

The Real “Mother of All Wars”

Brad Cole

In 1844, a German Biblical scholar by the name of Constantin Von Tischendorf arrived at Saint Catherine’s Monastery, on Mount Sinai, in search of ancient Biblical manuscripts. At the end of a long day he was asked by a monk if he would like a fire to warm his room. To his astonishment, the monk then proceeded to start the fire with a pile of ancient manuscripts. These forty-four leaves were felt to be of little value to the monastery and had been carelessly discarded in the trash. Von Tischendorf, however, soon determined that this pile of “trash” was a virtually intact ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament. This discovery ultimately led Von Tischendorf to uncover other Biblical manuscripts at this monastery that were hundreds of years older than what had been the best available to scholars at that time, ultimately improving the accuracy and reliability of our current day translations of the Bible.¹

Over the years, Christian theology has had the strong tendency to construct every belief of any real consequence around the central theme of personal salvation. “Am I saved? How can I *know* that I am saved? What was done to secure my salvation? How do I ‘accept’ what was done for me?” and so on. This focus on personal salvation, however, has led to the development of a rather large “blind spot” in our understanding of God and of the world around us. Perhaps, like Von Tishendorf, we need to walk over to the trash can and take another look at a perspective that has been largely neglected since the first centuries of the early Christian church.

What “perspective”, you ask? I believe that we would do well to re-examine every belief in the context of a cosmic conflict – a conflict that is of such mammoth proportions and significance that the peace and security of the entire universe literally hangs in the balance as to whether or not God is able to bring this war to a successful conclusion. There is much more at stake than our own personal salvation and, as we shall see, many of the most difficult questions that we struggle with in Christian theology can only be understood if we have incorporated a larger picture of a heavenly conflict that has spilled over to planet earth. What we will discover is that when we incorporate this cosmic conflict as a central theme that this adds a depth of understanding to every other Christian doctrine – including personal salvation. In fact, the extreme and radical way in which God won the universal conflict with Satan is the very same way in which God provided for our personal salvation.

What extreme and radical measures?

¹ “The Romance of Manuscripts”, a lecture given by Luke Timothy Johnson, Ph.D., Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at Emory University

When Kingdoms of the world fight with extreme and radical measures they drop nuclear bombs or fly passenger planes into skyscrapers. By contrast, how does the all-powerful God of the Universe fight a war and squash a rebellion? God's nuclear weapon that shook both heaven and earth 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. But, that is getting ahead of our story...

Taking the history and making the diagnosis

Several years ago, I was called by an emergency room physician to see Jose, a 32-year-old man who lived in Mexico. While visiting his sister near Los Angeles, he developed double vision that rapidly progressed to the point that he could not even open his eyes. He was rushed to the emergency room and by the time I saw him his condition had worsened to the point that he could hardly speak and was short of breath. Initially, it was not entirely clear what was going on. He told me that he had been completely healthy prior to this and denied taking any medications or using any drugs. Brain scans and extensive lab tests were all coming back normal but yet he continued to worsen. Just as it appeared that he was about to lose the ability to breathe on his own, I asked, "Are you sure that there wasn't something going on before you got sick that you haven't told me?" Only then, with a weak and slurred voice did he confess, "Yeah...I shoot up heroin, doc." With this revelation, things suddenly began to make sense. He then unfolded the story of how he regularly purchased his heroin in Mexico (also known as "black tar heroin") which is well known to cause botulism. A careful search now revealed infected heroin injection sites and eventually testing that confirmed the diagnosis of botulism. Once the diagnosis was in hand, he was given the appropriate treatment which ultimately led to a complete recovery.

In medicine, making the correct diagnosis is the key first step in understanding the treatment that is most likely to help the patient. Likewise, as we search to understand the cruelty, pain and suffering that we see around us every day, our diagnosis for the problem must be correct if we hope to understand the solution that is needed. In the case of Jose, making the correct diagnosis required an understanding of what was going on in his life prior to developing the symptoms of botulism. Cosmic conflict theology invites this same question as we try to understand a sin-sick world: "Are you sure that there wasn't something going on before you got sick...?" And so, let's roll up our sleeves in this chapter and try to arrive at the correct diagnosis of our sick patient (i.e. – suffering humanity) by taking some history of the sin problem.

