whispering in his or her ears? In one sense, that sentiment is right: when you fall into temptation, even once, you have gone too far to ever get yourself back. That's exactly why Jesus came, won the victory for us where we all have failed, and then offers His triumph to us. This is what the whole gospel is about, Jesus doing for us in the great controversy what we could never do for ourselves. At the same time, too, though, we have to choose, daily, hourly, moment by moment, to place ourselves on His side, and we do that by obeying His Word and by claiming the promises of victory that He had assured us we can have, the whole time leaning only upon His merits for us as the surety of our salvation.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What are some of the other physical realities that exist all around us and yet that are completely inaccessible to our sense perceptions? Again, how should this reality help open our minds to the existence of other forces and powers that we simply cannot see? How can our realization of the existence of these unseen realities help us to understand the reality of the great controversy?
- 2 Many Christians do not believe in or have any concept of the great controversy worldview. What reasons might they have for not seeing it? What arguments might they throw out at you against it, and how would you answer them? If you were to give someone a study on the great controversy, what texts 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 resurrection and ascension, why didn't Jesus just come back and destroy the devil once and for all?

An Amazing Ride: Part 3

Note: In Part 3, we complete the stories from the Solomon Islands, as told by Carol Boehm.

In 1986, Christine became a Seventh-day Adventist. Her family was horrified, especially her brother. She was disowned and told to leave the village. She went to study nursing at Atoifi, our Adventist hospital on the island of Malaita. Little did she know that her parents mourned deeply for her.

Later, when Christine returned home, everyone in the village welcomed her—except her brother. He told everyone that the Adventist Church should be “thrown into the mangroves.” (This was the stretch of beach used as toilets for the village.)

For more than 20 years, he interrogated Christine about her beliefs and beat her mercilessly. One day, as she noticed a bush knife sitting beside her brother, she told him, “Even if you chop my head off I won’t renounce my beliefs.” He beat her fiercely. Christine was black and blue, but she felt no pain and kept praising God for His goodness. When the wife of the Adventist pastor asked Christine why she kept returning to her village, she simply said, “I stopped fearing death or pain a long time ago. These people are my family, and I’m the only Seventh-day Adventist they know.”

When Christine married, she took her husband, Gary (a nurse and Adventist minister), to her village. The villagers were so embarrassed about the beatings that they allowed Gary to run a church mission and agreed to let the Adventists build some pit latrines.

This had been a huge need for the people, and their hearts began to soften. Eventually, five people from Christine’s village were baptized in the water at the end of a pier that separates the now unused men’s and women’s mangrove areas. The devil may have wanted to throw Adventists into the putrid water, but God had other plans! Because of this dear woman’s faithfulness, her entire village is opening up to Jesus.

The Boehm family moved to the Solomon Islands in 2011 for what they thought would be five years, but the Lord had other plans. During their two years there, Wayne served as the president of the Solomon Islands Mission, and Carol homeschooled their eldest son and introduced CHIP (Complete Health Improvement Program) to the city of Honiara. From the Solomon Islands, the Boehms were called to Fiji, where Wayne served as secretary of the Trans-Pacific Union Mission. They are now in Sydney, Australia, where Wayne serves as manager of Hope Channel.

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Matthew 11:12*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand the conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan.

Feel: Recognize how Christ through His ministry has ensured the victory of God's kingdom.

Do: Experience the victory of Christ in the great controversy.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Conflict Between the Two Kingdoms

- A How did the conflict begin?
- B What are the issues in the conflict?
- C How real is the conflict in our lives?
- D How does the great controversy theme affect our worldview?

II. Feel: The Victory of Christ in the Conflict

- A What does it mean to say, “the Kingdom of Heaven has been forcefully advancing” (*Matt. 11:12, NLT*)?
- B How and where does this advance take place?
- C How and where must the kingdom of God expect violence against it?
- D How and when will the conflict between the two kingdoms end?

III. Do: Experience the Victory of the Kingdom of God.

- A How real is our involvement in the war between Christ and Satan? (*See Eph. 6:10–18.*)
- B In what ways can our daily choices reveal on whose side we are in this conflict between kingdoms?

▶ **Summary:** Even though the great controversy involves cosmic concerns and is an exhibit for the entire universe, most immediately it is a battle for the human mind and heart. Whose side we are on is decided there, and upon that rests our destiny.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Matthew 11:12*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: This week’s lesson centers on *Matthew 11:12*: “ ‘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*). In this saying, Jesus makes a profound point on the great controversy between Christ and Satan. The kingdom of God has been the hope and heartbeat of God’s people ever since sin entered the world. That kingdom became a historic reality when the Son, the Second Person of the Godhead, took upon Himself human nature to redeem humanity from sin. Since then, God’s kingdom has been steadily advancing, even though the kingdom of Satan has been trying to thwart the divine initiative.

In the context of this conflict between kingdoms, everything the Gospels record of the coming of God’s kingdom in the person and ministry of Christ—Herod’s infanticide in Bethlehem, the wilderness temptations, the imprisonment and beheading of the Baptist, the continued plots and schemes against Jesus, the Crucifixion—illustrates how forceful and determined satanic forces are in their warfare against God’s kingdom. But the triumph of God in the conflict is assured; as a witness, see how the ministry of the Son turns tragic consequences of sin into triumphant witnesses of the Son’s victory: “ ‘The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them’ ” (*Matt. 11:5, NKJV*).

