

The Cosmic Conflict



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 13:24–27; Gen. 1:31; Ezek. 28:12–19; Isa. 14:12–15; Matt. 4:1–11; John 8:44, 45.*

Memory Text: “ ‘And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel’ ” (*Genesis 3:15, NKJV*).

Central to biblical theology is the great controversy between Christ and Satan. Although the idea of a cosmic conflict between God and celestial creatures who have fallen and rebelled against God is a prominent motif of Scripture (*Matt. 13:24–30, 37–39; Rev. 12:7–10*) and also is prevalent in much of Christian tradition, many Christians have rejected or neglected the whole idea.

From a biblical perspective, however, the theme of a cosmic conflict, in which the kingdom of God is opposed by the devil and his angels, is not one that we can neglect without missing a great deal of what the biblical narratives are about. The Gospels alone are filled with references to the devil and demons who oppose God.

To begin with this week, we will address how the two following questions might be answered according to some crucial biblical passages:

1. Where does Scripture teach that there is a cosmic conflict between God and Satan?
2. According to Scripture, what is the nature of the conflict?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 1.

An Enemy Has Done This

Read Matthew 13:24–27. How does the parable help us understand evil in our world?

Jesus tells the story of a landowner who sows only good seeds in his field. However, tares spring up among the wheat. Upon seeing this, the servants of the owner ask him, “ ‘ “Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?” ’ ” (*Matt. 13:27, NKJV*). This is similar to the question often asked today concerning the problem of evil: If God created the world entirely good, why is there evil in it?

Read Matthew 13:28–30 in light of Christ’s explanation in Matthew 13:37–40. How does this also shed light on the nature of the cosmic conflict?

The master replies to his servant’s question: “ ‘ “An enemy has done this” ’ ” (*Matt. 13:28, NKJV*). Jesus later identifies the one “ ‘who sows the good seed’ ” as “ ‘the Son of Man,’ ” who is Jesus Himself (*Matt. 13:37, NKJV*), and explains that “the field is the world” (*Matt. 13:38*), and the “ ‘enemy who sowed’ ” the tares is “ ‘the devil’ ” (*Matt. 13:39, NKJV*), explicitly depicting a cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan. Why is there evil in the world? Evil is the result of the enemy (the devil) who opposes the master. “ ‘An enemy has done this’ ” (*Matt. 13:28, NKJV*).

This answer, however, provokes the follow-up question, “ ‘Do you want us then to go and gather them up?’ ” In other words, why not uproot the evil immediately? “ ‘No, ’ ’ ” the master replies, “ ‘lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest’ ’ ” (*Matt. 13:29, 30, NKJV; compare with Mark 4:29*). According to the parable, God will finally put an end to evil, but uprooting it prematurely would result in irreversible collateral damage that harms the good.

What are some of the dangers in seeking to uproot the tares from the wheat now? At the same time, why does this not mean simply ignoring the evil that we encounter?

The Origin of the Controversy on Earth

Parallel to the question in the parable—about why there is bad seed in the field if the owner planted only good seed—is another question: if God created the world entirely good, how did evil arise here?

Read Genesis 1:31. What do God’s words reveal about the state of creation when God finished creating, and why is this answer important?

According to Genesis 1:31, when God finished creating the world, it was “very good.” In Genesis 1, there is no hint of evil in God’s creation of this planet. How, then, did evil come into the human experience?

Read Genesis 3:1–7. What does this tell us about how evil got here on earth? What light does this shed on the nature of the cosmic conflict? (See also Rev. 12:7–9.)

In this narrative, we see lies about God’s character raised by the serpent, identified as the devil himself (that “serpent of old” [NKJV]) in Revelation 12:7–9. The serpent first uses a question to cast doubt on God’s command, nearly reversing what God had commanded in his question. Then, the serpent directly challenges what God had said, saying to Eve, “ ‘You will not surely die’ ” (*Gen. 3:4, NKJV*).

Someone, either the serpent or God, lied to Eve, who now has a choice to make about whether she will believe what God told her or what the serpent did.

Here and elsewhere in Scripture, the nature of this conflict is primarily over what and whom to believe, which is itself integrally related to love. And that is because your beliefs about someone, the kind of person that he or she is, and whether he or she can be trusted, deeply impact whether you will love and trust that person and, in this case, listen to what He tells you.

Read Genesis 3:15. God’s statement to the serpent that the Seed of the woman, referring to the Messiah, would crush the serpent’s head is often identified as the first gospel (*protoevangelium*) in Scripture. How does this both reinforce the reality of the conflict and yet provide hope for us in the midst of it?

