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THE GREAT CONTROVERSY

All humanity is now involved in a great controversy between Christ and Satan regarding the character of God, His law, and His sovereignty over the universe. This conflict originated in heaven when a created being, endowed with freedom of choice, in self-exaltation became Satan, God's adversary, and led into rebellion a portion of the angels. He introduced the spirit of rebellion into this world when he led Adam and Eve into sin. This human sin resulted in the distortion of the image of God in humanity, the disordering of the created world, and its eventual devastation at the time of the worldwide flood. Observed by the whole creation, this world became the arena of the universal conflict, out of which the God of love will ultimately be vindicated. To assist His people in this controversy, Christ sends the Holy Spirit and the loyal angels to guide, protect, and sustain them in the way of salvation.

THE GREAT CONTROVERSY

Scripture portrays a cosmic battle between good and evil, God and Satan. Understanding this controversy, which has involved the entire universe, helps answer the question Why did Jesus come to this planet?

A Cosmic View of the Controversy

Mystery of mysteries, the conflict between good and evil began in heaven. How could sin possibly originate in a perfect environment?

Angels, beings of a higher order than humans (Ps. 8:5), were created to enjoy intimate fellowship with God (Rev. 1:1; 3:5; 5:11). Of superior strength, and obedient to God's Word (Ps. 103:20), they function as servants or "ministering spirits" (Heb. 1:14). Though generally invisible, at times they appear in human form (Genesis 18,19; Heb. 13:2). It was through one of these angelic beings that sin was introduced to the universe.

The Origin of the Controversy

Using the kings of Tyre and Babylon as figurative descriptions for Lucifer, Scripture illuminates how this cosmic controversy began. "Lucifer, son of the morning," the anointed covering cherub, resided in the presence of God (Isa. 14:12; Eze. 28:14). Scripture says, "You were the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty....You were perfect in your ways from the day you were created, till iniquity was found in you" (Eze. 28:12,15).

Although sin's rise is inexplicable and unjustifiable, its roots can be traced to Lucifer's pride: "Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor" (Eze. 28:17). Lucifer refused to be content with the exalted position his Creator had given him. In selfishness he coveted equality with God Himself: "You have said in your heart; 'I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the

stars of God...I will be like the Most High"" (Isa. 14:12-14). But though he desired God's position, he did not want His character. He grasped for God's authority but not His love. Lucifer's rebellion against God's government was the first step in his transformation into Satan, "the adversary."

Lucifer's covert actions blinded many angels to God's love. The resulting discontent and disloyalty to God's government grew until one third of the angelic host joined him in rebellion (Rev. 12:4). The tranquility of God's kingdom was shattered and "war broke out in heaven" (Rev. 12:7). The celestial warfare issued in Satan, depicted as the great dragon, the ancient serpent, and the devil, being "cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him" (Rev. 12:9).

How Did Human Beings Become Involved?

Upon his expulsion from heaven, Satan spread his rebellion to our earth. Disguised as a speaking serpent and using the same arguments that had led to his own downfall, he effectively undermined Adam and Eve's trust in their Creator (Gen. 3:5). Satan aroused in Eve discontent regarding her assigned position. Infatuated by the prospect of equality with God, she believed the tempter's word—and doubted God's. Disobeying God's command, she ate the fruit and influenced her husband to do the same. In believing the serpent's word over that of their Creator they betrayed their trust in and loyalty to God. Tragically, the seeds of the controversy that had begun in heaven took root in Planet Earth (see Genesis 3).

In seducing our first parents to sin, Satan ingeniously wrested from them their dominion over the earth. Now claiming to be the "prince of this world," Satan challenged God, His government, and the peace of the whole universe from his new headquarters, Planet Earth.

The Impact on the Human Race

The effects of the struggle between Christ and Satan soon became apparent as the sin distorted the image of God in humanity. Though God offered His covenant of grace to the human race through Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:15; see chapter 7 of this book), their first child, Cain, murdered his brother (Gen.4:8). Wickedness continued to multiply until in sorrow God had to say of man "that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5).

God used a great flood to cleanse the world of its unrepentant inhabitants and give the human race a new start (Gen. 7:17-20). But before long the descendants of faithful Noah departed from God's covenant. Although God had promised never again to destroy the entire earth with a flood, they blatantly concretized their distrust of Him by erecting the tower of Babel in an attempt to reach heaven and thus have a means of escape from any ensuing flood. This time God quashed man's rebellion by confounding his universal language (Gen. 9:1,11; 11).

Sometime later, with the world in near total apostasy, God extended His covenant to Abraham. Through Abraham, God planned to bless all nations of the world (Gen. 12:1-3; 22:15-18). However, the successive generations of Abraham's descendants proved faithless to God's gracious covenant. Entrapped in sin, they aided Satan in achieving his

objective in the great controversy by crucifying the Author and Surety of the covenant, Jesus Christ.

