

ADULT  
SABBATH SCHOOL  
BIBLE STUDY GUIDE  
*Jan • Feb • Mar 2012*

# Glimpses of Our God



SEVENTH-DAY  
ADVENTIST CHURCH 

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## GLIMPSES OF OUR GOD

Who can look at those photos from the Hubble Space Telescope and not marvel at the beauty of the cosmos? Astonished at the famous photo of the Sombrero Galaxy, one writer said, “How can we begin to fathom the knowledge, the power, the reasoning, the truths, and the purposes that went into the Sombrero Galaxy (which is just one among billions of others)? Here we are, so small and so isolated, a speck of the creation with so much in our view but so infinitely beyond our grasp.”

More astonishing than the universe itself, however, has to be its Maker, because only something greater than the universe could have made it.

Of course, as Seventh-day Adventists, the God whom we worship and serve is the One who, indeed, has made the universe—everything from the Sombrero Galaxy to the quarks that compose all matter in it and everywhere else.

It is in this context—that of the Lord whom we worship and serve—that this quarter’s lesson is going to do some “theology,” a technical term for “the study of God.” After all, is it not important to know about the God whom we worship, trust, and serve—the One we are called to love with “all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind” (*Luke 10:27*)?

The picture of God in the Bible is very expansive. Yes, God’s love is underscored, again and again, but there is so much more about Him that He wants us to know. For example, there are hundreds of different names for God in Scripture. Each one

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of them could give a deeper and more informed understanding of the great God of heaven and earth. He is so much more than a benign Santa Claus in the sky who doles out assistance at our request. (A professional poker player recently won millions of dollars in a tournament and then publicly thanked Jesus for it!)

This quarter we're going to look at God, at various aspects of Him as they have been revealed to us, and at what these things mean for us on a practical level. We're going to start with some of the "basics," such as the Trinity—the amazing teaching that God is One God and yet composed of Three Persons. From there, we're going to focus on God as Creator—the doctrine that forms the foundation of all that we believe. Next, we'll look at His work of redemption because, in a fallen world, being created isn't enough. We need to be redeemed, as well. We'll also look at God as both a God of grace and a God of judgment. We'll then look at His holiness, His law, and the Sabbath, all of which stem from the essence of His character and help us to understand more about what He is like.

*This quarter we're going to look at God, at various aspects of Him as they have been revealed to us, and at what these things mean for us on a practical level.*

And we also are going to look at some other aspects of God not commonly considered, such as God as a God of beauty, of history, and even of romance. Among other things, such as prayer and ecology (that is, we want to look at some of the practical aspects of what it means to serve our Lord), we're going to look at God's great promise of the Second Coming, which leads to the climax of history and the end of humanity's horrible experience with sin.

God is big (after all, He created—along with everything else—the Sombrero Galaxy!). We are so small in contrast. How grateful we should be, then, for every bit of light He casts our way. This quarter we'll look at some of that light. How faithfully we walk in it, is up to each of us individually.

*Jo Ann Davidson is a professor of theology at Andrews University Seminary in Berrien Springs, Michigan, U.S.A.*

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# Got Questions?

## Sabbath School University *has answers!*

*Sabbath School University* is a 28-minute discussion of the *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*. SSU discusses the content and strategies to enrich your Sabbath School with fellowship, outreach, Bible study, and missions. Sabbath School leaders, don't miss this weekly broadcast on Hope Channel.



[www.hopetv.org](http://www.hopetv.org)

# Mission to the Chinese

Mandarin Chinese is the most widely spoken language in the world. Well over a billion people speak Mandarin, Cantonese, or one of several other languages and dialects that originated in China. Millions of Chinese-speaking people live throughout Asia, North America, and dozens of other countries around the world. In North America Chinese is the third most widely spoken language.

Yet until recently, few video programs have been produced in one of the Chinese languages. The church is striving to make God's message available to Chinese-speaking populations wherever they live through avenues such as the Internet and Hope Channel. I'm glad that this quarter part of my Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help make more programming available to the Chinese-speaking people around the world. For me, it's personal.



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# The Triune God



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Deut. 6:4; Phil. 2:6; Matt. 28:19; Gen. 1:26, 27; John 14–16.*

**Memory Text:** “But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life” (*Jude 20, 21, NKJV*).

**Key Thought:** Scripture contains references and hints to the deity and unity of the divine Godhead.

Although the word *Trinity* doesn't appear in the Bible, the teaching definitely does. The doctrine of the Trinity, that God is One and composed of three “Persons,” is crucial because it is dealing with who God is, what He is like, how He works, and how He relates to the world. Most important, the deity of Christ is essential to the plan of salvation.

In Scripture, there are three separate but interrelated types of evidence for the Trinity, or tri-unity of God: (1) evidence for the unity of God, that God is One; (2) evidence that there are three Persons who are God; (3) subtle textual hints of God's three-in-oneness.

The distinctions among God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit found in the Bible must be understood as being the way God is in Himself, however difficult this may be for our fallen minds to grasp. The “eternal heavenly dignitaries—God, and Christ, and the Holy Spirit,” as Ellen G. White calls them (*Evangelism*, p. 616), are equal but not identical or interchangeable. As fundamental belief number 2 says, “There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal Persons.”

\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 7.

## The Oneness of God

The belief system of the ancient Hebrews was rigorously monotheistic: “mono” expressing “one” and “theistic” from the Greek word for “God,” meaning that there is only one true God. This position is unwavering all through the Old Testament. There is but one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and not many gods as believed by the nations and tribes around the Hebrews. In this sense, the religion of the Bible was unique.

**How** does God speak about Himself in Exodus 3:13–15? How do these verses imply the oneness of God?

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The oneness of God is also found in the text (*Deut. 6:4*) called by the Jews “the Shema.” It was given this name because the opening word, the command “Hear” in Hebrew, is the word *shema*. This statement is one of the great truths about God, a truth that the people of Israel were commanded to believe and to teach their children.

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (*Deut. 6:4, ESV*). Compare that verse with Genesis 2:24 (*ESV*), “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” What might it mean that the same Hebrew word for *one* appears in both texts?

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The same word, *echad*, for “one,” is used of God in the “Shema” of Deuteronomy 6:4. This word *echad*, for oneness, does not imply a mathematical sum but a complex unity instead. Something is being affirmed here about a unity of distinct parts. Husbands and wives are to be “one” (*echad*) according to Genesis 2:24, just as in Deuteronomy God is “one.”

**How** does the New Testament talk about the oneness of God? *James 2:19, 1 Cor. 8:4.*

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**How should the understanding of God as one help us avoid the pitfalls of idolatry in any form? Why should the Lord alone be the One whom we worship? How can you eradicate any “idols” from your own life?**



## The Deity of Christ

The deity of the Father is scarcely, if ever, in dispute. Those who question the Trinity often challenge the deity of Christ. Were Christ anything but eternal and fully divine, the plan of salvation would be seriously compromised (see Thursday’s lesson).

**How** does Paul, once a rigid Pharisee, talk about the deity of Christ?

*Phil. 2:6.*

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For a Pharisee grounded in the Old Testament teaching of the oneness of God, this is an astonishing statement, because it reveals Paul’s deep commitment to the deity of Christ.

The book of Hebrews—written to Jews who were strong monotheists, as was Paul—contains potent statements underscoring the deity of the Son of God. In Hebrews 1:8, 9, Christ’s divine nature is powerfully and explicitly expressed.

Most important in revealing the deity of Christ is Jesus’ own self-consciousness. He didn’t march through the streets of Jerusalem with a triumphal chorus proclaiming His deity. Yet the four Gospels include many threads of evidence which reveal that this is how He understood Himself. Jesus repeatedly claimed to possess what properly belonged only to God: He spoke of the angels of God as His angels (*Matt. 13:41*); He claimed to forgive sins (*Mark 2:5–10*); and Jesus claimed the power to judge the world (*Matt. 25:31–46*). Who else but God could rightfully do that?

**Review** how Jesus accepted the worship of various people in the Gospel records (*Matt. 14:33, 28:9, Luke 24:50–52, John 9:35–38*). Compare His actions with Paul’s (*Acts 14:8–18*). What does Jesus’ acceptance of all this worship reveal about His deity?

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At His trial, one accusation against Jesus was that He claimed to be the Son of God (*John 19:7, Matt. 26:63–65*). If Jesus did not regard Himself as God, this was a critical opportunity for Him to correct a mistaken impression. Yet He did not. In fact, it was at His trial before Caiaphas that He affirmed His own deity under oath. Hence, we have powerful evidence from the Bible of the deity of Christ.

**Think about Jesus’ life. Focus on the fact that He was God, the Creator of the universe. What does this tell us about God’s love for the world? Why should you draw much comfort and hope from this truth?**

## The Holy Spirit

If God can be “one,” with the two Persons of the Father and the Son, adding a third Person to the Godhead should not particularly add more difficulty. We are talking here about the Holy Spirit.

**Read** Genesis 1:2. What does this tell us about the role of the Holy Spirit, who appears so early in the biblical record?

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**How** does Matthew 28:19 draw attention to the three members of the Godhead?

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Three Persons of the Godhead are mentioned when Jesus instructs how new believers are to be baptized. This baptismal “formula” is used today in most Christian baptisms. The person who has chosen to follow Jesus is baptized into the “Name” (singular, not plural, in the Greek), although three Persons are included. Three Divine Beings are viewed as One.

At the baptism of Jesus, all three Persons of the Trinity appear together. Read Mark’s dramatic description of that baptism (*Mark 1:9–11*). Mark’s description of the heavens as “parting” (*vs. 10, NKJV*) would be better translated as “torn open” (*NIV*). Mark draws attention to all three Members of the Divine Godhead in an awesome revelation of God that affects even nature itself.

As with Jesus, the work of the Holy Spirit is linked with, and attributed to, the actions of God. Review the following portrayals of the Holy Spirit’s actions:

1. When announcing the birth of Christ, the angel tells Mary that her Child will be called “holy” because the Holy Spirit will come upon her (*Luke 1:35*).
2. Jesus claimed that the Spirit of the Lord was upon Him, anointing Him to preach (*Luke 4:18*).
3. He also claimed to be driving out demons by the Spirit of God (*Matt. 12:28*).
4. The Spirit, who is to carry on Christ’s work after His departure, is another Counselor of the same kind (*John 14:16*).
5. Jesus breathed out the Holy Spirit upon His followers (*John 20:22*).
6. New Christians will have both the indwelling Holy Spirit (*John 14:17*) and also the Spirit of Christ (*Gal. 2:20, Col. 1:27*).

Christ and the Holy Spirit are intimately linked with each other’s ministry. Moreover, there are biblical references that identify the Holy Spirit as God. Read Acts 5:1–11. How does this incident help us to understand the deity of the Holy Spirit, as well?

## In Unity and Equality

However clear it is in the Bible that God is one (*echad*), the Bible also talks about the plurality of Persons. Scholars and Bible students throughout the millennia have seen in many Old Testament texts powerful evidence of the plural nature of God. This truth, as with many others, is more fully revealed in the New Testament.

**Read** Genesis 1:26, 27. How is God’s plurality revealed here?

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This pairing of the plural and the singular when referring to God also occurs in Genesis 11:7, 8 at the building of the tower of Babel. God Himself speaks again. The “LORD” is mentioned, yet He speaks as one of a group (“Us”).

**Read** Isaiah 6:8. In what ways do you see the plurality of the “Lord” revealed there, as well?

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In the New Testament, how does Peter’s sermon at Pentecost exalt Jesus within the Godhead? (*See Acts 2:33.*) Peter, a devout monotheistic Jew, and thus a believer in One God, proclaims the full divinity of Christ, now in heaven. In his letter to the Jewish exiles of the dispersion, Peter again communicates evidence of the triune nature of God. (*See 1 Pet. 1:1–3.*)

**How** does Paul include the plurality of God as he describes the process of salvation? *2 Cor. 1:20–22. (See also 2 Cor. 13:14.)*

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With our finite and fallen minds, this teaching is not easy to fully grasp. But so what? We are dealing here with the nature of God, the Creator of the universe. How foolish it would be to think that we could fully understand Him, especially when, as humans, we don’t “fully” understand pretty much anything. Dwell on even the “simplest” thing you can think of. How many aspects of it remain beyond your grasp? How much more so with something as grand as the nature of God Himself?

## The Trinity and Salvation

The Gospel of John gives direct and conscious attention to the unique nature of God. John seems to be fully aware of the oneness, yet “threeness,” of God.

**Read** Christ’s prayer in John 14–16 and count the number of references to the three Persons of God. How do these passages help us to understand the reality of this important truth?

This passage in the Gospel of John is the most extensive concentration of references to the coequal, three-Person God. Here, the inter-dynamics among the Trinity come through repeatedly. The doctrine of the Trinity, far from being a piece of abstract speculation, is the inevitable conclusion that comes from a systematic survey of Scripture.

Of special importance in this context is the deity of Christ. If Christ were not fully God, then all we have is the Lord shifting the punishment for our sins from one party to another, as opposed to taking them upon Himself. The whole point of the gospel is that it was God Himself on the cross bearing the sins of the world. Anything short of this would denude the atonement of everything that made it so powerful and effective.

Think about it: if Jesus were merely a created being, and not fully God, how could He—as a creature—bear God’s full wrath against sin? What created being, no matter how exalted, could save humanity from the violation of God’s holy law?

Were Jesus not divine, then God’s law would not be as sacred as God Himself, because the violation of it would be something for which a created being could atone. The law would be only as sacred as that created being, and not as sacred as the Creator. Sin itself would not be so bad if all it took to atone for it was the death of a creature and not the death of the Creator to atone for it. The fact that it took God Himself, in the Person of Christ, to remedy sin presents powerful evidence of the seriousness of sin.

Also, our assurance of salvation through what Christ has done for us—and not through our own works—comes from the fact that God Himself paid the penalty for our sins. What could we do to add to that? Were Christ a created being, maybe we could add something. But with God the Creator sacrificing Himself for our sins, it’s all but blasphemous to believe that anything we do could supplement that sacrifice. Thus, were Christ not divine, the atonement would be fatally compromised.

**Think for a moment: the Creator of the universe died in your stead, in your place, so you could have the promise of eternal life in Him. How can you learn to draw hope and assurance from this amazing truth? In light of this reality, what else really matters?**

**Further Study:** In the doctrine of the Trinity, we do not find three different divine roles displayed by one Person (that is *modalism*). Nor are there three gods in a cluster (that is *tritheism* or *polytheism*). The one God (“He”) is also, and equally, “They,” and “They” are always together, always closely cooperating. The Holy Spirit executes the will of both Father and Son, which is also His will. This is the truth that God reveals about Himself all throughout the Bible.

Some people struggle with the divinity of Christ because of how, while here in the flesh, Jesus had subordinated Himself to the will of the Father. Many see this as “proof” that He was somehow less than the Father. This reality, however, does not reflect the inner structure of the Godhead. This subordination reflects, instead, how the plan of salvation was to operate. Jesus was to come into humanity, becoming “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (*Phil. 2:8, ESV*). Also, “though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; and being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him” (*Heb. 5:8, 9*). These statements reveal that the subordinate role Jesus played resulted from the Incarnation, which was crucial to the plan of salvation. They don’t prove that He is anything other than fully divine and eternal.

“‘His name shall be called Immanuel, . . . God with us.’ ‘The light of the knowledge of the glory of God’ is seen ‘in the face of Jesus Christ.’ From the days of eternity the Lord Jesus Christ was one with the Father; He was ‘the image of God,’ the image of His greatness and majesty, ‘the outshining of His glory.’ It was to manifest this glory that He came to our world.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 19.

## Discussion Questions:

❶ Some early Adventists struggled with the doctrine of the Trinity. Today the church has taken a firm stand on the doctrine. How does this change over time reveal to us the unfolding nature of truth? In your own experience, how have you grown in your understanding of truth? What beliefs did you once hold that, today, you no longer accept?

❷ John 8:58 reads: “Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, before Abraham was, I am.” How does this text powerfully reveal the full divinity of Christ?

**Summary:** If we want to deepen our love for the great infinite God we serve and be drawn to worship Him, we first must try to grasp what He tells us about Himself. The Trinity is a mystery, but in Scripture “mysteries” are deep truths that an infinite God reveals to us on a finite level. Thus, we can safely speak of God only from our knees. “‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!’” (*Deut. 6:4, NKJV*).

## Curse of the Fetish Priest

by GUILLAUME DJOSSOU

Giving one's life to God can be a life-or-death decision in some regions of the world. As a lay pastor and church planter working near the city of Cotonou, Benin, I saw this firsthand.

When Ann and her husband became Seventh-day Adventist Christians, Ann's father, a fetish priest in Benin, cursed her with death.

One day as Ann sat working under a tree, she noticed dark clouds forming. She gathered her things, but before she could leave, rain started falling. The rain wasn't heavy, so Ann remained under the sheltering tree.

Suddenly, lightning struck, and Ann's clothes caught fire. She yanked off the burning cloth wrap, but her back was badly burned. Some Seventh-day Adventist church members nearby ran to help Ann to safety. Ann lost consciousness before they reached a nearby house.

Realizing that Ann's injuries were the work of the devil, the believers read Revelation 12:7–12 and claimed God's power over Satan. Then they prayed for Ann. While they prayed, some people approached the house and began invoking spirits. The believers realized that these were fetish priests, and they prayed even more earnestly, even as the voodoo priests called on their spirits.

When Ann regained consciousness, the believers tried to take her to the hospital. But the priests prevented them from leaving. Finally, the police arrived and helped the Christians take Ann from the house. Ann eventually recovered from her ordeal.

At the time the demons attacked Ann, the little Seventh-day Adventist congregation had just eight members. But word spread about how God had saved Ann from the curse of the voodoo priests, and many people came to hear about Ann's powerful God.

Because of Ann's steadfast faith and the family's work in the community, many people have given their lives to Jesus. The little church in the village has grown to more than 50 members.



Your mission offerings are helping to advance the work of God in a demon-infested region of the world. Who knows how many people will hear Christ's message of love because you have given? Thank you.

GUILLAUME DJOSSOU (left) was a lay evangelist when this event happened. He is now studying theology at the Adventist University Cosendai in Cameroon.

# In *the* Beginning



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Matt. 19:4; Job 38:4–7; Deut. 32:10, 11; Psalm 19; John 1:1–13; Rom. 5:12; Isa. 66:22.*

**Memory Text:** “For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him” (*Colossians 1:16, NKJV*).

**Key Thought:** The doctrine of Creation, a literal six-day Creation, is foundational to all that we believe.

It's hard to imagine two more diverse views of our origins than the biblical model of Creation and atheistic evolution. The first presents a creation that was planned, calculated, with nothing left to chance. In contrast, the evolutionary model is all chance. Second, in the biblical account, everything was created for a purpose; God had an end goal, a purpose for what He created. In contrast, evolution works on the premise that there is no final goal, no purpose-driven force motivating what's created. Random mutation and natural selection (products of chance) work together blindly, keeping what functions and discarding what doesn't. Finally, the biblical account teaches that humans were made in the image of God. Evolution teaches that they are made in the image of whatever primate just happened to precede *Homo sapiens*.

This week, we'll look at the biblical doctrine of Creation. If we get Creation wrong, we're all but certain to get many other things wrong. That's how crucial the teaching is to what we believe as Seventh-day Adventist Christians.

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 14.*

## Creation Week

**“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (*Gen. 1:1, NKJV*). How does this opening line automatically make the Bible and Darwinian evolution mutually exclusive?**

The book of Genesis opens with God already in action as Creator. No explanation for, or introduction of, God is given. None of the Bible writers thought that God needed an introduction. The closest thing for a proof of the existence of God might be the sentiment of the psalmist: “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God’ ” (*Ps. 14:1, NKJV*).

Scholars have noted an amazing artistry, not just in creation but in how it is presented in the Bible. Genesis 1:2 provides the introductory aspects upon which God’s masterpieces of matter are organized: “The earth was without form and void.” The first three days He “forms” what was “unformed.” The next three days He “fills” what had been “void” or empty.

The light created on *day one* was filled or completed on *day four* with the great lights of the sun and moon (and “the stars also,” *Gen. 1:16*). The air and water that had been the focus on *day two* were filled up with the birds and water creatures on *day five* (*Gen. 1:6–8, 20–23*). The dry land separated from the waters and then filled with vegetation on *day three* (*Gen. 1:9–13*) was completed with the land animals, along with humans, on *day six*. Finally, all was pronounced “very good” and then regally celebrated on the seventh day by God Himself (*Gen. 2:1–3*).

The point is that nothing in these texts leaves any indication that anything was left to chance. On the contrary, the texts teach the opposite: everything was meticulously worked out and planned.

**According** to the following texts, who also believed in the biblical account of Creation?

*Matt. 19:4* \_\_\_\_\_

*Exod. 20:8–11* \_\_\_\_\_

*1 Tim. 2:13* \_\_\_\_\_

*Isa. 40:26* \_\_\_\_\_

Everything in the Bible testifies to the fact that the Lord created the world, speaking it into existence just as depicted in Genesis 1 and 2. Scripture leaves us no wiggle room regarding that matter. One can choose Creation, or one can choose evolution, but honesty allows no melding of the two. The texts themselves don’t leave us that option.



## The Heart of the Creator

The drama of Creation week is extraordinary. Day after day, the Creator speaks into existence the life systems and life forms that continue to amaze scientists. Even God refers to the extreme joy of that time.

**How** does God express to Job the excitement that was part of the earth's creation? *Job 38:4–7.*

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A hint of the joy in the Creator's heart that first week can also be found in the second verse of Genesis chapter one (*NKJV*): "And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." Biblical scholars become ever more appreciative of the fine literary crafting of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) by Moses. In this instance, as Moses describes the Spirit of God "hovering" over the face of the waters at the opening of Creation week, he deliberately chooses a word that he will only use one more time—in Deuteronomy 32. That chapter is part of his farewell sermon to Israel.

**How** does Moses use the word *hovering* this second time? *Deut. 32:10, 11. (See also Matt. 23:37.)*

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Think of how mother birds lovingly prepare the nest for their babies. Then, picture them hovering over their babies, bringing them food, and then teaching them how to fly. Moses, who had taken care of sheep for 40 years, must have seen this natural phenomenon happen each spring, and it must have made him think of God's tender care. Under inspiration, he pictured the same emotions in the Holy Spirit's heart as our human "nest" was being constructed.

Everything in the Creation account, then, in contrast to the various evolutionary models—which depict our Creation as the work of forces violently competing with each other—reveals a God who loves His creation, who cares about it, and who purposely and carefully designed it. There's nothing impersonal about the creation, nothing emotionless, nothing purposeless. Love was there at the start of the Creation week. What a contrast to evolution, which teaches that love somehow emerged only after billions of years of selfish violence. Love motivated the Creation, and love will be there when this damaged version of Creation is created anew.

**Dwell on the marvels of nature. How do you see the amazing love of God manifested there?**

## The Heavens Declare

The book of Psalms contains a rich corpus of songs praising the Creator. Regularly and jubilantly the psalmists refer to the “great works” of God.

**Psalm 19.** The progression of thought is audacious. First, David describes the glories of the heavens and firmament, including the blazing sun. He compares the brilliant energy of the sun to a bridegroom going to his wedding and also to an athlete in training (*vss. 1–6*). He then links this splendor of the sun to the perfection of God’s law and the power of its precepts. The contents of the law are thereby linked with the grandeur of God’s creative actions (*vss. 7–11*).

