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## The Cosmic Conflict Over God's Character

A Thirteen-Week Guide to Discovering  
the Trustworthiness of God

# The Cosmic Conflict Over God's Character

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Published by: Lennox Publishing

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#### Bible Abbreviations:

New International Version (NIV), New King James Version (NKJV), Good News Bible (GNB), Contemporary English Version (CEV), New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) GOD'S WORD (GW), New American Standard Bible (NASB), New Living Translation (NLT), The Message (MSG), English Standard Version (ESV)

# CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION.....	1
WEEK 1: In the Very Beginning.....	5
WEEK 2: The “Poisonous” Lie.....	20
WEEK 3: Cosmic Conflict in the Old Testament?.....	36
WEEK 4: Job and the Cosmic Conflict, Part 1.....	51
WEEK 5: Job and the Cosmic Conflict, Part 2.....	66
WEEK 6: Cosmic Conflict in the Life of Jesus .....	80
WEEK 7: Destroying the Works of the Devil.....	94
WEEK 8: Distortion of Justice.....	109
WEEK 9: Hellfire: Satan’s Ongoing Efforts to Malign God’s Character...	124
WEEK 10: The Wrath of the Lamb.....	139
WEEK 11: Revelation and the Cosmic Conflict, Part 1.....	155
WEEK 12: Revelation and the Cosmic Conflict, Part 2.....	171
WEEK 13: Revelation and the Cosmic Conflict, Part 3.....	187



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M I N I S T R I E S

Come and Reason Ministries believes that God is love and all life is built to operate in unity and harmony with our Creator. However, a destructive principle has infected and altered God's design for life and is the root to pain, suffering, and ultimately death. We believe that eternal healing is experienced when we are reconciled into unity of love with God, possible through the achievements of Jesus Christ, which leads to an intelligent cooperation with God in practicing His methods and principles in our daily lives. Therefore, Come and Reason Ministries has developed these study guides to refocus our minds upon God—His character of love and His design for life, health, and eternal happiness. It is our hope that in utilizing these guides you will experience not only greater intimacy with God, but actual transformation of being such that God's methods of Truth, Love, and Freedom will become your methods, actually applied and lived out today. So, come and reason through the abundant evidence God has provided of His unending love, supreme trustworthiness, and life-enhancing nature of His methods.

# The Cosmic Conflict Over God's Character

## *Introduction*

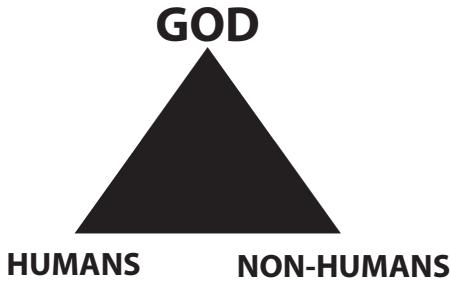
In the first few moments of the popular movie trilogy *The Matrix*, viewers are introduced to Neo, a man who believes he's just an ordinary guy, working at an ordinary job, living in an ordinary city. This belief forms the basis for his thoughts and how he relates to the world around him. Over time, however, he comes to realize that there's something more going on—something unseen. He can never quite put his finger on what it is until he takes a red pill and discovers that what he once thought constituted “reality” was only façade. That's when his eyes are opened to a markedly different narrative for his existence.

Like Neo, we all have the desire to see the reality of things and to put our lives in the right context. For centuries, Christian theology has played and replayed a story that has centered on personal salvation with only two main characters—God and humans. We often say to ourselves, “We've sinned; Jesus came to pay the price for our sin; if we accept what Jesus did on our behalf, we can go to heaven, receive eternal life, and avoid eternal punishment.” However, this focus on getting in the “right standing” with God often minimizes the importance of Satan and the demonic forces that gather around him. In the terminology of literature, Satan is typically plugged into the story line as a rather nondescript and non-dimensional background character, having no central role in the plot.

The traditional view of human/God reality looks something like this:



Our goal during these thirteen lessons is to reexamine the story line about God and the world around us and to recognize that the Bible describes a much more complex universe than we've traditionally acknowledged. We're living in the vortex of a Cosmic Conflict with not two but *three* central characters: God, humans, and *non-humans* (both good and evil). Within this Cosmic Conflict view, the universe looks more like this:



Incorporating a Cosmic Conflict as the center focus of our theology is no less transforming than Neo's decision to take the red pill. Cosmic Conflict theology does not turn a blind eye to personal salvation, but it does fundamentally change our understanding of how God deals with sin and what He's doing to bring us safely to our eternal home.

## MARGINALIZED REALITY

In modern times, the notions of Satan and demonic forces are either chuckled at or marginalized to the realm of Ouija boards, black magic, and Halloween. Many simply can't wrap their minds around the concept of an all-powerful God who would allow for an enemy to exist. Comedian Bill Maher once asked the obvious question that seems to represent a flaw in this paradigm that includes a devil: "Why doesn't he [God] just obliterate the devil and therefore get rid of evil in the world?" He's asking a common question: Is God not strong enough to destroy the ultimate "bad guy"?

The Bible itself almost seems to highlight Maher's question by assigning titles of great power and influence to our adversary. Jesus calls Satan "the prince of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30). Paul refers to the devil as "the god of this age" and "the ruler of the kingdom of the air" (2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 2:2). Even after the crucifixion,

John tells us that “the whole world is under the control of the evil one” (1 John 5:19).

We will certainly address Maher’s challenge, but for now we can at least say that the Bible describes a highly complex and nuanced universe. Its message, when viewed through the lens of full understanding, is unquestionable. What we see around us every day is not merely of human or divine origin. There’s a powerful, unrelenting enemy hard at work.

Aside from influencing our view of the universe, the Cosmic Conflict perspective also reshapes Christian doctrines. For example, can the atonement be rightly understood without a cosmic opponent? Does the subject of prayer take on a deeper meaning if we include an angelic world that is also influenced and driven into action by our prayers? What about the relative absence of Satan in the Old Testament as compared to the New Testament? Is the devil an active figure behind the scenes in the Old Testament stories? If he is, how does this change our perspective on our view of God’s character in the Old Testament? Can we really explain human suffering without incorporating a cosmic enemy? And finally, once we have understood how to recognize Satan’s activity as a polar opposite to God’s principles of other-centered love, are we better prepared to deal with his final, devastating attempt to deceive the human race?







# The Cosmic Conflict Over God's Character

— WEEK 1 —

In the *Very* Beginning

# DAY 1 War!

## LIVING WORDS

“Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, who fought back with his angels; but the dragon was defeated, and he and his angels were not allowed to stay in heaven any longer. The huge dragon was thrown out—that ancient serpent, named the Devil, or Satan, that deceived the whole world. He was thrown down to earth, and all his angels with him” (Revelation 12:7-9 GNT; all Scripture quotes are GNT unless otherwise indicated).

## BOTTOM LINE

This week we’ll explore the beginning of the sin problem. To do that, we need to go far back in time past the creation week on this planet. **What went wrong, and how could sin originate in the immediate presence of a perfect God?**

## SETTING THE STAGE

At first glance, the creation story in Genesis could leave the impression that all was well in the universe when God created our world. Strangely, we need to read all sixty-five books of the Bible before arriving at the “war in heaven” as described in Revelation. How do we know that this war began before the creation account? Why is it even important whether we place the heavenly conflict before or after the rebellion of Adam and Eve?

Mr. Johnson, a 56-year-old construction worker, hurries to the emergency room after he notices sudden-onset right-side weakness. The emergency room physician, charged with putting the pieces together of what has happened to Mr. Johnson, requires an understanding of his medical history. That history uncovers hypertension, diabetes, and high cholesterol. In addition, the doctor discovers that his patient hasn’t been compliant with his medications for any of these conditions and has missed the last three visits with his primary care physician. With this background firmly in mind, the diagnosis is pretty straightforward: stroke due to multiple poorly controlled vascular risk factors.



## DAY 2 Three in One

Before there was war in heaven, there was peace in heaven—a time when God and the angelic population lived together in perfect love and harmony. If we stretch our minds further, perhaps we can even imagine that there was a time before the creation of angels—a time when only God the Father, God the Son (Jesus), and God the Holy Spirit existed. Based on the picture the Bible provides concerning the Trinity, we can piece together how these three members of the Godhead related to one another even prior to the creation of intelligent beings external to themselves. This exercise will be helpful as we later seek to understand what it was that broke the harmony of God’s universe.

### **FATHER:**

At Jesus’ baptism His Father spoke these tender words: “You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you” (Luke 3:22). Jesus describes the intimacy He experiences with the Father this way: “you are in me and I am in you” (John 17:21). Yet, despite what could be perceived as a hierarchy within the Godhead, the Father deflects praise and honor to Jesus by assigning Him a “name that is greater than any other name” (Philippians 2:9).

### **SON:**

Though Jesus is fully God, He did not walk around this planet telling people, “Hey, look at me! I’m God!” Instead, His selfless message was to direct all eyes to the Father: “If you knew me, you would know my Father also” (John 8:19); “Now that you have known me . . . you will know my Father also” (John 14:7).

### **HOLY SPIRIT:**

Like the Father and Son, the Holy Spirit does not tell us about Himself but is continually described as revealing the truth to us about God in the person of Jesus Christ. “He is the Spirit, who reveals the truth about God” (John 14:17). Jesus tells us, “When, however, the Spirit comes, who reveals the truth about God, he will lead you into all the truth. . . . He will give me glory, because he will take what I say and tell it to you” (John 16:13-14).

It's remarkable that all three members of the Godhead, also known as the Trinity, seem to deflect praise and glory away from self to others. The Father gives the Son a name higher than any other; the Son doesn't talk about Himself but rather His Father; and the Holy Spirit deflects all glory to the Son in order that we can see what the Father is like.

This display of love between the members of the Godhead suggests that prior to the creation of anything, the Trinity lived together in a selfless, other-centered, loving relationship. The Trinity is the ideal for all human relationships. Actions that promote self at the expense of others are the polar opposite of how God's kingdom operates. This loving, giving, serving interaction of the three members of the Godhead is the foundation upon which our universe was designed to function. When Father, Son, and Holy Spirit created intelligent creatures, their desire was to share this love and to experience this type of social interaction with others.

"At the root of all present-day oppressive dictatorships, divided or monochrome societies, devaluation of certain individuals and the inability to cultivate loving community, is a denial of the Trinity. The Trinity models an image of mutuality, reciprocity and totally shared life" (Greg Haslam, "God in Three Persons," blog post, April 20, 2010, [thissideofthecross.com/blog1/?p=354](http://thissideofthecross.com/blog1/?p=354)).

## NOTES

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## DAY 3 Why God Created Us

In the context of the ideal relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we have to wonder why God decided to create free beings if there was even a *possibility* of rebellion and the destruction of peace and harmony.

The Bible pictures God not as a distant and disinterested figure, but as someone who desires relationship. Speaking to the Father, Jesus said that “Eternal life means to know you” (John 17:3). The words *to know* highlight intimacy with His creatures in the same way that “Adam *knew* Eve” (Genesis 4:1 KJV, emphasis provided) when they had a son. The marriage metaphor is frequently used as a way to describe what God desires with each one of us. The book of Revelation suggests that when everything is made right once again, we will experience something like the consummation of a marriage as we become reunited with God.

God is a social being who longs for more than can be received from pets and flowers. He seeks a relationship with intelligent creatures who not only have the ability to offer His brand of love in return, but who can also refuse and say no to a loving relationship.

The creation story and the intimate marvels we observe in nature speak to the love that God wants to shower upon his bride. Consider these insights from the book *Epic: The Story God Is Telling*, by John Eldredge (Nashville, Tennessee [Thomas Nelson, Inc.: 2004], pp. 44-45):

Imagine the most beautiful scenes you have ever known on this earth—rain forests, the prairie in full bloom, storm clouds over the African savanna, the Alps under a winter snow. Then imagine it all on the day it was born. . . . Into this world God opens his hand, and the animals spring forth. Myriads of birds, in every shape and size and song, take wing—hawks, herons, warblers. All the creatures of the sea leap into it—whales, dolphins, fish of a thousand colors and designs. Thundering across the plains race immense herds of horses, gazelles, buffalo, running like the wind. It is more astonishing than we could possibly imagine. No wonder “the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy” (Job 38:7). A great hurrah goes up from the heavens!

We have grown dull toward this world in which we live; we have forgotten that it is not normal or scientific in any sense of the word. It is fantastic. It is a fairy tale through and through. Really now. Elephants? Caterpillars? Snow? At what point did you lose your wonder of it all?

Even so, once in a while something will come along and shock us right out of our dullness and resignation.

We come round a corner, and there before us is a cricket, a peacock, a stag with horns as big as he. Perhaps we come upon a waterfall, the clouds have made a rainbow in a circle round the sun, or a mouse scampers across the counter, pauses for a moment to twitch his whiskers at you, and disappears into the cupboard. And for a moment we realize we were born into a world astonishing as any fairy tale. A world made for romance.

## THINK AND DISCUSS

1. Is it possible that when God created our planet that He looked into the future and saw you, me, and everyone else who would become His friends? How would that influence His plans concerning this world?
2. Is it possible that God saw the heartbreaking prospect of rebellion, suffering, and death, but at the same time He also looked forward to a future day of countless numbers of intelligent creatures all living together in harmony and love? In what ways would that alter your decisions and plans if you were the Creator?
3. Is it possible that when God created our universe, He also saw His own indescribable suffering and death, yet went forward anyway, driven by anticipation of the loving relationship He would experience with each one of us throughout all eternity? How can you apply that to your life and the choices you make every single day?



## DAY 4 Formless and Void

### QUESTION

**When did the “war in heaven” (Revelation 12:7) begin?** There are important clues in the Genesis account of creation that all was not well during creation week.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was *formless* and *void*, and *darkness* was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Genesis 1:1-3 NASB, emphasis provided).

The word *formless* (*tohu*) means a worthless thing, confusion or chaos. *Void* (*bohu*) suggests an indistinguishable ruin. The word *darkness* also suggests more than mere “absence of light” and is elsewhere used in the Bible to describe misery, destruction, death, ignorance, sorrow, and wickedness (1 Samuel 2:9). All three of these words are used by Jeremiah not to describe a physical darkness, but a spiritually dark people who do not know God and are about to be taken into Babylonian captivity: “The LORD says, ‘My people are stupid; they don’t know me. They are like foolish children; they have no understanding. They are experts at doing what is evil, but failures at doing what is good.’ I looked at the earth—it was a barren waste [“formless and void” or “*tohu vabohu*”]; at the sky—there was no light” (Jeremiah 4:22-23).

As Jon Levenson concludes, “formless and void” in the Bible symbolizes “the forces that oppose [Yahweh] and his acts of creation—the forces of disorder, injustice, affliction, and chaos, which are, in the Israelite worldview, one” (Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* [Princeton, NJ]: Princeton University Press, 1969], p. 133).

While it’s true that God declared, after each day of creation, that “it was good,” “There are several aspects of the Genesis narrative that indicate that, while the creation of Genesis 1:2 onwards is ‘good,’ it is set in the context of a broader environment that is *not* altogether good” (Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997], p. 97).

Another clue for a preexisting Cosmic Conflict is that after creating Adam and Eve, “God blessed them; and God said to them,

‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it’” (Genesis 1:28 NASB, NKJV, ESV). The Hebrew word for *subdue* means “to enslave” or “to conquer” something. Then God “placed the man in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and guard it” (Genesis 2:15).

What were Adam and Eve to “conquer”? From what were they to “guard” their new home?

This is usually interpreted to mean that Adam was simply to till the garden—as though protecting the garden from weeds was his greatest concern. But in light of the fact that the broader narrative suggests that the ground did not become resistant to Adam or produce things like weeds until after the rebellion, and in light of the fact that a malevolent serpent appears in the next chapter with the intent of bringing Adam and Eve’s paradise to ruin (Gen 3:1-5), one could easily argue that Adam’s charge to “guard” the garden concerned more than weeds. He was supposed to protect Eden from malevolent forces, represented by the serpent (Boyd, *God at War*, p. 99).

While all of these are important clues, the most obvious reason to place the “war in heaven” prior to the story of creation is that there was an evil serpent in Eden even prior to Adam and Eve’s rebellion. God did not create a snake to tempt Adam and Eve. Rather, the Genesis narrative indicates that the rebellion in heaven was already under way. And in case we have any question about the identity of the snake that spoke with Eve, Revelation 12 makes it very clear: “The huge dragon was thrown out—that ancient serpent, named the Devil, or Satan” (Revelation 12:9).

## THINK AND DISCUSS

1. Why do you think God would create our planet in the context of a war?
2. Wouldn’t it be better to first win the war and then create?
3. Is it possible that our planet was created in order to be a part of God’s solution to win the war?

## DAY 5 The Evidence of Love

Thus far, we've said that the context of the Eden story is set against the aftermath of some sort of large-scale heavenly conflict that involved Satan and "all his angels with him" (Revelation 12:9). What kind of a "war" was this, and what type of weapons were used? Did Satan believe that he could "out-gun" God?

The Greek word for *war* in Revelation 12:7 is *polemos*, from which we derive the word *polemics*—"the art or practice of argumentation or controversy." Satan knows that he doesn't possess the necessary physical power to overthrow God. The battlefield for the war in heaven was not a plot of land or stretch of sea, but rather within the minds of intelligent creatures. Satan is a deceiver (Revelation 12:9), and the war in heaven was not fought with tanks and lightning bolts but with deceptive words and subtle insinuations.

Lies can be very damaging. In Lesson 2, we'll be very specific about the lies that were told. But first, it's important to establish the destructive consequences of a believed lie and the great difficulties involved in undoing it.

We often hear of elderly individuals who have lost their life savings because they believed a lie—an enticement that would allow them to multiply their money. Patients with a devastating illness will sometimes turn to medical

(or pseudo-medical) quacks out of desperation, only to find that they've lost thousands of dollars and are no better off. Lies destroy marriages because they break down the trust between husband and wife.

If you are the victim of a lie, what's the best way to prove that you are in the right? In order to gain an advantage for an upcoming promotion, suppose that a coworker told your boss that you were wasting time on Facebook all day instead of working. How would you seek to set the record straight? You could make an appointment with your boss and say that the accusation was false, but why should your boss believe you? The claim that you were falsely accused may

**" THE BATTLEFIELD FOR THE WAR IN HEAVEN WAS NOT A PLOT OF LAND OR STRETCH OF SEA, BUT RATHER WITHIN THE MINDS OF INTELLIGENT CREATURES. "**

not be entirely convincing. Whenever someone is lied about, it is *very* difficult to remove the resulting seeds of doubt.

God has gone on record making claims that Satan was the liar: “From the very beginning he was a murderer and has never been on the side of truth, because there is no truth in him. When he tells a lie, he is only doing what is natural to him, because he is a liar and the father of all lies” (John 8:44). But if God had made this statement in heaven when the conflict began, would this have settled the argument?

What demolishes lies? What would have convinced your boss that you weren’t wasting your time on Facebook?

Suppose that you went to the information security officer of your company to see whether records are kept of employee Internet usage. You learn that he or she tracks all of this information and, at your request, provides a copy for your boss. Now you make an appointment with your superior armed with concrete *evidence* that you do *not* spend any time on the Internet during work hours. *Evidence* is the key to defeating a lie. Similarly, providing evidence or “truth” is God’s primary weapon in the war against Satan.

Power, force, and claims could not win the war. The only way that God could convince the universe for eternity was to provide clear-cut evidence that He was in the right, while at the same time providing unbiased evidence that would unmask the deceiver. Ultimately, Jesus Christ would become the flesh-and-blood evidence that would destroy the deceiver’s lies.

## NOTES

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## DAY 6 True Freedom

The principle of freedom lies at the core of God's Kingdom.

Imagine that God held a gun to our heads and said, "You are completely free to do whatever you want to do unless, of course, you rebel against me. If you do that, I will kill you." If God said that to us—or to Lucifer—the notion of "freedom" becomes nothing more than an illusion. God had the power to eliminate Satan and his angels when their rebellion began. But this action would mean that freedom didn't exist in the first place.

The second-century Greek philosopher Celsus did not understand this idea and attacked the early Christian belief in a Devil who could oppose God. It seemed ridiculous to him that the all-powerful God would tolerate a rival: "[The Christians'] utter stupidity can be illustrated in any number of ways, but especially with their misreading of the divine enigmas and their insistence that there exists a being opposed to God, whom they know by the name of devil (in Hebrew, *Satanas*, for they refer to one and the same being by various names)" (*Celsus on the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians*, trans. R. Joseph Hoffmann [New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987], pp. 98-99).

When Osama Bin Laden was killed by U.S. Special Forces, there was celebration that an evil and powerful individual had been eliminated. It's difficult to wrap our minds around the fact that God doesn't use the same means. To some, the idea of "Satan" as a real person seems ridiculous because it makes God look soft or even disinterested in our planet because He doesn't react with violence.

### CONSIDER THIS

Let's consider some of the options God could have used in defeating Satan's rebellion.

Imagine what would have happened if God had merely eliminated Satan the moment he began to think rebellious thoughts. What if you were an angel in heaven and suddenly the great Lucifer, whom you loved and respected as a friend, was gone? Perhaps you'd muster up the courage to ask God, "What happened?" How would you feel if God told you, "Well, I saw his mind going the wrong way, so I eliminated him"? Would this make you trust God

even more or a little less?

Let's suppose that God had eliminated Satan and his followers after they openly rebelled. Wouldn't this action have created doubt and fear about God in the minds of the loyal angels? At the very least, it may have caused some to think, "You know, I'd better not think a bad thought about God or ever question Him. Look what He might do to me!"

God could have banished Satan to the farthest planet, never to be heard from again. But, as we will discover during the next lesson, Satan's first accusation about God to Eve was that God did not respect her freedom. Banishing Satan to an isolated planet would have actually supported his claim that God did not have much regard for individual freedom. In order to win the rebellion once and for all, God had no choice but to allow Satan the freedom to spread his lies.

## THINK AND DISCUSS

1. In the context of a heavenly rebellion, why did God create our planet?
2. What does the mere existence of Satan and his followers suggest about the freedom God extends to his intelligent creatures?

## NOTES

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## DAY 7 Eternal Options

### DON'T STOP NOW!

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. The Lord's principles are not of this order. His authority rests upon goodness, mercy, and love; and the presentation of these principles is the means to be used. God's government is moral, and truth and love are to be the prevailing power. 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 (E. G. White, *Desire of Ages* [Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1898], p. 759).

Listen to this lecture for more details about "formless and void" in Genesis 1: [godscharacter.com/index.php/bible-study/genesis/genesis-1-2](http://godscharacter.com/index.php/bible-study/genesis/genesis-1-2).

### TALK ABOUT IT

Let's explore the options available to God when choosing to create intelligent creatures.

1. What would have been the consequence of removing the possibility of their freedom to rebel?
2. If you were God, would you have chosen to create if you knew the suffering that would result to others and to yourself?
3. How would you answer the charge of Celsus about the "utter stupidity" that there is a being opposed to God?

4. How would you answer Bill Maher's question that if there is an enemy, God should simply destroy him?
5. What do you think Satan did that broke the harmony of love?
6. What lie or lies could result in so much damage?
7. What do you think Satan hoped to achieve?
8. What difference does it make to consider the ideal of God's Kingdom as seen in the interaction between the Trinity?
9. If we live our lives in this other-centered way, are we choosing not to participate in the nature of Satan's Kingdom?

### **AND FINALLY...**

In this lesson, we've suggested that the Cosmic Conflict has great explanatory power that changes the way we understand God and our world. We've also considered that the very essence of God's character is love, which by its very nature is giving and serving toward others. This love and desire for relationship led God to create other intelligent beings.

Since real love can only occur in the context of complete freedom, however, God could not create a universe that was immune to the possibility of rebellion.

Finally, we have concluded that God's method of dealing with the rebellion was not to use fear, force, coercion, or claims. Rather, He would provide persuasive and compelling evidence—evidence in the form of Jesus Christ.





# The Cosmic Conflict Over God's Character

— WEEK 2 —

The "Poisonous" Lie

## DAY 1 Snake!

### LIVING WORDS

“Now the snake was the most cunning animal that the LORD God had made. The snake asked the woman, ‘Did God really tell you not to eat fruit from any tree in the garden?’ ‘We may eat the fruit of any tree in the garden,’ the woman answered, ‘except the tree in the middle of it. God told us not to eat the fruit of that tree or even touch it; if we do, we will die.’ The snake replied, ‘That’s not true; you will not die. God said that because he knows that when you eat it, you will be like God and know what is good and what is bad.’ The woman saw how beautiful the tree was and how good its fruit would be to eat, and she thought how wonderful it would be to become wise. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband, and he also ate it” (Genesis 3:1-6).

### BOTTOM LINE

**Understanding what went wrong in Eden is essential if we are to comprehend human reality and God’s plan to set things right again.**

### SETTING THE STAGE

The human race seems to be horribly infected with a sinful heart and mind. As we search to identify the sin problem, our diagnosis must be absolutely correct if we are to uncover the cure. What went wrong? If we were to ask Abraham, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Peter, and John about sin, would they all agree with Paul, who lamented, “I don’t do the good I want to do; instead, I do the evil that I do not want to do. . . . What an unhappy man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is taking me to death?” (Romans 7:19, 24).

In order to fully comprehend how humanity got sick in the first place, we need to consider very carefully the story of Adam and Eve, two perfect beings who were created in the flawless precision of Eden, two humans with no bent toward sin. Adam and Eve had the remarkable distinction that, for at least some period of time, they reflected the character of their Creator. “God spoke: ‘Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature.’”



## DAY 2 A Matter of Trust

“Now the snake was the most cunning animal that the LORD God had made. The snake asked the woman, ‘Did God really tell you not to eat fruit from any tree in the garden?’” (Genesis 3:1).

The serpent’s implication to Eve was subtle, yet clear. “You know, this might not be true, but I heard that God doesn’t let you eat any fruit in this garden? Are you that restricted, Eve? Eden is a nice place and all, but it’s a pity that you don’t have much freedom.”

Of course, this was a direct contradiction of God’s words to Adam and Eve that “You may eat the fruit of *any* tree in the garden” (Genesis 2:16, emphasis supplied)—all, except one. Perhaps this negative implication about God started the wheels turning within Eve’s mind as to why God would selfishly withhold anything from her.

The snake’s suggestion that God had limited her freedom should have been a major red flag to Eve and caused her to leave the scene immediately. Instead she foolishly stuck around and engaged Satan in dialogue: “‘We may eat the fruit of any tree in the garden,’ the woman answered, ‘except the tree in the middle of it. God told us not to eat the fruit of that tree or even touch it; if we do, we will die’” (Genesis 3:2-3).

Eve’s weak reply to Satan’s accusation suggests that she was already being lured into the trap that he would now spring. “The snake replied, ‘That’s not true; you will not die. God said that because he knows that when you eat it, you will be like God and know what is good and what is bad’” (Genesis 3:4-5). In other words, “Eve, God has lied to you! God is untrustworthy! First, He limits your freedom to even come to this tree. Then He threatens you with death just to keep you from eating a piece of fruit that would be for your own good. What kind of a ‘God’ is that, Eve?”

In addition, the suggestion that Eve could enter a loftier state by eating the fruit was designed to stimulate selfish desires.

And so Eve ate the fruit. But eating the fruit was merely the action that confirmed her belief in Satan’s lies about God. This was not a poisonous apple, but a poisonous lie! What Eve (and later Adam) ingested was a lie about the character of God. Eve devoured the lie that the God who created her was restrictive, untrustworthy, and that He was selfishly trying to keep her at a lower state. Eating the fruit also symbolized her desire to elevate self.

Soon after they swallowed the fruit, reality was turned on its head for both Adam and Eve. They now saw God as the one to be afraid of, not Satan. This was confirmed when God came to meet them in the garden and Adam and Eve hid in the bushes. “I heard you in the garden; I was afraid and hid from you” (Genesis 3:10). Why were they hiding? Because they now doubted God’s goodness and trustworthiness. They now wondered if God had really been on their side all along.

This is the key point to the story! Satan’s calculated plan was to distort God’s character and, in the process, lead Adam and Eve to break their trust in God. The Eden story is a microcosm that magnifies the essential issue of all issues. The central question in the Cosmic Conflict revolves around the trustworthiness of God’s character. Everything on our planet dramatically changed when Adam and Eve decided that God could not be trusted.

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## DAY 3 What's in a Name?

Jesus said that Satan is “the father of lies” (John 8:44). The story in Genesis reveals what Satan lies about. We can imagine that by the time he has his little conversation with Eve under the tree that Satan has mastered his deceptive technique of pulling minds away from God to a high art form. Thus, his words that broke down the trustworthiness of God’s character to Eve provide an understanding about what was said in the heavenly realm as well.

Misrepresenting God is the primary method of the Adversary. In the book of Revelation, which carefully details the ongoing struggle between God and Satan, we see the same *modus operandi*: “Then I saw a beast coming up out of the sea. . . . The dragon gave the beast his own power. . . . It began to curse God, his name, the place where he lives, and all those who live in heaven” (Revelation 13:1-2, 6).

The word *name* in the Bible refers to more than a person’s name. It refers to the entire person, especially the individual’s character. Thus, when Satan is described as “misrepresenting his name” in Revelation, this refers to the character assassination of God that he’s been practicing from the very beginning. “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” (E. G. White, “Acquaint Now Thyself With Him,” *Review and Herald*, February 15, 1912).

Revelation 12 identifies one-third of the angelic population as believing Satan’s lies about God. It’s worthy of note that the Bible describes the loyal angels as intently interested in the ongoing conflict. When Jesus’ wilderness temptation was over, for example, “the Devil left Jesus; and angels came and helped him” (Matthew 4:11). The angels were watching! Can you imagine their surprise when Satan asked his Creator to kneel down and worship him?

Our experience is a “spectacle for the whole world of angels” (1 Corinthians 4:9) who are even described as “learning” about the Good News: “These are things which even the angels would like to understand” (1 Peter 1:12).

Is it possible that the loyal angels, as they consider the large angelic population that fell for Satan's lies, are especially sympathetic to the plight of the human race? The enthusiasm of the angels could not be contained as they witnessed God coming in human form to rescue humanity from the Devil. "Suddenly a great army of heaven's angels appeared with the angel, singing praises to God: 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth'" (Luke 2:13-14).

## NOTES

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## DAY 4 Me, Myself, and I

### QUESTION

**What is Satan's motivation for lying about God? What does he hope to get out of it?**

During the wilderness temptations, Satan revealed that his deepest desire was to be worshiped as God. Satan is the ultimate narcissist (see 1 Timothy 3:6). The funeral poem in Isaiah 14 describes the entirely self-centered reality that Satan created for himself. Notice how many times Satan says the word "I" to himself:

How you are fallen from heaven, O shining star, son of the morning! You have been thrown down to the earth, you who destroyed the nations of the world. For you said to yourself, "I will ascend to heaven and set my throne above God's stars. I will preside on the mountain of the gods far away in the north. I will climb to the highest heavens and be like the Most High." Instead, you will be brought down to the place of the dead, down to its lowest depths (Isaiah 14:12-15 NLT, emphasis provided).

This passage in Isaiah further confirms the selfish and proud aspirations of Lucifer (the light bearer) when he became Satan (the accuser) and established a kingdom based on "me, myself, and I." The book of Revelation describes Satan's desires turning into reality as he successfully deceives the whole world into worshiping him. "All people living on the earth will worship [the beast]" (Revelation 13:8).