The Origin of the Controversy in Heaven

Genesis 1–3 alone shows that evil existed *before* the fall of Adam and Eve. Conceptually, “evil” has already appeared, in the name of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (*Gen. 2:9, 17*). Then the serpent accuses God of lying when, in fact, he, the serpent, is the one lying. The existence of the serpent (*Rev. 12:9*), along with his lying, shows the reality of evil there. Thus, even in Eden before the Fall, the presence of evil is manifest.

Read Ezekiel 28:12–19 in light of Exodus 25:19, 20. What is the nature of this being’s fall?

According to this passage, the origin of evil and the cosmic conflict began in heaven.

Before he fell, the being who became known as Satan was a covering cherub. Beyond being identified as this cherub, he was “ ‘the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty’ ” and was “ ‘in Eden, the garden of God’ ” (*Ezek. 28:12, 13, NKJV*). Neither of these things could be said of the human king of Tyre (or any other human). Hence, we know that we have been given here a glimpse into the fall of Lucifer.

Read Isaiah 14:12–15. What additional light does this shed on the origin of the great controversy?

According to Isaiah 14, Lucifer decided to exalt himself and make himself like God. This verse complements what we saw in Ezekiel 28, that his “heart was lifted up” because of his “beauty” (*Ezek. 28:17*), which should have brought him to glorify the God who made him beautiful. Instead, he became proud. Worse, in this pride, he set out to take God’s place and to slander Him. The Hebrew term for “trading” in Ezekiel 28:16 also means “slander,” an indication of how Satan will operate against God and against us, as well.

How do we understand the fact that Lucifer, who fell, was originally “perfect . . . from the day” he was created “till iniquity was found” in him (*Ezek. 28:15*)? How could a perfect being fall unless being “perfect” included true moral freedom?

If You Worship Me

Satan's quest to usurp God's throne is also revealed in the temptation narratives found in Matthew 4 and Luke 4. In the striking encounter between Jesus and the tempter, much is revealed about the nature of the conflict. Here we see the reality of the great controversy between Christ and Satan, but played out in stark and graphic terms.

Read Matthew 4:1–11. How is the reality of the great controversy between Christ and Satan revealed here?

The Spirit had “led” Jesus into the wilderness for the express purpose that Jesus was “to be tempted by the devil” (*Matt. 4:1, NKJV*). And before facing this prearranged encounter, Jesus fasted for forty days. So when the devil came, he tempted Jesus to turn stones into bread, playing on Jesus' extreme hunger. But Jesus countered this temptation with Scripture, and Satan's ploy failed.

Then, in an attempt to get Jesus to act presumptuously, the devil tempted Jesus to throw Himself down from the pinnacle of the temple. Satan twisted Scripture to suggest that if Jesus were truly the Son of God, angels would protect Him. But with Scripture read rightly, Jesus again counters the temptation.

The third temptation clearly reveals just what the devil is trying to accomplish. He wants Jesus to worship him. Satan attempts to usurp the worship that is due to God alone.

And to do so, he shows Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world and their glory” and then claims: “ ‘All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me’ ” (*Matt. 4:8, 9, NKJV*). Indeed, in Luke 4:6, a text that parallels Matthew, the devil claims: “ ‘All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish’ ” (*Luke 4:6, NKJV*).

Once again, Jesus counters the temptation with Scripture, and again Satan fails.

In all three cases, Jesus used Scripture to defend against the enemy's attacks.

Ephesians 6:12 reminds us that “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (*NKJV*). Though we shouldn't live in fear, why must we always remember the reality of the struggle going on around us?

The Nature of the Cosmic Conflict

We have seen some passages that teach a cosmic conflict between God and Satan. But how is such a conflict even possible? How could anyone oppose the omnipotent God? If the cosmic conflict were over sheer power, it would have been over before it started. It must be of a different kind. Indeed, Scripture reveals that the conflict is a dispute over God's character—a conflict over slanderous allegations raised by the devil against God, that (among other things) He is not fully good and loving. Such claims cannot be defeated by power or brute force but by comparing the two competing characters.

“In His dealing with sin, God could employ only righteousness and truth. Satan could use what God could not—flattery and deceit. He had sought to falsify the word of God and had misrepresented His plan of government before the angels, claiming that God was not just in laying laws and rules upon the inhabitants of heaven; that in requiring submission and obedience from His creatures, He was seeking merely the exaltation of Himself. Therefore it must be demonstrated before the inhabitants of heaven, as well as of all the worlds, that God's government was just, His law perfect. Satan had made it appear that he himself was seeking to promote the good of the universe. The true character of the usurper, and his real object, must be understood by all. He must have time to manifest himself by his wicked works.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 498.

