

***Good Word Schedule***  
**“Preparation for the End Time”**  
**April, May, June 2018**

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**Theme: The Cosmic Controversy**

**Leading Question:** Is the idea of the “Cosmic Controversy” or the “Great Controversy” unique to Adventism?

The theme for this quarter, “Preparation for the End Time,” has deep roots in Adventism. But in contrast with much Adventist practice, the official study guide includes these powerful words in the Introduction, words that we must constantly keep before us as proceed with our study this quarter: “Not only do we not know when the end – climaxing with the second coming of Jesus – will come, we don’t need to know. We need to know only that it will come, and that when it does, we must be prepared.”

Keeping those words in mind will allow us, even force us, to take a fresh look at many of the topics included in our study for this quarter.

But now let us focus on our leading question: Do Adventists have a special claim on the concept of a “Cosmic Conflict” or a “Great Controversy”?

Both John Milton and more recently, C. S. Lewis, have built their faith edifices around the idea of a cosmic conflict. One of my favorite quotes relating to that conflict comes in Lewis’ description of the role of “prayer” in the conflict. His essay, “The Efficacy of Prayer,” in *The World’s Last Night and Other Essays*, concludes with these sobering lines (pp. 10-11):

Prayer is not a machine. It is not magic. It is not advice offered to God. Our act, when we pray, must not, any more than all our other acts, be separated from the continuous act of God Himself, in which alone all finite causes operate.

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.

**Question:** What biblical passages are central to an understanding of the conflict?

The story in Genesis 3 of sin's origin on earth, and the narrative of its climax on the cross in Revelation 12 are central to the idea. A host of other references are closely linked to the narrative, including the tantalizing passages in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 which hint at the origin of sin in the heart of Lucifer before sin made its appearance in Eden. But for practical purposes, our discussion here will focus on Genesis and Revelation.

**Question:** Why is the story of the Conflict not laid out with greater clarity in Scripture?

Another quotation from Lewis is worth noting here, a quote from the anguished narrative of his tussle to regain faith after his wife died, *A Grief Observed* (1961):

My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of His presence? The Incarnation is the supreme example; it leaves all previous ideas of the Messiah in ruins. – *Grief*, IV.15

Sin has so thoroughly clouded our ability to understand truth and its application to our lives, that it often unfolds gradually and in ways that may puzzle or even startle later generations. The history of Satan is one of best illustrations of that gradual unfolding. Christians are so accustomed to seeing the serpent as an explicit reference to Satan, that it can come as a shock to realize that Revelation 12:9 is the first passage in Scripture to make that identification explicit.

Along the way, then, we will also be puzzled by God's command to Moses to exalt a bronze serpent in the wilderness as a focal point of "salvation" from the bite of the poisonous serpents in the wilderness (Num. 21:6-9). And those who are familiar with the writings of Ellen White could be further surprised by the bluntness of the biblical record: "then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died" (Num. 21:6, NRSV). Ellen White takes some of the sting out of the story by re-interpreting the narrative to say that the Lord "permitted" the serpents to sting them: "As the protecting hand of God was removed from Israel, great numbers of the people were attacked by these venomous creatures" (PP 429).

Ironically, it is the very history of Satan in the Old Testament that would grant Ellen White the privilege of making that kind of re-interpretation, though she was most likely unaware of how it happened. The story of David's census, for which he was severely punished, is told twice in Scripture, in 2 Samuel 24 and in 1 Chronicles 21. The earlier account in Samuel is almost incomprehensible to us, declaring that it was the Lord who "incited David against them." Then God punished him for it! By contrast, Chronicles states that it was Satan who did it.

The short explanation of that contrast lies in the historical setting of ancient Israel who was always tempted to worship other gods. So Israel's God took steps to prevent them from worshiping Satan as an evil deity. The nuanced version of that narrative in Scripture is remarkable, for the very first command in the decalogue does not prohibit other nations from worshiping their gods. It only speaks to Israel: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3, NRSV). When the status of Israel's God, Yahweh, became secure – towards the end of the

Old Testament – then the very last book of the Old Testament could clearly say that it was Satan, not Yahweh, who made David number his people.

What is so surprising for us is that Satan, as a supernatural being opposed to God, is only explicitly mentioned in three Old Testament books/contexts: Job 1 and 2, Zechariah 3, and 1 Chronicles 21, as noted above. All three of these books were either written or canonized toward the end of the Old Testament period. Both Job and Chronicles are included in the third section of the Hebrew Bible (Writings). Zechariah is in the second (Prophets) but is a post-exilic book, written after the destruction of Jerusalem. Most scholars say that Job is probably the most ancient book in the Old Testament reflecting the semi-nomadic era of Abraham. Its Hebrew is challenging with some 100 words appearing only in Job and nowhere else. Most likely an inspired writer added the “Great Controversy” setting in the prologue (Job 1 and 2). There is no trace of Satan in the remaining 40 chapters. Thus only the author and the reader know anything about Satan. When Job himself needs to vent his emotions, he directs his wrath toward God, a challenging suggestion for us when we struggle with undeserved suffering.

What this all means for the Adventist understanding of the Great Controversy is that several passages that figure prominently in our understanding of the Great Controversy, are interpreted that way much later than the original authors. In the history of interpretation, it is several centuries into the Christian era before Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 are interpreted in terms of Satan.

And today, Evangelicals still quarrel with our Adventist understanding of Azazel in Leviticus 16 as referring to Satan. But confirmation of the Adventist perspective is reflected in this intriguing quotation from T. H. Gaster in the article on Azazel in the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (1962), who offers this interpretation of Azazel as one of three possibilities:

It is the name of a demon inhabiting the desert. This view is adopted by most modern commentators, and is anticipated in *Enoch*, where Azazel appears as a ringleader of the rebel angels, who seduces mankind. Against it, however, stands the fact (strangely overlooked) that in no other culture are scapegoats offered to demons. Indeed, in view of the very fact that sin and impurity are unloaded upon them, they can be (and are) used only as vehicles of elimination, but not of propitiation.

The Adventist interpretation sees Azazel representing Satan, the one who bears responsibility for sin. Could he thus be seen as a means of elimination, but not of propitiation?

**Question:** How does Revelation 12 highlight the role of the cross in the great controversy?

Adventists are so accustomed to think of the war in heaven as a primeval event, that to think of the war continuing in heaven until the cross can be a startling insight. Yet that is the obvious reading of Revelation 12. Here are the crucial lines:

7 And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, 8 but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9 The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were

thrown down with him.

10 Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming,

“Now have come the salvation and the power  
and the kingdom of our God  
and the authority of his Messiah,  
for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down,  
who accuses them day and night before our God.

11 But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb  
and by the word of their testimony,  
for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.

12 Rejoice then, you heavens  
and those who dwell in them!  
But woe to the earth and the sea,  
for the devil has come down to you  
with great wrath,  
because he knows that his time is short!”

Clearly the great divide took place at the cross. The war is not yet over, but the decisive battle has been won. Highlighting the cross in that way links up with Ellen White’s striking statement: “At the cross of Calvary, love and selfishness stood face to face. Here was their crowning manifestation.” – *Desire of Ages* (1898), 57.

What follows is a chapter from *Who’s Afraid of the Old Testament God*, “Whatever happened to Satan in the Old Testament?” It provides additional material on the role of Satan in the Old Testament:

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Chapter 3, “Whatever happened to Satan in the Old Testament?”  
Alden Thompson, *Who’s Afraid of the Old Testament God?* (1988, 1989, 2000, 2003, 2011)  
Available from [www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com) and [www.adventistbookcenter.com](http://www.adventistbookcenter.com)

## CHAPTER 3

### **Whatever happened to Satan in the Old Testament?**

*Now the serpent was more subtle than any other  
wild creature that the Lord God had made. –  
Genesis 3:1*

If the suggestion developed in the last chapter is correct, it would be quite appropriate to

say that God created a good world, but let it go wild. If he is a freedom-loving God, his creatures must have the right to rebel, in spite of all the tragic consequences that can come from such a course. But then God seeks to win his creatures back. He meets them where they are and seeks to draw them step by step along a better path.

All that sounds fine – until I actually turn to the Old Testament. There I find descriptions of God’s activity that make me very uncomfortable. At first sight, some of the incidents seem to suggest that he is not a freedom-loving God after all, but is quite arbitrary. Let’s note some of the more disturbing problems.

In the story of the Exodus from Egypt, the biblical account says on more than one occasion that “God hardened Pharaoh’s heart” (Ex. 7:3; 9:12). Now that sounds like something much more appropriate to Satan than to a good God. Why would God want to harden a man’s heart, setting him on a self-destructive course which would also bring others to ruin? Taken at face value, the words present a real problem for those of us who claim that God is good.

A story that is perhaps even more curious is found in 2 Samuel 24. It deals with a census ordered by King David. Although the biblical story does not offer an explanation, David was apparently keen to find out just how large an army he could field, an act that would have been seen in that era as stemming from wrongful pride. Even his crusty general Joab knew such a course to be wrong (2 Sam. 24:3), but David went ahead. According to the story in 2 Samuel, even though David belatedly confessed his sin, the Lord announced to David through the prophet Gad, that punishment was on the way, though David would have the “privilege” of choosing the mode of punishment. All that seems a bit strange to us, but the most difficult part of the whole story is the introduction which explains God’s role in the incident: “Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them saying ‘Go, number Israel and Judah’” (2 Sam. 24: 1). Then as noted above, the Lord punished David for his act (2 Sam. 24:10 ff). Now how could a good God actually incite a wrong act which that same God would then proceed to punish? From our point of view the story is inexplicable.

Moving to a slightly different type of incident, we could list numerous examples of God’s stepping in and directly administering punishment. We might be more comfortable with a view which says that God *allows* the sinner to receive the punishment which his sin merits. Why does God have to wade in with his own scorpions and serpents? Does not sin bring its own punishment? One example should be sufficient to illustrate the point. Numbers 21 describes one of Israel’s repeated rebellions. Rather than providing a picture of a God who reluctantly allows his people to flaunt his protecting care, to be pummeled about by the harsh realities of life, the biblical writer gives us a quick glimpse of the anger of the Lord: “Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people so that many people of Israel died” (Num. 21:6). This type of description has led some to conclude that the Old Testament God is indeed arbitrary: “If you don’t do it my way, I’ll send out my serpents to bite you.” Some Christians react against such a picture, while others actually use these very passages to shore up an authoritarian view of religious life: “Don’t ask any questions. Do it because say so.”

Now in each of the examples noted above, if I simply take the words at face value without placing the incidents in a larger framework, the resultant view of the Old Testament God can be a harsh one indeed. That is why it is so important to develop the overall framework within which we can interpret the Old Testament. In the last chapter I suggested that the great degeneracy evident in the Old Testament is to be understood against the background of a great cosmic

struggle between good and evil. That the universe may be more secure in the end, God provides the freedom necessary for evil to develop. The process is slow and dangerous when viewed from a human point of view and it seems as though God is taking great risks with his reputation. But the end result is the vindication of God against all the accusations of his Adversary.

Yet even if one accepts that type of framework within which one may interpret the Old Testament, one of the great surprises in the actual reading of Scripture is the very poor publicity which the Adversary receives in the Old Testament. In fact, if I were in his place I think I would complain rather vigorously. There are hints of his activities in such places as Genesis 3 and of course in the book of Job, but if you really make a careful search of the Old Testament, specific references to the demonic, to Satan, or the Devil are very sparse indeed. As a matter of fact, a concordance will reveal only three passages in all of the Old Testament where a specific demonic being named Satan appears: Job 1-2, 1 Chron. 21:1, and Zech. 3:1-2. Traditional Christian theology assigns a fairly significant role to Satan, and he certainly is quite prominent in the New Testament. Why then does he have such a low profile in the Old Testament?

Before exploring the possible reasons for Satan's infrequent appearance in the Old Testament, we need to take a closer look at the Old Testament word for "Satan." The English word "Satan" is in fact a straight transliteration of the Hebrew word *Satan*. And though the word normally suggests to us a supreme evil personality, Satan with a capital "S," the earlier Old Testament usage applies the term to any "adversary" or "accuser." For example, when Solomon turned away from God, "The Lord raised up an *adversary (satan)* against Solomon, Hadad the Edomite" (I Kings 11:14). The RSV has translated the Hebrew word *satan* as "adversary" and it clearly refers to a human being. Likewise, when the Philistines went up to battle against Israel, a number of the leaders were reluctant to have David join them, even though he had been living in their midst: "Lest in the battle he become an *adversary (satan)* to us" (1 Sam. 29:4). So David could turn into a *satan*! But perhaps the most fascinating use of the word is in the story of Balaam. There the angel of the Lord opposed Balaam and "took his stand in the way as his *adversary (satan)*" (Num. 22:22). Thus the biblical writers could apply the word *satan* to Hadad, an enemy of Solomon, to David, and to the angel of the Lord. But in each of these incidents the word simply means something like "adversary" as most of our English translations indicate.

In the later use of the term, biblical writers begin to think of a supreme Adversary, *the Satan* with a capital "S," representing the great opponent of God. But many Bible scholars hold that even in the three Old Testament passages where the Hebrew word *satan* clearly refers to an individual superhuman adversary, the English word "satan" should still be written with a lower case "s." The seeds of the New Testament understanding of Satan are clearly there, but Satan's supreme status as chief of all demons is not yet really clear.

Now when we cite evidence suggesting that the Old Testament understanding of Satan developed gradually, we need to remind ourselves that God has not given all truths to all men at all times. If Old Testament people have fallen far from God, then we must not expect everyone everywhere to have the same understanding. The Old Testament was written over a long period of time and this is reflected in the way that the various writers describe God's activities. A single event may be described by two later writers, both quite removed in time from the original event. The emphasis and interpretation of each writer will reflect his own special circumstances and, at times, two accounts may even appear to be contradictory. But if we make the necessary adjustments for time and place, we can discover the underlying harmony that is important for

understanding God's activities. Perhaps the best examples of differing emphasis and interpretation is provided in the comparison between Samuel-Kings and Chronicles in the Old Testament, and in the comparison of the gospels in the New.

Now as far as Satan's role in the Old Testament is concerned, both Jewish and Christian writers have assumed the presence of Satan in many biblical incidents even though the original account without Satan and the later interpretation with Satan can be very useful. One writer has simply chosen to define the role of the demonic, while the other has elected to focus on the omnipotence of God.

If, however, the demonic is indeed a force to be reckoned with in life, the existence of the Devil cannot depend on whether or not a given writer mentions him. Either Satan has been at work in the history of this world or he has not. Without question, traditional Christian doctrine assigns a definite role to Satan. Hence the pertinence of the question: Whatever has happened to Satan in the Old Testament?

### DANGERS OF EMPHASIZING THE DEMONIC

As a first step in answering that question, perhaps we could ask about the possible dangers that might arise in a primitive society from an emphasis on the demonic. By looking at various primitive cultures where the demonic plays a much more visible role, we can discover some interesting implications. Pagan religions are often dominated by fear. By definition, demons or evil deities cannot be trusted, so primitive people took all manner of superstitious precautions to protect themselves from the demonic. In ancient Israel, however, the use of magic and consultation with 'wizards that peep and mutter' was strictly forbidden (cf. Lev. 19:31; Isa. 8:19). Israel's God could be trusted. Such trust, however, was not possible when the authority of demons held sway.

From a more strictly theological point of view, an active awareness of the demonic runs the risk of developing into polytheism or dualism. Ancient Israel emerged from a thoroughly polytheistic society in Egypt. Had God chosen to highlight the role of a satanic figure, the condition of the people could have made dualism, if not polytheism, a likely threat to the purity of the faith that God was seeking to establish. Thus the wording of the first command at Sinai may be more significant than a superficial reading might suggest: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3). Note that in this instance, God does not expressly deny the existence of other gods. He simply asks that Israel worship him exclusively. Other passages in Scripture greatly ridicule the worship of other gods and the worship of idols (cf. Deut. 29:16-17; Is. 44:9-20), but the evidence from the Old Testament is that the people in general had a difficult time focusing their attention on the one true God. Even when they were right with him, the threat of neighboring deities was a real one. Thus, for practical reasons, God treated Israel very much as a wise father might treat a young son if the two of them were to set out on a jaunt through the woods. To warn a small lad of wildcats, bears, and snakes, could be quite unsettling. So the father simply says: "Trust me. Whatever happens, I will take care of it."

