**GOD’S CLOSING ARGUMENT**

At the end of a court trial, each side’s lawyers get to present their closing arguments in a final attempt to persuade the judge or jury to rule in their client’s favor. The goal is to leave a lasting, often dramatic impression. God technically doesn’t need to defend Himself; He’s God. Because of His position as Almighty Creator, He is truth. What He says literally defines reality, yet He chose to allow His created beings to question Him. This freedom of choice is the only way true love is possible; forced love is never true.

Unfortunately, Lucifer began a rather successful smear campaign against God’s character, first winning a third of heaven’s angels to his side (Rev. 12:4) and later winning humanity over. God appeared to have three clear options when the controversy first began: 1. Immediately destroy all rebels; 2. eradicate all created beings and restart the universe, leaving no record of prior events; or 3. let sin run its course while revealing His character so everyone can decide which side they want to stand on. God had to address the claim against His integrity and love so that sin would never return, so He chose the third option. This slow, careful method of exonerating Himself is crucial for love-based faithfulness to be the modus operandi of all creation. By allowing sin to take its course, all can see its horrific fruit. God also provided the most powerful closing argument ever made: the cross. Jesus’ death definitively addressed all lies about God’s character. For all time and for all to see, the cross established the fact that God is, and always will be, love.
Write out Matthew 27:15—28:10 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out Matthew 27:45–54. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
A MURDERER FROM THE BEGINNING

Though political candidates may claim to stand for certain values on the campaign trail, only time will reveal their true intentions. At first, the messaging might be about helping and caring for people and the general betterment of society. However, more often than not, once candidates have gained popularity or been elected to certain positions of power, their opinions and attitudes change or even reverse. One is left to wonder if their original positions were ever the honest ones.

Scripture tells us that Lucifer desired to “be like the Most High” (Isa. 14:14); that he “shook kingdoms” (Isa. 14:16); that “by the abundance of [his] trading,” which can be interpreted as slander, he “became filled with violence within” (Ezek. 28:16). The Bible indicates that Lucifer started with smearing God’s name and suggesting that he would make a better ruler than God. At first, his intentions may have even come across as pure and concerned for the wellbeing of all created beings. After all, nobody had ever sinned before, so why would they suspect any evil objectives?

Despite how relatively mild his initial acts of rebellion may have appeared, the evil of Satan’s character was unmasked by the murder of Jesus on the cross (Acts 5:30). It was Satan who put it into the heart of Judas to betray Jesus into the hands of those that were looking for a way to kill Him (Luke 22:3). In his persecution of God’s people throughout the ages and his repeated attempts to murder the Son of God (e.g., Matt. 2:16–18; 4:6; 27:15–26; Luke 4:16–30; John 5:1–18), his intentions and identity as the original killer became crystal clear. “He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it” (John 8:44).

Satan utilized Judas, the religious leaders, and the Roman government to realize his murderous plot, but while he may have influenced the method of execution, Jesus did not die because of the nails! Jesus said, “I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again” (John 10:17, 18). He died voluntarily, laying down His life, crushed by the weight of the sins of all humanity (see Isa. 53). The cross exposed Satan’s deep hatred for God.

It’s easy to condemn all who were complicit in the death of Christ, the Son of God, but how often do we do the same? Every time we sin, we essentially crucify again the Son of God (Heb. 6:6). Incredibly, even then, in His abundant grace, Jesus offers us His forgiveness: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34).
PARDON AND POWER

The gospel records Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Nearly everyone has heard the oft-repeated truth of John 3:16—that God loved us so much that He paid the price of our sins, all so we can have eternal life. It’s a beautiful statement, and it’s worth taking a deeper dive into the underlying dynamics at play within the great controversy. Satan opposes that act of Divine love; he stands as “the accuser of our brethren” (Rev. 12:10) and claims that sinners have no right to be saved. With this in mind, I encourage you to think through the next few paragraphs slowly and prayerfully.

