

The Controversy Continues



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Sam. 17:43–51, 2 Sam. 11:1–17, 1 Kings 18:21–39, 2 Kings 19:21–34, Esther 3:8–11, Nehemiah 1.*

Memory Text: “And I told them of the hand of my God which had been good upon me, and also of the king’s words that he had spoken to me. So they said, ‘Let us rise up and build.’ Then they set their hands to this good work” (*Nehemiah 2:18, NKJV*).

When we compare the lives of David, Elijah, Hezekiah, Esther, and Nehemiah, similar themes surface: God is able to use “insignificant” people to turn back the tide of evil. Through some of these accounts we can see that, despite tremendous obstacles, we don’t need to buckle under overwhelming evil. Instead, we can stand firm, but only in the power of God, who is faithful to His covenant promises, promises fulfilled for us in Jesus. When God’s people endure in His might, they will see that the forces of evil are not powerful enough to ultimately prevail.

The focus, and the challenge, is for us to rejoice in His deliverance. This does not always make sense in the context of the overwhelming challenges that we sometimes find ourselves in, challenges that are so much bigger than ourselves. Rejoicing in God’s deliverance before deliverance comes is an act of faith and worship, rather than the logical consequence of what is happening around us. On the other hand, because of what Christ has done for us, trusting in God’s faithfulness is, really, the only logical thing we can do.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 30.

David, Goliath, and Bathsheba

Life is complicated, and that's because, as humans, we are complicated. Imagine—creatures made in the image of God, the Creator of the universe, who then corrupt themselves. No wonder that our potential both for good and for evil can reach remarkable levels. And it isn't just that some people attain great levels of "goodness" while others, unfortunately, drop to the extremes of depravity. Instead, both extremes can be manifested in the same person! The great news is that some who, at one time, were at the lowest have, by God's grace, done great things for Him and for humanity. Of course, the opposite can happen, as well: those at the heights can fall to the depths. Satan is real, the great controversy is real, and unless connected to the Lord, even the best of us can fall prey to our foe (*1 Pet. 5:8*).

Read 1 Samuel 17:43–51. What words came out of David's mouth that are so crucial to understanding his victory? In contrast, read 2 Samuel 11:1–17. What stark contrast do we see here in the same man? What made the difference?

The same David who defeated the giant Goliath is the David who was defeated by his own lust and arrogance. How many women did the man already have? And he sees one more, a *married* woman, and suddenly where is all the talk about "the battle is the LORD's" (*1 Sam. 17:47*) or "that there is a God in Israel" (*1 Sam. 17:46*)? If there were a time when David needed not only to know that the "battle is the LORD's" but also to fight that battle in God's armor, it wasn't in the war zone in the Valley of Elah but in the recess of his own heart, where in each of us the great controversy rages.

Upon coming to his senses after this terrible fall with Bathsheba, David had a lifetime of grief and guilt. His sorrow led him to write Psalm 51, in which he pleads for a clean heart (*1 Sam. 17:10*) and the restoration of his fellowship with God (*1 Sam. 17:11, 12*). In the great cosmic struggle, mighty men are just as vulnerable as the person of the lowest rank; yet, God is willing to work with all who truly repent.

Think about yourself, right now—the triumphs, the disappointments, the victories, the failures. How can you apply lessons from either of these stories for whatever situation you face, *right now*?

To Turn Their Hearts

Elijah the Tishbite has to be one of the most colorful characters in Scripture. We first meet him standing before a startled king and telling him there will be no rain for the next three years (*1 Kings 17:1*). It was not easy either to approach a king or to escape from him, but this hairy man with his leather belt (*2 Kings 1:8*) just slips through the guards, delivers God’s message, then runs to the mountains, about 12 kilometers (7 miles) away.

These were sorry times for the northern kingdom of Israel. Most had forsaken the Lord God (*1 Kings 19:10*) and were worshiping fertility gods instead. To say that it would not rain was a direct challenge to Baal, who was thought to bring rain to ensure fertile crops and herds that made farmers wealthy. The prevailing religious rites focused on fertility and income.