That is very much what I see happening at Sinai and in much of the Old Testament. The first great step that God asked Israel to take was: "Worship the one God who brought you out of Egypt." The knowledge about Satan would have to come later when their faith was more stable. And this late appearance of Satan seems to be precisely what we find in the Old Testament, for as



we look at the three Old Testament passages where a specific *Satan* is mentioned as God's opponent, in each case, the passage appears in a book that was either written or canonized late in the Old Testament period. But the question of early and late and the matter of canonization requires at least a brief explanation before we proceed.

## CAN WE DATE OLD TESTAMENT MATERIAL?

Any attempt actually to date Old Testament material is fraught with difficulty, for the Old Testament books themselves give very little direct information about the time of writing. The only clear-cut dating material comes from the prophetic books where specific prophetic oracles are often assigned to the reign of a specific king (e.g. Jer. 25:1; 26:1; 27:1). But a great many of the Old Testament books remain anonymous. In some cases earlier stories are retold, as when the book of Chronicles retells some of the stories from Samuel and Kings. But how do we know that Chronicles is retelling the stories of Kings and not the other way around? That is particularly a problem for the uninitiated reader who happens to be reading in Kings and finds references to the "Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah" (cf. 1 Kings 14:30). In this particular instance a more careful reading of the books of Kings and Chronicles clearly suggests that Kings comes before Chronicles and that the "chronicles" mentioned in Kings are official court records, not our book of Chronicles in the Old Testament.

One of the more helpful ways at arriving at early and late for all of the biblical books, at least in a very general way, is to look at the canon of Scripture as held by the ancient Hebrews. Where the indications of the time of writing are slim, the place of a book within the canon can be enlightening. That term "canon," however, also requires at least a brief explanation.

In its early usage, the word "canon" simply means "rule" or "norm." With reference to Scripture it means those books accepted by a particular community as authoritative, the books providing the norm or rule by which the community chooses to live. Other books may be held to be just as "true" and in some cases just as "inspired," but for reasons that are seldom known to us, the community did not accept them as canonical, that is, as permanently authoritative. Presumably there are sayings of Isaiah and Jeremiah, of Paul and of Jesus which did not find their way into our Scriptures, but are just as true and just as "inspired" as the ones which did, or at least the early recipients of those words would have held them just as true and just as "inspired."

Protestant Christians generally accept the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments as their canon. Roman Catholics accept certain of the so-called Apocryphal books in addition. The Jewish believers accept only the thirty-nine Old Testament books (twenty-four by their reckoning), and even within those books the Jewish community sees different levels of authority, depending on the section in which a book appears. And that is the part that is of particular interest to us.

A New Testament reference actually identifies the three major sections of the Hebrew canon: "the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms" (Luke 24:44). The process by which God worked among his people to designate particular books as "Scripture" is one that will always remain mysterious. We must simply admit that the Spirit led the community of God's people to recognize certain books as containing the word of the Lord in a way that would be enduring for all time. The Old Testament canon was certainly complete by New Testament times

as Luke 24:44 suggests. Furthermore, scholars would generally assign the following, dates for each of the three sections: 400 BC for the Law (Genesis through Deuteronomy); 200 BC for the second section, the Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea-Malachi); and 100 BC for the third section, the Writings (designated in Luke by its largest book, Psalms: Ruth, Ezra to Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Daniel, Chronicles). These dates are really just educated guesses; the canonization of the various sections may have been complete earlier or later, but for our purposes it is significant to note that canonization took place in three steps and that it took place over a period of time.

It is also important to remember that canonization is not particularly concerned with authorship. A book may have been written long before it was canonized or a book may tell a story that happened many centuries before the book was finally accepted as canonical. At least the process of canonization gives us some guide as to when the community was willing to accept a particular book as authoritative for all time.

Now let us return to the three Old Testament passages which mention Satan and look at them in the light of the statement made earlier, namely, that the books in which these passages occur were either written or were canonized towards the end of the Old Testament period. A comment on each passage might prove helpful.

## SATAN AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

*1 Chronicles 21:1* Of the three passages, this one is in some ways the most important and interesting because it is part of the retelling of the story of David's census mentioned at the beginning of this chapter (2 Samuel 24). Not only is Chronicles in the third section of the Hebrew canon, but it is also the very last book in the Hebrew Bible. Hence it contains the very last interpretation of Old Testament material. And, in fact, the book of Chronicles is just that, a final interpretation of the period of the monarchy. In the course of retelling that story, the biblical writer makes a startling modification to the story of David's census. The earlier account said that the LORD (Yahweh) was responsible for the census, but in Chronicles, "*Satan* stood up against Israel, and incited David to number Israel" (1 Chron. 21:1). The inspired writer now sees that an Adversary was responsible for the evil deed, and not the Lord, a remarkable difference indeed.

Now if we are too concerned about harmonizing biblical accounts, we may miss the significance of this passage, so let us pause just a moment to consider the implications. There is a sense in which both passages can be seen to be true. If God is truly all-powerful, then he is ultimately responsible for everything that happens. Both the author of Chronicles and the author of Samuel would most assuredly agree with that. But whereas the earlier author was still operating with the view that the Lord is the *active cause* of everything, the later writer sees evil events happening with the *permission* of the Lord. Perhaps an illustration can clarify the point: instead of taking whip in hand to punish the children for munching green apples, the Lord allows them to receive the stomach ache which is the appropriate reward for eating forbidden fruit. And there is quite a difference in those two approaches.

I am much more comfortable with the way that 1 Chronicles tells the story, but I must also recognize the implications of the story as told in 2 Samuel, namely, that the Lord was willing to assume full responsibility for evil. Perhaps the reason was, as suggested above, his pastoral concern for his people. And if the Lord was willing thus to portray himself as

responsible for evil, then suddenly we have a handle for understanding a whole group of problem passages in the Old Testament, including the hardening of Pharaoh's heart and the sending of the serpents. There is a sense in which the Lord is still responsible for all that happens; but now I have a biblical basis for saying that he *permits* instead of *causes* evil, even in those passages where he is actual described as causing it.

Now some may be uncomfortable with this approach and might suggest that I am putting my own interpretation on the words instead of taking the Bible "just as it reads." I will admit that I have put an interpretation on the biblical account. Upon reflection, we would probably all admit that every single word in Scripture, in fact, every word everywhere, must be interpreted. No word or sentence has meaning by itself. It is always read by a person with a particular background and infused with particular meaning. That is why "father" can mean something quite different to me from what it does to someone else. When I hear the word "father." I think of my Dad and have a very positive picture. But someone with a cruel father would see things quite differently.

So we must interpret Scripture. We have no choice. That is why the Christian admonition to approach Scripture always in the attitude of prayer is so very important. If I do not seek the Lord and ask him to guide me into the knowledge of himself, I will certainly misinterpret and misapply Scripture. When I come to interpret his Word I must use all the mental machinery that I can muster, but whether or not I use that machinery in the proper manner depends on my vision of God. It is not a question of faith or reason, but rather, whether or not I will choose to use my reason faithfully.

Now my reason tells me that there is a difference between 2 Samuel 24:1 and 1 Chronicles 21:1. The more I have reflected on that difference, the more significant it has become. As a matter of fact, you could perhaps "blame" this entire book on those two verses. At least it would be safe to say that these two verses provided the catalyst for the method of interpretation which I am suggesting in the book. That was why I said earlier that, of the three passages which mention Satan in the Old Testament, 1 Chronicles 21:1 is the most significant one. That was a personal testimony.

*Zechariah 3:1-2* This passage requires only a short comment. Although the book of Zechariah is in the second section of the Hebrew canon, the book itself provides the information which allows us to say that it was one of the very last of the prophetic books. In fact, it was written well after the close of the Babylonian exile. In this passage, Satan appears as the adversary of Joshua. The setting is evidently a judgment scene; the Lord rebukes the Adversary, restoring Joshua to right standing. Hence the passage provides a helpful illumination of the cosmic antagonism: the Lord is for us; the Adversary is against us. In the end, good triumphs as the Lord rebukes the Adversary and restores his people.

*Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7* These verses in Job are certainly the best known of all the Old Testament passages which mention Satan. Scripture nowhere tells us who wrote the book of Job or when it was written. More traditional Christian writers have often tended to adopt the dominant Jewish tradition about the book, namely, that Moses was its author. Actually, Jewish speculation about the book was wide-ranging. When the rabbis discussed the question of when Job lived, they propounded suggestions that ranged all the way from the time of the great patriarch Abraham to the post-exilic Persian period and the time of Esther. In fact, the rabbi who suggested that Job was a contemporary of Esther used a clever piece of logic which is likely to

elude anyone who has not been immersed in rabbinic logic: Job lived in the time of Ahasuerus because the book of Job says that Job's daughters were the fairest in all the land. When was the time of fair women? The time of Esther. Therefore, Job lived at the time of Esther. [See the Babylonian Talmud: *Baba Bathra 15b*, English translation by the Soncino Press London.] Perhaps it is not difficult to see why the tradition of Mosaic authorship seemed more convincing.

Regardless of who wrote the book, it appears in the third section of the Hebrew canon, suggesting that it was not accepted as authoritative until very late in the biblical period. The story itself bears every mark of being a most ancient one and perhaps it was the very mention of Satan that proved a hindrance to its general acceptance since Satan is not explicitly mentioned in the Law, and only once in a late prophetic book. Yet you will notice that Satan actually makes a very limited appearance even in the book of Job, a point which merits further comment.

One of the fascinating aspects of the book of Job lies in the fact that Job himself, his wife, and his friends, apparently know nothing of the satanic attack; at least there is no evidence for such knowledge in the book itself. Furthermore, when Job begins to realize the seriousness of his problem and when his friends attempt to needle him into repenting of his sins, sins which were non-existent from Job's point of view, Job argues with God, not with Satan. He clearly sees God as the author of his difficulties (cf. Job 16:7-17; 19:6-13). Even in one of the passages where Satan does appear, God says to Satan: "You moved me against him, to destroy him without cause" (Job 2:3). So in the book of Job, the figure of Satan makes only a very cautious appearance. God is still responsible for what happens, and all the primary actors in the drama see God as all in all.

In looking a little more closely at the two passages where Satan does appear in Job, we must recognize how important the structure of the book is for its interpretation. The book of Job consists of a prose prologue (1-2) and a prose epilogue (42:7-17). In between is the poetic body of the book, consisting of a lively dialogue between Job and "friends" (3-31), a monologue by the young man Elihu (32-37), followed by the divine response out of the whirlwind (38-42:1-6). In the prologue there are five separate scenes, three depicting Job's situation on earth, interspersed with the two heavenly scenes where Satan and God discuss Job's integrity. Taking away scenes two and four, the ones where Satan appears, leaves the world scene as Job saw it. Only the addition of these two scenes gives the setting of the cosmic struggle between God and his Adversary, between good and evil. As is the case with every disaster scene in the earth, the causes and responsibility for the events are terribly difficult to untangle. We sometimes suffer because we deserve to, but often the troubles seem so undeserved. The book of Job attempts to provide some framework for handling the problem: a cosmic struggle in which the very character of God is under attack. We have already seen some evidence thus far in our discussion as to just how significant the cosmic struggle is for the method that I am suggesting one should use in approaching the Old Testament. The forces of evil must have their day in court if God is going to win in the end.

Before moving on to further implications of the disappearance of Satan from the Old Testament, I would like to comment just briefly on those passages in the Old Testament which do not explicitly mention Satan, but which have been interpreted within the Christian community as applying to Satan: Genesis 3; Isaiah 14:12-15; and Ezekiel 28:11-19.

In Genesis 3, an unbiased reader will strongly suspect the animosity which exists between the serpent and God, pointing in the direction of a full-fledged Adversary relationship. But the

serpent figure is, in fact, an ambiguous one in the Old Testament. The serpent attack recorded in Numbers 21 is successfully warded off by Moses' raising a brass serpent, the later symbol of the opponent of God! There is even evidence to suggest that the people began to worship this serpent; thus it had to be destroyed (2 Kings 18:4).

The first clear identification of the serpent as Satan in Judeo-Christian writings does not come until Revelation 12:9. There there is no doubt: the Dragon, the Serpent, the Devil, and Satan are all one and the same. Considering the strong role that the serpent plays in Christian interpretation, it is perhaps surprising that his identity is never really clarified in the Old Testament. An explanation might lie in the fact that in Egypt, the serpent is both a symbol of a good deity and of an evil one. The biblical writers thus could not really develop the serpent motif without raising the specter of dualism or something worse.

Turning to Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:11-19, we find two passages which share several similar characteristics. Both passages have been applied to the "prehistory" of Satan and 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 AD 240.

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 was apparently not made until several centuries into the Christian era.

The question naturally arises: is it legitimate to apply these passages to Satan when such was apparently not the intent of the original author? That is a difficult question to answer, for within the Christian tradition, an interpretation has often been drawn from a biblical passage which was clearly not the one intended by the original writer. A second meaning may have been implied but that is quite a different matter from saying that such a meaning was the one intended by the original writer. Nevertheless, as long as we do not use a second application to obscure our study and understanding of the author's original intent, such second meanings can be useful. Certainly if we choose to stand within traditional Christianity we must be willing to admit that such secondary meanings have been very popular within the Christian community, and to a certain extent, we must be resigned to such an approach even if we aren't very happy with it. But the problem has been that such traditional interpretations have often obscured or even replaced the original meaning. I actually suspect that the vehemence with which traditional Christian positions are sometimes attacked is a direct result of Christian reluctance to admit the first meaning of the text. Thus, one of my concerns as I write this book, is to show that it is possible to stand within a conservative Christian tradition and still be able to read the Old Testament for the purpose of discovering its most likely original meaning.

But after admitting that the original intent of Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:11-19 was probably not to outline the pre-history of Satan, I still suspect that Satan is lurking somewhere in those passages. Connected with that suspicion is the probability that the prophets have apparently borrowed from cultures other than their own. We must make it clear, however, that prophets are free to “borrow” whatever they choose and from wherever they might wish. It is the final product that is the result of the divine inspiration, not the bits and pieces. Yet even if that is the case, what right do we have to suspect that pagan religions had bits and pieces of a sort that could be used? That is where I think we ought to take the events of Genesis 3-11 more seriously. Whatever mankind may have originally known about the cosmic struggle would have certainly made its way into pagan cultures and would have come in a distorted fashion to that line of patriarchs which retained the slender thread of the knowledge of the true God. Suddenly, here in prophetic literature, bits and pieces of that cosmic struggle begin to appear, but in a way which does not threaten God’s first concern, the development of faith in him as the one true God. Certainly Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:11-19 do define the *issues* of the cosmic struggle, namely, that selfishness and pride are the supreme distortion of the will of God and lead inevitably towards full opposition to God himself. The personality of the Adversary, however, is certainly well hidden behind the mask of his quite human proteges. Perhaps, then, the primary criticism of the Christian usage of these passages stems from the impression that has often been given, that these passages must have clearly outlined in the Old Testament audience the knowledge of God's Adversary. Within the context of the approach of this book, I would say that such a knowledge was still too hot for the Old Testament to handle; it had to come later.

One further passage should perhaps be added here as touching on the demonic in the Old Testament, and that is Leviticus 16, the chapter that describes the ritual of the scapegoat (indicated in the RSV as the goat “for Azazel” – Hebrew, *azazel*). Christian interpretation of this passage has often seen both goats, the one that was sacrificed and the one that was led into the wilderness, as types of Christ. But another interpretation of this passage with ancient as well as modern support suggests that the goat led out for or to Azazel represents a demonic element. This interpretation seems to find fairly early confirmation from the intertestamental book known as 1 Enoch, for when the unknown author of 1 Enoch wished to select a name for the leader of the fallen angelic spirits, he chose the name Azazel. Now if the demonic element was indeed part of the original ritual, then perhaps here is an additional glimpse of the cosmic struggle between God and his Adversary; one goat was for the Lord and one for Azazel.

But after demonstrating just how little explicit information the Old Testament contains about Satan, we must turn our attention to the way in which the Old Testament writers handled the problem of evil in Satan’s absence. Although they would often simply attribute violent acts directly to the Lord, they sometimes softened this picture by depicting other supernatural beings as the active agents in destroying and punishing. These beings belonged to a “heavenly court” which was under the direction of God. The role of this “heavenly court” is something that we must look at more closely.

