

The Controversy Continues



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Sam. 17:43–51, 2 Sam. 11:1–17, 1 Kings 18:21–39, 2 Kings 19:21–34, Esther 3:8–11, Nehemiah 1.*

Memory Text: “And I told them of the hand of my God which had been good upon me, and also of the king’s words that he had spoken to me. So they said, ‘Let us rise up and build.’ Then they set their hands to this good work” (*Nehemiah 2:18, NKJV*).

When we compare the lives of David, Elijah, Hezekiah, Esther, and Nehemiah, similar themes surface: God is able to use “insignificant” people to turn back the tide of evil. Through some of these accounts we can see that, despite tremendous obstacles, we don’t need to buckle under overwhelming evil. Instead, we can stand firm, but only in the power of God, who is faithful to His covenant promises, promises fulfilled for us in Jesus. When God’s people endure in His might, they will see that the forces of evil are not powerful enough to ultimately prevail.

The focus, and the challenge, is for us to rejoice in His deliverance. This does not always make sense in the context of the overwhelming challenges that we sometimes find ourselves in, challenges that are so much bigger than ourselves. Rejoicing in God’s deliverance before deliverance comes is an act of faith and worship, rather than the logical consequence of what is happening around us. On the other hand, because of what Christ has done for us, trusting in God’s faithfulness is, really, the only logical thing we can do.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 30.

David, Goliath, and Bathsheba

Life is complicated, and that's because, as humans, we are complicated. Imagine—creatures made in the image of God, the Creator of the universe, who then corrupt themselves. No wonder that our potential both for good and for evil can reach remarkable levels. And it isn't just that some people attain great levels of “goodness” while others, unfortunately, drop to the extremes of depravity. Instead, both extremes can be manifested in the same person! The great news is that some who, at one time, were at the lowest have, by God's grace, done great things for Him and for humanity. Of course, the opposite can happen, as well: those at the heights can fall to the depths. Satan is real, the great controversy is real, and unless connected to the Lord, even the best of us can fall prey to our foe (*1 Pet. 5:8*).

Read 1 Samuel 17:43–51. What words came out of David's mouth that are so crucial to understanding his victory? In contrast, read 2 Samuel 11:1–17. What stark contrast do we see 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 arrogance. How many women did the man 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 Sam. 17:47*) or “that there is a God in Israel” (*1 Sam. 17:46*)? If there were a time when David needed not only to know that the “battle is the LORD's” but also to fight that battle in God's armor, it wasn't on the war zone in the Valley of Elah but in the recess of his own heart, where in each of us the great controversy rages.

Upon coming to his senses after this terrible fall with Bathsheba, David had a lifetime of grief and guilt. His sorrow led him to write Psalm 51, in which he pleads for a clean heart (*1 Sam. 17:10*) and the restoration of his fellowship with God (*1 Sam. 17: 11, 12*). In the great cosmic struggle, mighty men are just as vulnerable as the person of the lowest rank; yet, God is willing to work with all who truly repent.

Think about yourself, right now—the triumphs, the disappointments, the victories, the failures. How can you apply lessons from either of these stories for whatever situation you face, right now?

To Turn Their Hearts

Elijah the Tishbite has to be one of the most colorful characters in Scripture. We first meet him standing before a startled king and telling him there will be no rain for the next three years (*1 Kings 17:1*). It was not easy either to approach a king or to escape from him, but this hairy man with his leather belt (*2 Kings 1:8*) just slips through the guards, delivers God's message, then runs to the mountains, about 12 kilometers (7 miles) away.

These were sorry times for the northern kingdom of Israel. Most had forsaken the Lord God (*1 Kings 19:10*) and were worshiping fertility gods instead. To say that it would not rain was a direct challenge to Baal, who was thought to bring rain to ensure fertile crops and herds that made farmers wealthy. The prevailing religious rites focused on fertility and income.

For the next three years the fertility gods are impotent. Then Elijah confronts the king again and asks for a showdown between himself and all the prophets of Baal and the goddess Asherah (goddess of fertility)—one man against 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 you falter [limp] between two opinions?" (*1 Kings 18:21, NKJV*). Bulls are chosen and prepared for sacrifice, and the people wait to see which god is powerful enough to answer by fire from heaven. The bull was the most powerful object of the ancient fertility religions. Surely the gods of fertility would show their strength.

Read *1 Kings 18:21–39*. Despite the obvious reality of the great controversy here, what did Elijah really want to see happen in Israel, and why is that so relevant to us today?

