

Good Word Schedule
“Rebellion and Redemption
January, February, March 2016

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Theme: “Crisis in Heaven”

Leading Question: Is the idea of a battle in heaven crucial for our understanding of the Great Controversy between Christ and Satan?

A “cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan” suggests a primal battle in the heavenly realm, a view that comes clear in Scripture only in Revelation 12:7-12: “Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. 8 But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. 9 The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him” (NIV).

Here the rebel leader is called dragon, serpent, devil, and Satan. What is remarkable about these names is their distribution in the Bible. In particular, Revelation 12 is the first passage in Scripture to identify the serpent as Satan. In Genesis 3, where the serpent appears in the garden, he is simply “more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made” (NRSV).

1. Question: If it weren’t for Revelation 12, how could one argue that the serpent is Satan?

Note: In Egypt the serpent could represent both a good deity and an evil one. Even the bronze serpent which Moses raised in the wilderness shows the ambiguity of the symbol (Numbers 21). Hezekiah (d. 687 BCE) ordered the bronze serpent destroyed because the people were worshiping it (2 Kings 18:4).

2. Question: Where in Scripture could one go to confirm the nature of the principles involved in the conflict, i.e. self-sacrificing love vs. selfishness?

Note: Two passages in the prophets have traditionally been used to demonstrate the element of pride in Lucifer’s fall: Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:11-19. The two passages share several characteristics and both have been applied to the “prehistory” of Satan. In addition, both appear in prophetic oracles or “taunt-songs” against heathen kings. Isaiah 14 is directed against the king of Babylon; Ezekiel 28 is directed against the prince or king of Tyre. Modern scholarship has been very much intrigued with the parallels between these passages and similar passages in the literature of other Ancient Near Eastern cultures. Two general conclusions can be drawn from the research done on these passages. First, that the parallels in pagan cultures are striking indeed; second, that the prophets themselves are speaking of the historical enemies of Israel, not of the supernatural realm. The supernatural appears only by way of analogy. In other words, most modern scholars would say that these prophetic oracles would not have been understood by an Old Testament audience as describing Satan. That conclusion seems to be verified by the fact that the first clear application of the Lucifer passage (Isaiah 14:12-15) to Satan, was not made until the time of Tertullian, a church father who died in 240 CE. The history of the interpretation of Ezekiel 28:11-19 is less clear, for the passage has

been applied not only to a supernatural being, but to the first man as well (cf. RSV), a problem of interpretation which stems from ambiguity in the original text. In any event, the application to Satan is not explicit until several centuries into the Christian era.

Regardless of when these passages were linked with Satan/Lucifer historically, however, the thrust of both passages emphasizes the danger of a pride that seeks to be equal with or above God himself.

3. Question: How do the Gospels describe the role of Satan?

Note: In John 12:31, 14:30, and 16:11, Jesus refers to the condemnation of the “ruler of this world.” Luke 10:18 states that Jesus saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning. The wilderness temptations of Christ (Matthew 4, Luke 4) also depict Satan in his role as Christ’s opponent.

4. Question: Can one describe the Great Controversy struggle without a clear satanic figure?

Note: In the Old Testament Satan is only identified as a supernatural opponent of God in three passages, all of which were either written or canonized late: Job 1-2, 1 Chron. 21:1, and Zech 3:1-5. The verse in 1 Chron. 21 is particularly interesting because it attributes to Satan what the earlier parallel in 2 Sam. 24 attributes to God, namely, responsibility for triggering David’s numbering of the people. This “late” appearance of Satan was no doubt linked with the danger that Israel might worship Satan as another deity, an evil one. So, for practical purposes, God assumed full responsibility for evil through much of the Old Testament. That is why Christians often have such difficulties in reading the Old Testament because God is depicted as the active agent in everything that happens.

5. Question: What does the book of Job contribute to the Great Controversy story?

Note: Satan only appears in two of the five scenes in the prologue to Job (Job 1-2). Otherwise, throughout the book only the author and the reader know anything of Satan. Job appears to be oblivious to his existence. In a sense, then, Job faces the same dilemma that moderns do when confronted with a disaster: Did God do it or Satan? For us, the conclusion is rarely clear. Yet the dialogue in Job helps us to see more clearly the issues in the great struggle between good and evil.

Summary: Through this quarter we will be looking for evidence of the great struggle between good and evil in the people, events, and teachings of the Bible. For the most part, we will be doing so in the absence of explicit references to the great opponents in the battle. Once one glimpses the full panorama of the drama, however, one can return to virtually any aspect of Scripture and see how the cosmic battle is played out.

Theme: Crisis in Eden

Leading Question: Who was responsible for the first sin in Eden?

If one is looking for the ultimate culprit, the one responsible for introducing sin into our wretched world, there are four potential candidates: God, the serpent, Eve, Adam.

1. Question: In terms of degree of responsibility for the first sin, how would one rank the four primary actors in Genesis: God, the serpent, Eve, and Adam?

Note: In seeking to rank the key players in terms of their responsibility, one must face a whole series of significant questions about God, Satan, and human beings. In particular, Genesis 3:1-19 describes the roles filled by each of the key players.