If Satan’s role is not dearly defined in the Old Testament, then we might also expect to find a description of the celestial economy which differs in some respects from the traditional Christian view which builds more directly on New Testament data. Revelation 12:9 provides the essentials of the New Testament view and the one which generally has been adopted in Christian interpretation: Michael and his angels versus the Dragon and his angels. The cosmic struggle is

full-blown. In the Old Testament, however, everything must take place under the direction of the one God. Thus the “dragon and his angels” must be seen to be under divine management, though we can still catch glimpses of their misbehavior.

Perhaps an illustration from the human realm would be helpful in describing, the difference between the Old Testament view and the New Testament one. In the New Testament, the forces of good seem almost to represent a government in exile; the rulership of this world has been usurped by the dragon, the ruler of this age. The tension is deep, leading to open war, as is evident in the battleground description of Revelation 12. In the Old Testament, however, the situation would perhaps be similar to the tension between two political parties, one in power, the other in opposition. Both still operate within the one government, but the opposition at times betrays signs of disloyalty to government policy. We shall return later to the Old Testament view, but first we need to look at another aspect of the Old Testament which is quite pertinent to our discussion, an aspect which is both intriguing and difficult, the names for God.

## OLD TESTAMENT NAMES FOR GOD

As Christians, we are quite accustomed to the view that there is only one God. In my own case, for instance, I was so steeped in this belief, that it was surprising and difficult for me to recognize that for much of the Old Testament period, such a view was not so self-evident. I was aware that Israel’s pagan neighbors worshiped other gods, but I had assumed that Israel clearly saw the absoluteness of the one God. To be sure, the Old Testament tells how Israel often turned aside to worship Baal; even with my “high-road” orientation, I recognized that. But what about Israel when she was right with God? How strong were her convictions then? That was the part that I found surprising. For even when Israel was right with God, she apparently tended to look at her God as the God of Israel, but perhaps not really the God of her neighbors. It is in this context that the discussion of the names of God in the Old Testament becomes pertinent.

One of the ten commandments declares that God’s name is not to be taken in vain. The later Jewish community was so serious about that command that it decided the safest course would be simply never to utter the name of God at all. That habit of scrupulously avoiding the name of God established a tradition that has continued right down to this very day even in the Christian community. Thus users of the standard English translations (KJV, RSV, NEB, NIV) always read a substitute for the actual name of Israel’s God. The story is a very complex one, but for our purposes we simply need to understand that, given Israel’s situation in a world where there were many gods, the simple name “God” was not specific enough for Israel’s God. Thus, when God instructed Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt, he gave a personal name for Israel to use when addressing him, their own personal God. Most scholars now agree that this name was originally something like “Yahweh.” Some modern translations (e. g. The Jerusalem Bible), actually use this name throughout the Old Testament, adding a most interesting flavor to familiar stories. Thus when we read the Old Testament, we discover that the Philistines had their Dagon, the Moabites had their Chemosh, the Syrians had their Rimmon, but Israel had Yahweh. And Israel also clearly understood that whatever the other nations claimed or believed, she herself was to have no other gods before this Yahweh.

Our modern English Bibles deliberately avoid using the name “Yahweh,” but by a very clever method, they do make it possible for the reader to know where an original Yahweh

appears in the Hebrew: wherever you find LORD or GOD (written in small capital letters), that indicates the name Yahweh in the original Hebrew Bible. When you find “Lord” applied to God (written with only the first letter capitalized), that is generally a translation of the word *Adonai*, a close equivalent to our English “lord” in that it can refer to God or a human being, depending on the context; any authority figure could be an *adonai*. As for the word “God” (written with only an initial capital), this represents the Hebrew *Elohim*. *Elohim* is like our English word “god” in that it can refer to the one true God or to false gods. But *Elohim* is also peculiar in that it is *plural* in form, so that precisely the same word could signify God, god, or gods, depending on the context. The above distinctions are important and can be quite helpful in illuminating some Old Testament passages; perhaps a diagram would be appropriate:

*Usage in English Bibles Application to Hebrew Old Testament*

LORD or GOD	= Yahweh, the specific name of Israel’s God
Lord	= Adonai, the general for any authority figure, human or divine
God	= Elohim, the general word for “god,” plural in form, but can be plural or singular in meaning; only the context determines whether it should be translated as God, god, or gods.

The name “Yahweh” as given to Moses is closely tied up with God.’s deliverance of his people from Egypt (Ex. 3:13-15; 6:2-8). This name had great potential for reminding Israel of an intimate personal relationship, just as any personal name when used by close friends yields much more warmth than “Mr.,” “Mrs.,” or “Ms.” *Elohim* could be used to refer to God and was used a great deal, but it was the name “Yahweh” that carried the personal message and was the one name that could never be misunderstood as belonging to another more ordinary god.

But for understanding the way that the Old Testament handles the problem of evil, the word *Elohim* is the important one. In many ways it is almost like our English word “angel,” but unlike the common use of our English word “angel.” *Elohim* is often used for the supreme God. In some passages in Scripture, the expression “sons of God” (*Elohim*) shades into the supernatural sense of “angels.” This is quite clearly the case in Job, not only in the prologue where the “sons of the Elohim” met before the Lord, Satan among them (Job 1:6; 2:1), but also in the poetic portion where “sons of God” and “morning stars” are parallel, suggesting supernatural beings who sang at the creation of the earth (Job 28:7).

THE HEAVENLY COURT

It appears that these *Elohim* or sons of the *Elohim* are members of a heavenly court. In Job, Satan was one of these “sons of God” and qualified as a member of the heavenly court even though he was clearly not a wholehearted supporter of the heavenly government. That tension within the heavenly court also occurs in other places in the Old Testament, even when the figure of Satan does not appear. Of particular interest is the story of Micaiah and the false prophets, told both in 1 Kings 22 and in 2 Chronicles 18. Let us note some of the key features.



As the story is told in 1 Kings (the Chronicles version varies little), Jehoshaphat, king of Judah (the southern kingdom) has gone north to join Ahab, king of Israel (the northern kingdom) in an attempt to regain Ramoth-Gilead for Israel from the Syrians. By reputation, Ahab ranks low as a worshiper of the true God, Yahweh, being constantly tempted by his wife's Baal worship. But the biblical writers generally give Jehoshaphat good marks for his efforts in the service of Yahweh. Why Jehoshaphat decided to link up with the ungodly Ahab is a curious matter, but he had done so. Yet having decided to help Ahab, the king's religious scruples began to work on his conscience. "We need to inquire from Yahweh, first," he said. "No problem," replied Ahab, and he summoned four hundred prophets, all of whom confidently declared "Yahweh will give Ramoth-Gilead into the hand of the king" (1 Kings 22:6).

These four hundred prophets apparently left Jehoshaphat even more uneasy, so he asked if perchance there might possibly be one more prophet. "Well, yes, there is Micaiah," admitted Ahab. "But I hate him, for he never prophesies good concerning me, but evil." Jehoshaphat got his wish, though, and Micaiah arrived, amidst a show of convincing visual aids by one of the other prophets – iron horns to push the Syrians (1 Kings 22:11).

With a touch of sarcasm, Micaiah told the king to go ahead (1 Kings 22:15), but Ahab caught the tone and commanded him to tell the truth. Micaiah did just that, confirming Ahab's suspicions as to the nature of Micaiah's prophecies, for he predicted the king's death. For our purposes, however, what is significant is the way that the heavenly court figures in Micaiah's reply. Part of Micaiah's reply is couched in terms of a vision:

I saw Yahweh sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left, and Yahweh said, "Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead?" And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before Yahweh, saying, "I will entice him." And Yahweh said to him, "By what means?" And he said, "I will go forth, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets." And he said "You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go forth and do so!" Now therefore behold, Yahweh has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these our prophets; Yahweh has spoken evil concerning you (1 Kings 22:19-23).

The parallel with Job is striking, for though the Lord is still clearly responsible for what happens, the actual performance of the evil deed is carried out by a member of the heavenly court. But, of course, there is a notable difference between the experience of Ahab and that of Job, for Job is a blameless and upright man. Such is hardly the case with Ahab, even though the specific deed which precipitated his downfall is not indicated in connection with Micaiah's vision.

From our point of view, the charade of the heavenly court looking for some way to make Ahab fall seems a strange way for the God of the universe to carry on. But that is the beauty of a vision: God can use whatever imagery is necessary to get the point across in a particular circumstance. For ancient Israel, the scene of the heavenly court was very useful, for it maintained the view of the omnipotence of Yahweh, while allowing some of the deeds to be carried out by lesser members of his entourage. The evil spirit who misleads Ahab is not yet cast in the role of a "Satan" who is the "accuser of the brethren," but the picture is not all that far

removed from such a view.

This idea of the heavenly court is used for another purpose in the Old Testament, namely to “control” the gods of the other nations. It may be difficult for Christian theologians to visualize the gods of the other nations as something more than mere sticks and stones. Yet even in our modern era, conservative Christians can live quite comfortably with a belief in a demonic kingdom, while at the same time viewing all the gods of the pagans as nonexistent. We probably wouldn’t be quite so ready to say that the gods of the pagans were evil angels, but the Old Testament view is perhaps close to that point of view. Let us look at some of the key passages.

At the outset we need to recall a suggestion made earlier, namely, that God did not immediately set himself before Israel as the only true God of the universe. There are many passages in the Old Testament that declare that Yahweh is the only God worthy of the name. The creation account in Genesis 1 and numerous psalms declare that there is one God who made the world and all that is therein. But for the average Israelite the problem was faced at a much lower level: “You shall have no other gods (*Elohim*) before me.” Where do the other gods (*Elohim*) fit in? They are the gods (*Elohim*) of the other nations. Yahweh is the *Elohim* in Israel and for Israel; Dagon is the *Elohim* for Philistia, Chemosh is the *Elohim* for Moab, and so on. The biblical evidence for such a position is not extensive, but when brought together it provides a reasonably clear picture.

One of the most fascinating and pertinent passages is Deuteronomy 32:8-9, rendered in the RSV as follows:

When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of men, he fixed the bounds of the people according to the number of the sons of God. For the LORD’s (Yahweh’s) portion is his people. Jacob his allotted heritage.

So here is a poetic passage suggesting that Israel (Jacob) belongs to Yahweh, but the other peoples belong to the sons of God. But you will notice a curious footnote in the RSV. The standard Hebrew text which was passed down through the official rabbinical line actually reads, “he fixed the bounds of the peoples according to the sons of *Israel*,” a reading that makes very little sense and seems rather puzzling. The Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament), however, had rendered this passage as “angels of God,” instead of “sons of Israel,” leading a number of scholars to surmise that in the original Hebrew, the phrase “sons of God (*Elohim*)” had appeared. Apparently the devout and monotheistic scribes could not accept such an interpretation, so they modified the text to read “sons of Israel.” But when the Dead Sea Scrolls came to light, one of the more sensational discoveries was a portion of a Hebrew manuscript with this passage included. In short, the conjecture of the scholars who had looked at the Greek Old Testament was correct; the manuscript read “sons of God.” So the rendering given above by the RSV is most certainly correct and is one of the most helpful passages for establishing the Old Testament concept of the heavenly court.

Moving into narrative portions of the Old Testament, additional passages confirm the view that Israel sometimes saw Yahweh as one of the *Elohim* instead of the supreme and only *Elohim*. Judges 11:24 indicates that Jephthah, one of the judges, held such a view; at least such is indicated by his diplomatic correspondence with the Ammonites “Will you not possess what

Chemosh your *Elohim* gives you to possess? And all that *Yahweh* our *Elohim* has dispossessed before us, we will possess.”

This view is indicated also in the story of David. When he was fleeing from Saul, he had opportunity to kill the king, but settled for his spear and jar of water. When Saul realized what had happened, he and David carried on a moving conversation – across the valley from each other – but moving nevertheless. In his appeal to Saul, David makes the following pathetic observation:

If it is *Yahweh* who has stirred you up against me, may he accept an offering; but if it is men, may they be cursed before *Yahweh*, for they have driven me out this day that I should have no share in the heritage of *Yahweh*, saying, “Go, serve other *Elohim*” (1 Sam. 26.19).

Driving David out of the land of Israel was tantamount to saying: “Go serve other *Elohim*. You are no longer in *Yahweh*’s land.”

Further hints of this view of the heavenly court appear in a most curious story in 2 Kings 3. The story describes Israel’s attack against Moab. Moab was on the run as Israel pursued them right into Moab itself. In fact, circumstances had become so bleak for the Moabites that their king felt constrained to do something drastic: sacrifice the crown prince, his eldest son. When Israel saw this sacrifice taking place, they apparently recognized that here was *the* supreme sacrifice that a king could make to Chemosh. But note the strange way that the biblical writer has recorded the story for us:

Then he took his eldest son who was to reign in his stead, and offered him for a burnt offering upon the wall. And there came great wrath on Israel and they withdrew up from him and returned to their own land (2 Kings 3:27).

The biblical writer is apparently afraid to admit that Israel had granted any kind of power to Chemosh, yet he does tell us that the army hastened back to their own land. When we put this story alongside the other passages in the Old Testament which touch on the *Elohim*, the conclusion becomes clear that Israel’s army was not at all sure that *Yahweh* was with them on foreign soil. *Yahweh* was *Elohim* in Israel, but was he also *Elohim* in Moab? They weren't taking any chances and headed for home.

Another story which has a bearing on the discussion is that of Naaman in 2 Kings 5. Naaman apparently felt that it was necessary to travel to Israel if he was to be healed by Israel's God. His testimony after his healing is remarkable, both with respect to the claims that he makes for *Yahweh* and for the parallel but somewhat contradictory recognition that back home in Syria *Yahweh* was not really in charge:

“Behold I know that there is no *Elohim* in all the earth but in Israel; so accept now a present from your servant.” But he said, “As *Yahweh* lives, whom I serve, I will receive none.” And he urged him to take it, but he refused. Then Naaman said, “If not, I pray you, let there be given to your servant two mules’ burden of earth; for henceforth your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any *Elohim* but

*Yahweh*. In this matter may *Yahweh* pardon your servant: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, *Yahweh* pardon your servant in this matter.’ He said to him, “Go in peace” (2 Kings 5:15-19).

*Yahweh* is the only true *Elohim*, but he is still the *Elohim* of Israel. Hence, some of Israel’s land must be taken to Syria so that Naaman can worship Israel’s *Elohim* properly, on Israel’s land.

Still further evidence for the heavenly court comes from the book of Daniel. Daniel 10 describes how Daniel prayed for divine assistance. The angelic response was delayed because ‘the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days; but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, so I left him there with the prince of the kingdom of Persia’ (Daniel 10:13). Daniel 10:20-21 also mentions the “prince of Persia,” who will be followed by the “prince of Greece.” Furthermore, Michael “your prince contends by my side against these.” Now without the other evidence for the concept of the heavenly court in the Old Testament, one might be tempted to see these princes as mere human rulers. Yet the figure of Michael seems to suggest that we are, in fact, dealing with the supernatural. If that is the case, then the book of Daniel also reflects the concept of the heavenly court: Michael and Gabriel on Daniel’s side against the Prince of Persia and the Prince of Greece. The tensions are deeper here, approaching the full break as seen in New Testament times, but the interesting thing from the standpoint of the heavenly court is the fact that each nation has its prince.

The crowning piece of evidence for the concept of the heavenly court is provided by Psalm 82. Without the concept of the heavenly court, the psalm is quite inexplicable, but when set against the background of the heavenly court it can be seen as a significant step towards the position which is so important to Christians, namely, that there is really only one *Elohim* worthy of the name, and that is *Yahweh*, the God of Israel.

This psalm is one of the best places to see the dual usage of *Elohim* as singular and as plural, for the psalm begins: “God (*Elohim*) has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods (*Elohim*) he holds judgment” (Ps. 82:1). God then proceeds to condemn roundly these *Elohim* for failing to establish justice. They have judged unjustly, showing partiality to the wicked and failing to give justice to the weak, the fatherless, the afflicted and destitute. Then in a glorious climax which prepared the way for the exaltation of the one true God, the psalmist quotes his God: “I say, You, are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you; nevertheless you shall die like men, and fall like any prince”(Ps. 82:6-7).

