

Rules of Engagement



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Dan. 10:1–14, Rev. 13:1–8, Job 1:1–12, Job 2:1–7, John 12:31, John 14:30, Mark 6:5, Mark 9:29.*

Memory Text: “He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8, NKJV).

A powerful narrative that reveals the nature of the cosmic conflict can be found in 1 Kings 18:19–40, Elijah on Mount Carmel, where the Lord exposes the so-called “gods of the nations.” Yet, there is more behind the scenes about these “gods” than that they are mere figments of pagan imagination. Behind the “gods” that the nations surrounding Israel thought they were worshiping was, actually, something else.

“They sacrificed to demons, not to God, to gods they did not know, to new gods, new arrivals that your fathers did not fear” (Deut. 32:17, NKJV). Paul adds, “The things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons” (1 Cor. 10:20, NKJV).

Behind the false “gods” of the nations, then, were actually demons in disguise. This means, then, that all of the texts of Scripture dealing with idolatry and the foreign gods are “cosmic conflict” texts.

With this background, the cosmic conflict theme is better understood. And this truth has massive implications for understanding more about the nature of this conflict and how it sheds light on the problem of evil.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 8.

An Angel Delayed

As we have seen, the false “gods” of the nations were demons in disguise. And elsewhere we see evidence that demonic celestial rulers are sometimes behind earthly rulers. Even angelic agents sent by God can be opposed by the forces of the enemy.

Read Daniel 10:1–14, with special attention to verses 12, 13. What do these verses teach that is relevant to the cosmic conflict? What do you make of the angel sent by God being “withstood” for twenty-one days?

How could it be that an angel sent by God could be “withstood” for three weeks? Being all-powerful, God possessed the power to respond to Daniel immediately—that is, had He chosen to. If He exercised His power to do so, He could make an angel appear to Daniel right away. Yet, the angel sent by God was “withstood” by the “prince of the kingdom of Persia” for three entire weeks. What is going on here?

“For three weeks Gabriel wrestled with the powers of darkness, seeking to counteract the influences at work on the mind of Cyrus. . . . All that heaven could do in behalf of the people of God was done. The victory was finally gained; the forces of the enemy were held in check all the days of Cyrus, and all the days of his son Cambyses.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 572.

In order for such a conflict to transpire, God must not be exercising all of His power. The enemy must be afforded some genuine freedom and power that is not removed capriciously but is restricted by some parameters known to both parties (the details of which are not revealed to us). It seems there must be parameters in the cosmic conflict that even God’s angels are operating within, which in the coming lessons will be referred to as the “rules of engagement.”

In a certain sense, understanding these limits might not be hard if we grasp the idea, already talked about, that God works only by love, and that love, not coercion, is the foundation of His government. This idea, that God works only through the principles emanating from love, can help us better understand the great controversy.

How have you experienced the limits of working only through the principles of love and not coercion? What lessons did you learn about the limits of power?

The Dragon of Revelation

The overarching perspective of celestial rulers in the cosmic conflict is encapsulated in the book of Revelation, where the devil is depicted as “the great dragon” who opposes God and “deceives the whole world” (*Rev. 12:9, NKJV*).

Read Revelation 13:1–8. What does this reveal about the extent of the dragon’s jurisdiction?

The dragon (Satan) not only wars against God (*Rev. 12:7–9*) and His servants (*for example, Rev. 12:1–6*), but he is depicted as the ruler behind the earthly kingdoms who persecute God’s people throughout the ages.

The dragon “gave . . . his power, his throne, and great authority” to the beast from the sea (*Rev. 13:2, NKJV; compare with Rev. 13:5; Rev. 17:13, 14*). This beast from the sea is “given a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies, and he was given authority to continue for forty-two months” (*Rev. 13:5, NKJV*).

So, Satan (the dragon) gives power and ruling authority to a beast (an earthly religious-political power). This power is exercised in order to usurp the worship due to God. The beast blasphemes God’s name; it also wars against, and even overcomes, God’s holy ones (saints), at least for a period of time. This worldwide authority and jurisdiction is given to him by the dragon, the usurping ruler of this world.

Yet, there are clear limits on Satan and his agencies, as well, including temporal limits. “‘Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time’ ” (*Rev. 12:12, NKJV*).

Satan “knows that his time is short” (*Rev. 12:12, ESV*), and the events described in Revelation proceed along prophetic time lines, which show specific limits (*see Rev. 12:14, Rev. 13:5*) to the reign of these evil forces.

