

**GOOD WORD Schedule**  
**“The Great Controversy”**  
**April, May, June 2024**

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Opening Question: “What shall we make of the biblical statement that there was once war in heaven?”

**Introduction:**

The lessons this quarter focus on a grand theme that has been well-known in the SDA community from its very beginning. The name most often given to this grand theme is “The Great Controversy,” or, more fully, “The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan.” This name speaks of a conflict that can be traced from before the Creation story all the way to the time when the Kingdom of God is finally fully established. It tells the story, From Eden lost to Eden restored.

We should observe that grand thematic stories like the one we will review this quarter are found all over the place in human experience. Truth is, if we want to make any sense of our living, we need to have a viable story that we can use to answer the major questions in life, one of which has to do with the existence of evil and suffering. These kinds of grand narratives provide a context for our lives that enable us to figure out who we are, what lies behind us, and what is yet to come in the future. These stories give us reference points for our living that enable us to steer our lives and make our decisions with an ultimate goal in mind. They allow us to live beyond our circumstances, to have a vision that guides us that is not tied only to the reality we are experiencing. Such stories often give us reasons to hope when we might otherwise be overtaken by despair.

The story of the great controversy in the Bible is a truly fascinating one, a vastly panoramic one, one that gives us at least a glimpse of the grand plan God has for this troubled world.

Please note that this set of lessons is a commentary on the official lesson quarterly that is produced by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. It is not intended to be a replication or replacement of that document.

## Lesson 1 ~ The War Behind All Wars:

**Major Texts for this Lesson:** Rev. 12:7-9; Ezek. 28:12-15; Isa. 14:12-14; Gen. 3:15; John 17:24-26

Every story has to have a beginning. The verses listed above all speak to the beginning of the conflict.

The first passage is truly remarkable, even disturbing for it tells of a war in heaven. One is hard-pressed to understand why or how there was war in what we would imagine to be a pristine, untroubled space. But the passage is quite clear, that there was war in heaven between Michael and his angels, and the dragon who is elsewhere identified with Satan, and his angels to the point that Satan and his minions did not prevail but were cast out. It clearly states that no “place was found for them in heaven any longer.”

Here is the beginning of the story. Something caused a great rift in heaven to the point that Satan and those who decided to follow him, had to be put out.

The picture of the origin of the Great Controversy is expanded or elaborated on by the next two passages listed above, Ezek. 28:12-15 and Isa. 14:12-14. When you read these passages, you will notice that they do not speak directly of Satan. One speaks about the King of Tyre, the other about the King of Babylon. How do we take them to be speaking of Satan?

Several things should be noted. First – and this will come as a shock to many people – the name Lucifer is not a biblical name but rather the transliteration of a Latin word that means “Day Star.” Somewhere along the way, the translators did not give the English equivalent of the Greek and Hebrew names used in Isa. 12 thereby causing people to assume the name Lucifer to be a biblical name for Satan. This development is easily traced by doing some internet searching. The name Lucifer is a transliteration of the Latin that means “Day Star” or “Light-bearer.” Please note that this little observation does not change the significance or meaning of these verses at all.

As for the verses being applicable to Satan and the war in heaven, there are two considerations. The first is the connection Jesus made in Luke about Satan falling like lightning from heaven. Very early on, Christians saw a connection between what is said in Isa. 12 and the words of Jesus. But - and this might be more significant - what is said about the King of Babylon could not have ever happened to a human for no human fell like lightning from heaven.

And when we look at the passage in Ezek. 28, it becomes very quickly apparent that the verses under consideration could not be talking about a human king for no human king was ever in the garden of God – Eden – nor was he an anointed cherub. Something far greater is going on here that is not hard to see. The writers are using an earthly situation to illuminate a cosmic one. The two kings help us project into the cosmic realm to see Satan in his original state, and then as he fell from heaven as noted in Luke and Revelation. It is not an unusual thing in the Bible to see situations on earth illuminating much grander events at the cosmic level.

One more thing to be noted is that Lucifer was apparently quite taken with his own beauty and, when something upset him, he decided to challenge God and lost his place in heaven.

Once this war broke out, the heavenly beings had to take sides and a host of angels apparently elected to go with Satan. Here is demonstrated Satan's power to persuade and even deceive perfect beings. We would be wise to regard him as a wily and powerful foe, one not to be trifled with.

The fact that Satan fell like lightning from earth to heaven gives us a connection between him and earth. The story of how he came to God's pristine little world that He created and deceived the humans there, now makes sense. Perhaps it was an antagonistic mindset that caused him to want to ruin what appears to have been a new creation by God. And, according to Genesis 3, he proved to be quite successful. He deceived Eve into ignoring the stipulations given by God about a certain tree. The effects of the coming of Sin far outweighed the deed that opened the door for it to come. The Bible is clear that sin spread out and infected the whole of this planet including the humans God had made. Perhaps most significantly, sin actually changed the orientation of humans so that we are now tilted away from God. There were immediate, intermediate, and final consequences that we are still very much living with.

But there is very good news that first appears in a little promise couched in metaphorical language, about the seed of the woman and that of Satan. Clearly, the seed of the woman, whom Christians contend is Jesus, is going to triumph over Satan. One is pressed to imagine the sorrow Adam and Eve must have felt when they realized what had happened. But we are also unable to imagine the joy and hope that must have surged through them when they heard this promise. Here is the beginning of a line of thought that runs throughout the whole of the Bible, the idea of deliverance, that one day, a Deliverer will come, a Messiah, who will restore the damage sin has caused. The hope culminates in the promise of a new heaven and a new earth.

It is important to note that God is the initiator of this plan of redemption. Everyone knows the most famous text in the Bible, John 3:16 that speaks of the love of God and his desire to save rather than destroy. This is reflected in many places in the Bible, and it is supported by God's actions in history to include Jesus coming to earth as a baby, living a remarkable life, then dying as a sacrifice for sin thereby making a way of escape for sinners. That was followed – and this is very important – by Jesus rising from the dead so he can now minister as a High Priest for humans with stated plans to return again one day to gather up those who believe, both the living and the dead.

The story that is laid out in this lesson in rudimentary fashion is the story that undergirds the whole of the Bible. It moves from the appearance of sin, to creation, to the fall, to the sometimes unimaginable meanderings of humans, to Calvary, the Resurrection, more meanderings, and, finally, the establishment of the Kingdom of God in its fullness. This we should keep in mind for the whole of the quarter.

## Lesson 2 ~ The Central Issue: Love or Selfishness

Major Texts: Isa. 41:10; Luke 19:41-44; Matt. 23:37, 38; Heb. 11:35-38; Rev. 2:10; Acts 2:44-47; John 13:35.

Opening Question: "Should we regard persecution as something good for the Church, or bad?"

The lesson this week picks up the story of the Great Controversy as it played out in the very early stages of the Christian era. It is widely known that the first few centuries after which Christianity appeared in Jerusalem, were very difficult years. The church faced a lot of adversity as did individual Christians. Some periods of time were truly grim featuring the execution of Christians because they would not surrender their faith. At the same time, the Christian faith spread rather rapidly all over the Roman Empire. This is an amazing eventuality, how a religion could spread so far and so fast to almost every corner of the Roman Empire and beyond to the point many of the Roman rulers were astonished. It seemed that the persecution of Christians actually aided the spread of the faith, in some cases right at the point of an execution where some who witnessed the persecution, stepped forward to profess a faith of their own. One writer, Tertullian, reported that a Christian once told a Roman official who was bent on trying to eradicate the Christian faith, that his efforts were actually aiding the growth of the faith, famously saying that "the blood of Christians is seed."

