

Good Word Schedule
“God’s Love and Justice”
January, February, March, 2025

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Theme: “God Loves Freely”

Leading Question: Given all that we know about the human race and about ourselves, is it “reasonable” to expect that God should love us?

Our lessons this quarter juxtapose the concepts of God’s love and justice. Here are some crucial questions that help us address the tension between his love and his justice:

1. Which is the more pressing question for us: Can I love God? Or: Can God love me? What drives each question? Perhaps the more sensitive and devout person would be the one to raise the question: Can God love me? The more skeptical would be inclined to ask: Can I love God?
2. Is it self-evident in Scripture that God is both loving and just? What could call into question either one of those concepts? Doesn’t love sound “friendlier” than “justice”? What kind of person would likely champion God’s justice? God’s love?
3. Does the Old Testament record emphasize God’s love in a way that furthers human hope? Does the New Testament emphasize God’ love because of Christ’s death on our behalf?

Biblical passages:

Exodus 33:15-22 – after appearance to Moses at Mt. Sinai after Israel’s rebellion. The sobering reality of Israel’s rebellion is juxtaposed to the remarkable revelation of God to Moses.

Hosea 14:1-4 – God’s promise to “love Israel freely” – against the backdrop of the whole book of Hosea

Matthew 22:1-14 (the wedding banquet): The violent treatment of those who refused to come, and to the one who did not have a garment provide a stark contrast to the “gentle” Jesus tradition. The only redeeming feature is that this is a parable, not a real-life experience from Jesus’ ministry.

Theme: “Covenantal Love”

Leading Question: “How does the idea of *covenant* help us understand the word “love”? Our lesson speaks of “covenantal love.” Just what does that mean?

Comment: Where we live there is a “covenant” which spells out what can be built and what cannot be built in our neighborhood. Does the restriction which such a word imply enrich or impoverish our understanding of love?

In the early chapters of Genesis, the word “covenant” appears several times. The first instance is in Genesis 6, just before the great flood:

Gen. 6:17-22: I am going to send a flood on the earth to destroy every living being. Everything on the earth will die, but I will make a covenant with you. Go into the boat with your wife, your sons, and their wives. 19-20 Take into the boat with you a male and a female of every kind of animal and of every kind of bird, in order to keep them alive. 21 Take along all kinds of food for you and for them. 22 Noah did everything that God commanded.

In this context, doesn’t the word “covenant” imply good news for Noah? The Lord is going to send a flood on the earth, “but I will make a covenant with you.” So the word covenant implies security, not just restriction. That is also true of the second time that covenant appears, just after the flood, in Genesis 9:

Gen. 9:9-13: I am now making my covenant with you and with your descendants, and with all living beings—all birds and all animals—everything that came out of the boat with you. 10 With these words I make my covenant with you: I promise that never again will all living beings be destroyed by a flood; never again will a flood destroy the earth. 11 As a sign of this everlasting covenant which I am making with you and with all living beings, 12 I am putting my bow in the clouds. It will be the sign of my covenant with the world.

A more revealing use of the term is found in Genesis 15, when the Lord promised to give Abraham the land of Canaan. But Abraham asked: “How can I know that it will be mine?” (Gen. 15:8. The Lord then instructed Abraham to bring a variety of animals and birds for a sacrifice. He was to cut the animals in half, but not the birds. The climax of this event is described in verses 17-18:

Genesis 15:17-18: When the sun had set and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch suddenly appeared and passed between the pieces of the animals. 18 Then and there the Lord made a covenant with Abram. He

said, “I promise to give your descendants all this land from the border of Egypt to the Euphrates River.”

Typically, when such a covenant was made between two parties, they would sever the bodies of an animal sacrifice, and both parties would walk through them, essentially saying, “if I break this covenant, may my body be torn in two like these animals.” It was a deadly oath that the parties were swearing in order to promise that they would not break the covenant.

Yet, God Himself does not walk through the animal carcasses. He makes a promise to Abram, and then, Abram has a dream. In this dream, symbols of God pass through the sacrifice on His behalf. While this is a strange ritual to us, the point was made clearly to the ancient audience: God will most definitely, certainly, absolutely fulfill this covenant that He is making with Abram.

And what exactly are the terms of that covenant? God promises that Abram’s descendants will eventually conquer the Promised Land, four generations after Abram has died. What is Abram’s part in the covenant? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. God makes a promise, but Abram is under no such obligation.

This is striking, because a covenant of this type requires two parties coming together and making promises to each other. Yet Abram is required to make no promise. God will fulfill His promise no matter what.

This is the same kind of assurance that we have today. No matter what I might do, no matter how far I might fall, no matter how sinful my thoughts, words, or actions may be, nothing can take me out of my Father’s hands. There is nothing that I could ever do to earn my salvation, and there is nothing that I could ever do to keep my salvation. It is all completely a gift of God!

But if all that sounds like a blank check, we need to look at a passage in Deuteronomy 7:

Deuteronomy 7:7-10: “The Lord did not love you and choose you because you outnumbered other peoples; you were the smallest nation on earth. 8 But the Lord loved you and wanted to keep the promise that he made to your ancestors. That is why he saved you by his great might and set you free from slavery to the king of Egypt. 9 Remember that the Lord your God is the only God and that he is faithful. He will keep his covenant and show his constant love to a thousand generations of those who love him and obey his commands, 10 but he will not hesitate to punish those who hate him.

Question: Are there sufficient safeguards in Scripture to prevent us from taking the covenant promise as a blank check?

Question: What about the new covenant? Does the New Testament concept of the New Covenant move us dangerously close to the idea of a blank check? And is there a difference between concept New Covenant in the OT and NT?

Christians are sometimes tempted to see the New Covenant as a contrast between the NT and OT ideas. Here the concept of New Covenant as quoted in Jeremiah is crucial:

Jeremiah 31:31-34: 1 The Lord says, “The time is coming when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. 32 It will not be like the old covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt. Although I was like a husband to them, they did not keep that covenant. 33 The new covenant that I will make with the people of Israel will be this: I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. 34 None of them will have to teach a neighbor to know the Lord, because all will know me, from the least to the greatest. I will forgive their sins and I will no longer remember their wrongs. I, the Lord, have spoken.”

Question: Does the fact that the book of Hebrews 8 quotes the same passage sometimes lead Christians to contrast the OT and NT usage rather than see them as the same?

Comment: These words from Hebrews 8:13 should not be taken to overrule the use of New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:

Hebrews 8:13: 13 By speaking of a new covenant, God has made the first one old; and anything that becomes old and worn out will soon disappear.

In Jeremiah 31, the promise is clearly made to Israel in the Old Testament. Is this a good example of how the same words in OT and NT should not be made equivalent? Each context must be taken on its own merits. In short, we should lay all the passages in both testaments side-by-side instead of on top of each other.

Question: Does the repetition of the concept of “covenant loyalty” in Psalm 136, provide grounds for reinforcing the idea of God’s everlasting “covenant” loyalty?

The New Revised Standard Version uses the phrase “steadfast love” as a refrain for every verse of Psalm 136. And that phrase “steadfast love” reflects the Hebrew word *chesed*, “covenant loyalty.”

Psalm 136: O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.
2 O give thanks to the God of gods,
for his steadfast love endures forever.
3 O give thanks to the Lord of lords,
for his steadfast love endures forever;

In short, God never gives up on us. Even if we turn our backs on him, his “steadfast love” can always be renewed.

Theme: “To Be Pleasing to God ”

The Leading Question: Which is our more serious challenge: Convincing arrogant sinners to abandon their arrogance, or convincing repentant sinners in their chagrined and depressed condition, that God really is eager to accept them?

This week’s memory text, Zephaniah 3:17, is a good place to start this week’s discussion:

Zephaniah 3:17: The Lord your God in your midst,
The Mighty One, will save;
He will rejoice over you with gladness,
He will quiet you with His love,
He will rejoice over you with singing.”

As the official study guide comments: “Zephaniah 3:17 emphatically displays the delight of God over his redeemed people. Just about every word for joy and delight in the Hebrew language is packed into this single verse, descriptive of God’s delight over His redeemed people. It’s almost as if not one of the terms by itself is sufficient to describe the magnitude of God’s delight on that day.”

But that attitude of unrestrained delight has to be tempered in light of the realities of our human condition. And we can glimpse some of the complex realities of those realities in the first major passage in our lesson, the story of the so-called prodigal son. In Luke 15. And those realities can be seen through the experience of the major characters, especially those of the prodigal and the father in their before-and-after situations:

1. The Prodigal:
 - A. In his arrogant departure
 - B. In his dejected return, depressed by a sense of his unworthiness
2. The Father:
 - A. Affronted by his son’s arrogant departure
 - B. Delighted and amazed by his son’s return
3. The angry elder brother

Questions: Is the stance of each of the three major characters understandable? Defensible?

Comment and further questions: Is the figure of the father the most attractive of these figures? Which of these figures is most helpful in addressing the situations faced by needy people in the real world? We must remember the tension that exists in the overall theme for this quarter’s lessons: “God’s Love and Justice”: Some sinners are eager to hear of God’s love, but less eager to hear of his justice. And in that connection we have to recognize the inherent tension between those who are to take advantage of God’s love, a love that they do not deserve, and those who can scarcely imagine that God’s justice would allow sinners like them to be part of his kingdom.

Question: Is there likely to be roughly the same number in each group? Or do believers in community tend to drift to one extreme or the other? In other words, are believers, in general, more likely to take unmerited advantage of God's love, or to see themselves, like the returning prodigal son, to be unworthy of God's love?

A Psalm worth pondering: Psalm 146. Considering the complex issues this week's lesson addresses, Psalm 146 is worth pondering. Ps. 146:2-9 are cited here in the NIV:

Psalm 146: 2 I will praise the Lord all my life;
I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.
3 Do not put your trust in princes,
in human beings, who cannot save.
4 When their spirit departs, they return to the ground;
on that very day their plans come to nothing.
5 Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord their God.
6 He is the Maker of heaven and earth,
the sea, and everything in them—
he remains faithful forever.
7 He upholds the cause of the oppressed
and gives food to the hungry.
The Lord sets prisoners free,
8 the Lord gives sight to the blind,
the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down,
the Lord loves the righteous.
9 The Lord watches over the foreigner
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.

Until one gets to the very last line, a believer could rejoice in the words of this psalm. But the last line is a cold shower: "he frustrates the ways of the wicked."

Question: To what extent is there a danger that believers will rest secure in God's saving care – when they really should be awakened to the knowledge that God frustrates the ways of the wicked?

A Startling New Testament Promise: Romans 5:6-10. For those who have difficulty in believing that God is able to save us, Roman 5:6-10 contains some remarkable statements:

Romans 5: 6-10: You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! 10 For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

Note these 3 remarkable statements:

vs. 6: "when we were still powerless"

vs. 8: "while we were still sinners"

vs.10: "While we were God's enemies"

In short, before we had done a thing, God accepted us. We don't need to earn God's salvation. He gives it to us while we were yet sinners. In other words, we can be pleasing to God without doing a thing on our own behalf.

Theme: “God Is Passionate and Compassionate”

Leading Question: Is it “reasonable” for God to be passionate and compassionate with his wayward children?

Question: Which is more biblical: To say that God will be reasonable with us or that he will be passionate and emotional with us?

In the King James Version, **Isaiah 1:18** makes a well known claim about God: “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

Some other versions are rather more vivid:

Contemporary English Version: “I, the Lord, invite you to come and talk it over. Your sins are scarlet red, but they will be white than snow or wool.”

Message: “Come. Sit down. Let’s argue this out.”

This is God’s Message:
“If your sins are blood-red,
they’ll be snow-white.
If they’re red like crimson,
they’ll be like wool.
If you’ll willingly obey,
you’ll feast like kings.
But if you’re willful and stubborn,
you’ll die like dogs.”
That’s right. God says so.

Today’s English Version: The Lord says, “Now, let’s settle the matter. You are stained red with sin, but I will wash you as clean as snow. Although your stains are deep red, you will be as white as wool.

