

The Central Issue: Love or Selfishness?



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Luke 19:41–44; Matt. 23:37, 38; Heb. 11:35–38; Rev. 2:10; Acts 2:44–47; John 13:35.*

Memory Text: “ ‘Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand’ ” (*Isaiah 41:10, NKJV*).

Suppose you are a herdsman tending your goats on the Mount of Olives overlooking Jerusalem. You hear voices. Immediately you recognize the voice of Jesus. As the setting sun gleams off the temple and reflects in snowy whiteness off its magnificent marble walls, Jesus emphatically states, “ ‘Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down’ ” (*Matt. 24:2, NKJV*).

The disciples are confused, and so are you. What could Jesus possibly mean by these words? How do they relate to the end of the world that Jesus' disciples asked about? You listen in rapt attention as Jesus masterfully blends events that would lead up to the destruction of Jerusalem with those that would take place just before His return.

In the destruction of Jerusalem, we discover a foreshadowing of Satan's strategy both to deceive and destroy God's people at the end time. Jesus' instruction in Matthew 24 clearly outlines last-day events in the context of Jerusalem's fall.

We will study Satan's twofold strategy both to deceive and destroy God's people. What the evil one fails to accomplish through persecution, he hopes to achieve through compromise. God is never caught by surprise, and even in the most challenging times He preserves His people.

* Study this week's lesson, based on *The Great Controversy, chapters 1–2, to prepare for Sabbath, April 13.*

A Brokenhearted Savior

As Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives overlooking the city of Jerusalem, His heart was broken. John's Gospel says, "He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him" (*John 1:11, NKJV*). Jesus did everything He could to save His people from the coming destruction of their beloved city.

Jesus' love for His people flowed from a heart of infinite love. He repeatedly appealed to them in love to repent and accept His gracious invitation of mercy.

Read Luke 19:41–44; Matthew 23:37, 38; and John 5:40. What do these verses tell you about Jesus' attitude toward His people and their response to His loving invitation of grace and mercy? What revelation of God's character do you see?

It is difficult to understand such an event as the destruction of Jerusalem in the light of God's loving character. History reveals that tens of thousands died as the Roman general Titus led his armies against the city. Jerusalem was devastated. Men, women, and children were slaughtered. Where was God when His people suffered so greatly? The answer is clear but not easy to grasp fully. God's heart was broken. His eyes were filled with tears. For centuries He reached out to His people. By their rebellion against His loving-kindness, they forfeited His divine protection. God does not always intervene to limit the results of His people's choices. He allows the natural consequences of rebellion to develop. God did not cause the slaughter of innocent children in the destruction of Jerusalem; the tragic death of the innocents was Satan's act, not God's.

Satan delights in war because it stirs the worst passions of the human heart. Down through the centuries, it has been his purpose to deceive and destroy and then blame his evil actions on God.

Read Matthew 24:15–20. What instruction did Jesus give to His people to save them from the coming destruction of Jerusalem?

It is well to remember that the vast majority of Christians living in Jerusalem in A.D. 70 came from a Jewish background. A loving God desired to preserve as many of His people as possible. That is why He gave the instruction that when the Roman armies approached, they were to flee the city.

Reflect on the following statement: we do not judge God's character by events we see around us; rather, we filter all the events we see through the prism of His loving character as revealed in the Bible. Why is this such good counsel?

Christians Providentially Preserved

God's mercy, grace, providence, and foreknowledge are clearly revealed in the events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem. Cestius Gallus and the Roman armies surrounded the city. In an unexpected move, when their attack seemed imminent, they withdrew. The Jewish armies pursued them and won a great victory.

With the Romans fleeing and the Jews pursuing, the Christians in Jerusalem fled to Pella in Perea, beyond the Jordan River. "The promised sign had been given to the waiting Christians, and now an opportunity was offered for all who would, to obey the Saviour's warning. Events were so overruled that neither Jews nor Romans should hinder the flight of the Christians."—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 30.

Read Psalm 46:1 and Isaiah 41:10. What do these passages tell us about God's providential care?

God is sovereign and overrules events on earth for the ultimate accomplishment of His divine purposes. Although at times God alters His original plans based on our human choices, His ultimate plan for this planet will be fulfilled. There will be times when the people of God experience hardship, persecution, imprisonment, and death itself for the cause of Christ. But even in the most challenging of times with Satan's most vicious attacks, God sustains and preserves His church.

Read Hebrews 11:35–38 and Revelation 2:10. What reality do these texts reveal about our battle with the forces of evil? How do these passages harmonize with the idea of God's protection in the previous question? Is there a contradiction in the idea of God's protection and God allowing some to face painful suffering and even a martyr's death for the cause of Christ?