In the New Testament, there are evidences of this persecution and also of the rapid growth of the faith. The most concise summary is to be found in Hebrews 11:35-38 where mention is made of many types of suffering believers were put through.

There are several issues that arise from the subject matter of this lesson, some of them quite difficult to navigate. Of course, behind the events under consideration, we must not neglect to see the great struggle between good and evil. In a cosmic sense, it plays out unseen, but its effects on the happenings on earth are very visible.

The first item to consider has to do with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. History tells us it was a truly terrible thing that occurred, with otherwise innocent people slaughtered by the thousands. So the perennial question arises that, if God is love, how could this be allowed? Here we come upon a hard truth, that failure to follow God brings all manner of trouble in its wake, and not because God is angry, but because God is good and his ways are good. Ignoring or abandoning God and his counsel can bring devastation that sweeps up everything like a plague. Sometimes humans are overtaken by evil, and evil seems to gain a life of its own. War is one place where evil often takes over and it bursts beyond the boundaries that humans would consider civil. It is not only at Jerusalem that evils unfolded. They unfold in every war. Evil is like a fire. It may start small, but if it gets going, it can consume whole forests and reduce them to ashes. Here the effect or result is far greater than the original cause.

At the same time, the Christians in Jerusalem had been warned and, during a lull in the siege, they fled to Pella and so escaped the worst of the fight. This is cited as a beneficent act of God to preserve them.

Another issue to take up is the Christian response to persecution. There are some records that early Christians regarded suffering and death as an honor that tied them in with Jesus. To suffer as he did was to some an honor. Put another way, they did not really fear persecution as much as people in later years. Their resolve and courage in the face of death was remarkable and a powerful testimony to their faith.

Another thing that happened that struck the Roman leaders was the way Christians loved not only each other but others around them. This was particularly noticeable in the two great pandemics that overran the Roman Empire in the early centuries. There are records that Christians, in spite of the danger of getting infected themselves – many got infected and died with joy in their hearts – they went about caring for the sick and the dying. They were living out the love of God they had themselves experienced. Actions like this proved to be a powerful testimony to the love of God. These kinds of things inspired others to become believers.

Some questions come now to mind:

- Why are times of persecution for the church also times of growth?
- What might church people today learn from the actions of their spiritual ancestors that would affect the witness of church today?
- Should God work harder to limit evil, or should he allow natural consequences to accrue even when they become evil.
- Think about the law of unintended consequences. How might it affect the trajectory of the controversy between good and evil?
- What might Christians who live in good times do to keep their faith shining brightly?

### Lesson 3 ~ Light Shines in the Darkness

Key Texts: *John 8:44; Prov. 23:23; Acts 20:27–32; 2 Thess. 2:7–12; Ps. 119:105, 116, 130, 133, 160; Prov. 16:25; 2 Cor. 4:3–6.*

Opening Question: "What can be done to prevent or slow doctrinal and behavioural drift in the Christian community?"

The lesson this week covers some interesting territory in that it invites us to look at the early centuries of the Christian era not so much from the viewpoint of the persecutions that took place from time to time, but from a change that took place as Christianity became more and more acceptable, finally becoming the religion of the empire. Along the way, some significant developments took place that, arguably, moved the Church to adopt ideas and positions that are quite far from biblical teachings.

There are several biblical passages that warned of this development, sometimes in rather stark terms. Consider, for example, 2 Thessalonians 2:7-12. In this passage, Paul tells the Thessalonian Christians that the secret power of lawlessness is already at work, and he goes on to describe the damage this power will do especially to those who are not vigilant in their understanding of God's word. There are also the words of Paul in Acts 20:27-32 where, in his parting speech to the elders of the Ephesian church, encouraged them to be good shepherds because "savage wolves" would come in and wreak havoc. These two passages should be put alongside Jesus words in John 17 where, in his prayer, he spoke of how the world hates his followers. In these three instances at least, we see reflected the great controversy as it plays out between the forces of good and those of evil.

It is widely known and acknowledge that, as the Christian faith became more acceptable to the general public and to officials who were in charge, it underwent some significant changes. This was partly due to the lack of proper instruction of new converts, but it was also due to the desire to make some elements of the faith more palatable to those who joined. Some examples of this would be the shift from Saturday sacredness to Sunday sacredness. This is a subject about which much is now known. There is some disagreement over what exactly precipitated the change, but what is known is that the change took place. Some cite a desire to differentiate Christians from Jews; others cite the desire to be more respectful to the gods the pagans once worshiped. What is known is that the change was initiated in Rome and it was gradual. AT one point, the Bishop of Rome encouraged believers to be respectful of both days!

Another significant change that took place was the adoption of a different concept of humans namely that we are not souls – living, breathing beings – but we have souls, inherently immortal entities that become part of us at conception and depart at the point of death. This is not a biblical idea but one that seems to have been borrowed from the pagan philosophers who were looking for a bridge between the ideal realm and the material one.

The best protection against doctrinal or ideological drift is to be well informed about the contents of the source of authority that is claimed. For Christians, that would be the Bible as it functions as the repository of the record of God's activities in history. By reading and studying what had been written down, people had their best chance of understanding the plan of God and following it. One of the big problems that developed as time moved forward was that the written word became scarce. For long periods, believers were proscribed from reading it on their own, if indeed they could get their hands on a copy. This eventuality allowed considerable drift from the truths of God's word to occur.

One of the points made prominent in the official lesson had to do with the authority of God's word. This needs some careful thought. Usually when we use the word "authority," we have in mind liberty given to someone who can come and clean up whatever mess has occurred. It is thought of as an external correction applied by someone duly designated to straighten things up whenever necessary. In the popular mind, the police would be one category of people who have authority. In consequence, there are many people who think of the Bible in similar terms, that it is an external authority to be applied even to the unwilling. But some careful thought about this would suggest that, if God is love, He would not work in that manner. God does not force his will onto humans. He works not by restraint, but by constraint. God asks for a willing compliance. To those who come to believe, the word of God and its teachings get internalized and function as a constraint and guide from inside the mind of a willing subject. Truth applied from the outside does not usually foster compliance as much as it produces rebellion.

Here the concept of truth must be brought to bear. One of the difficult things to have to face when dealing with truth is that it is intolerant in the sense that, if something is right, all else must be wrong. An idea cannot be both right and wrong at the same time. Furthermore, some serious thought has to be given to just how capable a human mind would be when faced with discovering and describing truth. It would be sheer hubris for a human to contend that he or she can discover and fully describe truth. This is why the prospect of revelation from outside the human realm is both attractive and important.

We would do well to keep 2 Corinthians 4:3-6 well in mind for it portrays a battle of and for human minds. We should keep it in mind that the ideas and concepts that we adopt or acquire, are very important for they create the framework or context from which we draw our beliefs and they are the reference points for our living. From a Christian perspective, it is of great importance to be accepting of what God has revealed. That is what should serve as an authority in our lives to guide our living.



## Lesson 4 ~ Standing for Truth

Key Texts: *Dan. 7:23–25; Rev. 12:6, 14; Jude 3, 4; Rev. 2:10; Acts 5:28–32; Ps. 19:7–11; 1 John 5:11–13.*

Opening Question: “How is it that some people will stand for their beliefs even in the face of death while others won’t?”

The lesson this week covers some challenging ground. It invites us to reflect on those who were willing to pay even with their lives, the cost of following God and orienting their lives by His word.

It is a thing of strange fascination to read about the centuries that followed the acceptance of the Christian faith by so many in the Roman Empire. History tells how, as the Roman Empire fell apart, the Christian church that was headquartered in the city of Rome, came to be the stabilizing force in society. But, as if often the case, the church of Rome adopted a model for itself that was patterned after the way the Roman Empire was structured, namely it established itself over time as a hierarchy that had many levels.