One can make the case for saying that God is “reasonable.” But this week’s lesson argues that God is passionate and emotional. And we start with some comparisons within the family. Is the father or the mother more likely to be emotional? Here is a verse for each:

Isaiah 49:15 (NIV) “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!
(Mother)

Psalm 103:13 (NIV) As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him (Father)

These passages seem to give the edge to the mother. Just as Matthew 23:37 uses feminine imagery: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.”

But any way you look at it, God is “emotional” and “compassionate” for his children.

God’s Compassion as Seen in Jesus. In Jesus we can see a host of wonderful examples of God’s compassion for people.

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Here Jesus’ parable contrasts an inadequate Jewish response with the compassion of the “good” Samaritan. The moral was embarrassingly clear.

The Missing Shepherd (Matt. 9:35-36). As Jesus went about with his teaching and healing ministry, he had “compassion” on the people who were like “sheep without a shepherd.”

Feeding the Hungry (Matt. 14:13-21). When a great crowd followed Jesus into a isolated place, he had “compassion” for them.

Raising the Widow’s Son (Luke 7:11-15). When Jesus came a funeral procession for a widow’s only son, Jesus had “compassion” on her, actually touching the bier – thereby becoming unclean – and raising him from the dead.

A Jealous God. The word “jealous” is a two-edged sword. On the negative side of the ledger, 1 Cor. 13:4 states that love is not “jealous” (TEV). But there is a positive side of jealousy. Exodus 20:5, right in the middle of the 10 commandments states: “I, the Lord your God am a jealous God.” To put a positive spin to that concept, we could say that jealousy is the opposite of shrug: God cares deeply.

Question: How can we convincingly argue that God is a “jealous” God given all the baggage that comes with the word? Paul states in 2 Cor. 11:2, “I feel a divine jealousy for you.” Does that help clarify the issues for us?

The official study guide contains a quotation that is worth citing in conclusion:

We long to be in relationship with persons who exemplify the kind of love described in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8. But how often do we seek to become this kind of person toward others? We cannot make ourselves longsuffering and kind; we cannot make ourselves not be envious, conceited, rude, or self-seeking. We cannot muster a love in ourselves that “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things,” and “never fails” (1 Cor. 13:7-8, NKJV). Such love can be exemplified in our lives only as the fruit of the Holy Spirit. And praise God that the Holy Spirit pours the love of God into the hearts of those who by faith, are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 5:5)”

Theme: “The Wrath of Divine Love”

Leading Question: “The Wrath of Divine Love” sounds so negative. Can’t we just skip it?

We will return to address the “leading question” after an important detour, a brief discussion of Satan in the Old Testament and the inclusion of a chapter from Alden Thompson’s book, *Who’s Afraid of the Old Testament God?*

The Brief Explanation

A remarkable feature of the Old Testament is the almost total absence of any mention of Satan. In the entire Old Testament, Satan as a supernatural being opposed to God, only appears three times, all of which were either written or canonized toward the end of the Old Testament period:

1) Job 1-2, the dialogue in heaven between God and Satan. Of the 42 chapters in Job, Satan only appears in Job 1-2; everywhere else in Job, God gets credit for evil. Job is in the last section of the Hebrew canon, the “Writings.”

2) 1 Chron. 21, the second version of David’s census. In the first version (2 Samuel 24), God is responsible for David’s sin of numbering Israel while in 1 Chronicles 21, Satan makes him do it. Chronicles, like Job, is also in the “Writings,” the last section of the Hebrew canon.

3) Zechariah 3, the story of Joshua and the angel and Satan’s accusation against Joshua. Zechariah is in the second section of the Hebrew canon, the “Prophets,” but is post-exilic and thus is one of the last prophetic books.

That’s it for Satan in the Old Testament? What about the serpent in Genesis 3? In Genesis, he is only the “most subtle creature which the Lord God had made.” In the Bible, Satan is not identified as God’s enemy until Revelation 12.

Chapter 3 from *Who’s Afraid of the Old Testament God?* “Whatever happened to Satan in the Old Testament?”

*Now the serpent was more subtle than any other
wild creature that the Lord God had made. –
Genesis 3:1*

If the suggestion developed in the last chapter is correct, it would be quite appropriate to say that God created a good world, but let it go wild. If he is a freedom-loving God, his creatures must have the right to rebel, in spite of all the tragic consequences that can come from such a course. But then God seeks to win his creatures back. He meets them where they are and seeks to draw them step by step along a better path.

All that sounds fine – until I actually turn to the Old Testament. There I find descriptions

of God's activity that make me very uncomfortable. At first sight, some of the incidents seem to suggest that he is not a freedom-loving God after all, but is quite arbitrary. Let's note some of the more disturbing problems.

In the story of the Exodus from Egypt, the biblical account says on more than one occasion that "God hardened Pharaoh's heart" (Ex. 7:3; 9:12). Now that sounds like something much more appropriate to Satan than to a good God. Why would God want to harden a man's heart, setting him on a self-destructive course which would also bring others to ruin? Taken at face value, the words present a real problem for those of us who claim that God is good.

A story that is perhaps even more curious is found in 2 Samuel 24. It deals with a census ordered by King David. Although the biblical story does not offer an explanation, David was apparently keen to find out just how large an army he could field, an act that would have been seen in that era as stemming from wrongful pride. Even his crusty general Joab knew such a course to be wrong (2 Sam. 24:3), but David went ahead. According to the story in 2 Samuel, even though David belatedly confessed his sin, the Lord announced to David through the prophet Gad, that punishment was on the way, though David would have the "privilege" of choosing the mode of punishment. All that seems a bit strange to us, but the most difficult part of the whole story is the introduction which explains God's role in the incident: "Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them saying 'Go, number Israel and Judah'" (2 Sam. 24: 1). Then as noted above, the Lord punished David for his act (2 Sam. 24:10 ff). Now how could a good God actually incite a wrong act which that same God would then proceed to punish? From our point of view the story is inexplicable.

Moving to a slightly different type of incident, we could list numerous examples of God's stepping in and directly administering punishment. We might be more comfortable with a view which says that God *allows* the sinner to receive the punishment which his sin merits. Why does God have to wade in with his own scorpions and serpents? Does not sin bring its own punishment? One example should be sufficient to illustrate the point. Numbers 21 describes one of Israel's repeated rebellions. Rather than providing a picture of a God who reluctantly allows his people to flaunt his protecting care, to be pummeled about by the harsh realities of life, the biblical writer gives us a quick glimpse of the anger of the Lord: "Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people so that many people of Israel died" (Num. 21:6). This type of description has led some to conclude that the Old Testament God is indeed arbitrary: "If you don't do it my way, I'll send out my serpents to bite you." Some Christians react against such a picture, while others actually use these very passages to shore up an authoritarian view of religious life: "Don't ask any questions. Do it because say so."

Now in each of the examples noted above, if I simply take the words at face value without placing the incidents in a larger framework, the resultant view of the Old Testament God can be a harsh one indeed. That is why it is so important to develop the overall framework within which we can interpret the Old Testament. In the last chapter I suggested that the great degeneracy evident in the Old Testament is to be understood against the background of a great cosmic struggle between good and evil. That the universe may be more secure in the end, God provides the freedom necessary for evil to develop. The process is slow and dangerous when viewed from a human point of view and it seems as though God is taking great risks with his reputation. But the end result is the vindication of God against all the accusations of his Adversary.

Yet even if one accepts that type of framework within which one may interpret the Old

Testament, one of the great surprises in the actual reading of Scripture is the very poor publicity which the Adversary receives in the Old Testament. In fact, if I were in his place I think I would complain rather vigorously. There are hints of his activities in such places as Genesis 3 and of course in the book of Job, but if you really make a careful search of the Old Testament, specific references to the demonic, to Satan, or the Devil are very sparse indeed. As a matter of fact, a concordance will reveal only three passages in all of the Old Testament where a specific demonic being named Satan appears: Job 1-2, 1 Chron. 21:1, and Zech. 3:1-2. Traditional Christian theology assigns a fairly significant role to Satan, and he certainly is quite prominent in the New Testament. Why then does he have such a low profile in the Old Testament?

Before exploring the possible reasons for Satan's infrequent appearance in the Old Testament, we need to take a closer look at the Old Testament word for "Satan." The English word "Satan" is in fact a straight transliteration of the Hebrew word *Satan*. And though the word normally suggests to us a supreme evil personality, Satan with a capital "S," the earlier Old Testament usage applies the term to any "adversary" or "accuser." For example, when Solomon turned away from God, "The Lord raised up an *adversary (satan)* against Solomon, Hadad the Edomite" (I Kings 11:14). The RSV has translated the Hebrew word *satan* as "adversary" and it clearly refers to a human being. Likewise, when the Philistines went up to battle against Israel, a number of the leaders were reluctant to have David join them, even though he had been living in their midst: "Lest in the battle he become an *adversary (satan)* to us" (1 Sam. 29:4). So David could turn into a *satan*! But perhaps the most fascinating use of the word is in the story of Balaam. There the angel of the Lord opposed Balaam and "took his stand in the way as his *adversary (satan)*" (Num. 22:22). Thus the biblical writers could apply the word *satan* to Hadad, an enemy of Solomon, to David, and to the angel of the Lord. But in each of these incidents the word simply means something like "adversary" as most of our English translations indicate.

In the later use of the term, biblical writers begin to think of a supreme Adversary, *the Satan* with a capital "S," representing the great opponent of God. But many Bible scholars hold that even in the three Old Testament passages where the Hebrew word *satan* clearly refers to an individual superhuman adversary, the English word "satan" should still be written with a lower case "s." The seeds of the New Testament understanding of Satan are clearly there, but Satan's supreme status as chief of all demons is not yet really clear.

Now when we cite evidence suggesting that the Old Testament understanding of Satan developed gradually, we need to remind ourselves that God has not given all truths to all men at all times. If Old Testament people have fallen far from God, then we must not expect everyone everywhere to have the same understanding. The Old Testament was written over a long period of time and this is reflected in the way that the various writers describe God's activities. A single event may be described by two later writers, both quite removed in time from the original event. The emphasis and interpretation of each writer will reflect his own special circumstances and, at times, two accounts may even appear to be contradictory. But if we make the necessary adjustments for time and place, we can discover the underlying harmony that is important for understanding God's activities. Perhaps the best examples of differing emphasis and interpretation is provided in the comparison between Samuel-Kings and Chronicles in the Old Testament, and in the comparison of the gospels in the New.

Now as far as Satan's role in the Old Testament is concerned, both Jewish and Christian writers have assumed the presence of Satan in many biblical incidents even though the original

account without Satan and the later interpretation with Satan can be very useful. One writer has simply chosen to define the role of the demonic, while the other has elected to focus on the omnipotence of God.

If, however, the demonic is indeed a force to be reckoned with in life, the existence of the Devil cannot depend on whether or not a given writer mentions him. Either Satan has been at work in the history of this world or he has not. Without question, traditional Christian doctrine assigns a definite role to Satan. Hence the pertinence of the question: Whatever has happened to Satan in the Old Testament?

DANGERS OF EMPHASIZING THE DEMONIC

As a first step in answering that question, perhaps we could ask about the possible dangers that might arise in a primitive society from an emphasis on the demonic. By looking at various primitive cultures where the demonic plays a much more visible role, we can discover some interesting implications. Pagan religions are often dominated by fear. By definition, demons or evil deities cannot be trusted, so primitive people took all manner of superstitious precautions to protect themselves from the demonic. In ancient Israel, however, the use of magic and consultation with ‘wizards that peep and mutter’ was strictly forbidden (cf. Lev. 19:31; Isa. 8:19). Israel’s God could be trusted. Such trust, however, was not possible when the authority of demons held sway.