Paul is even more direct in spelling out this final deception and the fact that the entire world would worship God's enemy: "Do not let anyone deceive you in any way. For the Day will not come until the final Rebellion takes place and the Wicked One appears, who is destined to hell. He will oppose every so-called god or object of worship and will put himself above them all. He will even go in and sit down in God's Temple and claim to be God" (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4).

How does Satan "sit down in God's Temple and claim to be God"? To what temple does this refer? Many have interpreted this



to refer to a literal Jerusalem with a literal anti-Christ sitting in a newly built temple. But is God primarily interested in a building made of stones and marble? The New Testament is abundantly clear that the temple refers to the hearts and minds of God's children (see 1 Corinthians 3:17; 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16).

Satan's highest goal is to be enshrined as "god" inside our hearts and minds. Given the apparent success the Bible portrays, we need to very carefully understand what it means to worship the Devil.

**NOTES**

Empty lined area for taking notes, consisting of approximately 20 horizontal lines.

## DAY 5 Whom Do We Worship?

Very few Christians could ever imagine bowing down to the Devil. Given the large percentage of God worshipers on the planet, how could it ever occur that “All people living on the earth will worship [the beast]” (Revelation 13:8)? To answer this question, we should consider the Pharisees, a very devout religious people who lived two thousand years ago.

On many occasions, Jesus commented on their careful observance of the law and how they would “search the scriptures” (John 5:39). In fact, they knew their scripture so well that they frequently came to Jesus when they saw Him contradicting what they interpreted as God’s law. The Pharisees never missed church and had many contentious encounters with Jesus in the synagogue or at the temple. Jesus commented on their intense missionary efforts to “sail the seas and cross whole countries to win one convert” (Matthew 23:15) and the fact that they even went so far as to “give to God one tenth even of the seasoning herbs, such as mint, dill, and cumin” (Matthew 23:23). Finally, these careful followers of God and children of Abraham kept the Sabbath. As Jesus and the thieves were dying on the cross on Friday night, they “petitioned Pilate that their legs be broken to speed death, and the bodies taken down” (John 19:31 MSG) because they wanted Jesus to die quickly so that they could make it home in time to keep the Sabbath.

The incredible fact remains: Bible-reading, law-keeping, evangelistic-effort-holding, churchgoing, and tithe-paying Sabbath keepers crucified the Son of God. Does that suggest that any of those activities are wrong? Absolutely not! What it does suggest to us is that we can do all of the externals, yet still be God’s enemy. It is almost unthinkable that these people who so carefully kept this good list of externals were referred to by Jesus with these hard words: “You are the children of your father, the Devil” (John 8:44).

The Pharisees believed in an arbitrary and severe deity who possessed no sympathy for the sick, suffering, and outcasts of society. They believed those things because that was their picture of God. They were simply waiting for that type of Messiah to come and punish their national enemies.

The essence of worshipping the Devil, therefore, is agreeing with Satan’s false caricature of God. Satan tries to paint God in our minds as having a demonic character. He was successful throughout the

Old Testament, leading entire nations to follow the pagan gods that were always angry, vengeful, and punishing. In a very short time, God was changed into the very image of Satan. This false worship of God led the people themselves to reflect the same character in their own lives. “They worshiped worthless idols and became worthless themselves” (Jeremiah 2:5).

“It is a law both of the intellectual and spiritual nature that by beholding we become changed. The mind gradually adapts itself to the subjects upon which it is allowed to dwell. It becomes assimilated to that which it is accustomed to love and reverence” (E. G. White, *The Great Controversy* [Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1888], p. 555).

By looking at the true God, we become changed into His image; by believing Satan’s lies, our own characters are directly misshaped. Paul describes those who refuse to direct their worship to the true God as having their thoughts changed to “complete nonsense, and their empty minds are filled with darkness. They say they are wise, but they are fools; instead of worshiping the immortal God, they worship images made to look like mortals or birds or animal or reptiles. . . . They exchange the truth about God for a lie” (Romans 1:21-23, 25).

These words, attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson, reflect this universal principle:

A person will worship something, have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts, but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.

## NOTES

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## DAY 6 Misplaced Fear

When Adam and Eve doubted God's goodness and love and separated themselves from Him, everything abruptly changed both internally and externally. The principles of God's Kingdom—other-centered love, service, and self-sacrifice for the sake of others—were immediately abandoned. Instead of continuing to love and serve each other, they began to exhibit the self-centered kingdom of God's enemy.

Adam stopped giving of himself to serve and love his wife and instead began to accuse her. "The woman you put here with me gave me the fruit, and I ate it" (Genesis 3:12). His words also imply a subtle accusation against God. "It's the woman's fault. And by the way, God, why on earth did you make her in the first place!"

Likewise, Eve deflected the blame onto the snake and indirectly at God for creating the snake. "The snake tricked me into eating it" (Genesis 3:13).

Sadly, from the fall of Adam and Eve to our modern day, the infection of Satan's kingdom—me-first, survival of the fittest, fear, blame, and selfishness—are woven into the very fabric of our fallen human nature.

Reality was quickly turned on its head for both Adam and Eve. They now saw God, instead of Satan, as the one of whom to be afraid. When God "called out to the man, 'Where are you?'" (Genesis 3:9), instead of running to God to tell Him what happened, Adam and Eve hid in the bushes. "I heard you in the garden; I was afraid and hid from you" (Genesis 3:10). Why were they hiding? They now doubted God's goodness and trustworthiness. They now wondered whether God had really been on their side all along. Satan's plan to distort God's character and incite Adam and Eve to distrust and even fear God had worked to perfection.

Fear of God has been the basic underlying theme of human history. By hiding in the bushes, Adam and Eve revealed that they

**"...THE INFECTION OF SATAN'S KINGDOM—ME-FIRST, SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST, FEAR, BLAME, AND SELFISHNESS—ARE WOVEN INTO THE VERY FABRIC OF OUR FALLEN HUMAN NATURE."**

had given up what God desired the most from them—friendship and relationship. No one hides from a friend. These seeds were planted through distortion of God’s character, leading to intense fear of Him and, later, resulting in the fruit of idolatry and paganism.

Now, thousands of years later, Satan’s lies about God still have an almost hypnotizing effect on the human race. Fear of God as a punishing tyrant has led many to atheism, while others serve Him from fear. There is even a name for fear of God—*theophobia*.

While theophobia is common, have you ever known anyone to fear Satan? We are advised to “Be alert, be on watch! Your enemy, the Devil, roams around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). Why is fear of the One who wants to be our Friend and the One who wants to marry us so common, while fear of the one who wants to devour us so uncommon?

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## DAY 7 The Lie of Sin

### DON'T STOP NOW!

Read E. G. White, *Desire of Ages*, [Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1898], chapter 1, "God with Us." This chapter beautifully summarizes the sin problem and the reason that Jesus came to this world. Here's a quote from the first chapter:

Sin originated in self-seeking. Lucifer, the covering cherub, desired to be first in heaven. He sought to gain control of heavenly beings, to draw them away from their Creator, and to win their homage to himself. Therefore he misrepresented God, attributing to Him the desire for self-exaltation. With his own evil characteristics he sought to invest the loving Creator. Thus he deceived angels. Thus he deceived men. He led them to doubt the word of God, and to distrust His goodness. Because God is a God of justice and terrible majesty, Satan caused them to look upon Him as severe and unforgiving. Thus he drew men to join him in rebellion against God, and the night of woe settled down upon the world.

The earth was dark through misapprehension of God. That the gloomy shadows might be lightened, that the world might be brought back to God, Satan's deceptive power was to be broken. This could not be done by force. The exercise of force is contrary to the principles of God's government; He desires only the service of love; and love cannot be commanded; it cannot be won by force or authority. Only by love is love awakened. To know God is to love Him; His character must be manifested in contrast to the character of Satan. This work only one Being in all the universe could do. Only He who knew the height and depth of the love of God could make it known. Upon the world's dark night the Sun of Righteousness must rise, "with healing in His wings" (Malachi 4:2).

Listen to this talk, which describes Satan's temptations and sin in more detail: <http://godscharacter.com/index.php/bible-study/genesis/genesis-3>.

We highly recommend Tim Jennings' most recent book, *The God-Shaped Brain: How Changing Your View of God Transforms Your Life*.

## TALK ABOUT IT

**Satan first implied that God did not respect Adam and Eve's freedom.**

1. As you look at the world today, what evidence is there that God has given the human race freedom, or does God appear restrictive?
2. In what ways do you sometimes wish that God didn't give so much freedom?
3. How could Satan accuse God of a freedom deficiency given the fact that God obviously had granted Him free access to the human race via the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil? In what ways are we guilty of making the very same accusation?

**Satan's second lie to Eve questioned God's goodness and suggested that He was untrustworthy.**

1. Deep down, do we still have a shred of doubt about God's trustworthy character, and how do we often manifest it?
2. As God's representatives, does this lie suggest something about our primary mission on this planet?

**Satan's third lie to Eve promoted a selfish desire to elevate self.**

1. Are there ways that we are similarly tempted today?
2. What do you imagine would have happened had Adam and Eve run to God instead of hiding in the bushes?
3. What if they had repented, not out of fear of punishment, but rather from a real understanding of what they had done? What would God have done for them if they, like David, had said,

“Create in me a new heart, O God, and put a new and loyal spirit in me” (Psalm 51:10)?

Read and discuss this revealing quote: “Eve believed the words of Satan, and the belief of that falsehood in regard to God’s character, changed the condition and character of both herself and husband. They were changed from good and obedient children into transgressors” (E. G. White, “Rejection of Light,” *Review and Herald*, January 5, 1886).

## **AND FINALLY...**

We’re all infected to some extent with believed lies about God. The pastor and theologian A. W. Tozer once stated: “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”

We will discover the truth of this statement more fully in subsequent lessons. To the degree that our picture of God is distorted, our own character is inevitably distorted. How crucial it is that we allow God to restore Jesus as our defining image of who God is. Jesus is the one and only antidote to the serpent’s venomous lies.

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# The Cosmic Conflict Over God's Character

— WEEK 3 —

Cosmic Conflict in  
the Old Testament?

## DAY 1 Unseen Enemy

### LIVING WORDS

“The LORD was angry at Israel again, and he made David think it would be a good idea to count the people in Israel and Judah” (2 Samuel 24:1 CEV).

“Satan wanted to bring trouble on the people of Israel, so he made David decide to take a census” (1 Chronicles 21:1).

### BOTTOM LINE

This week we will explore the discrepancy between the abundant New Testament references to Satan and demonic forces in comparison to the relatively sparse Old Testament allusions. **Putting Satan back into the Old Testament as an active agent opposed to God opens up a number of possibilities that put the Almighty in a much better light.**

### SETTING THE STAGE

Satan is veiled in the Old Testament. In the previous lesson, we assumed that Satan was the serpent in the tree, but the Bible doesn't clearly state the identity of this serpent until the last book of the Bible. In fact, Satan is only mentioned by name in three Old Testament books (Job, Zechariah, and 1 Chronicles 21). In comparison, there are well over thirty references in the New Testament, including an entire book (Revelation) that focuses on the actions of the dragon (Satan) against the Lamb (God's Son). Why the paucity of Old Testament references? Was Satan unknown to the Hebrew writers? How can we determine whether or not passages about the king of Tyre (Ezekiel 28), the king of Babylon (Isaiah 14), Gog (Ezekiel 38), or Leviathan (Isaiah 27:1; Job 41) refer to Satan in some way?

We'll discover this week that many of the familiar Old Testament stories take on additional meaning when we incorporate an unseen enemy at work.

## DAY 2 The Art of Deception

At the time of the flood, Noah was described as the “only good man of his time” (Genesis 6:9). God said to Noah, “I have found that you are the only one in all the world who does what is right” (Genesis 7:1). Sadly, these words would seem to be true, since no one except for Noah’s family got on board the boat.

The story of Abraham and his descendants worshiping other gods (see Joshua 24:2-3) revealed how far they had fallen from God’s ideal of other-centered love and service for others. Isaac and Rebecca created a similarly dysfunctional home, as father Isaac preferred son Esau and mother Rebecca preferred son Jacob (Genesis 25:28). Jacob’s life became a story of deception. Despite all of this, God came to him with a “stairway to heaven” as he fled from Esau. What is often missed in this story is Jacob’s shallow and conditional prayer in response: “Then Jacob made a vow to the LORD: ‘If you will be with me and protect me on the journey I am making and give me food and clothing, and if I return safely to my father’s home, *then* you will be my God’” (Genesis 28:20-21, emphasis supplied). Not exactly a model prayer.

It isn’t surprising, then, that a dozen dysfunctional families would descend from Jacob—what we refer to as the twelve tribes of Israel. Was Satan involved in the violence, lying, polygamy, and rebelliousness that the first thirty chapters of Genesis describe? If so, why doesn’t he receive even a footnote of recognition?

The story becomes even more shocking as Jacob’s oldest son “Reuben had sexual intercourse with Bilhah, one of his father’s concubines; Jacob heard about it and was furious” (Genesis 35:22). Sometime later, out of jealousy, youngest son Joseph was thrown into a pit and sold as a slave to Egypt by his brothers. During this time, Judah married a Canaanite woman and later slept with a prostitute:

When Judah saw her, he thought that she was a prostitute, because she had her face covered. He went over to her at the side of the road and said, “All right, how much do you charge?” (He did not know that she was his daughter-in-law.) . . . About three months later someone told Judah, “Your daughter-in-law Tamar has been acting like a whore, and now she is pregnant.” Judah ordered, “Take her out and burn her to death” (Genesis

38:15-16, 24).

It can't be overstated that this story is about Judah, the ancestor of Jesus. Jesus is even referred to as "the lion of the tribe of Judah" (Revelation 5:5). That's right, the Judah of Genesis 38!

When God was finally able to lead his people out of Egypt, their journey to the Promised Land became a forty-year period of gross rebellion against God. The book of Judges opens with a man having his thumbs cut off and ends with the Levite's concubine who was raped all night and then cut into twelve pieces.

Throughout this dark and violent period, the people were continually leaving God to worship false gods. Finally, the ten northern tribes were carried away into Assyrian captivity. This was followed later by the tribes of Judah and Benjamin being delivered into Babylonian captivity.

With this brief background in place for the Old Testament, let's continue in our search for the Adversary.

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## DAY 3 From Old to New

Our brief survey of the Old Testament revealed a deeply rebellious time in which God's chosen people were only occasionally interested in following the true God and were more often attracted to the cruel gods of the other nations—deities that demanded human (even child) sacrifice, and in which the worship experience involved temple prostitutes, fertility cult worship, extreme cruelty, and snake veneration. In this context, what we see in the Old Testament is God shielding the people from the full revelation of a great Adversary:

The nations surrounding Israel were polytheistic, worshipping many gods. In a polytheistic culture, the good things are attributed to the good gods, bad things to the evil ones. And those evil deities could be so volatile that humans were constantly brewing up incantations and magic rituals to placate them. . . . The great danger for Israel lay in the temptation to worship Satan as another god. So rather than just forbidding magic and incantation, God went a step further and claimed full responsibility for both good and evil. . . . As a result, throughout most of its pages, the Old Testament portrays God as the active agent in all things. God is the one who causes everything. Satan simply drops from sight until the very end of the Old Testament. . . . Indeed, only three passages in the entire Old Testament are explicit in their reference to the "Satan" who was God's great adversary, and all three passages were either written or canonized toward the end of the Old Testament period (Alden Thompson, *Servant God* [Loma Linda, CA: Loma Linda University Press, to be published in 2013]).

Out of mercy, God veiled Satan and met the people where they were. He did not open up to them the potential dangers of worshipping His antagonist, but instead made Himself out to be the only viable divine power who would either bless them if they were faithful or curse and bring ruin to them if they were unfaithful. "If you obey the LORD your God . . . he will make you greater than any other nation on earth. . . . But if you disobey the LORD your God . . . all these evil things will happen to you: The LORD will curse your towns and your fields" (Deuteronomy 28:1, 15-16).

Much of the book of Deuteronomy is filled with blessings and curses—all at the hands of God. In most of the Old Testament, God does both, including bringing punishment down to the third and fourth generation for the sins of the parents (Exodus 20). “I create both light and darkness; I bring both blessing and disaster. I, the LORD, do all these things” (Isaiah 45:7).

There is, however, a progressive unfolding of reality throughout the Old Testament. For example, in Ezekiel 18 God makes it very clear that, despite the words in the Ten Commandments, He does *not* punish the children for the sins of the parents. It isn’t until the New Testament, however, that everything is fully turned on its head. The promise for obedience in the New Testament is not *blessing* in this life, but rather *persecution* (Matthew 5). Those who are stoned in the New Testament are not the rule breakers, but rather those who are faithful to God. And, most important for our discussion, the Devil is the roaring lion who destroys in the New Testament, not God.

In the Old Testament, God is usually dealing with immature people just as parents deal with immature children—with rewards for good behavior and punishment for bad. Through Jesus, God calls His people to grow up. With maturity comes a greater understanding of our complex universe and the God who created it all.

## NOTES

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## DAY 4 Behind-the-Scenes Enemy

Having established the relative absence of Satan in the Old Testament, we should reread those thirty-nine books with an effort to catch a glimpse of the Enemy working behind the scenes. For this lesson, let's consider the book of 1 Samuel.

In the very opening of this book, we see examples of the perception that God is responsible for *everything*. The description of Hannah's plight is that "the LORD had kept her childless" (1 Samuel 1:6). When her ability to conceive was restored, Hannah prayed, "The LORD kills and restores to life; he sends people to the world of the dead and brings them back again. He makes some people poor and others rich; he humbles some and makes others great" (1 Samuel 2:6-7).

Does God really decide who will be poor and who will be rich, who will die and who will live?

Even though Eli warned his two evil sons of the consequences of their actions, "they would not listen to their father, for the LORD had decided to kill them" (1 Samuel 2:22-25).

Sure enough, they died in battle, but was it God's decision to take them out?

Saul is made king, and then is tormented by evil spirits who are sent from God:

The LORD's spirit left Saul, and an evil spirit sent by the LORD tormented him. . . . The next day an evil spirit from God suddenly took control of Saul, and he raved in his house like a madman. . . . One day an evil spirit from the LORD took control of Saul. He was sitting in his house with his spear in his hand, and David was there, playing his harp (1 Samuel 16:14; 18:10; 19:9).

After reading the New Testament, we can all say with confidence that God does not tempt anyone to do evil (James 1:13). But, obviously, this was not the view during this time.

Later in 1 Samuel, Nabal "suffered a stroke and was completely paralyzed. Some ten days later the LORD struck Nabal and he died" (1 Samuel 25:38).

Even in twenty-first-century medicine, the most common stroke that causes paralysis has a mortality of almost eighty percent. So, in

1 Samuel, is it really God who finishes off Nabal?

David expresses this same He-does-it-all view of God as he considers how King Saul will die: “‘By the living LORD,’ David continued, ‘I know that the LORD himself will kill Saul, either when his time comes to die a natural death or when he dies in battle’” (1 Samuel 26:10).

Later we read that Saul committed suicide, yet the description is that “the LORD killed him” (1 Chronicles 10:14).

Finally, David becomes king and makes the foolish decision to take a census. According to 2 Samuel, this was God’s doing: “The LORD was angry at Israel again, and he made David think it would be a good idea to count the people in Israel and Judah” (2 Samuel 24:1 CEV).

It’s fascinating that the description of this same event, written much later in Chronicles, identifies *Satan* as the one who incited David. “Satan wanted to bring trouble on the people of Israel, so he made David decide to take a census” (1 Chronicles 21:1). So who was ultimately responsible for David’s foolish decision?

Does God really keep some women childless, decide who will be rich and who will be poor, send evil spirits to torment, end the life of someone who had just suffered a devastating stroke, and tempt people like David to do foolish things? If we take the Bible as a whole, the clear answer is “Absolutely not!” God was speaking a language that the people could understand *at that time*. We need to reread these stories and put the devil back into the details. This view should not destroy our view of inspiration. Rather, what we see God doing is slowly unfolding the reality that He is not the only acting subject in our world—God has an enemy. And so do we.

## NOTES

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## DAY 5 The Serpent's Sting

Despite the fact that Satan is veiled in the Old Testament, if we take the Bible as a whole and take note of the unfolding picture of a Cosmic Conflict that runs through all sixty-six books, we begin to see more evidence of Satan's involvement.

One example occurs in the book of Numbers, which describes the forty years of wandering in the desert and the frequent rebellion of the people against God and Moses. Again and again, they boldly stated that they were better off in Egypt and expressed their desire to return. "They complained, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt to die in this desert, where there is no food or water? We can't stand any more of this miserable food'" (Numbers 21:5)!

Here's the description of God's response: "Then the LORD sent poisonous snakes among the people, and many Israelites were bitten and died" (Numbers 21:6).

How are we to interpret God's involvement in sending the snakes? Is it wrong to consider any other interpretation given the authoritative words in Scripture that "the LORD sent poisonous snakes"? The important principle that comes to light is that God takes responsibility for what happens in the Old Testament, and because of this, He is frequently described as *doing* what He simply *allows*.

Consider this interpretation of the snake story:

Every day of their travels [the Children of Israel] had been kept by a miracle of divine mercy. In all the way of God's leading they had found water to refresh the thirsty, bread from heaven to satisfy their hunger, and peace and safety under the shadowy cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. Angels had ministered to them as they climbed the rocky heights or threaded the rugged paths of the wilderness. Notwithstanding the hardships they had endured, there was not a feeble one in all their ranks. Their feet had not swollen in their long journeys, neither had their clothes grown old. God had subdued before them the fierce beasts of prey and the venomous reptiles of the forest and the desert. If with all these tokens of His love the people still continued to complain, the Lord would withdraw His protection until they should be led to appreciate His merciful care, and return to Him with repentance and humiliation.

Because they had been shielded by divine power they had not realized the countless dangers by which they were continually surrounded. In their ingratitude and unbelief they had anticipated death, and now the Lord permitted death to come upon them. The poisonous serpents that infested the wilderness were called fiery serpents, on account of the terrible effects produced by their sting, it causing violent inflammation and speedy death. As the protecting hand of God was removed from Israel, great numbers of the people were attacked by these venomous creatures (E. G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* [Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1958], pp. 428-29).

God is our Protector and Friend. But He also honors our freedom. If we stubbornly and rebelliously choose to leave His side, He will respect our decision rather than forcing Himself on us. When that happens, all hell literally breaks loose. In the story in Numbers, is it coincidental that snakes, the very symbol of Satan, were the animals that stepped into the void when God was pushed away?

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## DAY 6 Human Sacrifice

Despite all of God's attempts to shield His people from the Adversary who deceived Adam and Eve, He did not remove their free-will choice to abandon Him. What we see in the Old Testament is the devastating consequence of choosing to follow gods who were the very embodiment of Satan's kingdom. The worship of Baal, Molech, and other false gods was often remarkably cruel, punishing, and severe. Many demanded appeasement and child sacrifice.

What we need to see behind the scene is Satan's false caricature of God at work and his devious attempt to plant in human minds the picture of a cruel and unloving god. It is important that we recognize that this has been Satan's method of operation from the beginning of the war in heaven to our current day:

The reason why it seems so difficult to win souls for Christ, is that Satan is continually engaged in misrepresenting the character of God to the human mind. Christ came to reveal the Father to the world in his true character, that the false conceptions which men entertained of the divine character might be swept away (E. G. White, "Gospel Hearers," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 31, 1892).

As the Israelites were tempted to worship other gods, they were not only changing the name of their god but their style of worship. At a deeper level, idolatry in the Old Testament involved forming a different picture of God. In the Old Testament, God combats this false understanding by contrasting His character with the character of the "gods" Satan had established.

This understanding is very helpful as we try to wrap our minds around some unusual stories that seem so foreign to us.

**" THE REASON WHY IT SEEMS SO DIFFICULT TO WIN SOULS FOR CHRIST, IS THAT SATAN IS CONTINUALLY ENGAGED IN MISREPRESENTING THE CHARACTER OF GOD TO THE HUMAN MIND. "**

For example, God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his only son is much more than a test of Abraham's loyalty or an illustration of the death of Jesus. In the context of the cruel gods of that day that demanded child sacrifice, God wanted to start His new nation by first distinguishing Himself from those other gods. The take-home point from the story of Abraham and Isaac was that the God of Abraham is very different from all of the other gods. He *doesn't* demand the sacrifice of our sons and daughters. Somehow, He will provide his own sacrifice. Of course, many times in the Old Testament God went on record clearly stating that He does not need to be appeased by blood and sacrifice. The story of Abraham and Isaac was so vivid that it was surely told and discussed by countless generations.

Paganism in the Old Testament revolved around appeasement. For example, the worshipers of Baal "cut themselves with knives and daggers, according to their ritual" (1 Kings 18:28), hoping to deflect the anger of their god. That's *Satan's* depiction of God. In Jesus we see that God Himself is the Slaughtered Lamb—the One who suffered the most at the hands of His own creatures.

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## DAY 7 The Real God

### DON'T STOP NOW!

Listen to the talk “Scary God or Scary People” at: <http://godscharacter.com/index.php/good-news-tours/2009/482-gnt-2009-06>.

For centuries God looked with patience and forbearance upon the cruel treatment given to his ambassadors, at his holy law prostrate, despised, trampled underfoot. He swept away the inhabitants of the Noachian world with a flood. But when the earth was again peopled, men drew away from God, and renewed their hostility to him, manifesting bold defiance. Those whom God rescued from Egyptian bondage followed in the footsteps of those who had preceded them. Cause was followed by effect; the earth was being corrupted. A crisis had arrived in the government of God. . . . All heaven was prepared at the word of God to move to the help of his elect. One word from him, and the bolts of heaven would have fallen upon the earth, filling it with fire and flame. God had but to speak, and there would have been thunderings and lightnings and earthquakes and destruction. The heavenly intelligences were prepared for a fearful manifestation of Almighty power. Every move was watched with intense anxiety. The exercise of justice was expected. The angels looked for God to punish the inhabitants of the earth. . . . The heavenly universe was amazed at God's patience and love. To save fallen humanity the Son of God took humanity upon himself (E. G. White, “The Lord's Vineyard,” *Review and Herald*, July 17, 1900).

### TALK ABOUT IT

1. In what ways do you find it helpful to discover active demonic agencies at work throughout the Old Testament?
2. Can you think of other stories that have an additional depth of meaning if Satan is also perceived as active and involved?

3. What would be the consequences of God inspiring these words in the book of Genesis: "There is a powerful Enemy who is opposed to God. One-third of the mighty angels sided with this enemy who is now the prince of this world"?

4. In a time and culture where the power of one's god was the single most important factor, what perception would people have of a god who appeared unable to destroy his enemies?

5. How does the description of God sending evil spirits and controlling everything as described in 1 Samuel affect your view of inspiration? Are these examples of God meeting people where they are?

6. Are you comfortable with God slowly unfolding truth, as much as His people can bear?

7. With this lesson in mind, how would you respond to Richard Dawkins, who had this to say about the God of the Old Testament: "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal ... pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."

## **AND FINALLY...**

In the Old Testament, we must admit that Satan's deceptions effectively separated God from His people and ruined His reputation in the process. Ponder this quote:

Wherever they went, they gave me a bad name. People said, "These are GOD's people, but they got kicked off his land." I suffered much pain over my holy reputation, which the people of Israel blackened in every country they entered. Therefore, tell Israel. . . . "I'm not doing this for you, Israel. I'm doing it for me, to save my character, my holy name, which you've blackened in every country where you've gone. I'm going to put my great and holy name on display, the name that has been ruined in so many countries, the name that you blackened wherever you



# The Cosmic Conflict Over God's Character

— WEEK 4 —

Job and the Cosmic Conflict  
Part 1



## DAY 1 The Rest of the Story

### LIVING WORDS

God: “Did you notice my servant Job? . . . There is no one on earth as faithful and good as he is. He worships me and is careful not to do anything evil” (Job 1:8).

Elihu: “Have you ever seen anyone like this man Job? He never shows respect for God. He loves the company of evil people and goes around with sinners. . . . Any sensible person will surely agree; and the wise who hear me will say that Job is speaking from ignorance and that nothing he says makes sense. Think through everything that Job says; you will see that he talks like an evil man. To his sins he adds rebellion; in front of us all he mocks God” (Job 34:7-8, 34-37).

### BOTTOM LINE

**The book of Job reveals many of the key issues in the Cosmic Conflict and also shows how a friend of God responds to the lies of Satan.**

### SETTING THE STAGE

One needs to be very careful quoting Job because there are lies about God scattered throughout this book. What lies would Satan most desire us to believe? What could he insinuate that would most easily destroy our trust in God and lead us to serve Him for the wrong reasons? We’ve already observed Satan’s methods with the angels in heaven and with Eve at the tree. The book of Job, however, reveals how subtle and difficult it can be to detect the workings of Satan from behind the scenes.

The key to understanding this story is to place it in the setting of the Cosmic Conflict and to allow the beginning and the end of the story to stand as bookends, holding everything together.

Many have interpreted the book of Job using God’s apparent rebuke of Job as the key moment of the story, concluding that Job needed personal tragedies in order to uncover his deep sin and need for repentance. But what kind of picture of God does that portray?

Imagine that God said of you, “Now there’s a perfect and upright

individual.” Then, because of some deeply hidden sin in your life, He allowed for the death of your children, the destruction of everything you owned, and even the loss of your health! Eventually, as you lay homeless and suffering in a garbage dump, God comes and scolds you for complaining.

Obviously, there must be more to this story.

Fortunately, there *is* another way of understanding this book that incorporates God’s praise of Job at the beginning of the story as a “perfect and upright man,” and the end where God once again praises Job and scolds the friends (Job 42:7).

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## DAY 2 Holding Back the Winds

What lies would Satan want us to believe about God? What could he insinuate that would most easily destroy our trust in God, and lead us to serve Him for the wrong reasons?

One of the best illustrations of Satan's lies and accusations against God is found in the book of Job. Rarely has God had friends on earth of whom He could speak with pride. Job, however, was one such friend, and his story reveals that Satan's goal is to destroy God's reputation—to create in us a false picture of God's character.

At the conclusion of the story, God rebukes Job's friends with these telling words: "You did not speak the truth about me, the way my servant Job did" (Job 42:7). The issue of the whole book, as God said, is "the truth about me." As we read this account, we need to search carefully for the truth about God spoken by Job, in contrast to the lies about God uttered through the lips of Job's friends.

It's also critically important that we see the story of Job as the intense focus of onlooking angels. The story begins with God, standing before the angels, initiating a conversation with Satan:

When the day came for the heavenly beings to appear before the Lord, Satan was there among them. The Lord asked him, "What have you been doing?" Satan answered, "I have been walking here and there, roaming around the earth." "Did you notice my servant Job?" the Lord asked. "There is no one on earth as faithful and good as he is. He worships me and is careful not to do anything evil." Satan replied, "Would Job worship you if he got nothing out of it? You have always protected him and his family and everything he owns. You bless everything he does, and you have given him enough cattle to fill the whole country. But now suppose you take away everything he has—he will curse you to your face!" "All right," the Lord said to Satan, "everything he has is in your power, but you must not hurt Job himself." So Satan left (Job 1:6-12).

