



This will be the last article on the “war in heaven” described in Revelation chapter 12 and then we will go through the book more systematically. For me personally, the things discussed in this article are at the heart and center of everything that is important. In addition, we can only understand the book of Revelation when we see clearly the issues in this war given that the “cosmic conflict motif” is the central theme of the book.

For many it seems impossible that a Sovereign God could allow for a war to develop. Wouldn't this suggest that God is weak or at least disinterested? Why didn't he act with more authority and power to squash the rebellion? The 2nd century philosopher Celsus ridiculed this belief of the early Christians that a Sovereign God could have an opponent:

“Their 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 devil (in Hebrew, Satanus...)” (1)

“But they [the Christians] show how utterly concocted these ideas are when they go on to say that the highest god in heaven, desiring to do such and such – say, confer some great gift on man – cannot fulfil his purpose because he is opposed and thwarted by a god who is his opposite. Does this mean that the Son of God can be beaten by a devil? (2)

In the mind of Celsus it would be impossible for someone to thwart the will of God. It's worth noting that Celsus was unable to articulate a plausible explanation for the existence of evil, but yet to him the view that God has a powerful enemy seemed utterly inconceivable and downright offensive.

Before tackling that issue, let's first try to understand Satan's primary goal in stirring up this controversy. The Bible provides abundant evidence that what Satan has always desired is power and ultimately to be worshiped as God. We have already said that Lucifer was an exalted angel, “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. You were blameless in all you did from the day you were created until the day evil was found in you.” (3)

But apparently this wasn't enough for Lucifer and he turned his eyes from God and began looking at himself in the mirror, perhaps like the Snow White fairy tale: “Mirror mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?” but the voice came back, “God, is the fairest of them all.” The realization that God was superior to him in every way and that God was the only one worthy of worship was too much for him to handle and so Satan established the first of many proud and self-serving “me-myself-and-I” kingdoms.

We are warned not to “...swell up with pride and be condemned, as the Devil was” (4) and just listen to these proud and upward aspirations of Satan: “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.’” (5)

In a previous article on the book of Job, I tried to make the case that God's description to Job of the mighty Leviathan is also referring to Satan: “His pride is invincible; nothing can make a dent in that pride. Nothing can get through that proud skin-- impervious to weapons and weather...” (6) “When it raises itself up the gods are afraid; at the crashing they are beside themselves.” (7) “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.” (8) Later in Isaiah we read that someday this “slippery snake” Leviathan will be destroyed: “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.” (9)

In Ezekiel it is described of Satan that “In your great pride you claim, ‘I am a god! I sit on a divine throne in the heart of the sea.’” (10)

Pride consumes a person. It eventually leads to the worship of self and an insatiable desire that everyone else will acknowledge your supremacy as well. If there is any doubt that worship is what Satan desires most, when God himself came in human form, he began his ministry by going out into the desert to confront Satan. In his narcissism, Satan – a creature! – had the audacity to ask his Creator to kneel down and worship him, “All this will be yours, then, if you worship me.” (11) Remembering that this war began among the angels, it is worth noting that the angels in heaven must have looked on with stunned amazement at this time to see the former angel Lucifer make such a bold demand of God. And, it's clear that they were watching this entire encounter because when “...the Devil left Jesus...angels came and helped him.” (12)

Finally, the book of Revelation points to a very sad time in human history when Satan will have achieved his goal: “Everyone worshiped the Dragon...” (13) Feeding self is what Satan lives for and he roars here and there seeking who he can consume in order to feed the compulsions of selfishness. Satan has established planet earth as a place that operates under the principles of his kingdom which are otherwise known as “survival of the fittest” and every day on this planet we observe the stronger consuming the weaker.

By contrast, God's kingdom is nothing like this! His kingdom is based on the principle of other-centered, self-sacrificial love. God's kingdom is based on the principle of the stronger laying down their life for the weaker! Prior to sin, heaven was filled only with this kind of outward moving love. No one selfishly hoarded and no one judged and condemned others for the purpose of elevating self. Love for God and love for neighbor was the "law" of the kingdom. Everything changed, however, when the mighty angel Lucifer became the first "consumer."

If it is true that power and the desire for worship were Satan's end goal, what would be the best way to achieve this? Did Satan believe that he could outmuscle God? Not likely! It says in James that when the devils consider God's power that they tremble with fear. (14) Satan knew that a more subtle approach was needed.