From a more strictly theological point of view, an active awareness of the demonic runs the risk of developing into polytheism or dualism. Ancient Israel emerged from a thoroughly polytheistic society in Egypt. Had God chosen to highlight the role of a satanic figure, the condition of the people could have made dualism, if not polytheism, a likely threat to the purity of the faith that God was seeking to establish. Thus the wording of the first command at Sinai may be more significant than a superficial reading might suggest: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3). Note that in this instance, God does not expressly deny the existence of other gods. He simply asks that Israel worship him exclusively. Other passages in Scripture greatly ridicule the worship of other gods and the worship of idols (cf. Deut. 29:16-17; Is. 44:9-20), but the evidence from the Old Testament is that the people in general had a difficult time focusing their attention on the one true God. Even when they were right with him, the threat of neighboring deities was a real one. Thus, for practical reasons, God treated Israel very much as a wise father might treat a young son if the two of them were to set out on a jaunt through the woods. To warn a small lad of wildcats, bears, and snakes, could be quite unsettling. So the father simply says: “Trust me. Whatever happens, I will take care of it.”

That is very much what I see happening at Sinai and in much of the Old Testament. The first great step that God asked Israel to take was: “Worship the one God who brought you out of Egypt.” The knowledge about Satan would have to come later when their faith was more stable. And this late appearance of Satan seems to be precisely what we find in the Old Testament, for as we look at the three Old Testament passages where a specific *Satan* is mentioned as God’s opponent, in each case, the passage appears in a book that was either written or canonized late in the Old Testament period. But the question of early and late and the matter of canonization requires at least a brief explanation before we proceed.

CAN WE DATE OLD TESTAMENT MATERIAL?

Any attempt actually to date Old Testament material is fraught with difficulty, for the Old Testament books themselves give very little direct information about the time of writing. The only clear-cut dating material comes from the prophetic books where specific prophetic oracles are often assigned to the reign of a specific king (e.g. Jer. 25:1; 26:1; 27:1). But a great many of the Old Testament books remain anonymous. In some cases earlier stories are retold, as when the book of Chronicles retells some of the stories from Samuel and Kings. But how do we know that Chronicles is retelling the stories of Kings and not the other way around? That is particularly a problem for the uninitiated reader who happens to be reading in Kings and finds references to the “Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah” (cf. 1 Kings 14:30). In this particular instance a more careful reading of the books of Kings and Chronicles clearly suggests that Kings comes before Chronicles and that the “chronicles” mentioned in Kings are official court records, not our book of Chronicles in the Old Testament.

One of the more helpful ways at arriving at early and late for all of the biblical books, at least in a very general way, is to look at the canon of Scripture as held by the ancient Hebrews. Where the indications of the time of writing are slim, the place of a book within the canon can be enlightening. That term “canon,” however, also requires at least a brief explanation.

In its early usage, the word “canon” simply means “rule” or “norm.” With reference to Scripture it means those books accepted by a particular community as authoritative, the books providing the norm or rule by which the community chooses to live. Other books may be held to be just as “true” and in some cases just as “inspired,” but for reasons that are seldom known to us, the community did not accept them as canonical, that is, as permanently authoritative. Presumably there are sayings of Isaiah and Jeremiah, of Paul and of Jesus which did not find their way into our Scriptures, but are just as true and just as “inspired” as the ones which did, or at least the early recipients of those words would have held them just as true and just as “inspired.”

Protestant Christians generally accept the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments as their canon. Roman Catholics accept certain of the so-called Apocryphal books in addition. The Jewish believers accept only the thirty-nine Old Testament books (twenty-four by their reckoning), and even within those books the Jewish community sees different levels of authority, depending on the section in which a book appears. And that is the part that is of particular interest to us.

A New Testament reference actually identifies the three major sections of the Hebrew canon: “the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms” (Luke 24:44). The process by which God worked among his people to designate particular books as “Scripture” is one that will always remain mysterious. We must simply admit that the Spirit led the community of God’s people to recognize certain books as containing the word of the Lord in a way that would be enduring for all time. The Old Testament canon was certainly complete by New Testament times as Luke 24:44 suggests. Furthermore, scholars would generally assign the following, dates for each of the three sections: 400 BC for the Law (Genesis through Deuteronomy); 200 BC for the second section, the Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea-Malachi); and 100 BC for the third section, the Writings (designated in Luke by its largest book, Psalms: Ruth, Ezra to Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Daniel, Chronicles). These dates are

really just educated guesses; the canonization of the various sections may have been complete earlier or later, but for our purposes it is significant to note that canonization took place in three steps and that it took place over a period of time.

It is also important to remember that canonization is not particularly concerned with authorship. A book may have been written long before it was canonized or a book may tell a story that happened many centuries before the book was finally accepted as canonical. At least the process of canonization gives us some guide as to when the community was willing to accept a particular book as authoritative for all time.

Now let us return to the three Old Testament passages which mention Satan and look at them in the light of the statement made earlier, namely, that the books in which these passages occur were either written or were canonized towards the end of the Old Testament period. A comment on each passage might prove helpful.

SATAN AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

1 Chronicles 21:1 Of the three passages, this one is in some ways the most important and interesting because it is part of the retelling of the story of David's census mentioned at the beginning of this chapter (2 Samuel 24). Not only is Chronicles in the third section of the Hebrew canon, but it is also the very last book in the Hebrew Bible. Hence it contains the very last interpretation of Old Testament material. And, in fact, the book of Chronicles is just that, a final interpretation of the period of the monarchy. In the course of retelling that story, the biblical writer makes a startling modification to the story of David's census. The earlier account said that the LORD (Yahweh) was responsible for the census, but in Chronicles, "*Satan* stood up against Israel, and incited David to number Israel" (1 Chron. 21:1). The inspired writer now sees that an Adversary was responsible for the evil deed, and not the Lord, a remarkable difference indeed.

Now if we are too concerned about harmonizing biblical accounts, we may miss the significance of this passage, so let us pause just a moment to consider the implications. There is a sense in which both passages can be seen to be true. If God is truly all-powerful, then he is ultimately responsible for everything that happens. Both the author of Chronicles and the author of Samuel would most assuredly agree with that. But whereas the earlier author was still operating with the view that the Lord is the *active cause* of everything, the later writer sees evil events happening with the *permission* of the Lord. Perhaps an illustration can clarify the point: instead of taking whip in hand to punish the children for munching green apples, the Lord allows them to receive the stomach ache which is the appropriate reward for eating forbidden fruit. And there is quite a difference in those two approaches.

I am much more comfortable with the way that 1 Chronicles tells the story, but I must also recognize the implications of the story as told in 2 Samuel, namely, that the Lord was willing to assume full responsibility for evil. Perhaps the reason was, as suggested above, his pastoral concern for his people. And if the Lord was willing thus to portray himself as responsible for evil, then suddenly we have a handle for understanding a whole group of problem passages in the Old Testament, including the hardening of Pharaoh's heart and the sending of the serpents. There is a sense in which the Lord is still responsible for all that happens; but now I have a biblical basis for saying that he *permits* instead of *causes* evil, even in those passages where he is actual described as causing it.

Now some may be uncomfortable with this approach and might suggest that I am putting my own interpretation on the words instead of taking the Bible “just as it reads.” I will admit that I have put an interpretation on the biblical account. Upon reflection, we would probably all admit that every single word in Scripture, in fact, every word everywhere, must be interpreted. No word or sentence has meaning by itself. It is always read by a person with a particular background and infused with particular meaning. That is why “father” can mean something quite different to me from what it does to someone else. When I hear the word “father.” I think of my Dad and have a very positive picture. But someone with a cruel father would see things quite differently.

So we must interpret Scripture. We have no choice. That is why the Christian admonition to approach Scripture always in the attitude of prayer is so very important. If I do not seek the Lord and ask him to guide me into the knowledge of himself, I will certainly misinterpret and misapply Scripture. When I come to interpret his Word I must use all the mental machinery that I can muster, but whether or not I use that machinery in the proper manner depends on my vision of God. It is not a question of faith or reason, but rather, whether or not I will choose to use my reason faithfully.

Now my reason tells me that there is a difference between 2 Samuel 24:1 and 1 Chronicles 21:1. The more I have reflected on that difference, the more significant it has become. As a matter of fact, you could perhaps “blame” this entire book on those two verses. At least it would be safe to say that these two verses provided the catalyst for the method of interpretation which I am suggesting in the book. That was why I said earlier that, of the three passages which mention Satan in the Old Testament, 1 Chronicles 21:1 is the most significant one. That was a personal testimony.

Zechariah 3:1-2 This passage requires only a short comment. Although the book of Zechariah is in the second section of the Hebrew canon, the book itself provides the information which allows us to say that it was one of the very last of the prophetic books. In fact, it was written well after the close of the Babylonian exile. In this passage, Satan appears as the adversary of Joshua. The setting is evidently a judgment scene; the Lord rebukes the Adversary, restoring Joshua to right standing. Hence the passage provides a helpful illumination of the cosmic antagonism: the Lord is for us; the Adversary is against us. In the end, good triumphs as the Lord rebukes the Adversary and restores his people.

Job 1:6-12;2:1-7 These verses in Job are certainly the best known of all the Old Testament passages which mention Satan. Scripture nowhere tells us who wrote the book of Job or when it was written. More traditional Christian writers have often tended to adopt the dominant Jewish tradition about the book, namely, that Moses was its author. Actually, Jewish speculation about the book was wide-ranging. When the rabbis discussed the question of when Job lived, they propounded suggestions that ranged all the way from the time of the great patriarch Abraham to the post-exilic Persian period and the time of Esther. In fact, the rabbi who suggested that Job was a contemporary of Esther used a clever piece of logic which is likely to elude anyone who has not been immersed in rabbinic logic: Job lived in the time of Ahasuerus because the book of Job says that Job’s daughters were the fairest in all the land. When was the time of fair women? The time of Esther. Therefore, Job lived at the time of Esther. [See the Babylonian Talmud: *Baba Bathra 15b*, English translation by the Soncino Press London.] Perhaps it is not difficult to see why the tradition of Mosaic authorship seemed more convincing.

Regardless of who wrote the book, it appears in the third section of the Hebrew canon, suggesting that it was not accepted as authoritative until very late in the biblical period. The story itself bears every mark of being a most ancient one and perhaps it was the very mention of Satan that proved a hindrance to its general acceptance since Satan is not explicitly mentioned in the Law, and only once in a late prophetic book. Yet you will notice that Satan actually makes a very limited appearance even in the book of Job, a point which merits further comment.

One of the fascinating aspects of the book of Job lies in the fact that Job himself, his wife, and his friends, apparently know nothing of the satanic attack; at least there is no evidence for such knowledge in the book itself. Furthermore, when Job begins to realize the seriousness of his problem and when his friends attempt to needle him into repenting of his sins, sins which were non-existent from Job's point of view, Job argues with God, not with Satan. He clearly sees God as the author of his difficulties (cf. Job 16:7-17; 19:6-13). Even in one of the passages where Satan does appear, God says to Satan: "You moved me against him, to destroy him without cause" (Job 2:3). So in the book of Job, the figure of Satan makes only a very cautious appearance. God is still responsible for what happens, and all the primary actors in the drama see God as all in all.

In looking a little more closely at the two passages where Satan does appear in Job, we must recognize how important the structure of the book is for its interpretation. The book of Job consists of a prose prologue (1-2) and a prose epilogue (42:7-17). In between is the poetic body of the book, consisting of a lively dialogue between Job and "friends" (3-31), a monologue by the young man Elihu (32-37), followed by the divine response out of the whirlwind (38-42:1-6). In the prologue there are five separate scenes, three depicting Job's situation on earth, interspersed with the two heavenly scenes where Satan and God discuss Job's integrity. Taking away scenes two and four, the ones where Satan appears, leaves the world scene as Job saw it. Only the addition of these two scenes gives the setting of the cosmic struggle between God and his Adversary, between good and evil. As is the case with every disaster scene in the earth, the causes and responsibility for the events are terribly difficult to untangle. We sometimes suffer because we deserve to, but often the troubles seem so undeserved. The book of Job attempts to provide some framework for handling the problem: a cosmic struggle in which the very character of God is under attack. We have already seen some evidence thus far in our discussion as to just how significant the cosmic struggle is for the method that I am suggesting one should use in approaching the Old Testament. The forces of evil must have their day in court if God is going to win in the end.

Before moving on to further implications of the disappearance of Satan from the Old Testament, I would like to comment just briefly on those passages in the Old Testament which do not explicitly mention Satan, but which have been interpreted within the Christian community as applying to Satan: Genesis 3; Isaiah 14:12-15; and Ezekiel 28:11-19.