For the next three years the fertility gods are impotent. Then Elijah confronts the king again and asks for a showdown between himself and all the prophets of Baal and the goddess Asherah (goddess of fertility)—one man against 850 (*1 Kings 18:17–20*).

When the day arrives and the crowds gather at the top of Mount Carmel, Elijah addresses the people: “How long will you falter [lump] between two opinions?” (*1 Kings 18:21, NKJV*). Bulls are chosen and prepared for sacrifice, and the people wait to see which god is powerful enough to answer by fire from heaven. The bull was the most powerful object of the ancient fertility religions. Surely the gods of fertility would show their strength.

Read *1 Kings 18:21–39*. Despite the obvious reality of the great controversy here, what did Elijah really want to see happen in Israel, and why is that so relevant to us today?

First Kings 18:37 says it all. The miracle, impressive enough as it was, wasn’t the real issue: the issue was Israel’s faithfulness to the covenant. Notice, too, who had turned their hearts. It was the Lord Himself, *even before the miracle itself unfolded*. But God doesn’t force hearts to return to Him. He sends His Holy Spirit, and the people, responding to that Spirit, have to first make the choice to turn back to Him; only then, in His strength, can they act upon that choice. It’s no different today. It’s the power of God alone that sustains the beat of every heart, but He doesn’t force even one of those beating hearts to follow Him.

Words of Defiance

Hezekiah was king of Judah when the new superpower, Assyria, conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and scattered its inhabitants across Mesopotamia (*2 Kings 18:9–12*). “That which He could no longer do through them in the land of their fathers He would seek to accomplish by scattering them among the heathen. His plan for the salvation of all who should choose to avail themselves of pardon through the Saviour of the human race must yet be fulfilled; and in the afflictions brought upon Israel, He was preparing the way for His glory to be revealed to the nations of earth.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 292.

A few years later, the Assyrian king Sennacherib turned his attention to Judah and captured all its fortified cities and exacted heavy tribute (*2 Kings 18:13–15*). Although Hezekiah emptied the temple and palace treasuries, the Assyrian king was not satisfied and sent officials to negotiate the surrender of Jerusalem.

The Assyrians then taunted the people, warning that since the gods of the nations around them didn’t save them from Assyria, what made the Jews think that their God would do any better? (*See 2 Kings 18:28–30, 33–35.*)

Hezekiah then did the only thing possible for him—he prayed (*2 Kings 19:15–19*). God had already used Isaiah to encourage Hezekiah (*2 Kings 19:6*), and now God sends the prophet to him again.

Read 2 Kings 19:21–34, especially verses 21, 22. What is God’s message to His people amid this terrible crisis?

The outcome of all this was seen when the huge Assyrian army camped around the walls of Jerusalem. The frightened inhabitants of the besieged city arose one morning, not to see the final actions of a conquering army about to rip open the defenses of a besieged city but to see soldiers lying scattered on the ground in a deathly stillness as far as the eye could see (*2 Kings 19:35*). The disgraced Assyrian king went home, only to meet his end at the hands of two of his own sons (*2 Kings 19:6, 37*).

How can we learn, even amid the most discouraging and seemingly impossible situations, to trust in the Lord? Why must we always keep the big picture in mind, especially when things don’t always end, at least now, in such a positive manner?

Death Decree

It's so hard for us today (as no doubt it has been for people from various cultures throughout the centuries) to understand the customs and tradition of the ancient Persian Empire, where the story of Esther unfolds. One thing is certain, though: the Lord had used that empire in the process of fulfilling the covenant promises to the nation of Israel, promises that went back to Abraham (*see Gen. 12:1–3, Isa. 45:1, 2 Chron. 36:23*).