Earth, the Theater of the Universe

The account in the book of Job of a cosmic convocation involving representatives from various parts of the universe gives additional insight into the great controversy. The account begins, "Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. And the Lord said to Satan, 'From where do you come?' So Satan answered the Lord and said, 'From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking back and forth on it'" (Job 1:6,7; cf. 2:1-7).

Then the Lord, in effect, said, "Satan, look at Job. He faithfully obeys My law. He is perfect!" (see Job 1:8). When Satan countered, "Yes, but he's perfect only because it pays to serve You. Don't You protect him?" Christ responded by permitting Satan to test Job in any way short of taking his life (see Job 1:9-2:7).

The cosmic perspective the book of Job affords provides powerful proof of the great controversy between Christ and Satan. This planet is the stage on which this dramatic struggle between right and wrong is being played out. As Scripture states, "We have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men" (1 Cor. 4:9).

Sin severed the relationship between God and man, and "whatever is not from faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). The breaking of God's commandments, or laws, is the immediate result of a lack of faith, the evidence of a ruptured relationship. In turn, by the plan of salvation God intends to restore the trust in the Creator that leads to a loving relationship manifested by obedience. As Christ noted, love leads to obedience (John 14:15).

In our lawless age absolutes are neutralized, dishonesty is praised, bribery is a way of life, adultery is rampant, and agreements, both international and personal, lie shattered. It is our privilege to look beyond our desperate world to a caring, omnipotent God. This larger view reveals to us the importance of our Saviour's atonement, which is bringing this universal controversy to an end.

The Cosmic Issue

What is the pivotal issue in this life and death struggle?

God's Government and Law

God's moral law is just as essential to the existence of His universe as are the physical laws that hold it together and keep it functioning. Sin is "the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4, KJV), or "lawlessness" as the Greek word *anomia* indicates. Lawlessness issues from a rejection of God and His government.

Rather than admitting responsibility for the lawlessness in the world, Satan lays the blame on God. He says God's law, which he alleges is arbitrary, infringes on individual freedom. Furthermore, he charges, since it is impossible to obey it, that law works against the best interests of created beings. Through this constant and insidious undermining of the law, Satan attempts to overthrow God's government and even God Himself.

Christ and the Issue of Obedience

The temptations Christ faced during His earthly ministry revealed the seriousness of the controversy over obedience and surrender to God's will. In meeting those temptations, which prepared Him to be "a merciful and faithful High Priest" (Heb. 2:17), He met in single combat a deadly foe. In the wilderness after Christ fasted forty days, Satan tempted Him to change stones to bread to prove He really was the Son of God (Matt. 4:3). As Satan had tempted Eve to doubt God's word in Eden, so now he tried to cause Christ to doubt the validity of what God had said at His baptism:

"This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). Had Christ taken matters into His own hands, creating bread out of stones to prove His divine sonship, He would have, like Eve, revealed a lack of trust in God. His mission would have ended in failure.

But Christ's highest priority was to live by His Father's word. In spite of His great hunger, He answered Satan's temptation with "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4).

In another attempt to defeat Christ, Satan gave Him a panoramic view of the kingdoms of the world, promising, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me" (Matt. 4:9). He implied that by doing so Christ could regain the world thus completing His mission without enduring the agony of Calvary. Without a moment's hesitation, and in absolute loyalty to God, Jesus commanded, "Away with you, Satan!" Then, using Scripture, the most effective weapon in the great controversy, He said, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve" (Matt. 4:10). His words ended the battle. Though retaining His total dependence on the Father, Christ had defeated Satan.

Showdown at Calvary

This cosmic controversy comes into its clearest focus at Calvary. Satan intensified his efforts to abort Jesus' mission as the time approached for it to close. Satan was especially successful in using the religious leaders of the time, whose jealousy over Christ's popularity caused such trouble that He had to end His public ministry (John 11:45-54). Through betrayed by one of His disciples and perjured testimony, Jesus was arrested, tried, condemned to death (Matt. 26:63,64; John 19:7). In absolute obedience to His Father's will, Jesus remained faithful until death.

The benefits of both Christ's life and His death reach beyond the limited world of the human race. Speaking of the cross, Christ said, "Now the prince of this world [Satan] will be driven out" (John 12:31, NIV); "the prince of this world now stands condemned" (John 16:11, NIV).

The cosmic controversy came to its climax at the cross. The love and faithful obedience Christ demonstrated there in the face of Satan's cruelty undermined Satan's position, assuring his ultimate downfall.

