

The Great Controversy
Clairemont SDA Church
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Today we begin a new series focusing on the closing chapters of God's plan for this planet. We're going to take a brief view of the significant markers on the timeline as God wraps up the project to save His people. But first, today, we want to back up and lay the groundwork for our study by looking at how it all began. This is important because to understand the issues that face our planet at the end of time, we have to understand what happened at the very beginning.

In our study this morning, we're going to look at a number of Bible passages which bring to light the key players in the drama. We're also going to share some material from the writings of Ellen G. White, who was given unique insights into how this all started and how it will end. For those of you who may not know, Seventh-day Adventists believe that Ellen White exercised the gift of prophecy; that is, she was given some 2,000 visions during her lifetime through which God conveyed information for the benefit of the church. Seventh-day Adventists do not look upon her writings as being equal to the Scriptures, and certainly not above them; nevertheless, we believe that God was pleased to shed light through her writings (which we sometimes refer to as "The Spirit of Prophecy") which fill in some of the areas on which the Bible is silent. Going into greater detail regarding her role in the Seventh-day Adventist Church and addressing concerns that some have raised having to do with the giving of prophetic messages will be a topic for another time.

But today we will be sharing some of the material she wrote as we consider how all this began. This material is drawn from articles she wrote that were published in a magazine called the "Signs of the Times." They are available either in printed form (as in this book I'm holding), or they can be viewed for free on the website www.whiteestate.org. The articles were published January 9, 16 and 23 of 1879. Understanding life as we experience it today requires that we know where we have been and where we are going. That's what gives life meaning. The Lord in His mercy has given us such information through the Holy Scriptures and through the Spirit of Prophecy.

We learn from the Bible that we are involved in a fierce war; a "Great Controversy." This battle is between the devil and Christ, but we are involved; we must choose which side to be on. This "Great Controversy" theme is at the very foundation of our church's teachings. As surprising as it may seem, some who claim to follow the Bible do not appreciate its import. Here's what one critical website has to say about this belief. "In Seventh-day Adventist doctrine the Great Controversy is fundamental belief no. 8 - 'Humanity is involved in a "great controversy" between Jesus Christ and Satan.' This is an elaboration on the common fanciful Christian theory that evil began in heaven when an angelic being (Lucifer) rebelled against the Law of God. The theory is without doubt unmitigated nonsense." This quotation comes from a website called www.thisisyourbible.com

What does God's Word tell us? Revelation 12:7-9 tells about the war that began in heaven and was transferred to this earth when Satan was cast out. "And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him."

It sounds like the Bible indeed describes a war which began in heaven, led by a fallen angel Lucifer. By the way, the word "war" in that text is the word *polemos*, which comes into our language as the word "polemic." Here are some definitions of what the word "polemic" means. These definitions are quite interesting as we consider exactly what went on up in heaven during this "war." A "polemic" is: "A contentious argument that is intended to establish the truth of a specific understanding and the falsity of the contrary position." (Wikipedia) So that's the kind of "war," the *polemos*, that was being waged in heaven. Here's another description. A "polemic" is: "A controversial argument, especially one refuting or attacking a specific opinion or doctrine." (Free Online Dictionary) "A polemic is something that stirs up controversy by having a negative opinion, usually aimed at a particular group." (Vocabulary.Com) A polemic is "a heated controversy, especially an argument over theology or ideology." (AlphaDictionary.com)

So, the idea of a "great controversy" is not at all foreign to the Bible picture of how this began. When the Bible says there was "war" (*polemos*) in heaven, we understand that it was a war of ideas, a war

of concepts; not necessarily a physical war. This fits in perfectly with our understanding of just what happened up there. Satan began a campaign to turn the minds of other angels against God and toward himself.