The young Jewish girl Esther found herself as queen. Though her ascent was through a route rather different from, for example, Joseph's in Egypt or Daniel's in Babylon, she was (as Joseph and Daniel were) just where the Lord wanted her to be, and she was used by God in a powerful way, one that illustrates how the great controversy theme can play out in history.

Read Esther 3:8–11. Keeping in mind what God's plans were for the Jewish people, especially in regard to the coming of the Messiah, what consequences would the success of this decree have?

“Little did the king realize the far-reaching results that would have accompanied the complete carrying out of this decree. Satan himself, the hidden instigator of the scheme, was trying to rid the earth of those who preserved the knowledge of the true God.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 600, 601. And from these same people, too, would come the Savior of the world.

How fascinating it is that the issue started over worship (*see Esther 3:5, 8*) and the refusal of a distinct group of people to follow the laws and customs of the ones in power. Though, of course, the context will be different at the end of time, the reality behind it—the great controversy between Christ and Satan—is still the same, and those who seek to be faithful to God will face something as the Jews here did. We have been warned that, in the closing scenes of earth's history, the decree will go out, declaring that “as many as [will] not worship the image of the beast [are to] be killed” (*Rev. 13:15*). The one thing we learn from history is that we don't learn from history.

Why is it that we so often tend to be distrustful of those who are different from us? Why *should* the powerful truths of Creation and Redemption, truths that reveal the worth of every human being, show us just how wrong this attitude is? How can we purge our hearts of this terribly faulty tendency?

Nehemiah

The story of Nehemiah also comes at a time when the nation of Israel no longer existed as a political entity but as a remnant scattered across foreign lands. God, though, as always, would be faithful to His covenant promises, even when the people failed to live up to their end of the covenant.

Read Nehemiah 1. What is the background of his prayer? In what ways is it reminiscent of Daniel’s prayer in Daniel 9:4–19? In both cases, what is the issue, and how does this play out in the whole great controversy drama?

Through the grace of the king, Nehemiah is given permission to return and rebuild in Jerusalem. On his return, Nehemiah spends the first few days looking around. He tries to survey the city by night, but the piles of rubble are so extensive that he does not get far (*Neh. 2:14*); so, he goes outside the walls to survey them from there (*Neh. 2:15*).

Read Nehemiah 2:16–18. How do you think Nehemiah convinced the leaders to start working on something they had thought impossible? What could Nehemiah teach our church today?

Although Nehemiah did not at first tell the leaders why he had come, there were some people who were not happy and did all they could to prevent any work from being done to improve Jerusalem (*Neh. 2:10, 19, 20*). When work started on repairing the walls (*Nehemiah 3*), these foreign officials were “furious and very indignant” (*Neh. 4:1*), and they mocked the efforts (*Neh. 4:2, 3, NKJV*). When they saw that God’s people were serious about their work (*Neh. 4:6*), they became angry and planned an attack (*Neh. 4:7, 8*).

It would have been so easy to back down; yet, despite all sorts of machinations against their work, they persisted. Trusting in God, Nehemiah saw to the rebuilding of the wall and left the threats of his enemies in the hand of God (*Neh. 6:14, 15*).

We all face obstacles. How do we know when to back down and when to keep going?

Further Thought: No question, the Word of God, as we have studied this week, time and again shows God’s faithfulness to His people. Of course, in many cases, at the time things were happening, that faithfulness wasn’t always obvious or apparent. In the accounts we looked at, we were able to see the beginning to the end; some of the characters involved, such as Uriah the Hittite, didn’t. Today, we are ourselves immersed in the great controversy just as surely as were the people we have studied. And not only them, but there were many others just as real as the ones who made it into the text but who didn’t always live to see things work out so well. That’s why it’s so important for us, as Christians, to remember, especially when times are rough (as they so often can be), Paul’s wonderful words: “Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:16–18, NKJV). Here Paul is seeking to point us to something beyond the daily toils, foibles, and weaknesses of humanity and toward the only hope that makes life here anything more than a cruel farce.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What are some of the other Bible promises that point to our ultimate hope? Gather as many as you can and, either alone or in class, read them aloud and dwell on what they say. What kind of picture do they present to us?
- 2 What made David’s fall so tragic was that he had been so singularly blessed of God. And yet, despite all that he had been given—*he still sinned the way he did*. Instead of focusing just on the negative, think about the one positive aspect of his whole sordid story: God’s grace, even for someone who had fallen from such heights. What does that tell us about just how full and complete the redemption that we have in Jesus really is? How can we have assurance that no matter what we have done, or how far our fall, if we, like David, repent, that forgiveness is ours?