Terrible calamities soon follow. First, Job receives news from a servant that his donkeys were attacked and stolen, and his servants killed. Then another messenger arrives to describe that "Lightning struck the sheep and the shepherds and killed them all" (Job 1:16). Then a third messenger hurries in to tell Job that "Three bands of

Chaldean raiders attacked us, took away the camels, and killed all your servants except me” (Job 1:17). “Before he had finished speaking, another servant came and said, ‘Your children were having a feast at the home of your oldest son, when a storm swept in from the desert. It blew the house down and killed them all. I am the only one who escaped to tell you’” (Job 1:18-19).

Under the circumstances, Job’s response is remarkable:

Then Job got up and tore his clothes in grief. He shaved his head and threw himself face downward on the ground. He said, “I was born with nothing, and I will die with nothing. The Lord gave, and now he has taken away. May his name be praised!” In spite of everything that had happened, Job did not sin by blaming God (Job 1:20-22).

Two things to take away from the story thus far: (1) God was right about Job when he called him “perfect and upright”; (2) every day of our lives, God shields us from the power of Satan.

In this remarkable story, God’s restraints are removed, and we see the devastating consequences. Satan was able stir up a nearby tribe to steal Job’s cattle and kill his servants and even to control the elements by sending lightening from heaven and summoning a storm to destroy Job’s house and to kill his children. Satan has power that we cannot imagine. It’s only through God’s protection—His “holding back the winds” (Revelation 7:1)—that we are allowed to live in safety.

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## DAY 3 Theater of the Universe

Once again, God initiates a public conversation with Satan.

When the day came for the heavenly beings to appear before the Lord again, Satan was there among them. The Lord asked him, “Where have you been?” Satan answered, “I have been walking here and there, roaming around the earth.” “Did you notice my servant Job?” the Lord asked. “There is no one on earth as faithful and good as he is. He worships me and is careful not to do anything evil. You persuaded me to let you attack him for no reason at all, but Job is still as faithful as ever.” Satan replied, “A person will give up everything in order to stay alive. But now suppose you hurt his body—he will curse you to your face!” So the Lord said to Satan, “All right, he is in your power, but you are not to kill him” (Job 2:1-5).

Why would God allow such punishment to be brought upon a man of whom He just said “there is no one on earth as faithful and good as he is” (Job 1:8)? Who was watching? The angels are described as present in these conversations between Satan and God, and since only two-thirds of them remained loyal to God, perhaps even these angels had much to learn about the true character of God (see 1 Corinthians 4:9; Ephesians 3:10; 1 Peter 1:12).

Satan could not, by force, shake Job’s trust in God. So he chose a more subtle strategy—distortion of the truth. Three “friends,” who claimed to represent God, came to visit Job. During the conversations that followed, many things that the friends said were absolutely true. But, that’s the cunning way of Satan. As Satan had masterfully quoted Scripture in tempting Jesus in the wilderness, these friends were all the more subtle and deceptive because of the truth/lie intermix.

The Satanic inspiration of the friends became evident as the first visitor, Eliphaz, spoke: “Once a message came quietly, so quietly I could hardly hear it. Like a nightmare it disturbed my sleep. I trembled and shuddered; my whole body shook with fear. A light breeze touched my face, and my skin crawled with fright. I could see something standing there; I stared, but couldn’t tell what it was. Then I heard a voice out of the silence” (Job 4:12-16).

Job later declared that this “vision” is a nightmare to him, “But you—you terrify me with dreams; you send visions and nightmares” (Job 7:14). Would not Satan, who has done everything thus far to shake Job’s trust in God, be the author of this eerie vision and the false message of the friends that followed?

So, who do the friends represent in this story? They were “religious” and convinced that their deep understanding concerning God was correct, and that Job must have sinned and therefore is being punished by God. Job’s friends are the religious leaders—the ones who speak for God. This point cannot be overstated. Human history has revealed that people are easily deceived when a message comes from an individual who’s in a position of religious authority

The Old Testament description of Satan’s methods and of his success through lying prophets hasn’t changed with time. When Jesus came, His worst enemies were the pious Bible teachers of the day.

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## DAY 4 Friendly Lies

We will now try to be very specific about some of the lies about God told by Job's friends. Since space here allows only a brief overview, we would encourage you to reread the book of Job and practice distinguishing between the truth and the lies.

What do you think about the words of Eliphaz, who said, "Can anyone be righteous in the sight of God or be pure before his Creator? God does not trust his heavenly servants; he finds fault even with his angels. Do you think he will trust a creature of clay, a thing of dust that can be crushed like a moth?" (Job 4:17-19). He repeated this assertion later: "Can human beings be really pure? Can anyone be right with God? Why, God does not trust even his angels; even they are not pure in his sight. And we drink evil as if it were water; yes, we are corrupt; we are worthless" (Job 15:14-16).

Wait a minute. Hadn't God just declared Job as "perfect and upright" (Job 1:8 KJV)? Does God refer to the children who love Him as worthless and untrustworthy? He specifically refers to Moses and Abraham as His friends; David is referred to as "a man after his own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14 KJV); an angel sent from God tenderly calls Daniel: "O Daniel, man greatly beloved" (Daniel 10:11, NKJV); and Jesus reminds us: "I do not call you servants any longer because servants do not know what their master is doing. Instead, I call you friends" (John 15:15).

Job's friends said that God doesn't trust any of His creatures—even sinless angels—but the rest of Scripture doesn't support this view. Does the picture of God that Eliphaz presented sound like a God who is capable of having a trusting relationship with His creatures? Would you want to spend eternity with a God who even views His sinless angels as impure, and who views us who have rebelled as "worthless"?

Later Bildad added, "Then what about a human being, that worm, that insect? What is a human life worth in God's eyes?" (Job 25:6). Job's response: "Who inspired you to speak like this?" (Job 26:4). Who indeed! But doesn't the love that God showed by coming to this earth in human form reveal the infinite value God places on each of His children? "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). "The world" that God loves so much would include both His good and bad children.

The comment "He does not trust his heavenly servants; he

finds fault even with his angels" (Job 4:17) occurs several times in the book of Job and is directed specifically to the angels who were evidently watching this whole conflict, as the first two chapters of the book would indicate. These lies were intended to distort the true picture of God in their minds—"God doesn't care that much about you. . . . He doesn't trust you . . ." We can imagine that these were the methods Satan used to pull a third of the angels to his side when this war began.

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## DAY 5 Our Image of God

One of the most damaging lies in the story of Job is the notion that God delights in the suffering of His rebellious children. For example, Eliphaz made the claim: “Good people are glad and the innocent laugh when they see the wicked punished” (Job 22:19). Would it have been helpful to Satan’s cause if Job believed that God was pleased that he was suffering?

Remarkably, this dark and disturbing lie about God has been perpetuated to our current day. Many of the “spiritual giants” of the last two thousand years have thoroughly endorsed the view that those in heaven will join with God as they enjoy the torments of those in hell. Tertullian (A.D. 160–225) said, “how shall I admire, how laugh, how rejoice, how exult, when I behold so many proud monarchs groaning in the lowest abyss of darkness . . . liquefying in fiercer fires than they ever kindled against the Christians” (quoted in Moses Hadas, *A History of Latin Literature* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1952], p. 418). According to Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), “In order that the happiness of the saints may be more delightful to them . . . they are allowed to see perfectly the sufferings of the damned” (*Summa Theologica*, Third Part [Supplement] [New York: Benziger Brothers, 1922], p. 107). The famous hymn writer Isaac Watts (1674–1742) poetically wrote:

*What bliss will fill the ransomed souls,  
When they in glory dwell,  
To see the sinner as he rolls,  
In quenchless flames of hell.*

We’re all familiar with Jonathan Edwards’ sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” which makes God out to be a punishing monster. It’s surprising to discover that even the contemporary and influential theologian J. I. Packer wrote that even though it “sounds appalling” that we could approve of hell for our loved ones, “love and pity for hell’s occupants will not enter our hearts” because “in heaven our minds, hearts, motives, and feelings will be sanctified” (See [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/april22/28.84.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/april22/28.84.html)). Is he really saying that, as we become more like God, our compassion for those who reject God will diminish?

Using Jesus as our model, can we imagine Him laughing over

the suffering of His children? Of His rebellious children God said, "The people I love are doing evil things" (Jeremiah 11:15). When Israel went into Assyrian captivity, God cried, "How can I give you up, Israel? How can I abandon you?" (Hosea 11:8). And how does God describe His feelings about the final destruction of His rebellious children? "Tell them that as surely as I, the Sovereign LORD, am the living God, I do not enjoy seeing sinners die. I would rather see them stop sinning and live. Israel, stop the evil you are doing. Why do you want to die?" (Ezekiel 33:11).

If you were told about an earthly father who laughed as his son who'd left home and was tortured to death, you'd certainly call that man evil and devoid of all love, compassion, and goodness. Yet this is the picture of God in which Satan wants us to believe—even as we bow the knee in worship.

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## DAY 6 Lashing Out

Job's friends' major point of attack was that such disasters could not have happened to him if he were a good man. He obviously must have sinned to have received such treatment. The lie of Satan here is essentially: "If you are rich and healthy, it is evidence of God's blessing; if you are poor and sick, God is cursing you." For example, Eliphaz said to Job, "Think back now. Name a single case where someone righteous met with disaster" (Job 4:7); "Happy is the person whom God corrects! Do not resent it when he rebukes you" (Job 5:17).

The latter statement is true and could be quoted in church, but does it apply to Job? Is God correcting or testing Job in this story? From God's own statements at the beginning and the end of the book, we know that this is not the point. Job defends himself continually against the accusations that he deserved this treatment. "You have gone far enough. Stop being unjust. Don't condemn me. I'm in the right" (Job 6:29).

Do good people ever suffer loss? Many of God's special friends through the years have endured the worst treatment (see Hebrews 11:37, 39; 2 Corinthians 11:24-27). Jesus even said, "Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires" (Matthew 5:10). From a worldly point of view, the lives of God's best friends on earth often appear to have been a complete failure.

Job totally rejected the notion that temporal blessing in this life equated with an endorsement of God's favor and sarcastically asked, "Was a wicked person's light ever put out? Did one of them ever meet with disaster? Did God ever punish the wicked in anger and blow them away like straw in the wind or like dust carried away in a storm?" (Job 21:17-18).

The idea that riches are the result of God's blessing, while tragedy is due to His punishment, persisted to the time of Jesus. He had to remind His listeners that God is kind to all of his children—

**" THE LIE OF SATAN  
HERE IS ESSENTIALLY:  
'IF YOU ARE RICH  
AND HEALTHY,  
IT IS EVIDENCE OF  
GOD'S BLESSING;  
IF YOU ARE POOR  
AND SICK, GOD IS  
CURSING YOU.' "**

good and bad. Christ said, "For he makes his sun to shine on bad and good people alike, and gives rain to those who do good and to those who do evil" (Matthew 5:45).

Even His disciples didn't understand. Of the man born blind, they asked, "'Teacher, whose sin caused him to be born blind? Was it his own or his parents' sin?' Jesus answered, 'His blindness has nothing to do with his sins or his parents' sins'" (John 9:2-3). Later, Jesus again completely turned their philosophy upside down when He said, "How hard it is for rich people to enter the Kingdom of God! It is much harder for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. The people who heard him asked, 'Who, then, can be saved?'" (Luke 18:24-26). This statement was confusing to the disciples because, if it is difficult for a rich man to be saved (who, in their minds, was obviously blessed by God as evidenced by his riches), then who can be saved? The idea that material wealth is not necessarily evidence of God's blessing was incompatible with their theology.

Job's friends were persistent, insisting on his sinfulness again and again. "Put your heart right, Job. Reach out to God. Put away evil and wrong from your home. Then face the world again, firm and courageous. Then all your troubles will fade from your memory, like floods that are past and remembered no more" (Job 11:13-16). Sounds like good advice, but the friends obviously didn't know what transpired in heaven between God and Satan that had led to this tragedy! In their frustration, the friends resorted to insult and, in the process, revealed their true character: "But now you are being punished as you deserve" (Job 36:17); "God is punishing you *less* than you deserve" (Job 11:6, emphasis provided); "Any sensible person will surely agree; and the wise who hear me will say that Job is speaking from ignorance and that nothing he says makes sense. Think through everything that Job says; you will see that he talks like an evil man. To his sins he adds rebellion; in front of us all he mocks God" (Job 34:34-37).

This false picture of a God who retributively punishes His children for their sin seems almost hardwired into the human family. When hurricanes, earthquakes, car accidents, or cancer strike, how many have believed the theology of Job's friends (inspired by the Devil) that God is lashing out against sin?

## DAY 7 Who Do You Say That I Am?

### DON'T STOP NOW!

Listen to the talk “Job, part 1: Evidence for Conviction” for more discussion on the question of human suffering as a punishment from God at: [godscharacter.com/index.php/bible-study/job/job-part-1](http://godscharacter.com/index.php/bible-study/job/job-part-1).

### TALK ABOUT IT

Consider the following contrasting quotes about human suffering from two commentaries on the book of Job:

The book of Job is for the most part strongly opposed to the doctrine of retribution. Strict retribution is the position from which both Job and his friends start out, but, though the friends never deviate from the orthodox line, he himself soon comes to believe that his suffering is no punishment for wrongdoing but an unjust assault upon an innocent man. The causal nexus of the retributive principle has been unalterably broken for Job—and for all those of his readers who side with him in his battle against heaven, which means almost every single one (David J. A. Clines, “Job’s Fifth Friend: An Ethical Critique of the Book of Job,” *Biblical Interpretation* 12 [2004]: 247).

See a man suffering and you can be sure he has deserved it (Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. A Translation with Commentary* [New York: W. W. Norton, 2010], p. 6).

1. What does the book of Job suggest to us about human suffering?
2. Is God the only acting subject on our world?
3. What was God’s motive for bringing Job to Satan’s attention?
4. If it was not to punish Job for his sin, what was God’s purpose?
5. Do you think God was offended by Job’s harsh words?

6. Do you agree with the words of C. S. Lewis? “We needn’t be too afraid of questionings and expostulations: it was the impatience of Job, not the theodicies of Elihu that were pleasing to God. Does He like us to ‘stand up to Him a bit’?” (*The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Vol. III*, ed. Walter Hooper [Cambridge, England: HarperCollins, 2007], p. 1191).

## **AND FINALLY...**

Thus far, in the book of Job, we’ve seen that Satan was the one who afflicted Job, not God. We’ve also taken the position that God did not allow this to happen in order to punish or reform Job. We still haven’t answered the question, however, as to God’s *purpose* in this story.

1. If you were an onlooking angel, what would you take away from the story up to this point?
  
2. If you were told that God was going to come and talk with Job, would you think it more likely that He would say, “Well done, Job! You are really my friend!” Or do you think it is more likely that God would come to scold Job because of his audacity to question?

## **NOTES**

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# The Cosmic Conflict Over God's Character

— WEEK 5 —

Job and the Cosmic Conflict  
Part 2

## DAY 1 Talking Back to God

### LIVING WORDS

“I still rebel and complain against God; I cannot keep from groaning. How I wish I knew where to find him, and knew how to go where he is. I would state my case before him and present all the arguments in my favor. I want to know what he would say and how he would answer me. Would God use all his strength against me? No, he would listen as I spoke. I am honest; I could reason with God; he would declare me innocent once and for all” (Job 23:1-7).

### BOTTOM LINE

When God finally took center stage in this drama, He initially scolded Job and appeared to support the position of the friends. **In this lesson, we’ll explore the possibility that God’s appearance at the end of this story is the means of destroying Satan’s original accusation. In the end, God was proven correct in His claim that Job is “perfect and upright.”**

### SETTING THE STAGE

Many readers of this story are shocked by the strong language Job uses in his defense. Can you really talk to God and about God the way Job did? Many have taken the position that God was offended by Job’s words and therefore showed up in a storm with words of rebuke. Elihu, who came onto the stage at the very end of this book to harshly criticize Job, is viewed as speaking for God.

The other perplexing aspect of this interpretation is that it doesn’t seem to resolve the opening conflict between God and Satan. God claimed that Job was an upright man who would not let him down. Satan claimed that Job only served God because He blessed and protected him. Who was right?

If we take the position that God was upset at Job’s words and appeared out of the storm to reproach him, wouldn’t we imply that Satan was correct in his accusations? Finally, why didn’t Satan, the real villain of the story, emerge at the end of the book?

Or did he?



## DAY 2 Where Is God?

Job recognized that, since God is all-powerful, He could have prevented Job's personal tragedy. In his deep depression, he wondered how God could have allowed this to happen. His responses to Bildad and the others were tinged with desperation.

You think you are better than I am, and regard my troubles as proof of my guilt. Can't you see it is God who has done this? He has set a trap to catch me. I protest his violence, but no one is listening; no one hears my cry for justice. . . . He has taken away all my wealth and destroyed my reputation. . . . God has made my own family forsake me; I am a stranger to those who knew me; my relatives and friends are gone. Those who were guests in my house have forgotten me; my servant women treat me like a stranger and a foreigner. When I call a servant, he doesn't answer—even when I beg him to help me. My wife can't stand the smell of my breath, and my own brothers won't come near me. Children despise me and laugh when they see me. My closest friends look at me with disgust; those I loved most have turned against me. My skin hangs loose on my bones; I have barely escaped with my life. You are my friends! Take pity on me! How I wish that someone would remember my words and record them in a book! Or with a chisel carve my words in stone and write them so that they would last forever (Job 19:5-7, 9, 13-24).

Job obviously did not know that what he was going through was being watched closely by God, Satan, and the entire onlooking universe, and that his words would indeed be "chiseled" for all eternity. Was Job about to renounce God?

How God must have wanted to wrap His arms around Job in love at this point and explain why this was happening to him. But Job still had important things to say in defending God before the universe. Job continued, now remembering the God whom he had known as his friend: "But I know there is someone in heaven who will come at last to my defense. Even after my skin is eaten by disease, while still in this body I will see God. I will see him with my own eyes, and he will not be a stranger" (Job 19:25-27).

What a remarkable picture of God Job had! Even though he

complained and wrestled with God while suffering, he maintained that He was on his side and that God is the kind of person with whom someone can reason:

I still rebel and complain against God; I cannot keep from groaning. How I wish I knew where to find him, and knew how to go where he is. I would state my case before him and present all the arguments in my favor. I want to know what he would say and how he would answer me. Would God use all his strength against me? No, he would listen as I spoke. I am honest; I could reason with God; he would declare me innocent once and for all (Job 23:1-7).

## THINK AND DISCUSS

1. How do you think the angels considered the words of Job?
2. Will God listen as you present your case before him, even if your words are tinged with anger and frustration?
3. Can you reason with God?
4. Is it possible that even the angels wondered whether Job went too far?
5. In what ways do you think the end result of this story changed their picture of God?

## NOTES

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## DAY 3 Final Argument

Job, like Abraham and Moses, knew God as a friend, and he knew that God was not offended by honest and heartfelt questions, especially in such a predicament. God did not rebuke Moses when, in his frustration, he complained: “Lord, why do you mistreat your people? Why did you send me here? Ever since I went to the king to speak for you, he has treated them cruelly. And you have done nothing to help them” (Exodus 5:22-23)! God did not rebuke Abraham when he said, “Surely you won’t kill the innocent with the guilty. That’s impossible! You can’t do that. If you did, the innocent would be punished along with the guilty. That is impossible. The judge of all the earth has to act justly” (Genesis 18:25). Job knew that if he could just talk to God, his *friend*, everything would make sense.

This was the most painful aspect of Job’s experience. God, whom he had known as a friend, was no longer talking to him:

I have searched in the East, but God is not there; I have not found him when I searched in the West. God has been at work in the North and the South, but still I have not seen him. Yet God knows every step I take; if he tests me, he will find me pure (Job 23:8-10).

I call to you, O God, but you never answer; and when I pray, you pay no attention (Job 30:20).

Yet, even through this trial where God seemed absent, Job still held on to the truth about God, his friend, and was able to say, “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him” (Job 13:15 KJV).

Job’s three friends believed that humans were of no use to God. “Is there anyone, even the wisest, who could ever be of use to God? Does your doing right benefit God, or does your being good help him at all? . . . Do you help God by being so righteous? There is nothing God needs from you” (Job 22:1-3; 35:7).

But wasn’t Job, in this story, helping God in the vindication of His character before angels and men? God isn’t speaking in His own defense. Job is representing Him even though God appears to have abandoned him!

There was one subject, however, upon which Job and the friends agreed. Both acknowledged that God is all-powerful. The

friends, however, believed that God, as the Sovereign One, can do whatever He likes because He has all the power. Who are we (puny and insignificant mortals) to question God? In their mind, there's an infinite distance between God and His sinful children. "God's power is so great that we cannot come near him" (Job 37:23).

But God had always been near to Job. Job agreed that God's power is without limits, but he disagreed with the friends' picture of a distant and severe deity. Job knew God as a friend and understood the kind of relationship God desires to experience with His children. Neither the friends nor Elihu thought that God would ever say something like this to His creatures: "I do not call you servants any longer, because servants do not know what their master is doing. Instead, I call you friends" (John 15:15).

Then, Job presented his final argument:

Will no one listen to what I am saying? I swear that every word is true. Let Almighty God answer me. If the charges my opponent brings against me were written down so that I could see them, I would wear them proudly on my shoulder and place them on my head like a crown. I would tell God everything I have done, and hold my head high in his presence (Job 31:35-37).

God was now ready to answer Job. If Job was right in what he said about God, wouldn't we expect God to come to him gently and with comforting words, as Jesus did when He preached the Sermon on the Mount? Wouldn't that have been a happy ending to the story, followed by Job receiving his health and family again? Unthinkably, there was still one more trial for Job to endure.

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## DAY 4 Stand Up Straight and Answer

To our surprise, God came to Job in overwhelming power, apparently endorsing the view of the friends:

Then out of the storm the Lord spoke to Job. “Who are you to question my wisdom with your ignorant, empty words? Now stand up straight and answer the questions I ask you. Were you there when I made the world? If you know so much, tell me about it. Who decided how large it would be? Who stretched the measuring line over it? Do you know all the answers? What holds up the pillars that support the earth? Who laid the cornerstone of the world?” (Job 38:1-6).

God continued, now using a touch of sarcasm, “Do you know where the light comes from or what the source of darkness is? Can you show them how far to go, or send them back again? I am sure you can, because you’re so old and were there when the world was made” (Job 38:19-21)!

After many verses of God detailing His great power, He turned to Job. “Job, you challenged Almighty God; will you give up now, or will you answer?” (Job 40:1-2). Did Job really challenge God? Why is God now appearing to fault a “perfect and upright” man who had the worst calamities befall him, not because he was bad, but because God had removed his protecting hand? All poor Job could say was, “I spoke foolishly, Lord. What can I answer? I will not try to say anything else. I have already said more than I should” (Job 40:3).

But God was not finished yet. Was it possible that the angels were perhaps siding with the friends’ arguments as this point?

Then out of the storm the Lord spoke to Job once again. “Now stand up straight and answer my questions. Are you trying to prove that I am unjust—to put me in the wrong and yourself in the right? Are you as strong as I am? Can your voice thunder as loud as mine? If so, stand up in your honor and pride; clothe yourself with majesty and glory. Look at those who are proud; pour out your anger and humble them. Yes, look at them and bring them down; crush the wicked where they stand. Bury them all in the ground; bind them in the world of the dead. Then I will be the first to praise you and admit that you won the

victory yourself” (Job 40:6-14).

Job was apparently defeated, and his friends, along with Satan, must have been feeling quite pleased.

Then Job answered the Lord. “I know, Lord, that you are all-powerful; that you can do everything you want. You ask how I dare question your wisdom when I am so very ignorant. I talked about things I did not understand, about marvels too great for me to know. You told me to listen while you spoke and to try to answer your questions. In the past I knew only what others had told me, but now I have seen you with my own eyes. So I am ashamed of all I have said and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:1-6).

Did God bring this trial on Job to force these words of repentance from his lips? In the next lesson, we will consider why God came to rebuke Job.

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## DAY 5 Final Confrontation

We know that the angels were intently involved in what was happening to Job. They probably were wrestling with God's approach at this point in the story just as we are. Could some even have wondered if God had made a mistake in declaring of Job, "There is no one on earth as faithful and good as he is" (Job 1:8)? Did Satan appear victorious in his claim that Job would let God down?

But God knew his friend, and He also knew that that friend could be tested to the limit without breaking. The last trial for Job was to be utterly forsaken—even by God.

Amazingly, Job did not give up and curse God, even when God seemingly turned against him. In fact, it's fascinating that the more literal translations of Job's final response to God in 42:4 before he collapsed in despair suggests that he still wanted to carry on the conversation, to question God and to have Him respond:

- "Hear, now and I will speak; I will ask You, and You instruct me" (NASB).
- "Listen now, and I will speak. I will ask you, and you will teach me" (GW).
- "Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me" (NRSV).

It's almost as if Job maintains, even to his dying breath *that I can question God. I know that He'll not be offended. The God that I've known can be reasoned with. Even though I don't understand what's happening to me, I'll still trust in Him!*

At this point in the story, there was no longer any room for doubt among the heavenly counsel concerning Satan's claim that God had unfairly blessed Job to "pay off" his devotion. Job's faithfulness to the end vindicated God and defeated the mudslinging Adversary. Job proved that God is someone who values the loyal friendship of His creatures. God was not offended by Job's complaints, because an important quality of friends is that they are honest and open with each other.

Now, in order to publicly affirm that it was Job who was in the right, God suddenly ends the debate:

After the Lord had finished speaking to Job, he said to Eliphaz, “I am angry with you and your two friends, because *you did not speak the truth about me, the way my servant Job did.* Now take seven bulls and seven rams to Job and offer them as a sacrifice for yourselves. Job will pray for you, and I will answer his prayer and not disgrace you the way you deserve. *You did not speak the truth about me as he did.*” Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar did what the Lord had told them to do, and the Lord answered Job’s prayer (Job 42:7-9, emphasis provided).

This is such a surprising twist in the story! No more debate or accusations about who was in the right. Job was right. His friends (and more importantly the Devil) were dead wrong.

Job’s devotion to God to the very end, even when it seemed that God had forsaken him, was a powerful message to the angels and has incredible meaning for us as well. At the end of time, God will have a people who are as fully dedicated to Him as Job was. They too will experience the full onslaught of Satanic deceptions and apparent God-forsakenness. Job can be an everlasting encouragement to us, motivating us to never surrender our picture of God and our trust in Him even in situations where He seems to be absent from our lives—seemingly doing nothing to intervene on our behalf. At those moments, we reveal that our love and devotion for God are real and not dependent on temporal blessings.

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## DAY 6 Leviathan

There's one other important aspect of this story as it relates to the Cosmic Conflict. In the middle of God's words to Job, He describes a great beast called Leviathan who seems to exhibit qualities of the Adversary. Listen to how God describes this monster:

Can you catch Leviathan with a fishhook or tie his tongue down with a rope? Can you put a rope through his snout or put a hook through his jaws? . . . Touch him once and you'll never try it again; you'll never forget the fight! Anyone who sees Leviathan loses courage and falls to the ground. When he is aroused, he is fierce; no one would dare to stand before him. Who can attack him and still be safe? No one in all the world can do it. Let me tell you about Leviathan's legs and describe how great and strong he is" (Job 41:1-2, 8-12).

His pride is invincible; nothing can make a dent in that pride. Nothing can get through that proud skin—impervious to weapons and weather (Job 41:15-16 MSG).

Even angels [or "gods" or "the strongest"] run for cover when he surfaces, cowering before his tail-thrashing turbulence (Job 41:25 MSG).

His stony heart is without fear, as unyielding and hard as a millstone. When he rises up, even the strongest are frightened; they are helpless with fear. There is no sword that can wound him; no spear or arrow or lance that can harm him. For him iron is as flimsy as straw, and bronze as soft as rotten wood. There is no arrow that can make him run; rocks thrown at him are like bits of straw. To him a club is a piece of straw, and he laughs when men throw spears. He churns up the sea like boiling water and makes it bubble like a pot of oil. He leaves a shining path behind him and turns the sea to white foam. There is nothing on earth to compare with him; he is a creature that has no fear. He looks down on even the proudest animals; he is king of all wild beasts (Job 41:24-34).

The New International Version translates verses 33 and 34 this way: "Nothing on earth is his equal—a creature without fear. He looks down on all that are haughty; he is king over all that are proud."

It's significant that Leviathan elsewhere is described with these words: "On that day the LORD will use his fierce and powerful sword to punish Leviathan, that slippery snake, Leviathan, that twisting snake. He will kill that monster which lives in the sea" (Isaiah 27:1 GW).

How many "slippery" and "twisting" snakes do you know of in the Bible?

At the end of this incredible drama, only "three characters dominate the scene: Job, God, and Leviathan" (Carol Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003], p. 252). It's almost as if God is saying to His friend, "Job, there is just one piece of the puzzle you are missing in understanding what happened to you. In the great Cosmic Conflict, there exists a powerful adversary!"

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## DAY 7 Job and Christ

### DON'T STOP NOW!

Listen to the talk “Job, part 2: God’s Non-Use of Power” for more discussion on this story: <http://godscharacter.com/index.php/bible-study/job/job-part-2>.

Read *Education* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1903], pages 154-56, where Ellen White describes Job this way: “Very early in the history of the world is given the life record of one over whom this controversy of Satan’s was waged. . . . Seemingly forsaken of heaven and earth, yet holding fast his faith in God and his consciousness of integrity.”

### TALK ABOUT IT

Consider and discuss the similarities between Job and Christ.

1. Both stories begin with God’s declaration of innocence and approval. In the case of Jesus, His ministry began with baptism and God’s words, “You are my own dear Son. With you I am pleased” (Luke 3:22).
2. After God’s words of approval, both Jesus and Job were tested by Satan. Immediately after His baptism, the Spirit “drove” Jesus into the wilderness, where He was physically deprived and then tempted by the Devil.
3. Satan’s accusation against Job was that God unfairly blessed him and that this was the only reason he was faithful to God. Likewise, Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness also suggested that He was unfairly privileged. Who else can turn stones to bread or jump off a cliff without being injured?
4. Job was repeatedly told by the friends that he was nothing special to God. Likewise, Satan’s accusations to Jesus also denied His special relationship with the Father: “If you are God’s Son . . . ” (Luke 4:3). This temptation was pressed on Jesus to the very end: “He saved others; let him save himself *if* he is the Messiah whom God has chosen” (Luke 23:35, emphasis

supplied)!

5. Jesus and Job exposed and defeated Satan by vindicating the character of God before the onlooking universe.

6. Jesus and Job both experienced complete God-forsakenness (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” [Matthew 27:46])! Yet neither relinquished their trust in God. Many people stop reading the book of Job after God comes and seems to accuse Job, overlooking God’s final words of commendation to Job and rebuke to the friends. This is like listening to Jesus’ words, “Why have you forsaken me?” and then not reading on to the resurrection!

## **AND FINALLY...**

We don’t have on record that Job was ever told about the heavenly conflict, yet he played a vital role in God’s defeat of Satan. Much more of the Cosmic Conflict has been unfolded to us. Can we see ourselves taking part in that war every day and helping God defeat Satan’s accusations? Could there be a greater mission in life?

A reliance and confidence in the truth about God as revealed by Jesus is our only hope as this great conflict builds to its climax. Revelation describes those final events occurring after God’s people have been sealed. Having read the story of Job, it makes sense that God could only allow the final events of earth’s history to occur when His people have become settled into the truth just as Job was:

The Wicked One will come with the power of Satan and perform all kinds of false miracles and wonders, and use every kind of wicked deceit on those who will perish. *They will perish because they did not welcome and love the truth* so as to be saved. And so God sends the power of error to work in them so that they believe what is false. The result is that all who have not believed the truth, but have taken pleasure in sin, will be condemned (2 Thessalonians 2:9-12, emphasis provided).