So the reluctant members, the unjust members, the “satans” in the heavenly court, are finally brought to justice for their failures. What then is the only conclusion that can be drawn? In the words of the psalmist: “Arise, O God, judge the earth; for to thee belong all the nations!” (Ps. 82:8).

No longer will Naaman have to haul his mule loads of Israelite soil to worship the one true God. Cast down are Chemosh, Dagon, and Rimmon. Vanquished are the princes of Persia and Greece, for there is one God to whom all the nations belong, the God of Israel. That, of course, is a sentiment with which Christians would most heartily agree. Although the demonic is present in the world, there is one God who is over all, above all, and the creator of all that is.

Why did it take so long for Israel to see the truth? And why did God not make it clear all along? The answer lies in the character of our God. A freedom-loving God must grant his creatures the right to rebel. Furthermore, he must allow the principle of selfishness to manifest itself clearly if righteousness is ever to gain the upper hand. As God led Israel along the path of restoration, he sought to win the hearts and minds of his people. In a world permeated with polytheism, convincing Israel that there is one true God in heaven who is God over all was no easy task and the route may seem to us to have been circuitous. But as Israel grew towards the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the principles of the great cosmic struggle began to emerge more clearly, until finally in the New Testament the issues and the key protagonists stood out in bold relief for all to see.

Nor should we overlook the significance of that New Testament climax as it is so vividly described in Revelation 12. The war in heaven and the thrusting out of the dragon is often seen only in its primeval significance, but the book of Revelation clearly sees the struggle climaxing at the cross. As the Devil is cast down to the earth a loud voice in heaven proclaims:

Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death (Rev. 12:10-11).

The cosmic struggle may have been of long standing, but regardless of when the war in heaven began, it was won at the cross. Though the skirmishes on earth must continue (cf. Rev. 12:12), the heavenly court has been purified and is now composed solely of Michael and his angels. The banished accuser is no longer one of the “sons of God.” Thus, in a sense, Revelation 12 marks the transition between the Old Testament concept of the heavenly court and the New Testament portrayal of the battle between Christ and Satan, the great struggle for the hearts and lives of me – for the rulership of this world and the universe.

**Question:** “Applied Historicism” is a wonderful both/and model for expanding interpretative possibilities. But how can such an approach draw in those who strongly prefer one option or the other rather than both?

**Theme: Daniel and the End Time**

**Leading Question:** Daniel lived a long time ago. What can he tell us about preparing for the End Time?

In Isaiah 44 to 48, the prophet mocks those foolish and stupid people who craft an idol with their own hands and then bow down to worship it. The sarcasm in 44:9-20 is particularly biting. But this mocking of dead idols contrasts with the heavenly court idea and the concept of national deities as discussed in the first lesson of the quarter. In that world, no one laughs at the other gods, for they are seen as alive and powerful. In some ways that ancient tension is like the modern one between predestinarians and those who advocate free will. One can make a strong biblical case for either by using passages of Scripture selectively.

After addressing the leading question, we must look at both sides of the book: first, as a source of moral examples, second as a source of prophetic proofs.

**Question:** What can Daniel tell us about preparing for the end of time? Does it have more to do with moral examples, or with prophetic proofs?

**Daniel as Moral Example**

If one looks at Daniel as a source of moral examples, here are the snapshots of chapters 2, 3, 4, and 6, the ones which are the focus of the lesson:

2. Daniel and the image: Faithful interpreter for Nebuchadnezzar
3. Daniel's friends on the Plain of Dura: Obedience to God in spite of royal threats
4. Nebuchadnezzar's loss of sanity and return
6. Daniel and lions: Faithful pray-er in spite of royal decree

**Question:** Can one find sufficient substance in those four snapshots to say that Daniel, his friends, and Nebuchadnezzar, show us how to face the end of time?

**Daniel as Prediction and Proof**

Speaking of Daniel 2, the official study guide declares that this chapter provides a "revelation" of "God's foreknowledge" that "presents evidence for God's existence." While some may find that perspective helpful, several biblical examples can be cited that would diminish the effectiveness of that argument:

1. **Jonah: Failed prediction, but successful prophecy (conditionalism).** The book of Jonah provides a remarkable example of a failed prediction, but a successful prophecy.

With no ifs, ands, or buts, Jonah predicted the fall of Ninevah. But when the people repented, God repented and the prophecy was successful: “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity (KJV = “repented of the evil”) that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it” Jonah 3:10 (NRSV). Jonah was angry because he was much more eager to see a successful prediction than a successful prophecy. Remarkably if one uses the KJV as a reference, God repents more often in the Old Testament than anyone else.

**2. David and Saul at Keilah (conditionalism).** In 1 Samuel 23 we catch a glimpse of how ordinary human behavior can effect God’s intentions. David was on the run from Saul and ended up in Keilah, a small walled town in Judah. Saul heard that he was there and set out to capture him. David asked the Lord: “Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?” The Lord said, “They will surrender you” (1 Samuel 23:12, NRSV). So David and his men left Keilah. Scripture reports the results: “When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the expedition.” (1 Samuel 23:13, NRSV). In short in the course of ordinary events, human decisions can affect God’s plans.

**3. Multiple applications (conditionalism).** One intriguing feature of the “four kingdoms” presented in Daniel’s prophecies, is that nowhere in the book of Daniel is there a composite list of all four kingdoms. Daniel 2 identifies only Babylon as one of the four kingdoms. Daniel 7 identifies none of the four kingdoms by name. Daniel 8 identifies the Medo-Persia and Greece, but without correlating them with the other chapters. That allows real fluidity in interpretation. En route to the settled historicist interpretation of Babylon-Medo/Persia-Greece-Rome, other interpretations were accepted. The identity of the fourth kingdom of Daniel, for example, was most certainly identified as Greece, at least by some Jews, until the Romans came firmly on the scene.

In the Jewish apocalypse, IV Ezra (2 Esdras in the Protestant Apocrypha), written just before the end of the first century AD, the author includes a vision of an eagle. The interpretation of that eagle in IV Ezra is revealing for the history of the interpretation of Daniel’s fourth kingdom:

“This is the interpretation of this vision which you have seen: The eagle which you saw coming up from the sea is the fourth kingdom which appeared in a vision to your brother Daniel. But it was not explained to him as I now explain or have explained it to you (2 Esdras 12:10-12).

Commentaries are unanimous in agreeing that this passage signifies that the “old” interpretation was Greece, the “new” interpretation was Rome. Without these intervening applications leading to the ultimate application and the true “fulfillment” of the historicist pattern, the message would not have stayed alive. The historicist pattern is now fulfilled and remains in place. It is now a part of Christian and Adventist history.

But when we bring in Revelation, the picture becomes even more intriguing, for none of the beasts in Revelation are identified in the book itself. “Babylon” is a codeword

for Rome. By describing Babylon, Revelation means to point the finger at Rome. Or, extending that principle to our day, we can point the finger at whatever “beastly power” is acting like Babylon. Such an approach can be called “applied historicism” (see Alden Thompson, *Beyond Common Ground* (PPPA, 2009), 194-220, and both Daniel and Revelation very practical books: if the shoe fits, put it on. It doesn’t give us absolute certainty, but it encourages us to be always prepared for the Jesus’ return wherever we might be and at any time.

**Question:** If we cannot identify each beast with finality, how does that affect the usefulness of these chapters for believers? Could Daniel be a blessing even if we had no history books to confirm the historical facts?



**Theme:** Jesus and the book of Revelation

**Leading Question:** How does Jesus of the book of Revelation compare with the picture of Jesus as presented in the Gospels?

Part of the challenge of “hearing” the book of Revelation lies in the familiarity with the book which many readers bring to the book. That is especially true of Adventists who have been steeped in apocalyptic eschatology by virtue of their Adventist heritage.

So when the book opens with the phrase, “The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to him, one has to stop and think, realizing sooner or later that this is the revelation given by Jesus Christ, a revelation which came from God.

**Question:** How does our residual picture of God and of Jesus affect us when we seek to understand the book of Revelation? Is the cumulative image positive or negative or simply neutral?

The official study guide sees the book as being divided into two parts, with a bridge chapter between them. Revelation 1-11 is more historical, 13-22 is more eschatological with chapter 12 service as the bridge between them. Chapter 12 is also the chapter that tells of war in heaven, the chapter that defines the parameters of conflict between Christ and Satan.

**Question:** What contrasts between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New lurk in the background of this book, a book which never directly quotes the Old Testament, but is full of direct and indirect allusions to it?

Three significant contrasts mark the difference between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New:

**1. Separation and distance.** The separation between God and humanity begins in Genesis when our first parents were sent away from the Garden in shame. By the time Israel congregates around Sinai, one no longer sees a gentle God who came quietly walking in the Garden in the cool of the day, looking for his children. No; at Sinai God’s people stood afar off, having been warned by God (through Moses) not to get too close to the mountain.

Exodus 19:12 You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, ‘Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death. 13 No hand shall touch them, but they shall be stoned or shot with arrows; whether animal or human being, they shall not live’ (NRSV).

The idea of separation is reinforced by the way the sanctuary was structured. At the heart

of the sanctuary stood the most holy place. The holy place was a step removed and was separated from the most holy place by a curtain. One step further removed was the courtyard.

**Question:** Since sanctuary language and imagery saturates the book revelation, how much of this separation remained? How much of it had already been overcome?

**2. Indirect Communication.** When God spoke directly to the people at Sinai, they were terrified. Thereafter, communication with God was indirect, filtered by Moses, and that was at the urgent request of the people. These lines from Deuteronomy 5 tell the painful story:

Deut. 5: 22 These words the Lord spoke with a loud voice to your whole assembly at the mountain, out of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, and he added no more. He wrote them on two stone tablets, and gave them to me. 23 When you heard the voice out of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you approached me, all the heads of your tribes and your elders; 24 and you said, "Look, the Lord our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the fire. Today we have seen that God may speak to someone and the person may still live. 25 So now why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any longer, we shall die. 26 For who is there of all flesh that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and remained alive? 27 Go near, you yourself, and hear all that the Lord our God will say. Then tell us everything that the Lord our God tells you, and we will listen and do it."

28 The Lord heard your words when you spoke to me, and the Lord said to me: "I have heard the words of this people, which they have spoken to you; they are right in all that they have spoken. 29 If only they had such a mind as this, to fear me and to keep all my commandments always, so that it might go well with them and with their children forever! 30 Go say to them, 'Return to your tents.' 31 But you, stand here by me, and I will tell you all the commandments, the statutes and the ordinances, that you shall teach them, so that they may do them in the land that I am giving them to possess." 32 You must therefore be careful to do as the Lord your God has commanded you; you shall not turn to the right or to the left. 33 You must follow exactly the path that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you are to possess. (NRSV).

**3. Fear.** Those same lines from Deuteronomy indicate that the people were driven by fear. And God commended them for their fear!

**Question:** How much of that fear is reflected in the Book of Revelation. What evidence is there that God's perfect love has cast out fear within the pages of this book? (Cf. 1 John 4:18)

**Question:** Does the opening of the ark in heaven (Rev. 11:19) suggest that the fear and distance was being overcome?

**Question:** Three times in Revelation, Scripture declares that Christ is the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega (Rev. 1:11, 17; 22:13). What is suggested by the placement of these verses at the beginning and the end of the book?

**Question:** Many young Adventists report a terrifying and recurring dream of the Second Advent in which they are rooted to the ground when Christ comes in the clouds of glory (Rev. 1:7). Does the content of revelation contribute to that juvenile terror?

**Theme: Salvation in the End Time**

**Leading Question:** How important is that we *feel* saved as we look forward to the End Time?

In broad outline, the human family finds comfort and hope through two quite different models: a family model with a gentle and loving father, and a courtroom model with a strong and effective advocate on our behalf.

In my experience, a quotation from Ellen White’s *Steps to Christ* stands out in my thinking: “Do not wait to feel that you are made whole, but say, ‘I believe it; it is so, not because I feel it, but because God has promised.’” *Steps*, 51. But what startled me as I was preparing this study guide is that the Ellen White disc only records two instances of that quote, the original and a 2002 compilation, *A Call to Stand Apart*, p. 30. Is it possible that a quote that was intended to be encouraging has not really “caught on” in Adventism?

**Question:** Which of the two models is more effective in cementing both the feeling and the reality of salvation as we look to the future? Or will different people find one more helpful than the other?

In my teaching, I present both views of the atonement as being biblical: Jesus presenting us to the Father (objective) and Jesus presenting the Father to us (subjective), with neither having the advantage over the other. In the family model, Jesus appears more at teacher, revealing the Father to us. The key passage in John 14-17 is Jesus’ response to Philip’s question: “Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.’” John 14:7.

In outline form, here are the two perspectives: the objective, with Jesus pleading heavenward on the basis of his sacrifice; and the subjective, with Jesus pleading earthward on the basis of God’s gracious gift of his son. The subjective typically relies on the family model; the objective is more at home in the courtroom model:

A. Objective Atonement (substitution, penal satisfaction): Jesus as sacrifice.

- 1) Theocentric
- 2) Primary metaphor: courtroom
- 3) Emphasizes a price paid heavenward (satisfying divine wrath or claims of law)
- 4) The dominant emphasis in Paul’s writings: e.g. 2 Cor. 5:16 - 21
- 5) Not present at all in James; not emphasized in John’s Gospel, but is present in the Johannine epistles (e.g. 1 John 2:2; 4:10)

B. Subjective Atonement (moral influence): Jesus as teacher.

- 1) Anthropocentric
- 2) Primary metaphor: family
- 3) Emphasizes Jesus' life and death as teaching us about God
- 4) Primary biblical passages: John 14-17; Luke 15:11-32 (prodigal son)
- 5) Note crucial role of the negative (*not*) in John 16:25-27

**Note:** the subjective atonement is not nearly as well known in Adventism, and in fact is often viewed with alarm because it does not stress Jesus' sacrifice. By contrast, the objective view can give the impression that God is demanding a sacrifice, rather than offering it freely.

One paperback edition of *The Great Controversy* (Pacific Press, 1971, p. 368) actually (accidentally) drops out the negative from a famous Johannine passage, John 16: 25-27. Here is the passage in its entirety, with the intriguing "*not*" in italics:

John 16:25 "I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father. 26 On that day you will ask in my name. I do *not* say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; 27 for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God."

In my own experience, that troubling Ellen White statement that we are to "stand in the sight of a holy God without a mediator" (GC, 1911, 425) became a promise instead of a threat in the light of John 16:25-27. That discovery was part of a study of John 14-17 during which I made the life-changing discovery that Jesus was and is God incarnate.

**Question:** How can we teach both views of the atonement so that each can reach those who need it most?

**Note:** If one can see the sin-laden human heart as the source that "demands" a sacrifice, then Jesus' death does not need to be seen as a demand from God, but rather as the gift of a gracious God who knows the human heart through and through.

The following chapter from my book, *Beyond Common Ground* (PPPA 2009) represents a serious attempt to present both views of the atonement as part of God's plan to save the human family.

**“A Work in Progress: Cross and Atonement”**  
**Chapter 22, *Beyond Common Ground* (PPPA 2009), pp 246-252**  
**By Alden Thompson**

**The Bible says:** “When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” – 1 Cor. 2:1-2

**The Bible says:** “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” – 2 Cor. 5:21

**The Bible says:** “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” – Rom. 8:1

**The Bible says:** “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” – John 14:9

**She says:** “God’s people are tempted and tried because they cannot see the spirit of consecration and self-sacrifice to God in all who manage important interests, and many act as though Jesus were buried in Joseph's new tomb, and a great stone rolled before the door. I wish to proclaim with voice and pen, Jesus has risen! he has risen!” – *Special Testimonies A*, p. 29, August 10, 1890.

**They say:** “The earliest converts were converted by a single historical fact (the Resurrection) and a single theological doctrine (the Redemption) operating on a sense of sin which they already had – and sin, not against some new fancy-dress law produced as a novelty by a ‘great man,’ but against the old, platitudinous, universal moral law which they had been taught by their nurses and mothers. The ‘Gospels’ come later, and were written, not to make Christians, but to edify Christians already made.” – C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (1961), 23.3

This will be another brief chapter. But it might be the most important one in the book. Because the discussion is “a work in progress,” however, I am intentionally brief.