Choosing sin leaves us condemned to eternal death, because the choice to sin is the choice to disconnect from God, the Source of all life. It’s literally choosing to die. At its core, sin is pride and selfishness, two attitudes directly opposed to the law of life and selfless love. God’s law provides the only way for the universe to exist in eternal peace, and true freedom. His law is the only possible way for life to thrive. Anything that contradicts it leads to death. If the law were not serious or important, Christ’s death would not have been necessary.

In order to offer sinners a second chance at faithfulness and eternal life, God had to create a way to uphold the law of love and justice while also pardoning sin and healing the sinner. To put it simply, He had to find a way to enforce the law while also sparing us from the consequence of breaking it. Jesus’ life and death accomplished all of that, and as a result, all of Satan’s accusations against believers can be lawfully dismissed—hallelujah!

As the Lawgiver, when Jesus experienced death in the place of every sinner who will ever exist, He took upon Himself the result of lawbreaking. He died because of the crushing awareness of all sins ever committed, the guilty verdict they brought, and the punishment for those sins, which was poured out on Him in full. He thereby upheld justice and proved the eternal validity of the law. Through this transfer of punishment from all sinners to Himself, Christ can legally offer pardon—justification—to all who believe and trust that His death accomplished all this. In His resurrection, Jesus sealed the deal that guarantees this salvation for all who believe. Satan is a defeated foe; Christ’s victory is yours!

As one of us, Jesus lived and exemplified the principles of a saving faith: complete reliance on God. One of Satan’s primary claims was that God is too demanding, that His laws are too difficult to follow, but Jesus proved that Adam and Eve could have resisted temptation and lived without sinning. Jesus’ life of perfect obedience is credited to every sinner who comes by faith. Our record of sin and rebellion is covered with His record of righteousness. He also showed humanity that now that we’re pardoned, if we trust in God’s grace, we can follow Jesus and relearn how to be faithful. Jesus offers power to live a life of faithfulness through full reliance on Him.
What relationship do the following verses have with Matthew 27:15—28:10?

- Mark 15:6—16:8
- John 18:39—20:18
- Isaiah 53
- Psalm 22
- Romans 3:21–26
- 2 Corinthians 5:21

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with the primary passage?

(Cont. from inTerpret, p. 54):

Christ, how precious, worthy, and lovely He truly is. His matchless charms woo us, draw us to Him, and in total surrender we fall to our knees in worship, repentance, and praise, exclaiming, “Truly this [is] the Son of God!” (Matt. 27:54). He is your personal Savior, and with resurrection power He declares victory over your slavery to sin: “It is finished!” (John 19:30).
WHAT LOVE IS THIS?

There are very few heartbreaks worse than losing a loved one to sickness or other tragedy. It’s difficult to measure or exaggerate the pain that comes from such a separation and loss. Even so, the combined heartbreaks of all humanity are like a tiny teardrop compared to the ocean of deep sorrow God felt during Christ’s crucifixion and death.

Jesus experienced extreme levels of pain and suffering on the cross. He had to endure one of the most horrific methods of execution. The cruelest form of crucifixion involved nails piercing the wrists and ankles, which inflicts severe nerve damage and causes relentless torment. The suspended body endures strained muscles, dislocated joints, and severe cramps. Breathing becomes difficult and each gasp for air exacerbates the pain. Suffering is prolonged by exposure to the elements, dehydration, blood loss, and shock, culminating in a slow, agonizing death.

However, all the physical suffering was only a faint shadow compared to the intense mental anguish that overwhelmed Christ. In His complete moral purity, having never committed any sin, He felt every sin ever committed as if He were the perpetrator. He carried the full weight of the shame and despair from every act of selfishness, abuse, violence, sadism, murder, horror, and evil ever committed. He felt its guilt to the core. He drank the bitter cup of iniquity to its very last drop.