There are several things about hierarchies that we should never forget. The first is that they grow to use up all the resources available to them. In doing this, they become more and more complex, and they take over supervision of more and more of society. As they grow, they begin to take advantage of a new power that comes to them, what might be called managerial power. As organizations grow, they develop policies, and they develop protocols for dealing with those who dissent from their policies. They shift from having to use persuasion in order to gain the involvement of their citizens, to using coercion. It is right here that a significant and fundamental change takes place that is of note when dealing with churches. Religion, but its very nature, is voluntary. The love of God and adherence to His commandments cannot be forced. But when a church becomes a hierarchy that is well-defined, it gains the power to require certain things lest its adherents face discipline or punishment of some kind.

Add to this the well-known fact that power easily corrupts those who hold it in their hands. And the more power a person has, the more likely they are to use it for selfish or even nefarious purposes. And if you add God to the equation by claiming His endorsement of the hierarchy at hand, there emerges a dynamic that can easily lead to the idea that dissenters have to be eliminated and that by doing so, a person is serving God. This was precisely the dynamic that led the Apostle Paul in his early, pre-Christian days, to go about rounding up Christians an arranging for them to be put to death.

This is also the dynamic that played out once the Christian Church in Rome became very powerful. Over time, it established itself as supreme, and it set out to control what could be counted as Christian and what could not. And it even gained enough power to persecute and destroy those who dissented.

The big question that arises from all this has to do with the question, “What if what the church believes and endorses does not comport with Scripture?” What are the faithful to do then?

The answer from history is that some there were who decided to follow the word of God no matter the cost. They stood for what they understood to be truth even if it meant persecution, loss, and death.

This eventuality is predicted in the Bible. For example, in Daniel 7:23-25, in symbolic language, a prediction is laid out that there is coming a day when war would be made against God people, that the church would have to flee to the wilderness where it would be preserved and nurtured by God. Protestants have linked this prophecy to the period between 538 BC and 1798 AD, a time when the church of Rome held nearly absolute sway over the Western world. It was a time when dissent proved to be very costly. And in Jude 1, believers were urged to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, . . . who turn the grace of our God into lewdness” (*Jude 1:3, 4, NKJV*).

There are, of course, many examples in the Bible of people standing for what they understood to be truth. One of the most dramatic and engaging is found in Acts 5:28-32 where Peter and some other apostles were arrested and put in prison because of their preaching. In the night, an angel came and freed them so that the next day, they were out preaching again. When confronted by the religious leaders, they refused to be cowed famously saying, “We must obey God rather than men.”

There are also many examples of people dissenting from the status quo and doing so out of a sense of loyalty to God. The Waldenses are a group that is often cited for their refusal to go along with the status quo preferring to link their lives to the direct words of Scripture. They are credited with preserving the word of God during the ages preceding the Reformation. They adhered to and propagated the Bible at risk to their lives sometimes.

When we look toward the Reformation, other people stand out like John Hus and John Wycliffe. Wycliffe in particular was a well-educated man who set himself to the task of translating the Bible into the language of the common people. This was highly illegal, but he persisted and succeeded in getting his work done before his death. But his work was deemed to be so offensive by the religious powers of the time that they had his body exhumed and dragged through the streets, then burned, his ashes thrown into a river.

John Hus is another man who has come down in history as a man who determined to be faithful to God at any cost. He was, for a long time, imprisoned in a dank dungeon where he suffered but not without hope. Some of the letters he wrote from that prison reveal a great hope that burned in his heart, a hope that buoyed him up in times of difficulty. He was, very famously, burned at the stake singing all the while. Like the other faithful people, they lived out the admonition found in the Book of Hebrews, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful” (*Heb. 10:23, NKJV*).

The point of this study is to raise the question about believer's today. Do we have the same determination, the same willingness, the tenacity to hold to the word of God in spite of the flow of history around us.

- What has to happen in a person's life to make their convictions about truth so powerful they will rather face death than give in?

## Lesson 5 ~ Faith Against All Odds:

Verses to be read this week: *Ps. 119:103, 103, 147, 162; John 16:13–15; 2 Pet. 1:20, 21; Eph. 2:8, 9; Rom. 3:23, 24; Rom. 6:15–18.*

Opening Question: “What do you think would happen if the common person in our skeptical age were to read and understand the great truths of the Bible?”

As the title of this lesson indicates, this week we are invited to think about people who maintained their faith against all odds. The official lesson focuses on the period of history known as the Reformation. Of course, the Reformation is not mentioned in the Bible but there are biblical passages that speak to the overall issue of maintaining faith against all odds.

Psalms 119 is a Psalm that extolls the word of God with a particular focus in places on the Law of God. In verses 103 and 104, David tells his reaction to the word of God: “<sup>103</sup>How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! <sup>104</sup>I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path.” Here we learn that, among other things, contemplating the word of God brings joy, and it also produces a distaste for every wrong path. It is the contemplation of God’s word and the incorporation of its teachings into life, that is the basis of Christian living.

One of the major elements that gave rise to the Reformation was the availability of the Bible in readable language. People like John Wycliffe and William Tyndale were in the vanguard of those who discovered the Bible in readable form and worked to translate it into the language of the common people. In those days, doing this kind of thing was risky because the religious powers that be were very much opposed to this kind of thing. But the most interesting thing was the effect being able to read God’s word had on those who were able to do it. In so many instances, they became so captivated by what they read that they persisted even in the face of punishment and death.

It is well known that one of the major discoveries, this one by Martin Luther in particular, was that salvation is not something to be earned. In fact, it cannot be earned for it is a gift of God that comes by faith (Eph. 2:8,9). This was thought to be a new and dangerous idea. It was certainly troublesome for the religious powers for it undermined their whole system of earning merit with God.

As is always the case, whenever something is translated, questions arise about how that is best to be done. There is always the fear lurking that, if the human element in the process is too large, then there is a grave risk of the word no longer being from God. At the same time, we must always remember that human language, frail though it may be, does have the capacity to deliver messages. And there is the assurance given in the Bible that the same Holy Spirit who assisted in the writing down of scripture, will be present to help guide its translation and propagation. In this regard, there is an interesting historical incident recorded between John Knox, the Scottish reformer, and Mary Queen of Scots. She quizzed him about what to do when Knox had one translation and the priest had another. What was she to believe? And who was to be the judge as to which was correct? Knox responded by saying that God’s word is understandable in plain language, and that the Holy Spirit is present to be of assistance. He said

further that wherever popular thought differed from the Bible, the Queen should follow neither Knox of the priest but should rely on the clear message of the Bible, conviction driven home by the Holy Spirit. That sounds like good advice.

The goal of all this is very clear, as noted in Colossians 1:10 - <sup>10</sup>so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God," (NIV). And all this against the backdrop of the controversy raging between good and evil.

- How big a role should human opinion and culture play in the process of translating God's word from one language to another?
- What do you think would happen in our skeptical age if the common person were to actually read and discover the great truths of the Bible?

## Lesson 6 ~ The Two Witnesses

Texts to Read for This Week: *Rev. 11:3–6; Zech. 4:14; Rev. 12:5, 6, 14, 15; Dan. 7:25; Isa. 54:17; Ps. 119:89; Rev. 11:15–18.*

Opening Question: “What happens to a person or even a whole society when the word of God is suppressed or ignored?”

The opening scripture passage for this week is Revelation 11:3-6, a selection of verses that speaks of two witnesses that will prophesy in sackcloth for a period of 1,260 days. Clearly, this is highly symbolic language that has to be interpreted if we are to gain any understanding of what is being spoken about.

