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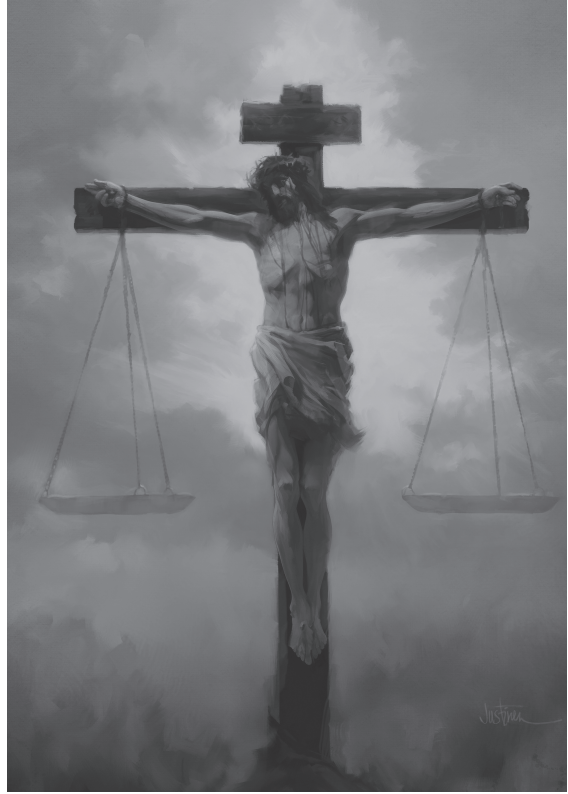
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The God of Love and Justice



God is love. So says 1 John 4:8 and 16. The entirety of the Bible testifies to this fact. The Christian faith is centered around God's character of love.

Love is at the core of who God is, at the core of everything that we believe, and should be at the core of everything we do. Accordingly, the way we understand love affects the entirety of our faith and practice. If, for example, one believes that God's love must be earned or merited, a person might think that God does not love them because they are sinful and unworthy. And, in relation to others, one might expect others to merit love—a recipe for disaster.

In this and many other ways, how we understand God's love has massive implications for our faith and practice. Yet, what is love? If you ask ten people to define love, you might get ten different answers. Even among Christians, there are many myths and misunderstandings about God's love.

For example, Christians offer different answers to the following questions:

Does God's love only give but never receive? Is divine love purely self-sacrificial, or might God also delight in and be pleased by humans? Is God's love emotional? Does God really care about humans? Can God's love be rejected or forfeited? Does God enter into a back-and-forth love relationship with creatures? Is anger incompatible with love? How do love and justice go together? If God is love, why is there evil in this world, and so much of it? Can humans love the way God does? If so, what would that look like?

The answers to some of these questions might seem obvious but are often disputed

in Christian treatments of divine love. And many answers that are sometimes taken to be obvious turn out on closer inspection to be incompatible with what Scripture teaches about God's love.

We will not address all these questions at once, but we will take up these and other questions throughout this quarter. And we will see that God's love is far greater than we might think. God's love as depicted in Scripture is far superior to the ideas that pass for "love" in much of our world today. In the coming weeks, we will look more closely at some of the most prominent and beautiful aspects of God's love that are revealed in the Bible.

And, as we continue on, we will see how divine love and justice are inextricably connected. The God of the Bible loves justice (*see, for example, Isa. 61:8*). And, as the Bible portrays them, divine love and justice are so interconnected so that you cannot have one without the other. Because God is love, He is deeply concerned about injustice and suffering in this world, and He identifies Himself with the oppressed and the suffering, willingly entering into the pain and grief that evil has wrought in creation—Himself suffering most of all, so much so that God Himself is the greatest victim of evil.

As the Bible portrays them, divine love and justice go together in such a way that you cannot have one without the other.

Throughout the Bible, God is repeatedly grieved and pained by evil and suffering because He loves each person more than we can possibly imagine. One can see the depth of God's love in the lament of Christ over His people when He said: " 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!' " (*Matt. 23:37, NKJV*).

The God of the Bible, who is love, is often portrayed throughout Scripture as brokenhearted and grieved by love rejected and love lost. The entire story of Scripture is about what God has done and is doing to restore love to every corner and crevice of the universe. This and much more is the topic of this quarter's lessons.

