**What On Earth Is God Doing? Satan’s Conflict With God**

***Lesson Five***

***THE CONFLICT***

***FROM THE REMOVAL OF ISRAEL***

***FROM THE PLACE OF BLESSING***

***THROUGH THE REFORMATION***

When Israel rejected her Messiah, the promised Redeemer, it was obvious that she was not prepared to make herself right with God through repentance. The Scriptures make it clear, however, that eventually the day will come when the nation will repent. At that time the Redeemer will return and set up the theocratic kingdom, bringing to the earth “seasons of refreshing” and “the times of restoration of all things” that God promised through the prophets (Acts 3:19-21; cf. Ezek. 36:25-38; Zech. 12:10 – 13:2).

**Acts 3:19-21 19 *“Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; 20 and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, 21 whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time.”***

Because of Israel’s attitude of unbelief toward Jesus, God removed her temporarily from the place of blessing that He had given her centuries before through the Mosaic Covenant. Israel will continue to remain outside that place of blessing until she repents by believing in Jesus Christ. Until that time comes, God is a special work among the Gentiles, bringing many of them to salvation from sin (Rom. 11:11-27).

*The Anti-Semitism of the Present Dispensation*

Because Israel rejected her Messiah, she doomed herself to centuries of desolation and persecution at the hands of the Gentiles (Mt. 23:37-38; Lk. 19:41-44). This persecution will continue until the nation is willing to change its mind about Jesus Christ.

**Mt. 23:39 *For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.***

Being outside the place of blessing, Israel cannot rely upon God to protect her from all harm. Her unbelief has exposed her to vicious anti-Semitism.

It would appear that Satan is the one who prompts the anti-Semitism even of the present dispensation. Although Israel is in a state of spiritual rebellion against God, she still is a key to the establishment of the theocratic kingdom. Being aware of the fact that he will not be crushed and the kingdom will not be set up until Israel repents, Satan ahs been striving to prevent that repentance. The surest way to prevent it is to annihilate Israel before she can repent. Thus, throughout this present dispensation, one of Satan’s goals has been the destruction of Israel.

In trying to accomplish his goal Satan has used several agencies for anti-Semitism. In ancient times he used the Roman Empire to slaughter thousands of Jews while Rome crushed their rebellions. During the Middle Ages he used the predominant, organized church to institute the Inquisition against the Jewish people. In the era of the Second World War he used Nazi Germany to annihilate some six million Jews in Europe. Later he used Communism in Russia. Ultimately it is Satan’s desire to destroy Israel that lies behind the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East.

Although God permits Israel to be chastened in this manner for her unbelief, He does not permit the total annihilation of the nation. The Jewish people are a vital key to the fulfillment of His purpose for history; therefore, God is careful to preserve at east a remnant throughout history, just as He had promised (Jer. 30:9-11; 46:27-28; Ezek. 6:8; 14:21-23; 36:16-31; Rom. 9:27-28).

**Rom. 9:27-28 27 *Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, “THOUGH THE NUMBER OF THE SONS OF ISRAEL BE LIKE THE SAND OF THE SEA, IT IS THE REMNANT THAT WILL BE SAVED; 28 FOR THE LORD WILL EXECUTE HIS WORD ON THE EARTH, THOROUGHLY AND QUICKLY.”***

**The Birth of the Church**

God never allows the world to go on without a witness concerning Himself and His universal kingdom. With Israel being out of joint spiritually, God was determined to raise up a new witnessing agency. Instead of being comprised of one nation, this new agency was to consist of people from many nations and tongues. Instead of being limited just to Jewish people, its membership was to include believing Jews and Gentiles, bound together in harmony as one body (Eph. 2:11 – 3:11). This new agency was to be known as the Church, the body and bride of Christ (Mt. 16:18; 1 Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 4:4-6; 5:22-32). It was to continue in the world until God would begin to work with Israel again to bring her to repentance.

Immediately before His ascension, Jesus delivered a special commission for the Church: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mk. 16:15). He also promised to give the Church the power to perform this witnessing ministry by giving it the Holy Spirit (Lk. 24:49; Acts 1:8).

**Acts 1:8 “…*but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”***

Several days after Jesus’ ascension, the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost, and the Church was born (Acts 2; 11:15).

**Early Attacks Against the Church**

With the birth of the Church, Satan had a new enemy to content with. The Church’s preaching of the gospel posed a serious threat to his kingdom. Every time the gospel is preached to members of Satan’s kingdom, they are in danger of believing it. Such belief transfers a person out of Satan’s kingdom of darkness and into the universal kingdom of God (Acts 26:17-18; Gal. 1:4; Col. 1:13).