But who would be the best person to interview? If we were to ask Abraham, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Peter, and John, wouldn't they all be able to agree with these words about the sin-sick and self-centered condition of their own heart: "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?”²

In order to understand how we got sick in the first place, wouldn't it make sense to go all the way back and to talk with someone who was “well” for at least a period of time? Adam and Eve had this remarkable distinction in that, for at least a 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’...God created human beings; he created them godlike, reflecting God’s nature.”³ At one point in time these two enjoyed the perfection of Eden and dwelled in the very presence of God until suddenly they became as sick (spiritually) as Jose. “So what happened, Adam and Eve? How did you get sick?”

But before our interview of Adam and Eve, it is critically important that we understand that *from a universal perspective*, all was not well when God created Eden – not unless we take the position that God created a bad snake for the purpose of testing Adam and Eve, that is. It is not until the last book of the Bible that this “ancient serpent” is positively identified as Satan:

“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.”⁴

The context of the Eden story is thus in the setting of some sort of heavenly conflict in which Satan has angels that are on his side – “all his angels with him.”⁵ As this chapter unfolds, we will discuss how it is that an all-powerful God could possibly allow a rebellion to occur in the first place. But for now, it is obvious from the Genesis account that God did allow Adam and Eve the freedom to at least hear what Satan and his rebellion were all about if they should choose. But yet, Satan appears to have had restricted access to the tree only and he was not allowed to stalk them around the garden. For example, there are no stories of Satan jumping out from behind every bush, “Hey Eve...” Understood in this way, the tree was really to protect them by placing limits on Satan and they could only encounter his twisted version of reality by disobeying God’s severe warning about the tree, “You may eat the fruit of any tree in the garden, except the tree that gives knowledge of what is good and what is bad. You must not eat the fruit of that tree; if you do, you will die the same day.”⁶

² Romans 7:19,24 – Good News Bible

³ Genesis 1:26,27 – The Message Bible

⁴ Revelation 12:7-9 – Good News Bible

⁵ Revelation 12:0 – Good News Bible

⁶ Genesis 2:16,17 – Good News Bible

Eve, however, ignored God's warning and engaged in a conversation that has resulted in untold carnage. But what really happened and how could a conversation about a piece of fruit lead to such devastation?

First, I think that it is fair to assume that the methods Satan used in luring some of the angels away from God and to his side is probably something he had perfected to a fine art form as he gracefully reclined in the tree. For that reason, the conversation between Eve and Satan provides important insights into what likely occurred in the heavenly realm as well, so 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?’”⁷

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...”⁸ – 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.

The snake's negative implication that God had limited her freedom should have been a major red flag to Eve and caused her to 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.’”⁹

Eve's 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.’”¹⁰

In other words, “Eve, God has lied to you! God is an untrustworthy liar! 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?”

⁷ Genesis 3:1 – Good News Bible

⁸ Genesis 2:16 – Good News Bible

⁹ Genesis 3:2,3 – Good News Bible

¹⁰ Genesis 3:4,5 – Good News Bible

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 that 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..."¹¹ Why were they hiding? They now doubted God's goodness and trustworthiness. They now doubted 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 great controversy revolves around the trustworthy character of God!** This war over God's character is the real "Mother of all Wars." God would have won the battle in the Garden of Eden had Adam and Eve refused to believe Satan's lies about his character. In fact, there would not have been a war in heaven in the first place had the angels refused to accept Satan's distortions about God. The passage just quoted in Revelation 12 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. We also derive the word "politics" from this Greek word. This war in heaven was not fought with tanks and lightning-bolts. It was a war fought just like the one we witnessed at the tree – a war of ideas and principles. Just as political candidates will slander the character of their opponent for political advantage, this is exactly the kind of campaign that Satan was waging against God – a political campaign based on lies and deceptions about God. Political campaigns are about winning hearts and minds and if Adam and Eve had decided that Satan was the untrustworthy liar they would have cast their vote for God and planet earth would have taken on an entirely different history.

Jose developed all of the symptoms of botulism because he injected himself with black tar heroin. His double vision, difficulty swallowing and weakness were merely the symptoms that resulted from using this dangerous form of heroin. Likewise, we are sick (spiritually) with symptoms of selfishness, hatred, and fear. How critically important it is to understand that these are the symptoms that are the natural result of ingesting the lie about who God is. It would make no sense for a physician treating Jose to "treat the double vision" or to "treat the weakness".