Read John 8:44, 45 in light of Revelation 12:7–9. What do these passages reveal about the character of the devil and his strategy?

The devil's plan from the beginning has been to try to make creatures believe that God was not really just and loving and that His law was oppressive and hurtful to them. No wonder Jesus refers to the devil as “a liar and the father of” lies (*John 8:44, NKJV*). In contrast, Jesus came to “testify to the truth” (*John 18:37, NASB*) and directly counter the lies and slander of Satan, defeating and, ultimately, destroying the devil and his power (*1 John 3:8, Heb. 2:14*).

Revelation 12:9, 10 identifies Satan (1) as the “serpent of old” (*NKJV*), (2) as the one who in the heavenly court accuses God's people, and (3) as the dragon ruler who deceives the world. The Greek word translated “devil” just means “slanderer,” showing once again that the nature of the conflict is over beliefs, including beliefs about God's character.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Origin of Evil,” pp. 492–504, in *The Great Controversy*.

“Nothing is more plainly taught in Scripture than that God was in no wise responsible for the entrance of sin; that there was no arbitrary withdrawal of divine grace, no deficiency in the divine government, that gave occasion for the uprising of rebellion. Sin is an intruder, for whose presence no reason can be given. It is mysterious, unaccountable; to excuse it is to defend it. . . . Had he [Satan] been immediately blotted from existence, they [the inhabitants of heaven and of other worlds] would have served God from fear rather than from love. The influence of the deceiver would not have been fully destroyed, nor would the spirit of rebellion have been utterly eradicated. Evil must be permitted to come to maturity. For the good of the entire universe through ceaseless ages Satan must more fully develop his principles, that his charges against the divine government might be seen in their true light by all created beings, that the justice and mercy of God and the immutability of His law might forever be placed beyond all question.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 492, 493, 499.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Many people wonder how a sinless creature like Lucifer could sin for the first time. Why is sin so “mysterious” and “unaccountable”? How can we explain this first sin without excusing it or justifying it? That is, why would explaining its origin be the same as justifying it?
- 2 Why did God not simply blot Satan out of existence right away? Why must evil “be permitted to come to maturity”? How is this “for the good of the entire universe through ceaseless ages”?
- 3 Why is it so important to understand that the conflict between God and Satan is not one of sheer power but a conflict of a different kind? How does a conflict over character make sense in ways that a conflict over sheer power could not?
- 4 How does understanding the nature of the conflict pull back the curtain, so to speak, on ways in which your own life might be a microcosm of the cosmic conflict? In what ways are you even now experiencing the reality of this conflict? How should you respond in ways that show whose side you truly are on?

The Persistent Caller: Part 1

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

The Zoom call just wouldn't go through.

"It's not working!" Matrona exclaimed.

Over her phone, Colette could hear Matrona typing and retying the Zoom password on a facility computer.

It was a call that they had attempted many times that week. Matrona was among many Alaska Native children living in facilities and foster homes in Alaska, and she was eager to get acquainted with Colette.

She tried the password again. "It's not working!" she cried.

"It's OK," Colette said.

"It's not OK! I want to try again," Matrona said.

When it still didn't work, Colette suggested they talk on the phone instead.

Colette Reahl, a Seventh-day Adventist pediatrician in Anchorage, was eager to get acquainted with Matrona, too. An Alaska Native girl, Matrona was eligible for adoption at a facility in Fairbanks, located 360 miles away.

Matrona reluctantly agreed to talk by phone. The first question she asked was, "What are your house rules?"

"That is something we can talk about more when you get to the house," Colette said. "But respect is pretty big in my house."

Matrona quizzed Colette for the next 30 minutes. At the end of the conversation, she said, "You know, my foster mom is going to adopt me, right?"

Colette, a Florida native who had lived with her husband in Alaska for eight years, had not known that. She thought, *Matrona is so interesting, and she has such a huge personality. This is going to be an adventure!*

From her side, Matrona knew that Colette was looking to adopt, but she didn't want to get hurt. So, she made it difficult for Colette to get close.

Colette asked how often she could call, and Matrona proposed once a week on Tuesdays. But when Colette called, Matrona wasn't available or didn't answer. They changed the time to Thursdays and then to Saturdays.

Colette sensed that Matrona was annoyed, but she couldn't understand why. She decided to keep calling every week whether Matrona wanted to talk or not. As she kept calling with unconditional love, Matrona's heart began to thaw.



This mission story offers an inside look at a previous Thirteenth Sabbath project. Pediatrician Colette Reahl is also coleader of Bethel (Alaska) Seventh-day Adventist Church, which received part of a 2024 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering. Thank you for helping spread the gospel with this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering on March 29. Read more about Colette and Matrona next week.