**Col. 1:13 *For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son…***

Thus, in order to prevent the membership of his kingdom from being depleted, Satan determined to blind the minds of his people to the gospel and attack the church.

**2 Cor. 4:3-4 3 *And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, 4 in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.***

Satan’s attacks have had two major thrusts.

1. On the one hand, he assaults individual members of the Church by tempting them (Acts 5:3; 1 Th. 3:5), accusing them (Rev. 12:10), persecuting them to the point of death (Rev. 2:10; 1 Pet. 5:8), hindering their work (1 Th. 2:18), trying to defeat them (Eph. 6:10-20), and deceiving them into believing wrong things by sowing among them his people who fashion themselves as ministers of righteousness (Mt. 13:38-39); 2 Cor. 11:13-15). It is because of Satan’s war against Christians that they are exhorted to endure hardness as good soldiers of Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 2:3-4), to put on the whole armor of God (Eph. 6:10-18), and to resist Satan (Jas. 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:8-9). Thus God counter’s Satan’s attacks by giving Christians adequate equipment and instruction.
2. On the other hand, Satan attacks the Church as an organized institution. Very shortly after the Church had begun, Satan tried to annihilate it through persecution. In spite of the fact that the church was totally Jewish in membership in its beginning years, it was attacked by Jewish enemies of the gospel. The apostles were imprisoned (Acts 4 – 5; 12); Stephen was stoned to death (Acts 6:8 – 7:60); James, the brother of John, was slain with a sword (Acts 12:2); and James, the half-brother of Jesus, had his brains dashed out with a club.

The early phase of Jewish persecution was organized and executed by a young Jew named Saul. Saul wreaked havoc on the Church (Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-2). God countered this satanic persecution by converting Saul to Christianity while he was on the road to Damascus to persecute more Christians (Acts 9:1-22). Eventually Saul became Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 13:9, 9:15). Thus the greatest opponent of the gospel became the foremost proponent of it. Sometime after Saul’s conversion, Herod Agrippa took over the leadership of the persecution of the Church, but God countered that by causing Herod to die a premature death.

**Acts 12:1 *Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them.***

***Acts 12: 21-23 21 On an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them. 22 The people kept crying out, “The voice of a god and not of a man!” 23 And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died.***

While Satan attacked the Church outwardly with persecution, he assaulted it inwardly with apostate teachings. False teachers penetrated the Church with such heresies as legalism, Gnosticism, and antinomianism (Acts 20:29-30). God countered this move toward apostasy through the apostles, who taught and wrote against these false views (Gal.; Col.; 1 and 2 Jn.; Jude), and through the decision of the apostles and elders at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15).

**The Roman Persecution**

The Jewish persecutors were not able to destroy the Church. In fact, the more they persecuted the Church, the more the Church grew (Acts 8:1, 4-8, 25, 40; 11:19-21; 12:24; 13:49). Thus, in order to accomplish his goals of annihilation and apostasy, Satan turned to the greatest military power on earth – Rome.

Nero (54-68 A.D.) was the first Roman emperor to persecute the Church. He turned Christians into living torches to illuminate his gardens at night. He also was responsible for having Paul beheaded and perhaps Peter crucified head downward.

Prior to 250 A.D. most of the Roman persecutions were local and sporadic. From 250 A.D. on they became universal in scope. Christians were ordered to participate in worship of the emperor and pagan gods. Such worship involved apostasy for God’s people. When many Christians refused to comply, the government made the total annihilation of the Church and its Scriptures an empire goal. Satan was determined to destroy not only God’s people but also God’s book that foretold his defeat. The cruel persecution and execution of Christians were carried out systematically. Thousands were martyred for their faith.

God countered the persecutions by using them to His own advantage. Once again, the more the Church was persecuted, the more it grew. In fact, the Church grew so amazingly during the persecutions that Tertullian, a church leader who lived during the time, made a statement saying that the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church.

**The Church’s Apostasy**

In 311 A.D. Emperor Galerius issued an edict granting toleration to the Church. Then Emperor Constantine granted total freedom to Christianity through the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. By 324 A.D. Christianity had become the officially favored religion of the empire. Finally, in 380 A.D., Emperor Theodosius I issued an edict that made Christianity the official and only religion allowed within the empire. Now the government began persecuting other religions.