First Kings 18:37 says it all. The miracle, impressive enough as it was, wasn't the real issue: the issue was Israel's faithfulness to the covenant. Notice, too, who had turned their hearts. It was the Lord Himself, *even before the miracle itself unfolded*. But God doesn't force hearts to return to Him. He sends His Holy Spirit, and the people, responding to that Spirit, have to first make the choice to turn back to Him; only then, in His strength, can they act upon that choice. It's no different today. It's the power of God alone that sustains the beat of every heart, but He doesn't force even one of those beating hearts to follow Him.

Words of Defiance

Hezekiah was king of Judah when the new superpower, Assyria, conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and scattered its inhabitants across Mesopotamia (*2 Kings 18:9–12*). “That which He could no longer do through them in the land of their fathers He would seek to accomplish by scattering them among the heathen. His plan for the salvation of all who should choose to avail themselves of pardon through the Saviour of the human race must yet be fulfilled; and in the afflictions brought upon Israel, He was preparing the way for His glory to be revealed to the nations of earth.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 292.

A few years later, the Assyrian king Sennacherib turned his attention to Judah and captured all its fortified cities and exacted heavy tribute (*2 Kings 18:13–15*). Although Hezekiah emptied the temple and palace treasuries, the Assyrian king was not satisfied and sent officials to negotiate the surrender of Jerusalem.

The Assyrians then taunted the people, warning that since the gods of the nations around them didn’t save them from Assyria, what made the Jews think that their God would do any better? (*See 2 Kings 18:28–30, 33–35.*)

Hezekiah then did the only thing possible for him—he prayed (*2 Kings 19:15–19*). God had already used Isaiah to encourage Hezekiah (*2 Kings 19:6*), and now God sends the prophet to him again.

Read *2 Kings 19:21–34*, especially verses 21, 22. What is God’s message to His people amid this terrible crisis?

The outcome of all this was seen when the huge Assyrian army camped around the walls of Jerusalem. The frightened inhabitants of the besieged city arose one morning, not to see the final actions of a conquering army about to rip open the defenses of a besieged city but to see soldiers lying scattered on the ground in a deathly stillness as far as the eye could see (*2 Kings 19:35*). The disgraced Assyrian king went home, only to meet his end at the hands of two of his own sons (*2 Kings 19:6, 37*).

How can we learn, even amid the most discouraging and seemingly impossible situations, to trust in the Lord? Why must we always keep the big picture in mind, especially when things don’t always end, at least now, in such a positive manner?

Death Decree

It's so hard for us today (as no doubt it has been for people from various cultures through the centuries) to understand the customs and tradition of the ancient Persian Empire, where the story of Esther unfolds. One thing is certain, though: the Lord had used that empire in the process of fulfilling the covenant promises to the nation of Israel, promises that went back to Abraham (*see Gen. 12:1–3, Isa. 45:1, 2 Chron. 36:23*).

The young Jewish girl Esther found herself as queen. Though her ascent was through a route rather different than, for example, Joseph's in Egypt or Daniel's in Babylon, she was (as Joseph and Daniel were) just where the Lord wanted her to be, and she was used by God in a powerful way, one that illustrates how the great controversy theme can play out in history.

Read Esther 3:8–11. Keeping in mind what God's plans were for the Jewish people, especially in regard to the coming of the Messiah, what consequences would the success of this decree have?

“Little did the king realize the far-reaching results that would have accompanied the complete carrying out of this decree. Satan himself, the hidden instigator of the scheme, was trying to rid the earth of those who preserved the knowledge of the true God.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 600, 601. And from these same people, too, would come the Savior of the world.

How fascinating it is that the issue started over worship (*see Esther 3:5, 8*) and the refusal of a distinct group of people to follow the laws and customs of the ones in power. Though, of course, the context will be different at the end of time, the reality behind it—the great controversy between Christ and Satan—is still the same, and those who seek to be 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 decree will go out, declaring that “as many as [will] not worship the image of the beast [are to] be killed” (*Rev. 13:15*). The one thing we learn from history is that we don't learn from history.

Why is it that we so often tend to be distrustful of those who are different from us? Why *should* the powerful truths of Creation and Redemption, truths that reveal the worth of every human being, show us just how wrong this attitude is? How can we purge our hearts of this terribly faulty tendency?

Nehemiah

The story of Nehemiah also comes at a time when the nation of Israel no longer existed as a political entity but as a remnant scattered across foreign lands. God, though, as always, would be faithful to His covenant promises, even when the people failed to live up to their end of the covenant.