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How to Use This Teachers Edition

“The true teacher is not content with dull thoughts, an indolent mind, or a loose memory. He constantly seeks higher attainments and better methods. His life is one of continual growth. In the work of such a teacher there is a freshness, a quickening power, that awakens and inspires his [class].”

—Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, p. 103.

To be a Sabbath School teacher is both a privilege and a responsibility. A privilege because it offers the teacher the unique opportunity to lead and guide in the study and discussion of the week’s lesson so as to enable the class to have both a personal appreciation for God’s Word and a collective experience of spiritual fellowship with class members. When the class concludes, members should leave with a sense of having tasted the goodness of God’s Word and having been strengthened by its enduring power. The responsibility of teaching demands that the teacher is fully aware of the Scripture to be studied, the flow of the lesson through the week, the interlinking of the lessons to the theme of the quarter, and the lesson’s application to life and witness.

This guide is to help teachers to fulfill their responsibility adequately. It has three segments:

- 1. Overview** introduces the lesson topic, key texts, links with the previous lesson, and the lesson’s theme. This segment deals with such questions as Why is this lesson important? What does the Bible say about this subject? What are some major themes covered in the lesson? How does this subject affect my personal life?
- 2. Commentary** is the chief segment in the Teachers Edition. It may have two or more sections, each one dealing with the theme introduced in the Overview segment. The Commentary may include several in-depth discussions that enlarge the themes outlined in the Overview. The Commentary provides an in-depth study of the themes and offers scriptural, exegetic, illustrative discussion material that leads to a better understanding of the themes. The Commentary also may have scriptural word study or exegesis appropriate to the lesson. On a participatory mode, the Commentary segment may have discussion leads, illustrations appropriate to the study, and thought questions.
- 3. Life Application** is the final segment of the Teachers Edition for each lesson. This section leads the class to discuss what was presented in the Commentary segment as it impacts Christian life. The application may involve discussion, further probing of what the lesson under study is all about, or perhaps personal testimony on how one may feel the impact of the lesson on one’s life.

Final thought: What is mentioned above is only suggestive of the many possibilities available for presenting the lesson and is not intended to be exhaustive or prescriptive in its scope. Teaching should not become monotonous, repetitious, or speculative. Good Sabbath School teaching should be Bible-based, Christ-centered, faith-strengthening, and fellowship-building.

God Loves Freely



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 33:15–22; Hosea 14:1–4; Rev. 4:11; John 17:24; Matt. 22:1–14; John 10:17, 18.*

Memory Text: “‘I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely, for My anger has turned away from him’ ” (*Hosea 14:4, NKJV*).

Though Peter had denied Jesus three times, just as Jesus had predicted (*Matt. 26:34*), these denials were not the end of the story. After the Resurrection, Jesus asked Peter, “‘Do you love Me more than these?’ ” And Peter replied, “‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’ ” And Jesus said, “‘Tend My lambs.’ ” Then, Jesus again asked Peter, “‘Do you love Me?’ ” And Peter replied, “‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’ ” And Jesus said, “‘Shepherd My sheep.’ ” Then, yet again, a third time Jesus asked Peter, “‘Do you love Me?’ ” And “Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, ‘Do you love Me?’ ” And Peter replied, “‘Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.’ ” And Jesus said, “‘Tend My sheep’ ” (*John 21:15–17, NASB 1995*). Just as Peter had denied Jesus three times, Jesus—by way of the crucial question, “‘Do you love Me?’ ”—restored Peter three times.

However different our circumstances may be from Peter's, in many ways the principle is the same. That is, the question that Jesus had asked Peter is really the ultimate question that God poses to each of us in our time and place: *Do you love Me?*

Everything depends on our answer to that question.

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

Beyond Reasonable Expectations

God not only asks us, “Do you love Me,” but God Himself loves each person, and does so freely. Indeed, He *freely* loves you and me and every other person more than we could possibly imagine. And we know this love by the way He has acted in the history of His people.

Read Exodus 33:15–22 and consider the context of these verses and the narrative in which they appear. What does this passage, especially verse 19, reveal about God’s will and love?

All seemed lost. Not long after God’s amazing deliverance of His people from slavery in Egypt, the people of Israel had rebelled against God and worshiped a golden calf. When Moses came down from the mountain, he saw what they had done, and he threw down the tablets containing the Ten Commandments and shattered them. Though the people had forfeited any right to the covenant privileges and blessings that God had freely bestowed on them, God freely chose to continue with them in covenant relationship anyway—despite their unworthiness for the covenant blessings.

