

The Book of Matthew

The Seen and the Unseen War

Lesson #5 for April 30, 2016

Scriptures: Matthew 11:1-15; 12:25-29; Revelation 5:5; Isaiah 27:1; Hebrews 2:14-15.

1. In this lesson we will seek to step back from our day-by-day activities to see how they might fit into the panorama of the great controversy going on throughout the universe.
2. Invisible entities such as x-rays, radio waves, and wireless communications are now familiar to all of us. It should not be a surprise to know that angels—both good and evil—and God Himself can and do exist and exert influences on us and our friends every day without being seen.
3. Certainly, we would recognize that there may be things about the spiritual world that we do not understand. Ellen White stated:

The very humblest forms of life present a problem that the wisest of philosophers is powerless to explain. Everywhere are wonders beyond our ken. Should we then be surprised to find that in the spiritual world also there are mysteries that we cannot fathom? The difficulty lies solely in the weakness and narrowness of the human mind. God has given us in the Scriptures sufficient evidence of their divine character, and we are not to doubt His word because we cannot understand all the mysteries of His providence.—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* 106.2-107.0.

4. Read Matthew 11:11-12. These verses have puzzled commentators for years. What was Jesus trying to tell us? Is it true that “the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it”? (*NIV*) Or, perhaps it should be rendered:

[Jesus said:] “The Kingdom of Heaven has been forcefully advancing, and violent people are attacking it.” (*New Living Translation*) [Content in brackets is added.]

5. In Matthew 11:12, the Greek word *biazō* can mean either “forcefully advancing” or “suffering violence.” And the Greek word *biastēs* can mean “forceful or eager men” or “violent men.”

In Matt. 11:12 used in the pass. but with mid. meaning, i.e., the kingdom of God *biázetai*, is sought with eagerness, haste. It is not carefully thought of as to its consequences which may not be pleasant, such as persecution by one’s very own household (Matt. 10:36). In the mid. voice, meaning that one presses himself in to seize the kingdom with his own energy as if the kingdom could be had as something to be grasped. We see this today as people eagerly and flippantly come forward to “accept Christ” without having experienced repentance of sin or having counted the cost of their acceptance (Matt. 16:24–28).—Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

6. Jesus warned us that our progress in the Christian way as individuals and as a group will not always be peaceful. (Matthew 10:34; Revelation 5:5; Micah 2:13)
7. The *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Monday, April 25 suggests the following is a possible solution.

Some have argued that the most likely interpretation of Matthew 11:12 is to apply the most common uses of *biazōmai* (typically positive) and *biastēs* (typically negative), giving us this interpretation: the kingdom of heaven is forcefully advancing with “holy power and magnificent energy that has been pushing back the frontiers of darkness”; and while this is happening, “violent or rapacious men have been trying to plunder it.”—D. A. Carson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary With the New International Version: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), pp. 266, 267. [Diacritical marks on Greek words are added.]

8. Surely, these ideas suggest that we are living in the midst of the great controversy, sometimes call the cosmic conflict. We make choices every day based on what we choose to do, listen to, watch, and say. Everything is either colored by the love of God or tinged with the ideas of Satan.

9. Although we recognize that God is all-powerful, it is still true that on planet earth Satan may at times seem to be winning. Read Matthew 12:25-29; Isaiah 27:1; 1 John 5:19; Romans 16:20; Genesis 3:14-19; and Ephesians 2:2; 6:11-12. These verses make it very clear that we live in a war zone. Jesus even admitted that “the whole world is under the rule of the Evil One.” (1 John 5:19) But, we know that, ultimately, “God, our source of peace, will crush Satan under your feet.” (Romans 16:20, *GNB*)
10. While Seventh-day Adventists have become very familiar with the notion of the great controversy, at least one contemporary non-Adventist theologian has described Adventists as having what he called a “warfare worldview.” No other group or church has spelled out the “cosmic conflict” or “great controversy” view as has Ellen White. Without her, the Seventh-day Adventist Church would be missing its core beliefs; and it is doubtful that we would be in existence today. Can you identify the work of Satan and the cosmic conflict in your own life? Remember that to Satan this is a life or death battle. He knows that, ultimately, he will lose; but, if he can be successful in getting us to join his side so that none of us actually understands the great controversy and stands firmly on God’s side, then he can delay that day.
11. Read Matthew 11:1-12. In the experience of John the Baptist and especially in his relationship with Jesus, what forces in the great controversy do we see acting? And in what ways? Who was responsible for putting John in jail? How do you suppose that impacted the lives of those who believed in John the Baptist and Jesus? What was John the Baptist expecting from Jesus? They wondered what might happen to Jesus Himself? When John was imprisoned, things got so bad in Judea that Jesus left there to work in Galilee. When John was beheaded, Jesus left Galilee to work outside Jewish territory! He returned only briefly before His final journey to Jerusalem.
12. And Satan suggested to Jesus’s followers that if Jesus was so powerful and able to do so many wonderful miracles, why was He allowing His faithful predecessor John the Baptist, His cousin, to languish in jail? What kind of future do you think the disciples foresaw for themselves as John was beheaded? What would have happened if Jesus had stayed in Judea or even Galilee?
13. Throughout human history, humans have engaged in warfare. For one reason or another—unfortunately, often for religious reasons—wars have caused plundering, pillaging, and slaughtering of one group by another. Catherine Tait, the daughter of Bertrand Russell, wrote these words about her father and his reaction to the prospects of World War I.