The passage in Revelation 12:7 that refers to the "war in heaven" uses the Greek word "polemos" for war. From this word we derive "polemics" which is the art or practice of argumentation or controversy. This war in heaven was not fought with tanks and lightning-bolts. It was a war fought more along the lines of a political campaign during which we frequently witness candidates slander the character of their opponent for political advantage. Tim Jennings used this illustration at a Good News Tour conference several years ago and I thought it was very effective (this is my loose re-telling of the story):

Imagine that you have attended a vibrant and loving church for many years. Your brother is the head-elder and your father is the pastor. This church oozed love. The poor in the local neighborhood were taken care of. Every week offerings flowed in for all kinds of worthy projects and the church board voted that rather than spend millions of dollars to build a larger church with plush seating (even though it was needed) that they would instead purchase cheap fold up chairs and have the overflow seating move onto the stage in order that the many projects for the needy could be advanced. What a church this was! But then one day, your brother, who you have always known to be a loving and trusting individual, pulled you aside after service with a concerned look. "I'm concerned about Dad...we need to help Dad...this is difficult for me to say, but the truth is that Dad has been secretly embezzling some of the offering money for himself and the problem is getting worse. Don't tell anyone until we can come up with a plan, but we need to do something to help Dad."

What would you do? You have always known both your brother and your father to be loving and trusting people, but now there is a seed of doubt about your father's goodness. Imagine now that this "news" was leaked to the entire church. Would the atmosphere change? How could the situation be resolved?

We will come back to this illustration, but do we have any evidence as to what Satan may have said to the angels. I would like to propose that by the time Satan spoke to Eve in the tree that he had perfected to a fine art form his temptations that led 1/3 of the angels away from God. He is a master deceiver at this point and for that reason the conversation between Eve and Satan provides invaluable insights into what likely occurred in the heavenly realm as well. Let's try to think through the implications of Satan's very calculated 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?’” (15)

The implication is subtle, yet clear. “Psst...Eve. Say, this might not be true, but I heard that God doesn’t let you eat any fruit in this garden? Has God really restricted you to that extent, Eve? Hmm...It’s a pity that God doesn’t give his creatures 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...” (16) – all, except one. Perhaps the implication started the wheels turning within Eve’s mind as to why God would restrict her access to anything in the garden. [Of course, the very fact that Satan is at the tree in the first place is absolute proof that God is a God of freedom! “Satanic” is the only word that accurately portrays this first lie to Eve!]

The snake’s negative implication that God had limited her freedom should have been a major red flag to Eve and caused her flee the scene immediately, but instead she foolishly 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.’” (17)

Eve’s rather weak reply to Satan’s accusation that God had been restrictive of her freedom, gave Satan the green light to immediately go in for the kill, “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.’” (18)

In other words, “Eve, Eve, Eve...Did you really believe what God said? Oh, I remember when I used to blindly trust God, but God has lied to you! Sadly, God is not trustworthy, Eve. First, he limits your freedom to eat fruit (I mean, what’s up with that?), and 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?”

And so, Eve ate the fruit, but eating the fruit was merely the action that confirmed that she had in fact believed the lies about God. What Eve really ate was the lie that the God who created her was restrictive and untrustworthy. This was no poisonous apple! What Eve (and later Adam) ingested was a lie about the character of God. Eating the apple was the action that confirmed the fact that they believed Satan’s lies about God to be true. For them, reality was suddenly turned on its head and they now saw God as the one to be afraid of instead of Satan. As confirmation of this, when God came for a walk in the garden, their response was to hide in the bushes, “I heard you in the garden; I was afraid and hid from you...” (19) Why were they hiding? Had God changed into an angry man loudly stomping through his garden? “Who stole my fruit!?” Of course not! Adam and Eve changed, not God. They now doubted God’s goodness and trustworthiness. They now questioned whether God had really been on their side all along.

And that is the key point of the story! Satan’s deception was to distort God’s character and in so doing to lead Adam and Eve to distrust God. Satan knew that once they were cut off from a trusting relationship with God that they would be powerless to overcome and almost immediately we see

the spiritual sickness that plagues all of us descend onto Adam and Eve: fear, hatred, and selfishness. This story is a microcosm that should magnify the essential issue of all issues: The central question in the cosmic conflict that began in heaven revolves around the trustworthy character of God and this subject matter is the central theme of the book of Revelation.

Turning back to the story of the pastor's son who had been lied to, what did he need in order to be 100% convinced that it was his brother who was the liar? If his father stood up in church the next week and made the claim that the charges were false would that fully settle the matter? Wouldn't doubts still persist? What the pastor's son and the entire congregation would need in order to be fully persuaded is evidence – not mere claims! Evidence along the lines of an independent audit that was performed on the financial books and to see that every penny was accounted for – line by line. Only then would they be fully convinced.