**Psalm 92.** This “Song for the Sabbath” opens with the attitude of praise from a grateful heart. The one who traces the use of “the works of Your hands” and “Your works,” as used throughout the Psalter (or throughout any biblical book for that matter), will be drawn to the extensive praise for the created world included in the Bible. And the more that any person learns about the created works of God—whether the smallest detail seen through a microscope, or the farthest star or planet seen through a telescope, or whatever creature of animal life (whether it swims, flies, or walks)—the more the amazing power of God’s creative activity comes through. Scientists continue to learn more and more, not only about the different plants and animals but also about how all systems of life interact with each other in the complex web of life. The more they learn, the more amazing it all appears.

**“[The] jaw is clearly not an example of intelligent design; rather, it is an imperfect adaptation that has occurred as a result of natural selection, working with the materials at hand to refashion and shorten the mammalian muzzle into a face.”—Owen Gingerich, *God’s Universe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 98, 99. What important point has this Christian—fruitlessly attempting to meld evolution with a Christian worldview—unfortunately missed?**

No question, the created world reveals the love and power of the Creator. But our world has also been devastated by sin, by the scars and disruption caused by the great controversy. We see the horrible results all around us in sickness, death, natural disasters, and the like. No part of the earthly Creation has escaped, and certainly no human being has. And yet, even amid this devastation, we can see the love and power of the Creator. The key is to focus not on the bad but on the good that underlies it. We might see, for example, a cherry tree smitten with the blight that destroys all the fruit. The blight, however bad, does not, and cannot, erase the love and goodness revealed in the tree itself, a love and goodness that points to the character of the Creator.

## The Cross and Creation

**Read** John 1:1–13. In what ways does John link Creation with the Cross? Why are the two teachings inseparable?

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In numerous places the Bible clearly links the Lord as Creator with the Lord as Redeemer, a link that provides more evidence that evolution cannot be reconciled with the Bible, especially with the teaching of the Cross. Otherwise, what? The Lord would have incarnated into an evolved ape created through the vicious and painfully murderous cycle of natural selection, all in order to abolish death, “the last enemy” (1 Cor. 15:26)? But how can death be the “enemy” if it was one of God’s chosen means for creating humans, at least according to the evolutionary model? The Lord must have expended plenty of dead *Homo erectus*, *Homo heidelbergensis*, and *Homo neanderthalensis* in order to finally get His own image (*Homo sapiens*). What this would mean, then, is that Jesus came to save humankind from the very process He, as Creator, used to create it in the first place. If that sounds ridiculous, it’s because it is.

**Read** Romans 5:12. How does this text help us to understand how crucial a literal reading of the Genesis Creation account is to the whole plan of salvation?

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How is the idea of the Fall, so clearly biblical, explained by those who seek to meld evolution with the Bible? Does God use processes of violence, selfishness, and dominance of the strong against the weak in order to create a morally flawless and selfless being who then “falls” into a state of violence, selfishness, and dominance of the strong over the weak—a state from which he has to be redeemed—or else face final punishment?

Again, the absurdity of the position utterly rules it out. The only way to make sense of the Cross, of the need for the Savior to redeem a fallen race, is for human beings to have “fallen” from something, and a “fall” implies a descent, a degeneration; it means that we went from that which was good to something that wasn’t as good. That makes perfect sense from a literal understanding of Genesis; with evolution, it makes no sense at all. Indeed, the idea of evolution makes a mockery of both the Fall and the Cross.

## Creation and Re-creation

**What** wonderful promises are found in these texts? *Isa. 65:17, Isa. 66:22, 2 Pet. 3:13, Rev. 21:4*. Also, how are these promises linked with the biblical model of Creation, as revealed in the opening chapters of Genesis?

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The whole Christian hope rests on the promises of a new heaven and a new earth, a heaven and earth without the devastation that sin has brought to the one we inhabit now. Without that hope, that promise, we have, literally, no hope at all. The promise of eternal life is wonderful, but we want that eternal life in a world without the horrors, sorrows, and disappointments of this one. What could be worse than the eternal death that awaits the unsaved except eternal life in a world in which misery is often the rule, rather than the exception?

All of which leads to some very interesting questions in regard to our origins and how the Lord worked in the process of the first Creation—the one depicted so masterfully in Genesis 1 and 2. The question is, will the new heaven and the new earth be created by divine fiat? That is, as depicted in a literal reading of Genesis: God speaks and within an amazingly short time all life exists on the earth fully formed and developed, with nothing left to caprice, violence, or chance?

Or, instead, will the process of creation mean that life will, again, have to endure the “joys” and rigors of natural selection and survival-of-the-fittest for billions of years until a new world, one “wherein dwelleth righteousness” (*2 Pet. 3:13*), finally appears?

After all, if God chose to use evolution the first time around to create this world, why would He do something different the second time? If these were His chosen means in the original Creation, are they not good enough for round two?

The absurdity of the idea that God would use evolution to re-create the heavens and the earth is more evidence pointing to the absurdity of His having created the world that way to begin with. No question, the Cross, Redemption, and the promise of a new heaven and a new earth are themes inseparably tied in with the literal Genesis account.

**Try to imagine what our world was like in its pristine beauty. Imagine, too, what it will be like when it is created over. Our minds and hearts can only begin to wrap around what that will be like. Why is nothing in this world worth having if we lose out on what is promised us?**

**Further Study:** Throughout all her ministry, Ellen G. White was uncompromising in her rejection of the theory of evolution.

“It is,” she wrote, “the worst kind of infidelity; for with many who profess to believe the record of creation, it is infidelity in disguise.” —*The Signs of the Times*, March 20, 1879.

“[S]hall we, for the privilege of tracing our descent from germs and mollusks and apes, consent to cast away that statement of Holy Writ, so grand in its simplicity, ‘God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him’? Genesis 1:27.”—*Education*, p. 130.

“When the Lord declares that He made the world in six days and rested on the seventh day, He means the day of twenty-four hours, which He has marked off by the rising and setting of the sun.” —*Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, p. 136.

## Discussion Questions:

**1** Another problem stemming from the attempt to meld evolution with the Bible is the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. Isn’t that going to be an instantaneous process, in the “twinkling of an eye” (*1 Cor. 15:52*) even? Some folk have been dead for thousands of years; there’s not much left to work with. Yet, if God can re-create them in an instant, why did He use evolution to create them the first time around?

**2** Contrary to popular conceptions, Charles Darwin worked on his theory of evolution from a theological premise. He expressed it like this: “There seems to me,” wrote Darwin, “too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the [parasitic wasp] with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that the cat should play with mice.” Of course a “beneficent and omnipotent God” did no such thing. What’s wrong with Darwin’s assumption, and how do you think it influenced him in his development of such a radically wrong theory on human origins?

**3** As a class, spend some time in nature and marvel at the various wonders of the created world. As you do so, keep open to the damage that sin has brought, and see how much you can distinguish between the creation and what sin has done to the creation. Why is it always important to keep this distinction in mind?

**Summary:** Despite many attempts to mix a biblical worldview with the doctrine of evolution, the two teachings are polar opposites. Christians must stand firm on the literal Creation story; once that goes, the plan of salvation goes with it.

# Power of Prayer

by IRINA MEZEUAN

Irina is a teenager who lives with her family in the Republic of Georgia. As a child, she suffered from a painful spinal tumor, and doctors gave her only four years to live. Her mother, desperate for help, met a woman who was lending books in the marketplace. Irina's mother chose several books that offered hope and took them home to read as she sat by Irina's bedside.

When her mother returned the books, she thanked the woman for sharing them. The woman invited Irina's mother to visit the Seventh-day Adventist church and to bring Irina. "We will fast and pray for her," she promised, smiling. Irina's mother took her to the church the following Sabbath, and the woman and her friends fasted and prayed for her.

When Irina's mother took her back to the hospital for a checkup, her doctors were amazed to find that the tumor was shrinking. They removed the tumor, and Irina's pain disappeared.

Irina's mother continued attending the Seventh-day Adventist church and took both Irina and her sister, Yana, with her. The girls learned the importance of prayer and began praying for others, just as Irina had been prayed for.

When the girls visited a certain store, they often sought out Lisa, a woman who sold bread there. They invited her to church, but Lisa refused to go. The girls weren't discouraged; they continued praying for their friend, even after she stopped working at the store.

One day Irina and Yana's mother met Lisa on the subway and told the woman that her daughters were praying for her. She shared words of hope with Lisa and invited her to church. This time Lisa agreed to go.

When Lisa arrived at church the next week, the sisters hugged her and sat with her. "We wanted her to know we love her and that she is special to God," Irina says.

Lisa continued attending church, even though she had to take several buses to get there. Irina, Yana, and their mother continued praying for her. One Sabbath the pastor invited those who wanted to accept Jesus to stand. The sisters prayed silently that Lisa would make her decision for Christ and were thrilled when Lisa stood up.

"We felt that God had answered our prayers for Lisa," Irina said. Lisa was baptized along with three friends for whom they also had been praying. The girls are praying for their father. "He's started reading the Bible," Irina says. "We know that God is working on his heart in answer to our prayers."

Sharing our faith through witnessing and prayer and giving a generous mission offering are the three most powerful ways to bring others to Christ.

# God *as* Redeemer



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Rom. 1:18, Gen. 3:15, Rom. 16:20, 1 Pet. 1:19, Mark 10:32–45, Matt. 27:46.*

**Memory Text:** “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!” (*Revelation 5:12, NKJV*).

**Key Thought:** The Triune God is our Creator and Redeemer.

Closely related to God as Creator is His role as our Redeemer. Sin is so bad, so hostile to the created world, that only the Creator Himself could solve the problem.

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (*Eph. 2:13, NKJV*). It is not through works, nor through anything we could ever do, but it is through His grace, manifest at the Cross that we as sinners can be redeemed by the Lord and be “brought near” to Him. Christ bore God’s wrath so that none of us would ever, ideally, have to.

Paul also tells the church in Corinth that “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (*1 Cor. 1:18, NKJV*). The scandal of the Cross is that it appears so absurd: God, the infinite, holy Creator, becomes a sacrifice for the sake of twisted human souls, even His avowed enemies, taking upon Himself the penalty for their sins so that they wouldn’t have to face that penalty themselves! The atonement is so deep, so heavy, so profound, that we grasp only what we can. Beyond that, thinking stops, and all we can do is worship.

*\*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 21.*

## At the Cross

**“But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). What is this text saying to us?**

At the cross, in the most humiliating, inconceivable manner imaginable, God triumphs over and shames the enemy. Love, justice, and compassion fuse in a singular dynamic act. God forgives sinners by paying in Himself the price of sin and absorbing into His own suffering Self the penalty of that sin. On Calvary, God reveals how extremely costly forgiveness is.

Christ didn't die in order to create love in God's heart for us. No, Jesus insists that the Father's love is the source, not the consequence, of the atonement (*John 3:16, 17*). God doesn't love us because Christ died for us; Christ died for us because God loved us. The atonement of Christ was not offered to persuade the Father to love those whom He otherwise hated. The death of Christ did not bring forth a love that was not already in existence. Rather, it was a manifestation of the love that was eternally in God's heart. Jesus never had to persuade the Father to love us. Notice how He insists on this truth in *John 3:16, 17; 16:26, 27*.

The real tragedy is that we have lost much of the knowledge of God, against whom we have sinned. We do not even feel that we have much to repent of, because we're not always sure about just how much we have offended God with our sins. We can become dull to just how bad sin really is. Modern religious sentimentality often minimizes repugnance toward sin. And because sin doesn't make us angry anymore, perhaps it becomes harder to realize that sin arouses the wrath of a Holy God.

**Paul is not afraid to discuss the wrath of God. How does he express it in Romans 1:18?**

This strong statement sets the tone for the lengthy treatment of the universal sway of sin on which Paul continues to elaborate for the next two chapters (*through Romans 3:20*).

An astounding aspect of the gospel is the fact that God is both the victor over our sin and the victim of it. And, as a result of this dual role, our holy God can keep His covenant with sinful covenant breakers. God's love does not lead to a bland tolerance of sin and evil but to a triumphant victory over it. It is precisely because God is love that He opposes sin and evil, for these realities corrupt and destroy His beloved children. The death that God endured on the cross is the price His love pays for taking sin seriously while still loving sinners.

**How seriously do you take the sin in your life? And what criteria do you use to justify your answer?**



## The Gospel in the Old Testament

**When** is the first promise of salvation given, and what does it mean?  
*Gen. 3:15.*

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The language here is striking. Adam and Eve have sinned. Now the great controversy is announced to them through the strong language of “enmity” between two opposing sides. This is a precious promise for human hearts now attracted to sin. We are also assured that this major conflict will not be eternal, for the head of the enemy will one day be crushed. In these verses, not only is the great controversy first revealed, but we also are told how it is going to end.

**Paul** took courage from Genesis 3:15. How does he express it in Romans 16:20? What point is he making?

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In Genesis 22:1–19, Moses also narrates an amazingly graphic atonement picture. What can we learn about the future atonement of Christ from this narrative?

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Note the many mentions of “father and son” and how the two go to the mountain of sacrifice together. The son carries the wood and the father the instruments of sacrifice (fire and knife). Isaac, much younger than his father, could have overpowered Abraham on the mountain of sacrifice. But, instead, we see two miracles: the father yielding his son, and the son yielding his life.

What a powerful representation of the sacrificial death of Christ on our behalf. The scene, however powerful and moving, was only a tiny foretaste of the time when—centuries later—another Father would offer His Son. This time, however, there would be no animal to die instead of the son. The Son Himself would die on the altar. The Father would truly give up His Son, and the Son would give His life.

There, on Mount Moriah, the world has been presented a very powerful picture (but still only a picture) of the plan of salvation and what it cost to redeem fallen humanity from the ruin of sin.

## Salvation in Isaiah

**On** the famous road to Emmaus, Jesus taught the two despairing disciples about the atonement from “Moses and all the prophets” (*Luke 24:27*). What prophetic materials might Jesus have included in His study of the atonement?

It’s very likely that Isaiah was among the prophets to whom Jesus would have referred.

**Read** Isaiah 53, which describes the “Suffering Servant.” Describe the details included there that help you to more fully grasp the amazing atonement of Christ.

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Although so much exists in this chapter, one point stands out more than anything else, and that is the substitutionary role of the Suffering Servant. Notice all the times that He is paying the price for the sins of others. Again and again this theme appears, and what it teaches is that at the heart of salvation, of atonement, is the death of Jesus on our behalf. As sinners who have violated God’s law, we can do nothing to make ourselves right with God. All of our good works cannot bridge the gap between us and God. The only way to save us was for Jesus to pay the penalty in our stead and then offer us His perfect righteousness, which we claim by faith.

Had our works been able to make us right with God in any way, then Jesus would not have had to die for us. The fact that He did, that it took nothing less than His death in order to make atonement, should be all the proof we need that we cannot earn our salvation. It is, instead, wholly a gift of grace.

**Read** 1 Peter 1:19, 2:21–25. How does Peter draw on Isaiah 53 in his explanation of Christ’s atoning death on our behalf?

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Isaiah 53 presents what’s perhaps the clearest theological explanation of the Cross, showing unequivocally that, whatever else the Cross represents, it represents Christ dying on our behalf, bearing in Himself the punishment that we deserve.

**Using Isaiah 53 as your text, think about the final scenes of Christ’s life. As you do, keep in mind that the person depicted there is our God, our Creator, one part of the Godhead Himself. How do we get our minds around this amazing truth?**

## The Gospels and the Cross

The astounding miracle of Christ's incarnation, His profound teaching, and the miracles He performed, are not the central focus of Christ's life. Instead, what dominates the thinking of Jesus is the giving of His life. As miraculous as His birth and ministry were, the great mission of Christ's life was His death.

In the four Gospels, we find Jesus endeavoring to prepare His disciples for His coming death. However, their devotion to Jesus, coupled with their hope for a political Messiah, prevents them from grasping what Jesus is telling them.

**Read** Mark 10:32–45. How did Jesus describe His coming execution? (vss. 33, 34). What was wrong with the request of James and John? (vss. 35–37). What was Jesus' pointed response? (vss. 42–45).

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The evening before He died, Jesus celebrated a Passover meal with His disciples. He then gave instructions that this event should be observed until He returned again. This ordinance of Communion, instituted by the Lord Himself—and the only commemorative act He personally authorized—is not a memorial of His incarnation, nor His miracles, nor His parables, nor His preaching, but only of His death. Christ Himself wished above all else to be remembered by His death.

In fact, in the four Gospel accounts of the Messiah's life, the events surrounding and including the crucifixion carry the major emphasis. The staggering miracle of the Incarnation is mentioned only by Matthew and Luke. Only two chapters in each of their Gospels record Christ's conception and birth. Mark and John omit any comment on Christ's birth at all and begin their Gospels with Jesus as an adult.

All four Gospel writers, however, determinedly emphasize the last week of Christ's life and, of course, His death. Glance through them and notice this pointed focus on just a few days of Christ's life. The last week of Jesus' life, leading up to and including His death, takes up from one-third to almost one-half of all gospel accounts. Each reader is "forced" to rivet attention on the great redeeming act of God.

**Look at your life, your past, your mistakes, your sins. Do you honestly think anything you have done, or could do, could ever atone for them? Why, then, should the death of Jesus on your behalf be the central focus of your life? What hope would you have without it?**

## The Cry on the Cross

Nothing is more destructive to our grasp of the atonement of Christ than the sentimentality that sometimes passes for Christianity in our day (all in the attempt to make the gospel conform to modern thinking). However, we must ever humbly acknowledge that anything we say about God can never do God justice, especially when we consider the atonement. We must avoid the temptation to reduce Jesus' death on the cross to merely an "example of selfless love." It was certainly that, but considering our situation as sinners, it would take more than "an example of selfless love" to redeem us. It would take, instead, our God bearing in Himself the full brunt of His own wrath against sin.

**On the cross, Jesus cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46, NKJV). How are we to understand this? What was Jesus saying, why, and how does this amazing cry help us understand what it cost to save us from sin?**

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"And now the Lord of Glory was dying, a ransom for the race. . . . Upon Christ as our substitute and surety was laid the iniquity of us all. He was counted a transgressor, that He might redeem us from the condemnation of the law. . . . The Saviour could not see through the portals of the tomb. . . . He feared that sin was so offensive to God that Their separation was to be eternal. . . . 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."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 752, 753.

Jesus addresses this prayer to "God," instead of to the "Father" as He always had done. Christ's cries from the cross are not some exemplary display that He appears to go through in order to demonstrate that He loves us. No, this is God giving Himself over to death so that our destiny would not be determined by death. This is God Himself dying the death from which we can be spared, the death that sin would otherwise bring us all.

Three Gospels record that Jesus cried out with a loud voice from the cross as He was dying. These loud cries are even mentioned in the book of Hebrews: "who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death" (*Heb. 5:7, NKJV*). Jesus' "cry of dereliction" is the most piercing cry in the Bible. There is no statement in all the Gospels to rival this one from Jesus on the cross, and in that cry we get a glimpse of what the Lord Himself was willing to go through in order to bring us salvation.

**Further Study:** “Oh, how inefficient, how incapable I am of expressing the things which burn in my soul in reference to the mission of Christ! . . . I know not how to speak or trace with pen the large subject of the atoning sacrifice. I know not how to present subjects in the living power in which they stand before me. I tremble for fear lest I shall belittle the great plan of salvation by cheap words.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 3, p. 115.

“The infinite mercy and love of Jesus, the sacrifice made in our behalf, call for the most serious and solemn reflection. We should dwell upon the character of our dear Redeemer and Intercessor. . . . As we thus contemplate heavenly themes, our faith and love will grow stronger, and our prayers will be more and more acceptable to God, because they will be more and more mixed with faith and love. They will be intelligent and fervent. There will be more constant confidence in Jesus, and a daily, living experience in His power to save to the uttermost all that come unto God by Him.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 89.

### Discussion Questions:

- ❶ In Scripture, God is portrayed both as a great Lover of sinners as well as extremely wrathful against sin. Some Christians try to pick one or the other as representing God’s nature. Why is that unnecessary? In fact, why is God’s love for sinners one of the main reasons why He is wrathful against sin?
- ❷ God’s love is not like the feeble and sometimes irregular affection that we bestow on one another. What does Christ’s act as Savior teach us about divine love?
- ❸ How does your understanding of God’s holiness, in contrast to your sinfulness, help you to understand better why salvation cost so much?
- ❹ Dwell more on the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22. In what other ways does it help us to understand the nature of Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf? At the same time, in what ways does it barely do justice to what it was intended to symbolize?

**Summary:** From the earliest pages of Genesis, the Bible points us to the death of Christ on the cross, where He would die a sinner’s death in order to redeem us, as sinners, from the eternal destruction that sin brings. Though the Bible uses different symbols and metaphors to explain Christ’s death, at the center of it all is His substitution, so graphically expressed in Isaiah 53. If we ever needed proof that works can’t save us, we have it with the death of God Himself on the cross. After all, what could fallen beings ever add to that?

# Hope and a Future

by ALEXANDER GRINEV

I was a typical Soviet youth—ambitious and skeptical. When the Soviet Union broke up, I opened my own business.

One day Natasha, my wife, met a woman who invited us to evangelistic meetings sponsored by Seventh-day Adventists. I had heard of Adventists and believed that they were honest people. So when Natasha came home from the first meeting, excited about what she heard, I agreed to go to the meetings with her.

As I listened to the speaker, my youthful skepticism melted away, and we accepted the truths we were learning. We made a commitment to God, and He delivered me from my bad habits. We were so happy!

When Communism failed in Russia, the Mafia stepped in and threatened small business owners, including me. I realized that we had to leave Russia, but where could we go? In answer to our prayers, a pastor-friend invited us to go to New Zealand. I knew a lot about this small island nation from my years in the Russian military. We sold everything and moved to New Zealand.

We found a Seventh-day Adventist church in Christchurch and were welcomed into the church family. As we learned of other Russians moving to Christchurch, we invited them to church. Our Russian-speaking company meets in the English church. We're continuing to grow as we invite other Russian-speaking immigrants to worship with us. We share our faith with those we meet and make friends for God among newcomers to this country.

We hold small-group meetings, women's meetings, and Bible-study groups. We now have a growing—congregation with a part-time Russian-speaking pastor who has helped to build this congregation. We have discovered that about 4,000 Russian and Slavic-speaking people live in our area of New Zealand.

Our mother church supports us, and its members are happy to see our congregation growing. We're all very excited about the potential to reach others in the community who need to know Christ as a personal Friend and Savior. Some of our friends have been baptized, and we're looking for more who want to know Christ.

I'm amazed at how God has led us. We're happy to be living in His will and working for Him in our adopted homeland.

Our Russian church plant is sponsored in part through Global Mission. Thank you for sharing God's love so that other Russians in New Zealand will know how much Jesus loves them.

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ALEXANDER GRINEV *shares his faith in Christchurch, New Zealand.*

# The God of Grace *and* Judgment



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *1 Cor. 3:13; 2 Cor. 5:10; Genesis 3; Genesis 6; John 3:17–21; Rev. 14:6, 7.*

**Memory Text:** “For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil” (*Ecclesiastes 12:14*).

**Key Thought:** God’s judgment is as pervasive in the Bible as is the theme of salvation; in fact, the two teachings are intricately entwined.

A soldier stood next to an old man about to be executed. He was guilty of being the “wrong” race and religion, nothing more. As the soldier raised his gun, his victim said, “Do you know that there is a God in heaven who sees all this, and who will one day judge you for your actions?”

The soldier then shot the old man dead.

This is, in many ways, a prime example of a secular society. Not a secular government (a government that does not promote one religion over another), but a secular society—one in which there is no higher standard than the rules of the society itself. It’s a society with no sense of transcendence, no sense of a higher authority, no sense of God or of a moral standard greater than anything human. It’s a society where humans take the place of God, a society where the only judgment one faces is the judgment of one’s peers or of one’s own conscience (whatever’s left of it, anyway).