The words of Exodus 33:19, “ ‘I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion’ ” (NKJV), are often misunderstood to mean that God arbitrarily chooses to be compassionate and gracious to some, but not others. However, in context, God is not stating here that He will arbitrarily be gracious and compassionate to some and not to others. That is not how God works, contrary to some popular theology in which God predestines some to be lost and to face eternal condemnation.

What, then, is God proclaiming here? Essentially, God is proclaiming that, as the Creator of all, He has the right and authority to grant grace and compassion freely to even the most undeserving of people. And He is doing so in this situation, even after the golden calf rebellion, by granting mercy to His people, Israel, even if they didn’t deserve it.

This is one of many instances in which God manifests His love and does so beyond any reasonable expectations. Good news for us all, is it not?

In what ways has God continued to reveal and manifest His love to you—even beyond any reasonable expectations?

Unrequited Love

God's striking instance of His love for fallen humanity is found in the story of Hosea. God commanded the prophet Hosea, " 'Go, take yourself a wife of harlotry and children of harlotry, for the land has committed great harlotry by departing from the LORD' " (*Hos. 1:2, NKJV*). Hosea and his unfaithful wife were to be a living object lesson of God's love for His people, even despite Israel's unfaithfulness and spiritual harlotry. That is, it is a story of God's freely bestowed love on those who do not deserve it.

Indeed, despite God's faithfulness and love, the people rebelled against Him, again and again, too. Accordingly, Scripture repeatedly describes God as the unrequited lover of an unfaithful spouse. He had loved His people perfectly and faithfully, but they had scorned Him and served and worshiped other gods, deeply grieving Him and breaking the relationship, seemingly beyond repair.

Read Hosea 14:1–4. What do these verses reveal about God's steadfast love for His people?

In the aftermath of repeated rebellion by His people, God declares: " 'I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely' " (*NKJV*). The term "freely" in the phrase " 'I will love them freely' " translated a Hebrew word (*nedabah*), which connotes that which is offered voluntarily. It is the same term used of the freewill offerings in the sanctuary system.

Throughout Hosea, and throughout the narratives of Scripture, God shows amazing commitment and compassion to His people. Even though they repeatedly went after other lovers, breaking the covenant relationship, seemingly beyond repair, God of His own free will continued to bestow His love on them. The people did not deserve God's love; they had rejected and forfeited any rightful claim to it. Yet, God continued to bestow love on them without any compulsion, moral or otherwise. Here and elsewhere, Scripture consistently displays God's love as free and voluntary.

Many people think of God as a distant and harsh ruler and judge. How does the imagery of God's being scorned and grieved as the unrequited lover of an unfaithful spouse help you see God differently? How does it change the way you view your own relationship with God?

Love Freely Given

God not only continued to bestow His love freely on Israel, despite repeated rebellions, but God also continues to bestow love freely upon us, even while we are sinners. We do not deserve God's love, and we could never earn it. Conversely, God does not need us. The God of the Bible does not need anything (*Acts 17:25*). God's love for you and for me and for all persons is entirely of His own volition.

Compare Revelation 4:11 and Psalm 33:6. What do these verses tell us about God's freedom relative to Creation?

God freely created this world. And, because of this, God is worthy of all glory, honor, and power. God did not need to create any world. Before the foundation of the world, God already enjoyed the love relationship that existed within the Godhead.

Read John 17:24. What does it tell us about God's love before the world existed?

God did not need creatures as an object of His love. But, in accordance with His character of love, God chose to create the world and enter into a love relationship with creatures.

Not only did God freely create this world as a bestowal of His generous love, but God also continues freely to love humans, even after humans fell into sin in Eden, and even after we personally sin.

After the Fall in Eden, Adam and Eve had no right to continue to live and receive God's love. But God, who upholds "all things by the word of His power" (*Heb. 1:3, NKJV*), in His great love, mercy, and grace sustained their lives and has made a way to reconcile humanity back to Himself in love. And that reconciliation includes us, as well.

What does the fact that God continues to bestow love on this world, despite its fallenness and evil, tell us about His love and character? How should this truth cause us to love Him in return?

Many Are Called, but Few Are Chosen

God not only loves people of His own free will, but He also invites them to love Him in return. That God grants them the ability to freely choose whether they will accept or reject His love is apparent in (among other places) Christ's parable of the wedding banquet.