Some parts of these verses are rather easy to interpret or derive meaning from. The first is the mention of oil which feeds into the lampstand. In many places the Holy Spirit is compared to oil (Zech. 4:2, 6), and light is linked to the word of God (Psa. 119:105). So, we may safely conclude that these verses have something to do with the word of God being sustained by the Holy Spirit.

As far as the sackcloth goes, it was, in ancient times, linked to mourning or sorrow. Here it indicates then, that the word from God tended by the Spirit is suffering through a period of adversity. That adversity is said to prevail for a period of 1,260 days. This part is much more complicated and requires more explanation.

This period of 1,260 days is mentioned in several places in the books of Daniel and in Revelation. In some cases, it is talked about as a period in months rather than days – 42 months (Rev. 11:2, 3). It is also designated in Revelation 12 as a “time, times, and half a time.” All these descriptions come out to 1,260 days. There has been lots of discussion about these being 24-hr days or symbolic ones. Seventh-day Adventists have noted that, at least in some cases, days are used to stand for whole years in cases of predictive prophecy. Numbers 14:34 and Ezekiel 4:6 are two examples of this though there are more evidences that support this idea. For example, Dr. William Shea, chronologist and Old Testament scholar, gives 23 lines of biblical evidence throughout the Old Testament for this principle. Applying this principle would lead to the conclusion that this period of 1,260 days stands for 1,260 actual years. The obvious question then becomes, what period of time would that be? Along with other Protestant interpreters of the past, Adventists have linked this period to the time of Papal supremacy over the western world, a period that begins in 538 AD and ends in 1798 AD. The first date here has significance as the day when the last of the so-called barbarian tribes were driven from Rome leaving the Bishop of Rome to be the most powerful ruler. The last date has significance as the time Napoleon’s general Berthier took the Bishop of Rome captive and moved him to Avignon there by destroying the supremacy of the Roman pontiff.

Protestants have long pointed to that period of time as a time when the Bible was purposely hidden and obscured and kept from the church and public. In its place were the teachings of priests and bishops that were often quite different from what is to be found in the Bible. In fact, those who insisted on reading and interpreting the Bible for themselves, if they could find one, and those who wanted to propagate the scriptures, faced very harsh treatment, sometimes even death.

The end conclusion drawn here is that the opening verses from Revelation 11 are speaking of a time when the Bible and knowledge of the Bible would be suppressed. The two witnesses have been linked to the Old and New Testaments. The period of time is the Middle Ages, a time when the Christian Church came to be under all kinds of teachings that have not proven to be derived from the Bible. Once the Reformation made the Bible public again, people discovered just how far the teachings of the church had drifted from what they read in the Bible.

It is important to note that the Bible was kept alive during this time period but in clandestine ways. There are not a few stories that have come down that put a smile on a person's face as they reveal that, at certain times, the attempts to suppress the Bible proved to enable its propagation! In the official lesson guide there is a great story told of William Tyndale who, when on trial for his faith and for his work translating the Bible into English, was asked who aided him the most in his work. To the surprise of everyone, he cited the Bishop of Durham!" Behind this statement was a hidden fact, that in his quest to eradicate the Bible, the Bishop had purchased at rather high cost, all the Bible's he could get in order to burn them but, in doing that, he generated enough money for Tyndale to print many more!

Reading further in Revelation 11:7-9, the situation gets worse for it states that the two witnesses were killed! This becomes more understandable when one brings to mind that it was the French Revolution that came hard on the heels of the demise of papal power. The government established Reason as the supreme authority in life. With atheism enshrined by the government, the destruction of religion and religious symbols ran rampant. The number of executions and other eliminations of religion and religious people remains legendary in the annals of history. Fortunately, this period lasted only about 3 years!

Revelation 11 goes on to speak of the two witnesses coming to life again. If one follows the line of thought being advanced here, that links prophecy to events in history, this coming to life phase would be tied to the Reformation, a time when knowledge of the Bible blossomed. The effects of this are also seen in history, one of them being the development after sometime, of a great desire among Europeans to carry the gospel to the rest of the world.

An important lesson to be drawn from this study is that the word of God may be suppressed, but it will never be eliminated. The Bible is clear that the plan of God will one day be triumphant.

Another thing to contemplate is the effect that accrues to a society where the word of God is suppressed. According to Romans 1, where the word of God is suppressed, a people enter into a downward spiral to where they end up worshipping things they have made with their own hands while attributing divine power to their idols. Conversely, where the truths of

God's word are head and adopted, life improves significantly, both personal life and communal life.



## Lesson 7 - Motivated by Hope

Verses for This Week: *1 Thess. 4:13–18; Matt. 24:27, 30, 31; 2 Pet. 1:19–21; Dan. 8:14; Dan. 9:20–27; Ezra 7:7–13.*

Opening Question: “What role does hope play in the lives of human beings?”

The lesson this week is anchored by a well-known verse from the writings of the ancient prophet Isaiah - **“And it will be said in that day: ‘Behold, this is our God; we have waited for Him, and He will save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for Him; we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation’”** (*Isaiah 25:9, NKJV*). This is one place of many in the Bible that look forward to a day when God will, in a dramatic way, interrupt the flow of human history in order to save those who believe and to also establish a kingdom of righteousness that will never end.

Although this theme of a coming Deliverer is found all throughout the whole record of Scripture beginning in Genesis 3, there have been times when it has been all but lost sight of. In modern times, it was revived when William Miller, a Baptist farmer in upstate New York, after many years of careful study, began to tell how he had come to the conclusion that the Bible predicted the actual return of Jesus. He even claimed to know the approximate time. Of course, his conclusions were wrong in terms of their attempted precise predictions for Jesus did not come on the appointed day leading to what is still known as the Great Disappointment. At the same time, his teachings resulted in a renewed fascination with what we know as the Doctrine of the Second Advent, the first Advent having already taken place at Bethlehem when Jesus was born. As we will see, this hope is one that has sustained believers for many centuries. It is a hope that has enabled them to survive even unspeakable circumstances.

Three of the major passages in the New Testament that speak clearly of Jesus return are these:

- **John 14:1–3,**
- **1 Thessalonians 4:13–18**
- **Titus 2:11–14.**

This would be a good point to spend some time discussing why the promise of Jesus returning is so significant to believers. There are a host of reasons. How many reasons can you come up with?

In the official lesson guide, there are not a few pages that go through a recitation of all the calculations William Miller and others, including early Adventists, went through in their quest to understand or decipher the various prophecies found in Daniel in particular. There are a host of dates given that, by one process of calculation, end with the year 1844, the precise year in which Miller and his associates expected Jesus to come. This process of calculation has great historical value at least for it explains the fervor of the early Adventists to include those who were present before Seventh-day Adventism emerged. What is unclear today is what to do

with those calculations given we are now 180 years beyond what was then predicted. At the same time, those calculations are what caused the idea or belief of a second Advent to become now well-known. It is important not to let arguments about calculations obscure the fact that the Bible is very clear that Jesus will come again at some time in the future. And it is also very clear that believers should live with an attitude of expectation. But it is also very clear that we cannot know the precise date.

One line of thought that has not been talked about much has to do with the Bible teaching that a time of trouble will precede the coming of Jesus again. What this would lead to is a careful monitoring of issues of freedom, specifically issues of freedom of religion and conscience. It could be credibly argued that when freedom of conscience is finally proscribed leading to gross intolerance of those who believe, then Jesus will come. It is when that happens on a global level that God will ring down the curtain of time saying, "Enough!"