According to the Bible, however, the old man was right: there is a God in heaven, and He knows all things and He, indeed, will bring everything into judgment.

*\*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 28.*

## Judgment Day

The theme of divine judgment runs through the entire Bible. Contrary to common beliefs, judgment is not contrary to salvation or to the gospel. Both themes are woven together in Scripture from Genesis through Revelation.

And no wonder. Judgment and salvation reflect twin aspects of God's character: His justice and grace. Thus, we should not pit the idea of judgment against the idea of salvation any more than we should pit the idea of God's justice against His grace. To do so is to rob both of their fullness and mutual complementarity. Scripture teaches both; hence, we need to understand both.

What is interesting is that the New Testament talks more about judgment than does the Old Testament.

**Read** the following verses. What are they about? Who is judged? What happens in these judgments? What do these texts reveal about the nature and reality of divine judgment?

*Eccles. 12:13, 14* \_\_\_\_\_

*1 Cor. 3:13* \_\_\_\_\_

*2 Cor. 5:10* \_\_\_\_\_

*Heb. 10:30* \_\_\_\_\_

*Matt. 16:27* \_\_\_\_\_

*Rev. 20:12* \_\_\_\_\_

*Rev. 22:12* \_\_\_\_\_

*Matt. 12:36, 37* \_\_\_\_\_

*1 Pet. 4:17* \_\_\_\_\_

*Rev. 14:6, 7* \_\_\_\_\_

These are a sample of the texts that clearly teach judgment. Many of the most explicit judgment texts, texts that clearly reveal the reality of divine judgment, or judgments, appear in the New Testament. This fact works against the notion that judgment is contrary to the new-covenant concept of God's grace, which is also taught in the New Testament. What this should teach us is that, however we understand judgment, and however we understand grace, we must understand them as divine truths that work together. To pit one against the other is to misunderstand the fullness of the gospel, which we looked at last week.



## Judgment and Grace in Eden

Think about this: before sin, there was no need of grace because there was nothing to forgive, nothing to pardon, nothing to cover. It's the same with judgment. Before sin, there was nothing to judge, nothing to condemn, nothing to be punished. Both grace and judgment arise, at least in a human context, only because of humanity's sin.

**Read** Genesis 3, the account of the Fall. In what ways are the themes of judgment and grace revealed?

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Satan succeeded in bringing sin into the world, changing everything as a result. Immediately, though, the Lord entered, calling out, "Where are you?" This question doesn't have to be seen as condemnatory; it was more an invitation to come to Him, the One who created and loved them. It was a call to turn away from their deceiver and to return to their Maker.

Notice, too, what happens. The first few lines from the mouth of God in this fallen world are questions (*see Gen. 3:9, 11, 13*). Then the first thing God says after He's finished questioning is to declare His judgment against the serpent. But next, in verse 15, even amid His judgment against the serpent, what does God say?

Verse 15 is the first gospel promise. As soon as He declares His judgment against the serpent, He then immediately gives the first message of grace, of redemption, of salvation for humanity. And only then, only after that gospel promise, does He start declaring His judgments against the woman and the man. Although they fell, the first things God gives them are hope and grace—the grace that forms the background against which judgment is to unfold. Thus, even before judgment, the promise of grace is given for those who will accept it.

It's too late for Satan; his destruction is assured. But there, even amid the judgments passed on to the man and the woman, God makes His grace known.

At the beginning of fallen human history, a relationship between sin, judgment, and God's grace emerges. Although God must judge and condemn sin, the promise of grace is always there, always present, always available for those who will claim it for themselves.

**In what ways might the Lord be saying to you, "Where are you?" What are you doing that, perhaps, is causing you to hide from Him? Why is understanding grace a crucial first step in heeding His call to draw near to Him and away from the deceiver?**

## The Flood

Critics of the Bible make a big deal of the fact that other ancient civilizations had their own flood stories. They argue that the Bible story isn't unique, original, or even true, but that it is merely a copy of some previous myth or legend.

On the other hand, those who believe that the Bible is the Word of God see these stories as a confirmation of the reality of the Flood. The Flood happened, and Genesis gives the inspired account of it. This account stands in contrast to the other versions, such as the one that says the Flood was sent because humans in their nightly feasting made too much noise and disturbed the gods' sleep. The gods, cranky from lack of rest, sent the flood to punish them.

**What** reason does the biblical account of the Flood give for the judgment that was to come upon the earth? *Gen. 6:5.*

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The idea of humans being so evil that they deserved death and destruction shouldn't be that hard to fathom for us today, living as we do in a world where evil just gets worse and worse. The Christian view of human sinfulness, although often derided, is constantly being verified. That we are capable of good deeds doesn't make us good. After all, American mobster Al Capone loved children, was generous to a fault, and treated his friends kindly. Who, though, would call him a good man?

**Even** amid the impending promise of retributive judgment, how is God's grace revealed in the Flood account? (*See Gen. 6:14–22, 2 Pet. 2:5.*)

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By building the ark, Noah was giving the world a warning about judgment. What's implied, too, is that there was a grace period, a chance for the world to turn from its evil ways and accept God's salvation. Ellen G. White wrote that had "the antediluvians believed the warning, and repented of their evil deeds, the Lord would have turned aside His wrath."—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 97. The building of the ark offered anyone who would heed the warning a refuge of safety from the coming destruction. No question, judgment was coming. But grace was offered to all who would accept it until it was too late, and the door of mercy was shut.

**How often has God revealed His grace to you? More times than you can count, probably. How can you learn to better surrender to that grace and let it mold you into the image of Christ?**

## Condemnation and Grace

Most everyone is familiar with John 3:16. What comes afterward, however, helps flesh it out and explain it even better.

**Read** John 3:17–21. What does it say about judgment? About grace? In what way do these verses reveal to us the way in which grace and judgment work together?

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The word translated as “condemn” in verse 17 is also translated in some versions as “judge.” Clearly, though, the context is that of condemnation, because God has made it clear in numerous other places that the world will be judged.

Two themes appear in these texts, grace and judgment, and they are radically intertwined. Sin and darkness and evil have brought the need for a God of justice to judge and condemn these things. At the same time, God’s grace offers a way out to those who are guilty, and that comes by faith in Jesus Christ.

He who believes in Jesus is not condemned. That’s what the texts say. It’s that simple. Christ’s righteousness covers that person, and that person stands without condemnation, now and in the judgment.

**What** reason do the texts give for condemnation?

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According to these texts, the default state of humanity is that of condemnation. That’s because all have sinned and all deserve the death that sin brings. These texts clearly debunk the notion that, after the Cross, all humanity is automatically justified. Instead, after the Cross, the whole condemned world is now offered salvation through the atoning death of Jesus Christ, which is sufficient for every human being. Everyone stands condemned; everyone, though, who, through the grace of Christ, accepts the provision offered, stands pardoned, justified, and redeemed through Jesus. The condemnation that is theirs is, through the merits of Jesus, canceled, and they stand in His perfect righteousness.

In fact, what does grace mean apart from the prospect of condemnation? Just as the idea of condemnation implies judgment, so does the idea of grace. Were there no potential for judgment (and condemnation), there would be no need for grace. The notion of grace itself all but demands the notion of condemnation. Hence, more reason to see how grace and judgment are linked.

## The Hour of His Judgment

**“Fear them not therefore: for there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known”** (*Matt. 10:26*).

Looking around at the world, we shouldn't have a problem understanding the idea of judgment and condemnation. One doesn't have to be a believing Christian to realize that something is radically wrong with humanity. Who can't see what a royal mess, even disaster, we've made of things? Maybe we cry so hard at birth because, instinctively, we know what's coming. "I cried when I was born and every day shows why," a poet wrote. Who can't relate? Who hasn't been the victim of just how greedy, selfish, and mean people can be? Or who hasn't at some point been the greedy, selfish, and mean one?

Thus, if God is just, and if justice was His only major attribute, who among us would stand before Him? If the Lord knows even our secret things, our secret deeds (*Eccles. 12:14*) (not to mention what we have done in public), what chance would even the godliest among us have on the day of judgment, when all these things will be revealed?

Fortunately, though, our God is also a God of grace. The whole plan of salvation was established so that every human being could, ideally, be spared the condemnation that God's justice would demand. Without grace, we'd all be consumed by God's justice. Our only hope, then, standing before a just God, is grace.

**Read** the first angel's message in Revelation 14:6, 7. How do these verses reveal the link between God's justice and His grace? How do they also parallel what we saw in Genesis 3 regarding the relationship between grace and judgment?

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How interesting that before the warning that the "hour of His judgment has come" (*NKJV*), the angel is proclaiming the "everlasting gospel." It has to be that way, otherwise the judgment would condemn all humanity. No one would have a chance because all have sinned, all have violated God's law. Here, among the last warning message to the world, God's grace is proclaimed. Otherwise, judgment would condemn everyone, without exception. Without grace, what message would we have for the world other than that God is going to destroy us all and there's no hope of escape? Fortunately, the message we have has the "everlasting gospel" as its foundation.

**What role are you playing in helping to spread this message of judgment and grace to others? What more could you do to help spread it because, most likely, you could be doing more, right?**

**Further Study:** How do grace and judgment work together? Here’s how inspiration reveals it:

“While Jesus is pleading for the subjects of His grace, Satan accuses them before God as transgressors. The great deceiver has sought to lead them into skepticism, to cause them to lose confidence in God, to separate themselves from His love, and to break His law. Now he points to the record of their lives, to the defects of character, the unlikeness to Christ, which has dishonored their Redeemer, to all the sins that he has tempted them to commit, and because of these he claims them as his subjects.

“Jesus does not excuse their sins, but shows their penitence and faith, and, claiming for them forgiveness, He lifts His wounded hands before the Father and the holy angels, saying: I know them by name. I have graven them on the palms of my hands.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 484.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 How does the above quote help you to understand the role of grace in the judgment? How does Ellen White describe God’s faithful people, and why is that important? How clearly do you see yourself described there?
- 2 Imagine standing before God with everything that you have ever done, good and bad, exposed? How well would you fare? Would you be able to stand before God on the basis of your good deeds, even the ones done out of the sincerest and most honest of motives? Do you really think that they would be enough to commend you before your Maker? How does your answer help you understand the need of grace?
- 3 What’s the deadly spiritual trap of thinking that it doesn’t matter what we do because we’re saved by grace? How can you protect yourself against falling into that deception?
- 4 People sometimes warn us about “cheap grace.” Yet, there’s no such thing. Grace isn’t cheap—it’s free! What’s cheap is when people, in claiming that grace, try to use it as an excuse to sin. What examples of that deception can be seen in the Christian world? Or even in our own church?

**Summary:** God is a God of justice, and justice demands judgment. God is also a God of grace. How crucial that we, as Seventh-day Adventist Christians proclaiming the three angels’ messages, understand both these divine truths and what they reveal to us about our God.

# The Stolen Cow

by JACQUE THERMIL

Roseline lives in a village in northwestern Haiti. She felt rich, for she owned three cows. But she also felt grateful to God for her wealth and had dedicated one of her cows to God. Now the cow was about to give birth, and Roseline would give the calf to the Lord.

One day after finishing her morning devotions, Roseline went to tend to her cows. But her dedicated cow was missing. She walked up and down the path, calling to the cow, but there was no response. She realized that the cow hadn't wandered off to find a lush stand of grass; it had been stolen.

Roseline started out to town to report the theft to the mayor's office. On the way she stopped at her pastor's home and told him that her cow had been stolen. "I'm not afraid," she told the pastor, "because this cow and its calf are dedicated to God. Nothing will happen to them that God doesn't wish. But I pray that the thief will bring the cow back because she belongs to God."

The pastor smiled at Roseline's faith and promised to pray for the cow and its calf. Then Roseline continued on to the mayor's office to report the missing cow and to ask that if someone returned a cow to let her know, for it was hers. Roseline never doubted that the cow would return home before her calf was born.

The next day Roseline again walked down the path to the pastor's house. "God's cow has come home!" she said excitedly.

"What happened?" the pastor asked, curious.

"The thief himself brought back the cow," Roseline responded. "He told me that every time he looked at the cow he was troubled. He sensed that there was something about this cow, and that made him uncomfortable, but he didn't know what it was. Finally, he couldn't stand it any longer and brought the cow back to me! He even apologized for taking her." Then Roseline hurried on to town to report to the mayor that God had sent her cow home safely.

Two months later, when the calf was born, Roseline gave it to God. She cared for it until it was old enough to leave its mother, and then she sold the calf and gave the money to the Investment offering.

A portion of Investment offerings helps to start new work and supports work in large cities around the world. Thank you for giving your mission and Investment offerings.

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JACQUE THERMIL is a pastor serving in northwestern Haiti.

# The Holiness of God



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Matt. 11:10; Mark 1:2; Gen. 2:3; Job 42:5, 6; Luke 5:1–11; Luke 4:31–36; Isa. 6:1–3; Rev. 4:8, 9.*

**Memory Text:** “Exalt the LORD our God, and worship at his holy hill; for the LORD our God is holy” (*Psalms 99:9*).

**Key Thought:** Scripture gives much attention to God's holiness. What does this holiness tell us about what God is like and what it means to the plan of salvation?

One of the foundational assumptions of all biblical writers is that the God of heaven exists. God's existence is just a given, like an axiom in geometry.

Instead, we find within the 66 biblical books an extensive recounting of what God is like and how He relates to us as fallen beings whom He longs to redeem.

This week's lesson focuses on one aspect of God's nature that's foundational in Scripture: God's holiness. God is love, Yes. And, Yes, God bids us call Him “Father.” And, Yes, God is patient, forgiving, and caring.

But, according to Scripture, fundamental to our understanding of God is His holiness. Both in the Old and New Testaments, God's holiness undergirds His revelation of Himself. This theme appears all through the Scriptures in one way or another.

What, though, does it mean to say that God is holy? How does the Bible depict His holiness? And how do we, as unholy beings, relate to a God like this?

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 4.*

## “It Is Written”

Even a superficial study of church history makes it clear that it’s all too easy to develop ideas about God and then to worship these ideas instead of God Himself, the God revealed in the Bible. As the skeptic Voltaire quipped, “God made man in His image, and man has returned the compliment.” We may not even realize that we have an incomplete, or even false, understanding of God.

Thus, we must return to Scripture and compare our thinking about God with what is taught there. And this study must include both Testaments, for in both the Lord has spoken to us. This point is important because some have argued that the God revealed in the New Testament is different from the One revealed in the Old. That’s not a position accepted by Seventh-day Adventists, nor is it a position taught in the Bible.

**What** phrases punctuate the Old Testament prophets again and again? *Jer. 7:1–3.*

The prophetic messages of the Old Testament are laced thousands of times with the phrase, “thus says the LORD,” or an equivalent. This should remind us that the prophet is not merely speaking for God but that God is speaking for Himself through the prophet.

At the same time, the New Testament is filled with reference after reference to the Old Testament. In fact, the whole theology of the New Testament is intricately linked to the Old. How does one, for instance, make sense of the sacrifice of Jesus apart from the entire sacrificial system revealed in the Old Testament? How many times did Jesus, as well as the New Testament writers, refer to Old Testament passages in order to buttress their arguments and points? The whole New Testament corpus finds its theological foundation in the Old. There’s no justification for any radical division between them. All Scripture—both Testaments—is inspired by the Lord (*2 Tim. 3:16*).

**Look** up the following texts. How do they help us to see the link between the New Testament and the Old? What do they tell us about how Jesus, as well as the New Testament writers, viewed the Old Testament? *Matt. 4:4, 11:10; Mark 1:2; 7:6; John 12:14, 15; Acts 13:33; Rom. 3:10; Gal. 3:13; 1 Pet. 1:16; 1 Cor. 5:7.*

**Mark Twain once said that it’s not the parts of the Bible that he doesn’t understand that bother him; it’s the parts that he does. Who doesn’t, at times, find sections of the Bible bothersome? Given what the Bible says about itself (*2 Tim. 3:16*), how should we respond to the parts we don’t understand, or maybe don’t even like? (*See also 1 Cor. 13:12.*)**



## To Be Set Apart

**What** is the first time the concept of “holiness” (from the same root often translated as “sanctified”) is mentioned in Scripture? *Gen. 2:3*. How significant is the fact that the first thing deemed holy in the Bible is time?

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This text gives us our first understanding of holiness. It shows that something, in this case time, is “set apart” from that which is around it. The seventh day itself is no different from any other 24-hour, sunset-to-sunset period; what makes it different, “holy,” is that God declared it that way. He set it apart from the rest of the week.

The Hebrew word there for “sanctified” means to “make holy” or to “declare holy.” Holiness then implies that something is special about whatever is “holy,” something that sets it apart from what isn’t holy.

To some degree, then, this idea should help us to understand the holiness of God. God is set apart from anything else in creation. He is transcendentally separate, far above and beyond anything that we can truly grasp. To be holy is to be “other,” to be different in a special way, as with the seventh-day Sabbath.

**How** do these texts help us to understand the holiness of God in this context? *Exod. 15:11, 1 Sam. 2:2, Pss. 86:8–10, 99:1–3, Isa. 40:25*.

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This concept of holiness should help us better understand the gap between a God who is holy and a race of beings who aren’t—a race, in fact, of sinners. God is separate from us not only because He is the Creator and we are the created but because we are fallen beings. All this should, ideally, help us better understand what Christ has done for us.

**Although we are made in the image of God, what are the ways in which we differ radically from Him? How do these differences help us to understand our need of a Savior? Make a list of those differences and bring them to class on Sabbath.**

## To Repent in Dust and Ashes

**After** enduring inhuman suffering at the hand of Satan, Job cries out: “I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (*Job 42:5, 6*). What does this response tell us about God’s holiness in contrast to human sinfulness? How is the gospel being preached in Job’s reaction to what he experienced?

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The prophet Ezekiel, whom God graciously sends to Israel (even though they are captive in Babylon as a result of their unfaithfulness), also experiences the awful presence of God. What happened? (*Ezek. 1:28*).

Jacob had to flee from home after deceiving his father, Isaac, and twin brother, Esau. What was Jacob’s response after his night vision of the ladder to heaven and of God speaking to him? (*Gen. 28:16, 17*).

While Israel remained encamped at Sinai, the Lord again descended in the cloud on the mountain and proclaimed Himself to Moses. How did Moses react? (*Exod. 34:8*).

Daniel, another prophet during the same Babylonian captivity of Israel, also received major visions from God while he served as a high government official.

**Although** repeatedly told that he is loved in heaven, how did Daniel react when given a vision of God? Why do you think he reacted as he did? (*Dan. 10:5–8*).

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Even though these men were faithful, godly, and righteous—they were prophets, even!—their reactions to the presence of God were fear, trembling, and worship. No doubt that was because, among other things, they understood their own unworthiness and sinfulness in contrast to the holiness of God. In their own way, these passages hint at the need of a Savior, a Substitute, Someone to bridge the gap between a Holy God and fallen sinful creatures like ourselves. Thanks to the Lord, we have that bridge in Jesus.

**Imagine yourself having a similar experience to one of these men mentioned above. How do you suppose you would react, and why?**

## Depart From Me!

In the Old Testament, we find a consistent record of human responses to a God who is holy. What about in the New? Some modern Christians argue that the Old Testament presents a primitive and outdated picture of God, a God who is harsh and very prone to anger. But when Jesus comes, He is now the God of grace and love. We know, of course, that this is a distorted view of the Bible and of the character of a God who does not change.

**What** do the New Testament writers teach us about God’s holiness? Read, for instance, Luke 5:1–11. How does this show the consistency between the Old and New Testaments regarding the holiness of God?

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After these men toiled unsuccessfully all night as fishermen, Jesus provided a miraculous catch of fish for His hard-working disciples. When this occurred, one would think a normal human response would be thankfulness to Jesus for such extraordinary financial assistance. Peter’s response, though, was focused on something else. His reaction was much like those of the Old Testament characters who encountered the Lord.

“But Peter was unmindful now of boats or lading. This miracle, above any other he had ever witnessed, was to him a manifestation of divine power. In Jesus he saw One who held all nature under His control. The presence of divinity revealed his own unholiness. Love for his Master, shame for his own unbelief, gratitude for the condescension of Christ, above all, the sense of his uncleanness in the presence of infinite purity, overwhelmed him. While his companions were securing the contents of the net, Peter fell at the Saviour’s feet, exclaiming, ‘Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord.’”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 246.

Why this reaction? It’s because we’re not in the Garden of Eden anymore, where Adam and Eve—before their fall into sin—welcomed the presence of God in the cool of the evening. This close communion dramatically changed immediately after the Fall, when the couple ran and hid. Not much has changed since then. Indeed, this reaction remains the consistent picture throughout Scripture. Whenever a human being truly encounters the living God, there is the initial horror of finally seeing the true depth of one’s own sinfulness.

**When was the last time you got a really good look at your own sinful nature? A horrible sight, isn’t it? What’s your only hope, and why?**

## When Demons Speak

**Read** Luke 4:31–36. What testimony is given here about the holiness of Christ? What is significant about who gave that testimony, too? What lessons can we draw from this story about God’s holiness?

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Demons, who are fallen angels, remember who Jesus really is, and even they—in their nastiness, hatefulness, and rebellion—are constrained to acknowledge Him and that He is holy. Notice, too, that they feared that He was going to destroy them. Why so fearful? It must be that, so full of sin, even demons fear before the presence of God’s holiness, somewhat in the same manner that sinful humans do.

In the last book of the Bible, John describes receiving a vision from God. Read Revelation 1:12–17. John, sometimes referred to as the apostle who had the greatest insight into the love of God, has the same response to his encounter with the Holy God as we saw in the Old Testament.

Moreover, a vision of how celestial beings worship God in the heavenly sanctuary yields a similar picture to what Isaiah depicted centuries earlier in a vision (*see Isa. 6:1–3*).

**What** did John hear the heavenly beings around the throne saying?  
*Rev. 4:8, 9.*

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Although God is love and all heavenly beings adore Him, we can see that, around the heavenly throne of God, the worship anthem is not “God is love, love, love.” Nor do the heavenly beings cry out, “God is good, good, good.” Instead, day and night these mighty beings exclaim, “Holy, holy, holy, LORD God Almighty.” Although all heaven is involved in the ministry of God’s love and salvation to this world, heavenly beings around the throne of God day and night praise the holiness of God. As sinless beings, they are awed by His holiness, but they don’t hide in fear of it, as do fallen beings.

In all of the human encounters of the divine as depicted in Scripture, one never finds a suggestion that God is frightening. What we see instead is that, in the piercing light of His holiness, human beings finally see themselves for who they really are. And that is scary. In Scripture, when people truly encounter the God of heaven, we find no hand clapping, backslapping, and lighthearted singing. Rather, there is abject personal repentance. All see and admit their personal guilt without any excuses and without reference to the faults of anyone else. How different our words, our lives, and our actions would be were we all to live with the constant sense not only of God’s presence but of His holiness, as well.

**Further Study:** As Christ stands before the trafficking crowd in the temple, “the confusion is hushed. The sound of traffic and bargaining has ceased. The silence becomes painful. A sense of awe overpowers the assembly. It is as if they were arraigned before the tribunal of God to answer for their deeds. Looking upon Christ, they behold divinity flash through the garb of humanity. The Majesty of heaven stands as the Judge will stand at the last day . . . with the same power to read the soul. His eye sweeps over the multitude, taking in every individual. His form seems to rise above them in commanding dignity, and a divine light illuminates His countenance. He speaks, and His clear, ringing voice—the same that upon Mount Sinai proclaimed the law that priests and rulers are transgressing—is heard echoing through the arches of the temple: ‘Take these things hence; make not My Father’s house an house of merchandise.’

