

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 unremitting 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:

❶ 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?

❷ 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.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Texts:** *Job 1:1–12, Ezekiel 28:12–16, Revelation 12:9*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Identify the great-controversy theme as the underlying template for understanding the book of Job and the whole Bible beyond that.

Feel: Foster a sense of security in God’s protection of His children within the cosmic battle that is raging around him or her.

Do: Resolve to daily choose the victorious Christ as Lord of his or her life as the great controversy plays out in each person’s heart.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Great Controversy

A How does the great-controversy theme appear in the first verses in the book of Job?

B What is Satan’s role in the heavenly council scene? How does God react toward Satan?

II. Feel: Safe in the Battle

A How do you feel about being a part of a cosmic battle? Are we just pawns in a universal chess game? Why, or why not?

B How does your own life reflect the reality of the great controversy?

III. Do: Claim Jesus’ Victory.

A What does Jesus’ death on the cross mean in terms of our own involvement in the great controversy?

B Is there anything we can contribute or do to end the great controversy? Explain.

► **Summary:** The great-controversy theme is introduced from the outset in the book of Job. Satan comes as Job’s accuser. His accusation that Job serves God only because of His blessings is ultimately directed at God. It is the same accusation that started the cosmic battle in heaven, was played out on earth in the fall of humanity, was answered by Christ on the cross, and will finally be resolved when Satan is destroyed.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Job 1:6–10*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The big question of suffering needs to be answered from within the bigger context of the great controversy. The book of Job introduces this theme right from the beginning in the heavenly council scene in which Satan appears before God. While the great controversy is an overarching theological theme that runs throughout the whole Bible, it is important to understand our part within it and how our personal choices make a difference in the cosmic battle.

Just for Teachers: There is danger in approaching the great-controversy theme from a Western mind-set, which is heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, especially by the idea of Platonic dualism. In this worldview, good and evil are contrasted but with the implication that the two represent equal forces. The biblical worldview is theocentric and does not allow for a dualist view on good and evil. God as Creator is at the center of the universe, and Satan as a created being is subject to God's will (*compare with Job 1:12*). Though Satan rebelled against God, it was never a battle of equals.

Opening Discussion: In various cultures we find stories about creation that answer the existential question “Where do we come from?” in a variety of ways. The famous *Enuma Elish* epic is an ancient Babylonian story about creation that stems in its original form from the twelfth century B.C. and was found by Austen Henry Layard in 1849 in the ruins of Nineveh. It describes creation in terms of a *Chaoskampf* (German for “struggle against chaos”) in which Marduk, the supreme Babylonian deity, enters into combat with Tiamat, who represents the mighty and chaotic waters. Marduk eventually subdues and destroys Tiamat in battle and then rips her corpse into two parts, from which he forms the earth and the skies. Throughout the epic story, there are always two sides—order versus chaos, good versus evil (although Marduk himself is quite a barbaric character as it turns out), thus creating a strong dualist perspective on creation, which is based on an epic battle. The Bible, in contrast, presents a very different picture of the origins of our earth and of sin.

How does the creation myth from ancient Babylon compare to the biblical beginnings of our earth and of the problem of sin?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Traditional depictions of Satan in Christian art, which find their origin in medieval times, have fixated on horns, goat hindquarters, tails, chicken legs, and other fear-inducing combinations of human and animal body parts. The pitchfork, presumably the implement that is used in tormenting souls in hell, is also part of the standard equipment in these images of Satan.

Modernist reactions against this imagery have justly criticized their superstitious character but to such an extent that a biblical understanding of Satan as a personal being has been replaced either by a vague notion of an evil power or by a denial of his existence altogether. Within the great-controversy theme, it is as important to understand the personhood of Satan as it is to believe in a personal God. Both superstitious imagery and denial of a devil only contribute to the same result, i.e., ignoring the real presence of the enemy of God as the originator of sin and the accuser of God and of humanity.

Bible Commentary

The Hebrew word for Satan (*sātān*) in the Old Testament is translated as adversary (also a human adversary; *for example, 1 Kings 11:14*), accuser (*Ps. 109:6*), or as the proper name Satan (*Zech. 3:2*). Especially in the book of Job, the word is used to describe the adversary of God, the devil (*Job 1:7–9, 12; 2:1–4, 6, 7; compare also 1 Chron. 21:1*). In all these verses, Satan always appears as a very real person, pointing to his active part in the great controversy.