"In vain were Satan's efforts to destroy the church of Christ by violence. The great controversy in which the disciples of Jesus yielded up their lives did not cease when these faithful standard-bearers fell at their post. By defeat they conquered. God's workmen were slain, but His work went steadily forward."—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 41.

What should it mean to us that the Bible writers, who certainly knew pain and suffering, could nevertheless, again and again, write about the reality of God's love? How can we experience that same love for ourselves?

Faithful Amid Persecution

Throughout the early centuries of Christianity, the Christian church grew rapidly, despite imprisonment, torture, and persecution. Faithful believers, totally committed to Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, proclaimed His Word with power; lives were changed, and tens of thousands were converted.

Read Acts 2:41; Acts 4:4, 31; Acts 5:42; and Acts 8:1–8. What do these verses teach us about the challenges the New Testament church faced and also why it grew so rapidly?

The disciples faced threats (*Acts 4:17*), imprisonment (*Acts 5:17, 18*), persecution (*Acts 8:1*), and death itself (*Acts 7:59, Acts 12:2*), yet, in the power of the Holy Spirit, courageously proclaimed the resurrected Christ, and churches multiplied throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria (*Acts 9:31*).

The bastions of hell were shaken. The shackles of Satan were broken. Pagan superstition crumbled before the power of the resurrected Christ. The gospel triumphed in the face of overwhelming odds. The disciples no longer cowered in the upper room. Fear danced away like a fading shadow.

Instead, faith filled the disciples' hearts. One glimpse of their resurrected Lord changed their lives. Jesus gave them a new reason for living. Our Lord had not only given them the Great Commission (*Mark 16:15*) but the great promise, “ ‘But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth’ ” (*Acts 1:8, NKJV*).

The gospel penetrated the remotest corners of the earth (*Col. 1:23*). Although the last of the disciples, John, died at the end of the first century, others picked up the torch of truth and proclaimed the living Christ. Pliny the Younger, governor of the Roman province of Bithynia on the north coast of modern Turkey, wrote to Emperor Trajan around A.D. 110. Pliny's statement is significant because it was nearly eighty years after the Crucifixion. Pliny described the official trials he was conducting to find and execute Christians. He stated, “For many persons of all ages, and classes and of both sexes are being put in peril by accusation, and this will go on. The contagion of this superstition [Christianity] has spread not only in the cities, but in the villages and rural districts as well.”—Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 4.

Despite the devil's most vicious attacks, the Christian church grew rapidly.

What can we learn from the early church that could help us, the end-time church?

Caring for the Community

The early Christian church grew not only because its members preached the gospel but also because they lived the gospel. Believers modeled the ministry of Christ who “went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people” (*Matt. 4:23, NKJV*). Jesus deeply cared for people, and so did the New Testament church. It was this unselfish love and commitment to meeting human needs combined with sharing the good news of the gospel in the Holy Spirit’s power that made such an impact on the world in the early centuries of the Christian church.

Read Acts 2:44–47, Acts 3:6–9, and Acts 6:1–7. Although circumstances vary, what principles can we learn from these passages about authentic Christianity?

These New Testament believers followed the model of Christ, who as Peter expressed was “‘anointed . . . with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him’ ” (*Acts 10:38, NKJV*). Christ’s church was His body on earth, and it, too, in these early centuries, expressed Christ’s sacrificial love and concern for hurting, broken humanity. These believers were living examples of Christ’s compassion.

In the great controversy raging in the universe, the devil wants to deface the image of God in humanity. The purpose of the gospel is to restore the image of God in humanity. This restoration includes physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual healing.

In John 10:10, Jesus reveals His plan for each one of us.

“‘The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly’ ” (*NKJV*). He longs for us to be physically healthy, mentally alert, emotionally stable, and spiritually whole.

This is especially true in the light of His promised return. This world is facing an enormous crisis. Jesus’ own predictions in Matthew 24 and Luke 21 foretell catastrophic conditions on the earth before His return. When Christ touches us with His healing grace, we long to touch others with the touch of Christ so that they can be made whole. Jesus sends us out into a broken world as ambassadors for Christ to touch others with His love. New Testament Christianity was characterized by the Christians’ love for one another and their communities.

Discuss: What role does the church have in cooperating with Christ in proving Satan’s charges wrong?

A Legacy of Love

Read John 13:35 and 1 John 4:21. What do these passages reveal about Satan’s challenge against the government of God in the great controversy? What do they tell us about the essence of genuine Christianity?

Love was the norm of Christian communities in the first few centuries. Tertullian, an early Christian theologian, claimed: “It is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. *See, they say, how they love one another.*”—“Chapter 39,” in *Apology*, trans. S. Thelwall, <https://www.logoslibrary.org/tertullian/apology/39.html> (accessed October 10, 2022).