“Slowly descending the steps, and raising the scourge of cords gathered up on entering the enclosure, He bids the bargaining company depart from the precincts of the temple. With a zeal and severity He has never before manifested, He overthrows the tables of the money-changers. . . . None presume to question His authority. . . . Jesus does not smite them with the whip of cords, but in His hand that simple scourge seems terrible as a flaming sword. Officers of the temple, speculating priests, brokers and cattle traders, with their sheep and oxen, rush from the place, with the one thought of escaping from the condemnation of His presence.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 158.

### Discussion Questions:

- ① In class, go over your answer to Monday’s last question. What are the major differences between us and a holy God? What are ways in which some of those differences can be eradicated, if any?
- ② Given what we have looked at this week, why is it so much easier to see why self-righteousness and self-satisfaction, especially about one’s own spiritual state, are very dangerous deceptions?
- ③ Think about someone you know who is “holy,” that is, who seems to be upright, honest, pure, and so forth; someone quite “set apart” from most people. How do you respond to the person? Does he or she make you feel good or bad, and why?

**Summary:** It might be much nicer to focus only on God’s love instead of His holiness, but that would be to distort the truth. We need to encounter God’s searing holiness until we tremble before Him. Understanding God’s holiness, and our sinfulness in contrast, is crucial to helping us to understand what the atonement is all about, why it is so desperately needed, and why it had to cost so much.

## Through the Children

How does a group of believers carry on its ministry when they have no place to meet outside of their worship hour? The Portuguese-speaking group of believers in Brussels, Belgium, is small, but growing. It started as a Global Mission project, and it's growing larger and stronger as it reaches out to the Portuguese-speaking community in this multiethnic city in northern Europe.

Because the group doesn't have a church of its own, members can't hold meetings whenever they wish. Brazilians love to sing, and the youth crave a time to hold youth meetings, but without space and time, it's difficult to hold regular meetings.

The church members have discovered that ministries to children bring adults to the church. They've held weekend camps for children and youth in rented locations and have started an Adventurers Club. Because the church doesn't have enough Pathfinder-age children to form a club, leaders have asked the older children to help lead in Adventurers. And the club has quickly grown to 18 children, half of whom are from non-Adventist homes.

One boy who comes is nine-year-old Paul. His father swore that he would never set foot inside a church, so Paul's uncle brought Paul to Adventurers. Paul's mother began coming with the boy to watch the program and to see what Paul was learning. She praised the leaders for the strong values they were helping to instill in her son.

But Paul's mother couldn't attend Adventurers on the week of Paul's investiture. This was an important program, so Paul's mother asked her husband to take the boy. In spite of his promise never to go to a church, Paul's father attended the investiture program. He, too, was impressed with what his son was learning, and now he takes Paul to Adventurers often. He did not object when Paul's mother began taking Bible studies with a member of the church.

One day Paul's father commented, "I still don't believe, but what you're doing for my son and other children is a good thing. You are teaching good values."

God is working in the hearts of parents through the lives of their children in Brussels, Belgium. And our mission offerings are helping to make this possible. A recent Thirteenth Sabbath Offering is helping to provide worship centers for the Spanish and Romanian congregations in Brussels. Giving these two groups their own churches has made it possible for the Portuguese and another language group to meet in the rented spaces these two churches once used. Thank you for helping God's work expand in Brussels, Belgium, a city with many hungry hearts.

# God *the* Lawgiver



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Heb. 12:21; Rom. 7:8–13; Job 24:14, 15; Exod. 16:4–30; Heb. 8:10; 10:16; Rom. 13:8–10.*

**Memory Text:** “For the LORD is our Judge, the LORD is our Lawgiver, the LORD is our King; He will save us” (*Isaiah 33:22, NKJV*).

**Key Thought:** God's law is an inseparable part of the Old and New Testaments. It is also an expression of His love.

As Seventh-day Adventists, we often hear the idea that the law is a transcript of God's character. (If so, then because God doesn't change, the law—which reveals His character—shouldn't change either.) What, though, does that mean?

Suppose you lived in a land with a king whose word was law. (“The state, that's me” one French king famously said.) Now, suppose the king issued laws that were repressive, nasty, hateful, unfair, discriminatory, and so forth. Would not those laws be a good representation of the kind of person the king was; would they not reveal his character?

Think through some of history's worst despots. How did the laws they passed reveal what kind of people they were?

In this sense, the law reveals the character of the lawgiver. What, then, does God's law reveal about God? When we understand God's law as a hedge, a protection, something created for us, for our own good, then we come to understand more about what God is like.

This week we'll take a look at the law and, by default, the Lawgiver.

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 11.*

## The Law at Sinai

**Read** Exodus 19:18, 19; 20:18; Deuteronomy 5:22; and Hebrews 12:21, descriptions of the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. Why would it be something so terrifying?

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“The people of Israel were overwhelmed with terror. The awful power of God’s utterances seemed more than their trembling hearts could bear. For as God’s great rule of right was presented before them, they realized as never before the offensive character of sin, and their own guilt in the sight of a holy God. They shrank away from the mountain in fear and awe.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 309, 310.

There’s something so powerful in the Ellen White quote above. As the law is presented to them, the people realize “as never before” just how bad sin is and their own guilt in the eyes of God.

So, right from the beginning of Israel’s covenantal relationship with God, we can see a revelation of the gospel in the law. The law was never meant to be a means of salvation, even at Sinai; rather, it was to show the people their need of salvation. It was right after the giving of the law that they were given instructions to build the sanctuary, which revealed to them the plan of salvation. The law was to point people to the Cross, to their need of atonement and Redemption. No wonder, then, that they trembled before the law, because the law showed them just how sinful and fallen they were.

**Read** Romans 7:8–13. How do these verses reveal this crucial truth? What is Paul saying that the law does? (See also Ps. 119:6.)

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In a sense, Paul is saying here what Ellen White said happened at Sinai. The problem is not with God’s law; the problem is with sinners who have violated the law, as we all have done. Paul is showing how the law is inseparably tied to the gospel, that it is the law that shows us just how sinful and fallen we are.

**Read** Exodus 20:1–17. Do you find yourself trembling before the law? Do you find yourself convicted by it? What are your emotions as you read the law and compare yourself with it?



## The Law Before Sinai

As soon as we talk about the law, the Ten Commandments, and Sinai, we hear the refrain that the Ten Commandments were first given to the Jews at Sinai; hence, the commandments are a Jewish or an Old Testament institution and not applicable to our day and time.

Of course, numerous problems exist with that theology, the biggest being that if this were true, then how could there have been sin before Sinai, “for sin is the transgression of the law” (*1 John 3:4*)? The truth is that the book of Genesis yields an amazing witness to the existence of God’s law long before Sinai.

Genesis 1 and 2 describe God’s perfect Creation. Genesis 3 records the fall of Adam and Eve. In the next chapter, Genesis 4, we have the first murder. How did Cain know he was guilty for murdering his brother if there were no law to define murder as sin?

Long before Sinai, God specifically denounced murder in the covenant He established with Noah after the Flood (*Gen. 9:6*).

In the oldest book in the Bible, the book of Job, we find God commending Job’s righteousness two times. What does He declare of Job’s character? (*Job 1:8, 2:3*). Obviously, a standard of right and wrong is operating. Job lived long before the Exodus, and he wasn’t even of the covenant line.

**Read Job 24:14, 15. How do these verses help us to understand what the standard of right and wrong included?**

When Abraham lied about Sarah to Abimelech, God rebuked Abraham for his falsehood. And even though Abimelech was king of Gerar and not of Israelite stock, God held him to the same standard of marital purity found in the Decalogue and demanded that Sarah be returned to Abraham (*see Gen. 20:9*).

**What pointed testimony about Abraham does God give to Isaac about his father? *Gen. 26:4, 5*.**

What’s fascinating about Genesis 26:5 is that the Hebrew uses four different words, *mshmr*, *mzvot*, *huqot*, and *torot* (from *Torah*, “the law”) to describe what Abraham obeyed. Certainly among all these were the Ten Commandments.

When Jacob, at God’s bidding, was returning to Bethel to build an altar to the Lord, he felt the need for revival in his household. What did he request his household to do? (*See Gen. 35:2, 3*.)

Clearly, the idea that there was no law until Sinai makes no sense in light of so much of what the Bible teaches about life before Sinai.

## The Sabbath Before Sinai

God doesn't reveal how He communicated the eternal principles of His law to humanity before Mount Sinai, but the evidence is clear and substantial that the giving of the law on Sinai was not the world's initial exposure to its precepts.

Many people, forced to concede that point, argue, instead, that it was only the Sabbath commandment, not the others, that was first given at Sinai, and, therefore, it is exclusively Jewish and doesn't pertain to Christians today. How valid is that claim?

**Read** Genesis 2:1–3. What does this passage teach us about the Sabbath before Sinai?

Next, in Exodus 5:1–5, the Bible reveals Moses and Aaron struggling with Pharaoh in regard to the question of letting Israel go. Verse five is particularly enlightening.

**Read** Exodus 5:5. What indication is there of the Sabbath in this text?

Pharaoh's response, "You make them rest from their labor" (*NKJV*), seems clear enough. The original language reads even more pointedly. Although there are several words for *rest*, the verb Pharaoh uses is built on the word for "Sabbath." The striking language of Pharaoh to Moses and Aaron reads like this, "You make them sabbath from their labor!" a hint, if nothing else, to the reality of the Sabbath rest before Sinai.

Proof of the Sabbath before Sinai, though, appears in Exodus 16, when God miraculously provides manna for Israel in the wilderness. This 40-year miracle began before the Israelites reached Mount Sinai.

**Read** Exodus 16:4–30, focusing especially on verses 23–30. How do these verses prove the existence of the seventh-day Sabbath before the Mount Sinai experience?

Notice the words of the Lord to Moses in verse 28, "How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws?" (*NKJV*), a clear indication that God's laws and commandments existed before the revelation at Sinai, and that among those commandments and laws was the seventh-day Sabbath. Thus, although something monumental happened with the giving of the law at Mount Sinai, the Ten Commandments themselves obviously weren't new.

**How is your Sabbath experience? Do you love the Sabbath, dread it, or are you ambivalent about it? What can you do to have a deeper and richer experience with the Lord through the gift of His Sabbath day?**

## The Law and the Prophets

Little controversy exists over the existence of the law in the period after Sinai. The Old Testament writings are filled with references to the law. And though, so often, those references deal with Israel's transgression of the law and the subsequent punishments, other texts reveal the great love and reverence many in Israel had for the law, which included not just the Ten Commandments but all of the rules and precepts that the Lord had given to His people.

**In** what ways do the following texts extoll the law? What attitudes do they reveal?

*Isa. 48:17, 18* \_\_\_\_\_

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*Ps. 119:69–72* \_\_\_\_\_

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*Ps. 119:97–103* \_\_\_\_\_

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*Jer. 31:33* \_\_\_\_\_

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Contrary to popular beliefs, although Israel (ideally) loved the law, those who understood the law's function never saw it as a means of salvation. The Hebrew religion had always been a religion of grace, even though the people went from one extreme to the other: from trampling the law openly and blatantly, as in the first-temple period, to extreme legalism, as seen so clearly in the time of Jesus.

Why, though, such a love of the law? Again, if one understands the word *law* to encompass not just the Ten Commandments but the whole body of Old Testament teachings, especially the first five books of Moses, then you understand that what was loved was the message of salvation, of grace, of redemption. They loved the "truth" as it was revealed to them and as they best grasped it. It wasn't a love of rules, per se, but a love of a set of guidelines and principles that, if kept, would have opened the way for many blessings and promises, because all that God had given them was for their own good and well-being.

Is it any different today?

**Think about what God has given us as a people. How could we better live out the wonderful light with which we have been blessed?**

## The Law in the New Covenant

From the start, the principles of the Ten Commandments were given to humanity out of the Lord's love for people. The law has always been intended to be a blessing. You obey the law, and you are greatly protected from the ravages of sin; you disobey, and you face the inevitable consequences of transgression. Who needs theology to know, personally, just how painful sin and its consequences are? How often can you read the results of sin on the faces of those who have been ravaged by it?

Although sections of the New Testament—Paul's writing specifically—deal with those who have misunderstood the purpose of the law, the commandments of God have been presented in the New Testament in a positive, uplifting way.

**Read** Hebrews 8:10 and 10:16 in their contexts. How is God's law presented in these texts? As something still relevant, or as something negated by grace?

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So often, we see people seeking to place the law in opposition to God's love or God's grace, the idea being that if you truly love, then God's law is negated. One could argue that love transcends the law, in the sense that one who truly loves God and others reveals the ultimate principles of the law. But this is no excuse for negating the law. On the contrary, love fulfills the law; love is the law expressed in its purest form.

It's like the parts of a car. The parts don't exist as ends in themselves; they are there so that the car will go from place to place. That's their purpose, so that the car can move. Yet, without each part, the car wouldn't function. The law is like that: it's not an end in itself but the means to an end, and that end is a deep expression of love, love for God and love for others.

**Look** up these texts. How do they help us to understand the link between love and law? *Rom. 13:8–10; Gal. 5:14; James 2:8; 1 John 5:2, 3.*

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Dwell more on the links between God's law and love. Law-keeping without love leads to what? Love without law-keeping leads to what? Write out your thoughts and bring them to class on Sabbath.

**Further Study:** “The ten holy precepts spoken by Christ upon Sinai’s mount were the revelation of the character of God, and made known to the world the fact that He had jurisdiction over the whole human heritage. That law of ten precepts of the greatest love that can be presented to man is the voice of God from heaven speaking to the soul in promise. ‘This do, and you will not come under the dominion and control of Satan.’ There is not a negative in that law, although it may appear thus. It is DO, and Live. . . . The Lord has given His holy commandments to be a wall of protection around His created beings.” —Ellen G. White, *Sons and Daughters of God*, p. 53.

“In the work of redemption there is no compulsion. No external force is employed. Under the influence of the Spirit of God, man is left free to choose whom he will serve. In the change that takes place when the soul surrenders to Christ, there is the highest sense of freedom. . . . True, we have no power to free ourselves from Satan’s control; but when we desire to be set free from sin, and in our great need cry out for a power out of and above ourselves, the powers of the soul are imbued with the divine energy of the Holy Spirit, and they obey the dictates of the will in fulfilling the will of God.

“The only condition upon which the freedom of man is possible is that of becoming one with Christ. ‘The truth shall make you free;’ and Christ is the truth. . . . Subjection to God is restoration to one’s self,—to the true glory and dignity of man. The divine law, to which we are brought into subjection, is ‘the law of liberty.’ James 2:12.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 466.

## Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Discuss your answer to Thursday’s questions about law and love. What is law-keeping without love like? How is it often manifested? At the same time, what is love without law-keeping like? What kind of love is it, if love at all? Why do they need to be linked?
- ❷ In what ways does the law reveal the character of the Lawgiver? How does God’s law reveal to us what God is like?
- ❸ What does Ellen White mean when she talks above about the law being a “law of liberty”? How can the keeping of the law be equated with “liberty”?
- ❹ What examples can we find in the world, and all around us, of what happens when people violate God’s law? How powerful a testimony are these examples of the value and continued validity of that law?

**Summary:** God’s law is an expression of His love, and when we love as God loves us, we will truly reveal the law in all its beauty and power.

## Determined to Serve

by ENKHCHIMEG ENKHBAATAR

Eggie's family wasn't religious, but when a classmate in secondary school invited her to attend church with her, Eggie agreed to go. She knew that her parents didn't mind, for her mother had told her that worshipping God was a good thing.

Her friend's church was a small group of 20 or 30 people who met on Sabbaths. Most were young people, and Eggie loved the vibrant worship service these youth led out in. Eggie invited her younger sister to attend, and eventually both girls were baptized.

Eggie finished high school and looked forward to studying to become a teacher. But her older sister was already studying at a university, and her parents couldn't afford to support two girls in university at once. Disappointed, Eggie found work as a waitress and saved money to study.

Eggie helped start a small group Bible study in another family's home. Her church family saw her leadership abilities and helped Eggie get a scholarship to begin her studies. Joyfully Eggie journeyed to Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia's capital city, to begin her studies.

She found a vibrant church family where she can grow spiritually. She teaches the children's class in church and hopes that when Mongolia opens a Seventh-day Adventist elementary school, she can teach there. In the meantime, she encourages other Seventh-day Adventist young people to stay true to God and the beliefs they treasure.

In the dormitory where she lives, Eggie shares her faith with her schoolmates. "My friends want to know what I believe," she says. "I give them books about my faith and copies of my Sabbath School lessons. I invite them to church and share with them my joy in Jesus."

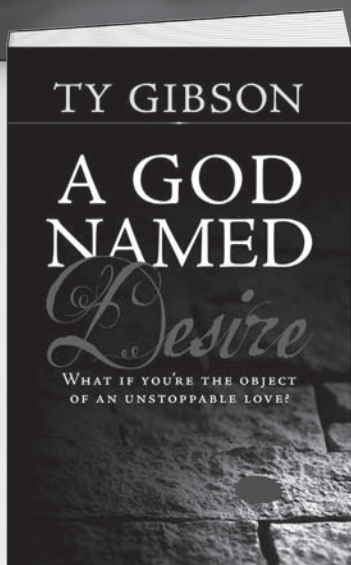
Eggie prays for her younger sister, who is working as a missionary volunteer while she awaits her turn to attend the university. "God is leading us, and we rejoice that we are working with Him to lead others to Jesus," Eggie says.

Mongolia is a small but growing mission field that relies on our mission offerings to help grow the church. Thank you for your part in this important ministry.



ENKHCHIMEG ENKHBAATAR (left) works for the Mongolian Mission.

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*Ty Gibson*

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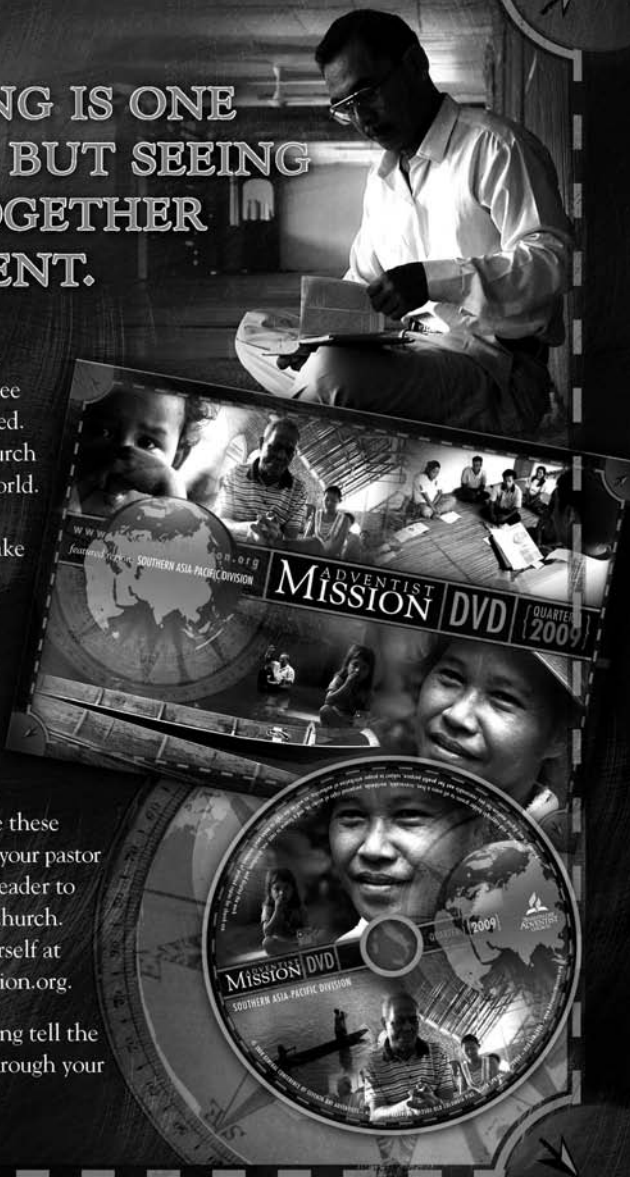
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# Lord of the Sabbath



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Gen. 2:1–3, Exod. 20:8–12, Deut. 5:12–15, Matt. 12:1–13, John 9, 19:30.*

**Memory Text:** “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.” (*Mark 2:27, 28, NKJV*).

**Key Thought:** The seventh-day Sabbath, in every way, points us to Jesus, our Creator and our Redeemer.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (*John 1:1–13*).

These verses are, of course, pointing to Jesus, Jesus as the One who made “all things” and Jesus as the One who gives salvation to those who “believe on his name.” That is, Jesus as Creator and Jesus as Redeemer.

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 18.*

## The Sabbath in Genesis

One of the most deeply imbedded truths of the Bible is this: back in Eden, in a perfect world created by a perfect God, the seventh day was set apart from the rest of the week and made holy. That's how far back, and basic, the seventh-day Sabbath is. From the perspective of this world, you can't get much farther back than that. With the Sabbath, then, we're dealing with one of the most fundamental and foundational of all biblical truths.

**What** four actions of God are recorded in Genesis 2:1–3 as He created the Sabbath?

God created a day, He rested on that day, He blessed the seventh day, and He sanctified it, which means He made it holy or set it apart for holy use. How fascinating that God Himself “rested” on the seventh day. Whatever that means, it shows how seriously the day is meant to be taken, because God Himself rested on it!

Genesis 2:3 states that the Creator “blessed” the seventh day, just as He blessed animals and man on the day before (*Gen. 1:22, 28*). God refers to this blessing of the Sabbath in the fourth commandment, forever linking the Creation Sabbath with the weekly Sabbath.

**Notice** how many times the phrase “the seventh day” is repeated in Genesis 2:1–3. What possible significance does that repetition have?

Three times that specific day is mentioned. This accentuates the extraordinary nature of the seventh-day Sabbath and clearly sets it apart from the rest of the week. It should always remind us that God didn't make the first day special, or any other day. The special blessing is for the seventh day and no other.

With the creation of the seventh-day Sabbath, God ended His creative work. He took the seven days of time and crafted them into a week. This weekly cycle is observed throughout the rest of Scripture and history. Thus, God demonstrates His manifold power over not just space and the things of space but over time, as well. None of us can control an hour, or even a minute, of time. Time relentlessly marches on, completely beyond our machinations. How important, then, that we learn to trust the Lord with the little amount of time we have here on earth.

**Think about the march of time, how it sweeps us along moment by moment, day by day, and year by year. Although we have no control over time itself, what we can control to some degree is what we do with it. How well do you use your time? What things occupy your time? How might you use your time better?**

## The Sabbath in Exodus

**Read** Exodus 20:8–11. What does the Lord tell us to do, and what reason does He give us to do it?

The entire family household, including any servants of either gender, the working class along with the “boss,” are to rest together. Sabbath is the great equalizer, the liberator of all inequities in the social structure. Before God, all human beings are equal, and the Sabbath is a unique way of revealing this crucial truth, especially in a world so dominated by class structures that place various groups “over” or “beneath” others.

This commandment is also a carefully structured literary unit:

- A. Introduction:** “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (*vs. 8, NKJV*).
- B. Command:** “Six days you shall labor and do all your work” (*vs. 9, NKJV*).
- C. Motivation:** “but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God” (*vs. 10a, NKJV*).
- B1. Command:** “In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor . . .” (*vs. 10b, NKJV*).
- C1. Motivation:** “For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, . . . and rested . . .” (*vs. 11a, NKJV*).
- D. Conclusion:** “Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it” (*vs. 11b, NKJV*).

A contains, as an introductory opening statement, the essential principle of the Sabbath commandment as a whole.

B conveys the positive command to engage in work on six days.