¹¹ Genesis 3:10 – Good News Bible

Rather, he needed the underlying infection of botulism to be treated and eradicated – only then did the symptoms begin to improve. In the same way, all of God’s efforts, as we shall explore, have been to work at the root of the problem – to vindicate his trustworthy character in our minds and to restore us back to a healing and trusting friendship once again. Ultimately this was done in the Person of Jesus Christ.

God’s response

To some, the suggestion that God is involved in some sort of a cosmic conflict may seem to diminish his sovereignty and power. After all, if God is all-powerful, how could he possibly be involved in a “war” that could not be solved by a single authoritative word? In order to answer this question, let’s consider some of options God could have used in defeating Satan’s rebellion.

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.”¹² 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

¹² John 8:44 – Good News Bible

the character of Satan. The Bible also gives us the promise God will win his case, “You will be proved right in what you say, and you will win your case in court.”¹³ 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.”¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶

Eternal life is all about having a true knowledge of God and his character. It 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.

¹³ Romans 3:4 – New Living Translation

¹⁴ John 1:18 – New Living Translation

¹⁵ John 17:3-6 – God’s Word Translation

¹⁶ John 17:4,6 – The Message Bible

“The Son of God appeared for this very reason, to destroy what the Devil had done.”¹⁷ “Jesus himself became like them and shared their human nature. He did this so that through his death he might destroy the Devil...”¹⁸ He came as “the light of the world”¹⁹ “because their minds have been kept in the dark by the evil god of this world.”²⁰

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.”²¹

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. 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 suddenly 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.”²²

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...”²³

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

¹⁷ 1 John 3:8 – Good News Bible

¹⁸ Hebrews 2:4 – Good News Bible

¹⁹ John 8:12 – Good News Bible

²⁰ 2 Corinthians 4:4 – Good News Bible

²¹ John 12:31,32 – New Living Translation

²² Colossians 2:15 – The Message Bible

²³ Colossians 1:20-22 – Good News Bible

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.”²⁴

The Principle of God’s Kingdom

While God’s character is the central focus of the great controversy, there is another closely related issue at stake, and that is the basic principle of God’s kingdom vs. Satan’s kingdom. In other words, in what way do God and Satan claim that the universe should be governed? Once again, if we compare this to a political campaign, the issue is not merely over the trustworthy character of the candidate, but it is also based on, “How is this candidate going to run the country?”

The Bible reveals that God and Satan have entirely different ways of governing. God’s kingdom is ultimately based on other-centered love and service. God came in human form and said that if you want to be first in his kingdom, you must be the servant of others, “...if one of you wants to be first, you must be the slave of the others--- like the Son of Man, who did not come to be served, but to serve...”²⁵ “Let love make you serve one another. For the whole Law is summed up in one commandment: ‘Love your neighbor as you love yourself.’”²⁶ In God’s kingdom, the stronger serve the weaker.

As we shall see, Satan’s kingdom by contrast is based on the survival of the fittest principle where the stronger abuse and push the weaker even further down. Satan’s kingdom is based on this principle, “If necessary, I will kill you, in order that I might climb a little higher.” God’s kingdom says, “I will lay down my life, in order that you might live.”

Although we see survival of the fittest in nature today, God did not design our planet such that the stronger would hunt, kill and eat the weaker. What we see around us is a reflection that Satan, “the prince of this world”²⁷ has had dominion on our planet, but we have the promise that

²⁴ Romans 5:10,11 – New Living Translation

²⁵ Matthew 20:27,28 – Good News Bible

²⁶ Galatians 5:13,14 – Good News Bible

²⁷ John 12:31 – New International Version

when God becomes ruler once again that our earth will be restored back into harmony with the principle of his kingdom:

“Wolves and sheep will live together in peace, and leopards will lie down with young goats. Calves and lion cubs will feed together, and little children will take care of them.”²⁸

In the Garden of Eden we see that Adam and Eve almost immediately began exhibiting the self-centered, survival of the fittest principle that dominates Satan’s kingdom. Adam stopped giving of himself to serve and love his wife and instead began to accuse her (notice also the implied accusation against God), “The woman you put here with me gave me the fruit, and I ate it.”²⁹ In other words, “It’s the woman’s fault, God. And by the way, it’s your fault too for making 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.”³⁰ Survival of the fittest at its best! The phrase “You are what you eat” really fits in this story. Adam and Eve ate a lie about God and in turn they immediately internalized and assimilated features of the satanic character and the satanic kingdom in their own lives.