# The Cosmic Conflict Over God's Character

—WEEK 6—

Cosmic Conflict in the Life of Jesus

## DAY 1 Behind the Temptations

### LIVING WORDS

“No one has ever seen God. The only Son, who is the same as God and is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (John 1:18).

“Now is the time for this world to be judged; now the ruler of this world will be overthrown” (John 12:31).

### BOTTOM LINE

**Central to Jesus’ mission was to reveal the truth about God and to defeat the lies and misrepresentations of Satan. When God became a human being, Satan and his angels pulled out all the stops to derail His mission. This conflict reached its climax at the cross.**

### SETTING THE STAGE

In contrast to the relative absence of the figure of Satan in the Old Testament, there are abundant references to demonic activity in the New Testament.

Immediately after His baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness where He was tempted by the Devil. And, throughout the life of Jesus, there were continued encounters with demon-possessed individuals whom He healed. On occasion, these demons communicated with Him as they were being cast out. Jesus’ struggle against the demonic forces climaxed at the cross. In this lesson, we will concentrate on the wilderness temptations.

Have you ever been tempted to turn stone into bread? These temptations can appear superficial or “too easy” for Jesus. When we consider Satan’s success in tempting Eve and his studied observation of the inherent weaknesses of the human race for thousands of years, did he underestimate Jesus? Turning stone to bread? Jumping off a cliff? Worshiping the Devil? Is this the best he could do? Or are we missing something?

Understanding the temptations of Jesus is important because it gives us insight into the Devil’s plan to thwart His mission. Satan knew what God was up to when He became a human. The

deceptions, though subtle, struck at the very root of the Kingdom that Jesus was coming to establish. Satan's calculated words were attempts to derail God's plan and to redirect His Son to achieve His goal of restoring the human family by using the wrong methods.

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## DAY 2 Like Temptations

There was a sense of urgency after Jesus' baptism—not to immediately preach or heal the sick, but to encounter Satan. The book of Mark says that “the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness” (Mark 1:12 NASB).

After fasting for “forty days and forty nights . . . he was famished. The tempter came” (Matthew 4:2 NRSV). Since we know that “God cannot be tempted by evil” (James 1:13), does this mean that these were not temptations for Jesus?

The issues in the Cosmic Conflict were not over God's power, but over God's character and the nature of His government. Thus, Jesus came as the pure bright light manifestation of God's character and Kingdom and was subjected to all of the inherent weaknesses of the flesh, including the ability to be tempted. Imagine the condescension of Almighty God subjecting Himself to temptations from one of His own creatures!

Comparing Jesus' temptations with those of Adam and Eve, we recognize some important differences:

- Adam and Eve ate the fruit not out of hunger but rather lustful desire. Jesus was tempted to eat after forty days of fasting.
- Adam and Eve lived in the perfection of Eden; Jesus grew up in a town that had a bad reputation: “Can any good thing come from Nazareth?” (John 1:46).
- Adam and Eve were surrounded by abundant evidence of God's blessing; Jesus grew up in a poor family during a time when wealth was perceived as the sign of God's blessing.

There are also parallels between Jesus' temptations and the experience of Israel. It seems that Christ was encouraging us to associate His trials with Israel's trials in the wilderness, since in His conversation with Satan He only quoted the book of Deuteronomy in His defense. Jesus and Israel were baptized (1 Corinthians 10:1-4) immediately followed by forty years/days of temptation. “Remember how the LORD your God led you on this long journey through the desert these past forty years, sending hardships to test you” (Deuteronomy 8:2).

More important than the parallels, however, are the contrasts.



Like Adam and Eve, Israel was unfaithful and fell to temptation. When the people were hungry or thirsty, they didn't trust God to provide. Instead, they grumbled and complained. Jesus, on the other hand, was faithful under the same circumstances. Jesus covered the same ground where Israel failed, and He was the conqueror.

"The Devil said to him, 'If you are God's Son, order this stone to turn into bread'" (Luke 4:3).

*If you are God's Son? How subtle.* We often read this temptation and wonder about the miracle of turning stone to bread without first recognizing the doubt that Satan asserted about who Jesus really is. Just forty short days earlier, God the Father had told Jesus, "You *are* my own dear Son. I am pleased with you" (Luke 3:22, emphasis provided). Now, Satan essentially was saying to Jesus, "Prove it! I don't believe that you are!"

The other important dimension of this temptation was to lead Jesus to do a miracle for selfish reasons. Throughout His ministry, Christ never did a miracle for Himself—everything was done for others. In this temptation, Satan was trying to lead Him down the path that was the polar opposite of the Kingdom Jesus was trying to represent.

This first temptation, designed to create doubt in His Father and uncertainty about the nature of His Kingdom, struck at the heart of Jesus' mission and was presented with the greatest intensity at the cross: "'Save yourself *if* you are God's Son! Come on down from the cross!' In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the Law and the elders made fun of him: 'He saved others, but he cannot save himself! Isn't he the king of Israel? *If* he will come down off the cross now, we will believe in him'" (Matthew 27:40-42, emphasis provided)!

In the desert that day, Satan knew that the kingdom of love and humble service was about to break out upon the world (see Matthew 20:28). From Satan's point of view, the simple request to turn a stone into bread was a brilliant deception. Had Jesus responded by creating bread from stone, He would have taken one step in the direction of Satan's kingdom—an evil empire based on serving self, not others.

But Jesus saw through the direction that Satan's temptation was heading. He came to establish a Kingdom that springs from love, and real love is never brought about by force, intimidation, or coercion.

## DAY 3 Key Texts

Unlike Eve, who entered into a conversation with the Serpent, Jesus did not give Satan the smallest foot in the door with which to volley more accusations. His only response was to quote Scripture: “The scripture says, ‘Human beings cannot live on bread alone’” (Luke 4:4).

Satan followed up with another temptation by quoting the Old Testament as if to say, “I can quote the Bible too!”

Then the Devil took him to Jerusalem and set him on the highest point of the Temple, and said to him, “If you are God’s Son, throw yourself down from here. For the scripture says, ‘God will order his angels to take good care of you.’ It also says, ‘They will hold you up with their hands so that not even your feet will be hurt on the stones’” (Luke 4:9-11).

As with the first temptation, there was implied doubt about the trustworthiness of God: “If you are God’s Son . . .” Jesus again quoted the book of Deuteronomy in His defense, “Do not put the LORD your God to the test” (Deuteronomy 6:16). It’s significant to note that the Devil can rattle off Bible texts in order to support his twisted purpose of distorting God’s trustworthiness. While it might seem authoritative to quote Scripture, this does not necessarily mean the verse has been understood correctly. The Bible has been used through the years to support everything from slavery to polygamy to the handling of snakes. The Pharisees diligently read the inspired Scriptures, yet missed the point that all Scripture points to Jesus (John 5:39). The Bible should be read as a story that progressively unfolds the beautiful truth about God, His character and His kingdom. Reading the Bible as a collection of “key texts” is dangerous because it allows for the possibility of assembling isolated statements to support virtually any belief system.

In this temptation, Satan quotes from Psalm 91, a beautiful passage that is about trusting God and claiming His promise to tenderly care for His children: “He will cover you with his wings; you will be safe in his care; his faithfulness will protect and defend you” (Psalm 91:4). This is not a psalm that encourages putting God to the test by jumping off a cliff!

It's also significant that Satan quoted verse 12 of this psalm, which is immediately followed by these words: "You will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot. Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name" (Psalm 91:13-14 ESV).

Though Satan used an isolated section of Psalm 91 to tempt Jesus, this passage as a whole contains the essential ingredients Jesus needed to be victorious—trusting in God's goodness and protection to overcome the Devil, and knowing the truth about God's name and character.

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## DAY 4 Motivation

A request to jump off a cliff wouldn't represent much of a temptation for most of us. For Jesus, however, it was. He rejected Satan's first demand that He change stone to bread. With the second temptation, however, Jesus was now asked to do something that put Himself at risk. "Aren't you the fulfillment of a passage in Psalms?" the Devil seemed to be saying. "Won't God send His angels to protect you? Don't you believe the words of the inspired Scriptures? Do you doubt that you are God's Son? You're not afraid, Jesus . . . are you?"

If we're ever put on the spot either to "prove" our trust in God or to put God to the test, it should be a huge red flag to us.

When I was a teenager, a pastor gave a passionate sermon about heaven and hell. Many Bible verses were quoted, and we were given the choice between heaven (if we accepted God) and hellfire (if we didn't). His sermon ended with the authoritative-sounding words of Joshua, "Decide today who you will serve" (Joshua 24:15), which was followed by an altar call. The implication was not subtle: come forward now if you choose heaven; stay in your seat if you choose hell.

These coercive and manipulative methods are not the way God works. Jesus spoke the truth in love and then allowed people to freely make their own decisions. It's love that awakens love within us. Coercion, on the other hand, leads to forced submission through fear.

It is not the fear of punishment, or the hope of everlasting reward, that leads the disciples of Christ to follow Him. They behold the Savior's matchless love, revealed throughout His pilgrimage on earth, from the manger of Bethlehem to Calvary's cross, and the sight of Him attracts, it softens and subdues the soul. Love awakens in the heart of the beholders. They hear His voice, and they follow Him (E. G. White, *Desire of Ages* [Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1898], p. 480).

The next time you're compelled by another individual to respond to God in some way, ask yourself: "Am I responding out of love that freely springs from within, or am I responding because I feel coerced or bullied? Am I being asked to take a leap in the dark

with scriptural quotes used to push me over the edge?" Your answer to those questions will determine whether you are responding to the Spirit of God or some other spirit. Coming closer to God should always spring from a cheerful heart, awakened by love (2 Corinthians 9:7). This is what the expansive Kingdom of God looks like. Christ was able to withstand the Devil's subtle motivation. So can we.

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## DAY 5    Alternative Road

Having been beaten down twice, Satan attempted to trap Jesus once more by offering everything to Him: "Then the Devil took him up and showed him in a second all the kingdoms of the world. 'I will give you all this power and all this wealth,' the Devil told him. 'It has all been handed over to me, and I can give it to anyone I choose. All this will be yours, then, if you worship me'" (Luke 4:5-6).

Really? Does Satan possess the power and ability to hand over all the kingdoms of the world to Jesus? Although Satan is "the prince of this world" (John 12:31), we must also remember that he is a liar. Jesus did not come for the "power" and "wealth" of the world's kingdoms. He came to win hearts and minds and to liberate all those who have been enslaved by Satan's lies. In other words, Satan offered something for which Jesus did not come. Satan tried to entice Him to strive for power, wealth, and fame instead of for hearts and minds. Perhaps he figured that Jesus would be tempted by the thought that He could win this world back the easy way without a need to take that long, painful, self-sacrificial road to Gethsemane and Calvary.

Unlimited power is what Satan has always desired (see Isaiah 14). But Jesus' entire ministry was focused on service, humility, and winning people to Him through self-sacrificial love. In Jesus' Kingdom, "The greatest one among you will be your servant" (Matthew 23:11).

At this point in the conversation, Jesus was revolted at Satan's offer and the very thought of worshiping anyone other than His Heavenly Father. "The scripture says, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve only him!'" (Luke 4:8). Using rather tough words (as translated from Greek), Jesus essentially told Satan to "get lost." The Message paraphrase describes it this way: "Jesus' refusal was curt: 'Beat it, Satan!'" (Matthew 4:10 MSG).

Christ was victorious in the wilderness temptations because He trusted fully in His Father and thoroughly understood the principles of His kingdom. There is also much to admire in the way Jesus limited Satan by not engaging in conversation, using no wasted words, and quoting Scripture in His defense. We might want to emulate that.

## DAY 6 Not Just About Us

“When the Devil finished tempting Jesus in every way, he left him for a while” (Luke 4:13). The book of Matthew includes another important detail to the end of this story, “Then the Devil left Jesus; and angels came and helped him” (Matthew 4:11).

Imagine that you were an angel in heaven when Lucifer’s rebellion broke out, and you now have the perspective of the unfolding controversy peaking at this critical moment when that same rebellious creature proudly asks his Creator to bow down and worship him. Do you think that the onlooking angels had any sympathy left for the Devil?

Satan’s accusation against God in the book of Job—that He had unfairly blessed Job—was once again completely shattered. God became a human. He humbled Himself to an infinite degree by spending nine months in the womb, becoming a helpless baby, living the life of a humble carpenter, and starting His ministry by depriving Himself of food for forty days. This was preceded by thirty years of life without one recorded self-aggrandizing miracle or special treatment. The polarization between the emaciated God in human form and the proud mudslinger who demands worship could not be more distinct in the minds of the angels. There in the desert, there must have been intense eagerness on their part to step in and comfort their Creator. Their words to Jesus are not recorded in Scripture, but I would like to imagine that, as they provided for His needs, they also offered their eternal love and devotion.

The plan of salvation is not only about *us*. The war of all wars began in heaven (Revelation 12), and Jesus came to make peace and to restore all things in the universe to him:

Through the Son, then, God decided to bring *the whole universe* back to himself. God made peace through his Son’s blood on the cross and so brought back to himself all things, *both on earth and in heaven*. At one time you were far away from God and were his enemies because of the evil things you did and thought. But now, by means of the physical death of his Son, God has made you his friends (Colossians 1:20-22, emphasis provided).

But the plan of redemption had a yet broader and deeper purpose than the salvation of man. It was not for this alone that

Christ came to the earth; it was not merely that the inhabitants of this little world might regard the law of God as it should be regarded; but it was to vindicate the character of God before the universe. To this result of His great sacrifice—its influence upon the intelligences of other worlds, as well as upon man—the Savior looked forward when just before His crucifixion He said: “Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all unto Me.” John 12:31, 32. The act of Christ in dying for the salvation of man would not only make heaven accessible to men, but before all the universe it would justify God and His Son in their dealing with the rebellion of Satan. It would establish the perpetuity of the law of God and would reveal the nature and the results of sin (E. G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* [Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1958], pp. 68-69).

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## DAY 7 Counterfeit Kingdom

### DON'T STOP NOW!

These talks provide an in-depth discussion of the wilderness temptations:

- **Greg Boyd, Resisting the Devil:**

<http://whchurch.org/sermons-media/sermon/resisting-the-devil>.

- **Brad Cole, The Wilderness Temptations:**

<http://godscharacter.com/index.php/bible-study/luke/luke>.

Consider these insightful words:

Not without hindrance was the Commander of heaven to win the souls of men to His kingdom. From the time when He was a babe in Bethlehem, He was continually assailed by the evil one. The image of God was manifest in Christ, and in the councils of Satan it was determined that He should be overcome. No human being had come into the world and escaped the power of the deceiver. The forces of the confederacy of evil were set upon His track to engage in warfare against Him, and if possible to prevail over Him. . . . Many look on this conflict between Christ and Satan as having no special bearing on their own life; and for them it has little interest. But within the domain of every human heart this controversy is repeated. Never does one leave the ranks of evil for the service of God without encountering the assaults of Satan. The enticements which Christ resisted were those that we find it so difficult to withstand (White, *Desire of Ages*, p. 116).

### TALK ABOUT IT

Reread the words of Ellen White in the previous quote: "The enticements Christ resisted were those that we find it so difficult to withstand."

1. As you consider the three temptations of Jesus, in what ways do you see them in your own life as well?

2. Does Satan ever press the doubt, “If you are special to God, why did this happen to you? If God really loves you so much, why are you in this situation?” How should you respond?

3. In what ways are you ever tempted to approve of “methods of the world” under the pretext of ushering in the kingdom of God?

4. Jesus refused to use power and coercion to serve Himself or to force others to His Kingdom. Do we support any form of coercive evangelism that attempts to intimidate people into the kingdom?

5. Our witness to God should manifest itself in the form of serving and speaking the truth in love. How can we do that in our daily lives?

6. Jesus was tempted with the offer of “power” and all the “wealth” of the world’s kingdoms. Are our lives primarily focused on humble service and devotion to God and others, or are we devoted to enriching ourselves?

7. Are we seeking to reflect God’s glory in our lives, or do we rather cherish the praise and admiration of others?

8. Jesus overcame Satan through an intimate connection with His Father and a thorough understanding of the Scriptures. Is it possible for us to attain such harmony with God that we also can reject the most enticing temptations of the Adversary?

## **AND FINALLY...**

The wilderness temptations provide a helpful window into the nature of Satan’s kingdom. It’s important that we’re able to recognize this false, counterfeit kingdom. These three temptations enable us to identify Satan’s counterfeit kingdom by the following characteristics:

- Power and authority are the goals.
- The means of evangelism is through impressive display, coercion, and intimidation.
- The primary motives are to enrich self rather than to serve others.



# The Cosmic Conflict Over God's Character

— WEEK 7 —

Destroying the Works of the Devil

## DAY 1    Revealing God

### LIVING WORDS

“The Son of God appeared for this very reason, to destroy what the Devil had done” (1 John 3:8); “The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil” (NRSV).

### BOTTOM LINE

**Every word and action of Jesus’ life is a living manifestation of God the Father’s Kingdom and character that emphatically exposes and defeats Satan’s lies.**

### SETTING THE STAGE

Jesus does not merely show us one dimension of God’s Kingdom and character; He “reflects the brightness of God’s glory and is the *exact* likeness of God’s own being” (Hebrews 1:3, emphasis added). As we read the evidence of Jesus’ life, we are repeatedly called to remind ourselves of one simple truth: God is like that! He is exactly like Jesus in character.

Satan has continually attempted to portray God as vengeful, arbitrary, punishing, and severe. How do these charges compare with the life of Jesus? The night before Jesus died He clearly stated that His mission was to reveal God to us: “This is eternal life: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you sent. On earth I have given you glory by finishing the work you gave me to do. . . . I made your name known to the people you gave me” (John 17:3-6 GW).

The Message paraphrase is helpful: “I glorified you on earth by completing down to the last detail what you assigned me to do. . . . I spelled out your character in detail to the men and women you gave me” (John 17:4, 6 MSG).

Compare and contrast these two questions: What do we believe about God? What did Jesus reveal about God? Any belief that is inconsistent with the life and character of Jesus must be carefully reexamined. Have we believed any of Satan’s lies? This week we will consider some of the falsehoods concerning God that are dispelled through the life and death of Jesus.

Heaven, looking down, and seeing the delusions into which men were led, knew that a divine Instructor must come to earth. Men in ignorance and moral darkness must have light, spiritual light; for the world knew not God, and he must be revealed to their understanding. Truth looked down from heaven, and saw not the reflection of her image; for dense clouds of moral darkness and gloom enveloped the world, and the Lord Jesus alone was able to roll back the clouds; for he was the light of the world. By his presence he could dissipate the gloomy shadow that Satan had cast between man and God. Darkness covered the earth, and gross darkness the people. Through the accumulated misrepresentations of the enemy, many were so deceived that they worshiped a false god, clothed with the attributes of the satanic character (E. G. White, "The Teacher of Truth the Only Safe Educator," *Review and Herald*, November 17, 1891).

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## DAY 2 Unselfish Love

None of us has a complete and perfect picture of God, but we must continually refocus on Jesus as the One who shatters every false image. American biblical scholar Walter Wink once said, "If Jesus had never lived, we would never have been able to invent him." We must continually fight the temptation to invent our own picture of God or to allow Satan's distortions about God to creep into our minds. Jesus stands alone as the complete and full manifestation of who God is.

Satan's first lie to Eve was that God was not a giving person—that God was selfish. "Did God really tell you not to eat fruit from any tree in the garden?" (Genesis 3:1). Has God really put such restrictions on you?

Jesus' first miracle was a denial of this accusation. While attending a wedding with His mother, the wedding party ran out of wine. Although Jesus told His mother "My time has not yet come" (John 2:4), something about the look and tone of His voice must have encouraged her because she "told the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' The Jews have rules about ritual washing, and for this purpose six stone water jars were there, each one large enough to hold between twenty and thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, 'Fill these jars with water.' They filled them to the brim" (John 2:5-7).

Why did Jesus involve Himself in this situation, and why did He make so much wine? Jesus changed water into somewhere between 120 and 180 *gallons* of wine! There was no stinginess on the part of Jesus; when He made wine He made the best wine and in abundant quantities. Where now is the charge that God is not a giving Person? This first miracle of Jesus began the process of unraveling Satan's distortions in our minds.

Jesus always displayed a generous attitude when He helped others. When He told His disciples to go fishing, they pulled in so many fish that the boat started sinking, and when He twice fed the multitudes there was an abundance left over.

We see this giving generosity of God in nature. Every year we plant five or six tomato plants and every year we ask ourselves, "Why did we plant so many?" In 2005, a farmer counted 72,500 acorns from one tree. It is estimated that during the life of an acorn tree somewhere between 6.5 to 13.5 million acorns are produced ([www.treeseedconsultant.co.uk](http://www.treeseedconsultant.co.uk))! How did God ever get the reputation

that He selfishly withholds any good thing from His children?

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## DAY 3 Forgiven Love

If our paradigm for human reality only includes what happens between God and humans, we neglect the third side of the triangle—the nonhuman entity—and we will perceive all evil as God either doing or allowing.

It's critical to our theology that we assign Satan the role of destroyer, not God. The poetic words about the "Shining one" in Isaiah 14 make clear that Satan is the one who has "destroyed your land and killed your people" (Isaiah 14:20). Revelation uses this passage to clarify the identity of the Destroyer: "They have a king ruling over them, who is the angel in charge of the abyss. His name in Hebrew is Abaddon; in Greek the name is Apollyon (meaning 'The Destroyer')" (Revelation 9:11).

Many of Jesus' miracles involve casting out demons that cruelly tormented their victims. Usually He spoke directly to the demons. "Jesus asked him, 'What is your name?' 'My name is 'Mob,' he answered—because many demons had gone into him" (Luke 8:30). On this occasion, when Jesus sent the demons out of the man, they begged to go into a nearby herd of pigs and then, "the whole herd rushed down the side of the cliff into the lake and was drowned" (Luke 8:33). Every action of the demonic during the life of Jesus was to injure and destroy; every action of Jesus was restore and to heal.

So is God arbitrary, severe, and unforgiving? What does the life of Jesus suggest about that charge?

When some people brought a paralyzed man to Jesus and lowered him through the roof, "Jesus saw how much faith they had [and] said to the paralyzed man, 'Courage, my son! Your sins are forgiven'" (Matthew 9:1-2). The man didn't come to ask Jesus for forgiveness, yet Jesus immediately forgave him and then healed him. What does this reveal about God's willingness to forgive?

As we observe Jesus lavishly pouring out forgiveness, we are to see the Father in the same light. Jesus' dying words were "Father, forgive them!" (Luke 23:34). These words were not needed to create willingness in the Father's heart to forgive. God the Father is just as forgiving as His Son, and we should hear in these words God's heart of love for all of humanity.

What about the charge that God is severe? "A man suffering from a dreaded skin disease came to Jesus, knelt down, and begged



him for help. ‘If you want to,’ he said, ‘you can make me clean.’ Jesus was filled with pity, and reached out and touched him. ‘I do want to,’ he answered. ‘Be clean!’” (Mark 1:40-41)!

This leper represents all of us, whether we are suffering spiritually or physically. The heart of God toward all of His children is seen in the face of Jesus. Satan’s accusations don’t have a leg to stand on when we internalize the simple truth that God is exactly as Jesus revealed Him to be. “Because of Jesus . . . I must adjust my instinctive notions about God. Perhaps that lay at the heart of his mission? Jesus reveals a God who comes in search of us, a God who makes room for our freedom even when it costs the Son’s life, a God who is vulnerable. Above all, Jesus reveals a God who is love” (Philip Yancey, *The God I Never Knew* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967], p. 267).

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## DAY 4 I Am

The Gospel of John intentionally focuses on Jesus' revelation of God's character. The Son came to make the Father known, humbly equaling himself with God:

“No one has ever seen God. The only Son, who is the same as God and is at the Father's side, he has made him known” (John 1:18); he had said that God was his own Father and in this way had made himself equal with God (John 5:18); “If you knew me, you would know my Father also” (John 8:19); “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30; see also John 14:7-10).

Jesus claimed to be none other than the “I Am” who spoke to Moses (John 8:24, 58). “When you lift up the Son of Man, you will know that ‘I Am Who I Am’; then you will know that I do nothing on my own authority, but I say only what the Father has instructed me to say” (John 8:28).

“Believing in Jesus” means believing that Christ and the Father are precisely the same in heart, mind, and character:

Jesus said in a loud voice, “Whoever believes in me believes not only in me but also in him who sent me. Whoever sees me sees also him who sent me. I have come into the world as light, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness. If people hear my message and do not obey it, I will not judge them. I came, not to judge the world, but to save it. Those who reject me and do not accept my message have one who will judge them. The words I have spoken will be their judge on the last day!” (John 12:44-48).

Our “judge” on “the last day” will be how we have responded to Jesus' revelation of the Father. Do we really believe that God is as Jesus revealed Him to be? In the upper room the night before Jesus died, He made it clear that the Father does not need to be pled with, for He has the same heart of love as the Son. “I have used figures of speech to tell you these things. But the time will come when I will not use figures of speech, but will speak to you plainly about the Father. When that time comes, you will make your requests to him in my own name, and I do not say that I will ask him on your

behalf" (John 16:25-26).

The JB Phillips translation presents it this way: "I need make no promise to plead to the Father for you." The Goodspeed translation highlights the intercessory language of this passage in this manner: "I do not promise to intercede with the Father for you."

So, why does Jesus *not* need to plead or intercede with the Father? According to Jesus it's because "the Father himself loves you" (John 16:25-30). Christ intercedes for us by *revealing God to us*. But Satan has twisted our understanding of intercession into a picture of an angry Father who needs Jesus to plead with Him to allow us into heaven. We can be sure that intercession has achieved its purpose and is no longer needed when we've come to equate Jesus with God.

Who is Jesus? He's God. And if God is the one in between, then there really is no one in between.

According to author George MacDonald, "I and the Father are One is the center truth of the universe." He's right, and Satan's greatest fear is that we internalize the significance of that powerful truth.

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## DAY 5 The Hour of Judgment

Throughout the Gospel of John, there is a focus on the concept of “the hour” of Jesus, which points us to the climax of His mission. When He turned water to wine, He told His mother that “my hour has not yet come” (John 2:4). During His ministry, many times people tried to arrest Him but were unable to do so because “his hour had not yet come” (John 7:30; 8:20).

As the message about the “Kingdom” Jesus had come to establish began to expand, and even Greek Jews were traveling great distances to see Him, there was a shift toward urgency. He stated plainly, “The hour *has come* for the Son of Man to be glorified” (John 12:20-23, emphasis provided).

As Jesus’ words continue, notice very carefully the purpose of the hour:

“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from *this hour*?’ No, it is for this reason that I have come to *this hour*. Father, bring glory to your name!” Then a voice spoke from heaven, “I have brought glory to it, and I will do so again.” The crowd standing there heard the voice, and some of them said it was thunder, while others said, “An angel spoke to him!” But Jesus said to them, “It was not for my sake that this voice spoke, but for yours. *Now* is the judgment of this world; *now* the ruler of this world will be driven out” (John 12:27-31, emphasis provided).

The “hour of Jesus” is the hour that the world is judged and Satan is driven out. This can also be translated as “Now is the critical moment of this world, now the ruler of this world will be *exposed* (12:31)” (Jo-Ann Brant, *John*, Commentaries on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2011], p. 193)

Jesus was not describing a physical change of location for the Adversary. Rather, Satan has been enthroned within the minds of all those who have believed his lies about God. The life of Jesus, which culminated in Jesus humbly laying down His life, not only reveals God’s character, it also exposes the hollow shell of all Satan’s lies.

The writer of the Gospel of John wants to make sure that we equate the cross with the defeat of the cosmic opponent: “Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that *his hour had come*

to depart from this world and go to the Father”; “After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, ‘Father, *the hour has come*; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you’” (John 13:1; 17:1, emphasis provided).

The moment of Jesus’ fully unveiled glory—which was the revelation of God’s character to the world (John 17:3-6)—was the moment of His death. This bright light revelation of God was the end of Satan’s influence over angels and people who have their eyes opened to see it: “Jesus himself became like them and shared their human nature. He did this so that through his death he might destroy the Devil” (Hebrews 2:14).

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## DAY 6 Nail in the Coffin

It appears that Satan and his angels did not really grasp what God was up to. They did not understand God's Kingdom of self-sacrificial love:

Yet I do proclaim a message of wisdom to those who are spiritually mature. But it is not the wisdom that belongs to this world or to the powers that rule this world—powers that are losing their power. The wisdom I proclaim is God's secret wisdom, which is hidden from human beings, but which he had already chosen for our glory even before the world was made. None of the rulers of this world knew this wisdom. If they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory (1 Corinthians 2:6-8).

"If they had known" that Jesus' death was their final nail in the coffin, "they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." For all of Satan's cunning and sophistry, he did not understand that Jesus' death would be his undoing. Satan and his angels were clearly propelling the final events of Gethsemane and at the cross. Jesus warned His disciples, "I'll not be talking with you much more like this because the chief of this godless world is about to attack" (John 14:30 MSG), and He warned Peter that "Satan has received permission to test all of you, to separate the good from the bad, as a farmer separates the wheat from the chaff" (Luke 22:31-32).

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was "enclosed by legions of satanic forces" (E. G. White, *Desire of Ages*, p. 693), and he was tempted by Satan to believe that by laying down His life for a sinful world "He would be identified with Satan's kingdom, and would nevermore be one with God" (White, *Desire of Ages*, p. 687). Doubts about the apparent failure of His mission were likely pressed on Jesus along with a thousand other Satanic whisperings: "Where were the people you healed, Jesus? Except for John, where are the other eleven disciples? Judas is dead and Peter betrayed you. And what about these ungrateful people standing around at the foot of the cross? Are they even worth the effort? You tried mercy, perhaps now is the time for a show of power? Why don't you come down off the cross and let them see who you really are . . . if you are the Son of God, that is. And, by the way, where is your Father? Seems that

he is displeased with you!"

The angels observed it all: The selfish creature against the selfless Creator; the "father of lies" against the innocent Son of God.

Jesus was victorious, and Satan was exposed! He refused every temptation and vindicated the character of God and the nature of God's Kingdom: "And on that cross Christ freed himself from the power of the spiritual rulers and authorities; he made a public spectacle of them by leading them as captives in his victory procession" (Colossians 2:15).

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## DAY 7 Gold Standard

### DON'T STOP NOW!

- Listen to the lecture by Brad Cole, “Jesus’ Miracles: Destroying the Works of the Devil” (1 John 3:8): <http://godscharacter.com/index.php/bible-study/1-2-3-john/1-john-3-8>.
- Listen to five lectures by Jean Sheldon on the chapter in *Desire of Ages*, “It is Finished”: <http://godscharacter.com/index.php/cosmic-conflict-lab/dr-jean-sheldon/freedom-vs-force>.
- Read the four-part blog series by Greg Boyd and Scott Boren entitled, “Portrait of God”: <http://whchurch.org/blog/tags/portrait-of-god>.
- Read this blog article by Brian Lowther, “Why did Jesus heal?”: <http://www.robertawinterinstitute.org/blog/2012/3/30/why-did-jesus-heal.html>.
- Read Beth Snodderly’s dissertation: “A Socio-Rhetorical Investigation of the Johannine Understanding of the ‘Works of the Devil’ in 1 John 3:8”: [http://www.academia.edu/1789850/Socio-rhetorical\\_Analysis\\_of\\_1\\_John\\_dissertation\\_](http://www.academia.edu/1789850/Socio-rhetorical_Analysis_of_1_John_dissertation_).