B1 gives the corresponding prohibitive command of refraining from any work on the Sabbath day, including the inclusive application to the entire family. Even the domestic animals, as well as any guests in the home, are included.

C and C1 supply the motivation for the commands. C acknowledges the time factor in the six-days/seventh-day sequence by emphasizing that “the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God.”

C1 contains the formal motivation clause with the introductory “for” or “because.” It presents the detailed motivation in terms of the Lord’s six days of work and His resting on the seventh day, rooting it directly in the first Sabbath of Creation week.

D is an independent clause, starting with a “Therefore” and also forming the conclusion. The last words of the commandment, “and made it holy,” correspond to the exhortation of the opening principle.

A “to keep it holy.” Both are linked to the holiness with which God endows the Sabbath in Genesis 2:3.

## The Sabbath in Deuteronomy

Although Seventh-day Adventists are most familiar with the Sabbath commandment as expressed in the book of Exodus, the Lord gave it again (and all the other commandments) in the book of Deuteronomy. What's fascinating is that, although the commands appear in very similar language, the language isn't precisely the same. Moreover, the commandment in Deuteronomy is given another motivation, one not seen in Exodus.

**Read Deuteronomy 5:12–15. Compare it with Exodus 20:8–11. What similarities exist between the two, what differences, and why are those differences important?**

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Although much is the same between them, there is a new element and emphasis. While both commandments talk about the servants resting on the Sabbath day, Deuteronomy goes out of its way to emphasize that point. The text reads that they should keep the Sabbath “so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, *as you do*” (*Deut. 5:14, NIV; emphasis added*). Here we see what was touched on the other day: how the Sabbath helps bring master and servant together on the same level; both are to rest on the same day. The Sabbath, on a purely practical level, offered servants some protection from the master who would work them nonstop—a protection built right into a commandment that had its origins in Creation itself.

Of course, this raises an interesting question. When the Sabbath was first instituted, it was to be a memorial of Creation in a nonfallen world. It had nothing to do with manservants or maidservants and certainly nothing about being in slavery in Egypt, itself a symbol of bondage to sin, and deliverance from that bondage. This new element, then, had been added onto the commandment after the Fall; that is, the original precept was altered to incorporate something that it originally didn't contain.

Thus, as first conceived, the Sabbath was a symbol of Creation; after sin, it came to be a symbol of both Creation and Redemption, which is itself a type of re-creation (*2 Cor. 5:17, Gal. 6:15, Rev. 21:1*). Creation and Redemption are closely linked in the Bible; only God the Creator could be God the Redeemer, and we have them both in Jesus (*see John 1:1–14*). Both versions of the commandment show that the seventh-day Sabbath is the symbol of the work of Jesus, our Creator and our Redeemer.

**Think about the bondage from which Christ has promised to free you. What promises of freedom do you have in Jesus? How can you learn to claim them and then allow the Lord to make them real in your life?**

## Jesus and His Sabbath: Part 1

Books have been written, and are still being written, with the sole purpose of showing that Jesus, when here in the flesh, was pointing people away from the seventh-day Sabbath, either toward Sunday worship or (more commonly today) toward the idea that the seventh day has been superceded and replaced with a more generic and general “rest” in Christ.

Neither option, though, seems to be found in any of the Gospel accounts of Jesus and the Sabbath. Besides the obvious reason for such books (a need to justify the rejection of the seventh-day Sabbath by the vast majority of the Christian world for centuries), they argue Christ’s healing on the Sabbath heralds the death knell of that commandment.

What about these arguments? A careful look at what Jesus did on the Sabbath shows the opposite of what these theologians are trying to milk out of the incidents themselves.

**Carefully** read Matthew 12:1–13, focusing specifically on the Sabbath healing. As you read it, ask yourself, **What is the context of the healing, why would Jesus have done it specifically on that day, and what is the major point that He is clearly making?**

Perhaps the key verse, the one that explains it all, is verse 7. This is what the issue was all about: it was about people, about mercy and kindness and loving others. Properly kept, the Sabbath allows us more opportunity to show kindness and mercy to those in need than would other days of the week when we are forced to earn a living. The problem was that the Sabbath day had become burdened with a host of man-made rules and regulations that soon became an end in themselves rather than the means to an end—and that end is love to God and to other people. Love, the Bible says, is the fulfilling of the law, and anything that turns the law into that which negates love, or that which works against love, is something that must be discarded. The Sabbath had become law without love, which is harsh legalism. This is what Jesus was fighting against by His Sabbath healing.

The hardness of the religious establishment could be seen in the healing of the man blind from birth (*John 9*). Look carefully at verse 16. Talk about law without love!

In the end, if Jesus were using His Sabbath healing to start pointing people away from the literal seventh-day Sabbath, it sure was a strange way to do it.

**Ask yourself, What are other ways one can manifest the law without love? Might you be guilty of doing the same thing?**

## Jesus and His Sabbath: Part 2

“It is finished” (*John 19:30*).

Jesus, through His Sabbath miracles, demonstrated what the Sabbath is really about. It is a day for healing and restoration. Jesus intended for the Sabbath to call to mind God’s creative power. Thus, the Sabbath is the day when He frees the captives (*Luke 4:31–37*), makes the lame walk (*Luke 13:10–17, John 5:1–9*), and restores sight to the blind (*John 9*).

For Jesus, the Sabbath was more about people than about rules, which is no doubt partly why He made His famous statement about the Sabbath being made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath. At the same time, as we saw earlier in the week, if properly kept, the rules protected people.

**Jesus not only reinforced the validity and importance of resting on the Sabbath while He was alive, but He did it in death, as well.** (*Read Matt. 27:57–28:1, Mark 15:42–16:1, Luke 23:52–24:1, and John 19:31–20:1.*) **What’s the one common point all four Gospel writers make here? More important, what does this tell us about the Sabbath, especially in the context of the question of whether or not the Sabbath is still valid?**

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After He cried out, “It is finished!” (*John 19:30*), that is, after His work of Redemption (prior to His heavenly intercession) was done, what did Jesus do?

He rested on the seventh day. Sound familiar? Where have we already seen that? Of course, in Genesis 2:1–3. After God’s work of creation, He rested on the seventh day. Now, after His work of Redemption, He does the same thing.

Also, in light of the whole question of Jesus’ moving humanity away from the seventh-day Sabbath, His example of resting in the tomb on the Sabbath is, indeed, another strange way of getting that point across. If anything, especially because His death sealed the new covenant, and the new covenant supposedly supercedes the seventh-day Sabbath, one is hard pressed to understand the logic of those who believe that the Sabbath commandment was abolished after the Cross. If it were abolished, why would resting on the Sabbath be the first thing Jesus did after the Cross?

Thus, both in life and in death, Jesus showed us the continued validity and importance of the Sabbath.

**Further Study:** “Should God forbid the sun to perform its office upon the Sabbath, cut off its genial rays from warming the earth and nourishing vegetation? Must the system of worlds stand still through that holy day? Should He command the brooks to stay from watering the fields and forests, and bid the waves of the sea still their ceaseless ebbing and flowing? Must the wheat and corn stop growing, and the ripening cluster defer its purple bloom? Must the trees and flowers put forth no bud nor blossom on the Sabbath?”

“In such a case, men would miss the fruits of the earth, and the blessings that make life desirable. Nature must continue her unvarying course. God could not for a moment stay His hand, or man would faint and die. And man also has a work to perform on this day. The necessities of life must be attended to, the sick must be cared for, the wants of the needy must be supplied. He will not be held guiltless who neglects to relieve suffering on the Sabbath. God’s holy rest day was made for man, and acts of mercy are in perfect harmony with its intent. God does not desire His creatures to suffer an hour’s pain that may be relieved upon the Sabbath or any other day.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 206, 207.

### Discussion Questions:

- ❶ It’s easy today, with hindsight, to mock the hardness and coldness of those religious leaders who attacked Jesus for His Sabbath healing. And they certainly will be judged for their actions. At the same time, try to put yourself in their sandals. These man-made rules had been around for so long that these leaders all but thought the rules were the very essence of Sabbath-keeping itself; hence, they truly believed that Jesus was violating the Sabbath. How would we feel were someone to come along today and, claiming great light and truth, maybe even doing miracles, yet was in our view trampling on the fourth commandment? How might we react? What important lesson can we learn from this exercise about knowing how to separate truth from mere tradition and why it is not always easy to do so?
- ❷ Further examine in class this idea that God rested after His work of Creation and His work of Redemption. How are we to understand the significance of this amazing fact?
- ❸ Place yourself in the shoes of someone who believes that Jesus’ miracles on the Sabbath showed that He was abolishing it. Compare what the Bible teaches He said and did with what you would imagine Him doing were He really making this change. What do you imagine He would have done differently?

**Summary:** The Bible reveals the Lord as the Lord of the seventh-day Sabbath, the most basic sign of Him as Creator and Redeemer.

## Raquel's New Church

Raquel is 10 years old. She lives with her family along the Amazon River in northern Brazil. Raquel's family doesn't attend church, but sometimes Raquel attended church with her cousin on Sundays. One Sunday evening Raquel's cousin didn't come to take her to church. Disappointed, Raquel wandered outside.

She heard people singing in the Seventh-day Adventist church near her home. She hurried back inside and asked her mother to let her go to the Seventh-day Adventist worship service since her cousin hadn't come for her. Her mother agreed, and Raquel hurried down the street to the church.

The members greeted Raquel warmly; she was happy that she had come. She enjoyed the worship service and decided to return. One of the members invited her to come for Sabbath School; so on Saturday morning when Raquel heard people singing in the little church, she hurried down the street to join them.

Raquel loved Sabbath School, where the children helped her learn new songs and the teachers made Bible stories so interesting. Raquel continued worshipping at the Seventh-day Adventist church. When her cousin invited her to go to church again, Raquel told her that she had found a new church.

Raquel has joined Pathfinders, and she sings in a children's choir. She enjoys helping with the children's programs at church. She has invited her family to come to church with her, and her mother and brother have visited several times. Although they don't always attend, they are glad that Raquel wants to worship God. "I feel that I'm a light shining in my home," she says.

Raquel learned that nearly everyone in the church is involved in one or more small groups that meet during the week to study the Bible and talk about God. Members invite their friends to come, and many people have joined the church through these small groups. Raquel wanted to learn how to lead a small group, so she took a class. Now she leads a small group just for children. Raquel invites her friends from school to attend the small group and encourages the other children to invite their friends as well.

Raquel has learned that there's power in group prayer. When her father was seriously ill, she asked the small groups at church to join her in praying for him. Her father recovered, and she told him that she's sure his recovery was in answer to the prayers of her church friends. Her father has promised to visit her church one day. Raquel can't wait for him to keep that promise.

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*Our mission offerings support gospel outreach in Brazil and throughout the world. Thank you for your support.*



# Creation Care



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *2 Pet. 3:10–14, Rom. 1:25, Psalm 100, Heb. 1:3, Gen. 2:15, Neh. 13:16–19, Gen. 1:26–28.*

**Memory Text:** “And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it” (*Genesis 2:15*).

**Key Thought:** How should Christians relate to the environment?

What should we, as Seventh-day Adventists, think about the environment, especially because we know that this earth is corrupted, will continue to be corrupted, and will one day be destroyed, burned up in a great lake of fire: “and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up” (*2 Pet. 3:10*)? Add to this the biblical injunction about humans having “dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth” (*Gen. 1:26*), and it’s no wonder that, at times, we struggle with how to relate to environmental concerns.

At the same time, as stewards of all God’s gifts, don’t we have an obligation to take care of the earth? After all, didn’t God create it and pronounce it “very good”? As a people with a distinct message about God as Creator (*Rev. 14:6, 7*), shouldn’t we have something to say about the question of how we treat God’s creation?

This week we’ll explore what the Bible says about some of these concerns.

*\*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 25.*

## The Lobster Liberation Movement!

Years ago an environmentalist entered a seafood restaurant. There before him, sitting in a large tank, were half a dozen Maine lobsters that probably wouldn't last the night. A customer would pick out the one that he or she wanted to eat, and before long the lobster would be sitting on someone's plate next to, perhaps, a potato smothered in cheese.

Moving stealthily, the environmentalist reached into the tank, grabbed the first lobster he could get his hands on, threw it into a bag, and ran. He then put the lobster in a tank in his car and drove to the shore. There, a helicopter took him over the ocean, and he then returned the lobster to the water. A lobster liberator strikes again!

The man was not alone in his concern. You can visit a Web site titled "Lobster Liberation" that talks about saving lobsters from getting eaten by humans. It even has a section called "Tips for Releasing Lobsters," telling you what to do once you rescue lobsters from a restaurant.

Another time, an American actress dedicated an entire episode of her sitcom to smuggling lobsters out of restaurants and releasing them in the ocean.

Caring about the environment is one thing, but stealing a lobster out of a restaurant and taking it, by helicopter, back to the ocean does seem a bit extreme, does it not?

All of which leads to the question, what about Christians—indeed, Seventh-day Adventist Christians—and the environment? Putting aside the strangeness of the lobster liberators, how should we relate to environmental concerns? After all, isn't Jesus coming soon? Isn't our whole message predicated on the notion that this world is coming to an end, that this earth is corrupted and not going to last? Given our understanding of the Second Coming, how concerned need we really be about the earth itself?

**Read 2 Peter 3:10–14, Isaiah 51:6, 65:17, and Revelation 21:1. What does the Bible clearly teach about the ultimate fate of the earth? How should this teaching impact the way we look at the environment? Or should it at all?**

The Bible is more than unequivocal: this world, this earth, will not last. It is destined to be destroyed by God, who promises to make it over, to re-create it, to make a "new heaven and a new earth." Although that's hardly an excuse (as we'll see this week) to abuse or exploit the environment, it should at the same time help to protect us from making a god, as many have done, out of the earth and of the environment. While we can laugh at the extremists, we need to be careful not to get caught up in those extremes ourselves.

**Read Romans 1:25. What important message should we take in regard to how we show our concern and care for the creation?**

## A Statement on Creation Care

How, then, do Seventh-day Adventists view the question of the environment? How do we get involved and yet seek to keep a right balance? Below is an official statement, voted by the church leadership back in 1995.

“Seventh-day Adventists believe that humankind was created in the image of God, thus representing God as His stewards, to rule the natural environment in a faithful and fruitful way.

“Unfortunately, corruption and exploitation have been brought into the management of the human domain of responsibility. Increasingly men and women have been involved in a megalomaniacal destruction of the earth’s resources, resulting in widespread suffering, environmental disarray, and the threat of climate change. While scientific research needs to continue, it is clear from the accumulated evidence that the increasing emission of destructive gasses, the depletion of the protective mantle of ozone, the massive destruction of the American forests, and the so-called greenhouse effect, are all threatening the earth’s ecosystem.

“These problems are largely due to human selfishness and the egocentric pursuit of getting more and more through ever-increasing production, unlimited consumption and depletion of nonrenewable resources. The ecological crisis is rooted in humankind’s greed and refusal to practice good and faithful stewardship within the divine boundaries of creation.

“Seventh-day Adventists advocate a simple, wholesome lifestyle, where people do not step on the treadmill of unbridled consumerism, goods-getting, and production of waste. We call for respect of creation, restraint in the use of the world’s resources, reevaluation of one’s needs, and reaffirmation of the dignity of created life.”—Adventist Administrative Committee (ADCOM), released at General Conference Session in Utrecht, the Netherlands, June 29–July 8, 1995.

**Look up the following texts. How do they help us to understand the reasoning behind this church statement?** *Gen. 1:1, 26; 9:7; Pss. 24:1; 100; James 5:1, 2, 4, 5; Heb. 1:3.*

If anything, as Christians who believe that this world and the life and resources on it are gifts from God, we should be at the forefront of seeking to take care of it. If we believed that the earth is just a chance creation, the product of cold, uncaring forces, we could almost be excused in seeking to exploit it to our own ends. When, though, we understand this world as something that God created and sustains, it’s hard to see how we could do anything other than be responsible stewards of it.

**How might your own selfishness impact how you treat the environment? And what’s wrong with the attitude that says, “Well, I’m only one person, so what does it matter?”**

## Creation Care

The issue of the environment, and caring for the environment, isn't specifically and openly addressed in the Bible. Of course, there are a lot of specific issues that the Bible doesn't address. What the Bible does do again and again, is give us principles that should be applied to all areas of life, which include the question of the environment.

**Think** about Matthew 22:37–40. In what ways could the principles taught here impact our attitude toward environmental concerns, especially when misuse of the environment can have some very detrimental effects on others?

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Early on in the Bible, we are given some indication of humanity's call to be a steward of what God had given Adam on the earth. Although the context is very specific, it's hard to see why the principle shouldn't continue.

**Genesis 2:15** reads, “And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.” How does this reveal the way in which humankind was originally intended to relate to the earth?

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Notice the reciprocal relationship here. God created this beautiful environment for the man; it was given to him as a gift. And yet, see how Adam was supposed to relate to it. He was to work it and to keep it. The word translated as “keep” comes from the Hebrew root *smr*, which means “to watch” or “to preserve” or “to protect.” Thus, right from the start, even in the pre-Fall world, Adam was called to be a steward of the environment in which he was placed. God didn't tell him to exploit it, to use it for his own selfish means, and to get out of it all that he could. Instead, he is told to work it and protect it.

What reason could we have for believing that this principle has changed? In fact, if this is what Adam was called to do in a world before sin entered, how much more important would good stewardship of the world be after it has been damaged by sin?

**How conscious are you of environmental concerns? How much do you really even care about them? How important or unimportant are they to you? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.**

## Sabbath and the Environment

**“Hell and Destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied” (Prov. 27:20, NKJV). How does the truth of this text directly impact the whole question of creation care and the danger our exploits pose to the environment?**

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As the creation statement said, part of the reason for the issue with our environment today has to do with “human selfishness and the egocentric pursuit of getting more and more through ever-increasing production, unlimited consumption and depletion of nonrenewable resources.” In other words, people just want more and more, and the only place they can get it is, ultimately, from the earth. Using natural resources, though, isn’t the problem; instead, the problem is that no matter how much a person gets, it’s never enough. When was the last time you heard someone, no matter how wealthy, say that they had enough money?

In the midst of all this, God has given humanity the gift of the Sabbath.

**Look** up these Sabbath texts. Although we tend to think about them in other contexts, try thinking about them in the context of how Sabbath keeping, by commanding us to rest from our work, to rest from seeking to make money and do business, could in a very real way impact the environment for good.

*Exod. 20:8–11* \_\_\_\_\_

*Neh. 13:16–19* \_\_\_\_\_

Sure, the Sabbath is about remembering that God created the world (which itself should make us conscious about how we treat it), but it is also about resting from the pursuit of making money. By keeping the Sabbath, by purposely taking one seventh of our lives every week and, without exception, not pursuing wealth and money and goods, we not only have a powerful weekly reminder that life isn’t all about making money, but we also often refrain from the kind of pursuits that, when overdone, do damage to the earth.

**How has Sabbath keeping been a means of helping to restrain your own greed and desire for more? How often has the lure of money tempted you to violate the Sabbath?**

## Humankind's Dominion

“And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. . . . And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (*Gen. 1:26–28*).

**In** the above verses we have some of the Bible’s earliest references to the way in which humanity is to relate to the created world. Read them over prayerfully and carefully, thinking about them in the context of creation care and environmental concerns, and then answer the following questions:

- How complete was humanity’s control over the earth to be?
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- What does it mean to subdue, and to have dominion over, the earth and all that was in it? What, if anything in the texts, gives humanity the license to abuse and defile that creation?
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- Genesis 1:28 says that they are to “replenish the earth.” The literal Hebrew means to “fill the earth.” How might that be understood in regard to the question of how the earth should be treated?
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No question, humanity was to rule over the earth, at least under the power and direction of the Lord. The fact that these verses were given in the pre-Fall world, a world without sin and death and suffering, should teach us that whatever dominion over the world means, it doesn’t mean a violent exploitation and plundering of the world, for those things certainly would not have happened in a world before sin. Whatever subduing and dominion entailed, it didn’t entail destroying that world.

Of course, a lot has changed since then: the Fall, the Flood, the curse (*Gen. 3:17–19*), and the general degeneration caused by sin as a whole. Yet, one would be hard pressed to see in these texts anything that justifies the plunder and ruin of the planet itself. If anything, we can see in these texts humankind’s responsibility, as ruler of the world, to take care of it, because God created it, and it was “very good.”

**Further Study:** “In the beginning, God was revealed in all the works of creation. It was Christ that spread the heavens, and laid the foundations of the earth. It was His hand that hung the worlds in space, and fashioned the flowers of the field. ‘His strength setteth fast the mountains.’ ‘The sea is His, and He made it.’ Ps. 65:6; 95:5. It was He that filled the earth with beauty, and the air with song. And upon all things in earth, and air, and sky, He wrote the message of the Father’s love.

“Now sin has marred God’s perfect work, yet that handwriting remains. Even now all created things declare the glory of His excellence. There is nothing, save the selfish heart of man, that lives unto itself. No bird that cleaves the air, no animal that moves upon the ground, but ministers to some other life. There is no leaf of the forest, or lowly blade of grass, but has its ministry. Every tree and shrub and leaf pours forth that element of life without which neither man nor animal could live; and man and animal, in turn, minister to the life of tree and shrub and leaf. The flowers breathe fragrance and unfold their beauty in blessing to the world. The sun sheds its light to gladden a thousand worlds. The ocean, itself the source of all our springs and fountains, receives the streams from every land, but takes to give. The mists ascending from its bosom fall in showers to water the earth, that it may bring forth and bud.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 20, 21.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 As a class, go over your answers to Tuesday’s final questions.
- 2 How would you respond to the person who says, “Jesus is coming soon, so why should I care about the environment”?
- 3 How can we as Christians strike the right balance in our understanding of the need to be concerned about the environment while at the same time not getting caught up in some of the extremist movements involved in environmental issues? Why is it so important that we don’t get caught up in them, especially those that are very political?
- 4 If you have the resources, do some research on just how beneficial a vegetarian diet is to the environment in contrast to a meat-eating one. Discuss your findings with the rest of the class.

**Summary:** No question, this world is coming to an end; it will not last forever. And yes, Jesus is coming soon. All that’s true, but nothing in these truths gives us the right, or the mandate, to defile the earth. If anything, as Christians, we should seek to take care of the world that our God has created for us.

# The Obstinate Professor

by JONY ERNESTO

Jony Ernesto lives in Angola, a country in southwestern Africa. He is studying to become a teacher. He attends a government university where classes are held Monday through Saturday. Jony and the other Seventh-day Adventist students at the school simply skip classes that are scheduled on Sabbaths. And when their exams are scheduled for Sabbaths, they ask permission to take the exams on another day. Because there are many Seventh-day Adventist students in Angola, most teachers allowed students Sabbath privileges.

Jony's math teacher had two Seventh-day Adventists in his class, but he refused to reschedule an exam planned for Sabbath. "Whoever misses this class will receive a zero exam grade," the teacher threatened. When Jony and the other Seventh-day Adventist student pleaded for him to reconsider, the teacher told them, "Other students take their tests on Saturday, and I expect you to do so too. God likes you to have a good education. Skip church and take the test."

Jony and his friend quietly left the teacher's office. The boys knew that they would fail the test, but they weren't ready to give up yet. They agreed to pray about the exam and for the teacher some more. Jony went home to pray and study. The next day a student leader found Jony and told him, "I've been looking for you for an hour! The math teacher wants to talk with you in his office—right away." Jony found his Seventh-day Adventist friend, and together the two hurried to the math teacher's office. They knocked gently at the teacher's door and entered when invited. They found their professor pacing the floor.