Indeed, God finally triumphs. “‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away’ ” (*Rev. 21:4, NKJV*).

However hard for us to see it now, in the end good will eternally triumph over evil. Why is it so important that we never forget this wonderful promise?

The Case of Job

In the book of Job, we are given some fascinating insights into the reality of the great controversy.

Read Job 1:1–12 and Job 2:1–7. What principles of the great controversy do we see unveiled here?

Many significant details can be gleaned from these verses. First, there appears to be some kind of heavenly council scene, not merely a dialogue between God and Satan; other celestial beings are involved.

Second, there is some existing dispute, signaled by the fact that God asks whether Satan has considered Job. Considered Job for what? The question makes sense in the context of a larger, ongoing dispute.

Third, while God declares Job blameless, upright, and God-fearing, Satan claims that Job appears to fear God only because God protects him. This amounts to slander against both Job's character and God's (*compare with Rev. 12:10, Zechariah 3*).

Fourth, Satan alleges that God's protection of Job (the hedge) is unfair and makes it impossible for Satan to prove his allegations. This indicates some existing limits on Satan (rules of engagement), and that Satan has apparently tried to harm Job.

God responds to Satan's accusation before the heavenly council by allowing Satan to put his theory to the test, but only within limits. He first grants Satan power over "all that he has," but prohibits personal harm to Job (*Job 1:12, NKJV*). Later, after Satan claims that Job cares only about himself, God allows Satan to afflict Job personally, but Satan must spare his life (*Job 2:3–6*).

Satan brings numerous calamities against Job's household, yet in each case Job continues to bless His name (*Job 1:20–22; Job 2:9, 10*), falsifying Satan's charges.

We learn many things here, such as that there are rules of engagement in the cosmic conflict. There are parameters in the heavenly court within which the allegations raised against God can be settled, but without God violating the sacred principles inherent in love, the foundation of God's government and how He rules the universe and the intelligent beings in it.

These heavenly scenes in the book of Job offer us fascinating insights into the reality of the great controversy, and how it is played out here on earth.

The (Temporary) Ruler of This World

We have seen in previous lessons that, within the cosmic conflict, Satan and his cohorts are temporarily granted significant jurisdiction in this world, limited according to some kind of rules of engagement.

These rules of engagement limit not only the actions of the enemy—the devil and his cohorts—but they also limit God’s action to eliminate or mitigate the evil that (temporarily) falls within the jurisdiction of the enemy. Because the Lord will never break His promises, to the extent He has agreed to the rules of engagement—thus affording some limited and temporary rulership to the devil—God has morally limited His future course of action (without lessening His raw power).

Read John 12:31, John 14:30, John 16:11, 2 Corinthians 4:4, and Luke 4:6. What do these texts teach about the rulership of the enemy in this world?

The New Testament sets forth a clash of kingdoms, the kingdoms of light and darkness, with the darkness coming from Satan and his rebellion. Part of Christ’s mission was to defeat the kingdom of Satan: “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (*1 John 3:8, NKJV*).

Nevertheless, there are “rules” that limit what God can do while remaining true to the principles behind His government. These limits include at least (1) the granting of free will to creatures and (2) the covenantal rules of engagement, which we are not privy to, at least now. Such impediments and limitations on divine action have significant implications for God’s moral ability to reduce and/or immediately eliminate evil in this world. Thus, we see continued evil and suffering, which can indeed cause many people to question either God’s existence or His goodness. However, once the background of the great controversy is understood, and the limits God has placed on how He will deal with evil, we can to some degree better understand why things are as they are—at least until the final triumph of God over evil.

How does the fact that Jesus calls Satan the “ruler” of this world help, at least somewhat, our understanding of the evil that exists in the world now? How comforting to know that it is, indeed, only a temporal rule!

Limits and Rules

The cosmic conflict is primarily a dispute over God's character, caused by the devil's slanderous allegations against God's goodness, justice, and government. It is a kind of cosmic covenant lawsuit.

Such a conflict cannot be settled by sheer power but, instead, requires demonstration.

If serious allegations are brought against a person in power, the best (and maybe only) way to defeat the allegations would be to allow for a free, fair, and open investigation. If the allegations threaten the entire government (of love), they cannot simply be swept under the rug.

What does all this mean for understanding the cosmic conflict and relating to the problem of evil? If God makes a promise, would He ever break it? Of course not. Insofar as God agrees to rules of engagement, His future action would be (morally) limited. As such, some evils may fall within the temporary domain of the kingdom of darkness.