Another outcome of the various calculations used by early Adventists was a new interest in the services of the Old Testament Sanctuary. In particular, people then began to make a correlation between what went on in that ancient edifice and what is happening now. This will be the subject of future consideration.

One more note here. Do not forget that the hope of Jesus coming again is what has sustained and energized the believing community for many years and in many seasons. That hope should not be obscured either by the cares of this life or by any misunderstandings of older prophecies. However you understand the prophecies in Daniel and Revelation or anywhere else, do not miss the fact that the grand conclusion to the story of the Bible is the coming of God's kingdom to replace the kingdom's of man.

- Jesus worried that what he called "the cares of this life." How would you describe the cares of this life?
- What keeps hope alive?
- Do you think freedom of conscience and religion is faring well or poorly in current times?

## Lesson 8 ~ Light from the Sanctuary

Texts for the Week: *Exod. 25:8, 9, 40; Heb. 8:1–6; Lev. 16:21, 29–34; Lev. 23:26–32; Heb. 9:23–28; Dan. 7:9, 10; Matt. 25:1–13; Rev. 11:19.*

### Opening Question: “What do you know about the services in the Old Testament Sanctuary?”

The primary text for this week is taken from Hebrews 8 and it has as its focus a high priest who is in heaven “seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens...” Here is an immediate clue that the lesson this week will have links to the Old Testament tabernacle or temple with its various services, a subject that has had a lot of play in the SDA community from before the SDA Church was even formed. A recitation of some history will be helpful.

If we go back to the Millerite movement and bring to mind some of the various calculations and ideas that led them to the conclusion that Jesus was to return on Oct. 22, 1844, one of the things we will find is words that are tied the sanctuary telling of a time when the sanctuary will be cleansed. The Millerites understood this cleansing to be pointing to the Second Coming as the event that would cleanse the sanctuary. They contended that the sanctuary must be this world that would be cleansed at the second advent. How they arrived at this conclusion is not entirely clear, but this opinion played a significant role in producing the Great Disappointment. The fact that Jesus did not come on the day predicted forced them toward an understanding that they had not correctly understood this cleansing of the sanctuary thing. The subsequent disappointment caused many to give up on their beliefs. But there were some who remained persuaded that they had been on to something that was of great importance, so they kept on studying and praying. What emerged from their efforts was a new position on the cleansing of the sanctuary, that it did not have to do with Jesus returning to earth but with something that was going on in the heavenly sanctuary.

By their careful study, those believers noted that there are two sanctuaries spoken of in the Bible, an earthly one and then a heavenly one. They came also to understand that the earthly one was a representation of the heavenly one. They used the words “type” and “anti-type,” the latter being a sort of scale model of the original. They went on to contend that what took place in the earthly sanctuary represented or taught people about what happened in the heavenly one. Of course, the heavenly one was the primary element, the earthly secondary.

Even a cursory look at the services of the tabernacle in the desert will show that the whole system spoke to a process by which people could have their sins forgiven and a hope of redemption becoming real in their lives. At the center of this process was sacrifice, the substitution of one life for another. This aspect of the plan for saving humanity was played out every day by having a morning and evening sacrifice offered, and also by individual people coming to ask forgiveness of specific sins. In both cases, sin was figuratively transferred from the sinner to the sacrifice and hence to the temple itself, symbolized by a priest taking some of the

blood of the sacrifice and sprinkling it at an altar in the tabernacle. This was known as the “daily” sacrifice for it took place from day to day.

But there was a second set of services that took place only once a year. That was known as the “Day of Atonement,” a day still observed in Jewish communities. As that day approached, the Israelites were to prepare for it by cleaning their homes and bathing themselves, and also by confessing their sins and making wrongs right. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest was involved. In addition to the daily sacrifice, another sacrifice was prepared. After the animal was sacrificed, some of its blood was taken in beyond the curtain that divided the tabernacle into two sections, and it was placed on the mercy seat of the ark located in the most holy place. The high priest then came out of the tabernacle and applied some blood to the horns of the golden altar and also the brazen altar, in symbol removing sin from the tabernacle. He then went to a goat that was also present, and he would place his hands on the goat and the goat would be led out into the wilderness and left there. The people were to understand by these rituals that on the Day of Atonement, the whole camp was now cleansed from sin.

The big question that immediately follows is this: If the earthly temple is a representation of the heavenly one, what is happening in heaven that is represented by the services on the Day of Atonement? The conclusion of the early Adventists was that the cleansing of the sanctuary indicated a transition of the work of Jesus from the forgiving of sins to beginning the process that will eradicate sin from the universe thereby making God’s creation pristine as it was in the beginning.

Based on their understandings of the great judgement scene in Daniel 7, and also another in Revelation 14, it was concluded that the process of bringing a conclusion to the great controversy between good and evil, involved a process of judgement. Early believers noted that the matter of judgment is many times spoken of in the Bible. As they studied this, they came to see that the final judgment has three phases, an investigative phase, an evaluative stage, and a stage where the verdict is executed. Their linking of judgment with the cleansing of the sanctuary caused them to believe that the investigative phase of judgment is what began in 1844.

There has been a lot of discussion about the idea of an investigative judgment. One strain of thought has tended toward perfectionism the argument being that the judgment must show that humans have become worthy of their salvation. It has been said that, “when your name comes up in the judgment, if you have even one unconfessed sin, you will be lost.” This idea has proven to be a very unsettling one for a lot of people. It also seems to fly in the face of Paul’s comment that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ.

A second line of thought about the Investigative Judgment has proposed a much broader focus than the individual sins of humans. Rather, it has been argued that this investigation is really intended to prove that God has acted righteously in his saving of sinners. If indeed God is a God of love, then volition plays a key role in bringing the great conflict to a conclusion. The

way that God has carried out the plan of salvation then becomes an important consideration as using force would mean salvation was not responded to voluntarily and the whole point of love becomes a farce. This second understanding of the Investigative Judgement is much more in harmony with the gospel story.

The interceding work of Jesus, built on his sacrifice and resurrection, becomes the basis for Christ to provide humans salvation. His work in the heavenly sanctuary of atoning for our sins and interceding for us has a sound foundation and is the reason the writer of Hebrews could tell us to approach the throne with boldness. It can be said that those who are “in Christ,” who have professed faith in him and put themselves under his leadership, have already passed through judgment so that any final judgment event will only reveal that their sins are atoned for. In this transaction, the mercy and justice of God are both satisfied, and sinners can have a real hope of redemption.

It is helpful here to bring to mind that the plan of salvation is a process more than it is an event. Because of conversion and the justification and forgiveness that comes with it, we can say, “I have been saved.” And because of the process of sanctification, we can say, “I am being saved.” And because of the promise of the Second Coming and the transformation that will take place then, we can say, “I am going to be saved.” Notice that it is not until the whole process is complete that we will be able to say in a final sense, “I am saved.”

There is one final point to make. It is possible to argue endlessly about the various points under discussion, but let that not obscure the fact that the great controversy is going to end one day with the complete salvation of those who believe and an eradication of evil itself.

## Lesson 9 ~ The Foundation of God's Government

Texts for this Week: *Rev. 14:6–12; Eccles. 12:13, 14; Prov. 28:9; Dan. 7:25.*

One of the things that received a lot of careful attention as the result of careful Bible study among those who founded the Adventist movement, was the law of God. They saw it as a major element at least in part because it was a transcript of God's character and desires, and it was also the basis upon which judgment would be rendered. A passage of scripture that was of particular interest to them was Revelation 14:6-12 where the remnant of the faithful would be characterized by keeping the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus which they linked to the phrase "the spirit of prophecy" found in Revelation 19:10. Since their movement came at the end of prophetic time as they calculated it, and because they were serious about keeping the commandments of God, they called themselves the Remnant Church, an appellation that is still part of Adventist identity.