2. Question: How are the key principles of love vs. selfishness played out in this passage of Scripture? Let's ask this question of each of the players:

God.

Serpent.

Eve.

Adam.

3. Question: What picture of God is suggested by his appearance in the narrative? God is active in 1:8-19.

Note: Christian interpretation has taken Genesis 3:15 as central to the story of salvation, showing how the “seed” would eventually wound the head of the serpent. A gentle God who comes walking in the garden looking for his wayward children eventually will bring the sharpest focus on the issues in the Great Controversy. God will give everything, including life itself. Satan would take everything, including the life of the Creator in order to establish his principle of selfishness in the universe. In the kingdom, every person will be able to trace out the conflict in the light of all the evidence.

Theme: Global Rebellion and the Patriarchs

Leading Question: How do patriarchal narratives illustrate the opposing principles involved in the cosmic conflict?

In a massive swoop through history, the official study guide takes us from Genesis 4 to 50, from the story of Cain and Abel through the flood, to Abraham on Mt. Moriah, the conflicts between Jacob and Esau, then on to the story of Joseph and his brothers.

1. Question: Even though no Satanic figure is mentioned, how do each of these narratives illustrate the issues underlying the cosmic conflict? Note how even the “good” people are tainted by the shadow side of the conflict.

Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1-16)

Note: The biblical narrative does not state that Cain brought the wrong sacrifice, only that he had the wrong attitude. The cosmic conflict does not focus so much on good or evil deeds, but on good or evil attitudes, attitudes that show care for others or antipathy toward others.

Flood (Gen 6-9)

Note: Critics of biblical faith have sometimes been quite harsh in their judgment against the God who unleashed the flood upon his creation. But a close reading of the text is revealing: “the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time” (6:5). And “the earth was corrupt in God’s sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways” (NIV). No one was safe in such a world, so God decided to start over.

Abraham on Mt. Moriah (Gen 22)

Note: The story of Abraham is full of contrasts. His own family worshiped other gods (Josh 24:2); with no apparent qualms of conscience he took a second wife; he told lies about his first wife Sarah; and without hesitation he headed up Mt. Moriah to sacrifice Isaac. The command to sacrifice Isaac has led to significant hand-wringing among Christians: How could the God who sent his son command such a horrific deed. But the backdrop of the cosmic conflict helps us to make sense of the narrative. Clearly child sacrifice was considered “normal” by the time of Abraham. In Genesis 18 he confronted God over the issue of destroying the innocent with the wicked. “Far be it from you!” he exclaimed. “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen. 18:25). But in Genesis 22 he heads to the mountain to sacrifice Isaac without even so much as a whimper. That illustrates not only how far Satan had gone in distorting the truth about God, but also how

God was willing to take the first step to transform Abraham's distorted thinking. At the last minute, God intervened to tell Abraham that he could not sacrifice his son (as everyone else was doing). God himself would provide the sacrifice. Abraham discovered the ram caught in the thicket which he offered in place of Isaac (Gen. 22:13). In the future God himself would be the sacrifice in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jacob and Esau (Gen 27-33)

Note: The lives of Jacob and Esau are a wild mix of good and evil. While Jacob was the "chosen" one, Esau was a man of honest conviction and a certain generosity. By contrast, Jacob was a cheating, conniving man who was constantly turning circumstances to his own benefit. The narrative makes clear, however, what is good and what is evil. It is not difficult to surmise where the hand of a demonic figure was at work.

Joseph (Gen 37-50)

Note: While Joseph is (rightly) celebrated as a person of integrity, especially in connection with Potiphar and his wife, he also displayed remarkable arrogance. In other words, he was not unlike Lucifer in certain aspects of his life! But the Lord was at work and transformed him in the end into a generous and kind benefactor for the very family members who sought to do him evil.

Theme: Conflict and Crisis: The Judges

Leading Question: In the era of the judges, God’s people were often far from him, but is it possible to detect good and evil in these sometimes violent leaders of Israel?

No satanic figure appears at all in the books of Judges, Ruth, and 1 Samuel, but by their works you shall know them! Clearly, his influence permeates the lives of even good people.

1. Question: Can we clearly identify good and evil in the lives of the judges?

Note: One of the troubling features involved in the study of the Old Testament is the presence of customs that would horrify us, but which are well accepted by the people at the time. If one evaluates people on the basis of whether or not they are following their conscience to the best of their ability, even horrific deeds – commanding the death of men, women, and children (1 Sam. 15:3) – can be seen as good. The issue of culture must be taken into account in the lives of these flesh and blood characters.

Deborah (Judges 4): In some modern Christian circles, what Deborah did in leading her people would have been strictly forbidden. This prohibition is found in 1 Tim. 2:12: “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent” (NIV). But in Judges 4 we read: “At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. 5 She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment. 6 She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, “The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you, ‘Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. 7 I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand’” (NIV). Here is a woman actually commanding a man to act in the name of the Lord. Why should the New Testament reverse a position that is so clearly stated in the English-language Bible? And where does all this fit in the great struggle between good and evil?