Read Matthew 22:1–14. What is the meaning of this parable?

In Christ's parable of the wedding banquet, a king arranges a marriage for his son and sends out his servants to "call those who were invited to the wedding," but "they were not willing to come" (*Matt. 22:2, 3, NKJV*). More than once the king sent out his servants to call them, but they ignored his call and, even worse, seized his servants and killed them (*Matt. 22:4–6*).

Later, after dealing with those who had murdered some of his servants, the king told his servants, "The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Therefore go into the highways, and as many as you find, invite to the wedding" (*Matt. 22:8, 9, NKJV*). After another episode of a man without a wedding garment being cast out, signifying the need to receive a wedding garment from the king to attend the wedding banquet, Jesus closes the parable with the cryptic but highly meaningful phrase, "Many are called, but few are chosen" (*Matt. 22:14, NKJV*).

What does this mean? Those who are finally "chosen," the "elect," are those who have accepted the Lord's invitation to the wedding. The term translated "call" and "invite" throughout the parable is the Greek term *kaleo* (to call, invite), and what determines who is finally "elect" (*eklekto*) is whether one has freely accepted the invitation.

In fact, God calls (that is, invites) *everyone* to the wedding feast. However, any one of us can refuse God's love. Freedom is essential to love. God will never force His love on anyone. Sad to say, we can reject having a love relationship with God.

The "elect" are those who accept the invitation. For those who love God, God has prepared things more wonderful than anything that we could possibly imagine. Once again, it all comes down to the question of love and the freedom inherent in love.

What about your life reveals that you have accepted the wedding invitation and have come appropriately clothed?

Crucified for Us

God invites everyone into a love relationship with Him, but only those who freely accept the invitation enjoy the eternal results. As seen in the parable of the wedding banquet, many whom the king called “ ‘were not willing to come’ ” (*Matt. 22:3, NKJV*).

Accordingly, shortly before His crucifixion, Christ lamented: “ ‘O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!’ ” (*Matt. 23:37, NKJV*). Christ wanted to gather them, but they were not willing. The same common Greek verb that means “to will” (*thelo*) is used both of Christ’s wanting to save them and of their not being willing to be saved (and the same term is in Matthew 22:3 above, as well).

Yet, Christ went to the cross for these people and for us. Amazing love! While human sin merits death, God Himself (in Christ) paid the price and has made a way to repair the ruptured relationship between heaven and earth. Meanwhile, He continues to bestow His love on us, though He is under no obligation beyond His own free commitment to do so.

Read John 10:17, 18. Compare with Galatians 2:20. What’s the message to us here in these texts?

In the ultimate display of God’s love—the Cross—we see that Christ gave Himself for us of His own free will. Christ laid down His life of His “own initiative.” No one took His life from Him; He freely offered it, according to the plan of redemption agreed upon in heaven before the foundation of the world.

“The plan for our redemption was not an afterthought, a plan formulated after the fall of Adam. It was a revelation of ‘the mystery which hath been kept in silence through times eternal.’ Romans 16:25, R. V. It was an unfolding of the principles that from eternal ages have been the foundation of God’s throne. From the beginning, God and Christ knew of the apostasy of Satan, and of the fall of man through the deceptive power of the apostate. God did not ordain that sin should exist, but He foresaw its existence, and made provision to meet the terrible emergency. So great was His love for the world, that He covenanted to give His only-begotten Son, ‘that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’ John 3:16.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 22.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “‘To Meet the Bridegroom,’” pp. 405–421, in *Christ’s Object Lessons*.

“It is the darkness of misapprehension of God that is enshrouding the world. Men are losing their knowledge of His character. It has been misunderstood and misinterpreted. At this time a message from God is to be proclaimed, a message illuminating in its influence and saving in its power. His character is to be made known. Into the darkness of the world is to be shed the light of His glory, the light of His goodness, mercy, and truth.

“This is the work outlined by the prophet Isaiah in the words, ‘O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and His arm shall rule for Him; behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him.’ Isa. 40:9, 10.

“Those who wait for the Bridegroom’s coming are to say to the people, ‘Behold your God.’ The last rays of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is a revelation of His character of love. The children of God are to manifest His glory. In their own life and character they are to reveal what the grace of God has done for them.