As the early Adventists looked at the Law, they noticed the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment in particular because it identified God as the earth's Creator and Sustainer. Sabbath was a day set aside by God at creation as a holy day to be revered and preserved from the common things of life like working for a living. For the early Adventists, then, the Sabbath, which they understood to be the 7<sup>th</sup> day of the week, became an item of particular concern and focus especially since most of the Christian world did not revere the 7<sup>th</sup> day of the week as the Sabbath. They read how God made the Sabbath a sign of the covenant he had between himself and those who followed him.

Another aspect of thought that developed back then was a link between the Sabbath and the sanctuary. Believers noted that in the tabernacle, the law of God was to be found on the mercy seat, the covering of the ark itself. They saw this to be something of great significance, the law in the most holy place on the ark, the holiest of furnishings.

With all these elements in play, early Adventists went out of their way to proclaim the eternality of the law of God. They saw no provision of it abridged or negated. The whole of it, including the Sabbath commandment, was binding on all humans. Further, the acceptance of the Sabbath necessitated an acceptance of the meaning of the sanctuary services, and the acceptance of the sanctuary services meant the acceptance of the law of God. Taken together – the law of God including the Sabbath - came to be understood as a symbol of loyalty to the Creator and Redeemer. It was a regular reminder of God's creative acts and of his saving grace. Revering the Sabbath created a link between creation and salvation. And it also looked forward to the re-creation that comes after Jesus second coming.

The 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> chapters of Revelation speak of a great and final conflict between the forces of good and evil. The language is quite figurative having to do with beasts and an image to the beast vs. angels bearing final messages and believers who are caught in a real bind over ultimate loyalties. Very clearly, Revelation 12 and 13 depict a great power at war with God and saints, and the central point of focus has to do with loyalty and worship. And, because the Sabbath is part of the commandments that are now abridged by so many people, moved to

Sunday, and because it shows God to be the Creator who is worthy to be worshiped, the issue of Sabbath vs. Sunday sacredness came to be seen as a crucial element in the final struggle.

People may argue over various possible interpretations of these two chapters in Revelation but let one thing be very clear. There is coming a great struggle, and the central piece will be the willingness to worship God who made the heavens and the earth. Opposite that are those who give their ultimate loyalties to a power that opposes God and abrogates His law. Who all the players in this final drama are going to be remains to be seen, but the issue of ultimate loyalty is very clear. As the end of history comes, every person will have to make their final and irrevocable decision, either to give their allegiance to God at what ever cost, or else to the powers at work under the guidance of Satan.

An interesting observation is that the faithful at the end of time are said to have the faith “of” Jesus. This would be a resilient faith that does not allow whatever circumstances may prevail to be the description of reality. The eye of a resilient faith will allow the faithful to see beyond their current circumstances to the greater reality of God’s kingdom.

- What could be done to make the Sabbath more of a day to be celebrated rather than a day focused on restrictive rules?
- How would you define worship?
- What does a person have to do in order to have a resilient faith?

## Lesson 10 ~ Spiritualism Exposed

**Texts for this Week:** *Matt. 10:28; Eccles. 9:5; Isa. 8:19, 20; John 11:11–14, 21–25; 1 Thess. 4:16, 17; Rev. 16:13, 14; Matt. 24:23–27; 2 Thess. 2:9–12.*

**Opening Question: “What is the condition of a human after they die and why is that question of importance?”**

The lesson this week covers some interesting ideological territory that has created a great division in human thought. It has to do with the spiritual underworld and also with the ideas people have about death. We will begin with the death part first.

What happens when a person dies? This is a question to which all thought systems have to provide an answer. There are two prevailing opinions. The majority opinion is that consciousness does not end at death. Rather, the essence of a person, commonly known as their soul, survives death and continues on in some other form. The basic idea is that there is an immortal part of every human being, a part that is inherently immortal so it cannot die. One of the most popular concepts is that this soul thing enters human life at the point of conception and remains part of a human until the point of death at which point it migrates to some other place. The most common idea is that if the person lived a good life, their soul migrates to a good place, like heaven for example. If the person has been bad, their soul goes to a bad place, like hell where the soul is tortured indefinitely. Or, if the person has not been very bad, they may go to some intermediate place where some restoration of the soul can take place before they then go to the good place. In some thought systems, the journey of the soul is then quite short, just the length of a human life, while in other systems, the journey is very long going through any number of reincarnations until it finally gets to its good place. Whatever the case, what is necessary in each of these systems is the understanding that death does not end human consciousness. After death, the soul can still see and understand, and in some cases, respond to those who are still living. These days, stories of what are called near-death experiences are used and cited to support the idea that consciousness does not end at death. People who have these experiences recover and tell of wondrous things they saw while nearly dead.

One of the spin-offs of the idea that death does not end conscious life is the possibility of an underworld, a world that is commonly called the world of spiritualism. We are not going to delve deeply into this idea because it is often dark, but the essential idea is that there are entities – spirits, devils, ancestor spirits, other beings – that are able to communicate and even guide those who are still living. Being able to contact and communicate with these spirits is attractive to many people because they are thought to be beyond the grave therefore possessed with powers of understanding and prediction that normal, living people do not have. The thought is that a person living now can be advantaged by seeking guidance from these spirits.



The other side of this issue is that at death, human consciousness ends, that death is much like a deep sleep where the person has no conscious thought going on, where they cannot be communicated with, where they can offer no guidance. It does not take much thought to realize that this second position immediately disallows what the other side contends, that there can be no punishment of the dead, no communication with departed loved ones, no guidance to be given from those whose lives have ended. And the whole matter of spiritualism raises major concerns as to what entities are out there if the dead know not anything? This becomes a very significant item when placed in the context of a great controversy between good and evil.

For those who believe the Bible to be the word of God, it becomes important to ask if the notion that there is consciousness after death fits the biblical data. Of course, those that hold to this position have their favorite texts to interpret in a manner favorable to their ideas, but a careful and over-arching look at the Bible certainly favors the minority opinion, that when a person dies, there is no more consciousness.

One of the best places to establish the grounds for this second opinion is the Genesis story of the creation of humans where we learn that human beings did not get souls when they were created. Instead, the Bible clearly states that humans BECAME living souls. God breathed into Adam the breath of life and he BECAME a living soul. This means that when God breathed into Adam the breath of life, he became a living, sentient entity. By contrast, it also means when the breath of life goes, the living ends. In truth, this word soul is used to describe living, breathing things. It is applied even to some living things other than humans. Its original meaning is preserved in the English language in maritime language, where we say a ship was lost along with all souls onboard. The souls mentioned here were living human beings not some inherently immortal entities.

Another thing to consider is the many, many references in the Bible that refer to death as a sleep. There are said to be some 53 occasions where death is referred to as a sleep. You can look for those for they are easy to find, to include the several cases where Jesus explicitly spoke of dead people as being asleep.

A third line of thought – and this is a very important one – is that, especially in the New Testament, any hope a person has of eternal life is not tied to the presence of an immortal soul but to the promise of a resurrection. The Apostle Paul is very clear about this in his writings. In 1 Thessalonians 4, the point is made clearly that the dead will rise first when Jesus comes. And in an even more emphatic passage in 1 Corinthians, Paul talks of the resurrection: “For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished” (1 Cor. 15:16–18, NKJV). Indeed, if the souls of the dead go to their reward at death, what is all this talk about a resurrection about? The idea of an immortal soul and a resurrection simply do not fit together.