At first the transition from being the persecuted to being the exclusive religion of the state appeared to be a tremendous victory for the Church. However, time was to prove that the “victory” was a defeat in disguise. Satan recognized the union of church and state as a golden opportunity to introduce apostasy to the Church. Once Christianity was made the only religion allowed, local churches became swamped with large masses of pagans who wanted to become “Christians.” Through this contact the pagans found the worship of the churches to be considerably different from that of their temples. Whereas the pagans had bowed and prayed to images of their gods, goddesses, and national heroes, the churches had no images. The pagans had had one goddess whom they adored as the queen of heaven; they also had had numerous heathen festivals, blood sacrifices, and priests. The churches had none of these. Because of these differences, the church seemed irrelevant to the pagans.

Christians feared that, unless the church were made relevant to the pagans, they never would be reached for Christ. In order to make the church relevant, these Christians attempted to Christianize the pagan practices and then adopted them into the church. They substituted images of the apostles and martyrs for images of gods, goddesses, and national heroes. Veneration of Mary as queen of heaven replaced veneration of the pagan queen. Communion was changed from a memorial to a sacrifice; elders were transformed from teachers into priests, and heathen festivals were incorporated as special church days.

At first it appeared that this process of adopting the methods of Satan’s kingdom in order to reach the members of that kingdom was correct. Local churches swelled numerically as the pagans professed to be Christians now that the churches seemed more relevant to them. However, time was to demonstrate that most of these people were still pagans at heart – Christianized pagans to be sure, but still pagans. The end result was that the churches became largely pagan in practice and membership. Through time, “ambitious, worldly, unscrupulous men sought office in the church for social and political influence.” In western Europe they built the church into a monstrous religious-political machine that gradually usurped power over the state. Thus the organized church of the Middle Ages became characterized, not by true, biblical Christianity, but by “a more or less corrupt hierarchy controlling the nations of Europe.”

As organized Christendom became more apostate, even the true gospel became perverted. The Scriptures had revealed and the apostles had taught that salvation was solely by God’s grace through personal faith in the Person and work of Jesus Christ (Rom. 4:1 – 5:2; Gal. 2:15-16, 21; Eph. 2:8-9). As paganism came into the church, the heathen concept that human works are essential for salvation was added to the gospel. As a result, the only way to salvation became hidden from huge masses of people for centuries. Thus, while Satan was leading the organized church into apostasy, he also was changing the message that it was to preach so that members of his kingdom could not be transferred into the kingdom of God.

Satan realized that, if he were to keep the organized church apostate and the gospel hidden, he had to pervert the interpretation of Scripture and even prevent the study of the Bible if possible. In 230 A.D. Origen, a church leader who had been influenced greatly by pagan philosophy, published a work in which he developed an allegorical method of interpreting the Scriptures. Instead of giving the words of the Bible their common, ordinary meaning, this method searched for symbolic, hidden meanings. It distorted the meaning intended by the writer into what the interpreter wanted to find in the Bible. Because of Origen’s position and influence, this method strongly affected the organized church.

As the church became more pagan, it had to look for support outside the Scriptures to justify its apostate teachings. So eventually it departed from the view that the Bible is to be the church’s sole source of authority for faith and practice. It placed church tradition on a level of equal authority with the Bible and through time asserted that the church is the ultimate source of authority. Finally, it forbade the laity to read the Scriptures and strongly opposed the translation of the Bible into the languages of the common people.

Because he hated the teaching concerning the future, political, theocratic kingdom, Satan was determined to obliterate it from the belief of the church. In the East the concept of the future kingdom was “inseparably bound up with the Christian faith down to the middle of the second century.” But by the close of the second century, church leaders in Alexandria, Egypt, began to attack the concept. Having been influenced by the pagan philosophical concept that anything physical is evil, they rejected the idea of a future kingdom with physical blessings as being to carnal and sensual. Origen’s allegorical method of interpretation helped to advance this rejection.

In addition, a strong anti-Semitic spirit developed in the Eastern Church. Gentiles who professed to be Christians increasingly developed a strong bias against anything Jewish. Because the premillennial belief in the earthly, political kingdom-rule of Messiah in the future was the same hope that had motivated the Jewish people for centuries, that belief was increasingly “stigmatized as ‘Jewish’ and consequently ‘heretical’ by Eastern Gentile Christians. As a result, Premillennialism was discredited through guilt by association.

