

The Great Controversy¹ and the Early Church



SABBATH—FEBRUARY 20

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Acts 1:6–8; Acts 2:5–12; Genesis 11:1–9; Acts 4:1–30; Acts 7:54; Acts 10:12–29.

MEMORY VERSE: “The leaders saw how bold Peter and John were. They also realized that Peter and John were ordinary [common] men with no training. This surprised the leaders. They realized that these men had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13, NlrV).

THE GREATEST PROBLEM JESUS HAD WITH HIS FOLLOWERS WAS THAT THEY WERE SET IN THEIR OPINIONS. The disciples paid little attention to what Jesus said if it did not fit in with their own ideas of who He should be. Right up to the time He went to heaven, the disciples still asked Jesus questions about freeing Israel from the Romans.

It was only after ten days of prayer and close fellowship in the presence of God that the disciples' opinions began to be replaced with the truth. Then the disciples were ready to hear what God told them. This opened the way for the wonderful events at that first Pentecost² after the death of Jesus.

Of course, the church still faced many challenges. Many local religious leaders, too, had certain opinions.

So, in this week's lesson, we will find the great controversy (war between Christ and Satan) theme revealed in different ways. We will find it shown openly, as those in power are inspired (caused) by Satan to put down the truth. But we also will find the great controversy taking place in a more hidden but important area: the human heart.

DEFINITIONS

1. great controversy—the war between Christ and Satan.

2. Pentecost—the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon believers. (Read Acts 2:1–4.)

THE BEGINNING OF A NEW BEGINNING (Acts 1:6–8)

After His resurrection,³ Jesus spent 40 days meeting with the disciples to provide evidence of the resurrection and to help them to better understand the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3; 1 Corinthians 15:4–7). But, even as they met, just before Jesus left for heaven, the disciples still wondered if this was the time for Jesus to finally conquer the Romans (Acts 1:6).

The disciples' own ideas of what should happen were so strong that they simply did not listen to what Jesus had been saying to them. Even after three and a half years with the best Teacher the world has ever known, the disciples still had many wrong ideas to unlearn.

Read Acts 1:6–8. In the face of such stubborn opinions, how did Jesus answer?

Jesus focused on the real issue rather than wasting time trying to correct the disciples' misunderstandings. The empowerment⁴ of God's people through the power of the Holy Spirit was far more important than political discussion.

After watching Jesus go up into the clouds and disappear, the disciples noticed two men standing by them. The two men told them that Jesus would return. Just as He was accepted into heaven as a conquering King, so He will come again as King. But that day will surpass even their greatest dreams—for He will come as King of all creation, not just king of a piece of land in the Middle East.

The 11 disciples returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. Their heads were filled with memories and their hearts with the truths taught by Jesus (at least the ones they understood). But they needed something more. Jesus told them to wait for a few days until the Holy Spirit baptized them (Acts 1:4, 5). The enemy (Satan) had been defeated, but he was not done yet. And the disciples would need power from on high in order to do what Jesus had asked them to do.

Read Acts 1:14. What was the big difference in how the disciples related to each other now, as compared⁵ to earlier times as found in Matthew 20:20–24? What message is there for us in this change of attitude (feeling)? In what ways can you put aside self in order to prepare for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit?



Just as Jesus was accepted into heaven as a conquering King, so He will come again to earth as King.

DEFINITIONS

3. resurrection—return to life from the dead.

4. empowerment—the act of giving power to someone to help him or her do something.

5. compared—to have shown how two things are the same or different.

PENTECOST (Acts 2:2, 3)

For ten days, the followers of Jesus (1) prayed, (2) studied Scripture and remembered their experiences with Jesus, (3) showed acceptance of one another, and (4) finally, let the Holy Spirit impress the truth upon them. The Spirit went over the face of the deep at the beginning of Creation. In the same way, the Spirit of God went over each of the disciples, appearing as divided tongues of fire on each of them (Acts 2:2, 3). It was a new beginning, a new creation.



At Pentecost, the Spirit of God went over each of the disciples, appearing as divided tongues of fire on each of them.

Read Acts 2:5–12. What is the importance of what happened in these texts? Compare their experience with Genesis 11:1–9.

Sometime after the Flood, the people of the earth decided to build a tower that reached heaven (Genesis 11:1–9). But God prevented them from finishing this boastful and foolish project (Genesis 11:5, 6). He did this by confusing their common language and scattering them “over the face of all the earth” (Genesis 11:7–9, NKJV).

At Pentecost, God did the opposite. Here He knew that the people were not building a new tower of Babel. Instead they were ready to preach the good news that evil would one day be forever removed.

People “from every nation under heaven” were in Jerusalem that day (Acts 2:5, NKJV; compare the scattering at the tower of Babel). And they were very surprised as they each heard their own language being spoken by the disciples (Acts 2:6–11).