Now to a few thoughts of the implications all this would have when viewed as being in the context of a great controversy between good and evil. The book of Revelation depicts a

great and final struggle where various entities will be involved in trying to deceive the inhabitants of the world. Chapters 13 and 16 in particular have verses that talk of these false entities performing signs and miracles in order to lead people astray from God. The prospect of having supernatural powers beyond death become a very powerful and even alarming possibility for deception. It would be easy for people who think there is consciousness after death to be taken in were someone like a much-loved relative to appear and do signs and wonders for them. The emotional power of that would be extreme.

We conclude here with the observation that, in the great and final struggle that will overtake the world just before Jesus returns, having a firm knowledge of truth will be the best protection.

## Lesson 11 ~ The Impending Conflict

**Verses for This Week:** *Rev. 14:7, 9, 12; Rev. 4:11; Rev. 13:1, 2; Rev. 12:3–5, 17; Rev. 13:11–18.*

Opening Question: “What can be said about the possibility of a final conflict taking place between the forces of good and evil?”

The title of this week’s lesson gives forth an indication of what the subject matter is going to be, the discussion of the great and final conflict that is envisioned particularly in the Book of Revelation.

With even a cursory reading of the Book of Revelation, a person can readily tell that the book, with all its symbols and beasts and apocalyptic language, points forward to a day when there will be a great and final conflict between the forces of good and evil after which the Kingdom of God will come and be fully established. While there has been, and continues to be, much discussion about the various players in the epic, the grand progression from earth to a new heaven and earth is quite plain to see.

What is also quite readily seen is the fact that worship is going to be at the heart of things in the conflict. There will be only two sides, those who worship the beast who is most certainly on the side of evil, and those who, against all odds, persist in worshipping God. The time of trouble spoken of will be unlike any other that has preceded it. But for the preserving hand of God, believers would all perish.

In chapter 14, and also in other places, the saints are called to worship God who is the creator of heaven and earth. He is the one who placed life on planet earth, who also made humans, who gave them a pristine place to live, and a Sabbath day memorial that was intended to keep ever before them the fact that it was God who created. It can rightly be said that, if this Sabbath memorial had always been revered, belief in the God of creation would never have disappeared from the face of the earth.

In Revelation 13 can be found key texts illuminating this final conflict. The major players in the scenario are Satan and a beast to which Satan gives power. This beast in particular, shows up to be a coercing power that enforces its system on all others to the point that those who dissent will first face economic sanctions – no man can buy or sell – and, finally, a death sentence for non-compliance.

Here a key point needs to be made. Because God is a God of love, he cannot use coercion in his doings. He can only invite, woo, never require. In light of this, any system that seeks to use the power of penalty, such as would come via the state, has to be held suspect. In matters of belief, religion, devotion, love, requirement does not work. These things cannot be enforced. They are had by citizens who grant to their leaders a willing compliance. To then read here of a beast the tries to enforce worship is to realize that this entity is very much opposed to the ways of God. By extension then, any time in the past, or any time in the future, where entities try to use force to achieve the loyalty and devotion of humans, must be put into what might be called “the beast category.”

If we take this as a rubric by which to evaluate the various powers that have held sway in past history, we can find many that have acted in a beastly way. Certainly, pagan Rome would be high on the list. But it is also true that the Christian church, during certain historical periods, used the same coercive *modus operandi*. It is well-known that when pagan Rome collapsed, it was the Christian church that found itself positioned to be the next ruling power. And at least somewhat inadvertently, the church adopted many of the ideas and systems that were Roman. For example, the church rather than being a community of believers, became a highly structured hierarchy just like the Roman empire itself had been. And many ideas came into it that came from sources other than the Bible. Worst of all, the church adopted the methodologies of Rome when it came to trying to enforce compliance and so became a persecuting entity. This system prevailed for a little over 1,200 years.

When you read the writings of many Protestants of long ago, they identified the beast with Papal Rome. This idea was very prominent for many years though it has faded to a large degree now. But notice that if papal Rome is identified in Daniel as beastly, and that identity is carried over into Revelation, it means that the Roman Church will be a key player in the final scenario of earth's history. It is precisely this understanding that fueled a lot of anti-Catholic dialog up into the middle 1900's. And, given the times, this interpretation fit the American scene quite well. This idea prevailed in Adventism in particular and still does in conservative circles. But some careful thought will show that this interpretation may be too narrow. For example, the papacy has lost a lot of its power though it might indeed revive at some point in the future. It is also true that there are many regions of earth where the papacy has little to no power. Communist countries would be an example. Also the Islamic world, and the Hindu world, to say nothing of the secular world that is now growing world-wide by leaps and bounds. In light of this, it seems a wider application of the beast principle should be considered.

There is another point to be made here that has to do with an important principle when interpreting apocalyptic writing and long lines of prophecy. All the lines of prophecy begin with concrete political organizations located around the eastern end of the mediterranean which can be readily identified. They are used to illustrate some aspect of the conflict between ancient Israel, the people of God, and the pagan world, which represent the side of evil. From that base, the imagery expands to not only the global level but to the cosmic level as well. So it might be that the beast already spoken about that originally could be pegged to the beastly behavior of the papacy in medieval times, would need to be expanded to a global level. In other words, there might be other players at the end time that behave like the medieval church did.

This assertion should not be a surprise to anyone for Adventists have long surmised that apostate Protestantism, Communism, and more recently, radical Islam, and secularism might all be players at the end, all collaborating to snuff out freedom of conscience. Given the current level of surveillance that exists, and presuming that it will become more pronounced, it is not hard to see how the scenario unfolded in Revelation could indeed take place.

## **Lesson 12 – Earth's Closing Events**

Texts for the Week: *John 8:32; Ezek. 20:12, 20; Rev. 7:1, 2; Rev. 14:1; Joel 2:21–24; Hos. 6:3; James 5:7, 8; Rev. 18:1–4.*

Opening Question: “Should we think of time as a circular thing, or a linear thing? Are we going round and round in history, or moving from a beginning to a point of destiny?”

The lesson this week looks at what might be called the closing scenes of earth’s history. It will come as no surprise to anyone who has read widely from the Bible that, in the Bible’s view of reality, time is linear rather than circular. In other words, history is moving from a point of beginning to a destiny, an end, a time when the flow of time as we experience it will be disrupted by the decisive actions of God in finally establishing His kingdom as a final replacement to the kingdoms of humans. This means there will come a time when earth will indeed experience some closing events.

A second thing to note is that the closing events will be tumultuous, cataclysmic. Reading from 2 Peter 3 makes that plain. The closing events will not just involve the machinations of humans but also the disruption of the natural cycles that currently prevail.

What is also true, particularly from reading the Books of Daniel and Revelation, is that there is going to be a time of great trouble where the focus is going to be on worship and loyalties established and nurtured. Two groups of people are going to emerge at the end, those who insist on worshipping God no matter the cost, and those who, for various reasons, fall prey to the machinations and wiles of Satan. To many, this seems simplistic if not impossible, but to those who study the Bible carefully, and who watch the dynamics that play out in human experience, this whole idea is plausible.

Of particular interest is the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Revelation. Three angels traverse the skies giving a final message that includes a call to worship God and to beware of loyalties to an evil power depicted as a beast. Notice that worship, the placing of loyalties, ultimate loyalties, is a key issue. And don’t forget that this struggle is set in the context of a very long struggle between good and evil in which Satan is said to be a liar and deceiver, and Christ a true and reliable leader of the good. This controversy began a long time ago, and it goes on not only in human lives but also at a cosmic level as noted by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians. Humans are foolish to think that, given our limitations, we can navigate this controversy by ourselves. Satan is a wily foe, far smarter than we imagine, a being who operates sometimes in very harsh ways, but other times in very gentle and subtle ways. His goal is always to lead humans astray from loyalty to God.