And so, as we read the Bible, we should especially tune in to look for these two central issues: “God’s character vs. Satan’s character” and “The way God runs his kingdom vs. the way Satan runs his kingdom.” Once we have become accustomed to looking for it, we will see that this is the central thread and the central question that runs all through scripture. Two rival “gods” – one is the “real deal” Creator who is entirely worthy of our worship and adoration, the other is a mere creature who lustfully desires to be worshiped as God; two entirely different “persons” – one who is other-centered love personified and who would lay down his life to reach even his enemies, the other who is self-centered to the core and will kill anyone who gets in his way; two polar opposite “governments” – one that calls for the stronger to serve the weaker, the other that call for the stronger to consume the weaker.

The Context of Reality

As the issues in the cosmic conflict become increasingly clear in our own minds, we begin to recognize these warring principles in every page of scripture as well as in our daily lives. The cosmic conflict places everything on a much larger canvas and provides a much richer context to understand the reality around us. Context, as they say, really is everything and this is especially true when it comes to our understanding of God. In my own experience, the incorporation of a cosmic conflict over the character of God is like going from a 2-dimensional to a 3-dimensional world and once such a fundamental change has taken place, there is no going back. It would be

²⁸ Isaiah 11:6 – New Living Translation

²⁹ Genesis 3:12 – Good News Bible

³⁰ Genesis 3:13 – Good News Bible

analogous to living in a house with the blinds pulled down for the first thirty years of life and with no concept or consideration that there might be something outside the walls of the house, until one day someone pulls up a set of blinds, and then another, and then another, until finally a whole new world is seen. And then, as the individual marvels at all of the hustle and bustle going on outside the window, the exhilarating thought occurs, “I am actually meant to be an active participant in what is going on out there! I can actually walk out that door and experience this new world!”

Job

The story of Job is an excellent illustration of this. He had absolutely no context to understand his horrible personal tragedies and was oblivious to the discussion between God and Satan in the heavenly counsel. He had no concept that he was the centerpiece of a debate between God and Satan before the on-looking angels. In fact, if you were an angel, wouldn't you have desired to encourage Job by telling him what God said about him in the beginning of the book: “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.”³¹

What Job needed was a larger perspective of a heavenly war between God and Satan and to see his important role in this conflict. Absent this knowledge, he spent the entire book groping in the dark and wondering what happened to his friend:

“If only my life could once again be as it was when God watched over me. God was always with me then and gave me light as I walked through the darkness. Those were the days when I was prosperous, and the friendship of God protected my home”³²

It wasn't until the very end of the book that God stepped onto the stage to broaden Job's small grasp of reality. Before concluding the argument by saying to the three friends, “You did not speak the truth about me, the way my servant Job did,”³³ God tried to convey this idea to Job of an enemy and a conflict by telling the story of a beast called Leviathan. Listen to some of the descriptive features of this beast:

“His pride is invincible; nothing can make a dent in that pride. Nothing can get through that proud skin-- impervious to weapons and weather...”³⁴ “When it raises itself up the gods are

³¹ Job 1:8 – Good News Bible

³² Job 29:1-3 – Good News Bible

³³ Job 42:7 – Good News Bible

³⁴ Job 41:15,16 – The Message Bible

afraid; at the crashing they are beside themselves.”³⁵ “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.”³⁶

Elsewhere in scripture, in the context of a description of the final end of sin and sinners, this same beast 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.”³⁷

How many other “slippery” and “twisting” snakes does the Bible describe?

God is trying to “open the blinds” and to shed new light onto Job’s reality (and ours!) with the message of this incredible story, which is this: “There is just one piece of the puzzle you are missing to explain all this pain and suffering, Job – a great controversy and a powerfully deceptive adversary!”

