

The Great Controversy



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Job 1:1–5, Job 1:6–12, Zech. 3:2, Matt. 4:1, Ezek. 28:12–16, Rom. 3:26, Heb. 2:14.*

Memory Text: “And the LORD said unto Satan, The LORD rebuke thee, O Satan; even the LORD that hath chosen Jerusalem rebuke thee: is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?” (*Zechariah 3:2*).

Scattered across the pages of both the [Old Testament] and the [New Testament] lie many references and allusions to an unrelenting war between God and Satan, between good and evil on both cosmic and personal levels. Comparing these passages, we inlay their individual insights to form a mosaic window of truth through which we can perceive the total message of Scripture with greater clarity than otherwise.”—*The Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 2000), p. 969.

The great controversy theme forms a template that can help us better understand “the total message” of the Bible, especially the plan of salvation. Though the theme is much more apparent in the New Testament, it is found in the Old Testament too. And perhaps nowhere in the Old Testament are we given a clearer glimpse of Satan and this conflict, and how they can powerfully affect life here, than in the book of Job.

This week we’ll look at the broader reality behind this immediate reality that’s the main focus of Job. And though our lives and stories are different from Job’s, we have one thing in common: like Job, we are all involved in this controversy.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 8.

A Little Heaven on Earth

The book of Job begins on a relatively positive note. From a worldly perspective at least, we see a man blessed in every way.

Read Job 1:1–4. What do the texts reveal about the kind of life that Job lived? What were the positive aspects of Job’s existence?

Job certainly seems to have it all, including a righteous character. The word translated in Job 1:1 as “blameless” (*NIV*) comes from a word that can mean “complete” or “full of integrity.” The word for “upright” means “straight,” which can give the idea of walking on a straight path. In short, the book opens with an almost Eden-like scene depicting a wealthy man of faithfulness and integrity who has it all.

Nevertheless, he has it all in a fallen world.

Read Job 1:5, 6. What do these texts reveal about the reality of the fallen world that Job inhabits?

“Amid the festivities of his sons and daughters, he trembled lest his children should displease God. As a faithful priest of the household, he offered sacrifices for them individually. He knew the offensive character of sin, and the thought that his children might forget the divine claims, led him to God as an intercessor in their behalf.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1140.

Clearly Job had it good, about as good as it can get here. As Eden-like as the scene is presented—a man with a full life, big family, a great name, and many possessions—it’s still a life lived on a fallen planet steeped in sin, and so, as Job will soon see, it comes with all the dangers that existence here brings.

What are the good things in your life right now? How can you learn to be always in an attitude of thankfulness for them?

Cosmic Conflict

The book of Job begins on earth, in a place of peace and tranquility. However, by the sixth text of the first chapter, the venue changes. It instantly shifts to an entirely different aspect of reality, one that is not seen by humans unless through divine revelation. And interestingly enough, this other aspect of reality, heaven, doesn't seem to be as tranquil and peaceful as things are on earth, at least in what is first presented here.

Read Job 1:6–12. Though we will study these texts in more detail later in this quarter, what is happening here? How does it contrast to what we have just seen happening with Job on earth?

There's so much to explore in these few texts. They reveal aspects of our universe that all our space telescopes don't detect and that human science doesn't even begin to fathom. What's fascinating, though, is that they also reveal a cosmic conflict. It's not a calm, peaceful, and tranquil conversation that we access in this passage. God talks about Job with (to use a human idea) a sense of pride, like a father proud of his son. Satan, in contrast, mocks what God says about Job. "So Satan answered the LORD and said, 'Does Job fear God for nothing?' " (*Job 1:9, NKJV*). One could almost hear a sneering sarcasm, a mocking tone in what Satan says to God.

Though the text doesn't explicitly say that this confrontation was in heaven, that's surely where it was. And thus you have this created being, an angel, standing before God in heaven and challenging Him to His face, before other "sons of God." It's hard to imagine someone talking to a worldly leader like that, but here we have a being doing so to God Himself. How could this happen?

The answer is found in a theme that appears in various places and in different ways all through the Bible. It's called the great controversy, and it provides a powerful template to help us to understand not just the book of Job but the entire Bible and its explanation of the whole sad story of sin and suffering on earth. And even more important, it helps us better understand just what Jesus accomplished for us on the cross in order to solve the problem of sin and suffering on the earth.