He had grown up with an optimistic Victorian belief in automatic progress, with the confidence that the whole world would, in its own good time, follow the wise course of the English from ancient brutality to civilized self-government. Then, suddenly, he found his own beloved compatriots dancing in the streets at the prospect of slaughtering great numbers of fellow human beings who happened to speak German.—*My Father Bertrand Russell* (England: Thoemmes Press, 1997), p. 45, as quoted in *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Tuesday, April 27.
14. In most human wars, of course, no one knows for sure exactly what the outcome is going to be. Will their side win? Or, not? But, in our cosmic conflict, we already know who is going to win! The questions then are: 1) Are we going to make the effort to join the winning side? 2) what are the issues in the great controversy? The great controversy is over who was/is telling us the truth. Jesus not only told the truth, but also He demonstrated it in His life and death. 3) Does sin lead to death? (Genesis 2:17) Or, is that a lie as Satan claimed? (Genesis 3:1-4) 4) Is Jesus really divine? Or, is He just another angel—Michael the Archangel—and, therefore, no greater than Lucifer himself? (See John 10:18. No creature could do that!)
15. Read Hebrews 2:14; 1 Corinthians 15:20-27; Revelation 12:12; 20:10. These verses make it very clear that Christ will be the ultimate Victor in this war. Satan even knows that he has only a little time left. And he will ultimately be destroyed in the lake of fire. Just as Christ and Satan battled over the minds of angels in heaven and Satan lost, the same basic conflict is happening on earth today.
16. Remember that by beholding we become changed. (GC 555.1) So, to what are we exposing ourselves each day? What are we doing? Watching? Listening to? Even thinking? How is that impacting us and slowly modifying our characters and our personalities?

17. What are some of the most subtle ways in which Satan deceives Christians and leads them astray? “Do it just once! It won’t hurt.” And when we have tried some forbidden pleasure, he comes back and says: “Now that you have committed this sin, there is no chance to go back; God will never welcome you back.” It is true that we cannot recover from sin on our own, but God will help us if we are willing to take the time and effort to make constant choices in the right direction.
18. Let us be clear: Very few Christians, even Seventh-day Adventists, understand the details of the “cosmic conflict” or the “great controversy” as spelled out by Ellen White. However, we need to understand that it was not Ellen White who first suggested these kinds of ideas. See the handout at: www.theox.org, go to “Teachers Guides,” then “General Topics” and look for “The Great Controversy Described in Scripture.”
19. Many portions of Scripture are hard to understand and, in fact, might easily be very misunderstood without a knowledge of the great controversy and the role of Satan.
20. So, why are we still here so long after Jesus won the victory on the cross? After winning that victory, why didn’t Jesus just come back to this earth and destroy the Devil?
21. What are the real issues in the great controversy? Who can be trusted because They always tell the truth?
22. The battleground of the great controversy was and is in the minds of God’s creatures throughout the universe. After the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the rest of the universe saw clearly the issues and have rejected all of Satan’s claims against God and His character and government. At this point in time, the great controversy is limited to this earth. (1 Corinthians 4:9; Ephesians 1:8-10; 3:8-10; Colossians 1:19-20) But, the issues have not changed. The angels and the beings in the rest of the universe needed the answers that were provided by the life and death of Jesus just as much as we do. But, they saw all of the details of the life and death of Jesus and understood almost everything that was involved; Satan can no longer be successful in deceiving them.
23. Notice some of the interesting comments by Ellen White from the book *The Desire of Ages*.
- When the last steps of Christ’s humiliation were to be taken, when the deepest sorrow was closing about His soul, He said to His disciples, “The prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in Me.” “The prince of this world is judged.” Now shall he be cast out. John 14:30; 16:11; 12:31. **With prophetic eye Christ traced the scenes to take place in His last great conflict. He knew that when He should exclaim, “It is finished,” all heaven would triumph. His ear caught the distant music and the shouts of victory in the heavenly courts.** He knew that the knell of Satan’s empire would then be sounded, and the name of Christ would be heralded from world to world throughout the universe.—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* 679.1. [Bold type is added.]
24. Jesus was aware in advance that He would face that incredible struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross. There is probably no better place to find the issues in the great controversy spelled out than in the chapters “Calvary” and “It Is Finished” in the book *The Desire of Ages*. A few selections from those chapters follow.
25. How did Jesus win by dying? He had perfect trust/faith in His Father based on evidence!
- ...In those dreadful hours **He had relied upon the evidence of His Father’s acceptance heretofore given Him.** He was acquainted with the character of His Father; He understood His justice, His mercy, and His great love. **By faith He rested in Him whom it had ever been His joy to obey.** And as in submission He committed Himself to God, the sense of the loss of His Father’s favor was withdrawn. By faith, Christ was victor.—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* 756.3. [Bold type is added.]
26. Except in our world, the answers about God and Satan were clear and convincing.
- Suddenly the gloom lifted from the cross, and in clear, trumpetlike tones, that seemed to resound throughout creation, Jesus cried, “It is finished.” “Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit.” A light encircled the cross, and the face of the