The teacher returned to his desk and invited the two students to sit down. "I couldn't sleep last night," he began. "And it was because of you two. I thought about you two and your Sabbath. I realize that your faith in God is true and strong and powerful. Now I don't want any problems with your God, so I will let you take your math exam on Friday."

Jony and his friend smiled broadly and thanked their teacher. They promised to present themselves at the appointed time on Friday. After taking their exam, they again thanked their teacher for allowing them to take the test early. On Sabbath when their classmates were taking the exam, Jony and his friend stood in church to tell the congregation what God had done for them in softening the heart of their once-obstinate teacher.

Our mission offerings help further the work in Angola, where almost 350,000 Adventists share their faith.

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JONY ERNESTO *lives in Luanda, Angola.*



# The Bible *and* History



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Ps. 104:1–9, Rev. 1:1–3, 2 Pet. 1:21, Daniel 2, Rev. 12:7–17, Rom. 16:20, 2 Cor. 5:17–19.*

**Memory Text:** “‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End,’ says the Lord, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty’ ” (*Revelation 1:8, NKJV*).

**Key Thought:** Our God works in and through history, and in and through history He has given us powerful evidence for faith.

Is human history a meaningless series of events, or is there a central direction toward a specified goal, all according to a plan? The Bible makes it clear that the latter is true. Bible writers in both testaments insist that God directs history and reveals Himself in it.

Yet, not all history reveals God's will: humans are free to make bad choices, choices that influence history. The point is that just because God works through history doesn't mean He causes all that happens. What it means, instead, is that, despite the machinations and evil of human beings, God is there, working out His ultimate will and that He will bring human history to a grand and glorious close.

Biblical Christians believe that the Bible writers operated within the framework that God had revealed and that He inspired them to record the most significant events in human history. God often even provides the interpretation of these events so that we can understand what they mean.

This week we'll explore a little of how God has worked in and through world history.

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 3.*

## The Past and the Future

World history is usually taught as the history of civilizations. The significant facts are generally the ones that have had a bearing on the development of those civilizations. Some people argue that human affairs are, like the rest of nature, essentially cyclical in character, moving endlessly through the cycle of birth, growth, maturity, decay, and death in a series that does not have a beginning or any significant end.

The circular dial of a watch can be deceptive; as the hands revolve around and around, they can give the illusion that time recurs in a cycle. But this is not reality. The fact is that human life runs in a line, not in a renewing circle. Time, according to the Bible, is a one-way street.

**What** do biblical writers assert regarding human history's beginning and end? *Gen. 1:1; Job 38:1-7; Ps. 104:1-9; Rev. 1:1-3, 19; 21:1-6.*

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Human history is not an unending series of repeated cycles. It had a definite beginning. It faces a glorious future. Human history has a point, a goal. Normally, you cannot be sure what the point of a story is until you have reached the end. There can always be surprises at the end, and in the best stories there often are. How, then, can we, who are still in this cosmic story, know the point? In our case, we know because God has, through His prophets, revealed it to us.

We are talking, of course, about divine revelation. Our Lord knows the future, knows all the possible choices humans can and will freely make, and He has told us how it will turn out in the end, whatever choices we make in the meantime.

**How** is this revelation explained in the New Testament? *2 Pet. 1:21.*

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Unless we distrust the Word of God and what it says about itself, we can know that the Lord knows the end and has revealed it to us. He's not only the God of the past and the present, He's the Lord of the future, as well. Thus, we can trust that the future will unfold as He has said it would.

**How easy is it to predict the future? How often have you gotten it wrong? The good news is that God does know the future, does know all that will happen. How can you draw comfort from the realization that a God of love knows about all that comes our way?**

## The Prophets as Historians

All through the Bible, the prophets use the phrase, “The word of the LORD” (or an equivalent “Thus says the LORD,” etc.). In short, what they are saying is, I am not speaking these truths to you; it’s God speaking them through me. So, you’d better listen.

**How** is this idea revealed in the following verses? *Jer. 1:14–19.*

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The reader is allowed to see the painful historical process by which the capital city Jerusalem is to be handed over to Babylon, in fulfillment of God’s predictions of Israel’s fate.

Human kings, of course, rarely believe that history works this way. They imagine that their governing decisions shape public life. They think that they, ultimately, are in control. But Jeremiah (and other prophets) assert otherwise. Israel’s rulers discover that the historical process is leading the nation toward devastation and then exile. The book of Jeremiah is a stunning reminder of the power of God’s Word to be fulfilled in historical events.

**How** do Isaiah and Nahum testify to this similar point? *Isa. 14:24–27, Nah. 1:5–10.*

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This infinite power of God seen in human history is also exhibited in nature. Psalm 104, for example, describes the processes of nature not as a self-contained, autonomously functioning mechanism, but rather as processes in which God is acting at every moment. The Bible doesn’t portray God as having created the world and then leaving it on its own in complete subjection to natural laws. Natural laws are, indeed, part of how God sustains the world, but all of these laws are there only because He created and sustains them.

**Many scientists declare that the world began by accident and that it will end that way, as well. Hence, there’s not much meaning to all that comes in between (how could there be?). Why, deep down, do you know that this view can’t be right?**

## Daniel 2 and the Providence of God in History

In the 1700s, a Frenchman, an atheist, speculated that because all of the universe, including human actions, were predetermined by natural laws—then, ideally, if someone could know all of those laws and all the positions of all the particles in the universe at a given time, then that person could know everything that would happen.

Of course, humans do have free will, free choice. God made us that way. As beings who can love, we had to be given free choice, because love that is forced cannot be love. To make us capable of love, God had to make us free. And yet, God’s power is so great that, even with human free will, He knows the future perfectly, regardless of the free choices that we make.

**Review** the prophecy of Daniel 2. In what ways is this one chapter powerful evidence, proof even, that God knows the future, and far in advance, too?

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This chapter was written more than twenty-six hundred years ago. Look at how history has unfolded exactly as God predicted. In one sense, this prophecy should be more meaningful for us today than for those who lived millennia ago. And that’s because we, today, looking back at history, can see exactly how these empires came and went, just as predicted. If you had read this prophecy during the time of Media-Persia, you wouldn’t have seen the rise and fall of the empires that followed. Today, looking back, we can see much more than someone from long ago could see. Thus, the prophecy holds a power for us that those in the past couldn’t appreciate.

The amazing thing is that despite these millions of people, all with free will, who lived during the long epochs depicted in Daniel 2, the Lord knew exactly what was going to happen, what kingdoms would rise and fall. And He knew it way in advance.

**The prophet Daniel was right about the rise and fall of all those kingdoms: Babylon, Media-Persia, Greece, and Rome, including the breakup of Rome into smaller powers that still exist today. From where we stand in history, the only kingdom left is the last one, God’s eternal kingdom (*Dan. 2:44*). If he was right about all the ones so far, how foolish would it be not to trust him about the last one?**

## The Great Controversy and History

No matter how apparently chaotic, how seemingly out of control, human history is not unfolding in a vacuum. There's a story behind it, a drama, a struggle between two radically different principles. We're talking, of course, about the great controversy. Only with that background can we even begin to get an understanding of human history and what it all means.

**How** do these texts help us to understand world history? *Rev. 12: 7–17; Job 2:1, 2; Isa. 14:12–14; Gen. 3:15; Eph. 6:12; Rom. 16:20.*

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Satan is real, the battle is real, and only at the Cross was he defeated and his destruction made certain.

“Heaven viewed with grief and amazement Christ hanging upon the cross. . . . Yet there stood men, formed in the image of God, joining to crush out the life of His only-begotten Son. What a sight for the heavenly universe! . . .

“Satanic agencies confederated with evil men in leading the people to believe Christ the chief of sinners, and to make Him the object of detestation. . . .

“Satan saw that his disguise was torn away. His administration was laid open before the unfallen angels and before the heavenly universe. He had revealed himself as a murderer. By shedding the blood of the Son of God, he had uprooted himself from the sympathies of the heavenly beings. . . . The last link of sympathy between Satan and the heavenly world was broken.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 760, 761.

Why was Satan not destroyed then?

“The angels did not even then understand all that was involved in the great controversy. The principles at stake were to be more fully revealed. And for the sake of man, Satan's existence must be continued. Man as well as angels must see the contrast between the Prince of light and the prince of darkness. He must choose whom he will serve.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 761.

What the Bible teaches, and Ellen White, too, is that events here on earth are linked to the wider conflict, the great controversy between Christ and Satan. This controversy forms the background motif for all that happens here, whether in our individual lives or in the larger course of human history. Everything unfolds in the context of the great controversy. And the good news is that, after the Cross, Satan's defeat was guaranteed, and this controversy will end, and with it all the pain and suffering and violence and fear and uncertainty that fill human history.

## The Cross in History

Have you ever noticed that world history is divided by one event? That event was not the rise or fall of some major empire, as one would expect. Nor was it the discovery of a new continent. Instead, world history has been divided by the birth of a single itinerant rabbi living in a relatively obscure part of the vast Roman Empire. Considering the vast number of Jews born at this time, it's even more revealing that this one birth, among so many, should be the marker that has divided world history into its two largest epochs.

That birth, of course, is of Jesus.

In the context of God and history, we can better appreciate the significance of salvation. For here, at the Cross—with the obvious failure of all humans, and thus, human history—is where the background and also the deepest meaning of world history unfold. The Cross tells us that, by forgiving us and making us His children, God has opened up a new future for us, a future in which we no longer need to drag along with us the enormous guilt of our past or of our personal history. This guilt has been taken away by One who “has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (*Isa. 53:4, NKJV*).

The whole doctrine of salvation can be expressed in this one sentence: God cancels our hopelessly stranded history and in its place puts His history. Through Him, the history of slavery to sin is ended in our life. Through Him, the stains of the past should not rise up to accuse, torment, and mock us. Our personal history, which would condemn each one of us, is replaced with Jesus' perfect history. Thus, in Him we find not only liberation from our past but the promise of a wonderful future. At the Cross, the Lord guaranteed that, whatever our history or whatever happened in world history, a new and glorious future awaits us and the world.

**Read** 2 Corinthians 5:17–19. According to these verses what did Jesus do for all humanity? How has this event changed human history?

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Our sins have been laid upon the shoulders of a Lord who willingly died beneath a load of human guilt and who, in its place, gave us salvation. And His promised climax of history will grant us eternal history with the Author of history. The destiny of every person is involved. The second coming of Christ will be decisive. Both the Old and New Testaments promise a “new heaven and a new earth.”

**If you have accepted Christ, how should your future be different, now that your past history won't be used to condemn you, no matter how much you deserve to be condemned?**

**Further Study:** “The Bible is the most ancient and the most comprehensive history that men possess. It came fresh from the fountain of eternal truth, and throughout the ages a divine hand has preserved its purity. . . . Here only do we find an authentic account of the origin of nations. Here only is given a history of our race unsullied by human pride or prejudice.

“In the annals of human history the growth of nations, the rise and fall of empires, appear as dependent on the will and prowess of man. The shaping of events seems, to a great degree, to be determined by his power, ambition, or caprice. But in the word of God the curtain is drawn aside, and we behold, behind, above, and through all the play and counterplay of human interests and power and passions, the agencies of the all-merciful One, silently, patiently working out the counsels of His own will.

“The Bible reveals the true philosophy of history.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 173.

## Discussion Questions:

**1** For years, philosophers and theologians have debated the issue of God’s foreknowledge and human free will. Many see the two ideas as incompatible. They argue either that we don’t have free will or that God doesn’t know the future. Why are both those positions wrong? What evidence do we have in the Bible that we do have free will? What evidence do we have that God does know the future? The truth must be that, even with our free will, God knows future events before they unfold. Why is there no contradiction in the idea of God having foreknowledge of a choice that is freely made?

**2** One of Satan’s harshest attacks is on Daniel 2, which provides such rational evidence for God’s existence. After all, what firmer foundation can you have for faith than something as solid and unchangeable as world history? Part of his attack is to use scholars to argue that Daniel 2 was written about 165 B.C., long after many of the events predicted in it already happened. Yet, the argument is destroyed by the prophecy itself. How could Daniel have so accurately predicted the break up of Rome into the nations of modern Europe, which didn’t happen until more than five or six hundred years later than 165 BC? If an amazing prediction like that required supernatural foreknowledge, why shouldn’t we then trust the book for what it says about itself and when it was written, as opposed to accepting a view that is refuted by the prophecy itself? The whole point of the late dating of Daniel is to try to denude it of its prophetic power. As we can see, this attempt fails, even miserably. Discuss.

**Summary:** However chaotic world history can appear, above it all the Lord is working out His purposes, and human history will end with the glorious second coming of Jesus.

# From Despair to Hope

by DOWELL CHOW

Neng Suan cried out in agony. His son—his only son—was dead.

Neng and his wife have five daughters, but, in their culture, girls count for nothing. If someone asked Neng how many children he had, his answer was, “I have a son.” A son meant stability, support in old age, and hope for the future. But suddenly his only son, his pride and joy, was dead. Now Neng had nothing, no hope, and no future.

Neng and his family live in a village in Southeast Asia. In his culture, if a couple dies without a son, the relatives swoop in and claim everything the couple owns—their land, their home, their livestock—everything. Daughters have no rights; it’s as if they don’t exist. And now Neng and his wife had no son. His life became meaningless.

Before his son died, Neng had been attending a Protestant church, but when his son died, his hope and faith died with the boy. He stopped attending church. His life became enshrouded in darkness. He began drinking, and before long, he was smoking and chewing *khaini*, a tobacco-lime product.

Neng lost interest in his work and spent his days drinking. His whole family gave up on him, except for his wife, who supported the family by cultivating a few crops in her hillside garden. She tried to encourage her distraught husband, but nothing seemed to bring peace to his troubled soul.

Then one night Neng turned on his radio looking for distraction. He found a program that caught his interest. It was called the *The Voice of Hope*. The speaker’s voice soothed him, and the message brought hope to Neng’s heart. From that night on, Neng listened to the program.

Neng learned that the speaker, Pastor Khan Suan, would be holding meetings near his home. Neng decided to attend the meetings. His wife went with him, and together they experienced the love of God anew. Neng and his wife surrendered their lives to Christ and asked to be baptized.

Neng claimed God’s promise in Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (NKJV), and with Christ’s strength, he gave up his self-destructive habits. People noticed the changes in Neng’s life. “God understands my loss,” he says. “He gave His son to die for me. Although I lost my precious son, I have found comfort in Christ.”

Neng is glad that in his deepest sorrow, God sent him the message of love through Adventist World Radio. Your mission offerings help support this ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

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DOWELL CHOW is president of Adventist World Radio.



# The Promise of Prayer



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** Col. 4:2, Rom. 12:12, Matt. 26:34–44, Heb. 11:6, James 4:2, John 14:15, 1 Thess. 4:3.

**Memory Text:** “Evening and morning and at noon I will pray, and cry aloud, and He shall hear my voice” (*Psalm 55:17, NKJV*).

**Key Thought:** In numerous places in the Bible, the Lord calls us to pray because prayer is an essential component of our walk with Him.

Ellen White gave us these words on the issue of prayer: “Our heavenly Father waits to bestow upon us the fullness of His blessing. It is our privilege to drink largely at the fountain of boundless love. What a wonder it is that we pray so little! God is ready and willing to hear the sincere prayer of the humblest of His children, and yet there is much manifest reluctance on our part to make known our wants to God. What can the angels of heaven think of poor helpless human beings, who are subject to temptation, when God’s heart of infinite love yearns toward them, ready to give them more than they can ask or think, and yet they pray so little and have so little faith? The angels love to bow before God; they love to be near Him. They regard communion with God as their highest joy; and yet the children of earth, who need so much the help that God only can give, seem satisfied to walk without the light of His Spirit, the companionship of His presence.”—*Steps to Christ*, p. 94.

That about sums it all up, doesn’t it?

*\*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 10.*

## The Power of Prayer

One day, a young man received a letter from a former co-worker, someone who had retired a number of years earlier. The two workers, to put it mildly, hadn't gotten along; the one who had left, had from the start, treated the other one badly. Anyway, the remaining worker opened the letter and started to read. Among the words were the following: "You know, I don't understand how prayer works, never did, at least intellectually. I do know, however, that we have been told to pray and over the past few weeks, as I've been praying, I've been greatly convicted about how I treated you all that time. I see that I was wrong, un-Christlike, and a horrible witness for my faith. I know I should have done this a long time ago, but I do sincerely apologize. I have to claim Christ's forgiveness for what I have done, no matter how unworthy I am, and now I ask for your forgiveness as well."

In many ways, this story exemplifies the power of prayer. It's not so much to get God to move mountains, although that can happen. Instead, it can cause something even more miraculous: it can change the human heart.

As the person wrote, prayer isn't always easy to understand. Why ask God for something if He knows about it already? Will God not do something unless we ask for it first? Can our prayers really change what the Creator God will do?

Whether we understand how prayer works or not, one thing is certain: without it, our walk with the Lord is destined to failure.

**Read** the following texts. What main point do they all have in common? *Matt. 26:41, Luke 18:1, 1 Tim. 2:8, 1 Thess. 5:17, 1 Pet. 4:7, Col. 4:2, Rom. 12:12.*

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No question, as Christians we are told to pray and to pray often. That we might not understand how prayer works is, really, beside the point. Most of us don't fully understand how anything works, be it secular or sacred. If we waited until we fully understood all the issues regarding our faith, then it would hardly be faith, would it? The very word *faith* itself implies that there are elements beyond our intellectual grasp. One thing, though, that anyone who prays consistently and fervently—and according to the will of God—can testify to is that prayer can, and does, change our lives.

**What is your understanding of prayer? How has it impacted your life? Where would you be in your Christian walk without prayer?**

## Jesus, the Praying Messiah

**What** do the following texts teach us about Jesus and prayer? What is the context of each verse?

*Luke 3:21, 22* \_\_\_\_\_  
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*Luke 9:28, 29* \_\_\_\_\_  
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*Luke 6:12, 13* \_\_\_\_\_  
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*Heb. 5:7* \_\_\_\_\_  
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*Matt. 14:23* \_\_\_\_\_  
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*Luke 22:31, 32* \_\_\_\_\_  
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*Matt. 26:34–44* \_\_\_\_\_  
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Jesus, the spotless Son of God, the One who was without sin, without fault, the One who lived in perfect harmony with the will of the Father, obviously had a powerful prayer life. (The above verses don't even include Jesus' prayer in John 17.) If Jesus needed to pray in order to deal with the things He faced, how much more do we? Christ's example of prayer makes it abundantly clear how central prayer needs to be in our walk with the Lord. It's hard to imagine anyone having any kind of relationship with God without that person praying. If communication is crucial to maintaining relationships with other people, how much more so in a relationship with God? Jesus gives us an example. It's up to us to make the choice to follow it.

**How consistent is your prayer life? How distracted are you from praying? Do you pray consistently or when you are in trouble? How can you make prayer central in your walk with the Lord?**

## The Prayer of Faith

**“But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him” (Heb. 11:6). What important principles does this text teach us in regard to what is required for prayer and what it means to us?**

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In a sense, prayer is a way of coming to God, of opening oneself up to Him. We don't pray so that God will know the things that we need. After all, Jesus Himself said, in the context of prayer, that “your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him” (*Matt. 6:8, NKJV*). We pray because prayer is a way of exercising our faith in God. It's a means of making our faith stronger, more real, and practical. Who hasn't experienced how fervent, unwavering prayer, offered with a sense of dependence and need, has increased one's faith and deepened one's relationship with God?

Prayer is a way of helping to empty self of self. It's a way to die daily. It's a way to reconnect with God on a very personal level. It's a way to remind yourself that you are not your own, that you have been bought with a price, and that left to yourself you would crumble and die in a world full of powers and forces that could, in an instant, trample you into the dirt.

**So often we hear the phrase “seek the Lord in prayer.” What does that mean to you? See *Dan. 9:3, 4; Zech. 8:21*.**

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To a great degree, every prayer is an act of faith. Who can see their prayers extend to heaven? Who can see God receive them? Often we pray without seeing immediate results; yet, we go on faith that God hears and will answer in the best way possible. Prayer is an act of faith in which we reach out beyond what we see or feel or even fully understand.

**How much of your prayer life is rote and static, as opposed to deep and heartfelt? How can you move away from the former toward the latter?**

## Because You Do Not Ask

One of the questions that those who pray often ask is, “Can my prayers really move God to do something that, otherwise, He might not do?” That’s a logical question. To answer it, all we can do is go to the Word of God and see what it says.

**Read James 4:2; Luke 11:9, 10; James 5:16–18. What do these texts say about our prayers and the actions of God?**

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However much prayer changes us and impacts our relationship with God and others, the Bible is very clear that our prayers influence what God does. We ask and He responds, one way or another.

**Read Genesis 18:22–33. How do we see this principle at work here?**

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Again, whatever the philosophical difficulties associated with understanding this truth, God does respond to human prayers. He said that He does, and so we have to take Him at His Word.

**“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land” (2 Chron. 7:14, NIV). What does this text teach us about prayer?**

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Notice, however, that God isn’t going to heal their land just because they ask. They are called to pray, but prayer is only one aspect of a general revival on their part.

Perhaps the most important example of this principle is here: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9, NIV). Here, we see a powerful link between prayer (in this case, confession) and God’s action in our lives. We confess our sins, and He forgives them, a process that also results in His cleansing us from our unrighteousness. The clear idea implied here is that if we don’t pray, don’t confess, we aren’t forgiven. No question, in these cases, God acts in response to our prayers.

## Complying With Conditions

Someone sits in a restaurant, consuming a large meal, filled with fatty food that he or she washes down with a soft drink. He or she then finishes off with a large bowl of chocolate ice cream covered in hot fudge. That night, before going to bed (and having a little snack before then, too), he or she kneels to pray. Part of his or her prayer is, “O Lord, please help me lose weight.”

What’s wrong with this picture?

The fact is, we can expect God to answer our prayers, but there are things we need to do in the process. It has been said that we need to live out our prayers; that is, we need to do all that we can, in our power, to see them answered. This isn’t humanism, nor is it showing a lack of faith. On the contrary, it’s part of what living by faith is all about.

“If we regard iniquity in our hearts, if we cling to any known sin, the Lord will not hear us; but the prayer of the penitent, contrite soul is always accepted. When all known wrongs are righted, we may believe that God will answer our petitions. Our own merit will never commend us to the favor of God; it is the worthiness of Jesus that will save us, His blood that will cleanse us; yet we have a work to do in complying with the conditions of acceptance.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 95.

She’s not saying that we have to be perfect in order to have our prayers answered. She’s clear, too, that our acceptance with God is not based on us, or on our merit, but only on the merits of Christ for us. She is saying that we have to be in an attitude of faith, humility, and surrender to God’s will in order for Him to be able to work in our lives.

**How** do the following texts help us to understand what it means to “comply with the conditions”? See *Heb. 10:38, Deut. 4:29, Luke 9:23, John 14:15, 1 Thess. 4:3*.

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Perhaps, of all the conditions necessary for us to have an effective prayer life, the central one is our own sense of need, our own sense of helplessness, our own sense that we are sinners in need of grace, and that our only hope exists in the Lord who has done so much for us. To be arrogant, self-assured, and full of oneself is a recipe for spiritual disaster.

**What are the things you’re praying fervently for? As you pray, ask yourself, What could I be doing differently that could help bring about the answer that I so desperately want?**

**Further Study:** “Prayer is the breath of the soul. It is the secret of spiritual power. No other means of grace can be substituted, and the health of the soul be preserved. Prayer brings the heart into immediate contact with the Well-spring of life, and strengthens the sinew and muscle of the religious experience.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, pp. 254, 255.