With all this in mind, it is fascinating in a strange sort of way, to note that there are two great errors that are quite prominent in the Christian world. The first has to do with the question of the nature of humans at death, the second has to do with the day of worship. Both of these items may have significant play in the closing scenes of earth’s history. The first item, because it holds to the idea that there is consciousness after death, leaves humans open to various kinds of manipulation that would seem to come from another realm. The second

because the shift away from the original day of worship leaves humans revering a day invented and endorsed by humans, not God. It places their ultimate loyalties in humanly devised systems of belief rather than the one given by God. The whole idea of a memorial in time designed to commemorate and keep before humanity the fact of the creatorship of God, is lost potentially leaving humans adrift from God's word and plan. How all these things will play out in a final scenario remains to be seen in its detail but let there be no doubt about the trajectory that has been set.

Another feature of the final scenes is also laid out in the Bible and it is an exciting one for there is a prediction that the Holy Spirit, who has been quite active throughout history, sometimes on dramatic ways as at Pentecost, will again be unleashed with uncommon power. The prophet Joel speaks to this making the statement that the Spirit will fall with power on all kinds of people from young to old thereby bringing the witness of God into full view and making the issues of worship and loyalty quite plain. It is to be expected that, in that season that takes place just before Christ appears a second time, that many will come to see the issue clearly that are now obscure to them and who knows how many will come to full faith in God. The well-known metaphor is the one about an early and latter rain, concepts that have received a lot of commentary among Christians.

One item that should ever be kept in mind is that loyalty, true and deep loyalty, can never be forced. There has to come a willing compliance somewhere in the equation of life if a person is to be most deeply committed. At the same time, those with authoritarian or totalitarian impulses hate liberty, the freedom to choose and decide. They have a very long record in history of trying, by various means including using torture and persecution, to bring about a unity of loyalty to themselves. History shows that it is almost always only a matter of time before their totalitarian schemes fall apart. The human will cannot be corralled indefinitely.

The key question that continually lies before every believer is this: "What loyalties are you nurturing in anticipation of what is to come?" The question Peter asked the saints of his day remains pertinent - "Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness?" (2 Peter 3:11)

## Lesson 13 – The Triumph of God’s Love

Texts for the Week: *Rev. 22:11, 12; Jer. 30:5-7; Ps. 91:1-11; Jer. 25:33; Rev. 21:2; Rev. 20:11-15.*  
Opening Question: “What visions of joy and grandeur come to you mind when you think about the day that evil and its residues are destroyed never to appear again?”

We come now to the final lesson for this quarter, a lesson that has to do with the very last parts of the controversy between good and evil. It is important to remind ourselves that, in so many ways, the future is the most significant dimension for us. This is because the future consists of the preferred or ideal state to which we aspire. The past cannot be fixed, and the present is significant because it has the path to the future depending on how we conduct ourselves. It is clear that we humans can endure all kinds of deprivation and struggle if we have a real hope of a better future. And here in Revelation, the impending perfect future for believers is laid out. And, once again, the overall picture is very clear while some of the details may not be as clear. The final outcome is that good will triumph over evil and evil, its perpetrators and its residues, will all be destroyed in a final conflagration and a new world will emerge in which the separation that has pertained between God and humans will be removed and the universe will once again beat to a single harmonious pulse.

There are several events that we should note. First, there will be a time of great tribulation, a time of trouble such as never was, this according to the ancient prophet Daniel. And Peter, writing to the early Christians, told of cataclysm that will prevail at the end of things. But – and this is a very important item – the righteous will be preserved. Just as the plagues in ancient Egypt did not fall on the Israelites, so the final destruction will not destroy the righteous.

The time of trouble will be interrupted and ended by the second coming of Jesus, that event spoken of so many times in the New Testament in particular. Clearly this will an intervention from the sky, Christ descending the skies with hordes of angels to redeem those who have been faithful.

Another notable event will be the resurrection of the righteous dead. This is a very important feature of the end for it brings together all those who have been believers so that they will go up together to meet the Lord. Here all the severed relationships brought about by death will be mended. The joy here will be unspeakable. Also at this time, the deformities and ailments of believers will be removed. As Paul noted, we will be changed in a moment. And one of the best things associated with that change will be the dropping away of our inherent attraction to sin!

Following the return of Jesus, the earth will be left desolate with Satan confined to its environs. The period of time here is stated as being 1,000 years otherwise known as the Millennium. The texts of the Bible and the words used here create a link between the desolation of earth at the end with its condition before God worked to create life upon it in

Genesis. Here the picture is one of the total reversal of creation in anticipation of a whole new world coming into being.

One of the more interesting elements of the final triumph has to do with what the saved are doing during the Millennium. Indications are that they will be in heaven as they will be caught up to be with the Lord at the Second Coming. But what will they be doing in heaven? Indications are, from Revelation 20, that they will be involved in evaluating the redemptive work of God. Paul, in one of his letters to the Corinthians, hinted at this, too. This idea fits very well with the fact that God is a God of love so He cannot resort to coercion. Furthermore, if sin is never to arise again, then those who are saved must be satisfied that God has acted fairly. One line of thought here has to do with questions that might arise about who was not saved, or who was saved who might not have looked much like a candidate for salvation while living on earth. The Millennium will be time enough to allow for those kinds of questions to be answered so, going on into eternity, there will be no cause for suspicion to arise again.

The final acts in the great controversy follow the Millennium. At the cost of those 1,000 years, there will be a third coming of Jesus. With him will not only be the heavenly beings mentioned in the Bible, but also those saved from earth, and the New Jerusalem. The city will settle on the earth and there will follow a great showdown for, as noted in Revelation 20:7-9, Satan will gather his forces who will be made up of all those who ever lived on earth who did not advantage themselves of salvation, and they will attempt to overrun the city of God. At that point, God will unveil his glory, which is a consuming fire, and Satan and the wicked and all the residues of evil, will be consumed in a lake of fire leaving the universe pristine once more. We should note that the verses mentioned do not speak of a never-ending fire for evil, it says, is consumed, meaning it will burn until it is consumed.

With all this in mind, it is both sobering and intriguing to think of the controversy between good and evil, how it has unfolded from its beginning with Satan, how it has played out in human and cosmic history, the various misdoings of the evil one against the redemptive acts of God. And all of this in a way where a God of love has been able to guide things in such a way as not to infringe on His own character or inveigh on the freedom humans have to choose which is an essential capacity to be present in order for love to exist. To then think of the fact that, still before us is a grand finale', one is inclined to think of the seriousness of picking sides now for now is the time to be living either a life focused on God and righteousness, or on evil and, behind the scenes, Satan. One is also drawn by the hope of one day living in a world where evil and brokenness are gone! Haste on that day. For those of us who have lived where good and evil can be found, the thought of living where evil is totally absent is wonderful indeed.

Perhaps there is no greater reflection on the end of things, the final outcome of the controversy, than the final paragraph of the book *The Great Controversy* - "The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation. From Him who created all, flow life and light and gladness, throughout the realms of illimitable space. From the minutest atom to the



greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love.”—*The Great Controversy*, p. 678

A final thought here – there is unsurpassed power when working with sentient beings, to gaining their willing compliance in decision-making and living. God knows this and so the whole of the great controversy has been played out in ways that invite willing compliance for when a person is persuaded against their will, they are of the original opinion still. In the final analysis, there is no better way to settle matters than to bring about a consensus or even a division, that is driven or undergirded by willing compliance.