The chapter is crucial because Adventists differ in their understanding of what the cross means. But we can’t just dump the cross or even avoid it. Without the cross there would be no resurrection; without the cross there could be no crown. If we live in hope, it is only because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

So why did Jesus have to die? The question is crucial but yields two dramatically different, but complementary answers. And those who are gripped by one answer are easily alarmed by those who are gripped by the other. And it works both ways. Most Christians find

both answers meaningful and will no doubt be puzzled by the intensity of the debate engendered by those who are intense. But this is another case where we do not choose our battles. So we have to take all sides seriously.

What are the answers? Both declare that Jesus died to save us, but then the difference emerges. One answer points the cross heavenward and sees the death of Jesus as a sacrifice that satisfies the demands of divine justice: sin requires death. This view can be called the “objective” atonement, indicating that Jesus’ death satisfies some kind of “objective” demand apart from the experience of the believer. It can be the demands of the law; it can also be seen as satisfying divine wrath. Thus the words “substitution” and/or “satisfaction” are also linked with this view. Those who hold this view are strongly attracted by Paul’s writings, especially Romans and Galatians.

The other answer points the cross earthward and sees the death of Jesus as a powerful revelation of God and his love for fallen creatures. This view is called the “subjective” atonement because it focuses on human experience. Thus it is part of Jesus’ answer to Philip: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” Those who hold this view are strongly attracted by John’s Gospel, especially John 14-17.

But then the battle begins. Those who are gripped by the “objective” atonement are inclined to argue that the other view is weak on the doctrines of sin and salvation. Without a real “sacrifice” pointed heavenward, they argue, the sin problem hasn’t really been solved.

On the other side, those who are gripped by the “subjective” atonement argue that the other view gives the impression that God demands a pound of flesh before he will save humankind. The more extreme rhetoric is likely to call the substitutionary atonement an immature view which should be outgrown.

Outside of Adventism and from Christian history both views bring along unwanted baggage. The subjective view has been called the “moral influence” theory because the cross is sometimes seen as “only” influencing the moral nature of humankind. As sometimes held by the more liberal Protestant churches, the subjective atonement can indeed undervalue the power of sin and the need for salvation.

The objective view also carries baggage. As held by Christians outside of Adventism, the objective atonement can be linked with a narrow view of salvation that excludes those who do not explicitly accept the sacrifice of Jesus. Thus the good heathen, the good Buddhist, the good Muslim cannot be part of God’s kingdom. The strong language, especially among Calvinists, can also be problematic. The phrase “penal substitution,” for example, tends to trigger the “pound-of-flesh” objection noted above. The rhetoric of “satisfying” divine wrath has a similar effect.

In Adventism, two developments that can be documented in the experience and writings of Ellen White are worth noting. First, in her later writings, she stepped back from her earlier emphasis on satisfying the “wrath of an offended deity,” speaking rather of satisfying the “demands of the law.” Second, chapter 70 in *The Desire of Ages* has bequeathed to Adventism the conviction that the ignorant but honest heathen can be saved. A commentary on the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25, that *Desire of Ages* chapter speaks persuasively of “heathen...who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish.” – DA 638 (1898)

Drawing on the previous two chapters in this book, I would like to note a couple of

crucial points, affirming, first of all, that the subjective or revelatory view of the cross, the one presented in John 14-17, is thoroughly biblical and is very much appreciated by many Adventists. But my second point is that this perspective is often viewed with alarm or at best treated as a kind of second-class citizen in Adventism. The Johannine or subjective atonement perspective has not been part of the *Questions on Doctrine* debate. That discussion is mostly between the perfectionist theology of Peter and the substitutionary theology of Paul, to borrow the labels I suggested in chapter 19.

I believe it is time to address the atonement issue honestly and in good faith. My own experience has been immeasurably enriched by my discovery of Jesus as presented in John 14-17. As I have frequently noted, however, I did not “discover” that wonderful news until I was in my second year at seminary. For all kinds of reason, discovering that Jesus was God on earth and continues to be God in the present may always be a late discovery in a Christian’s life. But it is central to Scripture and crucial for Adventist theology.

If the two sides are going to work together, however, we must recognize that not all the Bible writers give the same emphasis. If both sides can recognize the other’s position as being fully Christian and fully Adventist, it would greatly enhance the work of the church. But the demeaning rhetoric will have to stop. It is not appropriate, in my view, to characterize the Johannine perspective as a non-Christian deviation that is destructive of the Gospel. Nor is it appropriate to describe the Pauline perspective view of an immature theology in which God is seen to be demanding a pound of flesh.

But changing our views of the “other side” cannot simply happen by flipping a switch. Our impressions of the “other side” are often deeply rooted and inflamed by inappropriate rhetoric from the “other side.”

I do, however, have two suggestions that I have found helpful personally. If others, on both sides, would be willing to explore them with me, I suspect we could make good progress. I will spell them out rather pointedly.

**1. Memorizing Bible passages that the “other side” finds meaningful.** Here it is crucial to try and hear Scripture from the other person’s perspective, not simply to underscore our own. That does not happen easily or immediately. In my case I elected to memorize Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians 5:14-21. In that connection I should mention that a general “truth” or “rule” about memorization that I had already found applicable elsewhere proved to be true here, too. In brief, because it takes me a long time to memorize a passage of Scripture, about the 97<sup>th</sup> time through I begin to see truths that I hadn’t seen before and to be blessed by them.

And that has certainly been the case with the “substitutionary” passages in Scripture that I have set out to memorize. My understanding of the cross has been deepened and enriched. I no longer feel that I have to “re-interpret” every passage of Scripture to meet my “favorite” perspective. I can let Paul be Paul, James be James, Peter be Peter. And I think that means that I can also let God be God.

Now, when I go to *The Desire of Ages* and read the chapter “It Is Finished” (Chapter 78, DA 758-64 [1898]), for example, I can honestly admit that it is almost entirely “substitutionary” in its view of the cross. I am grateful that I don’t have to re-interpret it or avoid it. I am grateful that I can be blessed instead of troubled. My solution won’t work for everyone; indeed, probably no one else will be blessed in just the same way I have been. But by sharing our various



perspectives honestly with each other, we can walk together toward the kingdom.

In this connection I note the observation of a colleague, one for whom Paul's theology is especially precious, a colleague who has helped nurture my appreciation for substitutionary theology. He observed that the trajectory of my experience appeared to be quite different from his. His deepening appreciation for the things of God began with a keen awareness of human sinfulness, his own sinfulness; now he is gaining a deepening appreciation the goodness of God.

By contrast, he observed, my experience seems to have started with a deep appreciation for the goodness of God and I am now gaining a deeper understanding of human sinfulness. I think he is right. Our experiences will never be exactly alike. But it has been an enriching experience for us both as we have joined our minds and hearts together in the search for the good things of God.

**2. Recognizing that God did not demand a sacrifice for *his* benefit, but gave a sacrifice for *our* benefit.** In my case, discovering that Jesus was God in the flesh banished forever the haunting specter of a reluctant deity. If God himself took human flesh and came to earth to save me, he really must want me in his kingdom after all! God wasn't just letting Jesus sneak me in the side door as some kind of concession. No! My salvation was no concession. God came to earth because he really wanted me in his kingdom.

I decided that one of the mental pictures suggested by certain biblical passages had led me astray. In particular the picture of Jesus pleading his blood to the father had given me the impression that Jesus was my friend, but that the Father still needed to be convinced. Admittedly, protection from a holy deity can be a terrifying necessity. In his early years, for example, Martin Luther was just as frightened of the Son as he was of the Father. For him, the only safe approach to God was through the gentle virgin Mary!

In that connection John 16:26-27 has played a crucial role in my thinking. Not only has that passage enabled me to transform from a threat into a promise that scary Adventist line that we "are to stand in the sight of a holy God without a mediator" (GC 425 [1888, 1911]), it has also helped me see that as long as I need a mediator I have one. If the passage is truly a promise, then God is not about to pull the rug out from under us. He cares for our needs.

That same verse may also be helpful in addressing what I consider to be an erroneous impression that it is God who demands a sacrifice. Is it not possible that the "need" for an atoning sacrifice is driven by perceptions engendered by our twisted minds? As I see it, the belief in a "pound-of-flesh God" is the deadly result of sin. As the effects of sin and guilt gnawed away at the human mind, the "gods" became more and more demanding, more and more violent. The end result of that kind of thinking was the conviction that the gods demanded every first-born among humans. God recognized that devastating logic and commanded Israel to provide an animal substitute (Exod. 13:11-16) "Every firstborn male among your children you shall redeem," says Scripture. That same psychology is reflected in Micah 6:6-8. Moving up the ladder of potential gifts, the prophet ends with, "Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

The prophet's response implies that God is demanding no such thing. Indeed, the Good News Bible makes the "no" explicit at the beginning of the climactic verse 8. But the story of Jesus, indeed the death of Jesus, brings to an end, once and for all, any human thought of earning God's favor through a sacrifice. Jesus really did pay it all.

With such an approach, one could speak of a “psychological” and “governmental” necessity of the death of Christ. Such language would have distinct advantages over the “absolute” necessity implied by more extreme forms of Calvinist theology. Such an approach would also put to an end any thought that God was “demanding a pound of flesh,” but it would recognize that God gave a “pound of flesh,” so to speak, because diseased human minds thought it was the only way to find peace. We do not serve a vindictive or vengeful God. But we do serve a God who is willing to pay whatever price our twisted minds might demand. And that’s what we see on the cross.

So let’s put our heads and hearts together, seek God’s presence and study his Word so that gift of God can be the kind of good news he intends it to be. By God’s grace, whether we find John or Paul more helpful, we can all rejoice when any of God’s children discovers that God has made it possible for them to be in his kingdom. That should be wonderful news for us all.

**Theme:** Christ in the Heavenly Sanctuary

**Leading Question:** If the earthly sanctuary was intended to be a bridge between sinful humanity and a holy God, how are modern Christians to relate to that sanctuary in the light of the revelation of God in Christ Jesus?

One of the more striking New Testament passages dealing with God's presence among us, is this one from 1 John 1:1-4:

1 We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— 2 this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— 3 we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. 4 We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete (NRSV).

Thus we see God with our eyes and touch him with our hands. This God takes children into his arms, lays his hands on them and blesses them (Mark 10:16).

**Question:** With such a picture of God, why do we need to talk about the earthly sanctuary, which represents a holy God who carefully keeps his distance from us and warns us to keep our distance from him?

The book of Hebrews represents a bold attempt to build a bridge between the distant God, represented by the earthly sanctuary, and the approachable God, represented by Jesus. And the author of Hebrews tackles this monumental task by using the earthly sanctuary as his primary teaching tool! Two observations about Hebrews' approach are crucial:

**1. Jesus is the better way.** The opening lines of the book stress the superlative nature of God's revelation through Jesus:

Hebrews 1:1 Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. 3 He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs (NRSV).

**2. Through Jesus, we can break through to the holiest of holies.** In the earthly sanctuary, the holiest place was separated from the rest of the sanctuary by a curtain or veil. Hebrews tells us that it was Jesus who broke through that veil for us:

Hebrews 10:19 Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching (NRSV).

**Question:** What are we to make of the statement in 1 John 4:18 that “perfect love casts out fear,” when God continues to use fear as a motivating force?

On the use of fear, two points from a New Testament perspective:

**1. Fear as a choice.** The apostle Paul did not hesitate to use fear as a motivating force. Indeed he offered fear as an option to the believers: “What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?” (1 Cor. 4:21, NRSV).

**2. Rejecting any of God’s initiatives is dangerous. But rejection of the *best* revelation of all triggers a fearful judgment.** While stressing the “better” way of Jesus, Hebrews is not afraid to say that if you reject the better revelation in Jesus, great trouble will come upon you. It is Hebrews 10:31 that tells us: “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (NRSV). And it is Hebrews who tells the believers that they haven’t come that scary mountain, but to Zion. But note his rationale and the punch line in 10:29: “Our God is a consuming fire.”

Hebrews 12:18 You have not come to something[ that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, 19 and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. 20 For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.” 21 Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

25 See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! 26 At that time his voice shook the earth; but

now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.” 27 This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; 29 for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

**Question:** Could it be possible that the careless will confront judgment from the setting of the heavenly sanctuary while the careful and sensitive will be able to take comfort by the mediation that comes through Christ – also from the heavenly sanctuary? In short, is it possible that all possible motivational options are provided by the vision of the heavenly sanctuary?

**Theme: The “Change” of the Law.**

**Leading Question:** Is it possible that the most significant “change” in the law is the one that happens when it is written on our hearts?

Given the current situation in church and world, a lesson on the “change” of the law raises a host of issues, any one of which could take a whole quarter’s lessons to work through. I’ll simply note the primary issues and then we will address our leading question:

- 1. Sacred time.** In a world where the idea of sacred time has simply disappeared, what does a Sabbath/Sunday conflict mean?
- 2. Applied historicism.** In a world where beastly behavior is being exhibited by a host of powers, both secular and religious, what does it mean to focus on just one beast? Perhaps “Applied Historicism” can point the way to a both/and approach. See Alden Thompson, *Beyond Common Ground* (PPPA, 2009), pp. 194 - 220.
- 3. Gentle Beast.** Pope Francis is getting rave reviews by many for his gentle, Christ-like approach to people, church, and world. Yet the rumblings within his own church for a more traditional approach to Catholicism are worth noting. What does that mean for the Adventist approach to Roman Catholicism.
- 4. Conditional Prophecy.** The largely neglected article, “The Role of Israel in Old Testament Prophecy” (SDABC 4:25-38), thoroughly develops the idea of conditional prophecy, implying that God’s original plan was for his people to accept Christ as their Messiah. Where does that leave prophecy and prediction? The words of Ellen White are appropriate here:  
The angels of God in their messages to men represent time as very short. Thus it has always been presented to me. It is true that time has continued longer than we expected in the early days of this message. Our Saviour did not appear as soon as we hoped. But has the Word of the Lord failed? Never! It should be remembered that the promises and the threatenings of God are alike conditional. – MS 4, 1883, unpublished until *Evangelism*, 695 [1946], and then more completely in 1 SM 67 [1958]. The original response was apparently never sent to anyone.
- 5. Day/Year Principle.** The “History of the Interpretation of Daniel” in the SDABC 4:39-78 includes some choice nuggets. It wasn’t until Joachim of Floris (1135 -1202 CE) that the day-year principle was applied to the 1260 days of Daniel and Revelation (p. 50). Johan Petri (1718-1792) was the first to begin the 70 weeks and 2300 day together. In short, if the implications of the SDABC4 article noted above are taken seriously, no one would have been the wiser if Christ had actually concluded his ministry in the first century CE. The day-year principle only became an option when the calendar made such an option believable.

**Question:** But now let’s return to our “leading question”: Is it possible that the most significant

change in the law is the one that happens when it is written in our hearts?

Adventists have always insisted on the “binding” nature of the law: God’s law does not change! And we have focused on the Sabbath-Sunday issue as a crucial element in our heritage. Crucial it is, but compare that use of the term “binding” with the languages Ellen White uses when describing God’s law in heaven:

But in heaven, service is not rendered in the spirit of legality. When Satan rebelled against the law of Jehovah, the thought that there was a law came to the angels almost as an awakening to something unthought of. In their ministry the angels are not as servants, but as sons. There is perfect unity between them and their Creator. Obedience is to them no drudgery. Love for God makes their service a joy. So in every soul wherein Christ, the hope of glory, dwells, His words are re-echoed, “I delight to do Thy will, O My God: yea, Thy law is within My heart.” Psalm 40:8. *Mount of Blessings*, 109

Reinforcing that “internal” understanding of the law is this remarkable comment about the nature of God’s law:

The same law that was engraved upon the tables of stone, is written by the Holy Spirit upon the tables of the heart (PP 372).

In that context, what would it mean to refer to the “binding” nature of God’s law? How would I react if my wife insisted on my timely arrival at home, citing the “binding” nature of our marriage agreement? In my heart, at least, use of such language would have a withering impact on my relationship with my wife.

**Question:** How would our evangelism and outreach be affected if we were to shift from an emphasis on external law to internal? How might that affect the presentation of our eschatology?

**Question:** What is the goal and issue over “law” in the “Great Controversy”? Would one say that it is over the question of whether God’s law was arbitrary or natural?

**Question:** How might the Sabbath be affected if it were motivated internally rather than externally on the basis of rules?