Just for Teachers: “ ‘He who is not with Me,’ ” said Jesus, “ ‘is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad’ ” (*Matt. 12:30, NKJV*). To choose to be with Jesus means life eternal. To choose to be with Satan means eternal destruction.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Explore with the class the importance of choice between the two kingdoms in conflict.
- ② How does the great controversy between Christ and Satan enter into every phase of human experience?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: *Who am I? Where did I come from? Where*

am I going? What am I doing? What is the meaning of history? What is my role in life? These are some basic questions that confront us, and we tend to answer them according to the worldview we have adopted. Faith in a personal God will lead to a particular kind of worldview, and a denial of the existence of God will lead to an entirely different one. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible describes a basic worldview—a world in conflict between the powers of good and evil. To Seventh-day Adventists, this conflict is known as the great controversy between Christ and Satan. In this conflict of the kingdoms, we must take hold of a never-failing faith in God and affirm our role in advancing the kingdom of God. To do this, we need to understand the conflict between the two kingdoms, including the victory of Christ in the conflict and to experience that victory in our lives.

Bible Commentary

I. The Conflict Between Two Kingdoms (*Review Revelation 12:7–10 with the class.*)

From Genesis (3:15) to Revelation (12:7–10) the Bible reveals a continuing conflict between Christ and Satan, between the kingdom of righteousness and the kingdom of sin. The Bible never underestimates the existence and role of Satan in the affairs of human history. In fact, it portrays Satan’s origin in his efforts to become like God (*Isa. 14:12–15, Ezek. 28:12–15*); his rebellion against God, resulting in his being cast out of heaven (*Luke 10:18, Rev. 20:7–9*); and the end awaiting him in apocalyptic annihilation (*Rev. 20:7–10*).

The central issue in this cosmic conflict is the character of God: Can love and justice coexist in the nature of God? Is His law governing His creatures unfair, arbitrary, and impossible to fulfill? While it is “Satan’s studied plan” to “misrepresent the character of God” “as arbitrary, severe, and unforgiving” (Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 738), it is Christ’s intention to show to the universe that God is love and that His law is just and righteous.

To this end, Jesus came to this world. His life, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection and the Second Coming are all part of God’s eternal plan to “save His people from their sins” (*Matt. 1:21, NKJV; compare with Eph. 1:7–11*) and to establish His kingdom forever (*Rev. 11:15, 20:7–10, 21:1–5*).

Consider This: It is necessary that every Christian “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 Question: Have a class member read the statement above. Then invite class members to discuss how this cosmic conflict enters into their lives, including the personal struggles they face with it.

II. The Victory of Christ in the Conflict *(Review 1 John 3:8 with the class.)*

The apostle John, who observed for the longest time the dynamics of the great controversy, placed the victory in that conflict in the most appropriate causative context: “The devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (*1 John 3:8, NKJV*). The conflict began with Satan (*Rev. 12:7*), and the conflict must end with the destruction of Satan. There was, and is, no other way. Hence, the Second Person of the Godhead became incarnate in human flesh, lived a life of victory over every temptation Satan placed in His path, and finally defeated him on the cross by the giving of His life as a ransom for sin (*Mark 10:45; see also Col. 2:13–15*), thereby redeeming humanity from the clutches of the devil. Paul could therefore say, “Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (*1 Cor. 15:57, NKJV*).

The Cross is the highest expression of divine love and justice. It reveals, on the one hand, God’s infinite love for humanity (*John 3:16*) and, on the other, the immutability of God’s law. This expression of both love and justice on the cross is the very heart of the gospel in the face of which Satan and his kingdom stand defeated. And the defeat stands sealed forever by Christ’s resurrection.

Consider This: Why is the Cross essential to Christ’s victory in the great controversy? Mention some ways in which Satan tried to thwart God’s plan to ensure victory in the great controversy.

■ *How is this controversy between the two kingdoms raging in human hearts today?*

III. Experience the Victory of Christ *(Review Ephesians 6:12 with the class.)*

Just before Gethsemane, Jesus told Peter, “ ‘Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail’ ” (*Luke 22:31, 32*). This is true not only with reference to Peter but also of all disciples. It is Satan’s intent to lead us away from God’s kingdom and make us prey to his cunning devices. Thus, the great controversy is not only an unseen conflict between good

and evil, but it is very much a reality in our day-to-day life. Every disciple of Christ is a target of Satan’s deceptive plans, but every disciple is also an object of Christ’s love and earnest prayers. “Many look on this conflict between Christ and Satan as having no special bearing on their own life; and for them it has little interest. But within the domain of every human heart this controversy is repeated.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 116.

Paul calls this our spiritual warfare. As we engage in this battle for the soul, we are asked to “be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might” and “put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (*Eph. 6:10, 11, NKJV*). Victory in the Christian life begins with that sure and certain relationship with Jesus.

Discussion Question: Read Ephesians 6:14–18 and 2 Corinthians 10:3–5. How God has enabled us to fight against the powers of evil and to live a life of victory?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Christ “knew that the life of His trusting disciples would be like His, a series of uninterrupted victories.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 679.

Thought Questions:

- ❶ How can the life of a Christian be like that of Christ—“a series of uninterrupted victories”? What conditions are we to fulfill in order to arrive at that status?
- ❷ As a pointer to His victorious life, Jesus said, “The ruler of this world [Satan] is coming, and he has nothing in Me” (*John 14:30*). What must we do to make a statement like that?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: The road to spiritual victory and growth is filled with many satanic traps, and it is here that we ought to be on guard. Paul describes being watchful in powerful words of counsel: Resist! Be strong! Stand! Take up! Pray! Put on! (*Eph. 6:10–17*).

Activity: Invite class members to share their personal experiences in how they found these counsels to be relevant to a real victory they have won in their spiritual battles.

READY AND WAITING



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