In Genesis 3, an unbiased reader will strongly suspect the animosity which exists between the serpent and God, pointing in the direction of a full-fledged Adversary relationship. But the serpent figure is, in fact, an ambiguous one in the Old Testament. The serpent attack recorded in Numbers 21 is successfully warded off by Moses' raising a brass serpent, the later symbol of the opponent of God! There is even evidence to suggest that the people began to worship this serpent; thus it had to be destroyed (2 Kings 18:4).

The first clear identification of the serpent as Satan in Judeo-Christian writings does not

come until Revelation 12:9. There there is no doubt: the Dragon, the Serpent, the Devil, and Satan are all one and the same. Considering the strong role that the serpent plays in Christian interpretation, it is perhaps surprising that his identity is never really clarified in the Old Testament. An explanation might lie in the fact that in Egypt, the serpent is both a symbol of a good deity and of an evil one. The biblical writers thus could not really develop the serpent motif without raising the specter of dualism or something worse.

Turning to Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:11-19, we find two passages which share several similar characteristics. Both passages have been applied to the “prehistory” of Satan and both appear in prophetic oracles or “taunt-songs” against heathen kings. Isaiah 14 is directed against the king of Babylon; Ezekiel 28 is directed against the prince or king of Tyre. Modern scholarship has been very much intrigued with the parallels between these passages and similar passages in the literature of other Ancient Near Eastern cultures. Two general conclusions can be drawn from the research done on these passages. First, that the parallels in pagan cultures are striking indeed; second, that the prophets themselves are speaking of the historical enemies of Israel, not of the supernatural realm. The supernatural appears only by way of analogy. In other words, most modern scholars would say that these prophetic oracles would not have been understood by an Old Testament audience as describing Satan. That conclusion seems to be verified by the fact that the first clear application of the Lucifer passage, Isaiah 14:12-15, to Satan, was not made until the time of Tertullian, a church father who died in AD 240.

The history of the interpretation of Ezekiel 28:11-19 is less clear, for the passage has been applied not only to a supernatural being, but to the first man as well (cf. RSV), a problem of interpretation which stems from ambiguity in the original text. In any event, the application to Satan was apparently not made until several centuries into the Christian era.

The question naturally arises: is it legitimate to apply these passages to Satan when such was apparently not the intent of the original author? That is a difficult question to answer, for within the Christian tradition, an interpretation has often been drawn from a biblical passage which was clearly not the one intended by the original writer. A second meaning may have been implied but that is quite a different matter from saying that such a meaning was the one intended by the original writer. Nevertheless, as long as we do not use a second application to obscure our study and understanding of the author's original intent, such second meanings can be useful. Certainly if we choose to stand within traditional Christianity we must be willing to admit that such secondary meanings have been very popular within the Christian community, and to a certain extent, we must be resigned to such an approach even if we aren't very happy with it. But the problem has been that such traditional interpretations have often obscured or even replaced the original meaning. I actually suspect that the vehemence with which traditional Christian positions are sometimes attacked is a direct result of Christian reluctance to admit the first meaning of the text. Thus, one of my concerns as I write this book, is to show that it is possible to stand within a conservative Christian tradition and still be able to read the Old Testament for the purpose of discovering its most likely original meaning.

But after admitting that the original intent of Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:11-19 was probably not to outline the pre-history of Satan, I still suspect that Satan is lurking somewhere in those passages. Connected with that suspicion is the probability that the prophets have apparently borrowed from cultures other than their own. We must make it clear, however, that prophets are free to “borrow” whatever they choose and from wherever they might wish. It is the final product

that is the result of the divine inspiration, not the bits and pieces. Yet even if that is the case, what right do we have to suspect that pagan religions had bits and pieces of a sort that could be used? That is where I think we ought to take the events of Genesis 3-11 more seriously. Whatever mankind may have originally known about the cosmic struggle would have certainly made its way into pagan cultures and would have come in a distorted fashion to that line of patriarchs which retained the slender thread of the knowledge of the true God. Suddenly, here in prophetic literature, bits and pieces of that cosmic struggle begin to appear, but in a way which does not threaten God's first concern, the development of faith in him as the one true God. Certainly Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:11-19 do define the *issues* of the cosmic struggle, namely, that selfishness and pride are the supreme distortion of the will of God and lead inevitably towards full opposition to God himself. The personality of the Adversary, however, is certainly well hidden behind the mask of his quite human proteges. Perhaps, then, the primary criticism of the Christian usage of these passages stems from the impression that has often been given, that these passages must have clearly outlined in the Old Testament audience the knowledge of God's Adversary. Within the context of the approach of this book, I would say that such a knowledge was still too hot for the Old Testament to handle; it had to come later.

One further passage should perhaps be added here as touching on the demonic in the Old Testament, and that is Leviticus 16, the chapter that describes the ritual of the scapegoat (indicated in the RSV as the goat "for Azazel" – Hebrew, *azazel*). Christian interpretation of this passage has often seen both goats, the one that was sacrificed and the one that was led into the wilderness, as types of Christ. But another interpretation of this passage with ancient as well as modern support suggests that the goat led out for or to Azazel represents a demonic element. This interpretation seems to find fairly early confirmation from the intertestamental book known as 1 Enoch, for when the unknown author of 1 Enoch wished to select a name for the leader of the fallen angelic spirits, he chose the name Azazel. Now if the demonic element was indeed part of the original ritual, then perhaps here is an additional glimpse of the cosmic struggle between God and his Adversary; one goat was for the Lord and one for Azazel.

But after demonstrating just how little explicit information the Old Testament contains about Satan, we must turn our attention to the way in which the Old Testament writers handled the problem of evil in Satan's absence. Although they would often simply attribute violent acts directly to the Lord, they sometimes softened this picture by depicting other supernatural beings as the active agents in destroying and punishing. These beings belonged to a "heavenly court" which was under the direction of God. The role of this "heavenly court" is something that we must look at more closely.

If Satan's role is not clearly defined in the Old Testament, then we might also expect to find a description of the celestial economy which differs in some respects from the traditional Christian view which builds more directly on New Testament data. Revelation 12:9 provides the essentials of the New Testament view and the one which generally has been adopted in Christian interpretation: Michael and his angels versus the Dragon and his angels. The cosmic struggle is full-blown. In the Old Testament, however, everything must take place under the direction of the one God. Thus the "dragon and his angels" must be seen to be under divine management, though we can still catch glimpses of their misbehavior.

Perhaps an illustration from the human realm would be helpful in describing, the difference between the Old Testament view and the New Testament one, In the New Testament,

the forces of good seem almost to represent a government in exile; the rulership of this world has been usurped by the dragon, the ruler of this age. The tension is deep, leading to open war, as is evident in the battleground description of Revelation 12. In the Old Testament, however, the situation would perhaps be similar to the tension between two political parties, one in power, the other in opposition. Both still operate within the one government, but the opposition at times betrays signs of disloyalty to government policy. We shall return later to the Old Testament view, but first we need to look at another aspect of the Old Testament which is quite pertinent to our discussion, an aspect which is both intriguing and difficult, the names for God.

OLD TESTAMENT NAMES FOR GOD

As Christians, we are quite accustomed to the view that there is only one God. In my own case, for instance, I was so steeped in this belief, that it was surprising and difficult for me to recognize that for much of the Old Testament period, such a view was not so self-evident. I was aware that Israel's pagan neighbors worshiped other gods, but I had assumed that Israel clearly saw the absoluteness of the one God. To be sure, the Old Testament tells how Israel often turned aside to worship Baal; even with my "high-road" orientation, I recognized that. But what about Israel when she was right with God? How strong were her convictions then? That was the part that I found surprising. For even when Israel was right with God, she apparently tended to look at her God as the God of Israel, but perhaps not really the God of her neighbors. It is in this context that the discussion of the names of God in the Old Testament becomes pertinent.

One of the ten commandments declares that God's name is not to be taken in vain. The later Jewish community was so serious about that command that it decided the safest course would be simply never to utter the name of God at all. That habit of scrupulously avoiding the name of God established a tradition that has continued right down to this very day even in the Christian community. Thus users of the standard English translations (KJV, RSV, NEB, NIV) always read a substitute for the actual name of Israel's God. The story is a very complex one, but for our purposes we simply need to understand that, given Israel's situation in a world where there were many gods, the simple name "God" was not specific enough for Israel's God. Thus, when God instructed Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt, he gave a personal name for Israel to use when addressing him, their own personal God. Most scholars now agree that this name was originally something like "Yahweh." Some modern translations (e. g. The Jerusalem Bible), actually use this name throughout the Old Testament, adding a most interesting flavor to familiar stories. Thus when we read the Old Testament, we discover that the Philistines had their Dagon, the Moabites had their Chemosh, the Syrians had their Rimmon, but Israel had Yahweh. And Israel also clearly understood that whatever the other nations claimed or believed, she herself was to have no other gods before this Yahweh.

Our modern English Bibles deliberately avoid using the name "Yahweh," but by a very clever method, they do make it possible for the reader to know where an original Yahweh appears in the Hebrew: wherever you find LORD or GOD (written in small capital letters), that indicates the name Yahweh in the original Hebrew Bible. When you find "Lord" applied to God (written with only the first letter capitalized), that is generally a translation of the word *Adonai*, a close equivalent to our English "lord" in that it can refer to God or a human being, depending on the context; any authority figure could be an *adonai*. As for the word "God" (written with only an

initial capital), this represents the Hebrew *Elohim*. *Elohim* is like our English word “god” in that it can refer to the one true God or to false gods. But *Elohim* is also peculiar in that it is *plural* in form, so that precisely the same word could signify God, god, or gods, depending on the context. The above distinctions are important and can be quite helpful in illuminating some Old Testament passages; perhaps a diagram would be appropriate:

Usage in English Bibles Application to Hebrew Old Testament

LORD or GOD	= Yahweh, the specific name of Israel’s God
Lord	= Adonai, the general for any authority figure, human or divine
God	= Elohim, the general word for “god,” plural in form, but can be plural or singular in meaning; only the context determines whether it should be translated as God, god, or gods.

The name “Yahweh” as given to Moses is closely tied up with God.’s deliverance of his people from Egypt (Ex. 3:13-15; 6:2-8). This name had great potential for reminding Israel of an intimate personal relationship, just as any personal name when used by close friends yields much more warmth than “Mr.,” “Mrs.,” or “Ms..” *Elohim* could be used to refer to God and was used a great deal, but it was the name “Yahweh” that carried the personal message and was the one name that could never be misunderstood as belonging to another more ordinary god.

But for understanding the way that the Old Testament handles the problem of evil, the word *Elohim* is the important one. In many ways it is almost like our English word “angel,” but unlike the common use of our English word “angel.” *Elohim* is often used for the supreme God. In some passages in Scripture, the expression “sons of God” (*Elohim*) shades into the supernatural sense of “angels.” This is quite clearly the case in Job, not only in the prologue where the “sons of the Elohim” met before the Lord, Satan among them (Job 1:6; 2:1), but also in the poetic portion where “sons of God” and “morning stars” are parallel, suggesting supernatural beings who sang at the creation of the earth (Job 28:7).

THE HEAVENLY COURT

It appears that these *Elohim* or sons of the *Elohim* are members of a heavenly court. In Job, Satan was one of these “sons of God” and qualified as a member of the heavenly court even though he was clearly not a wholehearted supporter of the heavenly government. That tension within the heavenly court also occurs in other places in the Old Testament, even when the figure of Satan does not appear. Of particular interest is the story of Micaiah and the false prophets, told both in 1 Kings 22 and in 2 Chronicles 18. Let us note some of the key features.

As the story is told in 1 Kings (the Chronicles version varies little), Jehoshaphat, king of Judah (the southern kingdom) has gone north to join Ahab, king of Israel (the northern kingdom) in an attempt to regain Ramoth-Gilead for Israel from the Syrians. By reputation, Ahab ranks low as a worshiper of the true God, Yahweh, being constantly tempted by his wife’s Baal worship. But the biblical writers generally give Jehoshaphat good marks for his efforts in the service of

Yahweh. Why Jehoshaphat decided to link up with the ungodly Ahab is a curious matter, but he had done so. Yet having decided to help Ahab, the king's religious scruples began to work on his conscience. "We need to inquire from Yahweh, first," he said. "No problem," replied Ahab, and he summoned four hundred prophets, all of whom confidently declared "Yahweh will give Ramoth-Gilead into the hand of the king" (1 Kings 22:6).

