

Lesson 3: Satan lies in heaven

Memory Verse:

You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High." (Isaiah 14:13, 14)

The Bible account of the origin of sin on this planet is found in Genesis 3. But the Bible's story of the origin of sin in the universe isn't as simple to find. Here's what we know and how we know it.

The name "Satan" is Hebrew for "accuser." The name appears in the book of Job, once in Psalms, once in 1 Chronicles, and in the book of Zechariah. All other other appearances of the name are in the New Testament. So the Old Testament has little to say about Satan using that name. Jesus, however, talked about Satan in a way that leads us to believe that his listeners knew what he meant.

Then there's the book of Revelation. The name Satan appears there seven times. Four are in the messages to the seven churches, two are in the account of the millennium in chapter 20, and one is in chapter 12. It is here that we make the link between Satan and the great dragon that appears so often in this book.

And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. (Revelation 12:7-9)

Different interpretations of this passage vary in when the events depicted took place, and in how literally they should be understood. Revelation is a book of symbolic prophecy, and this passage needs to be understood symbolically as well. What does Revelation mean when it talks about war? What kind of war should we understand is being referenced?

The poem that comes after (verses 10-12) helps us some by telling us that the "accuser of our brothers" has been hurled down. The passage in Zechariah depicts Satan as standing at the right side of the high priest "to accuse him." (Zechariah 3:1) Is the Bible trying to tell us something about Satan and about the beginning of sin in the universe?

Our world today is full of accusers. And we can never be sure that the accusers are telling the truth. There are a lot of reasons people might have to accuse someone else falsely. It's such an old problem that the ninth commandment forbids false accusations. Suppose Satan got started by making accusations. Living as he did in a perfect universe run by a perfect God the only accusations he could have made would have been false accusations.

But who was there for Satan to accuse? Two Old Testament prophecies, neither of which use the name "Satan," are widely understood to tell us something about Satan and the origin of sin. This lesson's memory verse comes from the first of these, Isaiah 14. The passage is about the King of Babylon. It's a song sung by the Jews after the fall of Babylon. But Satan is the force behind earthly kings, and so the prophecy takes on a dual meaning and tells us something about what happened in heaven before the events of Genesis 1.

The second prophecy is found in Ezekiel 28, which is a prophecy about the King of Tyre. Again the same interpretive principle applies, particularly to the lament found in verses 12 through 19. Two of these verses in particular help tell the story.

You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones. (verse 14) Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. (verse 17)

The creature we know today as Satan, the devil, started life as an angel with great privileges. He was one of the guardian cherubs, depicted in the sanctuary by the two angels on either side of the mercy seat. No doubt he was beautiful and talented as befit his role. But somewhere in time he forgot that all of these things were gifts from God and, as the text suggests, he became proud.

As he began to think this way he began to think he could do as good a job as God at running the universe. And the inevitable result of that kind of thinking is that one begins to think he can do a better job. So this once perfect Angel began to accuse God of mishandling things. Remember that all his accusations were false. So in essence Satan began to tell lies about God and his character.

If we could explain why this angel, living in a perfect universe, would develop a sinful character, there would be an excuse for sin. There isn't an excuse for sin, there's no good reason for it, so why this one being became a sinner must remain a mystery. We only know that he started down that road and we know what terrible things have happened as a result.

One verse in the passage from Isaiah tells us what Satan wanted. "I will make myself like the Most High." (Isaiah 14:14) Think about it. What a shallow view Satan must have had of God! Satan couldn't create. He couldn't provide the angels with the gifts God gave them every day that made their lives possible. How could he be like God? He could receive the love and adulation of his fellow angels.

And so he told his lies about God. He tried to make God look bad so that he, in contrast, would look good. The only bad things Satan knew came from himself, so he tried to make it look as if God was selfish, as he had become.

How did God respond? He had only one weapon consistent with leaving the angels free to choose for themselves, the evidence of who he was. For God to respond with force would have been contrary to his character, and it would have robbed the angels of free choice. Without free choice there can not be love, and God is love. And so a war of ideas, a war for hearts and minds, began.

Possible thought papers:

1. Many people hear this story and wonder why God didn't just destroy Satan right away and save himself (and us) a lot of trouble. What do you think? What does this say about God's character?
2. Imagine you are one of the angels in heaven. Satan comes to you and tells you lies about who God is. How would you know if Satan was right or wrong?
3. Have you ever been the target of a false accusation? How did that make you feel? If the accusation was false, then truth would have helped you. Will truth help God?