### TALK ABOUT IT

Read and discuss the following quotes about the life and death of Jesus as a means of destroying the Devil:

In Jesus’ life on earth, His death on the cross, and His resurrection, we see demonstrated the contrast between Satan’s way and God’s way. There, Satan’s accusations against God were proved false, and God is seen to be the trustworthy, loving heavenly Father that He really is. He is not a selfish God. He is Himself the personification of the law of self-sacrificial love. He is not a bloodthirsty God demanding a sacrifice; He is Himself the sacrifice. . . . On the cross you also see the character of Satan unmasked. Intelligent beings see what selfishness and sin do to



a being as brilliant as Lucifer. It blinds him to his own limitations. He thinks he is better than his Creator. In fact, it even leads him to seek to destroy his Creator. The universe watches as he takes the hands of Jesus that have been outstretched in blessings only and nails them to the cross (Paul Heubach, *Make It Plain: The Plan of Salvation Made Simple* [Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1980], p. 54 ).

Had God the Father come to our world and dwelt among us, humbling Himself, veiling His glory, that humanity might look upon Him, the history that we have of the life of Christ would not have been changed. In every act of Jesus, in every lesson of his instruction, we are to see and hear and recognize God. In sight, in hearing, in effect, it is the voice and movements of the Father (excerpt from a letter written by Ellen White to her son, Edson, November 18, 1895, printed in *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 21 , pp. 392-93).

Now ask yourself:

1. What commonly held beliefs about God are inconsistent with the life, teachings, and death of Jesus?
2. Are words ever used of the Father that make Him sound less sympathetic toward sinners than His Son, who was criticized for His association with the likes of tax collectors and prostitutes?

## AND FINALLY...

Jesus is the gold standard that should be used to illuminate every belief about God the Father. Jesus came to reveal God's character in contrast to the lies that Satan has perpetuated. In the next lesson, we'll consider some of the images of God that were shattered by Jesus.



# The Cosmic Conflict Over God's Character

— WEEK 8 —

Distortion of Justice

## DAY 1    Conduits

### LIVING WORDS

“The beast was allowed to make proud claims which were insulting to God. . . . It began to curse God, his name, the place where he lives, and all those who live in heaven” (Revelation 13:5-6).

### BOTTOM LINE

**In this lesson we will begin a survey of commonly held beliefs that have been twisted by Satan in order to create fear and distrust in God. We'll first consider the subject of God's justice—a subject that is often translated in our minds to mean “God's punishment.”**

### SETTING THE STAGE

A Google search is not a good way to do theology, but it can be useful for providing a snapshot of what's believed about God by both laypeople and theologians. If you search for terms such as “God's wrath,” “God's justice,” “hell,” and “atonement,” the description of an angry and offended God frequently emerges. How did we inherit these views of God? On this question, it's critical that we discern that an enemy has consistently been at work to distort our picture.

Through the generations, Satan's efforts have frequently focused on the church, since this is the place people come to learn about God. We've previously considered multiple verses in the Old Testament that describe God's own priests spreading a false image of God to the people. Consider the damage to God's reputation when, in God's name, people like William Tyndale were strangled and burned at the stake. Or, consider how Crusaders—“Christians” who sought to evangelize the world with the sword—misrepresented God to the followers of Islam.

Since the time of Constantine, when Christianity first adopted the sword instead of the cross as a method of evangelism, false views about God promoted by the church have effectively vaccinated the human race against the true message concerning God. A vaccine is a dead virus that leads the body to produce antibodies against a live virus, thus protecting the individual from infection. Christianity has,

by and large, spread a dead virus with the name “Christ” attached to it, thus inoculating countless millions against the compelling and attractive nature of God’s true Kingdom.

David Kinnaman’s book *unChristian* reveals extensive survey results of attitudes that the younger generation in this country have toward Christians. This book reveals that nonchurchgoers in the 16-29 age group perceive “Christians” to be “hypocritical” (85%); “insensitive to others” (70%); “judgmental” (87%); “too involved in politics” (75%); and finally “anti-homosexual” (91%). How devastating to the reputation of those who take the name of Christ!

Sadly, we must agree with Gandhi, who said, “You Christians are so unlike your Christ.” The good news, however, is that once we’ve opened our eyes to the truth about God and allow Him to work in us, we become conduits of His love and goodness to the world.

## NOTES

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## DAY 2 Justice

It's often said that "God is love. But don't forget, He's also just." The meaning behind this phrase is that God must appropriately punish sinners—not as a form of discipline for their own good but rather as a retributive punishment.

To understand the concept of God's justice, we must appreciate the Hebrew understanding of that word. To our surprise, when we turn to the Old Testament, we find that God's justice is something that we would actually like to receive. For example, notice whom God administers justice toward in this verse: "Defend the poor and fatherless; Do justice to the afflicted and needy" (Psalm 82:3). In this verse, the psalmist is obviously not suggesting that the afflicted and needy should be punished. Rather, his command is that we should help them. Justice, in this verse, refers to the actions of mercy and love. Isaiah exclaims, "Wash yourselves clean. Stop all this evil that I see you doing. Yes, stop doing evil and learn to do right. See that justice is done—help those who are oppressed, give orphans their rights, and defend widows" (Isaiah 1:16-17).

Once again, the justice involved here is to do good to the outcasts of society by correcting the injustice that has been done to them. In fact, we'll notice that, as a theme all the way through the Bible, God is not the one who uses violence when He administers justice. Rather, God's justice is to compassionately intervene against the violent actions done *by others*. Jeremiah states, "This is what the LORD says to the dynasty of David: 'Give justice each morning to the people you judge! Help those who have been robbed; rescue them from their oppressors'" (Jeremiah 21:12 NLT).

In example after example, God's justice is ultimately to do what is right and make things right by pouring out loving compassion to those who have been treated unfairly. Ezekiel tells us: "For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: 'Enough, you princes of Israel! Stop your violence and oppression and do what is just and right ["execute justice and righteousness" NKJV]. Quit robbing and cheating my people out of their land. Stop expelling them from their homes, says the Sovereign LORD'" (Ezekiel 45:9 NLT).

Once again, God's justice here is to make things right by stopping the violence, not by executing violence on others. The injustice is to rob, cheat, and mistreat people. "Justice" then is to begin treating people in the right way—the way God would treat people.

To “bring justice” in the Old Testament does not mean to bring punishment but to bring healing and reconciliation. Justice means to make things right by correcting injustice. Justice, then, is ultimately an expression of mercy. It’s mercy in action! (Isaiah 30:18; Zechariah 7:9; Proverbs 2:8-9; 8:20.)

We are somewhat familiar with this kind of “making right” justice. When you “justify” a word processing document, you’re not punishing your computer or the document. You are aligning or “making right” (or left) your document.

With this foundation laid, these familiar words in Micah now have added meaning:

What shall I bring to the LORD, the God of heaven, when I come to worship him? Shall I bring the best calves to burn as offerings to him? Will the LORD be pleased if I bring him thousands of sheep or endless streams of olive oil? Shall I offer him my first-born child to pay for my sins? No, the LORD has told us what is good. What he requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God (Micah 6:6-8).

Micah is not contrasting between love and justice here. To do what is just *is* to show constant love, and only when we live in humble fellowship with God are we even capable of administering God’s style of justice! The Hebrew concept of *justice* means to make things right by manifesting the love of God through acts of kindness and mercy and by revealing God’s constant love to others. To walk in the path of justice is to respond to the evil and injustice in this world by returning goodness in its place. This kind of justice is the foundation of God’s Kingdom.

## NOTES

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## DAY 3 Punishment

Many today equate God's justice with retributive punishment. So how does God punish? Does sin need to be punished? We tend to view God's desperate interventions in human history, such as the flood or Sodom and Gomorrah, and say, "There is the justice of God! God is punishing them." These dramatic interventions, however, were not for the sake of punishment. Let me give a few examples—but, to be clear, the question as to whether God punishes is parenthetical to the subject at hand and does not fit under the same umbrella of what the Bible defines as God's "justice."

First, let's briefly discuss the flood. Again, our question is, "Is this a punishment sent by God?" Let's just look very briefly at a few details from this story:

Noah had no faults and was the only good man of his time. He lived in fellowship with God, but everyone else was evil in God's sight, and violence had spread everywhere. God looked at the world and saw that it was evil, for the people were all living evil lives (Genesis 6:9-12);

The LORD said to Noah, "Go into the boat with your whole family; I have found that you are the only one in all the world who does what is right" (Genesis 7:1).

The Bible says that Noah was the only good man of his generation. Noah was the only man in the world with a true knowledge of God. Do you think that the Bible is accurate in this statement, or is this an exaggeration? One man?

The statement must be accurate, because how many people got on that boat? If God had known that He had 10,000 friends during this time, wouldn't He have had Noah build hundreds of boats? But God knew that the entire world was evil and that no one would respond. So what does God do? In mercy, He has Noah preach a message to plead with the people over a very long period of time. Anyone could have gotten on that boat. God had patiently called out to that generation, but no one responded.

Now, imagine what would have happened had God not allowed the flood? The last man with a real trusting relationship with God would have died, and the knowledge of God on the earth would

have been extinguished. Planet Earth would have lost contact with God completely, and Satan would have won the great controversy.

We wouldn't be here today if God had not allowed the flood. All of the evidence that we have about what kind of a person God is—primarily based on His life and death on earth—had not yet been given. God had to rescue the last man, the last family, in order to preserve contact with Planet Earth and to win the Cosmic Conflict. The flood is not an example of God punishing sin. In fact, sin does a sufficient job of punishing all on its own. God doesn't need to add to the pain. The flood was a rescue mission to save the last man standing with a true knowledge of God in his heart. We must view every other drastic intervention of God in this same light.

Of course, there is a discipline from God (sometimes referred to as a punishment) with which any parent can identify. When your thirteen-year-old is abusing the Internet, a loving parent may "punish" by taking away Internet privileges for a period of time. But this is not a retributive act for the purpose of inflicting pain. It's for the purpose of healing.

God's justice is not retributive. All of God's actions spring from love and for the purpose of healing and restoration: "I will discipline you, but with justice; I cannot let you go unpunished" (Jeremiah 30:11 NLT).

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## DAY 4 The Loving Parent

Sin carries its own punishment. God does not need to add additional pain.

We are not to regard God as waiting to punish the sinner for his sin. The sinner brings the punishment upon himself. His own actions start a train of circumstances that bring the sure result. Every act of transgression reacts upon the sinner, works in him a change of character, and makes it more easy for him to transgress again. By choosing to sin, men separate themselves from God, cut themselves off from the channel of blessing, and the sure result is ruin and death (E. G. White, *Letter 96*, 1896).

Listen to the very clear words in Jeremiah: “You have brought this on yourself by abandoning the LORD your God when he led you on his way. . . . Your own wickedness will correct you, and your unfaithful ways will punish you. You should know and see how evil and bitter it is for you if you abandon the LORD your God” (Jeremiah 2:17-19).

Let’s say that you see a physician for a cough and fever. After examining you and running some tests, including a chest x-ray, he diagnoses you with pneumonia and informs you that antibiotics are necessary to cure this condition. But suppose you get home and refuse to take the medication. Does the doctor need to sneak into your home at night to worsen your pneumonia (because he’s angry with you), or does the pneumonia do its own punishing?

We should acknowledge that there are places in the Bible that describe God as punishing. And these can sound retributive. For example:

But if you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands, and if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws and fail to carry out all my commands and so violate my covenant, then I will do this to you: I will bring upon you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and drain away your life. . . . I will send wild animals against you, and they will rob you of your children, destroy your cattle and make you so few in number that your roads will be deserted (Leviticus 26:14-16, 22);

Just as the LORD has found great pleasure in causing you to prosper and multiply, the LORD will find pleasure in destroying you. You will be torn from the land you are about to enter and occupy (Deuteronomy 28:63 NIV).

Why does God talk this way sometimes? A loving parent will shout and even threaten to get the attention of their child if they're about to step on a rattlesnake. Throughout the Old Testament, God was frequently on the brink of losing His children to idolatry or captivity and so, out of His great love, He stooped to using hard words to reach every hardened and rebellious ear.

"The people of Israel are as stubborn as mules. How can I feed them like lambs in a meadow?" (Hosea 4:16). God clearly does not like to talk this way, but He will speak loudly to reach stubborn mules if that is the only way.

The Bible unfolds reality to each one of us. In Old Testament times, God does it all. He threatens punishments and bestows rewards in order to reach the spiritually immature. As the story unfolds, climaxing at the cross, we finally see that sin pays the wage, not God. With the cross in mind, perhaps we can even look back at God's harsh words in the Old Testament and appreciate God's great love to meet people where they were and to speak a language they could understand.

## NOTES

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## DAY 5 Justice Rebooted

The Old Testament definition of God's justice as compassionate intervention does not suddenly change in the New Testament. Unfortunately, we often fail to rely on the Old Testament as a basis for understanding God's justice in the New. Instead, we apply our modern-day understanding of courtroom justice and interpret any New Testament reference to justice predominantly in legal terms: *quid pro quo* justice, retributive justice, legal justice, and justice that involves an imposed penalty or punishment that fits the crime.

The beauty of the Bible is that it's internally consistent on this subject; we can use both Testaments to define and explain God's justice. Despite their outward religiosity, Jesus' repeated rebuke to the Pharisees was that they were not merciful and kind to the outcasts of society. "How terrible for you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You give to God one tenth even of the seasoning herbs, such as mint and dill, but you neglect to obey the really important teachings of the Law, such as justice and mercy and honesty. These you should practice, without neglecting the others" (Matthew 23:23).

Here we see that the New Testament definition of justice is the exact same concept as in the Old: "You are dealing unjustly with others," we hear Christ say. "Why don't you practice mercy and compassion to those around you? That is what my Father is really after. He would much rather have you treat others with love than to spend so much time tithing your herbs and spices."

In the story of the woman caught in adultery, who was really "unjust"? Was it not the self-righteous religious leaders who entrapped her and tossed her at Jesus' feet? It was unjust people who hypocritically sat as judges over this poor woman whom—they suggested—was to be stoned to death. Jesus, on the other hand, administered God's *restorative* justice and mercy by defending and protecting the person who was being abused and mistreated.

Jesus' concept of justice calls us to love and defend the victims of our society. Even His call for repentance ("Go and sin no more!")

**"JESUS' CONCEPT OF JUSTICE  
CALLS US TO LOVE AND  
DEFEND THE VICTIMS OF  
OUR SOCIETY."**

was uttered with kindness and designed to motivate her to a way of living that was not self-destructive. This is the kind of justice that the Messiah came to bring, as described prophetically in the book of Isaiah and quoted here in Matthew 12: “Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory” (Matthew 12:18-20 ESV).

Jesus came to bring real justice by healing the sick, the blind, and the deaf. In the person of Jesus, God’s justice came to make things right by interacting—on a personal level—with sinners and tax collectors. God’s justice fed five thousand hungry people. God’s justice said to the common person who’d been oppressed by a group of tyrannical and arrogant religious leaders, “Blessed are the meek—for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5 NKJV).

Unfortunately, this type of justice was not at all what most people of the day were hoping for from their Messiah. They wanted a conquering hero who would punish their enemies. They despised His compassionate treatment of lepers and were angered by His acts of mercy, such as healing a poor man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. They despised the riff-raff of society with whom Jesus ate and associated. They refused to acknowledge a King who chose a group of fishermen as disciples. They despised the kind of justice that Jesus came to bring, and so they nailed Him to a cross.

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## DAY 6 Making Things Right

It's often said that we see God's justice at the cross. Some interpret this to mean that the punishment that we deserved was poured out by God on Jesus. But who punished Jesus? The Father? Who exhibited violence at the cross? The Father?

At that cross we see no violence, no punishment coming directly from the hand of God. Isaiah calls it "justice miscarried" (Isaiah 53:8 MSG). Instead, the cross displays *injustice*, as a mob of religious yet violent murderers tortured the Son of God to death. Using prophetic foresight, Isaiah admits that "*we thought his suffering was punishment from God*" (Isaiah 53:4, emphasis provided). No! At the cross, the Father did not lay a hand on His Son.

Using our conventional understanding of justice, Jesus would have been totally justified to call down fire from heaven on the guilty people who dragged Him to a sham trial and then cruelly mocked Him. Instead, what we see at the cross is the innocent Son of God saying: "Father, forgive them." This returning of love and kindness in the face of hatred is the radical restorative justice of God. At the cross, our desire for punishment—our violence, and our hatred—is replaced by God's forgiveness, God's nonviolence, and God's love. Our Heavenly Father's justice is restorative and healing, not retributive.

While retributive justice seeks to fit the punishment to the crime, attempting to control wrongdoing through punishment, restorative justice forgives the crime and seeks to redeem wrongdoing through a repairing of the relationship. . . . At the Cross we see God turning away the opportunity to exact retributive justice and the demand for retribution, and instead God would choose to forgive. At the Cross we come face to face with the shameful depravity of our own sin by coming face to face with the One who has the right and the power to punish but who instead loves and forgives. . . . In the face of human hatred and hardness of heart, God still managed to redeem (Sharon Baker, *Stricken by God?* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007], pp. 234-35).

Responding to violence and hatred with forgiveness and love does not often fit into our paradigm of justice. But, thankfully, our

God is much bigger and much better than we can possibly imagine Him to be! At the cross we see the union of love and justice, but not in the way it's usually understood. The cross was the outpouring of God's love as an act of restorative "making things right" justice, which is not punitive or retributive. "Love is not in conflict with justice, love is how justice comes about because the New Testament understanding of justice is ultimately not about punishment, but about making things right again" (Derek Flood, *Healing the Gospel* [Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012], p. 7).

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## DAY 7 Making Things Right

### DON'T STOP NOW!

Enjoy this lecture by Brad Cole: “God’s Style of Justice”:  
<http://godscharacter.com/index.php/good-news-tours/2008/420-gnt-2008-chat-03>.

Read two excellent books on the subject of God’s justice:

- *Stricken by God?* by Sharon Baker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).
- *Healing the Gospel* by Derek Flood (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012).

### TALK ABOUT IT

Consider and discuss the following quote about God’s justice in the Old Testament:

Jewish kings were commanded to practice *mishpat u'tzedakah*. The literal translation of this term is “justice and righteousness” or “justice and charity.” Classical as well as modern commentators agree that this command does not refer to “courtroom justice and charity” but to social justice. The major wrongdoing to which the prophets objected was not the perversion of the judicial process, but oppression and exploitation of the poor by the political elite and the wealthy classes. . . . One modern political scientist wrote, “the execution of righteousness and justice in the royal domain refers primarily to acts on behalf of the poor and less fortunate classes of the people.” This policy was implemented primarily by means of social legislation rather than by court judgments. The idea (or ideal) of social justice has a long history in Judaism (Frank Loewenberg, *From Charity to Social Justice* [Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2001], p. 159).

Consider and discuss this quote, which suggests how deeply ingrained the concept of equating biblical justice with punishment

has become in our minds:

Centuries of reading the Bible through the culturally dominant lens of punitive justice are hard to shake off. We read the word “justice” in our Bibles and simply assume that it is referring to punitive justice (Flood, *Healing the Gospel*, p. 9).

1. How do you think we moved from the biblical description of justice, where help is provided to the poor and outcasts (as described above), to a punishment that is executed on sinners?
2. How does a belief about God’s justice equated with retributive punishment affect His reputation?
3. In what ways does the belief that sin needs to be punished by God distract from the fact that sin carries an intrinsic “punishing” quality in and of itself?
4. How does a need for an externally applied punishment for sin suggest that the law of God is arbitrary and imposed?

## **AND FINALLY...**

God’s justice involves setting things right, not punishment. God’s justice involves compassionate intervention in the world against all injustice, with a special attention to those who are being abused. God’s justice is something in which we’re taking part as we make things right in the world.





# The Cosmic Conflict Over God's Character

— WEEK 9 —

**Hellfire: Satan's Ongoing Efforts  
to Malign God's Character**

## DAY 1 Invitation

### LIVING WORDS

“But the LORD says, ‘Now I will do something and be greatly praised. Your deeds are straw that will be set on fire by your very own breath. You will be burned to ashes like thorns in a fire.’ Everyone, both far and near, come look at what I have done. See my mighty power! . . . The sinners in Zion are terrified; trembling grips the godless: ‘Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?’ He who walks righteously and speaks what is right” (Isaiah 33:10-15 NIV).

### BOTTOM LINE

**The doctrinal belief that our Heavenly Father causes His rebellious children to burn in a literal burning fire is a belief that comes from the mouth of the Devil—calculated to create fear and distrust in God. When we take the subjects of “hell” and “fire” as a whole, the Bible paints a very different picture.**

### SETTING THE STAGE

Imagine that there’s a neighbor in your town whose reputation is impeccable. His acts of kindness, charity, and generosity are renowned. He has been known to give of himself for the welfare of others.

After hearing the stories about this man year after year, you’re surprised when a messenger from his house arrives at your doorstep to announce that he desires your friendship. You are invited for a party at his house—the most extravagant meal that you can possibly imagine, to be followed by an extended vacation on the beach with all expenses paid.

Finding all of this difficult to believe, you ask, “What happens if I choose not to come? What if I say no to his offer of friendship?” A pained look comes over the messenger’s face. After some coaxing he finally admits, “If you do that foolish thing, I will come and take you by force. My master’s sense of justice will force him to burn you in his oven until you have paid in full for your foolishness. But let’s not focus on that. Just come to the party and all will be well!”

Would you still want to attend? How would you feel at the party if you knew that those who refused the invitation were screaming in pain from the kitchen?

We're told that God is love personified, and we have the inspired record of God's life and death in human form. We're all invited to the party—an eternity with God in paradise. But the typical Christian doctrine about hell contains a postscript to the invitation: "If you reject my offer of love and forgiveness, I will punish you for all of eternity. Love and obey me, or else!"

This version of hell as a retributive punishment for sin is an invention of the Devil that cannot be reconciled with the God of love and the lavish forgiveness that Jesus revealed while hanging on the cross. Many times the Bible describes God's love and mercy as lasting "forever," his anger but "for a moment" (see Psalms 30:5; 103:9; 1 Chronicles 16:34; 2 Chronicles 20:21). If hell lasts forever, in comparison with our short earthly existence, doesn't reality dictate that God's mercy lasts for a moment while His anger lasts for eternity?

Finally, how can a God who would inflict punishment for eternity be reconciled with the many passages in Scripture that describe God not willingly bringing pain to any of His creatures—the God who sees the little sparrow fall? "Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to *any* human being" (Lamentations 3:32-33 NIV, emphasis provided).

In this lesson we will try to take in the biblical evidence about hell to understand what is really being described.

## NOTES

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## DAY 2 Gehenna

What did the hearers in Jesus' day understand about hell? What images came to their minds?

Jesus spoke in Aramaic, while the words of the New Testament were written in Greek. The Greek word used for hell is *Gehenna*, which comes from the Hebrew meaning "Valley of Hinnom." Rather than associating this with some place of future torture, the Jewish audience of Jesus' day would associate "hell" with a real place they were all familiar with: the Valley of Hinnom south of Jerusalem (Joshua 15:8; 18:16). References to this valley from the Old Testament paint a distinctive picture with terrible connotations. It is repeatedly described as a place of idolatry and child sacrifice to appease cruel foreign gods (Jeremiah 7:30-33; 19:4-7).

Wicked King Ahaz worshiped Baal and sacrificed his own sons in Hinnom Valley, "imitating the disgusting practice of the people whom the LORD had driven out of the land as the Israelites advanced" (2 Chronicles 28:3; 2 Kings 16). To undo this, "King Josiah also desecrated Topheth, the pagan place of worship in Hinnom Valley, so that no one could sacrifice his son or daughter as a burnt offering to the god Molech" (2 Kings 23:10).

Topheth was the place of worship in Hinnom Valley that came to mean "a place to be spit on" and was associated with fire and death: "Topheth—the place of burning—has long been ready for the Assyrian king; the fire pit is piled high with wood. The breath of the LORD, like fire from a volcano, will set it ablaze" (Isaiah 30:33 NLT).

In New Testament times, tradition is that Hinnom Valley (Gehenna) was the garbage dump outside Jerusalem where the fires were continuously burning: "If that is so, his hearers would have known Gehenna as an abhorrent place where maggots and fire raced to consume the garbage, refuse and offal [by-product] dumped there each day. . . . The first-century Jewish historian Josephus says that this valley was heaped with the dead bodies of Jews following the Roman siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 69-70" (Edward William Fudge and Robert A. Peterson, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical & Theological Dialogue* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000], p. 42).

In the Old Testament, the location where the 185,000 Assyrian forces were killed was most likely Hinnom Valley. "When the Judeans got up early in the morning, they saw all the corpses" (Isaiah 37:36). This helps to explain Jesus' quote from Isaiah of "the

worm that never dies” which refers to this specific event. This quote is “the most misunderstood, misused and misapplied passage in the Bible on [the subject of] hell” (ibid., p. 32). The context is the mass of corpses of 185,000 Assyrians:

In chapter 66 Isaiah anticipates the same scene on a massive scale at the end of time. In this prophetic picture, as in the historical event of Isaiah’s day, the righteous view “the dead bodies” of the wicked. They see corpses, not living people. They view destruction, not conscious misery. Discarded corpses are fit only for worms (maggots) and fire—both insatiable agents of disintegration and decomposition. To the Hebrew mind, both worms and fire signify disgrace and shame (Jeremiah 25:33, Amos 2:1). Worms and fire also indicate complete destruction, for the maggot in this picture does not die but continues to feed so long as there is anything to eat. . . . This passage of Scripture says nothing about conscious suffering and certainly nothing about suffering forever (ibid., p. 32).

Hinnom Valley or Gehenna is, quite literally, a “hell on earth” and should not be associated with a future place of endless torture and anguish. Rather, the meaning is to associate hell with a real place that had a history of cruel idolatry, false gods, death, and destruction.

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## DAY 3 Fire

An eternal hell is often constructed because of an understanding of “the soul” as a separate and distinct substance—apart from the body—that must go somewhere at death, heaven or hell. This view is not supported by the Old Testament. The KJV describes how, when God breathed into Adam’s nostrils, “man became a living soul (*nephesh*)” (Genesis 2:7 KJV), but this does not describe a separate entity within Adam. The meaning is merely that man began to live.

The fact that man is mortal is emphasized repeatedly in Scripture. In the book of Ezekiel the phrase “mortal man” is used ninety-two times! Paul says that God “alone is immortal” (1 Timothy 6:16) and that “what is mortal must be changed into what is immortal” (1 Corinthians 15:53). What would it say about God if He performed this miracle of changing mortals into immortals merely for the sake of eternal punishment?

Jesus told a number of parables about hell, where there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” We must be careful to interpret these as parables. They’re only meant to convey one or two central meanings rather than a long list of literal descriptions of a place. In one instance, the weeping and gnashing of teeth will occur in “the fiery furnace” (Matthew 13:42); in another it occurs not in fire but in “outer darkness” (Matthew 8:12). The point of that “fire” is that there’s anguish involved in this process. The key issue to identify is the source and nature of the suffering. Fortunately, the Old Testament has many references to fire, and we should use all of them to paint a picture of the reality they describe.

God is repeatedly described as “like” a fire. “The LORD your God is like a flaming fire” (Deuteronomy 4:24); “God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29 NIV). Yet, this is something quite different from the fire you can easily start by lighting a match. For example, when Moses spoke with God at the burning bush, He appeared as a fire yet the bush was not consumed. A short time later at Mount Sinai, the glory of God’s presence appeared “like devouring fire on the top of the mountain” (Exodus 24:17), but there was no forest fire. When Moses spoke “face to face” with God, his face was shining from the reflected “fire” of God (Exodus 34:34-35). It’s worth noting that Moses was called a friend of God and that he spoke with Him “face to face just as someone speaks with a friend” (Exodus 33:11)

and was unharmed. Throughout the Old Testament, “the dazzling light of the LORD’s presence” consumed the burnt offerings, yet the sheets and the tabernacle were never harmed (see Leviticus 9:23-24; 2 Chronicles 7:1-3).

Those who are rebellious against God experience this fire quite differently. For example, when the rebellious sons of Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu “disobeyed the LORD burning before Him the wrong kind of fire . . . fire blazed forth from the LORD’s presence and burned them up, and they died there before the LORD” (Leviticus 10:1-3 NLT). When men were called to carry out the bodies, what do you imagine was left? What exactly happens when a rebel experiences “fire from the LORD’s presence”? Surprisingly, the men “came forward and picked them up by their garments and carried them out of the camp, just as Moses had commanded” (Leviticus 10:4-5 NLT). All of these descriptions are pointing to something *other* than a literal, combustible fire since even their garments were not singed.

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## DAY 4 The Fire Within

Unlike Nadab and Abihu, Lucifer once experienced the immediate presence of God, “the stones of fire,” unharmed: “I ordained and anointed you as the mighty angelic guardian. You had access to the holy mountain of God and walked among the stones of fire” (Ezekiel 28:14 NLT).

The poetic description of Lucifer’s final annihilation reveals that the destructive nature of Satan’s final end comes from within—the inherent result of his sinful rebellion—not an external punishment sent from God: “You defiled your sanctuaries with your many sins and your dishonest trade. So I brought *fire from within you*, and it consumed you. I let it burn you to ashes on the ground in the sight of all who were watching” (Ezekiel 28:18 NLT, emphasis supplied).

This very significant passage in Isaiah 33 also points to the inherent destructive nature of sin:

But the LORD says, “Now I will do something and be greatly praised. Your deeds are straw that will be set on fire by your very own breath. You will be burned to ashes like thorns in a fire. Everyone, both far and near, come look at what I have done. See my mighty power!” . . . The sinners in Zion are terrified; trembling grips the godless: “Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?” He who walks righteously and speaks what is right (Isaiah 33:10-15 NIV).

So, in the Old Testament, who kindles the symbolic fire of hell? Origen of Alexandria maintained that “Scripture indicates that every sinner kindles for himself the flame of his own fire, and is not plunged into a fire which has been previously kindled by someone else or which existed before him” (G. W. Butterworth, *Origen on First Principles* [London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1936], v. 2.20.4).

God is the very personification of love and forgiveness. This attribute is symbolized as “light”: “God is light, and there is no darkness at all in him” (1 John 1:5). Jesus came to the world as the light of God and described the judgment as the rejection of the light in preference for darkness (see John 3:19-22). The awful description of suffering that’s described as “hell” is the process of coming face



to face with God—not an angry, vengeful God—and finding only hatred *in ourselves* and no love and appreciation for Him in our hearts.

When Isaiah saw God face to face, he also saw himself with a greater clarity than ever before. In that moment, he experienced guilt. But God immediately stepped in to reassure him. This is similar to the experience of Job who, when he finally saw God, repented. When God came to Daniel, his companions “were terrified and ran and hid” (Daniel 10:7). Even Daniel “had no strength left, and my face was so changed that no one could have recognized me.” He “fell to the ground unconscious and lay there face downward” until the angel reassured him, “Daniel, God loves you” (Daniel 10:8-11). When Paul was caught up to what he referred to as the “third heaven” in vision, he humbly exclaimed, “I will not boast about myself, except the things that show how weak I am” (2 Corinthians 12:5). And finally, when John saw God in Revelation he said that “I fell down at his feet like a dead man” (Revelation 1:17).