These four hundred prophets apparently left Jehoshaphat even more uneasy, so he asked if perchance there might possibly be one more prophet. "Well, yes, there is Micaiah," admitted Ahab. "But I hate him, for he never prophesies good concerning me, but evil." Jehoshaphat got his wish, though, and Micaiah arrived, amidst a show of convincing visual aids by one of the other prophets – iron horns to push the Syrians (1 Kings 22:11).

With a touch of sarcasm, Micaiah told the king to go ahead (1 Kings 22:15), but Ahab caught the tone and commanded him to tell the truth. Micaiah did just that, confirming Ahab's suspicions as to the nature of Micaiah's prophecies, for he predicted the king's death. For our purposes, however, what is significant is the way that the heavenly court figures in Micaiah's reply. Part of Micaiah's reply is couched in terms of a vision:

I saw Yahweh sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left, and Yahweh said, "Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead?" And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before Yahweh, saying, "I will entice him." And Yahweh said to him, "By what means?" And he said, "I will go forth, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets." And he said "You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go forth and do so!" Now therefore behold, Yahweh has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these our prophets; Yahweh has spoken evil concerning you (1 Kings 22:19-23).

The parallel with Job is striking, for though the Lord is still clearly responsible for what happens, the actual performance of the evil deed is carried out by a member of the heavenly court. But, of course, there is a notable difference between the experience of Ahab and that of Job, for Job is a blameless and upright man. Such is hardly the case with Ahab, even though the specific deed which precipitated his downfall is not indicated in connection with Micaiah's vision.

From our point of view, the charade of the heavenly court looking for some way to make Ahab fall seems a strange way for the God of the universe to carry on. But that is the beauty of a vision: God can use whatever imagery is necessary to get the point across in a particular circumstance. For ancient Israel, the scene of the heavenly court was very useful, for it maintained the view of the omnipotence of Yahweh, while allowing some of the deeds to be carried out by lesser members of his entourage. The evil spirit who misleads Ahab is not yet cast in the role of a "Satan" who is the "accuser of the brethren," but the picture is not all that far removed from such a view.

This idea of the heavenly court is used for another purpose in the Old Testament, namely to "control" the gods of the other nations. It may be difficult for Christian theologians to visualize the gods of the other nations as something more than mere sticks and stones. Yet even in our modern era, conservative Christians can live quite comfortably with a belief in a demonic

kingdom, while at the same time viewing all the gods of the pagans as nonexistent. We probably wouldn't be quite so ready to say that the gods of the pagans were evil angels, but the Old Testament view is perhaps close to that point of view. Let us look at some of the key passages.

At the outset we need to recall a suggestion made earlier, namely, that God did not immediately set himself before Israel as the only true God of the universe. There are many passages in the Old Testament that declare that Yahweh is the only God worthy of the name. The creation account in Genesis 1 and numerous psalms declare that there is one God who made the world and all that is therein. But for the average Israelite the problem was faced at a much lower level: "You shall have no other gods (*Elohim*) before me." Where do the other gods (*Elohim*) fit in? They are the gods (*Elohim*) of the other nations. Yahweh is the *Elohim* in Israel and for Israel; Dagon is the *Elohim* for Philistia, Chemosh is the *Elohim* for Moab, and so on. The biblical evidence for such a position is not extensive, but when brought together it provides a reasonably clear picture.

One of the most fascinating and pertinent passages is Deuteronomy 32:8-9, rendered in the RSV as follows:

When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of men, he fixed the bounds of the people according to the number of the sons of God. For the LORD's (Yahweh's) portion is his people. Jacob his allotted heritage.

So here is a poetic passage suggesting that Israel (Jacob) belongs to Yahweh, but the other peoples belong to the sons of God. But you will notice a curious footnote in the RSV. The standard Hebrew text which was passed down through the official rabbinical line actually reads, "he fixed the bounds of the peoples according to the sons of *Israel*," a reading that makes very little sense and seems rather puzzling. The Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament), however, had rendered this passage as "angels of God," instead of "sons of Israel," leading a number of scholars to surmise that in the original Hebrew, the phrase "sons of God (*Elohim*)" had appeared. Apparently the devout and monotheistic scribes could not accept such an interpretation, so they modified the text to read "sons of Israel." But when the Dead Sea Scrolls came to light, one of the more sensational discoveries was a portion of a Hebrew manuscript with this passage included. In short, the conjecture of the scholars who had looked at the Greek Old Testament was correct; the manuscript read "sons of God." So the rendering given above by the RSV is most certainly correct and is one of the most helpful passages for establishing the Old Testament concept of the heavenly court.

Moving into narrative portions of the Old Testament, additional passages confirm the view that Israel sometimes saw Yahweh as one of the *Elohim* instead of the supreme and only *Elohim*. Judges 11:24 indicates that Jephthah, one of the judges, held such a view; at least such is indicated by his diplomatic correspondence with the Ammonites "Will you not possess what Chemosh your *Elohim* gives you to possess? And all that *Yahweh* our *Elohim* has dispossessed before us, we will possess."

This view is indicated also in the story of David. When he was fleeing from Saul, he had opportunity to kill the king, but settled for his spear and jar of water. When Saul realized what had happened, he and David carried on a moving conversation – across the valley from each

other – but moving nevertheless. In his appeal to Saul, David makes the following pathetic observation:

If it is *Yahweh* who has stirred you up against me, may he accept an offering; but if it is men, may they be cursed before *Yahweh*, for they have driven me out this day that I should have no share in the heritage of *Yahweh*, saying, “Go, serve other *Elohim*” (1 Sam. 26.19).

Driving David out of the land of Israel was tantamount to saying: “Go serve other *Elohim*. You are no longer in *Yahweh*’s land.”

Further hints of this view of the heavenly court appear in a most curious story in 2 Kings 3. The story describes Israel’s attack against Moab. Moab was on the run as Israel pursued them right into Moab itself. In fact, circumstances had become so bleak for the Moabites that their king felt constrained to do something drastic: sacrifice the crown prince, his eldest son. When Israel saw this sacrifice taking place, they apparently recognized that here was *the* supreme sacrifice that a king could make to Chemosh. But note the strange way that the biblical writer has recorded the story for us:

Then he took his eldest son who was to reign in his stead, and offered him for a burnt offering upon the wall. And there came great wrath on Israel and they withdrew up from him and returned to their own land (2 Kings 3:27).

The biblical writer is apparently afraid to admit that Israel had granted any kind of power to Chemosh, yet he does tell us that the army hastened back to their own land. When we put this story alongside the other passages in the Old Testament which touch on the *Elohim*, the conclusion becomes clear that Israel’s army was not at all sure that *Yahweh* was with them on foreign soil. *Yahweh* was *Elohim* in Israel, but was he also *Elohim* in Moab? They weren’t taking any chances and headed for home.

Another story which has a bearing on the discussion is that of Naaman in 2 Kings 5. Naaman apparently felt that it was necessary to travel to Israel if he was to be healed by Israel’s God. His testimony after his healing is remarkable, both with respect to the claims that he makes for *Yahweh* and for the parallel but somewhat contradictory recognition that back home in Syria *Yahweh* was not really in charge:

“Behold I know that there is no *Elohim* in all the earth but in Israel; so accept now a present from your servant.” But he said, “As *Yahweh* lives, whom I serve, I will receive none.” And he urged him to take it, but he refused. Then Naaman said, “If not, I pray you, let there be given to your servant two mules’ burden of earth; for henceforth your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any *Elohim* but *Yahweh*. In this matter may *Yahweh* pardon your servant: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, *Yahweh* pardon your servant in this matter.’ He said to him, “Go in peace” (2 Kings 5:15-19).

Yahweh is the only true *Elohim*, but he is still the *Elohim* of Israel. Hence, some of Israel's land must be taken to Syria so that Naaman can worship Israel's *Elohim* properly, on Israel's land.

Still further evidence for the heavenly court comes from the book of Daniel. Daniel 10 describes how Daniel prayed for divine assistance. The angelic response was delayed because "the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days; but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, so I left him there with the prince of the kingdom of Persia" (Daniel 10:13). Daniel 10:20-21 also mentions the "prince of Persia," who will be followed by the "prince of Greece." Furthermore, Michael "your prince contends by my side against these." Now without the other evidence for the concept of the heavenly court in the Old Testament, one might be tempted to see these princes as mere human rulers. Yet the figure of Michael seems to suggest that we are, in fact, dealing with the supernatural. If that is the case, then the book of Daniel also reflects the concept of the heavenly court: Michael and Gabriel on Daniel's side against the Prince of Persia and the Prince of Greece. The tensions are deeper here, approaching the full break as seen in New Testament times, but the interesting thing from the standpoint of the heavenly court is the fact that each nation has its prince.

The crowning piece of evidence for the concept of the heavenly court is provided by Psalm 82. Without the concept of the heavenly court, the psalm is quite inexplicable, but when set against the background of the heavenly court it can be seen as a significant step towards the position which is so important to Christians, namely, that there is really only one *Elohim* worthy of the name, and that is Yahweh, the God of Israel.

This psalm is one of the best places to see the dual usage of *Elohim* as singular and as plural, for the psalm begins: "God (*Elohim*) has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods (*Elohim*) he holds judgment" (Ps. 82:1). God then proceeds to condemn roundly these *Elohim* for failing to establish justice. They have judged unjustly, showing partiality to the wicked and failing to give justice to the weak, the fatherless, the afflicted and destitute. Then in a glorious climax which prepared the way for the exaltation of the one true God, the psalmist quotes his God: "I say, You, are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you; nevertheless you shall die like men, and fall like any prince" (Ps. 82:6-7).

So the reluctant members, the unjust members, the "satans" in the heavenly court, are finally brought to justice for their failures. What then is the only conclusion that can be drawn? In the words of the psalmist: "Arise, O God, judge the earth; for to thee belong all the nations!" (Ps. 82:8).

No longer will Naaman have to haul his mule loads of Israelite soil to worship the one true God. Cast down are Chemosh, Dagon, and Rimmon. Vanquished are the princes of Persia and Greece, for there is one God to whom all the nations belong, the God of Israel. That, of course, is a sentiment with which Christians would most heartily agree. Although the demonic is present in the world, there is one God who is over all, above all, and the creator of all that is.

Why did it take so long for Israel to see the truth? And why did God not make it clear all along? The answer lies in the character of our God. A freedom-loving God must grant his creatures the right to rebel. Furthermore, he must allow the principle of selfishness to manifest itself clearly if righteousness is ever to gain the upper hand. As God led Israel along the path of restoration, he sought to win the hearts and minds of his people. In a world permeated with polytheism, convincing Israel that there is one true God in heaven who is God over all was no

easy task and the route may seem to us to have been circuitous. But as Israel grew towards the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the principles of the great cosmic struggle began to emerge more clearly, until finally in the New Testament the issues and the key protagonists stood out in bold relief for all to see.

Nor should we overlook the significance of that New Testament climax as it is so vividly described in Revelation 12. The war in heaven and the thrusting out of the dragon is often seen only in its primeval significance, but the book of Revelation clearly sees the struggle climaxing at the cross. As the Devil is cast down to the earth a loud voice in heaven proclaims:

Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death (Rev. 12:10-11).

The cosmic struggle may have been of long standing, but regardless of when the war in heaven began, it was won at the cross. Though the skirmishes on earth must continue (cf. Rev. 12:12), the heavenly court has been purified and is now composed solely of Michael and his angels. The banished accuser is no longer one of the “sons of God.” Thus, in a sense, Revelation 12 marks the transition between the Old Testament concept of the heavenly court and the New Testament portrayal of the battle between Christ and Satan, the great struggle for the hearts and lives of men – for the rulership of this world and the universe.

Now let's return to the “Leading Question for Lesson 5, “The Wrath of Divine Love”

Leading Question: “The Wrath of Divine Love” sounds so negative. Can't we just skip it?