We read near the end of the book of Revelation about the conclusion of this war. "Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and *makes war*. (Who is this on the white horse? It's Jesus, isn't it.) And the *armies* (groups involved in warfare) in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. And I saw the beast, the kings of the earth, and their *armies*, gathered together to *make war* against Him who sat on the horse and against His *army*." Revelation 19:11, 14, 19. Who wins the war? It's clear from the next verses that the Rider on the white horse, Jesus Christ, is the Victor in this battle. On Whose side do you want to place your allegiance in this war?

So the theme of the Great Controversy is clearly spelled out in the book of Revelation. But the theme of the "war," the *polemos*, isn't just found in the last book of the Bible; it goes deep into the soil of the Scriptures; it's woven into the fabric of every part, even of the Old Testament. In the book of Job, thought to be the very first book of the Bible written, we read about the confrontation between Satan and God regarding the person of Job. In the book of Genesis we read about the serpent that beguiled Eve and caused her downfall and that of Adam.

In Isaiah 14 we read of Satan's blind and selfish ambition to be like the Most High. "How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer (the "light bearer") son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, you who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart, 'I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.'" Isaiah 14:12-14.

In Ezekiel 28 we read how he was caught up in his own beauty and cherished pride. "You were the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering. Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor." Ezekiel 28:12, 13, 17. How a created being could come to the conclusion that he deserved the same homage and worship as the Creator God is a mystery, but that's what happened. Instead of

dismissing that thought when it came into his mind, he cherished and nourished it. As strange as it may seem, Lucifer, the anointed covering cherub became the devil. Let's understand this clearly: God didn't create a devil; He created a perfect being who was given free choice, who exercised that choice to turn himself into a devil. What does the Bible say? "You were perfect in your ways from the day you were created till iniquity was found (not "put") in you." Ezekiel 28:15.

In the Gospels there was constant conflict between the devil and his forces against Christ. Paul spoke about putting on the whole armor of God so that we could successfully wage war against the devil. He talks about "fighting the good fight of faith." In the book of Jude we read, "Michael the archangel, in *contending* with the devil, when he (the devil) *disputed* about the body of Moses, dared not bring against him a reviling accusation, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you.'" Jude 9.

What is this war, this *polemos* about? The devil, Satan, started a war of ideas in heaven, challenging God's government and His law of *agape* love, the law of selfless service. Feeling slighted because he was not given the same honor as Christ and was not consulted regarding the creation of this earth, He began to make sly insinuations among the angels, suggesting that God's system wasn't fair, and then he used their responses to his provocative questions to target other angels, thus covertly winning them to his way of thinking. It was a war of concepts, a war of principles, a war of ideology. Satan made it seem that God's law of love was restrictive and limited their freedom. Following God made you a deluded slave, he contended. His way would give true freedom, freedom from law. Do any of these thoughts seem familiar to you today? Do not many Christian pulpits ring out these very same sentiments?

Keep in mind that prior to this all had been happiness and harmony. Not a single note of discord had been heard throughout the entire universe. Yet Satan proposed that his plan would bring improvement. Keep in mind also that at that time the full effects of sin were not known. Exactly where this path of rebellion would lead was a mystery, except to the mind of God Who knew precisely the sorrow it would cause. There had never been any pain or death. But the seeds of all the woeful results of sin were in the fruit that Satan offered the angelic beings whom he deceived. This *polemos*, this war of ideas became the Great Controversy.

Perhaps the closest thing in the Bible to the actual phrase "the great controversy," is found in Daniel 10 in which we read, "In the

third year of Cyrus king of Persia a message was revealed to Daniel, whose name was called Belteshazzar. The message was true, but the appointed time was long." Do you see that last word there, the word "long"? Now, in my Bible I have a note that gives an alternate reading for that word. Instead of the word "long," the note reads, "of great conflict." Using that phrase in place of the word "long," the text would read, "The message was true but the appointed time was of great conflict." The word "conflict" is a synonym for the word "controversy," isn't it? You could almost say that the text could read, "The message was true, but the appointed time was a great controversy."