This same logic applies to God's dilemma with regards to Satan's slanderous allegations as well. Here are the 3 options that God had:

1. The use of force

Imagine what would have happened if God, as Satan began spreading his lies, had merely ended the debate by eliminating Satan. Would that have achieved victory? Had Barack Obama attempted to win his campaign against John McCain by having him killed, his support would have evaporated and he would have ended up in jail instead of the White House. Similarly, God would have immediately lost the sympathy of the angels altogether had he used the methods of force, fear and coercion. The action of force would have confirmed in their minds that Satan was probably right, and the rebellion would have deepened.

2. Argument and claims



It's true that God has gone on record in making claims about Satan, "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." (20) But if God had made this statement in heaven when the war began (which he very likely did), would this have settled the argument? When a political candidate or President today makes a bold proclamation as Bill Clinton did several years ago, "I did not have sex with that woman..." are we immediately convinced that the words are true? God needed to do more to win the universe back to his side than to merely assert that "I am love personified and Satan is a liar."

3. Evidence

The only way that God could win his case in the minds of both angels and humanity was to provide evidence to defeat the lies and accusations. The entire Biblical record is evidence that God's character is thoroughly good and trustworthy and by contrast it also reveals and exposes the character of Satan. The book of Revelation is especially convincing on this singular point, as I hope to prove. The Bible also gives us the promise that God will win his case, "You will be proved right in what you say, and you will win your case in court." (21) God's supreme action to vindicate his character and to expose Satan's character was to become a member of the human race. God became flesh and blood evidence.

This was the evidence that Adam and Eve needed as they were shaking in the bushes in fear of God. As Eve pondered whether or not God had been restrictive of her freedom could she envision that God would be the one to restrict his own freedom (and to an infinite degree!) by condescending to spend nine months in the womb? Could Adam and Eve possibly imagine that the one they were so afraid of would one day live the life of a humble carpenter? And, as Eve

wondered if God withheld a piece of fruit that would make her more elevated, could the thought possibly enter her mind that the Almighty God would go from the infinitely elevated position as “God” to the very lowest position – dead in a tomb?

Jesus’ mission was to reveal this convincing evidence about God’s character and by contrast to reveal the character of Satan. “No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is Himself God, is near to the Father’s heart. He has revealed God to us.” (22) That is, no one has really seen God and so “the unique One, who is Himself God” came in human form to reveal to us who the true God really is.

The night before Jesus died he confirmed very clearly that his mission was to vindicate God’s character:

“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.” (23) The Message Bible translates this as, “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.” (24)

Eternal life is all about having a true knowledge of God and his character while at the same time banishing the distortions about God that Satan has hacked into our brains. Eternal life is about entering into a very real and personal relationship with God, but this is not possible if our picture of God is such that we would prefer to join Adam and Eve in the bushes. Jesus’ self-described mission was to make God’s name (character) known and this would only make sense for Jesus to say if his name (character) had been slandered and misunderstood. Jesus came to clear up all the confusion and to convincingly squash the lies that seem to be woven into the very fabric of our being about who God is. God’s humility and condescension won the cosmic conflict.

“The Son of God appeared for this very reason, to destroy what the Devil had done.” (25) “Jesus himself became like them and shared their human nature. He did this so that through his death he might destroy the Devil...” (26) He came as “the light of the world” (27) “because their minds have been kept in the dark by the evil god of this world.” (28)

And when Jesus died, not a shred of doubt should remain about whether Satan’s lies about God were true. Jesus described it this way, “The time for judging this world has come, when Satan, the ruler of this world, will be cast out. And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to Myself.” (29)

From where is Satan cast out? If the war is one fought over the trustworthy character of our God, Satan is cast out of our minds when we embrace the reality of God’s character as revealed by Jesus Christ. I think that when Revelation 12 describes Satan and his angels as being cast out of heaven that we should not merely consider a physical change of address for Satan. More importantly, he was cast out of the minds of the loyal angels as they became convinced that Satan was the untrustworthy liar, not God. Ultimately, God’s character was vindicated by Jesus for a God who would allow his own creatures to torture him to death is certainly a God who can be trusted

and Satan's lies are revealed to be utterly preposterous. "He stripped all the spiritual tyrants in the universe of their sham authority at the cross and marched them naked through the streets." (30)

There was once war in heaven – a political war over the character of God. God won the war and restored peace in heaven (and will eventually on earth as well) by his remarkable condescension in becoming a human and dying such a humiliating death:

"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..." (31)

