



The Greatest Tragedy

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What do you consider to be the greatest tragedy in the universe? How would you answer that? Do you know what most people consider to be the tragedy of the universe? It's their own tragedy or misfortune. "I'm unhappy." "Something bad happened to me." But that's only the result because everything that is misfortune in your life is just the result of a far greater tragedy.

I would like to suggest for you six very important statements about our belief in the doctrine we call the Great Controversy. These Biblical principles give us a wonderful foundation and they shed light in our daily experience in the Lord. Here is the first statement:

The greatest tragedy in the universe is the maligning of God's character and government.

Definition of Malign: to speak evil of; defame; slander

This is how the Great Controversy began, when Satan tried to damage the reputation of our God. **Revelation 12:7-9, " And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, 8 And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. 9 And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him."**

Genesis 3:4-5, “ And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: 5 For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.”

War in heaven...and then the first deception on planet earth. This stands at the very root of the whole issue of the Great Controversy. The only way Satan could succeed in turning people away from friendship and loyalty and loving admiration to our God was to confuse their minds about who He is. Now some might say that's too elementary. But let me remind you that this being, Satan, Lucifer, was so clever, so persuasive, so thoughtful in what he did that he was able to deceive more than a third of those wise, intelligent beings that live in God's very presence. That puts it on a very sophisticated level, doesn't it? He deceived those angels in spite of God personally showing them the other point of view.

It doesn't take long to realize that Satan continues to be immensely successful. And would it be fair to say that all of us have operated at one time or another on Satan's misinformation about God? Every result of sin and of rebellion came as a result of this first original tragedy. And it far outweighs anything that can be happening in our lives because this is what caused what is happening in our lives.

But now, let's carry this to the next step. If the greatest tragedy in the universe was the attack upon God's government and character and if that was itself the cause of every other tragedy, what does that mean for our daily lives? Here's the second principle.

Satan has power over a person only by deceiving him about the character and plan of God.

The book of John carries the theme of light versus darkness all the way through it's an exciting theme. The next time you sit down to read the book of John, try to just look at the issue of light and darkness and see how John sees this. What you find is that darkness can symbolize confusion or misunderstanding about God and light equals truth or accurate insights into the character of God. Then watch the light verses darkness theme struggle through the book of John. And as you read through the Book of John you come to the place where Jesus says to the Pharisees, "You are children of your father and your father is Satan." They didn't like that. But then He said a very interesting thing about Satan. In my own words, "Satan is the father of lies and when Satan tells a lie, he's expressing his own nature, because that's just the way he operates."

Well, then, anybody who has been duped by Satan's deceptions about God are children of darkness. Let's see if we can give a practical illustration. Why do most people feel negative or hostile about the "law of God"? In many circles you can just mention the word "law" and people just rankle. "Oh, I've been liberated from the law." Adventist Christians can be asked, "Is the law still binding?" and they'll say, "Yes, it's very binding." Have you ever noticed that we'd rather find another word or concept to express the word 'law'? Many have misunderstood the whole meaning and purpose and nature of law. People who are "down" on the Sabbath don't know what the Sabbath is really all about. And right down the line, you take God's beautiful truth and principles of living and distort them and people will turn negative. Tens of thousands people have turned away from knowing God as the result of the false teaching of ever-burning hell - where souls will burn and suffer anguish for the ceaseless ages of eternity. Well, that doctrine came from a group of people who professed to be teaching in the name of God and what is the result? Many have turned away from God and even worse - become haters of God.

How many of our youth have left the church and left Christianity because they have heard, "Do as I say" but have seen "Do not as I do." Many youth have left the church because they have not heard or seen a true representation of the truth as it is in Jesus!

But let's not stop with that! Satan deceived angels; he deceived Adam and Eve. And if he can, he'll deceive us. I'd like to talk about one particular way he has deceived most people, even Christians. It has to do with a mis-belief that I'm sure you have come across at least once in your lifetime - that God's opinion of man needs to be changed. Here's the third statement:

It's man's opinion of God, not God's opinion of man that needs to be changed.