A quotation from Ellen Whites' *Desire of Ages* focuses on our question:

Divine love has been stirred to its unfathomable depths for the sake of men, and angels marvel to behold in the recipients of so great love a mere surface gratitude. Angels marvel at man's shallow appreciation of the love of God. Heaven stands indignant at the neglect shown to the souls of men. Would we know how Christ regards it? How would a father and mother feel, did they know that their child, lost in the cold and the snow, had been passed by, and left to perish, by those who might have saved it? Would they not be terribly grieved, wildly indignant? Would they not denounce those murderers with wrath hot as their tears, intense as their love? The sufferings of every man are the sufferings of God's child, and those who reach out no helping hand to their perishing fellow beings provoke His righteous anger. This is the wrath of the Lamb. To those who claim fellowship with Christ, yet have been indifferent to the needs of their fellow men, He will declare in the great judgment day, "I know you not whence ye are; depart from Me, all ye workers of iniquity." Luke 13.27. (DA 825)

The official study guide makes this insightful comment: “In the biblical narratives, God is repeatedly provoked to anger by what biblical scholars refer to as the cycle of rebellion. This cycle goes as follows:

“ The people rebel against God and do evil, sometimes even horrendous atrocities, such as child sacrifice and other abominations in His sight.

God withdraws according to the people’s decisions.

The people are oppressed by foreign nations.

The people cry to God for deliverance.

God graciously delivers the people.

The people rebel against God again, often more egregiously than before.

But God repeatedly forgives, meeting humans with unending faithfulness.

Psalm 78:38, this week’s memory text, declares the state of God’s continuing restoration: “But He, being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity , and did not destroy them. Yes, many a time He turned His anger away, and did not stir up all His wrath.”

Nehemiah 9:7-33 documents this cycle in Israel’s history. Amos offers more examples of this cycle. Amos 7:1-2 describes how the the Lord was preparing another dose of destruction when the prophet cried out: “O Lord God, forgive, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!” The Lord relented concerning this: It shall not be,” said the Lord (Amos 7:3)

Question: Does the cycle never end? Can the people go too far? **Answer:** Yes. There are numerous biblical examples of the people going too far. One of the more poignant ones is found in Hosea 4:17: “Ephraim is joined to idols – let him alone.”

Question: If you were to prepare a study guide on the book of Jonah, how might you prioritize the following points:

1. Conditional prophecy: When the people changed, God changed! Jonah 3:10: “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.”

2. An unconverted prophet as a powerful preacher. It is clear from the book of Jonah that the prophet was unconverted when he preached his powerful sermon. Jonah 3:5: “The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.”

3. A God more gracious than people. Jonah was angry when the people repented and God changed his mind about punishing them: Jonah 4:1-2: “But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. 2 He prayed to the Lord, “Isn’t this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.”

Jonah 4:9-11: But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?” “It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.”

But the Lord said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. 11 And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

Righteous Indignation. Jesus' cleansing of the temple is perhaps the best known example of Jesus' "righteous indignation" (Matthew 21:12, 13; John 2:13-17). But Mark gives us more examples:

1. Mark 3:4-5: Jesus' anger when challenged about healing a paralytic on Sabbath: "He looked around at them in anger."

2. Mark 10:13-14: Jesus' indignation when the disciples tried to send the children away from Jesus. "When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

Question: Do we tend to practice too much righteous indignation or not enough?

Comment: Patience is on every New Testament virtue list; anger is on none of them.

Theme: “God’s Love of Justice”

Leading Question: Is the understanding of “justice” the same among all human beings?

When it comes to matters of diversity, an Ellen White quotation is a good place to start:

Every association of life calls for the exercise of self-control, forbearance, and sympathy. We differ so widely in disposition, habits, education, that our ways of looking at things vary. We judge differently. Our understanding of truth, our ideas in regard to the conduct of life, are not in all respects the same. There are no two whose experience is alike in every particular. The trials of one are not the trials of another. The duties that one finds light are to another most difficult and perplexing.

So frail, so ignorant, so liable to misconception is human nature, that each should be careful in the estimate he places upon another. We little know the bearing of our acts upon the experience of others. What we do or say may seem to us of little moment, when, could our eyes be opened, we should see that upon it depended the most important results for good or for evil. (MH 483)

Starting where we can all agree. Malachi 3:5-6 lists a string of sins that go a long way toward defining “justice” from a biblical perspective:

Malachi 3:5-6: “So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me,” says the Lord Almighty. 6 “I the Lord do not change.

The only place in this list where we might differ in our perspectives would be the sorcerers. But let’s list out the rest of the list and take a closer at each one:

1. Adulterers
2. Perjurers
3. Those who defraud laborers of their wages
4. Those who oppress the widows and the fatherless
5. Those who deprive the foreigners of justice

In Exodus 23:1-9 another list appears with which we could all likely to agree.

1. Do not spread false reports. Do not help a guilty person by being a malicious witness.
2. Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd.
3. Do not show favoritism to a poor person in a lawsuit.
4. If you come across your enemy’s ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to return it.

5. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help them with it.
6. Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits.
7. Have nothing to do with a false charge and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty.
8. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds those who see and twists the words of the innocent.
9. Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt.

Let's tuck in a Genesis narrative, the one between God and Abraham over the fate of Sodom: That will give us further insight to the biblical perspective on "justice":

Genesis 18:23-25: Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? 25 Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

We could add another famous text to our list:

Micah 6:8: He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

In short, God expects his children to follow his example and to do justice!

A God who repents? Some passages in Scripture declare that God will repent or relent when people make the necessary changes. A quote from the official study guide addresses the issue:

"These passages explicitly declare that God 'is not a man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?' (Num. 23:19). Read in light of the other passages, these texts cannot be taken to mean that God does not "relent" at all, but instead they convey the truth that He does not "relent" or "repent" in the ways that humans do. Rather, God always keeps His promises, and while He will change course in response to human repentance, He does so always in accordance with His goodness and His Word."

On the fringes: Accommodation. Our lesson does not address the question of "accommodation" at all. But if one is going to grapple with all of Scripture, the concept is important.

Accommodation refers to passages that "accommodate" to the people's cultural perspective. One good example is the concept of blood vengeance, the idea that if a male member of a tribe is killed by someone, it is the obligation of the tribe to see that the offender be put to death. In that view, justice can only be done by following through with vengeance. Numbers 35 spells out the various aspects that need explaining. The reason why I have chose this example is that it is the only place I know of where Ellen White begins to address the

question of accommodation. She has no relevant comments in her earlier writings. But this is what she says in *Patriarchs and Prophets* with reference to the appointments of the six cities of refuge, providing a kind of half-way house to take the rough edges off an ancient custom:

The appointment of these cities had been commanded by Moses, "that the slayer may flee thither, which killeth any person at unawares. And they shall be unto you cities for refuge," he said, "that the manslayer die not, until he stand before the congregation in judgment." [Num. 35:11-12] This merciful provision was rendered necessary by the ancient custom of private vengeance, by which the punishment of the murderer devolved on the nearest relative or the next heir of the deceased. In cases where guilt was clearly evident, it was not necessary to wait for a trial by the magistrates. The avenger might pursue the criminal anywhere, and put him to death wherever he should be found. The Lord did not see fit to abolish this custom at that time; but he made provision to insure the safety of those who should take life unintentionally. (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, 515)

Another narrative which requires a strong doctrine of accommodation is the story of Achan and the treatment of the "devoted things" that Achan took. The Hebrew word which refers to this custom is *cherem*. And it is not unique to Israel. There is a record of a Moabite king who dedicated an Israelite city to destruction.

But these customs are deeply rooted and must be taken into account if we want a biblical understanding of "justice." Because Israel had failed to live within the parameters of known justice, Achan and his family had to pay the price. Here is Joshua 7:20-26, describing the fate of Achan and his family:

Joshua 7:20 Achan replied, "It is true! I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel. This is what I have done: 21 When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath."

22 So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent, and there it was, hidden in his tent, with the silver underneath. 23 They took the things from the tent, brought them to Joshua and all the Israelites and spread them out before the Lord.

24 Then Joshua, together with all Israel, took Achan son of Zerah, the silver, the robe, the gold bar, his sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had, to the Valley of Achor. 25 Joshua said, "Why have you brought this trouble on us? The Lord will bring trouble on you today." Then all Israel stoned him, and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them.

26 Over Achan they heaped up a large pile of rocks, which remains to this day. Then the Lord turned from his fierce anger. Therefore that place has been called the Valley of Achor ever since.

Some have attempted to neutralize the story of Achan by referring to Deuteronomy 24:16, which is much more compatible with modern views of justice:

Deuteronomy 24:16: “The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, nor shall the children be put to death for the fathers; every man shall be put to death for his own sin.”

But the Deuteronomy passage does not take into account the radical note of accommodation represented in the story of Achan.

Israel’s God was a God who valued justice. He expected his people to live up to what they believed to be right. Achan did not and paid the price for his failure.

Theme: “The Problem of Evil”

Leading question: Is there a happy solution to the problem of evil?

One of the most enduring issues in our world is the problem of evil. If there is no over-all solution, there are at least four partial solutions, several of which are hinted at in the official study guide.

1. Partial Solution #1: Liberation from the stories of Uzzah and the two she-bears that mauled the 42 boys. This reflects my own personal experience. As a young Christian, I was fearful of being too honest and open with God because of the haunting images of two Old Testament stories: the story of Uzzah and the ark and the story of the two she bears that mauled 42 boys. Here are the biblical references:

2 Sam. 6:1-11: David again brought together all the able young men of Israel—thirty thousand. 2 He and all his men went to Baalah in Judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the Name, the name of the Lord Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim on the ark. 3 They set the ark of God on a new cart and brought it from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, sons of Abinadab, were guiding the new cart 4 with the ark of God on it, and Ahio was walking in front of it. 5 David and all Israel were celebrating with all their might before the Lord, with castanets, harps, lyres, timbrels, sistrums and cymbals.

6 When they came to the threshing floor of Nakon, Uzzah reached out and took hold of the ark of God, because the oxen stumbled. 7 The Lord’s anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down, and he died there beside the ark of God.

8 Then David was angry because the Lord’s wrath had broken out against Uzzah, and to this day that place is called Perez Uzzah.

9 David was afraid of the Lord that day and said, “How can the ark of the Lord ever come to me?” 10 He was not willing to take the ark of the Lord to be with him in the City of David. Instead, he took it to the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite. 11 The ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite for three months, and the Lord blessed him and his entire household.

For starters, I was troubled by the story because it appears that Uzzah was just trying to be helpful. “For the oxen stumbled” is the crucial phrase. There are all kinds of disasters sent by God in the Old Testament. But somehow this one stood out because of Uzzah’s apparent desire to be helpful.

That was one of the stories that taught me to be very careful in my prayer life. The other one was the story of the two she-bears at the time of the prophet Elisha.

2 Kings 2:23-24: 3 From there Elisha went up to Bethel. As he was walking along the road, some boys came out of the town and jeered at him. “Get out of here, baldy!” they said. “Get out of here, baldy!” 24 He turned around, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the Lord. Then the two bears [KJV has she-bears!] came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys.

Putting those two stories together, I learned to be very careful when dealing with sacred objects or people. The result was a very impoverished prayer life. But just as the problem arose from two Old Testament stories, the solution came from two other Old Testament stories that helped me realize that God’s friends are skeptics: Abraham’s conversation with God over Sodom, and Moses’ conversation with God over the fate of Israel.

2. Partial Solution #2: Discovering that God’s friends are skeptics.

As I recall, the first real break came when I was reading the story Abraham’s conversation with God over the fate of Sodom. Without hesitation, Abraham confronted God over the possibility of Sodom’s destruction. Here is the kernel of the story from Genesis 18:

Genesis 18:22-26. The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord. 23 Then Abraham approached him and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? 25 Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”

26 The Lord said, “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.”

When I got to the story of Israel’s rebellion at Sinai, the second story fell into place. Here is the biblical narrative from Exodus 32:

Exodus 32:7-14 The Lord said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; 8 they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’ ” 9 The Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. 10 Now let me alone so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, and of you I will make a great nation.”