Finding True Gold: Part 1

Amair was born in Manaus—the capital city of Brazil’s Amazon region. Shortly after he was born, his parents divorced and his mother took him to Manacapuru, a town on the banks of the Amazon. Because the family business was in agriculture, Amair’s mother eventually moved upriver to a small village where she bought much land.

Meanwhile, Amair continued growing and was eventually drafted for military service. After serving his 15-month tour, Amair was ready for another kind of adventure—looking for gold! During the 1980s gold fever hit Brazil, and diggers flocked to where gold had been found.

Amair’s brother lived in one of these “golden” areas, so he invited Amair to come stay with him. Unbeknownst to Amair, his brother had become a Seventh-day Adventist. As they worked together, the brother began to share his faith with Amair. Just one week after he arrived, however, the government closed all the places for gold hunters, and Amair lost his job.

Although very disappointed, Amair stayed with his brother for a time and continued to learn. “My brother told me about Jesus, and this gave me happiness. I lost the gold I had been looking for, but I found the truest gold!” Amair’s brother gave him a series of Bible studies, and before long Amair was baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

But then his conscience began to bother him. What about the rest of his family? Who would share this heavenly treasure with them?

He first went to his sister who was living in Manaus. To his surprise and delight, she, too, had become an Adventist. He stayed there for a year, during which time his sister further strengthened his faith.

It was also around this time that Amair met a young woman named Francinette, who wasn’t an Adventist. Not knowing where it might lead, Amair became friends with Francinette, determined that “I will get her for God and for me!” The two remained friends for a long time, and Amair was able to study the Bible with Francinette. “At first she hugged the truth, and then she started to hug me also!” Amair explains with a smile. Eventually, Francinette was baptized, and later on the two were married. The couple moved to a village along the upper stretches of the Amazon, then later, at the invitation of Amair’s mother, moved to the little village where she lived.

The village needed a school teacher, and during that time the government of the Amazon region stated that anyone who completed four years of primary education could qualify to be a teacher in the community. Amair was chosen to be the village’s community teacher.

Amair was a natural teacher, but he wanted to share more than just reading, writing, and arithmetic with the community. He wanted to share “God’s gold” that he had found!

To be continued in next week’s Inside Story.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Nehemiah 2:18*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand that God actively fights on behalf of His faithful ones.

Feel: Have the confidence that, in time, God will deliver him or her from every obstacle of the evil one.

Do: Pray and fulfill his or her present duty, trusting in God's gracious guidance.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: God Is Directly Involved When His People Face Insurmountable Obstacles.

A How is the great controversy theme demonstrated in the experiences of David and Goliath? Elijah and the prophets of Baal? Hezekiah and Sennacherib? Esther and Haman?

B What lessons can we learn from Nehemiah's resolve to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem in the face of opposition (*Neh. 2:8, 18*)?

II. Feel: Reassured of God's Sovereignty Over the Forces of Evil

A How would you have felt if you were Elijah on Mount Carmel? Or Hezekiah facing marauding Assyrians? Or Esther and Mordecai facing the wrath of Haman?

B How is David's repentance, as reflected in his prayer of repentance in Psalm 51, reassuring amid our own failures?

III. Do: When Faced With Obstacles, God's People Do Not Back Down From Duty.

A What lessons on prayer can we learn from the prayers of Elijah, Hezekiah, and Nehemiah?