**Question:** Can we take the new covenant promise of Jeremiah 31:31-34 as the basis of all our living?

**Theme:** Matthew 24-25

**Leading Question:** According to Matthew 24 and 25, does an increase in the number of wars or the number of earthquakes tell us that Jesus' return is nearer?

Adventists have always had a strong interest in the “soon” return of Jesus and over the years, many have referred to the “signs” of Matthew 24 as an indication that Jesus' coming was soon. But my mentor during my undergraduate years, J. Paul Grove, almost earned the “heretic” badge by declaring with some firmness that Matthew 24-25 doesn't tell us how long before Jesus comes. All it tells us is we must always be ready! The article at the end of this lesson, “Living in the End Time,” expands on that theme.

**Question:** How can we demonstrate from Scripture that passages of Scripture can have more than one application? More than one meaning?

The idea that a passage of Scripture can have more than one “true” interpretation has often by resisted by devout conservatives as well as by sophisticated liberals. But three passages from Matthew 24-25 seem to point quite clearly to the possibility of “multiple applications,” all of which have some bearing on “end time” preparation.

**1. “Abomination of Desolation.”** In Matthew 24:15 Jesus refers to a future time when the “abomination of desolation” will stand in the holy place. Here is crucial passage:

“So when you see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place, as was spoken of by the prophet Daniel (let the reader understand). . . . (NRSV).

Three passages in Daniel (9:27, 11:31, 12:11) provide the antecedents for the “desolating sacrilege” (NRSV) or “abomination of desolation” (KJV) of Matthew 24:15. In Daniel, preterist scholars generally apply the phrase to Antiochus Epiphanes' desecration of the Jerusalem temple in 168-167 BCE. Matthew 24:15 is widely seen referring to the desecration of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in 70 CE.

What is significant for prophetic interpretation is the recognition that Matthew points to an event that is still future, thus disqualifying a thorough-going preterist view of Matthew 24:15. Support for the idea of multiple applications can also be found in surprising places – for example, in Mervyn Maxwell's devotional commentary on Daniel, *God Cares*, vol. 1. In his notes on Daniel 11, Maxwell openly states that the seeing Antiochus Epiphanes as the one who made the sanctuary desolate was “the most popular” interpretation in Jesus' day. “Josephus, the famous Jewish historian, held this interpretation in the first century A.D. It is possible that Christ's disciples did also.” A few paragraphs later, in connection with Jesus' statement that the



desolating sacrilege was still future, Maxwell makes this striking assertion: “In other words, old interpretations are *bound to be inadequate*. Only interpretations made in relatively recent years have any chance of getting the real issues straight”(Mervyn Maxwell, *God Cares*, vol. 1: *The Message of Daniel for You and Your Family* [Mt. View, CA: Pacific Press, 1981], 269, 270). Along similar lines is his comment on p. 282: “In spite of its shortcomings, the Antiochus Epiphanes interpretation bore such an apparent relationship to the career of the little king that it seems to have been believed by many Jews in the time of Christ. As we noted on page 269 it is possible that even the disciples believed it. If so, they were startled when – sitting with Jesus on the Mount of Olives overlooking the Jerusalem temple on a cool spring night shortly before the crucifixion – they heard Jesus invite them to ‘understand’ that the ‘abomination that makes desolate’ was still in the future.”

**2. Sun, moon, and stars.** In the classic historicism of 19<sup>th</sup> century Adventism, the “signs” were seen as one-time events in the course of history: the Lisbon earthquake (1755), Dark Day (1780), the Falling of the Stars (1833). But the heavenly signs were always seen by Old Testament prophets as forerunners of the “Day of the Lord.” And that Day was always a local event which then became a type of the final “Day of the Lord.” These signs are cited in Isaiah (13:10; 24:23), Jeremiah (15:9), Ezekiel (32:7), Joel (2:10, 31; 3:15), Amos (8:9-10); and Habakkuk (3:10-11).

Of particular interest is the reference in Joel 2, cited by Peter in Acts 2:16-21 with reference to the events surrounding Jesus’ last days and resurrection. In Revelation 6:12-17, these cosmic signs are re-applied to the second coming, though Uriah Smith does not see the “re-application” because he is too closely tied to traditional historicism.

**3. The Ten Virgins.** The re-application of the story of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1-13) is an in-house Adventist phenomenon, but still illustrates how the process of re-application works. In its original context, the story reflects the time just preceding the second coming. And in *Christ’s Object Lessons*, that is the application given by Ellen White: “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” – COL 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” – COL 414.

But in *The Great Controversy*, the story is used to illustrate the experience of the Great Disappointment:

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.

The SDA *Bible Commentary*, in its comments on the parable, does not even mention the application to the Disappointment. But it is still part of Adventist History.

**Question:** How does the possibility of multiple applications relate to the theme of constant preparedness? Does knowing that a passage of Scripture may have more than one application help keep us alert and prepared?

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### **Living in the End Time**

By Alden Thompson

(*Signs of the Times*, June 1984, pp. 8-10)

Somewhere in our town lives a man with 150 guns tucked away at home. Is he a collector or a crook? Neither, actually. He simply believes the world is about to fall apart. And when it does, he intends to protect himself from the rabble.

Because our local gunman is not alone in his fear of hard times, survival stores are hot items right now in several parts of the country. Our local newspaper quoted the owner of one such store in southern Oregon as claiming that 90% of his business came from the sale of firearms and self-defense items.

Now if a man sees his home as his castle, fortified against the imminent collapse of civilization, he probably won't wander very far afield. In fact, a friend told me recently of one man in our valley who is so gripped by the fear of the end that he refuses to travel any further from home than the distance he can cover with his car on a half tank of gas. The other half tank in reserve is his protection from being stranded when the crisis strikes.

This survival mania poses interesting questions for Christians. Would you, for example, expect the gunman, the survival store owner, and the man with the half tank of gas to worship together on the week-end? And if they sat beside you in your pew in your church, what you want them to hear?

Somewhere along the line the man with the guns probably should hear Jesus' word about turning the other cheek (Matt. 5:39). The man with the half tank of gas probably should hear about going the second mile (Matt. 5:41). All three would no doubt profit from a sermon based on the text, "Perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). But what about the underlying assumption that the world is on the verge of collapse? Does a Christian have something to say about that?

He should – for Scripture says a fair bit about the demise of civilization. But the New Testament hardly envisions a simple slide toward anarchy. Instead, Scripture tells of a clean sweep followed by a fresh new world – "a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away" (Rev. 21:1). In such a scenario 150 guns or a half tank of gas won't offer much comfort.

Because I grew up steeped in the fervent hope of the return of Christ and the end of the world, the reaction of some Christians to the biblical teaching puzzles me. In Scotland, for example, I had the privilege of becoming acquainted with a fine Christian gentleman, a Protestant and deeply committed to his faith. But when we talked about the end of the world, he

simply confessed to being quite mystified.

On another occasion, a devout Roman Catholic woman attending classes on the campus of our Adventist college, exclaimed, “I have never lived with this sense of expectancy, destiny or urgency.”

Now living without a sense of expectancy has one great advantage – one never faces the specter of disappointment. And Adventists do know something about disappointment. Born out of the Millerite movement of the nineteenth century, Adventists are the spiritual heirs of those who unflinchingly expected their Lord to come and the world to end on October 22, 1844. But they were disappointed – keenly disappointed. In the words of the Adventist pioneer Hiram Edson, “Our fondest hopes and expectations were blasted, and such a spirit of weeping came over us as I never experienced before . . . . We wept, and wept, till the day dawn.”

In the agonizing days which followed, Adventists had to learn to live expectantly – but with disappointment. Fortunately, Jesus prepared his disciples for just such a situation and his counsel is recorded for us in Matthew 24 and 25.

The essence of the first of these chapters, Matthew 24, is a tantalizing paradox: signs will tell us the end is near, yet the end will catch us by surprise. Then from the three stories in Matthew 25, we discover an end-time agenda consisting of three simple principles: sleeping nights, working days, and helping those in need. Sounds suspiciously like life as usual, doesn't it? Let's take a closer look.

When the disciples asked about the signs of his coming and the end of the world, Jesus described the difficult times to come, but cautioned, “Don't be alarmed; all this has to happen, but the end is not yet” (Matt. 24:6). In fact, wars, famines, and earthquakes would be “but the beginning” of troubles (Matt. 24:8). Nevertheless, these signs would show the disciples that his coming was “near, at the very gates” (Matt. 24:33).

But then the surprise – in spite of warning signs, the end would come as a thief in the night, “at an hour you do not expect” (Matt. 24:43-44).

Now if the Lord's return is going to catch us by surprise, is it safe simply to continue to live life as usual? Jesus' answer to that question is found in his final illustration of Matthew 24. There he tells of two servants, one “faithful and wise,” because he consistently fulfilled his responsibilities; the other “wicked,” because he said, “My master is delayed,” using that as an excuse to beat his fellow servants and to adopt a reckless, drunken lifestyle (Matt. 24:49).

The “wicked” servant apparently was counting on some kind of warning, something buying him time so he could shape up before his master returned. Surprise. The master returns “when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know” (Matt. 24:50). The moral of the story is clear enough – the one safe course is a faithful “life as usual.”

And does the text say anything about stashing away weapons? Not a peep. The wise servant knows that times will be difficult. Yet Jesus had counseled, “Don't be alarmed” (Matt. 24:6). Thus the formula for end-time living is surprisingly simple: no fear, no special preparations, just a faithful life as usual.

“Wait a minute,” you say. “When times get tough my body begins pumping adrenaline. What's the Christian's antidote for that?” Good question and one to which we must return. But first a quick look at the other half of Jesus' end-time counsel, Matthew 25.

Immediately following his discussion of signs and surprises (Matthew 24), Jesus tells

three stories to conclude his “last days” discourse. Telling of high hopes, disappointment, and delay, these stories also raise the question of accountability – how have we lived in a time of expectancy and disappointment?

The first story tells of an oriental wedding party – ten virgins to be more precise – eagerly awaiting the bridegroom (Matt. 25:1-13). But the hours slip by. No bridegroom appears. Disappointment.

The virgins not only slumber, they sleep – all ten of them. Now if we were telling the story, we would probably let the five foolish virgins sleep and keep the wise ones awake. But Jesus even put the wise ones to sleep. He wanted to show that a prepared person doesn’t need to panic when the Lord returns.

When the bridegroom actually came, the wise virgins had oil for their lamps and were ready to go. Only the foolish virgins panicked – the delay had burned up all their oil.

The second story, usually known as the parable of the talents, describes a businessman who entrusts his estate to his servants while he departs on a long journey (Matt. 25:14-30). In contrast with the parable of the virgins, no dramatic sense of expectancy dominates the story. The focus is rather on accountability. Giving no clue as to how long he will be gone, the owner simply expects his servants to manage his estate during his absence.

He finally returns to settle accounts, but only “after a long time” (Matt. 25:19). Two of the three servants had doubled their assigned capital, one converting five talents into ten, the other, two into four.

The master calls both of these servants “good and faithful” (Matt. 25:21, 23). For them, his arrival had occasioned no panic, no frenzied burst of activity. From the day of his departure they had been prepared for his return.

But one servant did panic and right from day one. In his fear he did nothing with his one talent except bury it in the ground. Upon returning, his master called him “wicked and slothful,” chiding him for not making at least minimum effort by investing his one talent with the bankers. The master wasn’t asking for brilliant achievement or extraordinary effort; he would have been quite happy with “ordinary” faithfulness. But the man did nothing at all – except panic.

The final story in Matthew 25 is a judgment scene, the separation of the sheep from the goats. Jesus, represented by the king sitting in judgment, catches the “sheep” by surprise in quite a different sense. He welcomes them to his kingdom, commending them for all the acts of kindness which they have done to him personally – feeding him, slaking his thirst, welcoming him when he was a stranger, clothing him, and visiting him both when he was sick and when he was in prison (Matt. 25:35-36).

The saints are non-plussed, saying, in effect (politely), “We don’t know what you are talking about.” Then the surprise: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40). By their faithful “life as usual,” caring for the needs of those close by, the saints had ministered to the king himself.

How could Jesus have outlined a clearer plan for living in the end time? A follower of Christ must be prepared for delay. Prudent planning is therefore essential – we should always maintain an adequate supply of “oil” (for our “spiritual” lamps, not for our cars!). But then we should be able to sleep nights, to work days, and to continue ministering to those in need.

And in times of crisis, what is the antidote for our adrenaline? It is both simple and

mysterious. Everyone burdened with the cares of this wild world is invited to come to Jesus for rest (Matt. 11:28). Knowledge of his love casts out fear (1 John 4:18).

But wait. Let's not be too hasty in choking off the adrenal glands. The troubles in the world are signs of the end. Such signs are God's warning signals to those who are drowsy and unprepared. A shot of adrenaline could save their lives.

**Theme:** Worship the Creator

**Leading Question:** Is it possible for the Sabbath to be a gift and a test at the same time?

Modern Adventists face somewhat of a dilemma on how to present certain aspects of its heritage. Read directly from the page, each of the three angel's messages in Revelation 14:6-12 appear to be very confrontational. The first hour calls for the worship of the creator God, but then adds that the hour of his judgment is come. The second angel declares that Babylon is fallen and when its message is linked with the message of the "other" angel of Revelation 18: 4, "Come out of her my people." It becomes very confrontational indeed.

Among the early SDA pioneers, it was Charles Fitch who developed the most strident aspects of the second angel's message, identifying Babylon as both Protestant and Roman Catholic. Balancing that early call for separation are some of the later writings of Ellen White, perhaps reflecting her own more gentle perspective as she discovered the full divinity of Christ and as she began to define the law in terms of internal rather than mere external factors.

These Ellen White quotations from her mature years are certainly ones that modern Adventists should take into account:

In laboring in a new field, do not think it your duty to say at once to the people, We are Seventh-day Adventists; we believe that the seventh day is the Sabbath; we believe in the non-immortality of the soul. This would often erect a formidable barrier between [120] you and those you wish to reach. Speak to them, as you have opportunity, upon points of doctrine on which you can agree. Dwell on the necessity of practical godliness. Give them evidence that you are a Christian, desiring peace, and that you love their souls. Let them see that you are conscientious. Thus you will gain their confidence; and there will be time enough for doctrines. Let the heart be won, the soil prepared, and then sow the seed presenting in love the truth as it is in Jesus. – GW 119-120

The Lord wants His people to follow other methods than that of condemning wrong, even though the condemnation be just. He wants us to do something more than to hurl at our adversaries charges that only drive them further from the truth. The work which Christ came to do in our world was not to erect barriers and constantly thrust upon the people the fact that they were wrong. (121/122)

He who expects to enlighten a deceived people must come near to them and labor for them in love. He must become a center of holy influence. – 6T 121-122

There is need of a much closer study of the Word of God; especially should Daniel and the Revelation have attention as never before in the history of our work. We may have less to say in some lines, in regard to the Roman power and the papacy, but we

should call attention to what the prophets and apostles have written under the inspiration of the Spirit of God. . . . *Christ Triumphant*, 335, —Letter 57, 1896 (Manuscript Releases, vol. 16, pp. 333-335)

**Question:** In sharing the Sabbath as a gift and less as a test, will it lose some of its convicting power?

These passages seem to present a more gentle perspective on the Sabbath:

Genesis 2:2 And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. 3 So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation (NRSV).

Exodus 20:8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy (NRSV).

Deut. 5: 12 Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 13 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 14 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. 15 Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day (NRSV)

Isaiah 58:13 If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,  
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;  
if you call the sabbath a delight  
and the holy day of the Lord honorable;  
if you honor it, not going your own ways,  
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;  
14 then you shall take delight in the Lord,  
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;  
I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken (NRSV)

Mark 2: 27 Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; 28 so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”

**Question:** Even when one selects the more positive and gentle Sabbath passages, the tough ones are still their in our Bibles, including the one where God commands Israel to stone a man who picked up sticks on the Sabbath (Num. 15:32-36)

**Note:** In our modern age, secularization, not Sunday legislation, is the real threat to our Sabbath. To choose to relish the Sabbath in a world where frenzied activity continues to boil around us, may qualify us more to receive the seal of God than if we are confronted by the death penalty. And in that connection, two quotations from C. S. Lewis are worth remembering, one affirming the great value of a commitment to God when time seems so very silent, the other a reminder (in counsel from Screwtape to Wormwood about the dangers of gradual capitulation):

**When God is silent:**

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, *Screwtape Letters*, 8.4

**The hazards of a gradual fall:**

Like all young tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness. But do remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy. It does not matter how small the sins are, provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed, the safest road to Hell is the gradual one -- the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts. --C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 12.5



**Theme: End-time Deceptions**

**Leading Question:** What is the most effective way for the devil to deceive the church and world?

From the beginning the “serpent” had a reputation as the Deceiver. In Genesis 3:13, many translations have Eve telling the Lord that the serpent “deceived” her. The New Testament witness confirms that perspective; 1 Timothy 2:14 says that the man was not “deceived,” but the woman was; and Revelation 12:9 refers to him as the “deceiver of the whole world.”