Here's how a few other translations render this passage. "The news was true and it was about a battle." (New Life Version) "The message was about a horrible war, and it was true." (Contemporary English Version) "The message was true. It dealt with a big war." (The Message Bible). "The thing is true and the warfare is great." (Young's Literal Translation) "The message was true and one of great conflict." (New American Standard Bible) Even if the exact phrase "great controversy" isn't used in Scripture, there can be no question that that theme is a thread that runs from Genesis through to Revelation. Some may state that the concept of the "Great Controversy" is "fanciful and unmitigated nonsense," but that accusation is not backed up by the Word of God!

In heaven, eventually the stress and disharmony brought by Satan's attack against God's kingdom and the smudges he brushed against God's character brought things to a head. Here's some more background information. We're told in the Spirit of Prophecy that even before sin entered, the Godhead operated with a division of roles. God the Father was "Chief Administrator," while Christ, being fully equal to the Father, moved within and conversed among the angel host. Yet Christ was Creator God, and the angels, including Lucifer had the privilege of witnessing Him bringing into existence planets and galaxies. Still, because He occupied a somewhat different role than God the Father, Lucifer began to entertain the thought, "Why is Christ so exalted and worshiped, and not me? Why is He admitted into the council with the Father to design the new creation, and not me?" The more he thought about it, he actually talked himself into believing that he was equal to Christ and deserved the same homage and reverence as belonged to God. Tragic thinking!

The day came when God assembled all the heavenly host and clearly set before them the true position of Christ, that He was fully and completely equal with the Father and equally deserving of

reverence. All the angels bowed before Christ in worship, including Lucifer, though there was a deep struggle within his heart. He came close to renouncing his way of thinking and acknowledging the truth of what the Father had presented, but his pride got in the way. He would have lost face with the other angels, and this he refused to do.

Finally God summoned all His angels together and each one was given the opportunity to declare where they would place their allegiance; with God and His government, or with rebellion. Lucifer was first to announce his resolution. With shocking and defiant boldness he declared that he would not stand by and submit to the continuation of the abridgement of his "rights." One by one the angels gave their answer. Without question, every time an angel threw his lot in with Satan, another arrow of sorrow pierced God's heart. Those who rebelled must go. The pollution of their sinful ways could not damage the purity of heaven. They were cast out of heaven, and found themselves on Planet Earth, freshly created by God.

Lucifer found himself barraged by the angry words of his companions, who were now wondering about the "higher estate" that he had promised them. It wasn't quite working out like he had told them. There was some confusion as to what would happen next. Would they remain loyal to Satan and join in whatever plan he devised? Unhappy with his new condition, Satan requested an audience with Christ and told Him that he was now willing to repent and take back his old position and acknowledge the deity of Jesus. With untold sadness and tears in His voice, Christ told Satan that there was nothing He could do for him. He had crossed that invisible line of rebellion and committed the unpardonable sin. His case was not redeemable. There was no plan of salvation for him.

Finally convinced now that he would never again be reinstated to heaven, Satan's fury knew no bounds. He would leave no stone unturned in his efforts to bring God's kingdom down. The Father and the Son went forward with the plan to populate this planet, and Adam and Eve were created in perfect holiness. Satan determined to draw their loyalty away from God, but as he thought about the consequences of what he was about to do, he shuddered to think of plunging innocent and happy Adam and Eve into the miserable state in which he now found himself. In addition, he recognized that the guilt which he had already incurred would be multiplied many times over by wresting the holy couple from their Creator. Yet he thought he had no other choice. The feelings of hatred and animosity toward God energized him to move forward with his plans.

He withdrew from the other angels and pondered the best approach to tempt Adam and Eve. He concluded that a direct approach would not be successful, nor would intimidation or a show of strength. No, he would resort to stealth and deception. The other angels found him and told him that they were ready to throw their lot in with him in his effort to gain the human family in his rebellion. Satan explained to them his plan to attack Adam and Eve, and notified them that he himself would be the agent of temptation.