Gideon (Judges 6): The roller coaster: Where does a man like Gideon fit into the great conflict between good and evil. Note the wild swings of the pendulum.

Weakness: Needing a sign (offering consumed)

Strength: Builds an altar

Weakness: Tears down the altar to Baal at night

Strength: Summons the men of Israel

Weakness: Twice demands a sign

Strength: Allows his army to be reduced to 300

Strength: Pursues Zebah and Zalmunna

Weakness: Avenges those who oppose him

Weakness: Makes an ephod which becomes a snare to Israel

Samson (Judges 13-16): After a miraculous birth, Samson's life was filled with profligacy, on the one hand, and acts of revenge on the other. How can he be listed among the saints in Hebrews 11:32? In what way does he contribute to the resolution of the cosmic conflict?

Ruth: As someone has said, there are no villains in Ruth. Some interesting customs appear there, including the near-kinsman/redeemer and the law of the husband's brother (levirate marriage law). But how does such a beautiful story belong in the same discussion with Gideon and Samson?

Samuel (1 Sam. 1 - 19): Just as Eli could not cope with his boys, so Samuel was unable to point his boys in the right direction. But he was the one to anoint both Saul and David as kings over Judah. He was the last of the judges. After him came the kings, good, bad, and indifferent – but mostly bad.

Theme: The Controversy Continues

Leading Question: What kind of people does the Lord use to do his work in the great conflict between good and evil?

In this week's lesson, the official study guide surveys a remarkably diverse cluster of people who appear in Scripture as illustrations of God's people on stage, so to speak: David, with a great victory over Goliath, but a great defeat in connection with Bathsheba; Elijah, with a passionate bid to win back the hearts of the people on Carmel; Hezekiah, with bold defiance against Sennacherib; Esther, who rescued her people from certain destruction; and Nehemiah, who came back to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of a city that had been rubble for some 140 years. He made it happen in just 52 days.

These, now, are the characters with all their strengths and weaknesses. It would be profitable to compare each with reference to these traits:

Integrity – Fearlessness – Gentleness – Consistency – Courage – Tenacity

David – first with Goliath, then with Bathsheba

Elijah – before, during, and after Mt. Carmel

Esther – under Mordecai, in the king's house

Hezekiah – against the Assyrians, in dialogue with the Babylonians

Questions:

Is there any common thread in the experiences of these people?

Is it always clear in the text whether or not they were being faithful?

Are there any examples of faithfulness against the norms of their day that might be seen differently against the norms of our day when we judge everything by the life and teachings of Jesus?

Theme: Victory in the Wilderness

Leading Question: Why are the accounts of Jesus' temptations not in the same order in Matthew and Luke?

Our leading question is one that the official study guide doesn't even mention, namely, that Matthew and Luke do not shape their stories of the temptation in the same way. Matthew's final temptation is to accept Satan's offer of the whole world to Jesus if he would fall down and worship him, whereas Luke finishes with the temptation to jump from the temple pinnacle.

Question: Is this question significant enough to raise? Or significant enough to avoid?

Note: In 1983, Pacific Press published a little book by George Rice, *Luke, a Plagiarist?* Most likely it never would have appeared if it hadn't been for the furor over Ellen White's use of sources. In it, he develops an argument for what he calls the "Lucan model" of authorship, over against the "prophetic model." Significantly for 1983, Pacific Press, the publisher of the book makes this disclaimer in the book's front matter:

"The purpose of this book is to investigate a concept of inspiration not generally held by most Seventh-day Adventists. Although the publisher believes that this book will stimulate a constructive study of this subject, this book does not represent an official pronouncement of the Seventh-day Adventist Church nor does it necessarily reflect the editorial opinion of the Pacific Press Publishing Association." – p. (4)

Rice argues that the order of the temptations is crucial to each author's purpose: Matthew finishes with the world-wide offer because his purpose focuses on the establishment of the Kingdom of God; Luke puts the temple challenge last because his focus is on the release from Satan's power and dominion (p. 36).

Question: What difference do Rice's suggestions make for the study, understanding, and application of the three temptations?

Question: Looked at from the perspective of the conflict between God and Satan, what do each of the three temptations tell us, regardless of their particular order in Matthew 4 and Luke 4?

Stones into bread

Casting oneself down from the temple

Worshipping Satan in order to receive back the dominion over the world

Theme: Jesus' Teachings and the Great Controversy**Leading Question:** How does knowing that Satan is after us affect us in our daily living?

The official study guide for this week's lesson focuses on issues of daily living as illustrated by selected texts from Matthew's Gospel. Two of them are admonitions: "Come unto me and rest (11:29) and "Do not judge" (7:1-5); two of them are stories: building on the rock (7:21-27) and the sower (13:3-23); one is an affirmation: "I am with you always" (28:20).