One of the greatest revelations of God’s love was demonstrated when two devastating pandemics plagued the early centuries around A.D. 160 and A.D. 260. Christians stepped forward and ministered to the sick and dying. These plagues killed tens of thousands and left entire villages and towns with scarcely an inhabitant. The unselfish, sacrificial, caring, loving ministry of Christians made a huge impact on the population. Over time, thousands, and eventually hundreds of thousands, and then millions in the Roman Empire became believers in Jesus during these two epidemics. Love, outgoing concern, and organized, selfless care of the sick and dying created an admiration for these believers and the Christ they represented.

Rodney Stark’s *The Rise of Christianity* is a modern historical narrative portraying these historic events in a new and improved light. In it he describes how during the second epidemic the whole Christian community, which was still heavily Judeo-Christian, became a virtual army of nurses, providing the basic needs for the suffering community to survive.

“At the height of the second great epidemic, around A.D. 260, . . . Dionysius wrote a lengthy tribute to the heroic nursing efforts of local Christians, many of whom lost their lives while caring for others.

“Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains.”—*The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 82.

What is the obvious message for us here? How do we learn to die to self so that we, too, can manifest this same selfless spirit? It’s not easy, is it?

Further Thought: “The gospel continued to spread and the number of its adherents to increase. It penetrated into regions that were inaccessible even to the eagles of Rome. Said a Christian, expostulating with the heathen rulers who were urging forward the persecution: You may ‘kill us, torture us, condemn us. . . . Your injustice is the proof that we are innocent. . . . Nor does your cruelty . . . avail you.’ It was but a stronger invitation to bring others to their persuasion. ‘The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.’—Tertullian, *Apology*, paragraph 50.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 41, 42.

“The mysterious providence which permits the righteous to suffer persecution at the hand of the wicked has been a cause of great perplexity to many who are weak in faith. Some are even ready to cast away their confidence in God because He suffers the basest of men to prosper, while the best and purest are afflicted and tormented by their cruel power. How, it is asked, can One who is just and merciful, and who is also infinite in power, tolerate such injustice and oppression? This is a question with which we have nothing to do. God has given us sufficient evidence of His love, and we are not to doubt His goodness because we cannot understand the workings of His providence.”—*The Great Controversy*, p. 47.

Discussion Questions:

- ① What value does persecution serve? Why do you think God allows His people to suffer at times? And though in some cases, such as in the early church, good was able to come of it, what about times when it appears that nothing good has come from it? Why in situations like this is the personal experience of God’s love so important in order to maintain faith?
- ② How would you respond if a friend asked you these questions: “Where is God in my suffering? If He loves me, why am I going through such a difficult time?”
- ③ How can your local church become a caring community to impact the world? Discuss practical ways to apply this week’s study.

Faithful Gymnast in Italy

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Seven-year-old Sara loved gymnastics. It was easy for her, and she was good at it. She especially liked doing cartwheels. She could do cartwheel after cartwheel in a row, and she only stopped when she fell down.

But there was something that Sara loved even more than gymnastics. She loved God.

So, she was not tempted to skip church when the gymnastics coach announced that a major gymnastics show would be held on the Sabbath in her hometown of Iesi, Italy. The show only took place once a year, and children would show off what they had been learning to their parents and families.

Sara felt sad when the coach said the show had been scheduled on the Sabbath.

At home, Mother saw Sara's downcast face.

"God can solve any problem," she said.

She suggested that Sara could take her Sabbath problem to God.

That evening, Sara prayed, "Dear God, I am very sad to hear the news that I will miss the show, but Your will be done."

Sara and the other children met for gymnastics practice every Tuesday and Thursday. The coach had announced the date for the gymnastics show at a Tuesday practice.

Sara prayed on Tuesday night and on Wednesday night. At the Thursday practice, the coach suddenly announced that the date for the gymnastics show had been changed.

"We have to postpone the show by one day, until Sunday, because of some organizational problems," she said.

Sara couldn't believe her ears. She was ecstatic with joy! When she excitedly broke the news to Mother a short time later, Mother smiled bigger than the sun.

"You have to trust God always!" she said.

And Sara always has. This was her first experience with prayer, and it greatly strengthened her faith in God. On Sabbath, she told the church about what had happened. A church member prepared a special sermon about the prayer and invited Sara onto the platform to tell her story.

"I have always prayed when facing problems in life," Sara, now 19, told Adventist Mission.

This mission story illustrates Spiritual Growth Objective No. 7 of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's "I Will Go" strategic plan: "To help youth and young adults place God first." For more information, go to the website: IWillGo2020.org. Read more about Sara next week.