Hiding in the bushes, Adam and Eve were not friends of God. To them, God was one to be feared and that has been the basic underlying theme of human history ever since. The hallmark of paganism all through the Old Testament is based on the concept of appeasement of angry gods who require much flowing blood and child sacrifice. Even the "loyal" religious people in Jesus' day who claimed to worship the God of Abraham were religious primarily because they were desperately trying to keep the right list of rules in order to somehow get right with God. If you had asked them, "Is God good and trustworthy?" they would say "Of course!" but yet their motivation for obedience was based on fear that all originated from a false conception of God – fear of a God who will punish severely unless they obeyed the rules. They were "hiding in the bushes" just as much as Adam and Eve even as they claimed to be God's loyal people. Jesus came to bring us all out of the bushes, so to speak, through the revelation of his character and to restore us back into a loving friendship:

"For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of His Son while we were still His enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of His Son. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God." (32)

The "war in heaven" motif is not merely an interesting side point. This concept opens our minds to understand what the plan of salvation is all about. For many Christians it seems that everything of importance revolves around a complex legal framework: "I've sinned (i.e. – broken the rules). God's sense of justice would require him to kill me (or torture me for eternity) but he paid the legal penalty for sin when he died on the Cross. So now, if I 'accept' this gift I am now in good 'legal standing' with God. I am 'covered by the blood,' God's wrath has been assuaged, and so God will now allow me to enter heaven – primarily for legal reasons."

This description is not the reality. If we rather incorporate the view of what went wrong in the beginning we are now in a position to see what "salvation" is all about. What went wrong in the beginning is that the relationship between God and his children was severed. From my perspective, our preoccupation with the legal model has blinded us to the much more important relational model.

We are not in legal trouble with our God. If we look at “sin” from the aspect of what happened to Adam and Eve we see that it has the following essential features, in this order:

1. A believed lie about the character of God – “God is severe, arbitrary and punishing. God is a liar. God is a destroying tyrant. God is not trustworthy. God is restrictive of our freedom. God abuses his power. God is not a God of love.”
2. Once we have believed one or more of these lies about God, the inevitable and unavoidable consequence is that we now distrust God and “anything that is not based on faith [trust] is sin.” (33)
3. Once trust is broken, we collapse into chaos, lawlessness and open rebellion. “Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness.” (34) The Greek word for lawlessness in this text is anomia. “Nomia” is law, and so “anomia” is literally lawlessness. The result then of believing a lie about the character of God (#1) is that it destroys trust in God (#2) which immediately separates us from God’s friendship and relationship. This separation unavoidably leads to an attitude of rebellion and lawlessness towards God which manifests as outward acts of “sin” (#3).

Sinful actions (what we usually are referring to when we speak of “sin”) are merely the natural result of the internal distrust and rebelliousness against God. With this definition of sin, we are able to understand why God would praise someone like Abraham with these words, “Abram put his trust in the LORD, and because of this the LORD was pleased with him and accepted him.” (35) Abraham was no longer in a sinful and rebellious state as evidenced by the fact that he trusted God and was restored back into a right RELATIONSHIP with God! This is why the Bible is so redundant on the fact that what God really wants is to restore our trust: “God puts people right through their faith (trust) in Jesus Christ.” (36) All that God has ever asked of us is that we put our trust in him and that we are in relationship with him.

How did God restore our trust? If sin ultimately derives from believing a lie about the character of God, then God must first bring us to see the truth about His character. Enter Jesus Christ, the One who came to restore the true image of who God is in our minds and then to kneel and ask for our hand in marriage.

So now let’s start at the beginning and read the entire book of Revelation as just that – a REVELATION of who God is and by contrast of who Satan is. I think that if we read this book in the right way we will discover 2 very different individuals: one is a slaughtered lamb, the other a fierce dragon. Whose kingdom do you want to belong to?

- Written by Dr. Brad Cole

Footnotes:

1. Celsus on the True Doctrine: A Discourse against the Christians (trans. R. Joseph Hoffmann; New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 98-99.
2. Celsus on the True Doctrine, 99.
3. Ezekiel 28:14,15

4. 1 Timothy 3:6
5. Isaiah 14:12-17
6. Job 41:15,16
7. Job 41:25
8. Job 41:33,34
9. Isaiah 27:1
10. Ezekiel 28:2
11. Luke 4:7
12. Matthew 4:11
13. Revelation 13:4
14. James 2:19
15. Genesis 3:1
16. Genesis 2:16
17. Genesis 3:2,3
18. Genesis 3:4,5
19. Genesis 3:10
20. John 8:44
21. Romans 3:4
22. John 1:18
23. John 17:3-6
24. John 17:4,6
25. 1 John 3:8
26. Hebrews 2:4
27. John 8:12
28. 2 Corinthians 4:4
29. John 12:31,32
30. Colossians 2:15
31. Colossians 1:20-22
32. Romans 5:10,11
33. Romans 14:23
34. 1 John 3:4
35. Genesis 15:6
36. Romans 3:22