Peter uses this as an opportunity to preach to the people. He speaks of an outpouring of the Holy Spirit preparing a people to meet God (Acts 2:17–21). He points out the Messiah’s (Chosen One’s; Jesus’) true mission and scolds them for crucifying (putting to death on a cross) Him (Acts 2:23). They are “filled with shame” (Acts 2:37, NIRV). Then 3,000 are baptized and join the disciples (Acts 2:41).

Under the inspiration of Satan, some had permitted the death of Jesus to happen. But now, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, they become followers of Jesus. What does this tell us of the power of God, who forgives the worst of sins and changes the hardest of hearts?

FACING THE SADDUCEES⁶ (Acts 4:1–30)

Read Acts 4:1–30. How is the great controversy theme being shown here? In what ways is this just one example of how it has taken place all through history? How do we find Satan working here, and how do we find the Lord working too?

“The priests and rulers saw that Christ was praised above them. The Sadducees did not believe in a resurrection [return to life from the dead]. But when they heard the apostles [leaders and teachers] announce that Christ had risen from the dead, they became angry. They knew that if the apostles preached a risen Savior and worked miracles in His name, then no one would believe the doctrine [teaching] of no resurrection. In a short time, the sect [group] of the Sadducees would die out completely.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, page 78.

What got these leaders very upset was the healing that the Lord did through Peter (read Acts 3:1–10). But, when the leaders urged the disciples to stop preaching, the disciples did not weaken. The priests were not expecting this from “uneducated and untrained men” (Acts 4:13, NKJV). Sending the disciples out of the room, the leaders discussed among themselves what to do. They thought that if they commanded these men not to teach in the name of Jesus, they would humbly obey (Acts 4:18). But the leaders were wrong.

Instead, the disciples went back and joined the others. Together they praised God (Acts 4:24). They prayed for more boldness and that God would stretch out His hand for more healing (Acts 4:29, 30). They did not need to wait long. Because of the disciples’ growing popularity, people brought their sick out onto the streets to let Peter’s passing shadow fall on them (Acts 5:15). A great many people came from nearby towns, and their sick were all healed (Acts 5:16).

All through here we can find the great controversy (war) going on. Dishonest leaders tried to hide the truth. Faithful people read God’s Word and prayed for God’s power. The sick were healed. And souls were won. Things may not seem to work out as well for us as they did here for the disciples. But we must never forget how the great controversy will work out in the end. And the final victory surely will be ours because of what Jesus has done for all people.



The people brought their sick out onto the streets to let Peter’s passing shadow fall on them.

DEFINITIONS

6. Sadducees—a group of Jewish leaders who did not believe in resurrection.

THE STONING OF STEPHEN (Acts 7:2–53)

The apostles were not the only ones to be attacked by the religious leaders during the earliest days of the church. Stephen, who was filled with “faith and power, [and] did great wonders and signs among the people” (Acts 6:8, NKJV), was brought before them. His witness was so powerful that his enemies spread false stories about him. On these false charges, Stephen was taken to the council (Acts 6:9–14).

In Acts 7:2–53, Stephen gives a powerful message to those who accused him. Acts 7:54 says that they were “cut to the heart.” This means they were touched and felt guilty when they heard Stephen’s words. In Acts 2:37–41, after hearing Peter, who made many of the same charges against them, about 3,000 were touched and baptized. What was the difference between those who heard Stephen and those who heard Peter? And what does that tell us about how important giving one’s heart fully to God is?

The apostles had so far gotten away with challenging the leaders. But when Stephen tried to do the same, he was killed by an angry mob. Stephen’s death showed the beginning of an organized effort by Satan to wipe out the new religious movement.

But what did the apostles expect? If Satan could inspire some leaders to kill Jesus, His followers certainly should expect to receive the same treatment.

Of course, all through the great controversy the Lord would, time and time again, bring victory out of what often seemed like defeat. It was no different here.

“After the death of Stephen, Saul [Paul] was elected a member of the Sanhedrin council⁶ for the part he had played in attacking early Christians. For a time, Saul was a powerful instrument in the hands of Satan to carry out his rebellion [war] against the Son of God. But soon this stubborn attacker was to be used by God in building up the church that he was now tearing down. Jesus had chosen Saul to take the place of Stephen, to preach and suffer for His name, and to spread far and wide the news of salvation through His blood.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, page 102.

Sometimes we find the good that arises from what is clearly evil. That is great. What do we do if we do not find any good coming from evil but, in fact, find only more evil?