11 But Moses implored the Lord his God and said, “O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and

all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’ ” 14 And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Question: Does this very personal story resonate at all with your experience or with other believers of your acquaintance? For me, I was now liberated to confront the God of the universe!

After putting the two troubling stories in their place (Uzzah and the Bears) and finding liberation through the discovery of the two stories that liberate skeptics (Abraham and Moses), allowing them to confront God, I returned to the official study guide for our third partial solution.

3. Partial Solution #3: Misery Loves Company. The official study guide helps to compile a fairly long list of believers who had tussled with the theodicy question and introduces a term that is useful as a heading: “the skeptical theist.” How can a good God be master of a world where there is so much discord and pain? “The official study guide defines the “skeptical theist” as follows: “The skeptical theist is one who believes God has good reasons for acting as He does, but given our limited knowledge, we should not expect to be in a position to know just what those reasons are. The skeptical theist is skeptical regarding the human capacity to be aware of or to understand fully God’s reasons relative to the evil in this world.”

All my “skeptic” examples except one are from the Old Testament. But the one from the New Testament is crucial: Jesus’ cry from the cross: “My God, why have you forsaken me?” Recorded in two of the Gospels, Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34, it must be noted that Jesus is quoting Psalm 22 from the Old Testament. It is as if Jesus’ death, was and is the solution to the theodicy question!

So here is the rest of my list. Some of the passages are tangential, but they are part of the picture.

Job 30:26 But when I looked for good, evil came, and when I waited for light, darkness came.

Job 38:2 (CEV) Why do you talk so much when you know so little?

Psalms 10:1 Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

Psalms 73:1-3 Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. 2 But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped. 3 For I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

Jeremiah 12:1 You will be in the right, O Lord, when I lay charges against you, but let me put my case to you. Why does the way of the guilty prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?

Jeremiah 13:2 Do you know why your clothes were torn off and you were abused? It was because of your terrible sins. (CEV) – this verse doesn’t really belong on this list for it does not blame God, but humans for our dilemma.

Habakkuk 1:2-4 O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save? 3 Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. 4 So the law becomes slack, and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous; therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

Malachi 4:17 You have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet you say, “How have we wearied him?” By saying, “All who do evil are good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them.” Or by asking, “Where is the God of justice?”

4. Partial Solution #4: The Free Will Defense. The official study guide adds one more argument, the “free will defense,” to augment the argument for the “skeptical theist” and may enable an agitated believer to sleep nights in light of the chaos in our world.

The free will defense makes love possible, for it enables us to freely choose to love God.

Question: This lesson concludes with two arguments that may combine to be helpful to the thoughtful believer: 1) the skeptical theist; 2) the “free-will” argument. Is the combination of these two arguments likely to help you and your believing friends?

Theme: “Free Will, Love, and Divine Providence”

Leading Question: How does one tell if a particular event is “providential,” “natural,” or “demonic”?

Exploring the providential: A biblical story that reeks of providence is the story of Joseph. At the conclusion of the story, after the death of Jacob, Joseph’s brothers feared that he would be seeking revenge on him. Joseph’s comment to his brothers is remarkable for its forgiving spirit:

Genesis 50:15-21: 15 Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph’s brothers said, “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?” 16 So they approached Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this instruction before he died, 17 ‘Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.’ Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. 18 Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, “We are here as your slaves.” 19 But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? 20 Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. 21 So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

C. S. Lewis on Providence. Lewis writes a tantalizing and outrageous description of providence that I suspect is partially true at least some of the time:

I will not believe in the Managerial God and his general laws. If there is Providence at all, everything is providential and every providence is a special providence. It is an old and pious saying that Christ died not only for Man but for each man, just as much as if each had been the only man there was. Can I not believe the same of this creative act – which, as spread out in time, we call destiny or history? It is for the sake of each human soul. Each is an end. Perhaps for each beast. Perhaps even each particle of matter – the night sky suggests that the inanimate also has for God some value we cannot imagine. His ways are not (not there, anyway) like ours. – C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, 55.

Once in a conversation with a friend, my friend spoke of the value he found in “praying without ceasing.” But I have used the C. S. Lewis quote to give even more intense focus on prayers. My problem with praying without ceasing is that I have to *remember* to pray. If, however, I see everything as providential, it serves as a marvelous heuristic device. Whatever happens I am forced to ask what might be the providential aspect. If I lose something, for example, I am forced to ask what is providential about the loss. It could be that the loss provided

the opportunity to find something I didn't even know was lost. Thus I never need to ask whether a particular event is providential, natural, or demonic.

Question: Can you think of any biblical narrative that would counter or reinforce Lewis's claim? Certainly Joseph was forced to evaluate every event in his life from that perspective.

C. S. Lewis on love and free will. Several weeks ago, the official study guide cited a C. S. Lewis quote that provides a bridge between love and free will:

“Free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata – of creatures that worked like machines – would hardly be worth creating. The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other And for that they must be free.” – *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), p. 52)

Biblical narratives that reinforce the link between love and free will. Is there an element in the famous love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13, that reinforces the relationship between love and free will. Here is that chapter in its entirety to help focus our thinking:

1 Corinthians 13: If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, 10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 12 For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

A Sovereign God that always gets his way? Those who have a strong desire to emphasize divine sovereignty, often overlook those passages in Scripture indicate that God often has not gotten his way. Here are a few lines from Psalm 81 to illustrate the point that God does not always get his way:

Psalms 81:11-14 But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me.¹² So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels. ¹³ O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways!¹⁴ Then I would quickly subdue their enemies and turn my hand against their foes.

Question: What biblical narratives would be best to make the point that God does not always get his way? Choose from among these portions of Scripture

- A. The patriarchal narratives in Genesis
- B. The narratives describing the exodus from Egypt
- C. The wilderness wandering
- D. The narrative from Joshua and Judges
- E. The narratives from Samuel-Kings
- F. The prophetic narratives

A Divine attempt to *win* Israel's love. The *shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4 and following indicates God's great ideal for his people:

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. ⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Question: How successful was God in winning the hearts of his people?

God's promise to be with his people even in their troubles. John 16:33 makes it clear that just as God is never universally successful in seeing his will being accomplished on earth, so we will have difficulties, but God will be with us:

John 16:33 "I have said this to you so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution, but take courage: I have conquered the world!"

Question: What practical methods can we adopt that will help us ride out the difficult times in a world that rarely follows God will?

GOOD WORD 2025.1

Lesson #9 - March 1

“God’s Love and Justice”

Gen 1-3; Isa 14; Ezek 28; Matt 4, 13; Eph 6; Rev 12

– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: “The Cosmic Conflict”

Leading Question: What passages in the Bible teach most clearly that there is a cosmic conflict?

Genesis 1-3: Tree and the Serpent

Isaiah 14: Fall of Lucifer (King of Babylon)

Ezekiel 28: Covering Cherub (King of Tyre)

Matthew 4:1-11: Wilderness Temptation

Matthew 13:24-27: An Enemy at work

Ephesians 6:12: We Wrestle Not against Flesh and Blood

Revelation 12:7-9: War in Heaven

Question: If you were uninitiated, which of these passages would be most helpful? Here is each passage, noting the questions, strengths and weaknesses of each passage:

Genesis 1-3: The tree and the serpent, the serpent being “more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made.”

Isaiah 14: The Lucifer passage: Addressed to King of Babylon; the identification of Satan is first made explicit by the church Father, Tertullian (d. 240 AD).

Ezekiel 28: The “covering cherub in Eden” passage, like the Lucifer passage, not explicitly identified until 200 years after Christ.

Matthew 4: The Wilderness Temptation passage, where all the players and issues are clear.

Matthew 13: An Enemy at work, but not identified.

Ephesians 6:12: Issues clearly identified.

Revelation 12:7-9: War in heaven, key actors and issues all clearly identified.

Question: On balance, does the Bible make a “cosmic conflict” clear?

Theme: “Rules of Engagement”

Leading question: Does the Bible make clear that in the cosmic conflict God sets limitations on himself and on humans?

We will return to the question of “limits.” But let us begin where the official study guide begins, at the confrontation on Mt. Carmel. Here is the narrative as found in 1 Kings 18:19-40:

1 Kings 18:19-40: 20 So Ahab sent to all the Israelites and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel. 21 Elijah then came near to all the people and said, “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him, but if Baal, then follow him.” The people did not answer him a word. 22 Then Elijah said to the people, “I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord, but Baal’s prophets number four hundred fifty. 23 Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood but put no fire to it. 24 Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord; the god who answers by fire is indeed God.” All the people answered, “Well spoken!” 25 Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; then call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it.” 26 So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, “O Baal, answer us!” But there was no voice and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made. 27 At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, “Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.” 28 Then they cried aloud, and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. 29 As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.

30 Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come closer to me,” and all the people came closer to him. First he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down; 31 Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, “Israel shall be your name”; 32 with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. Then he made a trench around the altar, large enough to contain two measures of seed. 33 Next he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood. He said, “Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood.” 34 Then he said, “Do it a second time,” and they did it a second time. Again he said, “Do it a third time,” and they did it a third time, 35 so that the water ran all around the altar and filled the trench also with water.

36 At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. 37 Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God and that you have turned their hearts back.” 38 Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood,

the stones, and the dust and even licked up the water that was in the trench. 39 When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.” 40 Elijah said to them, “Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape.” Then they seized them, and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon and killed them there.

Several features from this narrative are jarring to our modern Christian ears, including Elijah’s violent slaughter of the 450 prophets of Baal. But the point that the official study guide makes is that the “idolatry” of the people is not simply the worship of idols of wood or stone, but the worship of real demons. And the official study guide quotes Deuteronomy 32:17: “They sacrificed to demons, not God, to deities they had never known, to new ones recently arrived, whom your ancestors had not feared.”

The official study guide adds to that passage, another one from 1 Corinthians 10:20: “the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. And I do not want you to have fellowship with demons” (NKJV).

The official study guide makes this striking statement: “Behind the false ‘gods’ of the nations, then, were actually demons in disguise. This means, then, that all of the text of Scripture dealing with idolatry and the foreign gods are ‘cosmic conflict’ texts.”

Question: Is it possible that the mockery against idols of wood and stone, as described in such passages as Isaiah 44:9-20, has led us to overlook the real demonic element in idol worship?

The Cosmic Conflict Invades Heaven Again. As we have noted already, the “cosmic conflict” originated in heaven. Daniel 10 reminds us that the battle still rages in heavenly circles. In Daniel 10:1-14, the battle between Michael and the “prince” of Persia is very much alive

Daniel 10:1-14: In the third year of King Cyrus of Persia a word was revealed to Daniel, who was named Belteshazzar. The word was true, and it concerned a great conflict. He understood the word, having received understanding in the vision.

2 At that time I, Daniel, had been mourning for three weeks. 3 I had eaten no rich food, no meat or wine had entered my mouth, and I had not anointed myself at all, for the full three weeks. 4 On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river (that is, the Tigris), 5 I looked up and saw a man clothed in linen, with a belt of gold from Uphaz around his waist. 6 His body was like beryl, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the roar of a multitude. 7 I, Daniel, alone saw the vision; the people who were with me did not see the vision, though a great trembling fell upon them, and they fled and hid themselves. 8 So I was left alone to see this great vision. My strength left me, and my complexion grew deathly pale, and I retained no strength. 9 When I heard the sound of his words, I fell into a trance, face to the ground.

10 But then a hand touched me and roused me to my hands and knees. 11 He said to me, “Daniel, greatly beloved, pay attention to the words that I am going to speak to you. Stand on your feet, for I have now been sent to you.” So while he was speaking this word to me, I stood up trembling. 12 He said to me, “Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I

have come because of your words. 13 But the prince of the kingdom of Persia opposed me twenty-one days. So Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, and I left him there with the prince of the kingdom of Persia 14 and have come to help you understand what is to happen to your people at the end of days. For there is a further vision for those days.”

In short, in Daniel’s day, the “cosmic conflict” was still active in the heavenly realms. And thus we return to the “rules of engagement,” where God imposes certain limitations on himself and on the forces of evil, until the “time is fulfilled.”