“When we do not receive the very things we asked for, at the time we ask, we are still to believe that the Lord hears and that He will answer our prayers. We are so erring and shortsighted that we sometimes ask for things that would not be a blessing to us, and our heavenly Father in love answers our prayers by giving us that which will be for our highest good—that which we ourselves would desire if with vision divinely enlightened we could see all things as they really are. When our prayers seem not to be answered, we are to cling to the promise; for the time of answering will surely come, and we shall receive the blessing we need most. But to claim that prayer will always be answered in the very way and for the particular thing that we desire, is presumption. God is too wise to err, and too good to withhold any good thing from them that walk uprightly. Then do not fear to trust Him, even though you do not see the immediate answer to your prayers.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 96.

### Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What do you say to someone who asks, “Why pray, if God knows all things in advance”?
- ❷ Who, at times, doesn’t struggle with the question of answered and unanswered prayer? For instance, someone prays that their car not break down on a trip and, when the car doesn’t break down, they attribute the happy circumstances to answered prayers. This is fine. But what do you say to the person who also prayed, in this case that their child wouldn’t die, and yet the child dies? How do we understand these things? Or can we?
- ❸ What is the role of the Holy Spirit in our prayer life?
- ❹ Imagine in class someone new arrives and he or she asks, “Can you teach me what it means to pray? How should I pray? Why should I pray? And what should I expect when I do pray, and what should I not expect?” How would you answer?

**Summary:** No question, there are a lot of things about prayer that we don’t grasp. But those who pray do know one thing for sure: prayer will change your life, and for the better, as well.

# The Noisy Neighbor

by BOBBY WAGH

Raju heard the singing coming from the neighbor's house and turned his music up as loud as possible. Sometimes he could still hear the singing, and he shouted abuses at the little group of Seventh-day Adventist believers who worshiped next door.

Other neighbors avoided confronting Raju about his actions. They left the handling of the troublesome neighbor to the Seventh-day Adventists. The believers visited Raju and offered to pray for him and his family. But their kindnesses only irritated Raju more. He purposely chose the believers' worship time to bathe his idols and pray to them.

Raju's first child died shortly after birth, but the man refused to let the believers pray with him. When his second child also died shortly after birth, Raju worshiped his gods with renewed vigor. But then his third child died, and Raju felt desperate. He ceased worshiping his idols and stored them inside his house.

When Raju's wife became pregnant again, Raju was filled with fear that he might lose both his wife and the child she carried. Once more the Seventh-day Adventists offered to pray with Raju and his wife about the unborn child, but still Raju refused.

The child was born apparently healthy, but soon he developed jaundice, just as his older siblings had. The doctors told Raju that only a full blood transfusion would save the baby. Raju felt powerless and desperate.

The Seventh-day Adventists learned of the baby's illness and visited the family in the hospital. Raju was distraught over his tiny son's fragile condition. Desperate, he allowed his Seventh-day Adventist neighbors to pray for his wife and son. The group gathered around the bed and earnestly petitioned God on behalf of mother and child.

As the baby grew stronger, Raju and his wife rejoiced. They realized that their son was alive because the God of the Seventh-day Adventists had shown mercy on them. Raju and his wife began attending the church next door to their house, and in time, they gave their hearts to the Lord. They threw their idols into the river and asked to be baptized.

Now, instead of raising a ruckus with loud music during the believers' worship service, Raju sings God's praises loud and clear. He is sharing his love for God with others and helping the little group grow. Our mission offerings help raise up congregations in areas such as Raju's, where few believers live. Thank you for helping to share God's love through your mission offerings.

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BOBBY WAGH is treasurer of the South Maharashtra Region of Western India Union.



# God *as* Artist



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Isa. 64:5–8, Ps. 51:10, 1 Chron. 23:5, Heb. 8:1–5, Rom. 11:33–36, Acts 9:1–22.*

**Memory Text:** “One thing I have desired of the LORD, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD” (*Psalms 27:4, NKJV*).

**Key Thought:** God as artist?

So far, we've looked at various aspects of the Lord: the Trinity, God's holiness, and God as Redeemer. There is one picture of God in Scripture, however, that is rarely given attention—God as artist.

Many people claim they have no interest in art. Many Christians know little about it. They may know what they like, but that is nothing more than knowledge about themselves. Others acknowledge that art exists, but they never consider its value or relevance. Christianity has often been ambivalent about the arts. At times, the arts have been denounced as irreligious and evil; other times, aesthetics have become a secular “religion” with serious devotees. There are also plenty of Christian writers, but they have seldom made attempts to relate the concept of “beauty” to the central Christian doctrines.

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” wrote poet John Keats. While Keats certainly overstated the case, God is indeed Truth, and the Truth is beautiful. Creation itself testifies to the fact that God is an artist and a lover of what's beautiful.

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 17.*

## God as Potter

“But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand” (*Isa. 64:8*).

**When** is the first time the Bible reveals God displaying His skills working with “clay”? *Gen. 1:26, 27, 31; 2:7.*

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Scripture opens with God creating the first humans out of the “dust of the ground.” In fact, the Hebrew word for “man,” *adam*, is closely tied to the Hebrew word for “ground,” which is *adamah*—a linguistic link that enforces the amazing truth about God’s skill as a “potter.” He truly formed us out of the clay of the ground. It’s hard to imagine how a human being, with our blood and bones and skin and nerves and all of the amazing parts of our body, could have been formed from the ground. Our existence is a miracle that far surpasses human understanding.

In a sense, though the “potter” image works, in that the Lord used clay to form us, in other ways (as is with most imagery seeking to explain God’s work and power) it hardly does justice to His creativity and artistry. After all, what potter can take clay and turn it into a living, breathing thing?

**Read** Jeremiah 18:3–10, Isaiah 64:5–8, Psalm 51:10. How is the imagery of God as potter used in some of these texts?

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Among the concepts revealed in these verses is the idea of just how helpless we are before the power of God. We are, in a sense, like clay in the hands of a potter; the potter, not the clay, is in charge.

At the same time, God is working to re-create in us His image. However much God cares about His physical creation, how much more would He care about the beauty of what He can do in us? We are to surrender, to die to self, and to cooperate with the Lord, who seeks to re-create and restore to us, as much as possible, the original spiritual and moral beauty that we once had. Sure, outside appearances can be beautiful, but inner beauty is what really matters.

Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky created a fictional character who had, Dostoevsky said, a “beautiful soul.” What is your idea of a “beautiful soul,” and what things in you do, and do not, correspond to that ideal?

## God as Architect

**After** God dramatically delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt, He brought them to Mount Sinai. There, He joined them to Himself in a sacred covenant. Among all the varied instructions He gave them there, how was beauty included? *Exod. 25:1–9*.

The first half of the book of Exodus details the miraculous deliverance of Israel from Egypt. The second half of the book deals with issues that include beauty. The divine instructions of Exodus 25:1–9 are followed by Exodus 25:10–31:11, with God’s “blueprints” for the portable tent sanctuary, its furnishings, and the priestly vestments. From Exodus 35:1 to the end of the book (*Exod. 40:38*) are found God’s detailed descriptions, along with the record of the precise accomplishment of them. This record includes extensive details of artistry.

This collection of details is tedious reading to many modern Christians. But it pleased God not only to present these many instructions to the newly freed slaves but also to include them in Scripture.

There are almost fifty chapters in the first five books of the Bible that record God’s precise directives regarding a beautiful sanctuary. He provides not only the architectural blueprints but also the exact directions for the furnishings. It is significant that on Mount Sinai God gave not only the Decalogue, His instructions for obedience within the covenant, but also specific directions of how to fashion a lavish structure involving almost every type of artistic skill.

God was architect of it all, even inspiring the artisans to craft the minute details of decoration. Nothing was left to human devising. There are more chapters regarding the plans for, and consequent building of, this sanctuary and its furnishings than for any other subject in the first five books of Moses.

**Upon** what was the earthly sanctuary modeled, and what does that tell us about God’s love of beauty? *Exod. 25:9, Heb. 8:1–5*.

If the earthly sanctuary was only a “shadow” of the heavenly, we can hardly begin to imagine the kind of beauty that must exist in the real sanctuary, the one made by God Himself.

**Why do you think it was important for the sanctuary to be so beautiful? Perhaps to give the people a sense of awe before the power and grandeur of God? Maybe to help them sense their own need before such grandeur? How can understanding the glory of the sanctuary better help us to grasp the character of God in contrast to our own earthliness and sinfulness?**

## God as Musician

“**Four thousand are to be gatekeepers and four thousand are to praise the LORD with the musical instruments I have provided for that purpose**” (1 Chron. 23:5, NIV).

Try to envision the scene above: four thousand people playing musical instruments in praise of the Lord! That must have been an amazing worship service.

God’s artistic expression is not restricted to the representational arts. In Scripture we find that, along with sacred architecture, Israel’s liturgy was inspired by the Lord. God is a lover of beautiful music, as well.

**How** does King David describe his composition of the psalms Israel used in worship? 2 Sam. 23:1, 2.

David was clear that he was inspired by the Lord to write the songs that he did. Although this doesn’t mean that the Lord wrote the words and music for him, it does mean that the Lord cared about the kind of music that was played. Otherwise, why bother to inspire it?

**Read** 2 Chronicles 29:25. What does this verse tell us about the role of the Lord in the music that was played in Israel’s worship services?

Throughout the Old Testament, when temple worship is recounted, music is evident and impressive. Picture, for instance, the worship atmosphere described in 1 Chronicles 23:5. Four thousand instruments! Whatever the music must have sounded like, it certainly wasn’t boring or dry!

It might be argued that aesthetic dimensions could be expected within sacred worship and that throughout history all nations have exhibited such in worship of their gods. However, Israel alone insists that God Himself designed every aspect of His worship, including architecture, furniture, priestly attire, and liturgy. There can be no doubt that artistic design is sanctioned in the Word of God. Anyone who rejects the aesthetic dimension, or who denies that being an artist can be a relevant vocation for a Christian, does so against the record of Scripture.

**Although we don’t have the music that accompanied Israelite worship, it must have been beautiful, and it certainly must have lifted their souls toward the Lord. How does music in our church function today? How can we be sure that it does the same thing, that is, lift our souls toward the Lord, as opposed to pushing us in another direction?**

## God as Author

Bible scholars have often been impressed by the incredible literary quality of the Bible. Many secular colleges also teach courses on the Bible simply for its literary beauty, not because they view it as God's Word.

As Christians, we have the blessing not only of enjoying the literary beauty of the Scriptures but of learning the truths about God as revealed in the Bible. No doubt, too, the artful construction of the narratives and the poetry, all influenced by the Spirit of the Lord (yet written out through the words of God's prophets), goes a long way in helping us to understand the truth contained therein.

The apostle Paul, for instance, with his complex theological discourse, regularly punctuates his theology with powerful literary devices. For example, in the first eleven chapters of the book of Romans, Paul gives a comprehensive account of the gospel. Look through these chapters and note the various topics Paul weaves together.

**Read Romans 11:33–36. Compare these texts with Romans 11:1–32.**

Like a hiker who has reached the summit of a high mountain, the apostle—who has taken in the vast panorama of salvation history—now bursts into praise. Before Paul goes on to outline the practical implications of the gospel, he worships.

Paul exhibits this subtle literary rhythm several times in his epistles and letters: intricate theological reasoning interlaced with praise to God before concluding with practical counsel.

The book of Revelation also is filled with an imposing mosaic of literary devices through which God portrays salvation history. Much of the book was taken from the Old Testament. The reader is presented with an exceedingly complex tapestry of words, phrases, and themes borrowed from other biblical writers but now woven together into an entirely new fabric. This final book in the Bible is in a style vastly different from what Paul and the Gospel writers used. Instead, we are almost overwhelmed with a profound aesthetic display carefully structured around seven scenes of the heavenly sanctuary, each one opening with deeper access into the heavenly court.

The book of Revelation is an extensive aesthetic display. God could have furnished John with a standard historical document to present the course of the salvation story. Instead, what we find are stunning pictorial vistas portraying the working out of the great controversy between Christ and Satan, and expanding on the imposing apocalyptic display given earlier to Daniel and Ezekiel.

**Imagine reading the Bible only as literature. Talk about missing the point! What lessons can we learn about how easily we can have truth right before our eyes and yet miss it completely?**

## God as a Sculptor

God is also a sculptor, but not one limited to granite or marble. Instead, He sculpts our characters. He can take a sinful human being and mold and chisel and hammer away until that person reflects something of heaven's glory. God has given extensive evidence of such profound skills. From cover to cover in Scripture, we find God taking persons we might disregard as unattractive and unworthy and fashioning them into something beautiful.

**Who** are some characters in the Bible who needed a bit of spiritual sculpting, as it were? What needed changes were made in their lives? For instance, **Jacob** (*Gen. 32:22–30*); **David** (*Psalms 51*); **Peter** (*Luke 22:31, 32*); **Paul** (*Acts 9:1–22*). **Whom else can you think of, and what kind of changes came about in them?**

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Another good example is Mary Magdalene. “Mary had been . . . a great sinner, but Christ knew the circumstances that had shaped her life. . . . It was He who had lifted her from despair and ruin. Seven times she had heard His rebuke of the demons that controlled her heart and mind. She had heard His strong cries to the Father in her behalf. She knew how offensive is sin to His unsullied purity, and in His strength she had overcome. . . . [This woman] who had fallen, and whose mind had been a habitation of demons, was brought very near to the Saviour in fellowship and ministry. . . . Mary stood beside the Cross. . . . Mary was first at the tomb after His resurrection. It was Mary who first proclaimed a risen Saviour.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 568.

Salvation history is full of divine creativity, restoring in fallen men and women the lost “image of God.” The gospel is no cosmetic face-lift but a matter of life-changing orientation running deep and swift in its power to cleanse, shape, and beautify. The gospel of Jesus Christ creatively builds with integrity and wholeness. Genuine newness is the result of an inward dynamic at work, a divine creativity that restores beauty to a fallen, sinful life.

**Sculpting involves chiseling, filing, maybe even the breaking off of parts. What areas in your life need to be sculpted a bit more? How much resistance do you put up during a process that isn't always fun?**

**Further Study:** “Let the converting power of God be experienced in the heart of the individual members, and then we shall see the deep moving of the Spirit of God. Mere forgiveness of sin is not the sole result of the death of Jesus. He made the infinite sacrifice not only that sin might be removed, but that human nature might be restored, *rebeautified*, reconstructed from its ruins, and made fit for the presence of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 6, p. 11, emphasis added.

“How earnestly and perseveringly the artist labors to transfer to canvas a perfect likeness of his model; and how diligently the sculptor hews and chisels out the stone into a counterpart of the copy he is following. So the parents should labor to shape, polish, and refine their children after the pattern given them in Christ Jesus. As the patient artist studies, and works, and forms plans to make the results of his labors more perfect, so should the parent consider time well spent that is occupied in training the children for useful lives and fitting them for the immortal kingdom. The artist’s work is small and unimportant compared with that of the parent. The one deals with lifeless material, from which he fashions forms of beauty; but the other deals with a human being whose life can be shaped for good or ill, to bless humanity or to curse it; to go out in darkness, or to live forever in a future sinless world.”—Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance*, pp. 476, 477.

## Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What opportunity have you had to develop and use any artistic skills? As you created something of beauty, how have you been mindful that this act of creation is one way in which you are reflecting the “image of God”? That is, by being creative, how are you in your own way reflecting the creative power of the Lord.
- ❷ Look around at the created world, at nature, even after it has been so long defiled by sin. In what ways does it powerfully testify not only to the creative power of God but to His artistic mastery and love of beauty? What things in nature do you find truly beautiful and why?
- ❸ As we said in the introduction, Christians have always had some ambivalence about the arts. Why would that be? What are some of the pitfalls in art? At the same time, how can we use our own artistic gifts in a way that glorifies God and advances His kingdom?

**Summary:** God’s skills as an artist have been underrated. His created world is often appreciated, but the expression of His artistic skills extends His great abilities much further. God designs that Christians especially should be a source of “beauty” in a dark and dying planet.

## One Year for God

One doesn't think of Denmark as a mission field, but with just 2,500 Seventh-day Adventists in the country, there's a lot of work to be done in this post-modern secular society. To help finish the work, youth are volunteering to spend a year serving in various ministries in a program called One Year for God, sponsored by the Danish Union and Adventist Volunteer Services.

Among these youth are Bjarne Rasmussen and Kim Larsen, two young men in their twenties. Bjarne, a pastor's son, wanted to get serious about his faith. He took a short-term study course in lay evangelism and hoped to become a Bible worker in the Danish Union. When finances didn't allow the union to hire him full-time, he volunteered to serve. "Who am I to call myself a Christian and not introduce others to Jesus?" Bjarne asks.

A learning disability made advanced studies tedious for Kim, so he took a break from his studies. God led him to the One Year for God program. "It's a good fit," he says.

The two young men work together to find people who are searching for something in their lives. Danish law forbids them from going door-to-door to sell books, so Kim and Bjarne give out flyers offering a free Bible along with Bible studies. Then they follow up with interested people. After four months they were studying with seven people. In Denmark, that's a good result.

Danes love to read, so the men sometimes give out free books to people who pass by on a street corner. And they held an open church worship service to celebrate the 125th anniversary of one of the oldest Seventh-day Adventist churches in Denmark. People came.

"It's difficult to find people in Denmark who are interested in God," Kim says. "People live comfortable lives with plenty of material things. But we've found people hungry to know God."

One man reported reading the Bible to give him peace at work. Even though he's not yet a practicing Christian, he's discovering God's Word and His love. Another woman who is studying the Bible lessons grew up in the state church. She says that God had never been part of her life until she faced difficult times. Now she is turning to Christ for answers.

"Working One Year for God is strengthening my personal walk with God. I'm so grateful to be a part of His plan," Kim says.

Materials for the One Year for God program are funded in part through the mission and world budget offerings. Thank you for serving God through mission giving.



# Love Stories



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Gen. 2:21–25, Exod. 20:5, Isa. 43:4, 62:5, Song of Songs, John 2:1–11.*

**Memory Text:** “The LORD has appeared of old to me, saying: ‘Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you’ ” (*Jeremiah 31:3, NKJV*).

**Key Thought:** How are we to understand the loving side of God?

Love is, perhaps, the most readily recalled attribute of God. And, indeed, we cannot overestimate God's love, nor exhaust the depth of it. But perhaps there is one aspect of His deep love that is not duly regarded; that is, God as a romantic.

To get a proper perspective on God's romantic nature, we need to remind ourselves, first of all, of the time frame exhibited in the Bible. This book covers thousands of years of human history. And like all history books, the Bible as a whole contains records of kings and queens, wars and battle plans, and political intrigue.

No history book, though, records everything. The same is true of Scripture. One does not find an exhaustive historical record in the broad scope of time that the Bible covers. A lot of things are skipped over. Most interestingly, though, is that God includes tender romances within the historical record He inspired the prophets to write. The question is, Why would the Lord include these kinds of love stories, stories of romance, in what is so much a history book? Does that tell us something about His own nature and how importantly He views romance? This week we'll look at why these accounts are included and what we can learn from them.

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 24.*

## The First Romance

**“And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Gen. 2:23).**

We need to begin with the initial chapters of Genesis for the first romance in Scripture, that of Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve are special creations of God. Both male and female reflect His image (*Gen. 1:26, 27*). Both Adam and Eve receive their life as a result of God’s incredible creative power. The complexity of our physical bodies remains one of the most powerful testimonies to the wisdom and might of our Creator.

**Read** the biblical account of the creation of Eve (*Gen. 2:21–25*). **How would you describe the kind of relationship between them as depicted in this account?**

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Perhaps the most obvious point from this account is just how intimately and closely tied together these two are. God creates the woman out of the body of the man; they are, literally, of the same flesh and blood.

Adam then breaks out into what has been called the Bible’s first “love song” or “love poem,” in which he openly acknowledges just how closely tied each is to the other. In Hebrew, the word for “man” that he uses in verse 23 is *ish*; the word he uses for “woman” is *ishah*, again showing just how closely tied they are.

In verse 24, the Bible says that a man will leave his parents and cleave unto his wife, and they shall be “one flesh,” another powerful indicator of the intimacy meant for them. (Some have wondered, What parents is the Bible talking about here, because there were none then? The point is, Moses wrote this account many centuries after it happened, and he used the story of their creation to explain in more detail what marriage meant.)

Finally, their nakedness also revealed the intense closeness and intimacy between this first couple.

Whatever else their relationship originally entailed, romantic love was certainly a major part of it. God is not against romance. On the contrary, He created us as beings capable of experiencing it. In fact, that seems to be one of the basic elements He created in us.

**Romantic love is such a wonderful, God-given gift to humanity. If you are in a proper romantic relationship, what things can you do to protect it from all that can go wrong?**

## Biblical Romances

Although the Bible covers a lot of history, it has made time to depict some romances. There was a strong, affectionate bond between Abraham and Sarah. He doesn't desert her during her long years of barrenness. In fact, it is only at Sarah's urging that Abraham takes Hagar as a surrogate wife. The ties of love between Abraham and Sarah are strong. (*See Genesis 16.*)

It takes a lengthy chapter in Genesis to record Abraham's servant's long trip to find Isaac a wife. Upon his return with Rebecca, the inspired account includes another love story. (*See Genesis 24.*)

Another romance given a lot of time in the Bible is the one between Jacob and Rachel. In quick strokes, the picture is painted of Jacob's impulsive and warm response to Rachel. Apart from the Song of Songs, there isn't another example in Scripture of a man and a woman kissing, certainly not before marriage. And if we recall that God is the ultimate author of Scripture, and through His inspiration the book of Genesis was written, we are reminded that God is a romantic, because He includes this love story and this kiss in the Bible. (*See Genesis 29.*) (If you were writing a history book spanning thousands of years, covering the creation of humankind and its Fall, why would you include this romantic detail?) In the historical period enclosed within the book of Genesis, there must be many time gaps. Yet, God inspired the inclusion of these warm love stories.

**Go** back over the stories of these romances. Whatever the love that existed, these accounts are in many ways similar to romance and love stories all over the world; that is, these people faced many challenges and suffered from the mistakes of one or both parties. What were some of the things done wrong that brought so much pain and suffering to these relationships? Most important, how can we learn from their mistakes?

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Unfortunately, many have made similar mistakes, or even worse. The good news is that God not only forgives, He heals. Whatever romantic mistakes you have made, how can you learn to seek the forgiveness and healing that come from the Cross?

## God's Love

Genesis shows, right from the start, that romance was to be a basic part of the human experience. One man with one woman, period. That was God's ideal, the biblical prototype that models what romantic love was to be about.

It's fascinating, too, how often the Bible uses imagery of love, of marriage, to depict the kind of love relationship God seeks with His people. Nothing is to be more intimate than a husband and a wife—except, perhaps, a person's individual relationship with God.

**Read** Exodus 20:5. What word in there reveals God's feelings toward His people? How are we to understand that word in the context of God?

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Many times God expresses His jealousy over His people. (*See also Exod. 34:14, Deut. 4:24, Joel 2:18.*) Jealousy is a feeling lovers get when they think that their beloved is not faithful to them. God is not a distant, nonfeeling, impersonal benign "force." He is a personal Being with profound affection for the human family. However hard it is for us to grasp, God does love us and, like any lover, He is pained by our unfaithfulness.

**Look** up the following texts. What are they saying? How do they help us to understand God's feelings toward us? *Isa. 43:4, 62:5, Ezek. 16:1–15, Jer. 31:3, Rev. 21:9.*

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The Bible openly teaches that God deeply loves individual human beings. This is not an easy concept to grasp, only because the concept of God, the Creator of the universe, isn't an easy concept to grasp. After all, we can barely understand the universe as a whole; how much less, then, the One who created it? At the same time, though, God has not only declared His love for us, He has shown it to us in many powerful ways. The greatest, of course, is the Cross and what happened there. What more proof do we need of God's love for us than what we have been given at Calvary?