But if deception is bad, wholehearted trust and obedience also has its downside. So in this lesson we will explore what it means to be “deceived” and how we are most vulnerable to deception.

The official study guide states that Satan’s greatest deception is “to cause people to believe that he does not exist.” There is no biblical statement to that effect, but in modern literature, that conclusion finds an echo and a confirmation. In the preface to *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis states:

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight. – *Screwtape*, p. 3

**Question:** Which is the most effective way for demonic forces to reach their objectives: making people disbelieve in devils or to make them obsessed with devils?

**Question:** How likely are modern believers to be “deceived” by the kinds of deceptions noted in the official study guide: Sabbath/Sunday issues, immortality of the soul, evolution, the papacy?

But now let’s turn to those things which have been identified as deceptions by people of our generation, such as the Jesuits and “spiritual formation.”

**Question:** What has been the practical impact focusing on these “deceptions”?

One colleague, commenting on the frenzy against “spiritual formation,” commented that “they have poisoned the well.” He meant that many helpful spiritual exercises are now viewed with suspicion, hostility and alarm, making it very difficult to nurture the soul at all.

American culture, in particular, is vulnerable to conspiracy theories. And once a conspiracy theory has gained traction it is impossible to disprove it, for any argument against the conspiracy

simply becomes proof of the conspiracy.

**Deceptions and fruit of the spirit.** If one ponders the fruit of the spirit, which one or ones would lead to a concern for “deceptions”? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

**Deceptions and the works of the flesh.** The works of the flesh provide an alternative list, one that would come closer to matching the accusatory spirit that a concern for deception engenders:

Galatians 5:19 Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, 21 envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.

A fascinating quote that emphasizes the importance of trust comes from C. S. Lewis in his essay, “On Obstinacy in Belief” (*The World’s Last Night and Other Essays*, 13 - 30):

To love involves trusting the beloved beyond the evidence, even against much evidence. No man is our friend who believes in our good intentions only when they are proved. No man is our friend who will not be very slow to accept evidence against them. Such confidence, between one man and another, is in fact almost universally praised as a moral beauty, not blamed as a logical error. And the suspicious man is blamed for a meanness of character, not admired for the excellence of his logic. – WLN 26

From a non-literary source, a survey by Rob Lebow, questioning workers from around the world, yielded these “Eight Principles of a Quality Work Environment” (Lebow Company, Bellevue, WA 98004, Copyright 1993). Note the second one on the list.

1. Treat others with uncompromising truth
2. Lavish trust on your associates
3. Mentor unselfishly
4. Be receptive to new ideas, regardless of their origin
5. Take personal risks for the organization’s sake
6. Give credit where it’s due
7. Do not touch dishonest dollars
8. Put the interest of others before your own.

**Question:** From a practical point of view, how does one determine whether to trust or to question? The devil is the master of deception. Is he the one who could tempt us to be overly-concerned about “deceptions”?

**Theme: America and Babylon**

**Leading Question:** Could Babylon repent?

One of the dangers of a strict historicist approach to Scripture is that it locks in both the innocent and guilty parties to their “prophetic” fate. One doesn’t have to baptize the beast. Beastly behavior is already amply documented in the history of the beast. But I see no good reason why the beast should have to retain loyalty to its beastly past. Let’s look at some examples

**1. Egypt and Assyria.** Pride of place has to go to Isaiah’s visionary prospects for two of Israel’s greatest enemies, Egypt and Assyria. These are the words from Isaiah 19:18-25:

Isaiah 19:18 On that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the Lord of hosts. One of these will be called the City of the Sun.

19 On that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the center of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border. 20 It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a savior, and will defend and deliver them. 21 The Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the Lord on that day, and will worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them. 22 The Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them.

23 On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.

24 On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, 25 whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.”

If both Egypt and Assyria can be seen as born-again nations, submissive to Yahweh, couldn’t there be hope for the beast?

**2. Ninevah.** The book of Jonah testifies to the fact that God can accept repentance from the most unlikely of subjects, namely, Ninevah, the capital of Assyria. In short, when the people of Ninevah repented, God repented. Here is the relevant section from Jonah 3:

Jonah 3:4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” 5 And the people of Nineveh

believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

6 When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. 7 Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. 8 Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. 9 Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”

10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

**3. Ahab.** After Jezebel arranged to kill Naboth so that Ahab could have a coveted vineyard, a remarkable dialogue ensued involving Ahab, Elijah, and Yahweh. Here it is, from 1 Kings 21:

1 Kings 21:15 As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, “Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead.” 16 As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

17 Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying: 18 Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel, who rules in Samaria; he is now in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. 19 You shall say to him, “Thus says the Lord: Have you killed, and also taken possession?” You shall say to him, “Thus says the Lord: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood.”

20 Ahab said to Elijah, “Have you found me, O my enemy?” He answered, “I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, 21 I will bring disaster on you; I will consume you, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel; 22 and I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha son of Ahijah, because you have provoked me to anger and have caused Israel to sin. 23 Also concerning Jezebel the Lord said, ‘The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the bounds of Jezreel.’ 24 Anyone belonging to Ahab who dies in the city the dogs shall eat; and anyone of his who dies in the open country the birds of the air shall eat.”

25 (Indeed, there was no one like Ahab, who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord, urged on by his wife Jezebel. 26 He acted most abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, whom the Lord drove out before the Israelites.)

27 When Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth over his bare flesh; he fasted, lay in the sackcloth, and went about dejectedly. 28 Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: 29 “Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son’s days I will bring the disaster on his house.”

**Note:** The Lord often postpones punishment rather than cancelling it completely. Josiah's great reform of the Jerusalem temple earned a one generation reprieve (see 2 Kings 22:14-20), just like Ahab's personal reform had done. The primary difference was that Josiah was one of Judah's best kings; Ahab was one of Israel's worst.

**4. Adventists and Babylon.** In the 1890s circumstances in Battle Creek had greatly deteriorated. It was Ellen White who make the comparison between Adventists and Rome. Here is her quote:

The present is a time of special peril. In 1890 and 1891 there was presented to me a view of dangers that would threaten the work because of a confederacy in the office of publication in Battle Creek. Propositions which to their authors appeared very wise would be introduced, looking to the formation of a confederacy that would make Battle Creek, like Rome, the great head of the work, and enable the office of publication there to swallow up everything in the publishing line among us. This is not God's wisdom, but human wisdom. Those matters have been coming up again and again in different aspects, but this policy of consolidation would, if adopted, result in marring the work. God would have His work move firmly and solidly, but no one branch is to interfere with or absorb other branches of the same great work. – Lt 71, 1894 [*Publishing Ministry*, 144 (1983)]

**Question:** In the light of the above examples, could we not offer hope to Babylon?

Here is another quote from Ellen White, one in which she pointedly argues against the attack mode:

The Lord wants His people to follow other methods than that of condemning wrong, even though the condemnation be just. He wants us to do something more than to hurl at our adversaries charges that only drive them further from the truth. The work which Christ came to do in our world was not to erect barriers and constantly thrust upon the people the fact that they were wrong. (121/122)

He who expects to enlighten a deceived people must come near to them and labor for them in love. He must become a center of holy influence. – 6T 121-122

**Theme: God’s Seal or the Beast’s Mark**

**Leading Question:** How does one know if a person has received the mark of the beast or the seal of God?

Behind the theme for this week’s lesson (“God’s Seal or the Beast’s Mark”) is the assumption that the situation today in America is similar to that of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The fact that we are still distributing the book *The Great Controversy* indicates that Adventists have difficulty in admitting the change.

So let me summarize the changes as clearly as possible under three headings:

**1. Sunday Legislation.** The national Sunday law movement was born in 1879; Congress debated Sunday laws in 1888 and 1889. Senator Blair, author of the 1888 bill declared, “Only a homogeneous people can be great. No nation can exist with more than one religion.” Between 1885 and 1896 Adventists spent a total of 1438 days in jail and 455 days on chain gangs for working on Sunday. See Dennis Pettibone, “The Sunday Law Movement,” in *The World of Ellen G. White*, Gary Land, ed. (Washington DC: Review and Herald, 1987), 113-28.

**2. Stance of the Roman Catholic Church.** In 1854 the pope denounced liberty of conscience as a “most pestilential error” (GC 564). In 1870 the First Vatican Council declared papal infallibility. Though Sunday law agitation virtually vanished at the turn of the century, Catholic zeal increased. Between 1906 and 1910 membership in the US doubled to 3 million. In 1908 Rome decreed that America was no longer a missionary country but a Roman Catholic Christian nation. Rome vowed to “win America for the church.” The era spawned more than 20 anti-Catholic journals. See Gilbert Valentine, *The Shaping of Adventism: The Case of W. W. Prescott* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1992), 216-219.

**3. Rampant secularization.** Several quotes from the 1990s on indicate some of the challenges that Adventism faces in our changing world. Just last year a former Adventist with a remarkable grasp of the American religious scene told me, “Nobody out there has any idea of sacred time.” In 1990 the *Adventist Review* quoted Charles Bradford, former General Conference Vice President: “Today there are fewer Sunday laws being enforced than at any time in recent years” (Charles Bradford, *Adventist Review*, Vol. 167, No. 34, July 17, 1990, p. 12). Roland Hegstad, former editor of *Liberty*, stated in a 1993 *Liberty Alert* insert in the *Adventist Review*: “Over the past 30 years the growing secularization of society has been a greater threat to our church than have Sunday laws” See Roland Hegstad, *Liberty Alert*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Jan/Feb 1993), p. 4; insert in *Adventist Review*, January 7, 1993).

Outside of Adventism, the rushing onslaught of secularization continues. When I was dean at WWC/WWU, the academic dean at Whitworth told me that Whitworth was the only

Presbyterian college established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that still maintained a Christian identity. All the others had become fully secularized. And several years ago I slipped into an AAR session at the national convention, on “Methods of Teaching Bible to Undergraduates.” The presenter, from William Jewell College in Missouri, said that his primary goal was to strike up enough interest in the Bible “...so that my students won’t sell their Bible back to the bookstore at the end of the term. . . .”

Comments from William Jewell web site underscore the subtle inroads of secularization at this one-time Baptist institution:

William Jewell College’s religious heritage is of the Baptist tradition. The College does not require its students to embrace this heritage or any particular faith expression. The faculty and staff of the College are committed to the mission, promise, values and vision of the College including intellectual and spiritual growth, leadership and service. Because it is committed to spiritual values and Christian maturity, the College offers students many opportunities to explore and express faith in ways unique to their own needs and individual interests.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century one could preach Sunday closing laws from the front page of any newspaper. Now the only way to do it is from the pages of *The Great Controversy* or the Sabbath School Bible Study Guide.

So what do the Mark of the Beast and the Seal of God mean in these dramatically changed circumstances? Ellen White may have pointed us in the right direction with these comments at the opening of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: “Just as soon as the people of God are sealed in their foreheads – it is not any seal or mark that can be seen, but a settling into the truth, both intellectually and spiritually, so they cannot be moved – just as soon as God’s people are sealed and prepared for the shaking, it will come. Indeed, it has begun already; the judgments of God are now upon the land, to give us warning, that we may know what is coming” ( Ms 173, 1902).

**Question:** If the seal of God is “a settling into the truth, both intellectually and spiritually, so they cannot be moved,” might it also be true that a similar phenomenon may be true of the followers of the beast? They are intellectually and spiritually settled into opposition against God and his people, so that they, too, cannot be moved.

According to Revelation 13, the essence of beastly activity is coercion and deception. Wherever that shoe fits, wear it! And the principles of “Applied Historicism” (*Beyond Common Ground*, 194- 220) give us wide latitude so that the shoe can be worn anywhere in the world.

And just as beastly coercion and deception may be more subtle these days, so our reverence for the Sabbath may be motivated more by genuine love for God rather than by a raging battle that includes the threat of deadly force.

**Theme: Babylon and Armageddon**

**Leading Question:** How does one know how to determine the line between the concrete and the abstract in Scripture?

This week's lesson brings together a vivid and concrete Old Testament story, the battle between Yahweh and Baal on Mt. Carmel, and the battle of Armageddon from Revelation 16:12-16, which is likely a symbolic battle, though through the centuries, many have tried to shape a concrete trajectory from the story.

**Question:** Is it possible to determine the "point" of a vision even if one is not sure where to draw the line between the concrete and the abstract?

A vivid example that seems to slip easily between the concrete and the abstract is found in Micaiah's vision in 1 Kings 22. There, the "point" of the vision is clear: Ahab deserves to die and Yahweh will make it happen. But the concept of the heavenly council in which Yahweh assembles the spirit to discuss how they can make Ahab fall is almost surreal for us.

A clear "point" for the Armageddon narrative in Revelation 16 is less certain, though it seems to suggest the fall of God's great enemy and nemesis, Babylon.

**Question:** What is significant about the way 1 Kings 18 describes the conflict between Yahweh and Baal?

**Note:** The idea of the heavenly court not only helps explain the story of Micaiah in 1 Kings 22, but also the story of Elijah on Mt. Carmel. On the basis of Deuteronomy 32:8-9, scholars have been able to provide remarkable "proof" of the idea of a cluster of national deities who compose Yahweh's heavenly court. A recently discovered Hebrew manuscript from the Dead Sea Scrolls confirms a hunch suggested by the Greek Old Testament. The Greek OT states that the Most High divided the nations according to the "angels of God," a reading that points to an original Hebrew, "sons of God" (*bene 'Elohim*).

At Mt. Carmel, one of those "gods" is Baal, the fertility God from Tyre and Sidon. Typically, Yahweh was not troubled by the worship of the other national deities as long as they stayed home. But Jezebel had brought her god with her to Yahweh's land. That was when the conflict became serious and deadly. "You shall have no other gods before me," declared God from Sinai. But don't you dare bring those other gods into my land! The violence of the Old Testament prophets is confirmed by Elijah's slaughter of the 400 prophets of Baal after Yahweh's victory on the mountain.

In the New Testament, Babylon, a richly symbolic term in its original Old Testament setting, is stand-in for the Beast, who deserves to die as much as the prophets of Baal at Carmel.



**Question:** Is it possible to separate culture and enduring truths in our modern world? Where are we most tempted to compromise? Is it always clear where the line is between legitimate cultural adaptation and illegitimate departure from the faith?

**Theme: The Return of our Lord Jesus Christ**

**Leading Question:** How can one explain the sharp distinction between the Old Testament perspective on Jesus' return and that of the New Testament?

Coming to this last lesson in a quarterly dedicated to the theme, "Preparation for the End Time," opened up some interesting questions for me. Immediately I thought of those passages that had fueled my Advent hope ever since I was a child. Here are the references and the key phrases as I remember them: John 14:1-3: "In my father's house are many mansions."; Acts 1:11, "This same Jesus will come in like manner"; 1 Thess. 4:16-17: "Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air"; Rev. 1:7: "Behold he cometh with clouds, and every eye shall see him."

Then I went to my *Nave's Topical Bible*. There the Second Coming is listed under the general heading, "Jesus, the Christ." Some 92 pages are dedicated to Jesus; "Second Coming," has six columns, spread over four pages. Interestingly enough, those six columns include only one Old Testament passage; Job 19:25, "I know that my redeemer liveth."

And that reference triggered a vivid classroom memory. The Hebrew word for "Redeemer," is *Goel*, the "near-kinsman who comes to rescue the family name, honor, and property." That is the word that refers to Boaz, the near-kinsman who "redeemed" Ruth; it is also the word that refers to the avenger of blood in the law that defines God's plan for the Cities of Refuge (Numbers 35:6-34).