Of these five passages, the "evil one" is explicitly mentioned only in one; in the parable of the sower the evil one snatches away the seed that falls on the path (13:19). In all the other passages, the Gospel writer no doubt assumes that the reader knows about Satan, but does not mention him. That represents quite a switch from the Old Testament perspective as seen in Job, where only the author and the reader "know" about Satan. Job and his friends operate with the apparent assumption that everything comes from God.

Question: Does knowing about Satan – the New Testament perspective and ours – help us determine the respective roles of the demonic and the providential in any given situation?

Note: Two C. S. Lewis quotes and one from George MacDonald can help us in this connection:

First, Lewis on the apparent godforsakenness of our world, a quotation from *Screwtape Letters*:

He wants them to learn to walk and must therefore take away His hand; and if only the will to walk is really there He is pleased even with their stumbles. Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys. – C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, 39

Second, Lewis on the seeming absence of God in our most difficult situations:

It would be even worse to think of those who get what they pray for as a sort of court favorites, people who have influence with the throne. The refused prayer of Christ in Gethsemane is answer enough to that. And I dare not leave out the hard saying which I once heard from an experienced Christian: "I have seen many striking answers to prayer and more than one that I thought miraculous. But they usually come at the beginning: before conversion, or soon after it. As the Christian life proceeds, they tend to be rarer. The refusals, too, are not only more frequent; they become more unmistakable, more emphatic."

Does God then forsake just those who serve Him best? Well, He who served Him best of all said, near His tortured death, “Why hast thou forsaken me?” When God becomes man, that Man, of all others, is least comforted by God, at His greatest need. There is a mystery here which, even if I had the power, I might not have the courage to explore. Meanwhile, little people like you and me, if our prayers are sometimes granted, beyond all hope and probability, had better not draw hasty conclusions to our own advantage. If we were stronger, we might be less tenderly treated. If we were braver, we might be sent, with far less help, to defend far more desperate posts in the great battle. – C. S. Lewis, “The Efficacy of Prayer,” *The World’s Last Night and Other Essays*, 10-11

Third, MacDonald on God’s use of bad things, even our sins:

It is so true, as the Book says, that all things work together for our good, even our sins and vices. He takes our sins on himself, and while he drives them out of us with a whip of scorpions, he will yet make them work his good ends. He defeats our sins, makes them prisoners, forces them into the service of good, and chains them like galley slaves to the rowing benches of the gospel ship. He makes them work toward salvation for us. – George MacDonald, “The Bloodhound,” *The Curate’s Awakening* (Bethany, 1985), 200

On that same theme Ellen White’s comment is perceptive:

There is not a blessing which God bestows upon man, nor a trial which he permits to befall him, but Satan both can and will seize upon it to tempt, to harass and destroy the soul, if we give him the least advantage. – *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 421 (1890)

Questions: How do each of the passages selected for this week’s lesson help us live faithfully in light of the cosmic conflict? Which works best: admonition, story, or affirmation?

Admonitions:

Rest: “Come unto me and rest (11:29)

Judging: “Do not judge” (7:1-5)

Stories:

The Rock: “The wise man built his house on the rock” (7:21-27)

The Sower: “The evil one comes...” (13:3-23) cf. “An enemy hath done this” (13:24-30)

Affirmation:

Christ’s presence: “I am with you always” (28:20)

Theme: Comrades in Arms

Leading Question: Why do the Gospels present the disciples as such flawed people?

The official study guide selects several passages from the Gospels to show the contrast between Jesus and the flawed humanity of the disciples. What do the following passages reveal about the nature of the conflict between good and evil insofar as it relates to ordinary people?

Peter and the great catch of fish (Luke 5:1-11)

Note: Peter's experience shows that even sensing God's goodness can terrorize God's children. One doesn't need a Mt. Sinai experience in order to learn the "fear" of the Lord.

Call of the twelve (Mark 3:13-19)

Note: The official study guide notes that Christ wanted the disciples to "be with him" before they went out on their mission trips. How can modern Christians find the equivalent experience of "being with him" since Jesus is no longer with us in the flesh?

Storm at sea (Mark 4:35-40)

Note: Jesus clearly could control the forces of nature. Is there any clue in Scripture as to why he sometimes intervenes and sometimes does not?

Greatest (Matthew 20:20-28)

Note: Given Jesus' clear teaching on serving others, how can we explain (and counteract) the powerful impulse toward a coercive hierarchy in the life of the church today?

Slow learners (Luke 24:19-35)

Note: If the disciples could not grasp the truth from Jesus himself, is it any wonder that in his absence, we too struggle to hear God's truth? That's a call to patience. Note this striking quotation from Ellen White, originally in the context of health reform:

"We must go no faster than we can take those with us whose consciences and intellects are convinced of the truths we advocate. We must meet the people where they are. Some of us have been many years in arriving at our present position in health reform. It is slow work to obtain a reform in diet. We have powerful appetites to meet; for the world is given to gluttony. If we should allow the people as much time as we have required to come up to the present advanced state in reform, we would be very patient with them, and allow them to advance [21] step by step, as we have done, until their feet are firmly established upon the health reform platform. But we should be very cautious not to advance too fast, lest we be obliged to retrace our steps. In reforms we would better come one step short of the mark than to go one step beyond it. And if there is error at all, let it be on the side next to the people. – 3T 20-21 (1872)

Theme: The Great Controversy and the Early Church

Leading Question: What evidence is there in the book of Acts that the disciples were still slow to accept the truths that Jesus had tried to teach them during his ministry?