Read Mark 6:5 and Mark 9:29. What do these texts display about how even divine action might be integrally related to such factors as faith and prayer?

In both these narratives, some limits or rules of engagement seem to be in place, dynamically related to such things as faith and prayer. Elsewhere we see abundant evidence that prayer makes a difference in this world, opening up avenues for divine action that otherwise might not be (morally) available. However, we should not make the mistake of thinking that faith and prayer are the only factors. There are likely many other factors of which we might be unaware.

This fits with what we've seen previously about rules of engagement. Insofar as God makes some commitment or agrees to some rules of engagement. As we said, there are certain rules of engagement in the great controversy that limit what God can morally do, at least for now.

Read Romans 8:18 and Revelation 21:3, 4. How do these texts give you confidence that even though there are many things we do not know, we can trust that God knows what is best, wants what is best, and will bring an end to evil and usher in an eternity of bliss?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Power of Satan,” pp. 341–347, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1.

“Fallen man is Satan’s lawful captive. The mission of Christ was to rescue him from the power of his great adversary. Man is naturally inclined to follow Satan’s suggestions, and he cannot successfully resist so terrible a foe unless Christ, the mighty Conqueror, dwells in him, guiding his desires, and giving him strength. God alone can limit the power of Satan. He is going to and fro in the earth, and walking up and down in it. He is not off his watch for a single moment, through fear of losing an opportunity to destroy souls. It is important that God’s people understand this, that they may escape his snares. Satan is preparing his deceptions, that in his last campaign against the people of God they may not understand that it is he. 2 Corinthians 11:14: ‘And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.’ While some deceived souls are advocating that he does not exist, he is taking them captive, and is working through them to a great extent. Satan knows better than God’s people the power that they can have over him when their strength is in Christ. When they humbly entreat the mighty Conqueror for help, the weakest believer in the truth, relying firmly upon Christ, can successfully repulse Satan and all his host. He is too cunning to come openly, boldly, with his temptations; for then the drowsy energies of the Christian would arouse, and he would rely upon the strong and mighty Deliverer. But he comes in unperceived, and works in disguise through the children of disobedience who profess godliness.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 341.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What does it mean to be “Satan’s lawful captive”? Does that mean the devil can do whatever he wants with people? If not, why not? How does this relate to what we might call the “rules of engagement” in the cosmic conflict?
- 2 Why would God grant Satan any jurisdiction in the cosmic conflict, even if only temporarily? What does this tell us about how God seeks to answer Satan’s accusations?
- 3 How do you respond to those, even Christians, who deny the existence of Satan as a real, personal being? Though we cannot prove Satan’s existence, what evidence can you marshal that might help someone who is so greatly deceived?

The Persistent Visitor: Part 2

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

To the Seventh-day Adventist pediatrician, the 13-year-old Alaska Native girl resembled a giant.

Four months after their first phone call, pediatrician Colette Reahl made the seven-hour drive from Anchorage to Fairbanks, Alaska, to meet Matriona for the first time at the facility where she lived with 19 other girls and boys. Matriona stood at 5 foot, 7 inches (174 cm). In comparison, Colette was a diminutive 5 foot, 3 inches (162 cm).

When Colette saw the girl, she thought, *She looks like a giant to me. This should be interesting.*

Matriona, who was sitting on the floor in a meeting room, was very shy and didn't want to talk at first.

Colette sat down on a couch near her. A few awkward minutes passed, and then she remembered that she had brought a gift, an encyclopedia about animals, for Matriona. Colette opened the book and silently began to leaf through the pages. Matriona's curiosity was raised, and she slowly inched her way over to Colette. Before long, Matriona was sitting beside Colette and looking at the pictures with her.

It was a pleasant first visit, and it lasted three hours.

The two met again the next month, and Colette gave Matriona a Bible. She suggested reading the Bible together over the phone. But when she called, Matriona made herself unavailable to talk.

Then Matriona moved to a facility in Anchorage. She was lonely and missed her friends in Fairbanks. She began to call Colette every day, trying to persuade her to adopt her.

Colette, meanwhile, started the process of changing jobs. Her work as a pediatrician in Anchorage was ending, and she was preparing to move to Bethel, the largest community in western Alaska, with a population of 6,000. She would work at a hospital there.

"Ewwwwwww," Matriona said when she learned about the move.

To her, Bethel was a small village, and she thought it would be boring.



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 Matriona next week.