The classroom memory was triggered by my statement to a group of ministerial students that the Redeemer/*Goel* in Job 19:25 was, in the first instance, most likely not a reference to Jesus, but to the near-kinsman/Redeemer that Job was hoping could come to defend him from the accusations of his three friends. I told the students that in a secondary sense it could refer to Jesus. One young woman blurted out in distress, "The size of our preachable Bible gets smaller and smaller!"

What she was reflecting was the deeply embedded conviction that if God said something, it really should apply to all people at all times and in all places. But her theological training at Walla Walla College/University had been nibbling away at that conviction. In that connection it is worth noting that the book of Job gives no clue that Job hoped for the second coming of Jesus. The book closes with the blunt statement: "Job died, old and full of days." That's it. The Greek translation of Job, however, prepared just shortly before the New Testament era, adds this notable comment: "And he will live again with those whom the Lord raises up" (Job 42.17).

But there is more to this story. Ellen White's commentary on the role of the Redeemer/*Goel* in the plan for the cities of refuge in *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 515, is the only passage I know of in the writings of Ellen White that clearly indicates the process of "accommodation," the means whereby God adapts his ideal to limited human understanding, a process that is strongly resisted by many devout conservatives. In fact, David Wright, the left-of-

center Inter-Varsity Fellowship church historian at the University of Edinburgh, who paved the way for my book *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?* to be published in the UK by Paternoster Press, told me that Inter-Varsity Press UK would never touch the book because the emphasis on “divine accommodation” was far too strong. Interestingly enough, the one passage where Ellen White clearly revealed “accommodation” was published late in her life: 1890 in *Patriarchs and Prophets*:

The appointment of these cities had been commanded by Moses, “that the slayer may flee thither, which killeth any person at unawares. And they shall be unto you cities for refuge,” he said, “that the manslayer die not, until he stand before the congregation in judgment.” [Num. 35:11-12] This merciful provision was rendered necessary by the ancient custom of private vengeance, by which the punishment of the murderer devolved on the nearest relative or the next heir of the deceased. In cases where guilt was clearly evident, it was not necessary to wait for a trial by the magistrates. The avenger might pursue the criminal anywhere, and put him to death wherever he should be found. The Lord did not see fit to abolish this custom at that time; but he made provision to insure the safety of those who should take life unintentionally. – *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 515

But if the Old Testament does not teach a second coming in the same way as the new, what is the eschatology of the Old Testament? J. Paul Grove, my mentor at Walla Walla College while I was a student (1961-1965), pointed us to a seminal article in the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 4:25-38, “The Role of Israel in Old Testament Prophecy.” By drawing on such passages as Isaiah 65, 66, and Zechariah 14, the article sketched out an “original” plan for ancient Israel which called for the gradual elimination of evil and the acceptance of the Messiah by his people. A key Ellen White quote was part of the framework for the article, one that she wrote in 1883 in response to an inquiry about the post 1844 delay:

The angels of God in their messages to men represent time as very short. Thus it has always been presented to me. It is true that time has continued longer than we expected in the early days of this message. Our Saviour did not appear as soon as we hoped. But has the Word of the Lord failed? Never! It should be remembered that the promises and the threatenings of God are alike conditional. – MS 4, 1883, unpublished until *Evangelism*, 695 [1946], and then more completely in 1 SM 67 [1958].

Such a plan sets up a tension between the traditional historicist end-time plan which takes earth’s history to 1844 and beyond. If Christ had been accepted by his people in the first century as the article implied, no one would have even dreamed about 1844.

When I wrote my book *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (RH 1991), I included a narrative about an experience I had had with two students who had been shocked by the Old Testament passages in Isaiah 65-66 and Zechariah 14. That story is included in the second edition of *Inspiration* (Energion, 2016) and is worth including here. It is chapter 21 in both editions.

**It's All So Very Plain**  
Chapter 22  
*Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers*  
By Alden Thompson

In this concluding chapter we return to our starting point, and take another look at the interplay between Christian experience and sacred text.

The year was 1982. I was teaching a new upper-division college course, Inspiration and Revelation. Over a period of 10 weeks, we would spend forty 50-minute sessions together. Since events in Adventism had thrust the topic into the limelight, our work was cut out for us.

My own goals for the class were clear: I wanted my students to learn to read their Bibles reverently, but without fear. And I wanted them to appreciate the ministry of Ellen White. To that end, we would empty the skeletons from the closet one by one and explore ways of turning potential stumbling blocks into stepping stones.

We would study Ellen White's experience and writings, but our first interest would be Scripture. The menu would be varied: prophetic experiences, proverbs, prayers, parallel passages, to mention some of the appetizers; the entree (that is, the tougher problems) would come towards the end of term: the use of the Old Testament in the New, the distinction between what is literal and symbolic in visions, and the analysis of enduring elements in eschatological passages. Finally, a choice morsel for dessert: Ellen White's classic statements on inspiration from *Selected Messages*, book 1, pp. 15-58, and the Introduction to *The Great Controversy*, pp. v-xii.

For some time I had been experimenting with assignments which would expose students to Scripture and encourage them to arrive at their own thoughtful conclusions, allowing me to monitor their spiritual pulse at the same time.

Thus a typical assignment simply required the student to react to reading material in a meaningful way. Any thoughtful response submitted on time received full credit. Tests were graded rigorously; but the assignments enabled the students to respond freely without risking their grade. This approach encouraged them to stay current with their reading and it allowed me to keep in touch with their thinking.

For the "Inspiration and Revelation" course, my choice of dessert (the Ellen White statements) was deliberate. After the students had worked their way through some twenty assignments and grappled with various problems, I wanted them to experience the remarkable blending of realism and reassurance which these statements offer. Pedagogically, the plan seemed sound – answers always make more sense after you see the problems. But I was in for a jolt.

The class was a delight to teach. A sprinkling of new Christians injected a certain simplicity and vibrancy into our discussions, a helpful counterbalance to the probing questions of the more skeptically inclined. Often, when students were surprised at their discoveries in Scripture, I referred to Ellen White's statements, pointing out how this godly woman was able to put the surprises in their place – and still believe. But through the term, these references were always secondhand. Even my most glowing recommendations failed to move these typical American college students to read the relevant passages before they absolutely had to. That turned out to be crucial.

During that term our School of Theology staff was also dealing with the inspiration issue in several local churches in our union. In those areas where members had left to join independent “Adventist” fellowships, inspiration had been a key issue.

As I took my turn at these off-campus appointments, I was impressed with the urgency of our task at the college. The churches were torn and bleeding; loved ones and friends had been wrenched apart; anger, hostility, fear, and sorrow were very much in evidence. To what extent were we at the college to blame for failing to educate the church? It was a gnawing and persistent question.

When away from campus we generally packed the Sabbath hours full of formal meetings and question-and-answer sessions. And the members were eager to meet informally on Saturday night as well. Again and again we worked over the questions of “Why?” and “Where do we go from here?”

The members weren’t shy about expressing themselves. One brother declared, “If you had told me those things eight years ago, I would have tossed you right out of the church.” That, of course, made it easier to explain the reputed “cover-up.” A pastor or teacher wants to share material in a way which will help the members grow. But if they aren’t ready, what should he do?

As the academic term was drawing to a close, I made a final week-end trip to one of the troubled churches. It was a good visit. And as I retired late Saturday evening at the home of a church family, I fell asleep with an oft-repeated line ringing in my ears – “If only we could have had meetings like these six months ago, we might have saved our church family.”

Sunday morning I awoke early. With plenty of time before breakfast and the flight home, I reached for the stack of “Inspiration/Revelation” assignments which I had tucked into my briefcase. Still snuggled comfortably in bed, I began to read. This was the assignment dealing with eschatological passages, the last “tough” one of the term. The students were to compare the Old Testament eschatological passages, Isaiah 65, 66 and Zechariah 14, with a New Testament passage, Revelation 21, 22, and comment on how one determines which elements from the Old Testament have permanent value.”

The first few responses were unexceptional. But suddenly I was wide awake, jarred by the following response: “In Zechariah it seems like the day of the Lord is an establishing of an earthly kingdom, not a heavenly one so much and it also seems like the people of that time looked for its soon fulfillment in their day. The question I have is why Adventists have taken some texts and left others to suit their own interpretation. It is the same in Isaiah, too. Can you be justified in taking some and leaving the rest? How do you really tell if there is a permanent or lasting value in them? I’m really mixed up and my faith in Adventism dwindles a bit here, because it seems we have misused the Scriptures or have greatly misunderstood them and used them in the wrong way. So many things have been uprooted that I need some stable evidence that I can trust. What do we have to stand on?”

Then came a break in the handwritten copy; a question mark and a single word cried out from the middle of the page:

HELP

The text resumed: “If we can’t trust in a prophet’s words because they aren’t direct or directed word-for-word inspired and we can’t tell whether something has lasting value for us today, how do we personally apply the Bible to us if we don’t know? Are the promises for others, with no thought of today? Has the Adventist tradition simply pulled texts out of context so that we have a totally made up theology? Please bring back our confidence or explain why.”

Hardly a ringing confirmation of my course objectives! I picked up the next paper. More of the same (the students were roommates): “As I read the passages listed I was almost shocked to find those texts that our church has always believed to be about the kingdom/heaven. . . . Somehow over these past weeks of this quarter, I’ve come up with the idea that the Holy Bible isn’t all that I had it cracked up to be. Ideas have been presented in this class that have made me wonder – is there any validity in what ‘the inspired men of old’ have written? And yet this is probably not what I was supposed to learn from this class (hopefully).”

Continuing, the student admitted to being “frightened” at some of her thoughts. “Maybe I’m not the kind who can handle the real truth.” But then came a postscript with a ray of hope: “After reading what I had written above, I noticed quite a sharp note to it, maybe too sharp. This class has been a real strength to my overall view of the Bible, helping me to realize that the men of the Scripture were humans like we are and not so infallible. This may seem a contradiction to what I just wrote above. I guess I’m just a little confused. I have enjoyed this class immensely and would hope that the views stated above would not necessarily reflect any fault on the teacher.”

Taking the two assignments to breakfast, I read them to my hosts. The contrast between Saturday night gratitude and Sunday morning panic was almost more than I could handle. We discussed the challenge of educating the church. And we prayed. How can we build a faith that endures? I knew the two young ladies who had expressed their alarm. They were committed Christians and a positive influence on campus. Why was their house of faith in trouble?

Monday morning the final assignment of the term was due. This was the dessert: “Read the Introduction to *The Great Controversy*, pp. v-xii and *Selected Messages*, vol. 1, pp. 15-58. Give your personal reaction.” I collected the papers; then I told them what had happened over the week-end. The discussion which followed was sobering, but helpful. After class I headed back to my office, pondering the tantalizing set of papers in my hand.

Joy and relief! The Spirit had been at work. While I was away the two roommates had read the assignment. With no coaching from me, this is what the first one wrote: “I wish we had read both of these at the beginning. They made it so plain about everything we have studied so far. It was like a compact writing of the whole quarter. EGW told exactly how to use her writings and the Bible. She made it so plain. I wish that everyone would read it so that there wouldn’t be so many problems today about the whole controversy.”

And from her roommate: “As I read those books I wondered why they weren’t required at the beginning of the quarter. I was very impressed. It answered a lot of my questions about dealing with her writings and the Scriptures. Why has there been so much hassle about her writings when she has the answers right there?”

You probably guessed. My students now read those passages at the beginning of the term *and* at the end. And the second time through they still see a great deal they didn’t appreciate the first time around.

But why are these statements so powerful? For the two students in my class, Ellen White didn't even address the issues raised by Zechariah 14 and Isaiah 65, 66. Nevertheless, they were reassured. Perhaps doubt gives birth to doubt; and faith multiplies faith. That great Christian apologist, C. S. Lewis, hinted at our vulnerability in this respect as he reflected on his own experience: "The society of unbelievers makes Faith harder, even when they are people whose opinions, on any other subject, are known to be worthless" (Lewis, p. 42).

The company we keep does have a bearing on our spiritual life. And when we read Ellen White's statements on inspiration, we are in the company of a believer. She actually doesn't tell us anything we couldn't discover for ourselves through a careful reading of Scripture. But should we run across an unsettling "surprise" in God's Word, she reassures us, telling us that she has been there before – and that she still believes. In an age of skepticism, we need that kind of help.

This experience has left its mark on me and my teaching; I believe I have learned three lessons that can benefit the church. Both the happy ending and the pain along the way have something to tell us.

First, the study of the Bible brings joy and light. But it can also be frightening and dangerous. We dare not proceed without imploring God to send His Spirit to guide and bless.

Second, complacency in our study of the Word may mean that we will have to learn our lessons in difficult times, through tears and heartache. At the peak of the 1888 crisis, Ellen White described the danger in a testimony to the church: "As real spiritual life declines, it has ever been the tendency to cease to advance in the knowledge of the truth. Men rest satisfied with the light already received from God's word and discourage any further investigation of the Scripture. They become conservative and seek to avoid discussion.

"The fact that there is no controversy or agitation among God's people should not be regarded as conclusive evidence that they are holding fast to sound doctrine. There is reason to fear that they may not be clearly discriminating between truth and error. When no new questions are started by investigation of the Scriptures, when no difference of opinion arises which will set men to searching the Bible for themselves to make sure that they have the truth, there will be many now, as in ancient times, who will hold to tradition and worship they know not what" (5T, pp. 706, 707).

The third lesson I believe we should learn is the great value of Ellen White's writings on inspiration. God gave her the remarkable ability to be realistic about the humanity of the authors of Scripture while reassuring us of God's presence in His Word. In an age reeking of skepticism, we must treasure this gift from God.

But if Ellen White held such a practical and balanced view of Scripture, why has such a view not been more widely held in the church? Perhaps because the church has not been ready to listen. And if the church is not ready, even if God's messenger speaks, the words will not find their way home.

In God's great Providence we can learn from her now. I know that I will be eternally grateful for what she has done for me. At a time when Adventists are struggling to know how to relate to the ministry of Ellen White and seem to be neglecting Scripture at the same time, maybe those of us who have been blessed by her ministry need to be more vocal in giving our testimony.

Initially, I was a bit startled when one of my friends who read this book in manuscript form described it as "an act of gratitude to Ellen White and as a gift of support to others wrestling with questions that arise in our secular and pluralistic culture." The more I think about it, the

more I like what he wrote. Indeed, I would be grateful if the church I love could see this book in that light.

Some may be unsettled by the forthrightness of my discussion. And those who may not have been touched by her ministry in the way that I have been touched may be puzzled by the intensity of my convictions. We are not capable of understanding all the mysteries of why we are able to believe and how. But as I have watched friends and students struggle with issues of faith, I have longed for them to find a meaningful relationship with God. Ours is a cruel and bitter world. Not without reason have Abraham and a host of others looked for “a city which has foundations whose builder and maker is God” (Heb. 11:10).

Are you tired of being alone in the world? “No intangible principle, no impersonal essence or mere abstraction, can satisfy the needs and longings of human beings in this life of struggle with sin and sorrow and pain. It is not enough to believe in law and force, in things that have no pity, and never hear the cry for help. We need to know of an almighty arm that will hold us up, of an infinite Friend that pities us. We need to clasp a hand that is warm, to trust in a heart full of tenderness. And even so God has in His word revealed Himself” (Ed., p. 133).

Do you need strength to keep on keeping on? “As the student of the Bible beholds the Redeemer, there is awakened in the soul the mysterious power of faith, adoration, and love. Upon the vision of Christ the gaze is fixed, and the beholder grows into the likeness of that which he adores. The words of the apostle Paul become the language of the soul: ‘I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord; . . . that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings (Phil. 3:8-10)’” (Ed., p. 192).

Finally, my prayer is that Ellen White’s model for studying Scripture could become ours. The goal is a daunting one, but it is one worth praying for. And when it happens, we give each other wisdom and strength as He designed that we should: “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” (CT, p. 433).

I like that picture. It is a marvelous model for a community of believers who plan to spend eternity together. Scripture, in all its richness and diversity, is God’s means for binding our hearts together in a mysterious union with Him and with each other. Let’s pray that He will make it happen.

**Question:** How is the best way to address the differences between the Old Testament teaching about God’s kingdom and the “blessed” hope is so much a part of the New Testament?

**Question:** Is it possible to grow in the knowledge of God without new and hard questions?

By God’s grace we can explore his Word and be absolutely honest with everything we see, knowing and trusting that his spirit will guide us.