In the West, belief in the future, theocratic kingdom was still a point of orthodoxy in the fourth century. It began to disappear there at the same time that the church became united with the state and began to go apostate. The writings of Augustine (A.D. 354-430), the most influential ancient church leader in the West, caused most of the organized church to reject the belief in the coming kingdom. In *City of God* Augustine taught that God’s promised kingdom is present on earth now in this present age, the organized church is that kingdom, Satan is bound now, eventually the church will conquer the world, and the kingdom age will end at the Second Coming when the history of this world will end.

Augustine rejected the idea of a future kingdom for the same reason as the Alexandrian leaders. In addition, with the church having become the exclusive religion of the empire, it did appear that it was conquering the world. In order to hold to his position, Augustine used Origen’s allegorical method to interpret Old Testament prophecies about the kingdom. Augustine’s view led the Church of Rome to conceive of itself, “as the universal church destined to bring all within its fold.”

The development of the strong anti-Semitic spirit and the teaching that the organized church is the future Messianic Kingdom foretold by God through the Old Testament prophets were part of a concept of replacement. According to that concept, since Israel as a nation rejected Jesus Christ as its Messiah during His First Coming, God rejected that nation forever as His people. This theology claims that God has no future program for Israel and that He replaced Israel with the church as His people. Thus the church became the “Israel of God” and inherits the blessings promised to national Israel. This concept violated and contradicted the Scriptures (Gen. 13:14-15; 15:18; 17:7-8, 19; 1 Sam. 12:22; 2 Sam. 7:23-24; Jer. 30:11; Rom. 11:28-29).

As a result of the inroads of paganism, the perversion of the gospel, the abuse and neglect of the Scriptures, the rejection of the theocratic-kingdom concept, and the replacement of Israel view, the organized church of the Middle Ages departed drastically from what God had intended it to be. Because of its apostate condition, the church instigated such things as the military crusades against other professing Christians, Jewish people, and Muslims and brought the Inquisition to bear against people who disagreed with it. Satan used the church of the Middle Ages as a tool to bring dishonor to God and His kingdom.

**The Threat of Islam**

Although the church had moved into apostasy after the fourth century, it still retained certain elements of divine truth, such as the deity of Christ. It also was very careful to preserve copies of the Scriptures, even though it did abuse their interpretation and study. As long as any Christian truth and the Scriptures continued to exist, Satan could not rest. He felt it imperative to rid the world of these elements of the universal kingdom of God.

Satan attempted to accomplish his goal through the rise of a new religion in Arabia. Muhammad began his career as the founder of Islam in A.D. 610. By the time of his death in A.D. 632, he had converted all of Arabia to his faith. During the next one hundred years, his followers conquered the Holy Land and Syria, most of the eastern Roman Empire, all lands eastward to India, Egypt, all of North Africa, and large areas of Spain. In much of this conquered territory the church dwindled and died because of its apostate condition.

The forces of Islam threatened to conquer all of Europe, thereby converting it into a Muslim continent. God countered this threat, however, when the Franks and other European tribes, under the leadership of Charles Martel, defeated the Muslims at the Battle of Tours in A.D. 732. Thus the Church, the Scriptures, and such truths as deity of Christ were saved from possible extinction.

**The Divine Counteraction of Church Apostasy**

From the time that the organized church began to go apostate to the time of the Reformation, God preserved a small remnant of people who opposed the apostate church. Here and there throughout Europe were groups of people who repudiated the authority of the Roman Church and its pope and rejected its pagan beliefs and practices. They held to the true gospel, regarded the Scriptures as their source of authority, encouraged the study of the Bible by laypeople, observed the Lord’s Supper as a memorial rather than a sacrifice, and had pastors instead of priests. Many of these groups believed in the future, political, theocratic kingdom. Some, such as Waldensians, sent out lay evangelists to preach the gospel to the members of Satan’s kingdom. Satan could not tolerate such true, biblical faith and witness. Therefore, he prompted the organized church to persecute these groups severely. Special crusades and the Inquisition were used against them. Some groups were annihilated. Many people were tortured, executed, or driven from their homes and countries, to be hunted like fugitives.

Toward the end of the Middle Ages God raised up several men who began calling for reform with the organized church. Among the most prominent of these were John Wycliffe of England (1324-1384), John Huss of Bohemia (1369-1415) and Jerome Savonarola of Florence Italy (1452-1498). Wycliffe opposed monasticism, the authority of the Roman Church and pope, the idea that the Lord’s Supper is a sacrifice, and the corruption of the priesthood. He urged that the church reform itself to New Testament standards. He was instrumental in producing the first Bible in the English language, and he sent out lay preachers call Lollards. These were persecuted and finally extinguished.