Daniel

Daniel was also missing this larger context when it seemed that God was not answering his prayer. In Daniel chapter 9, Daniel earnestly prayed that God would fulfill his promise and allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem. He then received a vision that was so troubling he mourned for 21 days.³⁸ Daniel must have wondered what was going on and he continued to pray about this as was his custom. Remarkably, an angel then appeared to Daniel to “open the blinds” and explain what was going on behind the scenes and to reveal that God *was* in fact acting on Daniel’s prayer. “The angel said to me, ‘Daniel, God loves you.’ Stand up and listen...Daniel, don’t be afraid. God has heard your prayers ever since the first day you decided to humble yourself in order to gain understanding. I have come in answer to your prayer.”³⁹ The angel then went on to describe an intense cosmic conflict that was going on behind the scenes during those 21 days and the reason for the apparent delay:

“The angel prince of the kingdom of Persia opposed me for twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief angels, came to help me... Now I have to go back and fight the guardian angel of Persia. After that the guardian angel of Greece will appear. There is no one to help me except Michael, Israel’s guardian angel. He is responsible for helping and defending me”⁴⁰

³⁵ Job 41:25 – New Revised Standard Version

³⁶ Job 41:33,34 – New International Version

³⁷ Isaiah 27:1 – God’s Word Translation

³⁸ Daniel 10:2

³⁹ Daniel 10:11-13 – Good News Bible

⁴⁰ Daniel 10:13,20; 11:1 – Good News Bible

Imagine Daniel’s surprise to discover that his prayer had, in part, caused good and evil angelic forces to be launched into combat against each other! In this story, Daniel was a “prayer warrior” in the highest sense and had actually become an active participant in the complex battle that was taking place between God and Satan. Daniel’s eyes were opened to the real enemy – one who is far more sinister than any king or kingdom of this world:

“For we are not fighting against human beings but against the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age.”⁴¹

Likewise, as our eyes become opened to the cosmic conflict, it will naturally have the effect of drawing us into the fray as we see that God eagerly waits for us to prayerfully align ourselves with his will, as Daniel did. “The prayer of a good person has a powerful effect”⁴² because when we pray for the things that are in harmony with God’s character, we allow God to intervene against Satan in the cosmic controversy. “I will do whatever you ask for in my name...”⁴³ is the promise of Jesus. Perhaps the understanding of our role to play in the cosmic conflict will cause us to take Jesus at his word and to pray with a much greater sense of urgency and with a real conviction that God has given us the power to actively intervene in this great controversy.

Ezekiel

Ezekiel was a contemporary of Daniel and he also needed a larger context for his depressing situation. After he was carted off to Babylon during the 2nd invasion of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar, things must have seemed very bleak. But then, God enlightened Ezekiel with 2 incredible visions. The first was a remarkably complex vision of wheels within wheels which Ezekiel interpreted this way, “I realized I was seeing the brightness of the LORD’s glory!”⁴⁴ The order, symmetry, and power of the scene must have instilled in the Ezekiel and the captives in Babylon that God really was in control, even if it didn’t seem like it at the time. But God also wanted to reveal to his people a much larger picture and so Ezekiel later received a vision that described another mighty being – initially referred to as the king of Tyre:

“Son of man, give the prince of Tyre this message from the Sovereign Lord: In your great pride you claim, ‘I am a god! I sit on a divine throne in the heart of the sea’... ‘Son of man, weep for the king of Tyre. Give him this message from the Sovereign Lord: ‘You were the perfection of wisdom and beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God. Your clothing was adorned with every precious stone... They were given to you on the day you were created. 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

⁴¹ Ephesians 6:12 – Good News Bible

⁴² James 5:16 – Good News Bible

⁴³ John 14:14 – Good News Bible

⁴⁴ Ezekiel 1:28 – Good News Bible

created until the day evil was found in you. Your great wealth filled you with violence, and you sinned. So I banished you from the mountain of God. I expelled you, O mighty guardian, from your place among the stones of fire. Your heart was filled with pride because of all your beauty. You corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth and exposed you to the curious gaze of kings.”⁴⁵

This passage describes the rebellion of “the mighty angelic guardian” who once dwelled in the very presence of God, “among the stones of fire.” But now his rebellion against God is on display right here on planet earth and before the entire universe – “the curious gaze of kings.”