For those who have persistently despised God and the nature of His Kingdom of love and service, there is nothing in that moment that resonates as good or true, and the cherished hatred of God causes them to run into the outer darkness. However, for those who have come to love and trust God in the person of Jesus, “He will wipe away all tears from their eyes” (Revelation 21:4).

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## DAY 5 Eternal Flame

The third angel's message contains perhaps the most terrifying description of hell in the entire Bible. When we have come to understand the symbols and the meaning, however, there is a deep significance in this passage. How do you interpret these words?

A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name" (Revelation 14:9-11 NIV).

We will discuss this passage in more detail in Lesson 12. For now, let's consider the fire and torment that is described.

For those who persist in rebelliousness against God, they will experience torment and guilt "in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb" (v. 10). Previously we considered our own mortality and that there is no "soul" that lasts forever and ever apart from the body. So what does the description of their "torment rises forever and ever" refer to? The book of Revelation consists of extensive allusions to the Old Testament. This particular reference is found in Isaiah 34, which describes the destruction of Edom:

The rivers of Edom will turn into tar, and the soil will turn into sulfur. The whole country will burn like tar. It will burn day and night, and smoke will rise from it forever. The land will lie waste age after age, and no one will ever travel through it again. Owls and ravens will take over the land. The LORD will make it a barren waste again, as it was before the creation (Isaiah 34:9-11).

Is the country of Edom still burning? No. Did God destroy Edom by fire? No. In fact, even a person reading this passage during Isaiah's time would not have assumed that the land was burning forever and that smoke would ascend forever if owls and ravens



## DAY 6 Like God

We have described the anguish of rebels in the presence of God. It's worth saying a little more about those who have courage in the presence of God. John describes individuals who will stand in the presence of God this way: "Yes, my children, remain in union with him, so that when he appears we may be full of courage and need not hide in shame from him on the Day he comes. . . . We know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he really is" (1 John 2:28; 3:2).

When God returns, those who already live in union with Him will have courage, for they will know that the glorious One who stands before them is just like Jesus in character; kind, gentle, humble, and forgiving. These individuals are settled into the truth about the type of person God is. And, by daily dwelling in the presence of the God of love, it's a well-documented law that we become like the person we love, trust, and admire: "We shall be like him, because we shall see him as he really is!"

It is growth in knowledge of the character of Christ that sanctifies the soul. To discern and appreciate the wonderful work of the atonement, transforms him who contemplates the plan of salvation. By beholding Christ, he becomes changed into the same image, from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord. The beholding of Jesus becomes an ennobling, refining process to the actual Christian. He sees the Pattern, and grows into its likeness, and then how easily are dissensions, emulations, and strife adjusted. The perfection of Christ's character is the Christian's inspiration. When we see him as he is, desire awakes to be like him, and this elevates the whole man; for "every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure" (E. G. White, "The Righteousness of Christ," *Review and Herald*, August 26, 1890).

The central characteristic of God's friends at the end of time is that they will see God as He really is. That is, they are fully settled in the picture of God that Jesus came to bring. By beholding the true God, it's an unavoidable natural consequence that we are changed into His image: "All of us, then, reflect the glory of the Lord with uncovered faces; and that same glory, coming from the Lord, who is



## DAY 7 Heaven and Hell

### DON'T STOP NOW!

- For further thoughts on the question of punishment, read Dr. Timothy Jennings's three-part blog, "The question of punishment":

<http://comeandreason.com/index.php/media-center/blog-menu/63-the-question-of-punishment-part-i>.

- Greg Boyd sermon, "The Fire of God,":

<http://whchurch.org/sermons-media/sermon/the-fire-god>.

- Brad Cole lecture, "The Rich Man and Lazarus,":

<http://godscharacter.com/index.php/bible-study/luke/luke-15-16>.

- Brad Cole lecture, "The fire that never goes out,":

<http://godscharacter.com/index.php/bible-study/matthew/matthew-3>

### TALK ABOUT IT

Read and discuss the following quotes. Ask yourself:

1. How is this different from what I've been taught to believe?
2. In what ways does this change my image of and love for God?

- "Satan has ascribed to God all the evils to which the flesh is heir. He has represented him as a God who delights in the sufferings of his creatures, who is revengeful and implacable. It was Satan who originated the doctrine of eternal torment as a punishment for sin, because in this way he could lead men into infidelity and rebellion, distract souls, and dethrone the human reason" (E. G. White, "The Teacher of Truth the Only True Safeguard," *Review and Herald*, November 17, 1891).

- "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. . . . 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” (E. G. White, *Desire of Ages* [1898], pp. 763-64).

- “The light of the glory of God, which imparts life to the righteous, will slay the wicked” (White, *Desire of Ages*, p. 108).
- “God does not stand toward the sinner as an executioner of the sentence against transgression; but He leaves the rejectors of His mercy to themselves, to reap that which they have sown” (E. G. White, *The Great Controversy* [Thomaston, GA: Family Heritage Books, 1888], p. 56).
- “Could those whose hearts are filled with hatred of God, of truth and holiness, mingle with the heavenly throng and join their songs of praise? Could they endure the glory of God and the Lamb? No, no; years of probation were granted them, that they might form characters for heaven; but they have never trained the mind to love purity; they have never learned the language of heaven, and now it is too late. A life of rebellion against God has unfitted them for heaven. Its purity, holiness, and peace would be torture to them; the glory of God would be a consuming fire. They would long to flee from that holy place. They would welcome destruction, that they might be hidden from the face of Him who died to redeem them. The destiny of the wicked is fixed by their own choice. Their exclusion from heaven is voluntary with themselves, and just and merciful on the part of God” (White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 543).

## AND FINALLY...

God’s presence results in either heaven or hell depending on how we have responded to the revelation of His goodness and love. How important it is that we allow God to shape and mold our hardened hearts so we can become reflectors of His transforming, “fiery” love to those around us.



# The Cosmic Conflict Over God's Character

— WEEK 10 —

The Wrath of the Lamb



## DAY 1 Planned Redundancy

### LIVING WORDS

“My anger will flame up like fire and burn everything on earth. It will reach to the world below and consume the roots of the mountains. I will bring on them endless disasters and use all my arrows against them. . . . They fail to see why they were defeated; they cannot understand what happened. Why were a thousand defeated by one, and ten thousand by only two? The Lord, their God, had abandoned them; their mighty God had given them up” (Deuteronomy 32:22-23, 29-30).

### BOTTOM LINE

In the last lesson, we considered that “It was Satan who originated the doctrine of eternal torment as a punishment for sin, because in this way he could lead men into infidelity and rebellion, distract souls, and dethrone the human reason” (E. G. White, “The Teacher of Truth the Only Safe Educator,” *Review and Herald*, November 17, 1891).

**In the same way, Satan has grossly distorted the true meaning of “God’s wrath.”**

### SETTING THE STAGE

One of the most effective teaching methods for medical student education is to incorporate “planned redundancy” into each course. The idea is that the key points that the teacher wants to plant in long-term memory are repeatedly emphasized at multiple points throughout the curriculum. When the board examination arrives, no last-minute cramming is needed in order to remember these concepts.

God’s wrath is a subject of “planned redundancy” in the Bible. With such repetitive use, there’s no reason for us to misunderstand the meaning. The books of Moses, the Psalms, the writings of the Minor and Major Prophets in the Old Testament, the description of Jesus’ death, the writings of Paul, and the book of Revelation all have something to say about this subject. Revelation describes “the wrath of the Lamb” (6:16) and “the seven bowls of God’s wrath”

(16:1) and provides a “final examination” of sorts, requiring us to synthesize all of the information in the previous sixty-five books if we’re to make sense of it all.

The first temptation to avoid in our search is to assume that we know how to define God’s wrath without examining all of the scriptural evidence. As with the subject of God’s justice and hellfire, we should read everything that the Bible has to say on the subject as we build our model of the reality. If we don’t take this approach, we may too easily draw the same false conclusions of this recent article on God’s wrath:

Many world religions teach that when their gods are angered by the misbehavior (sin) of their followers/worshippers, the gods need to be appeased—usually through sacrifices. In this way the wrath/anger of . . . the god or gods is turned away from the worshipper, and the god or gods are no longer displeased. This is called propitiation. But in Christianity, the sinner is doomed to face the wrath of God against sin. God gave Christ, however, as a substitute for the sinner. Because Christ carried our sins on Himself at the cross, He faced the wrath of God for all sinners. He became the propitiation for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2; 4:10) and therefore met the demands of divine law and justice. His death satisfied and appeased a God who hates sin and is radically opposed to it. His holiness and justice demand that atonement be made to change the condemned condition of the sinner, who faces the wrath of God. . . . It, therefore, makes sense that those who do not accept Christ’s death as a propitiation for their sins will face God’s wrath for themselves (Rom. 1:18; Eph. 2:1)” (Published by the Adventist Theological Society online at: <http://www.perspectivedigest.org/article/91/archives/18-1/god-s-loving-wrath>).

This quote says that God needs to be appeased and suggests that He is just like all of the pagan gods (who also need to be appeased) with the exception that Jesus paid the price of His divine wrath. In this model, God’s wrath is something that He actively pours out on unrepentant sinners.

This week, we will consider the broad use of God’s wrath in the Bible and ask one all-important question: When God is described as pouring out His wrath in human history, what actually happened?

## DAY 2 Wrath v. Wrath

Since many draw their visceral image of God's wrath from the book of Revelation, let's begin there and work our way back.

The two main actors in Revelation are Jesus and Satan, symbolically represented by a Lamb and a dragon. Both exhibit a form of wrath. For example, the people call "to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb'" (Revelation 6:16 NRSV; see also 14:9-10). And there's also a description of the final outpouring of God's wrath as the command goes forth to seven angels, "Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God" (Revelation 16:1 NRSV).

But the dragon also has wrath. After being thrown from heaven to the earth (Revelation 12:9), the warning is given, "woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short" (Revelation 12:12 NRSV).

According to dictionary.com, wrath means, "Strong, stern or fierce anger; deeply resentful indignation; ire; vengeance or punishment as the consequence of anger." If the dictionary is as far as we're willing to go in our search to understand the essence of God's wrath, we will arrive at a very sad conclusion: God's character must have a side that is "stern" and "fierce," and He will approach those who reject Him with "deeply resentful indignation, ire, vengeance or punishment as the consequence of anger."

Even if the book of Revelation were our only resource, there are still hints that the Lamb's wrath does not fit the description given in the dictionary. First of all, are lambs known for their "wrathful" nature? This description might work for other ferocious beasts, but who has ever witnessed the wrath of a gentle lamb, much less of a "slaughtered Lamb" (Revelation 5:6, 9, 12; 13:8)? Is the designation "slaughtered Lamb" merely so that we can make the proper identification ("Oh, this symbol refers to Jesus") or is it also meant to reveal something more? There is a deep significance to the term "slaughtered Lamb" that's meant to describe the character of the Lamb and that "Its having been slaughtered is an essential part of its identity" (Loren L. Johns, *The Lamb in the Rhetorical Program of the Apocalypse of John*, SBL Seminar Papers 37 (1998), 2:780).

The meaning of the slaughtered Lamb is that God has "definitively manifested his rule in Jesus, who turned out not to be

the Lion who devoured our enemies but [rather] the Lamb who was slain" (Eugene Boring, *The Theology of Revelation* [Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989], p. 266).

The fact that the Lamb is slaughtered reveals God's methods and "the way God rules the world" (Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], p. 64). "Christ and the saints conquer by dying; Satan and the powers of evil by physical force" (Anthony Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb* [London, SPCK, 1957], p. 165).

**" THE MEANING OF THE SLAUGHTERED LAMB IS THAT GOD HAS 'DEFINITELY MANIFESTED HIS RULE IN JESUS, WHO TURNED OUT NOT TO BE THE LION WHO DEVoured OUR ENEMIES BUT [RATHER] THE LAMB WHO WAS SLAIN.' "**

God as a slaughtered Lamb means that God's "omnipotence is not to be understood as the power of unlimited coercion, but as the power of infinite persuasion, the invincible power of self-negating, self-sacrificial love" (C. B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John* [New York, NY: A. & C., 1966], p. 75). Thus, even within the pages of Revelation we are led to consider that the wrath of the Lamb that would allow it to

be violently slaughtered must be different from that of the dragon.

Revelation also goes to great lengths to describe the distinguishing features of the contending powers. The Lamb is characterized as "Faithful and True" (Revelation 19:11 NRSV) and as one who noncoercively says, "I am standing at the door, knocking" (Revelation 3:20 NRSV). The Lamb is the groom who comes to marry his bride (Revelation 21:2) and who wipes away all her tears (Revelation 7:17).

The dragon, on the other hand, is painted in the darkest terms possible. It is given the ominous titles "Death and Hades," "The great dragon," "that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil [*diabolos*] and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world" (Revelation 6:8; 12:9 NRSV).

Sigve Tonstad has noted that "the unpretentious word 'mudslinger' is a faithful translation of the Greek 'diabolos' and an apt description of the character" (Sigve Tonstad, *Saving God's Reputation* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark International, 2006], p. 72).

The dragon through his surrogate beast power does not knock; he forcibly breaks the door down. “It forced the earth and all who live on it to worship the first beast. . . . The beast forced all the people . . . to have a mark placed on their right hands or on their forehead” (Revelation 13:12, 16). Even for his loyal subjects, the beast wipes no tears but rather sends locusts that torture (Revelation 9:5).

If we had only the book of Revelation to understand the difference between God’s wrath and Satan’s wrath, we can still see that their wrath is of a very different nature.

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## DAY 3 Given Up

There are dozens of times in the Old Testament when God's wrath or anger is mentioned. It's pervasive and redundant and begins in the books of Moses:

*My anger will flame up like fire and burn everything on earth. It will reach to the world below and consume the roots of the mountains. I will bring on them endless disasters and use all my arrows against them. . . . They fail to see why they were defeated; they cannot understand what happened. Why were a thousand defeated by one, and ten thousand by only two? The Lord, their God, had abandoned them; their mighty God had given them up (Deuteronomy 32:22-23, 29-30, emphasis provided).*

When that happens, I will become *angry* with them; I will *abandon them*, and they will be destroyed. Many terrible disasters will come upon them, and then they will realize that these things are happening to them because I, their God, am no longer with them (Deuteronomy 31:17, emphasis provided).

The description is clear and concise: "I will become angry with them," and the result is that "I will abandon them" and "I ... am no longer with them." During the time of the judges of Israel, God's people continually abandoned Him and suffered the horrible consequences of slavery at the hands of other nations.

In the two hundred years from Jeroboam to the Assyrian captivity, God sent prophet after prophet to Israel. For the most part, their messages were rejected, but God's efforts to reach them seemed to intensify through the messages of Isaiah and Hosea. Finally, in order to make the startling point that God still loved His rebellious people, even in their unfaithfulness, God asked Hosea to marry a woman who would be unfaithful. He then asked Hosea to pursue her, even in her prostitution, "You must love her just as I still love the people of Israel" (Hosea 3:1).

It's remarkable to consider that God, through the prophet Hosea, was pleading with His prostitute wife, Israel, to come home again. God was trying to reach hardened rebels, and so He had no choice but to also speak loudly and in a language they could understand: "I will attack the people of Israel and Judah like a lion.

I myself will tear them to pieces and then leave them. When I drag them off, no one will be able to save them. I will *abandon* my people until they have suffered enough for their sins and come looking for me. Perhaps in their suffering they will try to find me” (Hosea 5:14-15, emphasis provided).

If we take this passage as a whole, we see that God is warning His people that they are about to be abandoned and to suffer unspeakable consequences.

In Israel’s sad story, we see the wrath of God in action and, at the same time, we are allowed to glimpse the face of God. Is God’s face “stern or fierce” as He pours out His wrath? Hosea paints the picture of a God with tears on His face, saying, “How can I give you up, Israel? How can I abandon you?” The Message concludes this passage with, “I can’t bear to even think such thoughts. My insides churn in protest” (Hosea 11:8 MSG).

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## DAY 4 Freedom

Less than two hundred years after the Assyrian captivity, the people of Judah progressively rebelled, just as Israel had done. Once again, God sent prophet after prophet to turn them back. Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, lived during this awful time leading up to the captivity, and he described the complete rebellion and distrust that Judah had for its God. Jeremiah tells us that the reason for Judah's pain and suffering was not a direct punishment from God but that they had abandoned Him and were reaping the consequences:

You have brought this on yourself by abandoning the LORD your God when he led you on his way. . . . Your own wickedness will correct you, and your unfaithful ways will punish you. You should know and see how evil and bitter it is for you if you abandon the LORD your God (Jeremiah 2:17-19 GW); Judah, you have brought this on yourself by the way you have lived and by the things you have done. Your sin has caused this suffering; it has stabbed you through the heart (Jeremiah 4:18).

God's methods of love and discipline had failed to keep His people from leaving His side. What was God to do? Leave them alone? Get lost? His choice is really one of two things. He can either become the puppet master and say, "You *were* free to rebel to a certain point, but now I'm taking control. You're no longer free. I'm going to pull all the strings of your life and you will obey." Or, God can grant freedom to His people—the freedom to completely leave His side ... possibly forever. "The LORD says, 'I have *abandoned* Israel; I have rejected my chosen nation. I have *given* the people I love into the power of their enemies'" (Jeremiah 12:7, emphasis provided). The essence of God's wrath is that He gives people the freedom to leave His side. He refuses to become a puppet master. But is this really the most loving thing for God to do?

Let's say that someone wants to defy the law of gravity and jump off a cliff. Should God say, "No, you're not free to experience that; I'll suspend the law of gravity for you and you'll have a soft landing"? Or what about an individual who slowly begins to drink more and more alcohol? On his way to becoming an alcoholic, should God intervene by forcibly restricting his freedom to drink? Or at the very least, should God take away his freedom to drive?



Perhaps if God allows him to drive, should He ensure that if the man does have an accident, no one will be hurt? Or, should God make sure that only “bad people” get hurt when he drives under the influence? Would we prefer a God who would micromanage and manipulate the world in such a detailed way?

While it might make *human* sense to do this, when and where would God stop intervening? How would the universe be able to see that we are actually free?

In this sinful world, freedom always has a price. This is the dilemma that God is faced with every day. If He really is a God of freedom, He must freely give His children the possibility of rejecting Him and make bad choices. To respect free will, God has no choice but to allow the natural consequences of leaving His side to occur—consequences that can be devastating to everyone around, including to those who remain loyal to God.

## NOTES

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## DAY 5 Letting Go

As the people of Judah rejected the final message from God, the book of Jeremiah contains some of the clearest description of God's wrath in the entire Old Testament:

"I will fight against you with all my might, *my anger, my wrath, and my fury*. I will kill everyone living in this city; people and animals alike will die of a terrible disease. . . . Anyone who stays in the city will be killed in war or by starvation or disease. . . . It will be *given over* to the king of Babylonia, and he will burn it to the ground. I, the LORD, have spoken" (Jeremiah 21:5-6, 9-10, emphasis provided).

Although God thunders that, in His wrath, He will personally "kill everyone living in this city," He then clarifies that "It will be given over" and that it is the king of Babylonia who will burn the city to the ground, not God.

The relationship between God's anger and His abandoning the people cannot be overlooked in Jeremiah: "The LORD has *abandoned* his people like a lion that leaves its cave. The horrors of war and the LORD's *fierce anger* have turned the country into a desert" (Jeremiah 25:38, emphasis provided).

In the book of Lamentations, Jeremiah writes:

The Lord in his anger has covered Zion with darkness. Its heavenly splendor he has turned into ruins. *On the day of his anger he abandoned* even his temple. . . . Why have you *abandoned* us so long? Will you ever remember us again? Bring us back to you, LORD! Bring us back! Restore our ancient glory. Or have you rejected us forever? *Is there no limit to your anger?* (Lamentations 2:1, 5:20-22, emphasis provided)

What we see, in example after example in the history of Israel, is God exhausting every resource to reach His people until finally He can do no more than to grant their wish to follow other gods and suffer the dire consequences. "Very well, then, I will give you freedom: the freedom to die by war, disease, and starvation" (Jeremiah 34:17).

Ezekiel lived at the same time as Jeremiah and had the same

message of warning to Jerusalem: "You will feel my anger when I turn it loose on you like a blazing fire. . . . And I will *hand you over* to brutal men, experts at destruction" (Ezekiel 21:31, emphasis provided).

The historical record shows that God did not lay a hand on His people in the destruction of Jerusalem. God respected the free-will choice of His rebellious children and allowed them to suffer the consequences. The Babylonians, not God, burned the city. "The king killed the young men of Judah even in the Temple. He had no mercy on anyone, young or old, man or woman, sick or healthy. God *handed them all over* to him" (2 Chronicles 36:17, emphasis provided).

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## DAY 6 The Clearest Picture

Just as the Old Testament prophets links God's wrath to the most devastating events of Israel's history, so Paul associates God's wrath with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. God's people had so hardened their hearts against Him that they could even look Him in the eyes and accuse Him of being on the devil's side (Matthew 12:24). God could do no more for them and so, "in his anger," he handed them over. Paul describes it: "In this way they have brought to completion all the sins they have always committed. And now God's anger has at last come down on them" (1 Thessalonians 2:16)! Once again though, we need to ask the question, "What *actually* happened?"

Fortunately, Paul opens the book of Romans by summarizing all of the Old Testament descriptions of God's wrath that we have just considered. "God's *anger* is revealed from heaven against all the sin and evil of the people whose evil ways prevent the truth from being known. *God punishes them*, because what can be known about God is plain to them, for God himself made it plain" (Romans 1:18-19, emphasis provided).

So that we don't miss the point, three times Paul repeats the familiar Old Testament echoes on this subject by stating that what God does is to "give those people over . . . given them over . . . given them over" (Romans 1:22-28).

Despite all of this, many still have a difficult time viewing sin as the destroyer and punisher and God as the protector and healer. But, despite centuries of Christian tradition, the life and death of Christ provides us with the clearest picture of God's wrath.

What really happened at the cross, and how was the Father involved in Jesus' death? The prophet Isaiah explains that it was sin that punished Jesus, not the Father:

He was hated and rejected; his life was filled with sorrow and terrible suffering. No one wanted to look at him. We despised him and said, "He is a nobody!" He suffered and endured great pain for us, but *we thought* his suffering was punishment from God. He was wounded and crushed *because of our sins*; by taking our punishment, he made us completely well (Isaiah 53:1-5 CEV, emphasis provided).

"We *thought* that his suffering was punishment from God." But Isaiah tells us that we were mistaken in our thinking and that sin—our sin!—is what "punished" Jesus. Sin, by its very nature, causes separation between us and God—not because God leaves, but because we leave.

The anguish and sorrow of Jesus that began in the Garden of Gethsemane culminated with the words, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Matthew 27:46 GW). These are the very same words we have associated again and again with the separation of God from His rebellious children. The Father did not kill his Son at the Cross. At the Cross we see the full result of separation that sin causes between us and our God.

We could correctly say that "the wrath of God fell upon Christ," if we understand that the biblical concept of God's wrath is not punishment by God, but rather to be forsaken, abandoned, and given up. Paul concisely describes Jesus' death in this way: "Because of our sins he was *given over* to die" (Romans 4:25, emphasis provided).

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## DAY 7 Making Things Right

### DON'T STOP NOW!

- A lecture on God's wrath and how this ties together with hellfire: <http://godscharacter.com/index.php/bible-study/mark/mark>
- Listen to Graham Maxwell's discussion on the book of Hosea: <http://pineknoll.org/audio-book-by-book>
- Greg Boyd on how to reconcile God's wrath in the Old Testament with Jesus: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b5CkCGR9YI4>

### TALK ABOUT IT

Having provided an overview of God's wrath in the Bible, how would you now define "the wrath of the Lamb" and the last plagues in Revelation that are "the final expression of God's anger" (Revelation 6:16)? Are we now able to understand what is being described?

Remembering what we've learned, read these quotes and discuss in what ways they are consistent with the description of God's wrath in Scripture:

Satan works through the elements also to garner his harvest of unprepared souls. He has studied the secrets of the laboratories of nature, and he uses all his power to control the elements as far as God allows. When he was suffered to afflict Job, how quickly flocks and herds, servants, houses, children, were swept away, one trouble succeeding another as in a moment. It is God that shields His creatures and hedges them in from the power of the destroyer. But the Christian world has shown contempt for the law of Jehovah; and the Lord will do just what He has declared that He would—He will withdraw His blessings from the earth and remove His protecting care from those who are rebelling against His law and teaching and forcing others to do the same. Satan has control of all whom God does not especially guard. He will favor and prosper some in

order to further his own designs, and he will bring trouble upon others and lead men to believe that it is God who is afflicting them (E. G. White, *Great Controversy* [Thomason, GA: Family Heritage Books, 1888] p. 589).

I was shown that the judgments of God would not come directly out from the Lord upon them, but in this way: They place themselves beyond His protection. He warns, corrects, reproves, and points out the only path of safety; then if those who have been the objects of His special care will follow their own course independent of the Spirit of God, after repeated warnings, if they choose their own way, then He does not commission His angels to prevent Satan's decided attacks upon them. It is Satan's power that is at work at sea and on land, bringing calamity and distress, and sweeping off multitudes to make sure of his prey. And storm and tempest both by sea and land will be, for Satan has come down in great wrath. He is at work. He knows his time is short and, if he is not restrained, we shall see more terrible manifestations of his power than we have ever dreamed of (E. G. White, *Last Day Events* [Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1992], p. 242)

## **AND FINALLY...**

Satan's attempt is to turn the definition of God's wrath on its head and to lead us to believe that this is something that occurs outside of His love—the punishing actions of an offended God. The teaching of the Bible on this subject is very clear, however. God's wrath is what happens when He has exhausted every resource to bring us home safely, and sadly, with tears, allows us to freely go our own way.



# The Cosmic Conflict Over God's Character

— WEEK 11 —

Revelation and the Cosmic Conflict  
Part 1



## DAY 1 The End of the Story

### LIVING WORDS

“The last book of the New Testament Scriptures is full of truth that we need to understand. Satan has blinded the minds of many so that they have been glad of any excuse for not making the Revelation their study” (E. G. White, “Our Great Treasure-House,” *The Signs of the Times*, July 4, 1906).

“The very name ‘Revelation’ contradicts the statement that it is a sealed book. ‘Revelation’ means that something of importance is revealed. . . . One thing will certainly be understood from the study of Revelation. . . . A wonderful connection is seen between the universe of heaven and this world” (E. G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* [Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1946], pp. 113-14).

### BOTTOM LINE

**The book of Revelation is the climax of the Cosmic Conflict story. It describes the issues in that ongoing battle and contrasts the character and government of God with the character and government of Satan.**

### SETTING THE STAGE

Certain themes seem to diminish while others increase as the Bible slowly unfolds reality. In the books of Moses, God promises to bless and reward those who are obedient, while He threatens punishments on those who disobey. As the story unfolds, however, we understand that God was meeting spiritually immature people with those words and that, in this life, there’s no promise of temporal blessing. Jesus went so far as to say that we must carry our cross and follow Him, perhaps even to extreme suffering and death.

While Satan is only directly mentioned three times in the Old Testament, the Cosmic Conflict theme exponentially increases throughout the Bible and climaxes with Revelation—a book that revolves entirely around the battle between good and evil.

Revelation is a difficult book to understand unless we see the

Cosmic Conflict as its heart and center. In 1522 Martin Luther said, “My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book. For me this is reason enough not to think highly of it: Christ is neither taught nor known in it” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, trans. C. M. Jacobs and E. T. Bachmann [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960], pg. 399). It’s true that later in his life he saw value in Revelation, but primarily as a tool to hammer the Catholic Church.

Without a Cosmic Conflict, God doesn’t look all that good in this book. In the *Apocalypse*, D. H. Lawrence called Revelation a “hideous” version of Christianity, a “repulsive work” (*Apocalypse*). Harold Bloom felt that “Resentment and not love is the teaching . . . a book without wisdom, goodness, kindness, or affection of any kind” (Harold Bloom, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* [1988]). C. H. Dodd said that “We are bound to judge that in its conception of the character of God and its attitude to man the book falls below the level, not only of the teaching of Jesus, but of the best parts of the Old Testament” (C. H. Dodd, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* [1988]).

This view originates primarily from seeing God as the only acting subject and failing to apply the meaning of the rest of Scripture to the book.

The other misconception about Revelation is that this is a book of mystery that no one could possibly understand. Jerome stated, “The Apocalypse of John has as many secrets as words” (Jerome, *Ep. LXXX.9*).

The name of the book, however, is “Revelation,” which would indicate that something of great importance is revealed. Once we’ve tapped into its organization and dominant themes, a wonderful yet complex picture unfolds about the universe in which we live.

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## DAY 2 Schools of Thought

There are several different schools of thought with regards to interpreting Revelation:

- **Preterism** is the view that John saw past events or events in his own time.
- **Futurism** states that John saw distant future events.
- **Dispensationalism** is an evangelical interpretation that understands God to have revealed himself in a series of “dispensations” or periods in history. (The *Left Behind* series is a prime example.)
- **Historicism** insists that John saw future events but that he is concerned with historical continuity as well.
- Perhaps there is another interpretation—a **Cosmic Conflict** interpretation that sees Revelation describing the whole story—past, present, and future. (Many thanks to Sigve Tonstad for his focus on this interpretation of Revelation.)

The structure of Revelation is relatively simple. In between its prologue and epilogue, there are seven churches (1:7–3:21), seven seals (4:1–8:1), seven trumpets (8:2–11:19), the summary of the Cosmic Conflict (12–14), and the seven bowls (15:1–22:5).

Many interpreters have seen the Cosmic Conflict section (chapters 12–14) as the heart and center of the book.

Rather than unfolding along a chronological timeline, Revelation should be thought of as a symphonic piece that revolves around the Cosmic Conflict theme. The seals, trumpets, and bowls center on this theme, providing variations and revealing fresh and new dimensions. For example, the seals, trumpets, and bowls all have the same ending point. The seventh seal ends with a scene at “the golden altar of incense” (Revelation 8:3) and with “rumblings and peals of thunder, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake” (Revelation 8:5); the seventh trumpet ends with a scene at “the Covenant Box” and with “flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail” (Revelation 11:19); the seventh plague ends with “A loud voice from the throne in the temple” and with “flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder, and a terrible

earthquake" (Revelation 16:17-18).

There is not only repetition; there's progression. As in any well-written symphony, the main theme is repeated, and there's also a crescendo, a climax, and an ending. In the seal sequence, the pale-colored horse and riders are given authority over one-fourth of the earth (6:8); in the trumpets one-third of everything is affected; in the bowls, "Every living creature in the sea died" (16:3). In the seals, the winds of strife are held back because people are not yet sealed (7:1-3); in the trumpets they are sealed (9:4) and the command is given to release the winds (9:14); in the bowls there is completion as "with them the wrath of God is ended" (15:1).

John's vision creates a single symbolic universe in which its readers may live for the time it takes to read (or hear) the book. . . . The power, the profusion and the consistency of the symbols have a literary-theological purpose. They create a symbolic world which readers can enter so fully that it affects them and changes their perception of the world. Most "readers" were originally, of course, hearers. Revelation was designed for oral enactment in Christian worship services. Its effect would therefore be somewhat comparable to a dramatic performance, in which the audience enters the world of the drama for its duration and can have the perception of the world outside the drama powerfully shifted by their experience of the world of the drama (Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993], p. 10).