Saviour shone with a glory like the sun. He then bowed His head upon His breast, and died.—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* 756.2.

...Was there not joy among the angels? All heaven triumphed in the Saviour's victory. Satan was defeated, and knew that his kingdom was lost.

To the angels and the unfallen worlds the cry, "It is finished," had a deep significance. It was for them as well as for us that the great work of redemption had been accomplished. They with us share the fruits of Christ's victory....

Not until the death of Christ was the character of Satan clearly revealed to the angels or to the unfallen worlds. The archapostate had so clothed himself with deception that even holy beings had not understood his principles...—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* 758.1-3.

27. Power was never the issue in the great controversy. (James 2:19)

God could have destroyed Satan and his sympathizers as easily as one can cast a pebble to the earth; but He did not do this. Rebellion was not to be overcome by force. Compelling power is found only under Satan's government...—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* 759.1.

28. Satan had claimed that the principles of his government were superior to God's!

It was God's purpose to place things on **an eternal basis of security**, and in the councils of heaven **it was decided that time must be given for Satan to develop the principles which were the foundation of his system of government. He had claimed that these were superior to God's principles. Time was given for the working of Satan's principles, that they might be seen by the heavenly universe....**

Satan saw that his disguise was torn away. His administration was laid open before the unfallen angels and before the heavenly universe. He had revealed himself as a murderer. By shedding the blood of the Son of God, he had uprooted himself from the sympathies of the heavenly beings. Henceforth his work was restricted. Whatever attitude he might assume, he could no longer await the angels as they came from the heavenly courts, and before them accuse Christ's brethren of being clothed with the garments of blackness and the defilement of sin. The last link of sympathy between Satan and the heavenly world was broken.—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* 761.1-2. [Bold type is added.]

29. We must be given the opportunity to see the issues and choose. Why is God still waiting?

Yet Satan was not then destroyed. The angels did not even then understand all that was involved in the great controversy. The principles at stake were to be more fully revealed. **And for the sake of man, Satan's existence must be continued. Man as well as angels must see the contrast between the Prince of light and the prince of darkness.** He must choose whom he will serve.—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* 761.3. [Bold type is added.]

30. Satan had claimed that God's law could not be obeyed and if broken could not be forgiven!

In the opening of the great controversy, Satan had declared that the law of God could not be obeyed, that justice was inconsistent with mercy, and that, should the law be broken, it would be impossible for the sinner to be pardoned. Every sin must meet its punishment, urged Satan; and if God should remit the punishment of sin, He would not be a God of truth and justice. When men broke the law of God, and defied His will, Satan exulted. It was proved, he declared, that the law could not be obeyed; man could not be forgiven. Because he, after his rebellion, had been banished from heaven, Satan claimed that the human race must be forever shut out from God's favor.

God could not be just, he urged, and yet show mercy to the sinner....

Understanding the character of God, knowing His goodness, Satan chose to follow his own selfish, independent will. This choice was final. There was no more that God could do to save him. But man was deceived; his mind was darkened by Satan's sophistry. The height and depth of the love of God he did not know. For him there was hope in a knowledge of God's love. By beholding His character he might be drawn back to God.—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* 761.4-5. [Bold type is added.]

31. Satan's charges were proven false and completely refuted by the life and death of Jesus.

By His life and His death, Christ proved that God's justice did not destroy His mercy, but that sin could be forgiven, and that the law is righteous, and can be perfectly obeyed. Satan's charges were refuted. God had given man unmistakable evidence of His love....—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* 762.4.