I. The Origins of Sin (*Review Ezekiel 28:12 with the class.*)

The great controversy has a beginning and an end. It is not an eternal controversy. It begins in heaven before time on earth begins, with a created being who seeks to be like God, a cherub in whose heart iniquity is born (*Ezek. 28:14, 15*) and who seeks to be like God (*Isa. 14:14*). The origin of sin in Satan's heart is a moment of mystery, which cannot be fully explained. Pride, envy, and ambition cause Lucifer to fall. "Sin is an intruder, for whose presence no reason can be given. It is mysterious, unaccountable; to excuse it is to defend it."—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 493.

Consider This: What things in your life do you find difficult to explain? How often do these things have to do with the reality of sin?

II. The Great-Controversy Theme *(Review Job 1:6–12 and Revelation 12:4–9 with the class.)*

The book of Job can be understood only when viewed from the perspective of the great controversy. As Seventh-day Adventist Christians, we observe the ongoing spiritual battle between good and evil in this world and in our own lives. We also have an understanding of the universal battle that is raging over this planet. The great controversy began with Satan's rebellion in the heavenly courts (*Rev. 12:7–9*), which spread first to a third of the angels (*Rev. 12:4*) and then to earth after Satan and his angels had been cast out of heaven and caused the fall of humanity (*Genesis 3*). What is at stake in the great controversy is our understanding of the character of God, which has been distorted through Satan's initial accusation that God is not a God of love but that His creatures serve Him out of fear.

This accusation is reiterated at the beginning of the book of Job when Satan suggests that Job serves God only because of the divine blessings he receives. It is the old accusation: God is a tyrant who manipulates His subjects into submission (*Job 1:9–11*). They serve Him either out of fear or because they want to cash in on the blessings.

This great controversy, which began in heaven, has thus become a spectacle of the universe, taking center stage (*1 Cor. 4:9*). But it is not a show where the spectators are watching without any personal involvement; all of creation is anxiously looking forward to the final resolution of the cosmic battle (*Rom. 8:19–22*). This battle points to the end of the great controversy. Sin and its evil originator will not be part of this universe forever, and God will destroy Satan at the end of the millennium (*Rev. 20:10*). Only then will the great controversy have ended.

Consider This: How does the great controversy play out in your life?

III. Temptation, the Cross, and Beyond *(Review Matthew 4:1, Hebrews 2:14, and Zechariah 3:1 with the class.)*

The beginning of the decisive battle in the great controversy, as it played out here, was Christ's temptation in the wilderness. The fall of humanity in Eden began with the temptation of food. Satan also initiated the temptation of the Son of man with food (*Matt. 4:1–4*). However, Christ's victory over the temptations of the physical (food), mental (power), and spiritual (worship) made it clear to Satan that his battle against heaven was lost from the outset of Christ's ministry on earth. Satan finally had to depart from the Savior's presence at His command (*Matt. 4:10*). This battle decided the issue of sin (*Rom. 5:12–17*).

As a war never consists of only one battle, Satan continued to attack Jesus

throughout His ministry on earth. But the final battle was fought on Calvary, when Christ won our salvation by offering Himself as the sacrifice for our sins (*Heb. 2:14, 1 John 2:2, Rom. 4:25*), sealing the victory with His resurrection.

Beyond Calvary and the garden tomb, He serves as our heavenly High Priest, who intercedes on our behalf before the throne of God and defends us against the accuser (*Zech. 3:1*).

Consider This: How does Christ's death on the cross make a difference in your life?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: While it is important to understand the reality of Satan and sin, it is also important not to dwell on that reality beyond necessity. Our thoughts need to be, foremost, on Christ our Savior.

Thought/Application Questions:

❶ Why is it dangerous to dwell too much on Satan and his activities?

❷ How can you keep a constant image of Christ your Savior in front of your eyes? Be practical in your answer.

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: As Seventh-day Adventists, we have a great resource for the larger context of the great controversy as found in Ellen G. White's book of the same title.

Class/Individual Activities:

❶ As a class, read together the final chapter of *The Great Controversy* by Ellen G. White, and share your thoughts and feelings after reading it.

❷ Plan to read through the whole book as part of your daily devotions in the coming weeks or months.

❸ Share *The Great Controversy* with somebody who has never read it before.