DEFINITIONS

7. Sanhedrin council—the ruling Jewish council in the time of Jesus and Paul.

CHANGING ATTITUDES (FEELINGS AND OPINIONS) (Acts 10:12–29)

The disciples struggled with certain ideas that kept them from understanding what Jesus taught them. They also shared national prejudices.⁷ One example of this is the story of the Samaritan woman from whom Jesus asked a drink of water. The disciples were surprised that He even spoke to the woman (John 4:27, NKJV).

National prejudices also came up in the story of Cornelius, a Roman centurion in Caesarea. Cornelius was “faithful and worshiped God” (Acts 10:2, NIV). He also was highly respected by the local people (Acts 10:22). An angel told Cornelius to send for Peter in Joppa (Acts 10:22; read also Acts 10:3–8).

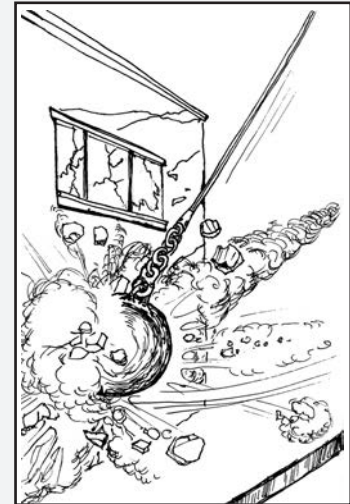
Meanwhile, in Joppa, Peter goes up to a rooftop to pray (Acts 10:9). With shelter from the sun and the cool sea breezes, he relaxes and begins to feel hungry. While waiting for his hosts to prepare lunch, Peter sees a strange vision. Heaven opens, and something like a huge sheet tied at the four corners comes down. Inside the cloth are many creatures (living things) that Peter thinks are “unclean.” But God tells Peter to kill and eat them (Acts 10:11–14).

Read Acts 10:12–29. What did Peter think when he was told to eat “unclean” food? And what did the vision mean?

In this vision, God teaches Peter an important lesson. Some people today think that this was the time when God changed the human diet to allow people to eat whatever they like. That is not what Peter receives from the vision. First, he wonders what it means. It is not clear at first (Acts 10:17). When Cornelius’s men arrive and explain their mission, Peter decides to return with them (Acts 10:22, 23). When Peter meets Cornelius, he is able to tell Cornelius the meaning of the vision. Christ is the Savior of all the world. Gentiles (non-Jews), too, are important souls for whom Christ died (Acts 10:34–48).

Peter was learning a lesson that we all need to learn. In Christ, all “blocks,” or walls, have been torn down. And there are no more differences between Jew and Gentile and among all people.

We are all one in Christ. Unfortunately, even in the church, that is not always how we feel, is it? How can we recognize the prejudices that we hold? And how, in God’s power, can we get rid of those prejudices?



In Christ, all walls have been torn down.

DEFINITIONS

8. prejudices—unfair feelings of dislike for a person or a group because of race, sex, or religion.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote about Jesus returning to the earth, but not in the way the Bible says it will happen. Instead, in this made-up story, Jesus returned at the time of the Inquisition,⁸ when religious leaders used their power for evil. The Grand Inquisitor (persecuting attorney) had Jesus, who came as a humble peasant (common laborer), arrested and thrown into a prison. That night the attorney visited Jesus in jail and scolded Him harshly for giving freedom to humans. “Instead of taking men’s freedom from them,” the Inquisitor (attorney) declares, “you [Jesus] made it greater than ever! Did you forget that man chooses peace, and even death, over freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil? Nothing is more tempting for man than his freedom of conscience. But nothing is a greater cause of suffering.” Despite his nerve, the Inquisitor has a point. Look at what humans have done with their freedom. Pain, evil, sin, suffering, and death have arisen from freedom, or from the abuse of it. But God created us as loving people, and the only way we could love is if we were created free. So much of how the great controversy works out in this world is influenced by what people have done and still do with the holy and expensive gift of freedom. (And the Cross shows the cost of freedom.) As we learned this week, some, when they learned of the gospel, repented (turned away from sin) and gave their hearts to Jesus. Others, instead, murdered the messenger. Freedom is a valuable (important) gift. But we need to be very careful about what we do with it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① No question, the New Testament points to the unity (oneness) that we have in Christ. This is a very powerful idea. Unfortunately, even now in the twenty-first century, one of the greatest evils that is still around is geographical, racial, and national prejudice. Only God knows the full result of what this evil has done. We expect this in the world, but what about the church, even our own church? How is it shown? Why is this kind of attitude so opposed to the most basic teaching of the gospel?
- ② At times, we all feel our hearts are touched by the Holy Spirit. How do you respond when the Holy Spirit speaks to your heart? It is in the heart that the great controversy goes on. How do the choices you make show whose side you might be on?

DEFINITIONS

9. Inquisition—an organization in the Roman Catholic Church in the past that was responsible for finding and punishing people who did not accept its beliefs and practices.