The official study guide selects five narratives from the early chapters in Acts to show the status of the battle between good and evil. And it is very much a mixed bag. Two narratives show how the disciples still could not grasp the fullness of Jesus' message: Will you restore the kingdom? (Acts 1) and accepting non Jews (Acts 10); one, Pentecost, comes close to the ideal (Acts 2), and two show boldness in witness: blind man healed (Acts 4) and Steven's speech (Acts 7).

But hidden in the narrative that climaxes in the stoning of Steven, are two potentially troubling aspects not directly discussed in the official study guide. One was the quarreling between the Hellenistic and Hebraic Jews about the unfair treatment of the Hellenistic widows, a quick retreat from the harmony of Acts 2. The other is the strident preaching of Stephen that resulted in his stoning, though in some respects his hard words may be similar to Jesus' pronouncement of woes on the Pharisees in Matthew 23.

Let's look at all these in the order in which they appear in Acts:

When will you restore the kingdom? (Acts 1:6). According Jesus' Olivet discourse in Matthew 24-25, the disciples had already asked about the timing of the second coming and the end of the age (Matt. 24:3). But now they seemed to be expecting Jesus to destroy Roman rule. Or is that reading too much into their question of 1:6? In John 18:36 Jesus had declared, "My kingdom is not of this world." Did they not yet believe it?

Blessed harmony of Pentecost (Acts 2). The official study guide draws attention to the remarkable contrast between Pentecost and the Tower of Babel experience in Genesis 11:1-9. In Genesis God used language to divide the rebels; by contrast, in Acts 2, God used the gift of tongues to unite people who otherwise could not have understood each other. Is there any other passage in the New Testament that so clearly illustrates the good work of the Spirit of God? This is good evidence that the truth of Jesus' mission had gotten through!

Brave testimony to the temple rulers (Acts 4). Because of the astonishing healing of a man born blind, Peter and John were arrested and brought before the Jewish leaders. The apostles stood their ground and said that they would not keep quiet as the Jewish leaders demanded. The Jewish leaders "were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus" (4:13, NIV). Acts 4 also talks about the willingness of the believers to share their goods with each other, Barnabas being a primary example (4:32-37).

Quarreling over unfair distribution to the widows who were Hellenistic Jews (Acts 6). The quarreling of Acts 6 is a wonderful example of how quickly harmony in the church can be shattered. There appears to be very little time elapsing between the joy of Acts 2 and the pain of Acts 6.

Stoning of Stephen (Acts 7). For gentle Christians, Stephen's brave witness is somewhat tarnished by the stridency of his tone – no wonder the Jewish leaders stoned him! How does that compare with the teachings and example of Jesus? Are strong words sometimes necessary. What about Jesus strong words against the Pharisees in Matthew 23? Ellen White's comment about Jesus' methods is worth noting: "He fearlessly denounced hypocrisy, unbelief, and iniquity, but tears were in His voice as He uttered His scathing rebukes" (*The Desire of Ages*, 354). Can one hear tears in the voice of Stephen?

Slow to learn (Acts 10). The Gospels record several powerful stories in which Jesus speaks and acts positively toward non-Jews: The Canaanite woman in the vicinity of Tyre and Sidon (Matthew 15:21-28), the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42), and the story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). But in Acts 10, Peter requires a three-fold vision before he reluctantly went to visit Cornelius, and with six witnesses, no less! And these witnesses were "astonished" (10:45, NIV) when they saw the Holy Spirit being poured out on these Gentiles. This may have been six to eight years after the resurrection. Human beings can be such slow learners!

Theme: Paul and the Rebellion

Leading Question: Where in the writings of Paul does one find the best description of the conflict between good and evil?

The official study for this week lists five significant theological passages from the writings of the Paul, but the role of Satan is explicit in only one of them (Eph. 6:11-17). Indeed, that entire passage reeks of warfare against “the devil’s schemes” (6:11, NIV). In some other passages Paul mentions Satan as in 2 Cor. 11:14 (“Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light”) and in 2 Thess. 2:9 (“The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works”). But there is little conceptual grappling with the forces of evil or their titular head, Satan.

Is it possible that Paul – who, of all the New Testament writers, is the one most likely to favor something close to predestination (cf. Romans 8 and 9) – simply is not keen on emphasizing a conflict in which the human will plays a prominent role? Is it possible that those of a predestinarian bent, those most impressed by the sovereignty of God, are least likely to highlight the role of Satan? Adventists, of course, might recognize the paradoxical relationship between grace and free will, but would affirm both. By contrast, Augustine (d. 430), known as the “Doctor of Grace,” can be quoted as denying free will in the interest of grace: “In trying to solve this question I made strenuous efforts on behalf of the preservation of the free choice of the human will, but the grace of God defeated me.” – from Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (Oxford, 1986), 117, citing *Retractationes* ii.1 (addressed to Simplicianus of Milan).