The Conflict on Earth

The book of Job pulls back a veil and reveals a dimension of existence that our eyes and ears and worldly philosophies could never show us. (If anything, these texts should show us just how limited our eyes and ears and worldly philosophies are when it comes to understanding the big picture!) And what these few texts show, too, is a conflict between God and this other being, Satan. And though the controversy is first introduced in the book of Job as taking place in heaven, it quickly shifts to the earth. All through the Bible, we find texts that point to this ongoing conflict, one that involves us, as well.

Read the following texts. How do they reveal the reality of a conflict being fought here on earth with evil supernatural powers?

Gen. 3:1-4 _____

Zech. 3:2 _____

Matt. 4:1 _____

1 Pet. 5:8 _____

1 John 3:8 _____

Rev. 12:9 _____

These texts are just a small sampling of numerous texts that point, either explicitly or implicitly, to a literal devil, a supernatural being with malicious intentions. Though many people view the idea of Satan as a primitive myth, with such clear Bible testimony we should not fall for this deception.

What are ways that, even now, you see the reality of Satan's work in our world? What is our only protection?

Job as a Microcosm

The opening scenes of the book of Job show us a few crucial points. First, as we have stated, they reveal the reality of another dimension beyond what, of ourselves, we can now know—a heavenly dimension with heavenly beings other than God. Second, they also show just how interconnected our earthly life here is with the heavenly realm. What happens here on the earth is not disconnected from the heavenly beings in this realm. Third, they reveal a moral conflict in heaven that is indeed connected to what happens here on earth.

In short, these opening texts, and the ones that follow, are a kind of miniportrayal of the great controversy itself. The texts show one way in which the great controversy, though cosmic in scale, was manifested in the life of one man, Job. And as we will see, the issues involved encompass us all.

The book of Job shows Satan in confrontation with God. What it doesn't show is how it first started. How do the following texts help us get some understanding about the controversy? *Isa. 14:12–14, Ezek. 28:12–16, 1 Tim. 3:6.*

Ellen G. White talked about “the law of love” as the foundation of God’s government. She noted that because God does not want “forced obedience,” He therefore “grants freedom of will” to all His moral creatures. However, “there was one who perverted the freedom that God had granted to His creatures. Sin originated with him who, next to Christ, had been most honored of God and was highest in power and glory among the inhabitants of heaven.”—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 34, 35. She then quoted from the texts above in Isaiah and Ezekiel to describe the fall of Satan.

The crucial concept here is the “law of love” and the reality of free will. The Bible tells us that Satan became self-exalted and proud because of His own splendor and beauty. Why this happened we don’t know; it must be part of what 2 Thessalonians 2:7 calls “the mystery of lawlessness” (*NKJV*), a connection that makes perfect sense when we understand how closely tied God’s law is to the foundation of His government. The point is that by the time Satan is introduced in Job, his fall was past, and the controversy it had started was well underway.

What are some important choices that you are facing right now, and what Bible promises can you claim to ensure that you make the right ones?

Answers at the Cross

The book of Job brings up many important issues. But many of these same issues do not get answered there. We need the rest of the Bible. And even then we still “see through a glass, darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12).

As we saw yesterday, for example, the book of Job says nothing about how Satan’s rebellion started. Also, it says nothing about how Satan is ultimately defeated in the great controversy. In fact, despite his major role in all that follows in the book—after appearing only twice in Job (Job 1:6–12, 2:1–7)—Satan does not come into view again. He simply vanishes, even though the destruction that he caused remains. The rest of the book doesn’t even mention him; instead, almost all that follows in the book is about God, not Satan. And that makes sense because, in the end, the book of Job is about God and what He is really like.

Nevertheless, the Bible doesn’t leave us without answers to the question about the defeat of Satan in the great controversy. And central to that defeat is the death of Jesus on the cross.

How do the following texts help to explain what Jesus did that will lead to the end of the great controversy? *John 12:31, 32; Rev. 12:10–12; Rom. 3:26; Heb. 2:14.*

At the cross, Satan fully was exposed to the universe for what he really is, a murderer. Those who knew Jesus when He reigned in heaven must have been astonished to see Him be so degraded by Satan’s minions. That’s the “judgment” on Satan that Jesus talked about in John 12. At the cross, when the Savior died for “the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2), only then could Heaven proclaim that *salvation has now come*. Here and now the divine promise, made before the world began (2 Tim. 1:9), became a reality. Because of His death on our behalf, Christ could be “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26, *NKJV*). That is, at the cross He refuted the devil’s charges that God could not uphold His law (be just) and still, at the same time, save those who have broken that law (the justifier). After Calvary, Satan’s doom was assured.