This is one major deception that Satan would like us to believe so he can have power over us. Just about every false religion, including many forms of Christianity, have been twisted because of man's attempts to change God's opinion of man. Why do some in the Eastern religions crawl on their hands and knees for miles and miles? Why did Martin Luther beat himself on the back with chains and ropes and lay down on a cold stone floor? All of this was an attempt to say, "God, won't you think better of me because of what I'm doing?" "Won't you like me now?"

How pervasive is this in your own experience? How often do you find yourself saying, "Oh, I don't want to do anything that would displease God." Well, I'm not encouraging you to do anything that would displease God, but what's the assumption behind that? "God will not like you if you do this. But if you do certain things, He'll like you better." And that's the whole essence of religion, isn't it? To get God to like us? No, absolutely not. That's not it. God already loves us. **John 16:25-27, " These things have I spoken unto you in proverbs: but the time cometh, when I shall no more speak unto you in proverbs, but I shall show you plainly of the Father. 26 At that day ye shall ask in my name: and I say not unto you, that I will pray the Father for you: 27 For the Father himself loveth you, because ye have loved me, and have believed that I came out from God."**

The Father's attitude toward us, the Son's attitude toward us has always been and always will be one of constant redemptive activity, constantly reaching out, taking the initiative to embrace us. And this is exactly what the apostle Paul tells us in **2 Corinthians 5:18-19, " And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.** Is the world trying to get God to be reconciled to the world? No, God is already reconciled to you, He's trying to get you to be reconciled back to Him.

What is the legalist? The legalist is the one who says, "When I succeed in performing this and this and this, then God will think well of me and I will have achieved." The problem with the legalist is not that he wants to obey. The problem is that he doesn't understand God.

But then you can swing the pendulum the other way, too. And the person says, "I will get God to think well of me by entering into an agreement with God whereby I will acknowledge and claim the death of Jesus on my behalf. And God will think well of me because I'm in Christ. But is that the issue? No. The issue is, What does that person think of God? Is that person drawn into unshakable loyalty and trust in God? Now, let's go even further. If Satan is the father of lies, the author of deception, what do we need to

be safe? How do we avoid believing Satan's lies? Here's the fourth statement:

The basis, the condition, the very meaning of salvation is to know and accept God as he really is.

John 17:3, "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." Now, where it says, "know thee the only true God" that can also be understood to say "to know God as He truly is." Not to know false pictures of God. Not to know the God the Pharisees or Sadducees advocated. We might even say, "Not to know the God some Christians advocate." But to know God as He really is.

And then to say, "I accept Him, I embrace Him, I reach out to Him and I say, Yes, I trust and admire Him. I now gratefully submit to Him because of who He is."

Isn't that all that God really wants anyway? Understanding and trust and friendship? Isn't that what's behind all those Bible texts that describe God being pleased with sacrifices? For example, **Exodus 29:18, "And thou shalt burn the whole ram upon the altar: it is a burnt offering unto the LORD: it is a sweet savour, an offering made by fire unto the LORD."** Was it the odour of burning sacrifice that was sweet to God or was it really the act of trust and faith behind that sacrifice? David recognized this when he wrote in **Psalms 51:16, 17, "For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."** **Psalm 51:19** goes on to add, **"Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt offering and whole burnt offering: then shall they offer bullocks upon thine altar."** So it's really the faith and trust that is behind the sacrifices that God was pleased with. And so to know God and to accept Him as He really is - that is faith and that is the very meaning of salvation.

If that is what it means to be saved, I should also ask: What then does it mean to be lost? Well, how did Adam and Eve manage to fall when surrounded by perfection in the garden? They believed Satan's deceptions about God. Satan came to them in the garden and he strung them a line of several major attacks on the character of God:

God doesn't tell you the truth.
God doesn't have your best good at heart.
He's limiting you from what you really want to be.
He may even arbitrarily destroy you in revenge if you disobey.