Read Nehemiah 1. What is the background of his prayer? In what ways is it reminiscent of Daniel’s prayer in Daniel 9:4–19? In both cases, what is the issue, and how does this play out in the whole great controversy drama?

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

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

Although Nehemiah did not at first tell the leaders why he had come, there were some people who were not happy and did all they could to prevent any work from being done to improve Jerusalem (*Neh. 2:10, 19, 20*). When work started on repairing the walls (*Nehemiah 3*), these foreign officials were “furious and very indignant” (*Neh. 4:1*), and they mocked the efforts (*Neh. 4:2, 3, NKJV*). When they saw that God’s people were serious about their work (*Neh. 4:6*), they became angry and planned an attack (*Neh. 4:7, 8*).

It would have been so easy to back down; yet, despite all sorts of machinations against their work, they persisted. Trusting in God, Nehemiah saw to the rebuilding of the wall and left the threats of his enemies in the hand of God (*Neh. 6:14, 15*).

We all face obstacles. How do we know when to back down and when to keep going?

Further Thought: No question, the Word of God, as we have studied this week, time and again shows God’s faithfulness to His people. Of course, in many cases, at the time things were happening, that faithfulness wasn’t always obvious or apparent. In the accounts we looked at, we were able to see the beginning to the end; some of the characters involved, such as Uriah the Hittite, didn’t. Today, we are ourselves immersed in the great controversy just as surely as were the people we have studied. And not only them, but there were many others just as real as the ones who made it into the text but who didn’t always live to see things work out so well. That’s why it’s so important for us, as Christians, to remember, especially when times are rough (as they so often can be), Paul’s wonderful words: “Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:16–18, NKJV). Here Paul is seeking to point us to something beyond the daily toils, foibles, and weaknesses of humanity and toward the only hope that makes life here anything more than a cruel farce.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What are some of the other Bible promises that point to our ultimate hope? Gather as many as you can and, either alone or in class, read them aloud and dwell on what they say. What kind of picture do they present to us?
- 2 What made David’s fall so tragic was that he had been so singularly blessed of God. And yet, despite all that he had been given—*he still sinned the way he did*. Instead of focusing just on the negative, think about the one positive aspect of his whole sordid story: God’s grace, even for someone who had fallen from such heights. What does that tell us about just how full and complete the redemption that we have in Jesus really is? How can we have assurance that no matter what we have done, or how far our fall, if we, like David, repent, that forgiveness is ours?

Finding True Gold: Part 1

Amair was born in Manaus—the capital city of Brazil’s Amazon region. Shortly after he was born, his parents divorced and his mother took him to Manacapuru, a town on the banks of the Amazon. Because the family business was in agriculture, Amair’s mother eventually moved upriver to a small village where she bought much land.

Meanwhile, Amair continued growing and was eventually drafted for military service. After serving his 15-month tour, Amair was ready for another kind of adventure—looking for gold! During the 1980s gold fever hit Brazil, and diggers flocked to where gold had been found.

Amair’s brother lived in one of these “golden” areas, so he invited Amair to come stay with him. Unbeknownst to Amair, his brother had become a Seventh-day Adventist. As they worked together, the brother began to share his faith with Amair. Just one week after he arrived, however, the government closed all the places for gold hunters, and Amair lost his job.

Although very disappointed, Amair stayed with his brother for a time and continued to learn. “My brother told me about Jesus, and this gave me happiness. I lost the gold I had been looking for, but I found the truest gold!” Amair’s brother gave him a series of Bible studies, and before long Amair was baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

But then his conscience began to bother him. What about the rest of his family? Who would share this heavenly treasure with them?

He first went to his sister who was living in Manaus. To his surprise and delight, she, too, had become an Adventist. He stayed there for a year, during which time his sister further strengthened his faith.

It was also around this time that Amair met a young woman named Francinette, who wasn’t an Adventist. Not knowing where it might lead, Amair became friends with Francinette, determined that “I will get her for God and for me!” The two remained friends for a long time, and Amair was able to study the Bible with Francinette. “At first she hugged the truth, and then she started to hug me also!” Amair explains with a smile. Eventually, Francinette was baptized, and later on the two were married. The couple moved to a village along the upper stretches of the Amazon, then later, at the invitation of Amair’s mother, moved to the little village where she lived.

The village needed a school teacher, and during that time the government of the Amazon region stated that anyone who completed four years of primary education could qualify to be a teacher in the community. Amair was chosen to be the village’s community teacher.

Amair was a natural teacher, but he wanted to share more than just reading, writing, and arithmetic with the community. He wanted to share “God’s gold” that he had found!

To be continued in next week’s Inside Story.