**Think** what it would mean were God to hate us or to be indifferent to us or to merely like us. But the Bible says that God loves us. What does that mean to you, personally, and how does this amazing idea (that God loves us) influence how you live?

## A Book of Romance

Libraries could be filled with books that deal with the difficult question of human suffering, difficult especially for those who believe in a loving and all-powerful God (for the atheist, suffering is merely part of what it means to live in a godless and meaningless universe and thus doesn't present the difficult philosophical questions it does for Christians). However, without an understanding of the great controversy between Christ and Satan, most of those books don't make much headway (even with an understanding of the cosmic drama, the question of suffering is, indeed, difficult enough).

And although the question of human suffering touches all aspects of life, we mustn't forget life's pleasures either. Why does food taste so good? Why so many taste buds perfectly matched to sense the many appealing flavors in food? Why are there so many shades of color? Why is the human eye able to connect with, and revel in, all the vivid colors? Why the joy of married sexuality? Reproduction certainly doesn't require the kind of pleasure that sexual activity offers. Some forms of life simply split in half to reproduce. Imagine if that were what we went through in order to reproduce. Even now, humans occasionally use methods of artificial insemination that don't involve pleasure. Why do we have the exact nerve endings needed to enjoy sensory pleasure, even sexual pleasure?

The answer to all these questions is the same: it's because God has made us that way. God created humans as physical beings who are intended to enjoy physical pleasures.

No book of the Bible deals with this topic better than the Song of Songs. Why is that book in the Bible? It is a book of sheer romantic pleasure. All the sexual pleasures included in the book have no connection to child-bearing. The book explicitly reminds us of the specific pleasures God designed and intended for husbands and wives. The effervescent springs of romantic love can be traced to their source in God.

**Skim** through the Song of Solomon. What does the book say to you about how God views the pleasures of the flesh in the right context?

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Of course, compared to many of the crude and licentious practices of our surrounding culture, Christian ideas about sex, marriage, and physical pleasures, in general, can seem outdated, prudish, and restrictive. But these principles come from the One who created our physical pleasures, the One who knows how they can best be enjoyed. Who alone but God can even begin to assess the pain and suffering caused by the abuse of these wonderful gifts? Who hasn't been impacted in one way or another by their abuse?

## Jesus and Romance

**Read** John 2:1–11. What does this tell us about Jesus’ attitude toward marriage and romantic love? What does it mean that He gave His blessing to such boisterous and long, drawn-out affairs as Jewish weddings were in that day and age?

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Jesus had just returned from the wilderness of temptation, where He Himself had drunk the cup of woe. But from there He came forth to give the human family the cup of blessing and to consecrate the warm relationships of human life. Jesus, who officiated at the first wedding in the Garden of Eden, now performs His first miracle. Where? At a wedding meal.

A Jewish wedding in biblical times was an impressive occasion. A marriage in the small village of Cana in Galilee might have been the event of the year. The partying went on for days. Rabbis and students would stop studying. Everyone brought presents and, in return, the hosting family was expected to keep guests well supplied with food, drink, and merrymaking.

The running out of drink was, then, more than a minor disappointment. It was a catastrophe, and the mother of Jesus comes to describe the emergency to Him. She suggests nothing, nor is she passive. She speaks to the servants of the household and urges, “Whatever He tells you, do it.”

Jesus then tells the servants to fill six water pots. Archaeologists say that at that time a storage jar could hold 15–25 gallons. At a minimum then, we are talking about at least ninety gallons. Some scholars suggest at least one hundred twenty gallons.

The next thing we hear is the steward’s exuberant exclamation to the bridegroom, congratulating him: “ ‘ Every man at the beginning sets out the good wine, and when the guests have well drunk, then the inferior. You have kept the good wine until now!’ ” (*John 2:10, NKJV*).

If there are four quarts to a gallon and each quart yields six glasses, the size generally used at wedding receptions, that amount is a minimum total of 2,160 glasses. This means, then, 2,160 servings of the finest drink for one little wedding party in a backwater village of Galilee. Jesus, at a wedding, pours out the best that anyone had ever tasted.

In this miracle we can see God’s creative power, the same power that created our world. And, in Jesus’ earthly ministry this creative power is first expressed in the context of a wedding.

Romantic love and marriage are, indeed, wonderful gifts from God. We must remember, too, that Jesus was never married, and thus He leaves an example that shows that not everyone has to get married. Single people can live full and productive and joyful lives as well as married people can.

**Further Study:** In both the Old and the New Testament, marriage is utilized to represent the tender and sacred union that exists between Christ and His people. To the mind of Jesus, the gladness of wedding festivities pointed forward to the rejoicing of that day when He shall bring home His bride to the Father's house, and the redeemed with the Redeemer shall sit down to the marriage supper of the Lamb. He says, "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you" (*Isa. 62:5, NKJV*). "You shall no longer be termed Forsaken" (*vs. 4, NKJV*). "But you will be called, 'My Delight' . . . for the Lord delights in you." . . . God will rejoice over you" (*vss. 4, 5, NASB*). "He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing" (*Zeph. 3:17, NKJV*).

Scripture concludes with this same glorious theme. When the vision of heavenly things was granted to John the apostle, he wrote, "I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunders, saying, 'Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.' And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright. . . . 'Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb! . . . These are the true sayings of God'" (*Rev. 19:6-9, NKJV*).

## Discussion Questions:

**1** Which practices in your society and culture could easily lead to the abuse of the physical pleasures that God has given us? How can you help educate others, especially young people, about the dangers of abusing these gifts? How can you show them that by following the principles and laws that God has given us, people will be in a much better situation to enjoy life than they would be if they followed the customs and practices of society that go contrary to the principles in God's Word?

**2** In the civil laws God gave Israel, there is another reminder of God's romantic nature. What kind of honeymoon does God suggest for a newly married couple? *Deut. 24:5*. What do we make of that time frame given them?

**Summary:** For many moderns, God has dwindled into a noble "example." Or He has been diluted into a concept useful for organizing world peace. He's not, however, seen as a Personality whom we can feel any love for. But Scripture insists that God is a passionate lover. Reflect on the difference that this concept makes for the various doctrines of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

# Breakthrough at Bebe Village

by WILSON KUKI

In the Solomon Islands and many other island nations of the South Pacific, individual villages and even entire regions are under the domain of a single church. It's often difficult to gain access to these villages, for the people's culture and identity are wrapped up in their church affiliation.

As a Global Mission Pioneer, I wanted to enter one of the villages dominated by another Protestant denomination. I asked permission to take some Seventh-day Adventist young people to the village to do community service work. The village leaders agreed to let the young people help repair the church roof, but they wouldn't allow us to hold public meetings. We agreed.

The village provided a house for us while we worked, and as the young people worked with the villagers, they became friends.

Every morning and evening, we gathered outside our house to sing and pray. Some of the villagers joined us, and this strengthened bonds of friendship.

We had planned to spend Sabbath at a small Seventh-day Adventist church in a nearby village, but the religious teacher of our village invited us to worship in the church we were repairing. We gladly accepted, but we were surprised to find this man had invited the villagers to join us for worship. The majority of the village came to our worship that day. We told Bible stories using picture rolls and sang songs of praise. The people loved it!

After worship, a man named George told us that he had been accused of sorcery and had been beaten to drive the spirits from him. He was knocked unconscious, and no one helped him. With tears in his eyes, George explained that he felt he had been rejected by his own village.

We prayed with George and gave him a Bible that he had requested. We arranged to return to the village and study the Bible with him. When George learned that I planned to hold evangelistic meetings in the next village, George gladly agreed to come.

We invited others from the village to join us for Bible studies, and several have asked for Bibles. We promised to give them Bibles if they'd come to our meetings, and many did. They're thrilled that other Christians would come and help them repair their roof and worship with them. A little kindness goes a long way toward building bridges—and church roofs.

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*WILSON KUKI is a Global Mission Pioneer working on Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands.*



# The Promise of His Return



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *2 Pet. 3:1–10, 13; John 14:2, 3; Dan. 2:44; Heb. 9:28; 11; Rev. 6:9–11; Luke 12:42–48.*

**Memory Text:** “ ‘And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work’ ”  
*(Revelation 22:12, NKJV).*

**Key Thought:** When is Jesus coming back? It doesn't matter. What matters is that He does.

At the end of the 1990s, many were wondering whether the world would last until the new millennium. Then the year 2000 came and went. Some argued that the time calculation was wrong and that 2001 was the first year of the new millennium. But, alas, we're still here.

Either way, Seventh-day Adventists, unlike many other Christian traditions, believe that the second coming of Christ draws nearer. In news reports, even secular reporters sometimes reflect on how the world seems edging closer to some great crisis, whether political, ecological, economic, military, or any combination thereof. One doesn't need to be a biblical apocalyptist in order to see a world that seems to teeter on the brink of catastrophe.

None of this should surprise us; after all, just about every Bible prophecy depicting end times paints a bleak forecast for the world prior to the Second Coming.

When is Jesus coming back? We don't know. What we do know is that He is, and that's what matters.

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 31.*

## The Beginning and the End

The description of our pitiful human condition is honestly and correctly painted in Scripture. Bible writers did not always despair, however, because they knew the final outcome. The last chapters in the books of Isaiah and Revelation assure us that the destruction of sin is coming and that God's kingdom will be restored. God revealed to His prophets the "last things" that will lead to the end of our world's dark history. These prophets gave full weight to the gravity of the situation, but they lived with hope because the remedy had been revealed to them.

As we saw earlier, if you believe the world began by chance, you most likely believe it will end that way, as well. This view doesn't really leave much hope for those in between such a beginning and such an end, does it?

In contrast, the Bible consistently refers to and describes a literal historical understanding of Genesis 1 and 2. Nothing was left to chance in the Creation of the world. Hence, it's no wonder that the Word of God also insists on a literal end of this world, as well. Nothing will be left to chance here either.

**Read 2 Peter 3:1–10. How does Peter link early events in human history with final ones? What message of hope can we take from this passage?**

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The primal creation and the final re-creation are vitally linked, each enhancing the significance of the other. When studying the doctrine of the last things (eschatology), we deal with God's final, definitive acts toward His creation, which lead right into the restoration of His kingdom.

Jesus clearly links the beginning and the end of things with Himself. Three times in Revelation (*Rev. 1:8, 21:6, 22:13*) Jesus refers to Himself as the Alpha and the Omega (*alpha* is the first letter of the Greek alphabet, *omega* the last). Whatever else He means by saying that, at a minimum it shows us Jesus' power and omnipresence; it tells us that Jesus was there at the beginning of all things, and He will be there at the end. We can trust in Him no matter where we are in between. It's a way of telling us that, however chaotic things might seem, He is always there for us.

**Some Christians have moved away from belief in a literal, physical return of Jesus and a supernatural restoration of God's kingdom on earth. Instead, they think we need to build the kingdom ourselves. Dwell on past attempts to do something similar. Why should we think future ones will fare any better?**

## Promise and Expectation

Because “last things” center around the establishment of God’s kingdom, attention to “last things” has always been a paramount Seventh-day Adventist concern. So much so that we have drawn attention to the end times in our name: Seventh-day Adventist. The name itself points to our belief in the second advent of Jesus.

**How** does Peter express this hope? *2 Pet. 3:13*. Why is this hope so central to all we believe? Without it, why do we have no real hope at all?

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Our own human expectations and hopes often are disappointing. Many times they fail us because we cannot control future events. Our most ardent hopes are often not fulfilled. We cannot control the future, no matter how hard we might try. Human beings are faced with possibilities and probabilities. Every plan of ours is tentative. The unfolding of history is complicated, incalculable, and subject to too many varied factors to allow us confidence in what we may decide about it. And this uncertainty causes us anxiety.

But the biblical writers assure us that we need not despair; the Lord is in control, and we have the promise of His return and the promise of what He’ll do at that return.

**Read** the following verses. What hope and assurance is found in them? What different emphasis is found in each one of these promises, as well?

*John 14:2, 3* \_\_\_\_\_

*Dan. 2:44* \_\_\_\_\_

*Acts 3:20, 21* \_\_\_\_\_

In all of these texts, and so many others, we have been given the promise not only of Christ’s return but that a radically different new world and existence await us when He does. Try to imagine what it will be like. We are so used to sin, sickness, death, fear, violence, hatred, poverty, crime, war, and suffering that we can’t easily imagine a world without them. And yet, that’s exactly the world we’re hoping for, the world we have been promised.

## Our Great Assurance

As Christians, as Seventh-day Adventist Christians, we live with the hope of Christ's literal return to this earth. Some Christian groups have abandoned hope in this teaching or have pushed it off to the side, or they have watered it down and so spiritualized it away that the Second Coming becomes essentially just a personal thing. They may say, *The Second Coming is realized in our hearts when we learn to fulfill our role in our community*, or *When we learn to love others as we should, then the second coming of Christ is actualized in our life*. Though, of course, we should love others and be fruitful members of our community, none of these are the same as the second coming of Jesus.

From our perspective, especially with our understanding of the state of the dead, it's hard to imagine what our faith would mean without the physical, literal return of Christ, at which time He will raise the dead in Him. It's so central to what we believe (again, our name itself reflects just how central) that, without it, our whole system would crumble. And that's because all that we believe in and hope for climaxes in the literal return of Christ "in the clouds of heaven" (*Matt. 24:30*); remove that and our teachings take us to a dead end.

**Of all the assurances we have of the Second Coming, which is the greatest? What one event, more than any other, guarantees His return, and why?** *Heb. 9:28, 1 Cor. 15:12–27.*

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Of course, the great hope of the Second Coming rests upon what Christ accomplished for us at the First Coming. After all, what good is the First Coming without the Second? In a sense, one could say that the First Coming, and all that Jesus accomplished for us there, is incomplete without the Second. At times the Bible uses the metaphor of ransom to refer to the Cross. Jesus Himself said that " 'the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many' " (*Matt. 20:28, NKJV*). At the cross, Jesus, by His death, paid the ransom for our souls, a ransom that was full, complete, and once and for all. At the same time, what good is paying a ransom if you don't come and get what was ransomed? The paying of the ransom isn't the end of the story. Just as a human parent would come to get the child he or she ransomed back, so, too, Jesus will come back to get what He paid such a great price for. Hence, Christ's first coming gives us the greatest assurance possible for the second.

## “Where Is the Promise of His Coming?”

From the earliest days of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Adventists believed that Christ’s coming was soon, “nearer than we first believed.” As it stands, we’re still here, much longer than many among us anticipated. How are we to understand this “delay”?

First of all, we’re not the only ones whose expectations about when the Lord would act have not been fulfilled as people have thought.

Eve, for instance, thought God’s promises for a Deliverer (*Gen. 3:15*) would be fulfilled in her first-born son. Read Genesis 4:1. An accurate translation of this text should have the word *from* in italics, because it is not in the original language but has been added by a translator. Eve’s statement can be more literally translated: “I have gotten a man—the Lord.” She was wrong; the child born was Cain, not the Redeemer. The Lord’s coming wasn’t until thousands of years later.

“The Saviour’s coming was foretold in Eden. When Adam and Eve first heard the promise, they looked for its speedy fulfillment. They joyfully welcomed their first-born son, hoping that he might be the Deliverer. But the fulfillment of the promise tarried. Those who first received it died without the sight. From the days of Enoch the promise was repeated through patriarchs and prophets, keeping alive the hope of His appearing, and yet He came not.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 31.

**Read Hebrews 11.** What’s the main point of this chapter, and how does it fit into the whole question of “delay”? (See especially vs. 13, 39, 40.)

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Throughout the Bible, we have examples of people waiting in earnest expectation. Look at how long Abraham waited for the promised son; look at how long Israel waited in Egypt for deliverance. Time and again in the Psalms, we read the question, How long, Lord, until deliverance comes? And, of course, we shouldn’t be surprised about the “delay” in Christ’s return, not when Peter wrote, almost two thousand years ago, the following words: “Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation” (*2 Pet. 3:3, 4*).

**Have you thought the Lord would have been back by now? Do you sometimes find yourself discouraged by the “delay,” or doubting the Second Advent because we’re still here? Think about evidence for belief in Christ’s return, realizing that your understanding of time is radically different from that of God.**

## “Behold, I Come Quickly”

**That** the Lord had not yet come is undoubtedly the basis for some of Paul’s counsel to the Thessalonians. What does Paul counsel the church at Thessalonica as they wait for the promised coming of Christ? *2 Thessalonians 2*.

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Certain events have to transpire in human history before Jesus will return, yet, the hope for the future is glorious.

**The** book of Revelation, the great book of high points, also gives evidence of a time lag. At the opening of the fifth seal, what do the voices under the altar cry out? *Rev. 6:9–11*. What’s implied there about the question of the “delay”?

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**Read** Luke 12:42–48. How does that text help us to understand the “delay”? More so, what important warning should we take from it for ourselves, who could easily start feeling the same way?

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What about the texts that talk about Jesus’ coming back quickly, or soon? For example, “Behold, I come quickly: blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book” (*Rev. 22:7*).

In one sense, as far as our own personal experience is concerned, the Second Coming is as “soon” as our death. We die, and regardless of how long after we are in the grave—two years, two hundred, two thousand—we sleep, and the next thing we know, in an instant, in a twinkling of an eye, Jesus has returned. Thus, one could argue that from our own personal perspective alone, from what we personally experience ourselves, the Second Coming takes no longer than the span of an individual human life. Although the Second Coming itself is a literal universal event that impacts the whole earth, we experience it only as individuals.

As the years roll by, do you find yourself becoming at ease in the world, getting comfortable with things, and less focused on the reality of the Second Coming? If so, you’re probably not alone. How can we fight this natural, although potentially dangerous, tendency? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

**Further Study:** “Another year has almost passed into eternity. A few more days, and we shall enter a new year. My brethren and sisters, employ wisely the remaining hours of the old year. If you have in any wise neglected your duty, repent before God, and return to the path from which you have wandered. Remember how brief the period of life allotted you. You know not how soon your probation may close. Say not presumptuously, ‘To-day or to-morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain.’ God may have different plans for you. Life is but a vapor, ‘that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth.’ You know not how soon your hand may lose its cunning, your step its firmness. There is peril in a moment’s delay. ‘Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, December 23, 1902.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, discuss your answer to Thursday’s final question. Discuss, too, the irony of the fact that the longer we’re here, the easier it is to put off the sense of Christ’s return, and yet the longer we’re here, the closer we come to that return.
- 2 What are the reasons that Jesus has not returned yet? Are we responsible for that “delay”? How do you justify your answer?
- 3 In your mind, what is the greatest reason for trust in the promise of the Second Coming?
- 4 Although there’s much debate in science about human origins, many scientists argue that the long-term prospects for humanity, the earth, the universe even, are not good. They predict that the universe is going to burn out or collapse back in on itself, leaving no life anywhere. As Seventh-day Adventists, we believe that the long-term prospects for the universe are the opposite: they are wonderful. The point is, if science has the end of all things so wrong, why should we trust that its understanding of the beginning of all things is any more accurate? This is especially true when science’s common understanding of the beginning is centered on various forces, including evolution, that deny a Creator or any purposeful design or intention in the creation itself. How much more wrong could it be?

**Summary:** We have many very good reasons for trusting in Christ’s return, no matter when it happens.

## Called Out

by MONSURU AKINWANDE

I grew up in a non-Christian family in Nigeria. One of my Christian friends often talked to me about Christ. One day he invited me to give my life to Jesus, but I wasn't interested. Then I had a dream in which Jesus stood between heaven and earth, touching people who were on their way to heaven. But when I approached Him, Jesus didn't touch me. Instead He said gently, "You're not ready yet." I turned away, rejected.

I told my friend about my dream, and he explained that God was speaking to me, inviting me to follow Him. *Wow, I thought. God would speak to me? He must love me!* My friends helped me give my life to Christ.

One day I met a man who lives near the church my friends attended. He invited me to study the Bible with him. I wasn't sure I should, so I asked my friends what to do. "Go ahead and study with him," they said. "Just be sure that what he teaches you is truth according to the Bible."

As I studied the Bible with this man, I realized that he knew his Bible well! And when he told me about the Sabbath, he showed me many Bible texts to prove that God never changed the Sabbath to Sunday. I was convinced that the Sabbath is Saturday. But I didn't know what to do about it.

My new friend gave me some books to read to help me understand the Bible better. He invited me to attend the Seventh-day Adventist church with him, and I went, glad to find the truth about God. The devil became angry and tried to stop me from being baptized, but I refused to give in.

Before I found Christ, I was nobody. But God has adopted me and has called me to serve Him and share my faith with those who haven't met Jesus yet. He has opened the door for me to study at Babcock University, the Seventh-day Adventist university in Nigeria. I know that God will make a way for me to complete my studies and answer His call to service.

Please pray for me and my fellow Christians who have been called out of darkness and want to share God's light with others. And thank you for your mission offerings and Thirteenth Sabbath Offerings that have helped establish this great school where thousands of young people are being trained to serve God.

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God raised up the Seventh-day Adventist Church to proclaim “present truth,” the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6–12. To fulfill our mission, we need to be purposeful in leading as many people into God’s kingdom as possible by giving those who face eternal destruction the opportunity for eternal life instead. Next quarter’s Adult Bible Study Guide, *Evangelism and Witnessing*, by Joseph A. Webb, strives to equip members with tools to achieve our core mission of telling the Jesus story with the intention that people will accept Him as Lord and Savior and become disciples and even disciple-makers. While evangelism and witnessing are the personal responsibilities of each believer, the whole body of Seventh-day Adventist believers (the church) has a corporate responsibility, as well. As each member contributes to the evangelistic goals and strategies of their local church, precious people are won to Christ. This needs to be done at the local church level, or it just won’t get done. Our challenge must be to make all that we do as a church relate to the core business of reaching the lost with the “everlasting gospel” (*Rev. 14:6*) and all that entails.

## Lesson 1—Defining Evangelism and Witnessing

### The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **Evangelism Is . . . ?** (*Acts 4:33, 5:42, 7:56*)

MONDAY: **Witnessing Is . . . ?** (*Mark 5:18–20, 1 John 1:3*)

TUESDAY: **The Biblical Evidence** (*Acts 13:1–49*)

WEDNESDAY: **Telling Our Stories** (*Acts 22:2–21*)

THURSDAY: **Our Job Description** (*1 Peter 3:15*)

**Memory Text**—*Matthew 28:19, 20*

**Sabbath Gem:** If we are to be involved in the fulfillment of the great gospel commission, we must understand what we mean by evangelism and witnessing. Thankfully, God’s Word gives us direction in these two areas.

## Lesson 2—Every Member Ministry

### The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **Every Member Ministry** (*Ephesians 4:12, 2 Corinthians 5:15–20*)

MONDAY: **The Need for Laborers** (*John 4:35–41*)

TUESDAY: **Individuals but Together** (*Ephesians 4:16*)

WEDNESDAY: **Working Together, With God** (*Acts 2:47*)

THURSDAY: **Reporting to the Church** (*Acts 14:27, 15:4*)

**Memory Text**—*1 Peter 2:9*

**Sabbath Gem:** Too often evangelism and witnessing are seen as the pastor’s job alone; this attitude is wrong.

**Lessons for the Visually Impaired** The regular *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* is available free each month in braille and on audiocassette to sight-impaired and physically handicapped persons who cannot read normal ink print. This includes individuals who, because of arthritis, multiple sclerosis, paralysis, accident, and so forth, cannot hold or focus on normal ink-print publications. Contact Christian Record Services, Box 6097, Lincoln, NE 68506-0097.