How can we learn to rejoice in what Christ has done for us at the cross, even amid the trials we face in the great controversy now?

Further Thought: The concept of a struggle, a controversy, between good and evil is found in many cultures. The idea has persisted throughout the millennia, often expressed through myths. Today, because of the influence of higher criticism and modernist rationalism, many Christians deny the reality of a literal devil and evil angels. These were, the argument goes, just a primitive culture's symbols for human and natural evil. From our perspective as Seventh-day Adventists, it's hard to imagine how anyone makes sense of the Bible at all without belief in the reality of the devil and his angels.

Not all Christians have fallen for the deception that denies the reality of this cosmic conflict between supernatural forces of good and evil. An evangelical scholar named Gregory Boyd, for instance, has written extensively on the reality of the age-long (but not eternal) battle between God and Satan. In the introduction to his book *God at War*, after commenting on a few passages in Daniel 10, Boyd wrote: "The Bible from beginning to end presupposes spiritual beings who exist 'between' humanity and God and whose behavior significantly affects human existence, for better or for worse. Indeed, just such a conception, I argue in this work, lies at the center of the biblical worldview." —Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 11. How correct he is.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What other texts talk about Satan and other demonic powers? What is lost if these are interpreted as merely symbols for the dark side of humanity?
- 2 Niccolò Machiavelli, a Florentine writer of the sixteenth century, said that it was much better for a ruler to be feared by his subjects than to be loved by them. In contrast, Ellen G. White wrote, "Even when it was decided that he could no longer remain in heaven, Infinite Wisdom did not destroy Satan. Since the service of love can alone be acceptable to God, the allegiance of His creatures must rest upon a conviction of His justice and benevolence. The inhabitants of heaven and of other worlds, being unprepared to comprehend the nature or consequences of sin, could not then have seen the justice and mercy of God in the destruction of Satan. Had he been immediately blotted from existence, they would have served God from fear rather than from love."—*The Great Controversy*, pp. 498, 499. Why does God want us to serve Him from love and not fear?

The Conversion of a Convict: Part 2

Alexandru went to Norway, where he began drug dealing. He was nearly killed twice and thought it was Satan's power that made him invincible.

Eventually, he was arrested for drug trafficking and sent back to Romania, where he bought and sold illegal guns. His father-in-law was so angry that he called the police.

Alexandru was imprisoned for two years. Prison officials were desperate to know what to do with this man. In one final attempt to reform him, they put Alexandru in charge of the prison's social activities room. As part of his job, Alexandru had to attend all meetings.

Church services were held there, including Seventh-day Adventist meetings conducted by lay evangelists. Alexandru enjoyed confounding the speakers with difficult questions. He even read the Bible to find questions to baffle these humble men.

But fighting against religion meant he heard a lot of sermons, and asking questions meant he received a lot of answers. Gradually, Alexandru learned about God's love. During one meeting, the lay evangelist asked Alexandru to pray. His mind was in turmoil, and he found it difficult to pray.

After the meeting, the lay evangelist touched Alexandru and said, "You aren't far from the kingdom of God." Deeply moved, Alexandru began studying the Bible earnestly, looking for faith and comfort rather than for questions to confound the speaker. He realized that he now believed in God.

Prisoners and guards noticed the change in Alexandru. He started treating prisoners with kindness and the guards with respect. When his friends mentioned the change, Alexandru told them God made the difference.

Alexandru asked the lay evangelist to notify his family in Bucharest about the change in his life. His wife was astonished. She found it difficult to believe that her infamous husband could change so drastically. During the last months of his imprisonment, Alexandru became a teacher among fellow prisoners.

After Alexandru was released, he and his wife, Florentina, spent hours in serious discussion and Bible study. Step by step, he showed her the beautiful message of God's love and salvation. Little by little, she came to understand the power that had changed her husband from a hardened criminal to a gentle, kind, loving man of God.

The months following Alexandru's release from prison were difficult. His friends from the underground pressured him to re-enter the lucrative world of ill-gotten fortune. But he stood firm.

Later, Alexandru and Florentina were baptized together in the church near the prison where he was converted.

Adapted from a story written by ION BUCIUMAN, from Bucharest, Romania.