B How did Nehemiah motivate the people so as to elicit the response: " 'Let us start building' " the walls of Jerusalem? (*Neh. 2:18, NRSV*). What are some of the duties and responsibilities that we often abandon due to obstacles?

► **Summary:** At one time or another, we all meet opposition while in God's service, but it is our privilege to overcome in His strength.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Nehemiah 2:18*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: When facing opposition and obstacles, God’s people should rely on His promises that He will fight for them. No matter their failings, repenting sinners can find forgiveness.

Just for Teachers: Invite members of the class to reflect on experiences in which they faced daunting opposition or obstacles in their spiritual journeys. Ask them to relate their experiences to the biblical stories for this week.

Opening Activity: Encourage three or four members in the class to share their personal testimonies on what they consider to be their most difficult moments in their walk of faith. Next, ask class members to share which of the following stories they identify with most, and why: David and Goliath, Elijah and Baal’s prophets (ask them to think of what the modern-day equivalent to Baal’s prophets might be), Hezekiah and Sennacherib, or Esther and Haman.

Consider This: Many of the heroes in the above-mentioned stories displayed behavior later in their lives that contradicted the faithfulness that we see here in their earlier narratives. For example, David went on to commit adultery with Bathsheba and tried to cover it up by instigating the death of her husband, Uriah. After the exhilarating showdown at Mount Carmel that demonstrated there was indeed a God in Israel, Elijah subsequently ran from Jezebel (*1 Kings 19*). Hezekiah, in a vain display, showed off his wealth instead of God’s goodness to visiting emissaries from Babylon (*2 Kings 20:12–18*). Clearly, any victories we may have had on our faith journey are all because of our God, who takes on our battles as His own. How do these stories help us to know to whom to give glory to for any victories we might gain over temptation or successes while conducting evangelistic meetings or in achieving our dreams in life?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: The narratives for this week’s study are ones of success and failure. But more so, they are narratives of God’s faithfulness. Even though these stories are familiar to many students, there is power in having Scripture actually read aloud (even a familiar

passage). Ask students to describe how the great controversy theme is depicted in each passage.

Bible Commentary

I. The Battle Is the Lord's: Deliverance in Moments of Crisis (Review *1 Samuel 17:43–51, 1 Kings 18:21–39, 2 Kings 19:21–34, and Esther 3:8–11 with your class.*)

David bravely faced the Philistine giant Goliath and overcame in God's strength. At issue was God's name, His sovereignty, and His election of Israel as His very own covenant people.

Similarly, at the contest at Mount Carmel, Elijah found himself contending with Baal's prophets. At issue here was God's lordship. Who was the Lord? When the Assyrians surrounded Jerusalem (after just pillaging many of the surrounding cities), the issue was whose God was sovereign: the Assyrian god (as they claimed) or the Holy One of Israel (as Isaiah declared). The great controversy theme is unmistakable in each instance.

When Esther had to ward off the threat from Haman, at stake was God's covenant with Israel, whether the community of Israel would be exterminated or would be miraculously preserved in order to be God's witnesses in the world. One theme that runs through these stories is that God fought on behalf of His people, taking on each battle as His own. Our own spiritual battles are no less God's than when He helped David vanquish Goliath or Elijah prevail over the prophets of Baal.

Consider This: In each of these stories, identify what made the story end as it did. For example: disposition of the human instrument, prayer, and faith in God.

II. When God's People Advance the Enemy's Cause (Review *2 Samuel 11:1–17 with your class.*)

Possibly every soccer player's worst nightmare would be if he or she were to accidentally kick a ball right into his/her own goal. Analogously, David, who was clearly on the Lord's side, appears to be fighting from the enemy's side in his affair with Bathsheba. As Christians, we may, like David, sometimes do things (by our action or inaction) that advance the interests of the enemy rather than of God. Thankfully, to whom we belong—whether Christ or Satan—is not a function of an act here and an act there. Belonging *to* Christ is based on our faith *in* Christ, “faith working through love” (*Gal. 5:6, NKJV*). Every sinner who repents will find

forgiveness and acceptance as a part of the family of God.