Had the exiles in Babylon only received the vision of an all-powerful God in Ezekiel chapter 1, the natural unanswered question would have been, “Then why is everything such a mess?” While it is doubtless true that “the mess” is most often a result of our own doing, the book of Ezekiel should encourage us to put things on a larger canvas and to realize that our experience on earth is part of something much bigger. We are literally involved in a “spectacle for the whole world of angels...”⁴⁶ and this rebellion was in fact started by “the mighty angelic guardian.” Even things like the Good News, which we generally attribute only to what it means for us, are “things which even the angels would like to understand.”⁴⁷

Notice also in this passage that Satan in his “great pride” claims, “I am a god!” and this is precisely what Satan desires – to be worshiped as God. When God himself came in human form, he began his ministry by going out in to 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.”⁴⁸ The angels in heaven must have looked on with stunned amazement to see an angel make such a bold demand of God. It’s clear that they were watching this entire encounter because when “...the Devil left Jesus...angels came and helped him.”⁴⁹

Isaiah

Isaiah also lived during discouraging times when there was little faith in God. And, like Ezekiel, Isaiah also witnessed God in all his glory⁵⁰ as well as a vision of the proud enemy:

“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

⁴⁵ Ezekiel 28:2, 11-17 – New Living Translation

⁴⁶ 1 Corinthians 4:9 – Good News Bible

⁴⁷ 1 Peter 1:12 – Good News Bible

⁴⁸ Luke 4:7 – Good News Bible

⁴⁹ Matthew 4:11 – Good News Bible

⁵⁰ Isaiah chapter 6

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. Everyone there will stare at you and ask, ‘Can this be the one who shook the earth and made the kingdoms of the world tremble? Is this the one who destroyed the world and made it into a wasteland? Is this the king who demolished the world’s greatest cities and had no mercy on his prisoners?’⁵¹

The name translated “son of the morning” in this passage literally means “shining one” or “brilliant one.” The Hebrew word is “helel” which is commonly applied to the planet Venus – a “star” so bright that it can even be seen in the middle of the day. The name is therefore also translated as “morning star” or “light bearer” or “Lucifer” in the Latin. Thus, the King James translates this as, “How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!”⁵²

This passage in Isaiah further confirms the selfish and proud aspirations of Lucifer when he became Satan and established a kingdom based on “me, myself, and I” – otherwise known as “survival of the fittest.” We are warned not to “...swell up with pride and be condemned, as the Devil was”⁵³ and Jesus rebuked this proud and self-centered mindset! “This, however, is not the way it shall be among you. If one of you wants to be great, you must be the servant of the rest; and if one of you wants to be first, you must be the slave of the others--- like the Son of Man, who did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life to redeem many people.”⁵⁴

While Satan is desperately trying to climb to the top, Jesus Christ descended to the very bottom:

“The attitude that you should have is the one that Jesus Christ had: He always had the nature of God, but he did not think that by force he should try to remain equal with God. Instead of this, of his own free will he gave up all he had, and took the nature of a servant. He became like a human being and appeared in human likeness. He was humble and walked the path of obedience all the way to death--- his death on the cross.”⁵⁵

What a striking contrast between the two kingdoms!

The above passage calls us to adopt the selfless, other-centered principles of God’s kingdom, “The attitude that you should have is the one that Jesus Christ had.” Cosmic conflict theology does not call us merely to admire God and his kingdom from a distance, but rather to join his kingdom and to adopt the same attitude as the King!

⁵¹ Isaiah 14:12-17 – New Living Translation

⁵² Isaiah 14:12 – New King James Version

⁵³ 1 Timothy 3:6 – Good News Bible

⁵⁴ Matthew 20:26-28 – Good News Bible

⁵⁵ Philippians 2:6-8 – Good News Bible

The early Christians

The early Christians expected Jesus to return very soon, but as years turned into decades and as the church experienced relentless persecution, the situation became very discouraging. Eventually, the only disciple still alive was John and he was imprisoned on the island of Patmos. Like Job, Ezekiel and Isaiah, those early Christians needed a larger perspective and so they received the letter we call “Revelation” because it was to *reveal* or to *clarify* something of great importance. The book opens with the words, “This is the Revelation of Jesus Christ”⁵⁶ and it then goes on to describe the tremendous back-and-forth battle between Christ and Satan.

This last book of the Bible, more than any other, should have been a wake-up call to the early Christians (and us!) to consider that there is much more at stake than the mess we see on our own little planet. God is engaged in a war on a much larger battlefield and planet earth is now the frontline in this war. This is the book that specifically mentions that “war broke out in heaven” and that the “ancient serpent, named the Devil or Satan” was “thrown to earth, and all his angels with him.”⁵⁷ In contrast to the imagery of Satan as a “huge red dragon”⁵⁸, God is humbly portrayed as “The Lamb who was killed...”⁵⁹ And, people are described as taking sides in this battle – some receive the mark of the beast, while others receive the seal of God. In the context of a political battle over the character of God and the nature of his kingdom, the book of Revelation again and again refers to the truth about God that Jesus revealed as the central focus:

“This is his report concerning the message from God and the truth revealed by Jesus Christ.”⁶⁰

“The dragon was furious with the woman and went off to fight against the rest of her descendants, all those who obey God’s commandments and are faithful to the truth revealed by Jesus.”⁶¹

“I am a servant together with you and with other believers, all those who hold to the truth that Jesus revealed. Worship God! For the truth that Jesus revealed is what inspires the prophets.”⁶²

“I also saw the souls of those who had been executed because they had proclaimed the truth that Jesus revealed and the word of God.”⁶³

⁵⁶ Revelation 1:1 – God’s Word

⁵⁷ Revelation 12:7-9 – Good News Bible

⁵⁸ Revelation 12:3 – Good News Bible

⁵⁹ Revelation 5:12 – Good News Bible

⁶⁰ Revelation 1:2 – Good News Bible

⁶¹ Revelation 12:17 – Good News Bible

⁶² Revelation 19:10 – Good News Bible

⁶³ Revelation 20:4 – Good News Bible

The book of Revelation paints the picture that God has already won the war in heaven. Satan is described as being thrown out of heaven and the loyal angels now offer the highest praise for what was accomplished by God in human form. God's great condescension in becoming a human and everything that he did to reveal God's character appears to have won the war in heavenly places:

“Again I looked, and I heard angels, thousands and millions of them! They stood around the throne, the four living creatures, and the elders, and sang in a loud voice: ‘The Lamb who was killed is worthy to receive power, wealth, wisdom, and strength, honor, glory, and praise!’”⁶⁴

Yet it was obvious to the early Christians that the war, from their perspective, was not over and they must have resonated with the description of a battle that rages on:

“And so be glad, you heavens, and all you that live there! But how terrible for the earth and the sea! For the Devil has come down to you, and he is filled with rage, because he knows that he has only a little time left.”⁶⁵

How much hope the early Christians should have taken away from the conclusion of the book, that Satan will be defeated and that they would one day dwell in the presence of God! The entire book of Revelation should give us the understanding that this conflict over the character of God still continues on our planet, but yet we should be filled with hope and the “endurance of the saints”⁶⁶ as we receive the encouraging message that God will be victorious in the end.

Our Mission in the Cosmic Conflict

It has been said of fish that “Of all the things a fish is unlikely to discover, one of them is water.” Yet, despite the fact that we are all literally immersed in a cosmic controversy that involves virtually every aspect of our lives, it is a view that is not often incorporated or emphasized in Christian theology. The reality is that the message of a cosmic conflict over the character of God and the principle by which he runs his kingdom is vitally important for modern day Christians. Why should we live in the dark as Job did for a time, unaware that the trying circumstances on planet earth are the intense focus of God, Satan and countless angels and that we have a critically important role to play? Why should we live in the dark as Daniel did for a time, unaware that our prayer life is so critically important in the battle against Satan and the advancement of God's kingdom?

⁶⁴ Revelation 5:11,12 – Good News Bible

⁶⁵ Revelation 12:12 – Good News Bible

⁶⁶ Revelation 14:12 – English Standard Version

It is not until we begin to see what the real issues are in this war that we are able to “fight” effectively. Christians are called to take up the same mission as Christ, who came to win the war by revealing God’s character of love and thereby dispelling the lies of Satan. We have one supreme command from Christ:

“And now I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples.”⁶⁷

When we truly “love one another” we are revealing to all those around us the character of our God who is love personified.⁶⁸ And, insofar as we take up the command of Christ to selflessly serve in the world rather than to dominate and control we reveal to all those around that the principle of God’s kingdom is also based on humble service to others.

To a suffering world that is asking, “Why so much pain?” Christians should have a clear and convincing answer that “An enemy has done this!”⁶⁹ – Not God! Followers of Christ should be able to affirm, “Yes, God is all-powerful” but yet at the same to explain the story of a universal conflict and that the “force” God used to win the war was to become a helpless baby, a humble carpenter, and a suffering servant. As Christians our highest mission is the vindication of God’s trustworthy character and to bring others, one by one, out of the bushes of fear and mistrust of God.

⁶⁷ John 13:34,35 – Good News Bible

⁶⁸ 1 John 4:8

⁶⁹ Matthew 13:28 – New Living Translation