What Paul does emphasize (also Augustine) is the all-encompassing role of Christ as our sacrifice and redeemer. We can insert his crucial insights into a “a great controversy” framework, but the nuts and bolts of that conflict will have to come from elsewhere.

These are the contexts which included in this whirlwind tour of “Paul and the Rebellion.”

Romans 5:12-21: Christ the second Adam.

1 Cor. 3:12-17: God’s people as God’s temple.

1 Cor. 12:14-26: The Body of Christ.

1 Cor. 15:12-56: Christ overcomes death, the last enemy.

Eph. 6:11-17: God’s armor against the enemy.

Question: Can emphasizing God’s sovereignty make the “Great Conflict” virtually redundant?

Theme: Peter on the Great Controversy

Leading Question: If a person chooses to treat others graciously and unselfishly, what does that tell us about that person's understanding of the Great Controversy?

As in Paul – reflect on the discussion from last week – Peter knows well the distinction between good and evil. And he is not afraid to identify the Devil as “a roaring lion” (1 Pet 5:8). But otherwise he does not provide us with a conceptual framework for understanding the great controversy.

These are the passages that the official study guide identifies as important:

1 Peter 2: 9-10 (NIV): “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

Note: Peter knows full well what it means to be holy and chosen by God. Thus he comes down solidly on the side of the good angels. But he does not present to us a conceptual framework within which to place his call to holiness.

1 Peter 4:1-9 (NIV): “Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. 2 As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. 3 For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. 4 They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you. 5 But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. 6 For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to human standards in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.

7 The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. 8 Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. 9 Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.”

Note: Verse 8, with its call to “love each other deeply,” shows us that Peter fully grasps the essential value at the heart of the great controversy: Self-sacrificing love over against self-exalting selfishness. So the practical counsel from Peter is right on. But he gives it to us without a well-developed “great controversy” setting.

2 Peter 1:16-21 (NIV): “For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. 17 He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” 18 We ourselves

heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.

19 We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. 20 Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. 21 For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

Note: Again Peter gives us exceptional practical counsel that reflects a clear understanding of the difference between good and evil. But if all we had were Peter's two epistles, we would know little of the theoretical underpinnings behind the great conflict between good and evil.

2 Peter 3:3-7 (NIV): "Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. 4 They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." 5 But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water. 6 By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. 7 By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly."

Note: Peter clearly understands the idea of a final judgment which will make clear those who have chosen good over evil. But again that is simply a practical perspective.

2 Peter 3:18-14 (NIV): "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. 9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.

11 Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives 12 as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. 13 But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

14 So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him."

Note: Peter clearly sees the end of the great conflict with good ruling over evil. But he only implies what the issues are. He does not make them explicit.

Final Comment: The author of this study guide is an avid supporter of the "great controversy" theme. But not everyone will be equally enthusiastic about it. Neither Paul nor Peter are to be despised just because they don't always reflect my theology. This Ellen White quotation is crucial for all those who seek God and cherish his word, for it makes the point I just expressed above, that we will not all see things in exactly the same way. But a quotation that comes with prophetic authority is one we should all take very seriously.

“In our schools the work of teaching the Scriptures to the youth is not to be left wholly with one teacher for a long series of years. The Bible teacher may be well able to present the truth, and yet it is not the best experience for the students that their study of the word of God should be directed by one man only, term after term and year after year. Different teachers should have a part in the work, even though they may not all have so full an understanding of the Scriptures. If several in our larger schools unite in the work of teaching the Scriptures, the students may thus have the benefit of the talents of several.

Why do we need a Matthew, a Mark, a Luke, a John, a Paul, and all the writers who have borne testimony in regard to the life and ministry of the Saviour? Why could not one of the disciples have written a complete record and thus have given us a connected account of Christ’s earthly life? Why does one writer bring in points that another does not mention? Why, if these points are essential, did not all these writers mention them? It is because the minds of men differ. Not all comprehend things in exactly the same way. Certain Scripture truths appeal much more strongly to the minds of some than of others.

The same principle applies to speakers. One dwells at considerable length on points that others would pass by quickly or not mention at all. The whole truth is presented more clearly by several than by one. The Gospels differ, but the records of all blend in one harmonious whole.

So today the Lord does not impress all minds in the [432/433] same way. Often through unusual experiences, under special circumstances, He gives to some Bible students views of truth that others do not grasp. It is possible for the most learned teacher to fall far short of teaching all that should be taught.

It would greatly benefit our schools if regular meetings were held frequently in which all the teachers could unite in the study of the word of God. They should search the Scriptures as did the noble Bereans. They should subordinate all preconceived opinions, and taking the Bible as their lesson book, comparing scripture with scripture, they should learn what to teach their students, and how to train them for acceptable service.