In that moment of intense physical, mental, and moral torment, He couldn’t even turn to His divine Companions, who had been His closest Confidants for eternity past. The Father and Holy Spirit had to separate from Jesus. Enshrouded by darkness, Jesus felt abandoned and alone. At the height of this internal struggle Jesus cried out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matt. 27:46). He heard no assuring voice in response. Heaven was silent. Instead of encouraging Him, the surrounding onlookers mocked Him. Jesus was being crushed by the punishment for sin, the consequences of humanity’s choosing disobedience. At that point, He could no longer see the hope of a resurrection. Any lingering hope He may have had was by faith alone, not by sight.

In an act of ultimate self-sacrifice, Jesus, who had the power to step off the cross at any moment, chose to remain for you—even if it meant prolonged suffering and eternal death. Jesus literally and spiritually died of a broken heart, and He did it because He loves you. He did it so you don’t have to experience any of the suffering He went through. He did it for just the possibility of a single person believing in His salvation.

What love is this? No words could ever describe it. This is God’s love for you. In the light of the cross, sin loses its power, pride melts like wax, and temptations become offensive. All things are seen as they truly are, and we realize how much we are loved, how much we need (cont. on p. 53)
THE SIN-BEARER’S VICTORY

“It would be well for us to spend a thoughtful hour each day in contemplation of the life of Christ. We should take it point by point, and let the imagination grasp each scene, especially the closing ones. As we thus dwell upon His great sacrifice for us, our confidence in Him will be more constant, our love will be quickened, and we shall be more deeply imbued with His spirit. If we would be saved at last, we must learn the lesson of penitence and humiliation at the foot of the cross.” (Ellen G. White, The Desire of Ages [1898], 83.)

“Satan with his fierce temptations wrung the heart of Jesus. The Saviour could not see through the portals of the tomb. Hope did not present to Him His coming forth from the grave a conqueror, or tell Him of the Father’s acceptance of the sacrifice. He feared that sin was so offensive to God that Their separation was to be eternal. Christ felt the anguish which the sinner will feel when mercy shall no longer plead for the guilty race. It was the sense of sin, bringing the Father’s wrath upon Him as man’s substitute, that made the cup He drank so bitter, and broke the heart of the Son of God.” (Ibid., 753.)

“The spotless Son of God hung upon the cross, His flesh lacerated with stripes; those hands so often reached out in blessing, nailed to the wooden bars; those feet so tireless on ministries of love, spiked to the tree; that royal head pierced by the crown of thorns; those quivering lips shaped to the cry of woe. And all that He endured—the blood drops that flowed from His head, His hands, His feet, the agony that racked His frame, and the unutterable anguish that filled His soul at the hiding of His Father’s face—speaks to each child of humanity, declaring, It is for thee that the Son of God consents to bear this burden of guilt; for thee He spoils the domain of death, and opens the gates of Paradise. He who stilled the angry waves and walked the foam-capped billows, who made devils tremble and disease flee, who opened blind eyes and called forth the dead to life,—offers Himself upon the cross as a sacrifice, and this from love to thee. He, the Sin Bearer, endures the wrath of divine justice, and for thy sake becomes sin itself.” (Ibid., 755, 756.)

“Christ did not yield up His life till He had accomplished the work which He came to do, and with His parting breath He exclaimed, ‘It is finished.’ John 19:30. The battle had been won. His right hand and His holy arm had gotten Him the victory. As a Conqueror He planted His banner on the eternal heights.... Not until the death of Christ was the character of Satan clearly revealed to the angels or to the fallen worlds. The archapostate had so clothed himself with deception that even holy beings had not understood his principles. They had not clearly seen the nature of his rebellion.” (Ibid., 758.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How can a person who’s heard about the cross from a young age still find wonder at such a familiar story?

How does the cross serve as God’s closing argument in the debate over His character?

Why is it significant that Jesus chose to lay down His life?

How does sinning make us complicit in Satan’s plot to murder God?

In light of the cross, how can we strive to reflect the selfless love and sacrifice that Jesus demonstrated?

Why do you think God didn’t destroy Satan after Jesus’ death and resurrection?

How was Jesus’ faith revealed at the cross?

How do you experience God’s pardon and power?

How does it feel to know that Jesus would have gone through the torture of the cross just for the potential of one person being saved?