As a result of reading Wycliffe’s writings, Huss began proclaiming the same evangelical concepts in Bohemia. His views caused so much trouble for the Roman Church that the pope excommunicated him and ordered him to appear before the Church Council of Constance. At first Huss refused to go, but he finally consented when the emperor promised him safe conduct. At the council he was condemned and burned at the stake in spite of the emperor’s guarantee. The church claimed that faith did not have to kept with heretics.

Savonarola was a fiery preacher of reform who attacked corruption in government, society, and the church. On one occasion he even wrote that the pope was not a Christian. He was excommunicated, imprisoned, hanged to death, and burned by order of the church. Thus Satan tried to squelch these attempts to reform the church to God’s standards.

**The Renaissance**

Between 1350 and 1650 Europe experienced a great cultural change that marked the transition from medieval to modern times. A new interest in the classic literature and art of Greece and Rome and in science was aroused. This new awakening has been called the Renaissance.

Satan attempted to use the Renaissance as his instrument for turning the thoughts of man away from God altogether. In southern Europe the movement developed into a secular, skeptical humanism with man, rather than God, being the focus of attention. People did continue to observe the formal ritual of the church, but “the tendency was to forget the claims of God upon the individual in daily life.” Even the popes of the time were more interested in culture than in spiritual things.

God was determined to use the Renaissance as His tool to prepare Europe for the coming Reformation. Thus in northern Europe the movement developed into a religious humanism. There scholars became more interested in the Judeo-Christian past than in the classical past. “They were more interested in man as a human being with a soul than they were in him as a rational creature.” They studied biblical manuscripts in the original languages, applied the humanistic techniques to the study of Scriptures, reemphasized the historical-grammatical interpretation as opposed to the allegorical, produced grammars and dictionaries of the biblical languages, and printed the Greek New Testament. The invention of printing by movable type in 1455 made the printing and distribution of the Scriptures and the writings of reformers easier, quicker, and less costly. All of this made it possible for men to see how drastically the church of their day had changed from the Church of the New Testament.

During the time of the Renaissance, a strong middle class and a spirit of nationalism developed. God used these also to prepare Europe for the Reformation. People were beginning to resent the fact that a foreign pope ruled their national churches, appointed their church leaders, demanded a tax to support him and to build ornate churches in Rome, exempted his clergy from their national laws and courts, and dictated political policies to their governments.

**The Reformation**

God’s greatest counteraction of the apostasy in the organized church was a new spiritual movement known as the Reformation. This movement , developed in several stages. It began in Germany in 1517 when Martin Luther, a monk and professor of the Roman Church, started to write and speak against the wrong beliefs and practices of the church. Luther called for reform, but the church refused to heed the call. It condemned and excommunicated Luther and demanded that he be delivered for trial and punishment. With the new wave of nationalistic spirit, the princes of northern Germany supported and protected Luther. Thus the Lutheran Church was able to be formed. When the Diet of Spires (1529) condemned Lutheran doctrine and made rulings against Lutheranism, the northern princes registered a formal protest. From that time on they and all others who called for the apostate church to reform were called Protestants.

While the Reformation was beginning in Germany, it also was springing up in Switzerland. Under the leadership of Ulric Zwingli, the canton of Zurich established the Reformed Church. The Presbyterian Church was started in Geneva through the work of John Calvin. The Anabaptist movement can into existence and grew in Germany and Switzerland under such men as Grebel, Manz, and Hubmaier.

Denmark, Sweden, and Norway adopted the Lutheran faith. In France groups of people adopted Protestantism and became know as Huguenots. In northern Netherlands most people accepted the Reformed faith, while a good-sized minority became Anabaptist in belief but called themselves Mennonites. Under the fiery preaching of John Knox, Scotland accepted the Reformed faith. The Reformation also began in England when Henry VIII broke the English Church away from Rome.

The Protestant Reformation emphasized three New Testament truths.

1. Justification by faith alone. The pagan concept of human works for salvation was rejected, and the original, pure gospel was declared once again.
2. The priesthood of the believer. The Reformers did away with the Roman church’s wide cleavage between clergy and laity. It stressed the New Testament concept that every Christian is a priest before God and thereby has the privilege of ministering and of studying the Bible on his own.
3. The Bible, not the church, is the final authority for faith and practice.