Consider This: While cautioning literature evangelists against deception and emphasizing the need for integrity in business dealings, Ellen G. White wrote: “One act does not determine the character, but it breaks down the barrier, and the next temptation is more readily entertained.”—*Counsels for the Church*, p. 84. How does this statement help us to understand why David, and many of us, have had chances to still take a stand on God’s side, in spite of glaring weaknesses?

III. Faithful Discharge of Duty in the Midst of Opposition (*Review Nehemiah 1 and 4:1–8 with your class.*)

We may never get the full picture of the opposition that Nehemiah faced. However, we know that the people who attempted to stand in his way were influential. We also know that the accusation they leveled against Nehemiah, which could easily reach the Persian capital, was a serious charge. It had to do with treason. Nehemiah’s action could be interpreted as planning an insurrection and attempting to assert Judah’s independence from the Persians.

Perhaps there was a sense of national pride that motivated Nehemiah. Those who have lived in foreign lands know how it feels to hear bad news from “home,” whether of political disasters or, as in Nehemiah’s case, of misfortune, such as reports of run-down structures or of complications regarding newly erected structures. Faithful to his divine commission in the face of opposition, Nehemiah took advantage of his proximity to the king to ask for financial assistance to construct the walls of Jerusalem.

Consider This: No doubt the construction work was a daunting task—one not for the faint of heart. Nehemiah entered the work with determination and commitment. His dedication was a motivation for others to join in. He was not to be deterred from the task by any force. So it should be with us in the construction work of the kingdom of God within us. Nothing is to take precedence over our preparation for God’s kingdom. According to Nehemiah 4:5, on what basis does Nehemiah implore God to intervene on the desolation of Jerusalem?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: It is comforting to know that, in spite of our failings, God still considers us who believe in Jesus Christ to be His people. In the grand scheme of the great controversy, believers are fighting on, and from, the winning side. We belong here, not on account of our action but on account of our faith in Jesus Christ. Granted, that faith works

through love, as we have seen. Again the obstacles that we face should be understood against the backdrop of the great controversy. God will give us the strength to press on in the construction work of our spiritual lives no matter what opposition we may face.

Thought/Application Questions:

① Understanding that it is the Holy Spirit who turns our hearts back to God whenever we wander away, what must we permit in order for the Spirit to do His work?

② How is worship a factor in the conflict involving Elijah and the prophets of Baal and in the other stories from this week? How do these stories inform our understanding of worship today?

Activity: In what ways might it be argued that our encounters with the forces of evil are no less dramatic than David's encounter with Goliath? Discuss.

► **STEP 4—Create**

Just for Teachers: The narratives in this week's lesson lend themselves to dramatic presentation. Ask for volunteers to prepare short skits for each of the stories studied this week.

Activity: Ask some of the other class members to download paintings of David and Goliath from the Internet, for those who have the technology such as iPads, other tablets, and iPhones, and project the images on a screen. Also do an Internet search on Elijah at Mount Carmel, as well as a search on Esther and Haman. What impressions do you get from these visual representations?

Alternate Activity: Where this electronic equipment is not available, ask members to prepare short skits depicting characters in one of these stories.

SEEK TO RESTORE... THIS IS TRUE MINISTRY*



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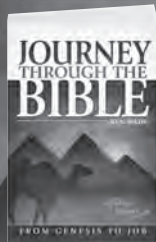
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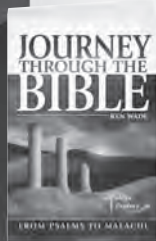
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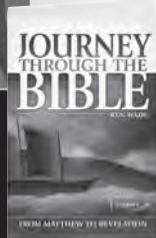
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