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## DAY 3 Christ in Revelation

Revelation primarily enlightens our theology, not our chronology. This perspective applies to the numbers that are used in Revelation as well. These numbers and numerical patterns hold a theological significance, and perhaps we can stand back for just a moment and appreciate the inspired beauty of this composition:

- There are seven beatitudes scattered throughout the book of Revelation. Since seven is the number of completeness in the Bible, this specific number of blessings is included to indicate the blessing on the one who reads (or listens) and obeys the message.
- Seven times the word *prophecy* is mentioned; seven times Christ reassures us that “I am coming”; seven times the titles “The LORD God Almighty” and “The One who sits on the throne” and “Christ” are used.
- Twenty-eight times the word *Lamb* occurs; seven of these are coupled with the phrase “God and the Lamb.” Since four is always the number of the world (Rev 7:1; 14:7; 20:8), “The 7 x 4 occurrences of the ‘Lamb’ therefore indicate the worldwide scope of his complete victory” (Bauckham, *Theology of the Book of Revelation*, p. 109).
- Seven times “the witness of Jesus” and seven times “the witnesses of Jesus” indicate that the followers of Jesus in Revelation are to live out His self-sacrificial life that willingly gives for others—even to death.

In terms of numbers, perhaps most remarkable of all are the seven times in total that three phrases are used to describe God. All are considered to be equivalent: “the Alpha and the Omega,” “the beginning and the end,” and “the first and the last.” Notice how these are organized within the book of Revelation:

<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>B*</b>	<b>A*</b>
<b>1:8</b>	<b>1:17</b>	<b>21:6</b>	<b>22:13</b>
End of prologue	Beginning of vision	End of vision	Beginning of epilogue
God	Christ	God	Christ
Alpha and Omega		Alpha and Omega	Alpha and Omega
	First and last		First and last
		Beginning and end	Beginning and end

The key aspect of these three titles for God is that the only time all are mentioned together is at the end of the book when referring to Jesus Christ. The numbers used in this case inform our theology, not our chronology:

As a way of stating unambiguously that Jesus Christ belongs to the fullness of the eternal being of God, this surpasses anything in the New Testament. . . . This pattern underlines the identification of Christ with God which the use of the titles themselves expresses. . . . It shows that the identification of Christ with God implied by the titles is not the result of an adoptionist Christology, in which the mere man Jesus is exalted at his resurrection to divine status. Important as the resurrection is for Christ's participation in God's lordship, these titles he shares with God indicate that he shared the eternal being of God from before creation. . . . It does not designate him a second god, but includes him in the eternal being of the one God of Israel. . . . The importance of John's extraordinarily high Christology for the message of Revelation is that it makes it absolutely clear that what Christ does, God does. . . . Revelation's Christology must be incorporated in our account of its understanding of God. . . . God is related to the world not only as the transcendent holy One, but also as the slaughtered Lamb (Bauckham, *Theology of the Book of Revelation*, pp. 263, 266-67).

## DAY 4 The Open Door

The book of Revelation is organized around the “war in heaven” (12:7), with the seven seals, trumpets, and bowls highlighting different aspects of the Cosmic Conflict.

The seven churches in Revelation each receive a message from God and are invited to come closer—to gaze behind the curtain and to understand why this world is such a mess. Each is also invited to see what God has done, is doing, and will do about it.

First, let’s establish that God wants the members of His family to come closer. To the faithful church in Philadelphia God opens a door and invites them in:

This is the message from the one who is holy and true. He has the key that belonged to David, and when he opens a door, no one can close it, and when he closes it, no one can open it. I know what you do; I know that you have a little power; you have followed my teaching and have been faithful to me. I have opened a door in front of you, which no one can close (Revelation 3:7-8).

For these people, a door has been opened for them to come in and understand. In contrast to the church of Philadelphia stands the lukewarm church of Laodicea. They’ve closed the door in God’s face. They believe themselves to be spiritually rich and do not recognize that they are in complete poverty in their understanding of God. They literally make God want to vomit. Most translations say, “I will spit you out of my mouth” (Revelation 3:16), but this doesn’t really capture the meaning. The Greek word used here is *emeo* (which is usually translated as “to spit out”). But it’s worth noting that the word *emetic*, which refers to a class of medicines that are used to induce vomiting, is derived from this same Greek word. So The Message translation is perhaps more accurate on this verse: “You make me want to vomit!”

But, as always, God’s rebuke to these people comes from a heart of love: “I rebuke and punish all whom I love” (Revelation 3:19). He also wants these people to come closer, to see and to understand! “Buy also some ointment to put on your eyes, so that you may see” (Revelation 3:18).

Much more could be said about the church of Laodicea, but for

now, let's appreciate that although they have closed the door, God is still there . . . knocking: "Listen! I stand at the door and knock; if any hear my voice and open the door, I will come into their house and eat with them, and they will eat with me. To those who win the victory I will give the right to sit beside me" (Revelation 3:20-21).

Notice that God doesn't break the door down and threaten them into His kingdom. In other words, God's methods are not coercive. Later, we will see that Satan uses fear, threats, and intimidation to force people into his kingdom. Not so with God. He respects our free-will choice and quietly knocks.

To the faithful church of Philadelphia, the door is wide open and the invitation is to "Come in!" To the unfaithful church of Laodicea, God knocks and entices them with the offer of a special meal together. Once again, we hear God asking "Please come closer!" All of this climaxes with Revelation 4:1, where it is implied that all of the churches are located in the Holy Place and their members invited to walk through the door, to experience intimacy with God, and to really understand: "At this point I had another vision and saw an open door in heaven. And the voice that sounded like a trumpet, which I had heard speaking to me before, said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must happen after this'" (Revelation 4:1).

It's sometimes suggested that understanding is not all that important ("God's ways are above our ways"). But according to Jesus, being a friend of God means to understand what He's up to! "I'm no longer calling you servants because servants don't understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I've named you friends because I've let you in on everything I've heard from the Father" (John 15:15 MSG). The invitation to the churches to come and to understand is a testament to the open, transparent nature of God's Kingdom.

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## DAY 5 God Is Worthy

Try to take in this astonishing scene as we enter the throne room:

And instantly I was in the Spirit, and I saw a throne in heaven and someone sitting on it. The One sitting on the throne was as brilliant as gemstones—like jasper and carnelian. And the glow of an emerald circled His throne like a rainbow. Twenty-four thrones surrounded Him, and twenty-four elders sat on them. They were all clothed in white and had gold crowns on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning and the rumble of thunder. And in front of the throne were seven torches with burning flames. This is the sevenfold Spirit of God. In front of the throne was a shiny sea of glass, sparkling like crystal. In the center and around the throne were four living beings, each covered with eyes, front and back. The first of these living beings was like a lion; the second was like an ox; the third had a human face; and the fourth was like an eagle in flight. Each of these living beings had six wings, and their wings were covered all over with eyes, inside and out. Day after day and night after night they keep on saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty—the One who always was, who is, and who is still to come.” Whenever the living beings give glory and honor and thanks to the One sitting on the throne (the One who lives forever and ever), the twenty-four elders fall down and worship the One sitting on the throne (the One who lives forever and ever). And they lay their crowns before the throne and say, “You are worthy, O Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power. For You created all things, and they exist because You created what You pleased” (Revelation 4:2-11 NLT).

There are a number of important symbols involved in this passage, but let’s highlight one main point. In the midst of all the brilliant light, color, music, and enthusiastic praise, a question is asked that quite frankly seems ridiculous! “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” (Revelation 5:1-2). With God Himself holding the scroll, how could anyone even consider asking whether someone was worthy to open it? Yet, there was no one found who was worthy to open the scroll (Revelation 5:3).

Suddenly a solution presents itself, and another person now

stands in the midst of the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders: “‘Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the heir to David’s throne, has won the victory. He is worthy to open the scroll and its seven seals.’ Then I saw a Lamb that looked as if it had been slaughtered. . . . He stepped forward and took the scroll from the right hand of the One sitting on the throne” (Revelation 5:5-7 NLT).

What is the meaning of all this? This title would seem to represent Jesus both in the beginning and end of the book (see 1:8 and 22:12-13). The meaning of the brilliant “Lord God Almighty” handing the scroll to the slaughtered Lamb is not the Father handing something to His Son. Rather, what is being described is a dramatic transition in our understanding of who God is.

In the life and death of God in human form, we see something dramatically different from anything we could possibly have imagined about who God is. A God who would spend nine months in the womb? A God who would spend His first night in a feeding

**“ GOD IS WORTHY  
BECAUSE IN JESUS HE  
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trough? A God who grows up as a boy in a poor family and then works as a lowly carpenter? A God who hangs out with the riff-raff of society? A God who allows His own creatures to torture Him to death and with His dying breath He forgives them? If ever there was a time to say with a conviction that “God IS worthy,” it was after the life and death of Jesus Christ!

God is worthy because in Jesus He proved that His infinite power is equally matched by His love and humility. Jesus rose to the challenge and vindicated God’s character and worthiness. And here is what I find incredible: The result of Jesus’ life and death is a “new song” (Revelation 5:9) and a dramatic amplification of praise for God so that now “thousands and millions” now stand to praise God (see Revelation 5:9-13). What an amplification of praise this passage describes! First four, then twenty-four, and finally “thousands and millions” of angels and “every creature in heaven, on earth, in the world below, and in the sea—all living beings in the universe” giving their praise to God because of what Jesus revealed about God!

## DAY 6 The Two Riders

The opening of the seals reveals something awful and painful. If we read the trumpets and bowls of God's wrath in parallel with the seals, they also reveal something terrible! The Old Testament anchor for the seven seals is Ezekiel chapters one and two. Both Ezekiel and Revelation describe God in all his glory and surrounded by four living creatures that have the faces of a human, lion, bull, and eagle. There are blazing torches, colors of the rainbow, and flashes of lightning. And both visions describe a "middle" or "center" of the throne—"the dazzling light which shows the presence of the LORD" (Ezekiel 1:28). In this context it is significant that after receiving this vision, both Ezekiel and John are presented with a scroll that was "covered with writing on both sides" (Revelation 5:1). The book of Ezekiel goes on to clarify that there is pain inside this scroll: "I saw that there was writing on both sides—cries of grief were written there, and wails and groans" (Ezekiel 2:10).

God allowed Satan the freedom to establish his kingdom (for the purpose of exposing and defeating his kingdom) when the first humans literally handed Planet Earth's keys to Satan. Most of what we see around us every day is a reflection of Satan's kingdom, not God's.

The book of Revelation describes God as "holding back the winds" and then finally allowing Satan to rule. This is not an arbitrary decision on God's part; rather, many have chosen and will chose to believe "the father of lies" and "the inventor of the lie" about who God is (John 8:44). The results have been catastrophic.

At the beginning of the conflict between God and Satan, it was not entirely clear who was telling the truth. Revelation describes that some of the angels sided with Satan, as did Adam and Eve. Paul clarifies why: "Well, no wonder! Even Satan can disguise himself to look like an angel of light!" (2 Corinthians 11:14). In Revelation, the pretender "angel of light" needed to be exposed, and so he was given a crown and allowed to ride out and conquer. "I looked, and there was a white horse. Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown. He rode out as a conqueror to conquer" (Revelation 6:2).

The book of Ezekiel concludes by also describing another rider with a bow. Previously, we read in Isaiah that the "King of Babylon" (Satan) tried to occupy "the north where the gods assemble" (Isaiah 14:13). In Ezekiel the enemy with the bow is "Gog," who is allowed

to conquer from the north “in order to show the nations who I am” (See Ezekiel 38:14-16). God promises, however, to “knock his bow out of his left hand and his arrows out of his right hand” (Ezekiel 39:1-3).

“The rider on the white horse appears as a part of a group that acts as demonic agents of destruction” (Mathias Rissi, “The Rider on the White Horse,” *Interpretation 18* [1964], 414-16). “Allen Kereslager takes the white horse to signify deceptive and counterfeit activity on the part of its rider” (Sigve Tonstad, *Saving God’s Reputation* [New York, NY: T&T Clark International, 2006], p. 132n47).

Again and again, the book of Revelation contrasts God’s Kingdom and Satan’s kingdom, God’s character and Satan’s character. The rider in Revelation 6 goes out with a bow to conquer; in Revelation 19 the rider is named “Faithful and True.” Perhaps implied in this is that the rider in Revelation 6 is *not* faithful and true. While the rider in chapter 6 conquers with a bow, the rider in chapter 19 has a sword coming out of his mouth which represents “truth” as God’s primary weapon. In addition, he has a “robe ... covered with blood” (Revelation 19:13). This does not represent the blood of his enemies, but rather his own blood. The meaning is that Satan attempts to conquer the world by using the methods of coercive power and violence. God, however, won the war by becoming a human being and by laying down His own life for others. Quite a contrast!

For a description of the rest of the seals, listen to this lecture: <http://godscharacter.com/index.php/revelation/revelation-6/revelation-6-8>.

## NOTES

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## DAY 7 Silence in Heaven

Rather than ending this week with questions, quotes, and other resources, let's conclude with the important meaning of the "silence in heaven" (Revelation 8:1) that concludes the seven seals, since this helps to tie things together.

That God won the controversy by becoming the violently slaughtered Lamb proves that God's ultimate "power" is love and truth, not coercive force. What will shock us into silence will be to understand the unthinkable way in which God chose to save, heal, and restore us back to trust. The answer to the problem of rebellion and the challenge of God's worthiness was so unexpected, the response was stunned "silence in heaven" (8:1). The silence in heaven comes out of the suffering servant passage in Isaiah 52 and 53:

Just watch my servant blossom! Exalted, tall, head and shoulders above the crowd! But he didn't begin that way. At first everyone was appalled. He didn't even look human—a ruined face, disfigured past recognition. Nations all over the world will be in awe, taken aback, *kings shocked into silence when they see him*. For what was unheard of they'll see with their own eyes, what was unthinkable they'll have right before them (Isaiah 52:13-15 MSG, emphasis supplied).

What will shock us into silence will be to understand the unthinkable way in which God chose to save, heal, and restore us back to trust. I would encourage you to read Isaiah 53, which describes the life and sufferings of Jesus that shock the universe into silence.

God became a humble servant. He experienced on His own human body the worst that life has to offer. God's "power" that won the Cosmic Conflict was to become an embryo and to spend nine months inside a womb, live the life of a humble servant, and then allow His own creatures to torture Him to death. In Jesus, we see that love does not conquer by killing the opposition, but by laying down its life for others. In Jesus, we see that the road to victory for each of us involves taking the downward path of humility and service for others. In Jesus, we see that even God was willing to fully identify Himself with the worst of our suffering. And if we

are tempted to grumble against God in the face of our own hunger, persecution, torture, and death, we see that Jesus (God!) also experienced hunger, persecution, torture, and death. In Jesus, we see that the all-powerful God loves His suffering children so much that He is willing to experience the worst of their pain in order to win them back to His side.

When we personally experience pain, suffering, or the anger of others, we can find peace by beholding the overwhelming love of God revealed in the Person of Jesus Christ. Our identity is not defined by our experience, but by the God of Calvary who values us so much that He gave His life for us.

One day, the realization of God's character as revealed by Jesus will give an entirely new meaning to the expression "shock and awe." A stunned silence is the only response one can have in the face of God's love. This silence is the result of internalizing the throne-room scene, the violently slaughtered Lamb, and the meaning of the seven seals:

The scroll confronts the council with a seemingly insoluble predicament, a veritable crisis in the divine government, highlighted by the tears of the Seer (5:4) and by the silence of everyone else (5:3). The breaking of the seals signifies that this predicament has been fully worked out, and with the breaking of the seventh seal comes a sense of closure to the heavenly council. . . . Only when the Lamb in its slaughtered state is allowed to exert a commanding influence on the entire scene will the representative biblical imagery for the silence in heaven receive its due. . . . [The text in Isaiah] is about silence—the silence of shock and awe in the face of an entirely unexpected manifestation. Revelation presents an analogous situation when the heavenly council confronts a disclosure that defies expectations, but the relationship between these texts consists of more than an analogy. The startling nature of what is disclosed, causing kings to "shut their mouths because of him" according to Isaiah (52:15), belongs organically to the vision of the "lamb that is led to the slaughter" in the original Old Testament context (Isaiah 53:7). Moreover, both texts describe the fate of the Lamb, one anticipating it, the other one after the fact. . . . What leads to silence in the fourth Servant Song in Isaiah is precisely that the Servant has been violently abused—"so marred was his

appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals" (Isaiah 52:14), and this reality lies behind the description of "a lamb that is led to the slaughter" (Isaiah 53:7). In the heavenly council there is silence, too, and the silence comes about when the council is brought face to face with the slaughtered Lamb, presented and acknowledged as the victor and revealer in the cosmic conflict. . . . All the seals are broken, signifying that the issue confronting the heavenly council has been resolved by the Lamb. Silence in this context serves as the reflective corollary of praise, and in this sense the proposed idea of "rapturous amaze" is not far off the mark (Tonstad, *Saving God's Reputation*, pp. 139-41).

## NOTES

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# **The Cosmic Conflict Over God's Character**

— **WEEK 12** —

**Revelation and the Cosmic Conflict  
Part 2**



## DAY 1 Lamb or Dragon

### LIVING WORDS

“Whereas modern terminology calls martyrdom ‘passive resistance’, John’s military imagery makes it just as active as any physical warfare. While rejecting the apocalyptic militancy that called for literal holy war . . . John’s message is not, ‘Do not resist!’ It is, ‘Resist!—but by witness and martyrdom, not by violence.’ . . . In this light, we can see why Revelation portrays the future as though all faithful Christians will be martyred. The message of the book is that if Christians are faithful to their calling to bear witness to the truth against the claims of the beast, they will provoke a conflict with the beast so critical as to be a struggle to the death. . . . The beast will tolerate no dissent from his self-deification. Witness to the truth is inconsistent with any compromise with his lies . . . there can be no compromise between the truth of God and the idolatrous lie of the beast. . . . It is not a literal prediction that every faithful Christian will in fact be put to death. But it does require that every faithful Christian must be prepared to die” (Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993], pp. 92-93).

### BOTTOM LINE

**This week, we will further expand on the issues within the Cosmic Conflict as they relate to the trumpet and bowl sequences. We’ll also consider the meaning of the mark of the beast. God is not the only acting subject in the book of Revelation. As readers of this book, we must always seek to discern whether the actions describe the Lamb or the dragon.**

### SETTING THE STAGE

Most interpreters of Revelation interpret the devastation and destruction as God’s retributive punishment on rebellious sinners to satisfy His brand of justice. This view, however, seems to miss entirely the elephant in the room—the cosmic opponent. As we’ll discover, Satan is the central focus of the trumpet sequence. The book of Revelation is not only God’s story, it’s also the story of

the dragon.

The seven seals, trumpets, and bowls of Revelation revolve around chapters 12–14—the heart of the book which describes the “war in heaven” (12:7) and the dragon who “dragged a third of the stars out of the sky and threw them down to the earth” (12:4). His subsequent activities on earth are terrifying: “How terrible for the earth and the sea! For the Devil has come down to you with great wrath” (12:12). Satan “began to pursue the woman . . . from his mouth the dragon poured out a flood of water after the woman . . . the dragon was furious with the woman” (12:13-17), who represents the church, God’s loyal friends.

Satan’s method of operation primarily involves character (name) assassination: “The beast was allowed to make proud claims which were insulting to God. . . . It began to curse God, his name, the place where he lives, and all those who live in heaven” (Revelation 13:5-6).

The means of deception is by imitation of the Lamb and occurs through surrogate powers—the lamb-like beasts that “seemed to have been fatally wounded” or “violently slaughtered” (13:2-4). Although the beast’s fatal wound is an allusion to Christ (and therefore an imitation of true Christianity), the beast’s methods are not at all Christ-like, as evidenced by the use of force and coercion. “The beast forced all the people, small and great, rich and poor, slave and free, to have a mark” (13:16).

It isn’t until the very end of the book that Satan no longer has beasts or the false prophet to hide behind. At the end of Revelation, he stands alone as the source of all universal suffering.

The seal sequence begins with a throne-room scene where the question is raised about God’s worthiness to open a scroll. As the seals are opened, our eyes are also opened to the fact that we have been deceived by God’s enemy. We’re shocked into silence as we understand that God Himself won the victory by becoming the violently slaughtered Lamb. New dimensions to this theme are to be discovered in the trumpet and bowl sequences.

## DAY 2 Trumpets Sounding

The first two trumpets unfold with dark and destructive imagery (see Revelation 8:7-9). If our model of human reality encompasses only two entities—God and humanity—there’s no doubt that God must be the acting subject who unleashes these horrors upon humanity. If, however, we understand Revelation to represent not only God’s story but also that of the dragon, it becomes difficult to ignore the demonic truth in the third and fifth trumpets:

Then the third angel blew his trumpet. A large star, burning like a torch (a great blazing star) dropped from the sky and fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. (The name of the star is “Bitterness.”) A third of the water turned bitter, and many people died from drinking the water, because it had turned bitter (Revelation 8:10-11).

If you have a Bible with footnotes, invariably Isaiah 14:12 will be listed as the reference for Revelation 8:10. This chapter in Isaiah is a funeral poem for the king of Babylon that begins, “How you are fallen from heaven, Shining one, son of the Dawn!” (Isaiah 14:12). The parallels between Isaiah 14:12-20 and the book of Revelation are significant—in fact, the entire book of Revelation is one large expansion of this passage. Both Isaiah and Revelation describe a great star that falls from heaven to earth after a fierce struggle. Both describe the activities of Satan on earth until finally he is thrown in the pit or abyss. And, as we will see, both Isaiah and Revelation clearly label Satan as the Destroyer. The key point is that Revelation is trying to tell us that the falling star in the third trumpet is the same falling star in Isaiah 14. “Then the fourth angel blew his trumpet. A third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that their light lost a third of its brightness; there was no light during a third of the day and a third of the night also” (Revelation 8:12).

In the book of Daniel, there is a parallel passage that describes the little horn which “grew strong enough to attack the army of heaven, the stars themselves, and it threw some of them to the ground and trampled on them. . . . [The little horn] even defied the Prince of the heavenly army . . . and true religion was thrown to the ground. The horn was successful in everything it did” (Daniel

8:10-12). The little horn is not strong enough to physically assault the army of heaven. Rather “truth” or “true religion” was thrown to the ground, which is also what the fourth trumpet describes—a darkening or distortion of the truth. This action intensifies in the fifth trumpet:

Then the fifth angel blew his trumpet. I saw a star which had fallen down to the earth, and it was given the key to the abyss. The star opened the abyss, and smoke poured out of it, like the smoke from a large furnace; the sunlight and the air were darkened by the smoke from the abyss. Locusts came down out of the smoke upon the earth, and they were given the same kind of power that scorpions have (Revelation 9:1-3).

The activities of Satan in the fifth trumpet are to deceive and coerce the world into worshipping him as God. Revelation 13 describes how the whole earth worshipped the beast (13:8). The dark spread of this locust army is ominous; they have faces like humans, lions’ teeth, and “tails and stings like those of a scorpion, and it is with their tails that they have the power to hurt people” (see Revelation 9:7-10). In case there is any doubt about who leads this army: “They have a king ruling over them, who is the angel in charge of the abyss. His name in Hebrew is Abaddon; in Greek the name is Apollyon (meaning ‘The Destroyer’)” (Revelation 9:11).

It’s *not* God who is the punisher in the trumpet sequence. Satan is the one who is responsible for death and destruction, which he accomplishes through lies and deception, force and coercion. This passage in Revelation is reinforced by the use of Isaiah 14:20 in the third trumpet, where he is also identified and exposed as the Destroyer: “you have destroyed your land, you have killed your people.”

It’s interesting that in Isaiah, God “will cut them off, head and tail. The old and honorable men are the head—and the tail is the prophets whose teachings are lies” (Isaiah 9:15). What is described here may be the torture that comes from accepting lies and falsehoods that make God out to be anything other than Jesus Christ in character.

## DAY 3 Satan Masquerading

The sixth trumpet describes the four angels releasing the winds of protection. This is followed by a massive locust army that is similar to the locusts in Joel, which were “too many to count” (Joel 1:6). The locusts in Joel also come from the north (Joel 2:20), which is significant. The north is contested territory of worship in the Bible. Of Satan, “You thought you would sit like a king on the mountain in the north where the gods assemble” (Isaiah 14:13). But this is where God is to be enthroned as King! “Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King” (Psalm 48:2). Satan is attempting to coerce the world into worshiping him as God:

I was told the number of the mounted troops: it was two hundred million. And in my vision I saw the horses and their riders: they had breastplates red as fire, blue as sapphire, and yellow as sulfur. The horses’ heads were like lions’ heads, and from their mouths came out fire, smoke, and sulfur. A third of the human race was killed by those three plagues: the fire, the smoke, and the sulfur coming out of the horses’ mouths (Revelation 9:16-18).

Previously we decided that the numbers in Revelation are primarily important because of their theological significance, not their chronological significance. Revelation seeks mostly to highlight theology, not a timeline of future events. The trumpet sequence is another example of this where the fraction *one-third* is referred to a total of fourteen times. Sigve Tonstad describes this fraction of a third as a marker of the demonic:

When the influence of Revelation 12 is felt on prior passages in Revelation, the thrust of the recurring “third” suggests a sense that will not be a reference to quantity, in answer to the questions probing for “what” or “where” or “how much.” It must also be seen as a qualitative reference, an answer to the question, “who?” With an eye on the beginning, the “thirds” under the trumpets serve as a signifier of agency and therefore as a telltale sign of demonic activity. The revelator perceives in these “thirds” the fingerprint of Satan on all the instances

of disaster and suffering that he catalogues, and he purposes to feature them by invoking the original satanic trademark, whose tail swept down “a third of the stars of heaven” (12:4). . . . The critical and distinctive point in this perception of the narrative is that before Revelation tells of the end of Satan, the reader is informed of the character of his activity, telling the story again and again from new and progressively revealing angles. In the trumpet sequence it is his activity that is depicted, in contrast to views that see the calamities accompanying the trumpets primarily as God’s judgments on human beings who are disobedient (Tonstad, *Saving God’s Reputation*, p. 112).

Finally, if we see the seven seals, trumpets, and bowls in Revelation as overlapping rather than occurring on a chronological timeline, the trumpet sequence informs us about the acting subject in the other sequences as well. It helps to clarify that the rider on the white horse within the seal sequence is Satan masquerading as an angel of light, and that Satan is the acting subject in the plagues as well when God removes His protection.

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## DAY 4 Trumpets and Bowls

The previous sixty-five books of the Bible—as well as the first fifteen chapters of Revelation—prepare us to understand these terrifying words: “Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, ‘Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God’” (Revelation 16:1).

In the final events of human history, the issues will become clear, and people will choose whether they prefer to follow the Lamb or the dragon. This choice is signified by either receiving the seal of God or the mark of the beast. When people have decided, God can do no more for those who’ve chosen to leave His side. At that time, all hell literally breaks lose. This is what the last plagues describe.

Analogous to a symphony which features a main theme that is repeated several times and each time provides a different musical nuance or effect, so the bowl, trumpet, and seal sequences highlight different aspects of the same Cosmic Conflict theme. The importance of this cannot be overstated, since it further reinforces the fact that demonic action is at work as the winds of protection are released. Notice the comparisons:

### **First Trumpet (T) and Bowl (B):**

**T** – Hail, fire, and blood fall on the earth.

**B** – The bowl is poured on the earth.

### **Second Trumpet and Bowl:**

**T** – One-third of the sea becomes blood; one-third of the sea creatures die.

**B** – The sea turns to blood. Every living thing in it dies.

### **Third Trumpet and Bowl:**

**T** – A blazing star falls on one-third of rivers and fountains.

**B** – The bowl is poured on rivers and fountains.

### **Fourth Trumpet and Bowl:**

**T** – One-third of sun, moon, and stars are struck. There’s darkness.

**B** – The bowl is poured on the sun, resulting in suffering.

### **Fifth Trumpet and Bowl:**

**T** – Shaft of the bottomless pit is opened, the sun and air are darkened with smoke, and locusts torture people who are not protected by God’s seal.

**B** – The bowl is poured out on the throne of the beast, plunging it into darkness. People “gnawed their tongues in agony.”

### **Sixth Trumpet and Bowl:**

**T** – The four angels bound at the great river Euphrates are released. Two million cavalry kill one-third of humanity.

**B** – The bowl is poured out on the great river Euphrates. Kings assemble for war. Armageddon takes place.

### **Seventh Trumpet and Bowl:**

**T** – The seventh trumpet ends with loud voices in heaven that announce the coming of the Kingdom of God and Christ. There’s a scene at “the Covenant Box” with “flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail” (Revelation 11:19).

**B** – The seventh plague has the same ending, with “A loud voice from the throne in the temple” and with “flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder, and a terrible earthquake” (Revelation 16:17-18).

Revelation tells the story with such vivid and terrifying words because God does not want any of us to fall under the rule of the Destroyer. He speaks loudly and with words of fierce warning, yet it is the unrestrained demonic activity that inflicts the punishment. This is especially seen in the sixth trumpet:

And I saw three foul spirits like frogs coming from the mouth of the dragon, from the mouth of the beast, and from the mouth of the false prophet. These are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty (Revelation 16:13-14 NRSV).

When Jesus arrived on this earth two thousand years ago, virtually no one recognized Him despite their avid reading of the Old Testament. How important it is that we are following the



Lamb and are not confused by the lamb-like imitation. The bowls of God's wrath are fully consistent with the description of God's wrath throughout the entire Bible. God allows people to follow their own rebellious choice as they reject His healing (see lesson 10). God sends messengers, He warns and reprovves, but when we're not willing to listen, He respects our freedom to leave. As that occurs, Satan steps in to destroy.

## NOTES

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## DAY 5 The Seal and the Mark

Revelation not only contrasts between the Lamb and dragon, it also contrasts between their respective followers. Those who follow the Lamb receive the seal of God; the followers of the dragon receive the mark of the beast. These marks are the polar opposite of each other, and the final events of earth's history do not take place until this sealing occurs: "The angel said, 'Do not harm the earth, the sea, or the trees, until we mark the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads'" (Revelation 7:3).

What is the seal of God? This sealing is a work of the Holy Spirit. "And you also became God's people when you heard the true message, the Good News that brought you salvation. You believed in Christ, and God put his stamp of ownership [seal] on you by giving you the Holy Spirit he had promised" (Ephesians 1:13).

The Message paraphrase translates this verse as "signed, sealed and delivered by the Holy Spirit." There are many other verses that associate this sealing with a work of the Holy Spirit (see also Ephesians 4:30; 2 Corinthians 1:21-22). The importance of linking the Holy Spirit with this sealing is that the function of the Holy Spirit is repeated throughout the Bible—He brings us the truth about God through the person of Jesus Christ:

- "The Helper will come—the Spirit, who reveals the truth about God" (John 15:26).
- "When the Spirit comes, who reveals the truth about God, he will lead you into all the truth" (John 16:13).
- "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, who will stay with you forever. He is the Spirit, who reveals the truth about God. The world cannot receive him, because it cannot see him or know him. But you know him, because he remains with you and is in you" (John 14:16-17).
- "The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and make you remember all that I have told you" (John 14:26).
- See also John 4:23-24 and Ephesians 1:16-17.