God knew what was in Satan's heart, and commissioned two angels to inform Adam and Eve of the rebellion that had transpired in heaven. They explained to them that they were not compelled to obey God; they were free moral agents and could choose. Yet they were encouraged to be loyal to Him, and to express their allegiance by not eating the fruit of one specific tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In this way they would confirm their choice to obey Jehovah God. They were warned that Satan could tempt them, but only in the confines of the forbidden tree. He would not be free to roam and harass them throughout the Garden. They were instructed to remain together, for resistance to his temptation would be aided by the strength of their union. Though not informed as to the specific method by which his temptation would come, more than adequate information was given to them to secure their obedience and the continuance of their happy state. Both Adam and Eve responded with fervent expressions that they would never disobey God and break His commandment.

Satan schemed that he would induce Adam and Eve to sin and cause grief to the heart of God. His strategy contained two parts: he reasoned that if he succeeded in causing them to disobey God, and if perchance mercy were extended to Adam and Eve, then he could claim that it would not be fair to withhold mercy from him. On the other hand, part two of his cunning plan, if they fell, the Garden would be his, with its Tree of Life which would sustain and strengthen their lives forever.

He was wrong on both counts. Adam and Eve indeed fell prey to his temptation and God put into operation a plan of redemption, but it would benefit the human race, not Lucifer and his associates. Why the difference? Because *Satan* had crossed that invisible line; he had committed the unpardonable sin. We're told that God "bore long" with Lucifer in heaven, and he was given ample opportunity to renounce his

rebellious thoughts, but he stubbornly refused to do so. His mind had become sealed in insurrection.

Adam and Eve, on the other hand, though not innocent of transgression, were not beyond redemption. Their minds were not set in concrete, as was the mind of Lucifer. There was hope for them, though the cost of their redemption would be expensive. It would require a divine Sacrifice, for a divine law had been broken. No one less than God Himself could pay for the sin of mankind. It would require the life blood of Christ Himself, the Creator, to atone for the transgression. Adam and Eve wept as they realized the results of their sin. Adam's hand was required to slay an innocent animal, from whose skin the Lord provided garments to replace the ineffective fig leaf coverings which they had fashioned after they had realized their nakedness.

Satan shuddered as he heard the words spoken to him by Christ, "you shall bruise His heel, but He shall bruise your head." He recognized in those words the prophecy of his doom, yet his anger spurred him on to create more and more misery on this planet. He inspired Cain to reject God's law and then infused him with anger to kill his brother Abel, whose obedience had resulted in his sacrifice being accepted. He corrupted the planet with sin to the point that God had to step in and wash the earth clean through a world-wide flood in Noah's day.

When Christ was born in Bethlehem, he breathed vengeance and jealousy through Herod, who gave the command to kill all the Bethlehem male infants. Throughout the life of Christ, Satan was on His trail, constantly seeking His downfall, but Jesus never once gave in to his temptations and at last died the death that mankind deserved in order to satisfy the demands of God's broken law. But He arose triumphantly from the grave and has given us the assurance of victory in and through Him.

Through the information given in the Bible, we believe that God's plan for this planet will shortly be fulfilled, and it is to this great plan that we will give our attention in the next few weeks. God has to solve the sin problem! He can't let it go on forever; it's too painful. Our objective will be to establish a timeline (not with "dates," but to lay out the sequence of events) based on what the Bible reveals, focusing on Christ's second coming, the 1,000 years that follow, the final judgment and destruction of the wicked, and the establishment of the new earth. Satan has done his best to twist the information given by the Bible and

deceive people about God's plan. That's why it's so important for us to study these things.

I realize that for some of us we've heard these things before. But the truth is that we're nearer to these things rising from the pages of Scripture and becoming reality than ever before. We must be firmly rooted in the truth, for the devil is going about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may destroy. God wants desperately to save us! He has loved us with an everlasting love! He is coming back soon to wrap things up and bring to an end the saga of sin! He wants us to be ready so that He can sweep us up to that cloud and take us home! Will you pledge to give your life to Him so that He can prepare us for His Great and Glorious Tomorrow?