Controversy About Truth as It Is in Jesus

Today the great controversy raging furiously around Christ's authority involves not only His law, but His word—the Scriptures. Approaches to the interpretation of the Bible have been developed that allow little or no room for divine revelation. Scripture is treated as if it were no different from any other ancient document and analyzed with the same critical methodology. A growing number of Christians, including theologians, no longer view the Scriptures as the Word of God, the infallible revelation of His will. Consequently, they have come to question the Biblical view of the person of Jesus Christ; His nature, virgin birth, miracles, and resurrection are widely debated.

The Most Crucial Question

When Christ asked, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" the disciples replied, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (Matt. 16:13,14). In other words, most of His contemporaries considered Him as a mere man. Scripture continues the account: Jesus asked His twelve, "But who do you say that I am?"

"And Simon Peter answered and said, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'

"Jesus answered and said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven'" (Matt. 16:15-17).

Today everyone faces the same question Christ asked His disciples. One's answer to this life-and-death question depends on one's faith in the testimony of God's Word.

The Center of Bible Doctrines

Christ is the focus of the Scriptures. God invites us to comprehend the truth as it is in Jesus (Eph. 4:21), for He is the truth (John 14:5). One of Satan's strategies in the cosmic conflict is to convince people that they can understand truth apart from Jesus. So several centers of truth have been proposed, either individually or in combination: (1) man, (2) nature, or the observable universe,(3) Scriptures, and (4) the church.

While these all have their part in revealing truth, Scripture presents Christ as the Creator of each of the above, and transcending each. They all find real meaning only in the One from whom they come. Divorcing Bible doctrines from Him leads to a misunderstanding regarding "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). It suits both the nature and the purpose of the antichrist to suggest other centers of truth than Christ. (In the original Greek, antichrist may mean not only "against" Christ but "in the place of" Christ.) By substituting some other center than Christ in the church's doctrines, Satan achieves his goal of directing attention away from the One who is the only hope of humanity.

The Function of Christian Theology

The cosmic view unveils Satan's attempt to remove Christ from His rightful place, both in the universe and in truth. Theology, by definition a study of God and His relationship with His creatures, must unfold all doctrines in the light of Christ. The mandate of Christian theology is to inspire confidence in the authority of the Word of God and to replace all other suggested centers of truth with Christ. When it does so, true Christian theology

serves the church well, for it goes to the root of the cosmic controversy, exposes it, and meets it with the only incontrovertible argument—Christ as revealed in the Scriptures. From this perspective God can use theology as an effective instrument for aiding humanity in opposing Satan's effort on earth.

The Significance of the Doctrine

The doctrine of the great controversy reveals the tremendous battle that affects every person born in the world—that, in fact, touches every corner of the universe. Scripture says, "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12).

The Doctrine Produces a Constant State of Watchfulness

An understanding of this doctrine convicts one of the need to combat evil. Success is possible only through dependence on Jesus Christ, the Captain of the hosts, the One "strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle" (Ps. 24:8). As Paul said, accepting Christ's survival strategy entails taking up "the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints" (Eph. 6:13-18). What a privilege for true Christians to live a life that is characterized by patience and faithfulness, a readiness at all times for the conflict (Rev. 14:2), manifesting a constant dependence upon One who has made us "more than conquerors" (Rom. 8:37).

It Explains the Mystery of Suffering

Evil did not originate with God. He who "loved righteousness and hated lawlessness" (Heb. 1:9) is not to blame for the world's misery. Satan, a fallen angel, is responsible for cruelty and suffering. We can better understand robberies, murders, funerals, crimes, and accidents—however heartbreaking—when we see them in the framework of the great controversy.

The cross testifies to both the destructiveness of sin and the depths of God's love for sinners. Thus the great controversy theme teaches us to hate sin and to love the sinner.

It Displays Christ's Present Loving Concern for the World

Upon His return to heaven, Christ did not leave His people orphans. In great compassion He provided us with every possible aid in the battle against evil. The Holy Spirit was commissioned to "fill in" for Christ to be our constant companion until Christ would return (John 14:16; cf. Matt. 28:20). The angels were also commissioned to be involved in His saving work (Heb. 1:14). Our victory is assured. We can have hope and courage as we face the future, because our Master is in control. Our lips can utter praises for His saving work.

It Reveals the Cosmic Significance of the Cross

The salvation of humanity was at stake in Christ's ministry and death, for He came to give His life for the remission of our sins. In doing so He vindicated His Father's character, law, and government, against which Satan had cast false aspersions.

Christ's life vindicated God's justice and goodness and demonstrated that God's law and government were fair. Christ revealed the groundlessness of Satan's attack on God, showing that through total dependence on God's power and grace repentant believers could rise above the harassments and frustrations of daily temptations and live victorious over sin.