To be “filled with the Spirit” is to be filled with a true understanding of God’s character as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. “It is not any seal or mark that can be seen, but a settling into the truth, both intellectually and spiritually, so they cannot be moved” (E. G. White, Manuscript 173, 1902, p. 170).

Since they unavoidably become like the God we love, worship, and admire (2 Corinthians 3:18), these individuals become Christ-like not by trying to be good, but by “following the Lamb wherever he goes” (Revelation 14:4). The end result is that “They will see his face, and his name will be written on their foreheads” (Revelation 22:4).

Since *name* in the Bible refers to character, to be sealed is to be settled into the truth about God and to become transformed into His image. These individuals are self-sacrificial just like Christ, “willing to give up their lives and die” (Revelation 12:11).

The mark of the beast is the polar opposite. They are so settled into the lies about God that they cannot be moved. Elsewhere in the Bible, this is equivalent to the sin against the Holy Spirit. When Jesus healed “a man who was blind and could not talk because he had a demon” (Matthew 12:22), the people accused him of doing this action through the power of the Satan. In this context, Jesus said, “people can be forgiven any sin and any evil thing they say; but whoever says evil things against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who says something against the Son of Man can be forgiven; but whoever says something against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven—now or ever” (Read the entire story in Matthew 12:22-32).

The mark of the beast is not arbitrarily placed on individuals but is rather a diagnosis of the human heart, much like a physician would look at an MRI and conclude, “You have terminal cancer.” When an individual looks at Jesus and instead sees Satan (or vice versa), that is the mark of the beast. Conversely, when an individual looks at Satan and thinks he or she is looking at Jesus, that is also the mark of the beast.

**“ THE MARK OF  
THE BEAST IS NOT  
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HUMAN HEART... ”**

## DAY 6 The Good News

In the context of Revelation 13 where the dragon works through surrogate lamb-like beasts to assassinate God's character, God's people, who "have his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads" (14:1), are given a final message to the world.

Then I saw another angel flying high in the air, with an eternal [everlasting] message of Good News to announce to the peoples of the earth, to every race, tribe, language, and nation. He said in a loud voice, "Honor God and praise his greatness! For the time has come for him to judge all people. Worship him who made heaven, earth, sea, and the springs of water!" (Revelation 14:6-7).

The final message to the world is the "eternal Good News." What is the Good News? Although it's often understood primarily in terms of personal salvation (which is indeed news of the highest caliber!), the ultimate Good News is that God is exactly as Jesus revealed Him to be: "This Good News is about his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 1:1-4). The Good News is that the character of the One on the throne is revealed in the violently slaughtered Lamb.

According to Paul, it's "the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel" (Romans 1:16 NET, NRSV, NKJV, ESV, TNIV). Many translations are listed here because the less precise way of translating this verse is "the gospel of God is the power of salvation" (GNT). N. T. Wright explains the controversy and how confusion on this verse came from the Latin translation:

Let me start with a bold double claim. Unless there had grown up in the Western church a long tradition of (a) reading "God's righteousness" as *iustitia Dei*, then (b) trying to interpret that phrase with the various meanings of *iustitia* available at the time, and (c) interpreting that in turn within the categories of theological investigation of the time . . . unless all this had happened, nobody would ever have supposed that the "righteousness" in question in Romans 1:17 was anything other than God's own "righteousness," unveiled, as in a great apocalypse, before the watching world (N. T. Wright, *Justification*

[Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009], p. 178).

What does it mean that the Good News is about God's own righteousness? Could we use other words such as trustworthiness, faithfulness, and the character of God as revealed by Jesus?

Paul explains that this Good News about God is what Satan desperately wants to blind us from:

For if the gospel we preach is hidden, it is hidden only from those who are being lost. They do not believe, because their minds have been kept in the dark by the evil god of this world. He keeps them from seeing the light shining on them, the light that comes from the Good News about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God. For it is not ourselves that we preach; we preach Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. The God who said, "Out of darkness the light shall shine!" is the same God who made his light shine in our hearts, to bring us the knowledge of God's glory shining in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:3-6).

The Good News is about the glory of Christ, which does not describe a physical brightness but rather a character revelation. When Jesus spoke to His Father shortly before His arrest in the garden, He told Him, "I have shown your glory on earth; I have finished the work you gave me to do" (John 17:4). He went on to clarify by saying, "I spelled out your character in detail to the men and women you gave me" (John 17:6 MSG). In addition, when Moses begged God, "Please show me your glory" (Exodus 33:18), it wasn't a physical brightness that was revealed to him, but a revelation of God's character (see Exodus 34:5-7).

The book of Revelation tells the story of the Lamb and the dragon. The message of those who follow the Lamb is the Good News that God is not the way the dragon has made Him out to be. Instead, He's exactly like the violently slaughtered Lamb in character—supremely gracious, forgiving, gentle, and humble (thanks to Paul Heubach for this wording). Jesus revealed that God has a heart full of love for all human beings, including societal outcasts. Jesus revealed that God is the very personification of love. This is a message of Good News! It's about God, not about us.

## DAY 7 Do You See Him?

### DON'T STOP NOW!

Listen to this talk on the meaning of the Good News from the book of Isaiah: <http://godscharacter.com/index.php/bible-study/isaiah/isaiah-40>.

### TALK ABOUT IT

- In this lesson we said that Satan's effort is to distort the Good News about God. In that light, discuss the meaning of this passage. Who is Paul referring to when he mentions "an angel from heaven"?

I am surprised at you! In no time at all you are deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ, and are accepting another gospel. Actually, there is no "other gospel," but I say this because there are some people who are upsetting you and trying to change the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel that is different from the one we preached to you, may he be condemned to hell! (Galatians 1:6-8).

- Contrast the Good News about God with the "bad news" about God that Satan has presented. Graham Maxwell lists several distortions of the Good News in this passage.

The good news is that God is not the kind of person Satan has made Him out to be. . . . Since the great controversy began, it has been Satan's studied purpose to persuade angels and men that God is not worthy of their faith and love. He has pictured the Creator as a harsh, demanding tyrant who lays arbitrary requirements upon His people just to show His authority and test their willingness to obey (Graham Maxwell, Pineknoll.org)

- In light of this passage, make a list with two columns. Under the first column list characteristics of God that fit under the title "Good News." Under the second column list false characteristics of God under the title "Bad News."

- This is perhaps the most beautiful description of the Good News message that is to go throughout the world. Carefully reflect on and discuss the words:

It is the darkness of misapprehension of God that is enshrouding the world. Men are losing their knowledge of His character. It has been misunderstood and misinterpreted. At this time a message from God is to be proclaimed, a message illuminating in its influence and saving in its power. His character is to be made known. Into the darkness of the world is to be shed the light of His glory, the light of His goodness, mercy and truth. . . . The last rays of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is the revelation of His character of love" (E. G. White, *Christ Object Lessons* [Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1941], p. 415-16).

## AND FINALLY...

The Cosmic Conflict view of reality sharpens the understanding of every belief. By and large, human history is a record of incorporating Satanic images and distortions into the character of God. The world is ripe to receive this message about God's character of love. The basic message is simple and can be expressed in many different ways:

- Look at Jesus dying on Calvary, forgiving even His enemies with His dying breath. Do you see Him? That's our God!
- Look at Jesus associating with sinners, fishermen, outcasts, tax collectors, and prostitutes. Do you see Him? That's the Almighty God!
- Look at Jesus as He tenderly feeds the poor, heals the lepers, values women, holds the children on His lap, and cries over those He couldn't gather to Himself like a mother hen gathers her chicks. Do you see Him? Do you *really* see Him?

**Now go and share that Good News throughout the world!**



# The Cosmic Conflict Over God's Character

— WEEK 13 —

Revelation and the Cosmic Conflict  
Part 3



## DAY 1 Torment and Fire

### LIVING WORDS

“A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: ‘If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name’” (Revelation 14:9-11 NIV).

### BOTTOM LINE

Last week, we concluded with a description of the Good News message that must go throughout the entire world. That message has a powerful effect, leading some to follow the Lamb while others turn away. The second and third angels’ messages describe those who reject the Good News. **What does it mean to be “tormented with burning sulfur”? Is this what God does to His enemies?**

### SETTING THE STAGE

The third angel’s message appears inconsistent with God’s command to love our enemies. How could He even suggest that His final action toward His enemies, as described in Revelation 14, is to burn them?

The belief that God tortures His enemies can have the very damaging effect of negating a central teaching of Jesus. If God does this, we can easily agree with the late televangelist Jerry Falwell who once said of America’s enemies, “Blow them all away in the name of the Lord!”

Jesus’ commands are clear and repeated so we don’t miss the point. We hear a redundant “Love your enemies,” “Pray for those who curse you,” “Offer the other cheek,” “Carry their pack the extra mile,” “Don’t seek revenge,” “Pay evil back with good” (see Matthew 5:39-48 and Romans 12:14-19). Not just His words but His actions underscored that concept. This teaching ultimately

led Him to lay down His life for His enemies, leaving no doubt concerning the motivations of God's heart. It's quite evident that this most important philosophy is also one of the most neglected by Christians, even to the point of them being ridiculed and declared immoral by many. "Peace and nonviolence are good to a certain extent," the Christian world seems to say, "but there comes a point where the sword is necessary."

But this is not consistent with the radical Kingdom Jesus came to establish. He never defended Himself or His followers using violent means. He never used a sword. He always forgave. He loved His enemies and chose to die for them rather than to kill them.

Jesus rebuked Peter when he tried to use violence. He told Pilate that He was the King of a Kingdom where swords have no place. Jesus' nonviolent Kingdom was in full display before our eyes when He lived on this earth and died on the cross. Kingdoms of this world will resort to violence. As Christians, however, we're supposed to be like Christ. Whatever we label a "Christian" activity should never be associated with violence—even toward enemies.

It's certain that the Kingdom of God will not become a reality on this earth until a group of people have the courage to accept that love for enemies and the refusal of violence in any form toward all human beings is the highest goal. The glimpses we've seen of this Kingdom as demonstrated by people like Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. were like brief rays of light shining through the darkness. Sadly, their radical teachings have not been embraced by Christianity.

Most in Western Christianity believe that God will burn His enemies forever in hellfire, while a minority believe that He will only burn them until they are dead (annihilationism). In both views, however, God will ultimately exact punishment on all the rebels, and if that is the way God treats His enemies in the end, perhaps all that talk about love for enemies in our world doesn't really apply today—or only applies in limited situations. A recent study showed that churchgoing Christians were more likely to support the use of torture in the war on terror than nonchurchgoers. This firmly suggests that we have seriously deviated from the teachings of Jesus (<http://theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2009/04/pew-church-goers-like-torture-more/16947>).

## DAY 2 Judgment Day

Before discussing the “fire and sulfur” in this passage, let’s consider the significance of judgment that is associated with the Good News:

Then I saw another angel flying high in the air, with an eternal [everlasting] message of Good News to announce to the peoples of the earth, to every race, tribe, language, and nation. He said in a loud voice, “Honor God and praise his greatness! *For the time has come for him to judge all people.* Worship him who made heaven, earth, sea, and the springs of water!” (Revelation 14:6-7, emphasis provided)

Judgment is often associated with an externally applied decree and ensuing punishment, but that is not the picture that the Bible presents. Jesus’ words to Nicodemus give the clearest picture of how judgment works: “This is how the judgment works: the light has come into the world, but people love the darkness rather than the light” (John 3:19).

The judgment describes those who reject the light and turn to the darkness. Thus, the judgment of the first angel’s message describes the response to the revelatory message of the Good News.

Who is the judge? Subconsciously, we imagine that the Father sits on the throne while the Son acts as our attorney. In reality, “The Father judges no one. He has given his Son the full right to judge. . . . And he has given the Son the right to judge, because he is the Son of Man” (John 5:22, 27).

The Son is the judge because He is the revealer. Thus, judgment, according to Jesus, does not work like our twenty-first-century legal system with a judge who hands down a sentence. It’s rather something that happens within the heart of the individual and how he or she responds to the message:

If people hear my message and do not obey it, I will not judge them. I came, not to judge the world, but to save it. Those who reject me and do not accept my message have one who will judge them. *The words I have spoken will be their judgment on the last day* (John 12:47-48, emphasis provided)!

What words, what message, what truth will be the judge? In the context of this passage in John 12, the words that will be our judge in the end include the message that Jesus revealed about His Father. If we just back up a few verses, “Jesus said in a loud voice, ‘Whoever believes in me believes not only in me but also in him who sent me. Whoever sees me sees also him who sent me. I have come into the world as light, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness’” (John 12:44-46).

The “judge on the last day” will be how we have responded to the central message, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father” (John 14:8). Is our picture of God one of Jesus Christ? Jesus’ revelation of God’s character *is* the Good News: “according to the Good News I preach, this is how it will be on that Day when God through Jesus Christ will judge the secret thoughts of all” (Romans 2:16). The Good News is like a “sweet fragrance” for those who are saved, but for those who are lost, “it is a deadly stench that kills” (See 2 Corinthians 2:14-16).

A parallel example of this is seen in the life of Pharaoh. God brought evidence to Pharaoh that his gods were weak and impotent compared to the God of Moses. He rejected this message, and the Bible describes both that Pharaoh hardened his heart and that God hardened his heart (see Exodus 9:34–10:1). Which is true? In a sense, both! When you put a lump of clay and a lump of butter into the oven, the clay hardens while the butter melts. The heat of the oven represents the revelatory message from God. This message had the potential to soften Pharaoh’s heart, but he chose instead to reject the message and hardened his heart. This is how the judgment works at the end of time. It’s not externally imposed, but rather reflects the response of the human heart to the Good News.

## NOTES

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## DAY 3 Strong Wine

The Good News brings about a splitting effect in the world. Some are softened and have the seal of God, while others are hardened and have the mark of the beast. For those who follow the beast, the second angel's message is sobering: "A second angel followed the first one, saying, 'She has fallen! Great Babylon has fallen! She made all peoples drink her wine—the strong wine of her immoral lust!'" (Revelation 14:8).

To fully understand what's described, we must first back up and identify the beast that led Babylon to fall. In chapter 13, "The beast was allowed to make proud claims which were insulting to God, and it was permitted to have authority for forty-two months. It began to curse God and his name" (Revelation 13:5-6). These forty-two months are used in both Revelation and Daniel (see Daniel 7:25; 12:7; Revelation 11:2-3; 12:6, 14; 13:5) as a reference to the period of time when this beast reigns (1,260 days, forty-two months, times, time and half a time, and three-and-a-half years all refer to the same period of time).

In Daniel, after describing the empires of Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece, "a fourth beast appeared. It was powerful, horrible, terrifying. With its huge iron teeth it crushed its victims, and then it trampled on them. Unlike the other beasts, it had ten horns" (Daniel 7:7). This refers to the empire of Rome, the next major kingdom on the scene. But then, another very different power emerges out of this beast. "While I was staring at the horns, I saw a little horn coming up among the others. It tore out three of the horns that were already there. This horn had human eyes and a mouth that was boasting proudly" (Daniel 7:7-8). Fortunately, Daniel is given clarity on this beast and the little horn:

The fourth beast is a fourth empire that will be on the earth and will be different from all other empires. It will crush the whole earth and trample it down. The ten horns are ten kings who will rule that empire. Then another king will appear; he will be very different from the earlier ones and will overthrow three kings. He will speak against the Supreme God and oppress God's people. He will try to change their religious laws and festivals, and God's people will be under his power for three and a half years (Daniel 7:23-25).

Revelation is describing the same beast that Daniel saw—a beast that is different than the other worldly powers because it works under the guise of religion and thus misrepresents God and His kingdom. Its “power extended toward . . . the Promised Land. It grew strong enough to attack the army of heaven, the stars themselves, and it threw some of them to the ground and trampled on them. It even defied the Prince of the heavenly army . . . true religion was thrown to the ground. The horn was successful in everything it did” (Daniel 8:11-12).

Both Daniel and Revelation portray the long period of time when Christianity tragically changed after Constantine from the suffering and persecuted minority to the persecuting majority. In the second century, historian Tertullian wrote that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” In the post-Constantine era, however, evangelism involved persecuting enemies instead of a willingness to suffer for them. The church that took the name of Christ also incorporated practices and beliefs that were anything but Christlike: the stake, the Inquisition, the Crusades, eternal conscious hellfire, purgatory, the sale of indulgences, and the pompous doctrine of infallibility—just to name a few.

The church no longer looked—or acted—like Jesus. Jesus was poor with no place to lay His head (Matthew 8:20), yet His church now reaped in huge offerings and erected giant cathedrals in His name. Meanwhile,

**“ IT’S IMPORTANT THAT WE UNDERSTAND THAT THERE IS A MASTERMIND BEHIND THE SABOTAGE OF THE ONCE-CHRISTLIKE CHURCH. ”**

those who attempted to translate the Scriptures into a language that the common person could understand were persecuted and often surrendered their lives in the process.

That period of religious tyranny subsided after the French Revolution and the founding of America, which promoted religious freedom. The sobering commentary of Revelation, however, warns that a similar union of the coercive methods of the state and religion will return again with the rise of a *lamb-like* beast that speaks like a dragon (see Revelation 13:11).

It’s important that we understand that there is a mastermind behind the sabotage of the once-Christlike church. These beasts are

merely surrogate powers of the dragon who seeks to deceive and lead people away from worship of the Lamb. “Everyone worshiped the dragon because he had given his authority to the beast” (Revelation 13:4). Both imitative lamb-like beasts in Revelation use all the coercive methods of the kingdoms of the world and then paste the name “Christ” on it. The result is a twisted picture of God that leads people to worship the dragon instead of the Lamb.

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## DAY 4 Appalling Blend

As the intensity of the Good News goes throughout the world, there is a corresponding softening or hardening of hearts and minds either for or against God. The end result of this bright light that goes throughout the world is that some enter the light while others choose the darkness.

The second angel's message that warns of Babylon's fall refers to the uniting of the church with the worldly powers. This false Christianity is unspeakably harmful because it leads people to believe that this is what Christ is like. "She made all peoples drink her wine—the strong wine of her immoral lust!" (Revelation 14:8).

In order to fully understand this, we need to read on to Revelation 17, which describes the fall of Babylon (the church) in more detail. The sin of Babylon is prostitution with the beast—the unity of the methods and coercive practices of the state in the name of Christ:

The Spirit took control of me, and the angel carried me to a desert. There I saw a woman sitting on a red beast that had names insulting to God written all over it; the beast had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and covered with gold ornaments, precious stones, and pearls. In her hand she held a gold cup full of obscene and filthy things, the result of her immorality. On her forehead was written a name that has a secret meaning: "Great Babylon, the mother of all prostitutes and perverts in the world." And I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of God's people and the blood of those who were killed because they had been loyal to Jesus. When I saw her, I was completely amazed (Revelation 17:3-6).

Prostitution is an image of unfaithfulness and falling away from God. In the Old Testament, the woman charged with prostitution is "Israel" (see Isaiah 1:21; Jeremiah 2:20; Ezekiel 16:15; Hosea 9:1). In Revelation, the prostitute is the fallen church.

The church was once faithful. In Revelation 12, she is standing on the sun and fleeing from the dragon. In Revelation 13 and 17, however, she is now united with the dragon and is sitting on the beast



rather than fleeing. John describes his shock at this transformation: “When I saw her, I was greatly amazed” (17:6). Sigve Tonstad has pointed out that this can also be translated as “I was appalled.”

The Kingdom of God should always look like Jesus, spreading by the application of loving service rather than by worldly methods of coercion and force. Nationalistic idolatry is a growing danger during our time. Especially in America, Christians frequently associate the actions of their state with the actions of their religion. Revelation’s dramatic imagery warns us that the two should be entirely separate.

Reflective of this, Greg Boyd described his experience in a Christian church:

I happened to visit a July Fourth worship service at a certain mega church. At center stage in this auditorium stood a large cross next to an equally large American flag. The congregation sang some praise choruses mixed with such patriotic hymns as “God Bless America.” The climax of the service centered on a video of a well-known Christian military general giving a patriotic speech about how God had blessed America and blessed its military troops. . . . Triumphant military music played in the background as he spoke. The video closed with a scene of a silhouette of three crosses on a hill with an American flag waving in the background. Majestic, patriotic music now thundered. Suddenly, four fighter jets appeared on the horizon, flew over the crosses, and then split apart. As they roared over the camera, the words, “God Bless America” appeared on the screen in front of the crosses. The congregation responded with roaring applause, catcalls, and a standing ovation. I saw several people wiping tears from their eyes. Indeed, as I remained frozen in my seat, I grew teary-eyed as well—but for entirely different reasons. I was struck with horrified grief. Thoughts raced through my mind: How could the cross and the sword have been so thoroughly fused without anyone seeming to notice? How could Calvary be associated with bombs and missiles? How could the kingdom of God be reduced to this sort of violent, nationalistic tribalism? Has the church progressed at all since the Crusades? (Gregory A. Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005], pp. 87-88).

“Appalled” is an appropriate word to describe this terrifying union of state and church, violence and cross, and patriotism and the Kingdom of Love.

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## DAY 5 Two Types of Fire

What happens to those who unite with the beast is one of the most chilling passages in the Bible:

A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: “If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur *in the presence* of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name” (Revelation 14:9-11 NIV, emphasis provided).

We described in lesson 9 how this suffering occurs “in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb” and that God’s presence is symbolized by a consuming fire (Daniel 4:24; Hebrews 12:29), leading to a psychological guilt that occurs in those who are in the presence of God, yet are rebellious against His character of love. For those who are opposed to God, coming face to face with the One who is love personified is terribly distressing.

The subject of fire in Revelation is more complex than this, however. In fact, God is not the only one described as sending fire. The lamb-like beast also brings “fire down from heaven to earth in the sight of everyone” (13:13). The demonic troops in the sixth trumpet send “from their mouths . . . fire, smoke and sulfur . . . a third of the human race was killed by those three plagues: the fire, the smoke and sulfur coming out of the horses’ mouths” (8:19).

While Revelation 14 describes Babylon and all who unite with the beast as being tortured by fire and sulfur in the presence of God, Revelation 17 seeks to paint a more complete picture of how this actually happens: “Come, and I will show you *how* the famous prostitute is to be punished, that great city that is built near many rivers” (Revelation 17:1, emphasis provided).

Reading on with the question of “how” the punishment takes place, we see that the destruction does not occur at the hand of God: “The ten horns that you saw and the beast will hate the prostitute; they will take away everything she has and leave her naked; they



## DAY 6 Two Types of Warriors

We have seen that Revelation describes two types of fire, one that emanates from the very presence of the Lamb, the other that comes from the dragon. Both the Lamb and the dragon also wage war, but using very different methods.

In the end of Revelation, God wages war by showing up as the rider with the sword of truth coming out of His mouth (Revelation 19:15). He fights with a robe “covered with blood” (19:13) which signifies *His own blood*, not the blood of His enemies. God will either win those to His Kingdom through the methods of truth (the sword coming from His mouth) and self-sacrificial love (His own blood on his robe) or not at all. God does not come to destroy or punish sinners any more than a physician would desire to punish smokers who are dying of lung cancer. Even the final destruction of Satan comes from within, not from without (see Ezekiel 28:18 NLT).

The Dragon, on the other hand, repeatedly brings violence and war: “The dragon and his angels warred” (12:7); “Then the dragon . . . went off to make war” (12:17); “And it was allowed to make war on the saints” (13:7); “the beast . . . will make war on them” (11:7); “these are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for war” (16:14); “Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against the rider” (19:19). Again and again we see demonic forces as the ones generating bloodshed and violence.

Even the violent description of “the wine press” where “blood flowed . . . as high as the bridles of the horses, for a distance of about two hundred miles” (14:20) has its roots in violent self-destruction. The context for this bloody passage is an apocryphal book attributed to Enoch:

In those days . . . a stream shall flow with their blood. For a man shall not be able to withhold his hands from his sons nor from (his) sons' sons in order to kill them. Nor is it possible for the sinner to withhold his hands from his honored brother. From dawn until the sun sets, they shall slay each other. The horse shall walk through the blood of sinners up to his chest; and the chariot shall sink down up to its top (1 *Enoch* 100:3; see also Ezekiel 38:23; Zephaniah 1:14-17; Zechariah 14:12-13).

The imagery of Revelation is dramatic, and often violent, but yet there is such a concerted effort to solidify the fact that this does not come from God: God is the One who has been violently slaughtered, and God is the One who returns with His own shed blood on His robe. Some read these passages and see exactly the opposite, however. Mark Driscoll, the well-known pastor of Mars Hill church in Seattle, Washington, once said, "In Revelation, Jesus is a prize fighter with a tattoo down His leg, a sword in His hand and the commitment to make someone bleed. That is a guy I can worship. I cannot worship the hippie, diaper, halo Christ because I cannot worship a guy I can beat up."

Can we worship a God that we could beat up? Isn't that precisely what we did to Jesus? When Jesus returns, is He a different person? Does He now have a vengeful attitude, ready to make someone bleed? If we are waiting for God to return to destroy our enemies, we really aren't much different than those who waited for the coming Messiah two thousand years ago. If that is the God we are waiting for, we will be just as disappointed as they were when He comes. The God who is returning is the same God who humbly walked among us. Have we fallen in love with *that* God?

## NOTES

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## DAY 7 Bookends

### DON'T STOP NOW!

- Listen to this talk on the treatment of enemies by Greg Boyd, “Let it Go”: <http://whchurch.org/blog/1223/let-it-go>.
- Listen to this talk by Tim Jennings, “Right Wing? Left Wing? Foot Washing?”: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nx6RDdSxkss>.
- Listen to this talk by Brad Cole, “Tormented with fire and sulfur”: <http://godscharacter.com/index.php/revelation/revelation-14/revelation-14-fire>.

German Lutheran pastor, theologian, and anti-Nazi dissident Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, “Our enemies are those who harbor hostility against us, not those against whom we cherish hostility. . . . As a Christian I am called to treat my enemy as a brother and to meet hostility with love. My behavior is thus determined not by the way others treat me, but by the treatment I receive from Jesus.”

### TALK ABOUT IT

In many ways, Revelation is a bookend to Genesis, where God makes right what went wrong in the first place. As we conclude our discussion on this book, consider and discuss the following contrasts:

1. Genesis opens with the claim that God is an untrustworthy and arbitrary liar (Genesis 3:1-5). Revelation reveals that God is “Faithful and True” (Revelation 19:11) and “the faithful witness” (1:5) while the serpent is unmasked as “the Devil, who deceived them” (20:10). How have you discovered in your own life that the serpent is dead wrong?
2. Genesis describes God’s mere presence causing His children to tremble in the bushes (Genesis 3:8), hiding from His face because “No one can see [God’s] face and live” (Exodus 33:20). In Revelation, God’s people are now “protected by his presence”

(Revelation 7:15), and “They will see his face, and his name will be written on their foreheads” (22:4). Have you ever been afraid of God? Why?

3. Genesis proclaims that “the ground will be under a curse” (Genesis 3:17). In Revelation, “Nothing that is under God’s curse will be found in the city” (Revelation 22:3). So what cursed the ground for Adam and Eve, and what brings trials and tribulations into your life?

4. Genesis tells the sad story of how Adam and Eve lost access to the tree of life (Genesis 3:24). In Revelation we read, “I will give the right to eat the fruit of the tree of life that grows in the Garden of God . . . the leaves of its tree will heal the nations” (Revelation 2:7; 22:2). Why can we now eat of that tree when Adam and Eve lost access to it? What’s the difference?

5. Genesis describes separation from God. Adam and Eve were warned of a hard life of struggles, hardship, and ultimately death: “You were made from the dust, and to dust you will return” (Genesis 3:19). In Revelation we find these words: “Now God’s home is with people! He will live with them, and they shall be his people. God himself will be with them, and he will be their God. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain. The old things have disappeared” (Revelation 21:3, 4). What “old things” are gone in heaven?

## **AND FINALLY...**

Imagine that you are diagnosed with lung cancer after years of smoking. There are two physicians in town. One doesn’t care for his patients and has spent his entire career peddling false cures while maligning the other physician’s character. The other is the Master Physician who has great compassion for each patient and has a cure for every form of disease and sickness. Sadly, there’s a line around the block for the quack.

The invitation of these thirteen lessons is to see the great contrast between the two contending physicians. The Heavenly Physician has no lines, no waiting list, and even more important than these, He



offers a cure. Put your trust in Him, and then go and tell others the Good News. You also might want to share with your family, friends, and neighbors the truth about the deceiving quack physician as well. Understanding his part of the story is important and makes the real Physician look even better.

## NOTES

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# comeandreason

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## M I N I S T R I E S

### ABOUT US

Come and Reason Ministries is dedicated to helping you learn to discern, to stimulate you to think, to help hone and refine your reasoning powers, and to increase your ability to know right from wrong and healthy from unhealthy. We're not here to tell you what to think, but to show you how to more efficiently use your God-given reasoning power to better grow in grace and experience a closer walk with God.

### WEEKLY STUDY

Come and Reason Ministries conducts a weekly Bible study every Saturday from 10:20am to 11:20am at the Collegedale, Tennessee, City Hall building that's open to anyone regardless of denominational affiliation. So, whether you're visiting from out of state or are a local resident, we invite you to stop by and listen to or participate in lively and thought-provoking discussions of various biblical topics.

### LIVE WEBCASTS

To view our live programs every Saturday at 10:20am Eastern, go to:

**[LIVESTREAM.COM/COMEANDREASON](https://www.livestream.com/comeandreason)**

Or to view our live programs on your mobile device, find and install the free Livestream App in the Apple or Android app store, launch, and search for "come and reason," then follow us!

### CONTACT US

If you are interested in more information, donating to our ministry, or if you have any questions or comments, visit **[COMEANDREASON.COM](https://www.comeandreason.com)**



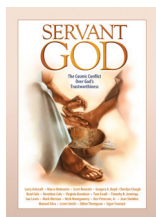
## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**Dorothee Cole** grew up in Germany, attended college in Collonges-sous-Salève, France, and graduated from Portland State University with a B.A. in French in 1990. She graduated from Loma Linda University School of Medicine in 1994. She currently works as a neurologist with a special interest in movement disorders, in Loma Linda, California. Dorothee helped coordinate the Good News Tour conferences and edited the book by G. E. Fifield *God Is Love*. She also was the editor for the multi-author book, *Servant God: The Cosmic Conflict Over God's Trustworthiness*, which is available at [ServantGod.com](http://ServantGod.com). She lives in Redlands, California, with her husband, Brad, and their three children, Christina, Caleb, and James.

**In modern times, the notions of Satan and demonic forces are** often marginalized to the realm of Ouija boards, black magic, and Halloween. Many simply can't wrap their minds around the concept of an all-powerful God who would allow for an enemy to exist. Yet Jesus assigns Satan the title "the prince of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30); Paul refers to the devil as "the god of this age" and "the ruler of the kingdom of the air" (2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 2:2); and even after Christ's resurrection, John tells us that "the whole world is under the control of the evil one" (1 John 5:19).

In this study guide, we will explore this Cosmic Conflict between God and Satan as the underlying story that should form the basis for all our theology. Difficult questions that we all have about human suffering, the Old Testament God, the meaning of Jesus' death, and the final destruction of the wicked can only be understood when they are placed in the larger setting of this Cosmic Conflict.



For a more in-depth book on the subject of God's character in the setting of the Cosmic Conflict, please read *Servant God*, a multi-authored book that was edited by Dorothee Cole. For more information, visit [ServantGod.com](http://ServantGod.com).