In Revelation, the work of the dragon/Satan clearly has to work within divinely-given limitations. The point is made most clearly in Revelation 12:12: “Rejoice then, you heavens and those who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath because he knows that his time is short!”

Job. As noted earlier, Satan is only explicit in chapters 1 and 2 in Job. But in the remainder of Job it is clear that God has invoked certain “rules of engagement” which Satan is not allowed to exceed. This is clear from Job 1:12 and 2:3-6:

Job 1:12: The Lord said to the accuser, “Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!” So the accuser went out from the presence of the Lord.

Job 2:3-6: The Lord said to the accuser, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.” 4 Then the accuser answered the Lord, “Skin for skin! All that the man has he will give for his life. 5 But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.” 6 The Lord said to the accuser, “Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life.”

Question: Do these additional insights about the limits which God imposes on himself and on others makes it easier to understand the implications of the “cosmic conflict”?

Theme: “What More Could I Have Done?”

Leading question: Does God always do everything he can to save his people?

Our lesson for this week is entitled, “What more could I have done?” echoing the question Isaiah asks in the parable of the vineyard:

Isaiah 5:3-4: “And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. 4 What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield rotten grapes?”

Question: What would be the implications for our understanding of the character of God if the answer to that question were: “Yes, God could have done more.”

The plan of salvation is based on the assumption that God had pulled out all the stops in order to win us back. One of my favorite quotes comes from Hugh Williams, an SDA pastor, now deceased: “Don’t believe anything about God that would make you think less of Him for it could not be true. You cannot believe Him to be better than He really is.”

John 3:16 is one of the best passages in the Bible to affirm that great truth: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

Christ Overcomes All. According to 1 John, Jesus came to destroy the works of Satan:

1 John 3:8 “The Son of God was revealed for this purpose: to destroy the works of the devil.”

Question: As far as the human family is concerned, which aspect of Christ’s work is the most powerful? Or would that vary from person to person?

- A. To live as the perfect example
- B. To provide the perfect sacrifice
- C. To somehow satisfy both goals?

A significant Ellen White quote notes the remarkable variety in human experience:

Every association of life calls for the exercise of self-control, forbearance, and sympathy. We differ so widely in disposition, habits, education, that our ways of looking at things vary. We judge differently. Our understanding of truth, our ideas in regard to the conduct of life, are not in all respects the same. There are no two whose experience is alike in every particular. The trials of one are not the trials of another. The duties that one finds light are to another most difficult and perplexing.

So frail, so ignorant, so liable to misconception is human nature, that each should be careful in the estimate he places upon another. We little know the bearing of our acts upon the experience of others. What we do or say may seem to

us of little moment, when, could our eyes be opened, we should see that upon it depended the most important results for good or for evil. – MH 483

Question: On a scale of 1 to 10, how well do you think Adventists affirm that variety? As Individuals? As a community?

Another Vineyard Story. The Old Testament vineyard story in Isaiah 5 is at best ambivalent when it is judging the hope for humanity. The New Testament story from the lips of Jesus is much more somber:

Matthew 21:33-41 “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went away. 34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first, and they treated them in the same way. 37 Then he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” 41 They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.”

Carrot or Stick? The vineyard stories raise the question of which is typically more effective in leading God’s people to the kingdom: positive or negative motivation. Jesus was clearly not shy about using negative motivation, especially in his parables – in his personal ministry he tended to be much more positive.

Question: Is it possible to be an effective witness if one uses exclusively positive motivation. Or are there occasions when the negative motivation becomes necessary?

Paul’s example. When Paul was dealing with the Corinthian church (perhaps his most difficult church), he gave an ambivalent suggestion in 1 Corinthians 4:

1 Cor. 4:17: 21 “What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick or with love in a spirit of gentleness?”

Ellen White’s mature perspective. Given the heavy-hitting example of early Adventists, especially when dealing the Roman Catholics, this is an intriguing quotation:

The Lord wants His people to follow other methods than that of condemning wrong, even though the condemnation be just. He wants us to do something more than to hurl at our adversaries charges that only drive them further from the truth. The work which Christ came to do in our world was not to erect barriers and constantly thrust upon the people the fact that they were wrong.

He who expects to enlighten a deceived people must come near to them and labor for them in love. He must become a center of holy influence. –
Testimonies 6:121-122 (1901)

Question: How does one determine whether to use the carrot or the stick? Do Adventists tend to use one more than the other? Is it possible to get the balance just right when dealing with people?

God's Ultimate Vindication. In the end, God's goal is to vindicate his name and his character. In that respect, Romans 3:21-31 is to the point:

Romans 3:21-31: 21 But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed and is attested by the Law and the Prophets, 22 the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ[a] for all who believe. For there is no distinction, 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; 24 they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; 26 it was to demonstrate at the present time his own righteousness, so that he is righteous and he justifies the one who has the faith of Jesus.

27 Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. Through what kind of law? That of works? No, rather through the law of faith. 28 For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. 29 Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of gentiles also? Yes, of gentiles also, 30 since God is one, and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. 31 Do we then overthrow the law through this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

In short, we affirm that it is the work of Christ that assures the success of the “cosmic conflict.”

Theme: “Love and Justice: The Two Greatest Commandments”

Leading question: Is it possible to identify the two greatest sins as well as the two greatest commandments?

If we make the two greatest sins parallel with the two greatest commandments, then we can say that the greatest sins would be not loving God and not loving human beings. And Jesus seems to be suggesting a way of bringing the two together: the best way to love God is to love human beings. Two of his statements in the Gospel of Matthew can be helpful in this respect. Matthew 22:34-40 identifies the two great commands, Matthew 7:12 boils the two down into one. Let’s quote these passages one after the other:

Matthew 22:34-40: When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35 and one of them, an expert in the law, asked him a question to test him. 36 “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” 37 He said to him, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Matthew 7:12: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”

Many passages in Scripture identify loving God with loving your fellow humans. The memory text for this week, 1 John 4:20, is one of those passages:

1 John 4:20: Those who say, “I love God,” and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.

Another passage comes from the prophet Micah:

Micah 6:8: He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?

The only passage that comes close to linking the religious and the social is Matthew 23:23. But even there Jesus calls the social the “weightier” matters of the law:

Matthew 23:23: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.

Question: By saying that the best way of loving God is to love human beings, are we going too far in minimizing the religious and the ritual, that is dumping the tithing completely?

The truth of Psalm 82. The official study guide, immediately after its discussion of Jesus two great commands, reinforces the conclusion we just arrived at, namely, the best way to love God is to love human beings. Psalm 82 points directly to social sins. Indeed, it brings the judgment of the heavenly court down to earth!

Psalm 82: God has taken his place in the divine council;
in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:
2 “How long will you judge unjustly
and show partiality to the wicked? Selah
3 Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.
4 Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”
5 They have neither knowledge nor understanding;
they walk around in darkness;
all the foundations of the earth are shaken.
6 I say, “You are gods,
children of the Most High, all of you;
7 nevertheless, you shall die like mortals
and fall like any prince.”
8 Rise up, O God, judge the earth,
for all the nations belong to you!

Perhaps without realizing it the author of the official study guide has made an iron-clad argument for molding the two parts of the lesson study guide, love and justice into one. Indeed one could say that justice is love and that love is justice.

Who Is My Neighbor. The official study guide adds one more of Jesus parables at the end of this week’s study, namely, the parable of the Good Samaritan. Indeed, as familiar as the story is, it might be good to read the story, Luke 10:25-37, out loud together. It is another way of cementing love and justice together.

Question: Perhaps without realizing it, the author of the study guide has brought love and justice together in a way that seemed unlikely when the quarter began. Are you convinced? Where is his argument most likely to be vulnerable?

– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: “Love Is the Fulfillment of the Law”

Leading question: Is the word “law” friendly or frightful?

Almost no one uses the word “law” in a friendly way. When someone says, “It’s the law!” It usually a hard-liner.

Let’s look at examples of the different ways we use law:

1. Mr. Thompson, you have broken the law.
2. You have fulfilled the requirements for your BA degree.
3. You broke your arm because you fell, breaking the law of gravity.

Question: Assign a “friendliness” number to each of those uses. Use this scale:

Negative			Neutral				Positive			
-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5

Briefly describe why you gave the number you did.

Another way of looking at law is to reflect on the way we have used “law” to encourage people to “obey” seat belt requirements.

1. Buckle up. We love you.
2. Buckle up – or we’ll see you soon (sign at a hospital).
3. Buckle up; it’s our law.
4. Buckle up. It’s the law
5. Click it or ticket!

As you work your way down the list, the signs become more “persuasive,” then more expensive!

Now let’s plug in some biblical passages.

Matthew 5:17: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”

Romans 7:7 What then are we to say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.”

Exodus 23:12 “Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest so that your ox and your donkey may have relief and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed.

Jeremiah 31:31-34: The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 32 It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. 33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.

Mark 2:27-28: Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath, 28 so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

James 1:22-24: But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; 24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25 But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

Romans 13:8: Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

Question: Where would you place these biblical passages on a good news/bad news scale?

Note. When God gave laws, he intended for them to be blessings.

Paul’s comments on the law in Romans 13 form a worthy conclusion to our quarter’s study on God’s love and justice. As the apostle of Grace, Paul is sometimes seen as the enemy of law. But rightly understood, he becomes a great defender of law as good news

Romans 13:8-10: Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Ellen White's "Good News" Perspective on Law
A View from Her Mature Writings
Adaptation and Restoration of the God's Ideal Law of Love

BEFORE SIN IN HEAVEN, THE ANGELS WERE VIRTUALLY UNAWARE OF LAW. "But in heaven, service is not rendered in the spirit of legality. When Satan rebelled against the law of Jehovah, the thought that there was a law came to the angels almost as an awakening to something unthought of. In their ministry the angels are not as servants, but as sons. There is perfect unity between them and their Creator. Obedience is to them no drudgery. Love for God makes their service a joy" (TMB 109).

BEFORE SIN ON EARTH, THE LAW WAS WRITTEN ON HUMAN HEARTS. "Adam and Eve, at their creation, had a knowledge of the law of God; they were acquainted with its claims upon them; its precepts were written upon their hearts. When man fell by transgression, the law was not changed, but a remedial system was established to bring him back to obedience" (PP 363).

AS HUMANKIND FELL AWAY FROM GOD, THE LAW WAS ADAPTED TO NEED: "If man had kept the law of God, as given to Adam after his fall, preserved by Noah, and observed by Abraham, there would have been no necessity for the ordinance of circumcision. And if the descendants of Abraham had kept the covenant, of which circumcision was a sign, they would never have been seduced into idolatry, nor would it have been necessary for them to suffer a life of bondage in Egypt; they would have kept God's law in mind, and there would have been no necessity for it to be proclaimed from Sinai, or engraved upon the tables of stone. And had the people practiced the principles of the Ten Commandments, there would have been no need of the additional directions given to Moses" (PP 364).

THE DECALOGUE APPLIED THE PRINCIPLES OF LOVE: "The precepts of the Decalogue are adapted to all mankind and they were given for the instruction and government of all. Ten precepts, brief, comprehensive, and authoritative, cover the duty of man to God and to his fellowman; and all based upon the great fundamental principle of love. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy strength and with all thy mind and thy neighbor as thyself" (Luke 10:27). In the ten commandments, these principles are carried out in detail and made applicable to the condition and circumstances of man" (PP 305).

ADDITIONAL LAWS ILLUMINED THE PRINCIPLES OF THE DECALOGUE: "The minds of the people, blinded and debased by slavery and heathenism, were not prepared to appreciate fully the far-reaching principles of God's ten precepts. That the obligations of the Decalogue might be more fully understood and enforced, additional precepts were given, illustrating and applying the principles of the Ten Commandments" (PP 310).

ALL THE LAWS WERE FOR THE GOOD OF THE PEOPLE: "The object of all these regulations was stated: they proceeded from no exercise of arbitrary sovereignty; all were given for the good of Israel" (PP 311).

THE LAW IS AGAIN INTERNALIZED: "The same law that was engraved upon the tables of stone, is written by the Holy Spirit upon the tables of the heart" (PP 372).