And they fell for it. They disbelieved God. And that's how they fell. But there's even more that we need to realize. If we accept that we have to know God as He really is and we don't have to change God's opinion of us that God already loves us why does a Christian live for God? Here's the fifth statement:

The Christian lives righteously not so that God will think well of him, but so that the world will think well of God.

1 Corinthians 10:31, "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God." If it's not a case where we are trying to win God's approval, then why are we trying to live right? Of course, we want to live right because it is right. But when you get your mind around this principle, it

will change the whole way you live. After all, what really was the essence of Moses' sin in the wilderness? Do you remember that? Remember the angry words of Moses, in **Numbers 20:10- 11**, “**And Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation together before the rock, and he said unto them, Hear now, ye rebels; must we fetch you water out of this rock? 11 And Moses lifted up his hand, and with his rod he smote the rock twice: and the water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their beasts also.**” One translation says, "Because you did not trust me enough to demonstrate my holiness to the people of Israel," Moses and Aaron's real sin was that they didn't represent God correctly. They didn't act for the glory of God. For us today, that's got to be the finest reason to be victorious, so that no one will find in our lives reason to think poorly of our wonderful God. Here's the sixth statement:

The object of God's redemptive work is to rebuild a friendship, not just to modify one's legal status.

Romans 5:8-11, “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. 10 For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. 11 And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.”

It's all about reconciliation. But many people seem to be obsessively concerned with, Am I innocent or am I guilty? Am I justified or am I condemned? In reading passages like this in Paul's writings, though, you get the distinct impression that the issue is not really a legal one, it's a friendship one. It's a relationship problem.

Let me illustrate it. Let's say that a husband and wife have been having enormous strains in their marriage due to the husband's unfaithfulness and they file for divorce. And as the process is going on, and the divorce papers are materializing and they're going through the waiting period, the wife begins to wonder whether for the sake of the kids they should not get a divorce after all. She calls up the husband and they discuss their children and how they are coping with the divorce proceedings. They don't feel any different toward each other, but they finally call up their lawyers and they say, "Stop the proceeding; we don't want a divorce." They both live in separate apartments. And the attorney tears up the divorce papers.

You might say, "They're still legally married." But is this marriage truly a meaningful, loving relationship? Would you want to live in that kind of marriage? Where there is a slip of paper somewhere, or there's a record down at the courthouse that says so and so are married but there is no love? Would you want that?

Is the sin problem a legal one where God says, "Well now we can erase the record of sins in the books and we can enter a record that says Forgiven." Is that good news? That's part of the good news. Referring to the previous example - it is good they're still married. At least there's a basis for working on the relationship.

I'm glad that God says we're forgiven when we're in Christ. But let's not stop there by any means. The issue is a relationship one. The problem got started when Satan got in there and wrenched that

relationship apart by telling personal lies about God. And the solution comes when the darkness and dust of all that deception gets pushed away and the light shines in and we say: "That's who He is, I love Him, He's marvellous, He deserves my fullest confidence and the more I learn about Him the more excited about Him I become. And it's just rooted out of my heart all of the rebellion, the hostility, the suspicion, the desire to remain distant it's all gone." That's the solution to the sin problem, isn't it?

The great controversy sees the problem as a relationship issue, as a friendship issue, hearts that beat, and arms that can embrace and loyalties that can be thoughtfully given or rebelliously withdrawn.

What is the greatest tragedy in the universe? It's believing Satan's lies about God. The Biblical Christian's contribution to the world is to understand the whole business through this theme. And the question for you and I today is: Will we be part of the greatest tragedy in the universe? Will we believe Satan's lies? Or . . . will we be part of God's solution to the tragedy? Will we keep our eyes on what God is really like, so that we won't believe Satan's lies? And will we show the picture of a loving, kind, unfailing God to those around us?