Then the end will come. God will vindicate His law and deliver His people. Satan and all who have joined him in rebellion will be cut off.... —Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* 763.4. [Bold type is added.]

32. Sinners will ultimately cut themselves off from God, the only Source of life.

This is not an act of arbitrary power on the part of God. The rejecters of His mercy reap that which they have sown. God is the fountain of life; and when one chooses the service of sin, **he separates from God, and thus cuts himself off from life. He is "alienated from the life of God."** Christ says, "**All they that hate Me love death.**" Ephesians 4:18; Proverbs 8:36. **God gives them existence for a time that they may develop their character and reveal their principles. This accomplished, they receive the results of their own choice. By a life of rebellion, Satan and all who unite with him place themselves so out of harmony with God that His very presence is to them a consuming fire. The glory of Him who is love will destroy them.**—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* 764.1. [Bold type is added.]

33. God had to wait for the results of sin to be demonstrated to the entire universe.

At the beginning of the great controversy, the angels did not understand this. **Had Satan and his host then been left to reap the full result of their sin, they would have perished; but it would not have been apparent to heavenly beings that this was the inevitable result of sin. A doubt of God's goodness would have remained in their minds as evil seed, to produce its deadly fruit of sin and woe.**—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* 764.2. [Bold type is added.]

34. Now the truth about Satan's claims and God's character have been clearly demonstrated.

But not so when the great controversy shall be ended. Then, the plan of redemption having been completed, the character of God is revealed to all created intelligences. The precepts of His law are seen to be perfect and immutable. Then sin has made manifest its nature, Satan his character. Then the extermination of sin will vindicate God's love and establish His honor before a universe of beings who delight to do His will, and in whose heart is His law.

Well, then, might the angels rejoice as they looked upon the Saviour's cross; for though they did not then understand all, they knew that the destruction of sin and Satan was forever made certain, that the redemption of man was assured, and that **the universe was made eternally secure.** Christ Himself fully comprehended the results of the sacrifice made upon Calvary. To all these He looked forward when upon the cross He cried out, "It is finished."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* 764.3-4. [Bold type is added.]

35. Having lost the core battle in the great controversy, be assured that the Devil is not going to give up easily. He is insane in his battle against God. Notice these words from Ellen White:

“The devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time.” [Revelation 12:12] The antitypical land of promise is just before us, and **Satan is determined to destroy the people of God, and cut them off from their inheritance.**—Ellen G. White, *The Gospel Herald*, August 1, 1910 par. 5.

From the beginning it has been Satan’s studied plan to cause men to forget God, that he might secure them to himself. Hence he has sought to misrepresent the character of God, to lead men to cherish a false conception of Him. The Creator has been presented to their minds as clothed with the attributes of the prince of evil himself,—as arbitrary, severe, and unforgiving,—that He might be feared, shunned, and even hated by men. Satan hoped to so confuse the minds of those whom he had deceived that they would put God out of their knowledge. Then he would obliterate the divine image in man and impress his own likeness upon the soul; he would imbue men with his own spirit and make them captives according to his will.

It was by falsifying the character of God and exciting distrust of Him that Satan tempted Eve to transgress.... **Even the covenant people, whom God had chosen to preserve in the world the knowledge of Himself, had so far departed from Him that they had lost all true conception of His character.**

Christ came to reveal God to the world as a God of love, [739] full of mercy, tenderness, and compassion. The thick darkness with which Satan had endeavored to enshroud the throne of Deity was swept away by the world’s Redeemer, and the Father was again manifest to men as the light of life.—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, vol. 5, 738.1-738.4 (1889). [Bold type and content in brackets are added.]

36. We have one monumental task that we need to accomplish before He can come again.

The Bible is its own expositor. Scripture is to be compared with scripture. The student should learn to view the word as a whole, and to see the relation of its parts. He should gain a knowledge of its grand central theme, of God’s original purpose for the world, of the rise of the great controversy, and of the work of redemption. He should understand the nature of the two principles that are contending for supremacy, and should learn to trace their working through the records of history and prophecy, to the great consummation. He should see how this controversy enters into every phase of human experience; how in every act of life he himself reveals the one or the other of the two antagonistic motives; and how, whether he will or not, he is even now deciding upon which side of the controversy he will be found.—Ellen G. White, *Education* 190.2. [Bold type is added.]

37. We know that the great controversy or the cosmic conflict began when Satan, then Lucifer, standing beside the throne of God in heaven, rebelled. It will not end until Satan and all who sympathize with him will have destroyed themselves by separating themselves from God. Every day we need to fix our attention on Jesus and allow Him to guide our lives. Only in this way will it be possible for us to attain the victory He is offering us.

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