The teacher’s success will depend largely upon the spirit which is brought into the work. A profession of faith does not make men Christians; but if teachers will open their hearts to the study of the word, they will be able to aid their students to a clearer understanding. Let not the spirit of controversy come in, but let each seek earnestly for the light and knowledge that he needs. – *Counsels to Parents and Teachers*, 432-433 (1913)

Theme: The Church Militant

Leading Question: How does one know which of the seven churches of Revelation offers the closest match to our own experience?

For this week’s lesson on the seven churches in Revelation, the official study guide states that “we shall study them from the perspective of the original recipients.” Such an approach may leave some readers unsatisfied since Adventists traditionally have used the historicist approach for both Daniel and Revelation. Thus they plot all events on a historical line to the end of time.

That approach is rooted in the prophetic chapters of Daniel where each line of prophecy extends from Daniel’s day to the end of time. In 2 the great stone strikes the image and grows until it fills the whole world; in 7, either the son of man (7:27) or the saints (7:13-14) receive the kingdom; in 8 and 9 the sanctuary is restored; in 10-12 Michael stands up and delivers God’s people. In short, in Daniel, the historicist pattern is unmistakable.

Not so in the book of Revelation. Only when one imports the historicist method from Daniel – and there are many echoes from Daniel in the book of Revelation – can one “find” historicism in Revelation. Thus, having imbibed historicism from Daniel, pure historicists interpret the seven churches as seven successive eras of history, with Laodicea being the last. But the Book of Revelation itself doesn’t even hint at such an approach.

Similarly, the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25 most naturally refers to the second coming of Christ. But Adventist historicists have also seen that passage as a road map of the great disappointment because Ellen White adopts that approach in *The Great Controversy*. Remarkably, the writings of Ellen White also preserve the contextual understanding of the parable of the 10 virgins as applying to the expectation of the 2nd Advent itself. Ironically, the comments on the parable in the *Seventh-day Adventist Commentary* don’t say a peep about the historicist application.

Here are the two passages from Ellen White which should allow us to adopt a both/and approach to biblical passages that have been interpreted more than one way:

Historicist Interpretation: “The coming of Christ as our high priest to the most holy place, for the cleansing of the sanctuary, brought to view in Dan. 8:14; the coming of the Son of man to the Ancient of days, as presented in Dan. 7:13; and the coming of the Lord to His temple, foretold by Malachi, are descriptions of the same event; and this is also represented by the coming of the bridegroom to the marriage, described by Christ in the parable of the ten virgins of Matthew 25” (GC 426).

“The proclamation, ‘Behold the Bridegroom cometh,’ in the summer of 1844, led thousands to expect the immediate advent of the Lord. At the appointed time the Bridegroom came, not to the earth, as the people expected, but to the Ancient of days in heaven, to the marriage, the reception of the kingdom. “They that were ready went in with Him to the marriage, and the door was shut.” They were not to be present in person at the marriage; for it takes place in heaven, while they are upon the earth. The followers of Christ are to ‘wait for their Lord, when

He will return *from* the wedding.’ [Luke 12:36] But they are to understand His work, and to follow Him by faith as He goes in before God. It is in this sense that they are said to go in to the marriage.” (GC 427)

Contextual Interpretation: “As Christ sat looking upon the party that waited for the bridegroom, He told His disciples the story of the ten virgins, by their experience illustrating the experience of the church that shall live just before His second coming.” – *Christ’s Object Lessons*, 406

“The coming of the bridegroom was at midnight – the darkest hour. So the coming of the Christ will take place in the darkest period of this earth’s history.” Ibid. 414

In short, the historicist interpretation may be helpful devotionally, but our study guide correctly focuses on the original recipients of the messages, seven very real churches in Asia minor. But regardless of the method of interpretation, one can find helpful personal applications.

These then are the messages to the seven churches. All references are from the NIV:

Ephesus (2:1-7): “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. 2 I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. 3 You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. 5 Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. 6 But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

7 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

Smyrna (2:8-11): “To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. 9 I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.

11 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.”

Pergamum (2:12-17): “To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. 13 I know where you live – where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your

city – where Satan lives.

Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. 15 Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

17 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.”

Thyatira (2:18-29): “To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. 19 I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

20 Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. 21 I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. 22 So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. 23 I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.

24 Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan’s so-called deep secrets, ‘I will not impose any other burden on you, 25 except to hold on to what you have until I come.’”

26 To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations – 27 that one ‘will rule them with an iron scepter and will dash them to pieces like pottery’ – just as I have received authority from my Father. 28 I will also give that one the morning star. 29 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Sardis (3:1-6): “To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 2 Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. 3 Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

4 Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. 5 The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. 6 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Philadelphia (3:7-13): “To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. 8 I know your deeds. See, I have

placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 9 I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars – I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. 10 Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.

11 I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. 12 The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name. 13 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Laodicea (3:14-22): “To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. 15 I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! 16 So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth. 17 You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. 18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

19 Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. 20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

21 To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

A “diversity” reminder. Another quotation from Ellen White is worth noting, one that again gives us “permission” to differ in our understanding of Scripture: The landmarks in Adventism are simple and secure. Our only problem comes when we try to make everything a landmark.

This quotation consists of the first two paragraphs of the chapter, “In Contact with Others” in the book *The Ministry of Healing*:

“Every association of life calls for the exercise of self-control, forbearance, and sympathy. We differ so widely in disposition, habits, education, that our ways of looking at things vary. We judge differently. Our understanding of truth, our ideas in regard to the conduct of life, are not in all respects the same. There are no two whose experience is alike in every particular. The trials of one are not the trials of another. The duties that one finds light are to another most difficult and perplexing.

So frail, so ignorant, so liable to misconception is human nature, that each should be careful in the estimate he places upon another. We little know the bearing of our acts upon the experience of others. What we do or say may seem to us of little moment, when, could our eyes be opened, we should see that upon it depended the most important results for good or for evil.” – *The Ministry of Healing*, 483

Theme: Redemption

Leading Question: As the book of Revelation brings us to the end of the Great Controversy, what allows the believer to stand in eager expectation of the return rather than in fear and trembling?

The official study guide focuses more on the final judgment in Revelation 20 than on the restoration of all things good in Revelation 21-22. But the final message is clear: forever and ever God’s kingdom will be secure from evil.

The binding of Satan (Rev. 20:1-3). What does the text of Revelation tell us about the end of evil and the Evil One? By the end of chapter 20, Satan and all the enemies of God’s goodness are gone. But for free-will theology, an important point lurks in 20:4, a time for asking questions.

Crucial to the Adventist understanding of the Great Controversy – embedded as it is in a free-will theology – is that God will allow us to ask our questions. As the NKJV translates 20:4 “Judgment was given to them.” That means a time to ask our questions and affirm the goodness and justice of God in his management of the universe. In the Arminian/Wesleyan/free will approach to theology, God must win the heart, not just win the battle! God cannot coerce.

By contrast, Calvinists, emphasizing God’s sovereignty, see no need for God to win anyone. He is the master of history and determines human destinies with no input from anyone. A little poem by the Calvinist Douglas Wilson, puts that grim perspective clearly in view. I suspect that even Wilson winces a bit at this perspective as the poem has disappeared from the second edition of his book:

Eternity and time confound
The buckling minds of mortal men,
Who rail at God as though He were
A lesser god, or one of *them*.
They hate discriminating love,
And drag it into human courts
To try to crucify the cross.
“Will you try *me*? our Lord retorts.
Though pearls may fall beneath the swine
They do not therefore cease to be,
And trampling won’t deface the shine
Decreed before eternity.
So hold your peace, rebellious pot,
The Lord is God – and you are not.

Douglas Wilson, *Easy Chairs, Hard Words* (San Diego: Oakcross Publications, 1991), 189 [omitted from second edition].

The earth made new (Rev. 21- 22). The last two chapters of our Bible speak of a glorious time of renewal when there is scarcely a trace of the old battle. Good news! The classic Adventist description of the end of the controversy is found in the final paragraphs of Ellen White's, *The Great Controversy*. It is a buoyant way to conclude this set of lessons.

“There the redeemed shall know, even as also they are known. The loves and sympathies which God Himself has planted in the soul shall there find truest and sweetest exercise. The pure communion with holy beings, the harmonious social life with the blessed angels and with the faithful ones of all ages who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb, the sacred ties that bind together ‘the whole family in heaven and earth’ (Ephesians 3:15) – these help to constitute the happiness of the redeemed.

There, immortal minds will contemplate with never-failing delight the wonders of creative power, the mysteries of redeeming love. There will be no cruel, deceiving foe to tempt to forgetfulness of God. Every faculty will be developed, every capacity increased. The acquirement of knowledge will not weary the mind or exhaust the energies. There the grandest enterprises may be carried forward, the loftiest aspirations reached, the highest ambitions realized; and still there will arise new heights to surmount, new wonders to admire, new truths to comprehend, fresh objects to call forth the powers of mind and soul and body.

All the treasures of the universe will be open to the study of God's redeemed. Unfettered by mortality, they wing their tireless flight to worlds afar – worlds that thrilled with sorrow at the spectacle of human woe and rang with songs of gladness at the tidings of a ransomed soul. With unutterable delight the children of earth enter into the joy and the wisdom of unfallen beings. They share the treasures of knowledge and understanding gained through ages upon ages in contemplation of God's handiwork. With undimmed vision they gaze upon the glory of creation – suns and stars and systems, all in their appointed order circling the throne of Deity. Upon all things, from the least to the greatest, the Creator's name is written, and in all are the riches of His power displayed.

And the years of eternity, as they roll, will bring richer and still more glorious revelations of God and of Christ. As knowledge is progressive, so will love, reverence, and happiness increase. The more men learn of God, the greater will be their admiration of His character. As Jesus opens before them the riches of redemption and the amazing achievements in the great controversy with Satan, the hearts of the ransomed thrill with more fervent devotion, and with more rapturous joy they sweep the harps of gold; and ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands of voices unite to swell the mighty chorus of praise.

‘And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.’ Revelation 5:13.

The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation. From Him who created all, flow life and light and gladness, throughout the realms of illimitable space. From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love.”