“The light of the Sun of Righteousness is to shine forth in good works—in words of truth and deeds of holiness.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 415, 416.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Worse than the thought of there being no God would be the thought that God hated us. How different a world would we exist in if that were the truth?
- ❷ Why do you think there is so much misunderstanding of God’s character in our world today? Think about and discuss ways that you might help people to see God’s character of love more clearly.
- ❸ What is the message that is to be proclaimed about God’s character today? How would you explain this message to someone who is not already familiar with the reality of God’s love? What evidence can you point to that shows the reality of His love and His wonderful character?
- ❹ Talking about God’s love is one thing. Revealing and reflecting that love in our lives is another. What “deeds of holiness” might reveal God’s love to those around us?

Opening the Bamboo Curtain

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Kneeling before a South Korean student, I asked if he had any prayer requests before I washed his feet during a Communion service at the Moscow International Seventh-day Adventist Church in Russia.

“Pray for North Korea,” said the student, who was studying at a Moscow university. “The gospel needs to reach the North for Jesus to return.”

With that prayer request in 2006, I learned about a special burden that Seventh-day Adventists from South Korea carry for their brothers and sisters in the North. Jesus said, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come” (*Matthew 24:14, NKJV*). South Korean Adventists see the North as a final frontier in the church’s mission to proclaim the gospel to the world, and today many are prayerfully seeking ways to open the Bamboo Curtain.

The Adventist Church’s work started in the North in 1904 and then spread to the South. Today, the church has 285,000 members living among 52 million in the South. But no Adventists are known to be in the North, which has a population of 26 million. Still, a trickle of information indicates that God has a people in the North, said Beom Seok Oh, a director at the Northern Asia-Pacific Division who oversees the church’s outreach to North Korea. During a trip to South Korea, he told me of a North Korean woman who drank a soy-sauce brew every Sabbath morning to get sick with a fever so she would be excused from mandatory Saturday work. When she was jailed, she smuggled a Bible into prison and buried it in the ground, furtively digging it up to read. Later, she managed to slip over the border to South Korea, where she could worship God freely. Church leaders are preparing for when the northern border will open. When it does, they intend to send missionaries into the country.

In the meantime, South Korean Adventists are caring for North Korean defectors. A deacon and his wife regularly visited a new defector, helping him clean his apartment, prepare meals, and submit government paperwork. After six months, the defector declared belief in God, said Chang-Seop Lee (pictured), pastor of the deacon and his wife’s church.

Another defector couldn’t sleep as he thought about his wife and children in the North. Pastor Lee prayed with him, and afterward, the defector acknowledged that he believed in God and had read the Bible in the North. The incident reenergized the pastor’s resolve to assist defectors. “I believe that we can expand our reach to the North by starting with the people whom we can meet today,” he said.



Pray for North Korea. Thank you for planning a generous Thirteenth Sabbath Offering on March 29 to further the spread of the gospel in the Northern Asia-Pacific Division.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Hosea 14:4*

Study Focus: *John 17:24; Matt. 22:1–14; John 10:17, 18.*

Introduction: God freely loves everyone more than we can possibly imagine. His love is utterly generous and merciful, as He voluntarily chooses to reveal His sacrificial love, even when people are unfaithful.

Lesson Themes: This week's lesson emphasizes three main themes:

1. God's love is not defined by necessity. His love is central to our understanding of His relationship with humanity. Divine love is an expression of God's spontaneous and abundant benevolence. His love is not caused or necessitated by any action on our part, nor the result of any human potential. God manifests His love without any expectation of obtaining advantage to Himself. He loves each person and does so freely, as in the case of Hosea, Israel, and us.
2. The scope of God's love is not to be calculated. God's love is not based on causal conditions. He voluntarily gave Himself for us, and His constant and unfailing love reveals His mercy more fully. His love surpasses all expectation, as He freely grants grace, mercy, and compassion to even the most undeserving of people.
3. God's love can be resisted. God offers to us the fullest revelation of His self-giving love but does not predetermine people's reaction to it. His love is not dominating or coercive but offers us the freedom to accept or resist it.

Life Application: God's love surpasses all human expectation, as He freely grants grace, mercy, and compassion to even the most undeserving of people. How does this notion of God's love change our attitude toward those within our sphere who have done nothing to deserve compassion from us?

Part II: Commentary

1. God's Love Is Not Defined by Necessity.

Freedom is a crucial feature of God's love. His love is not caused by something else. In the relationship of cause and effect, the effect is the necessary outcome of a cause. However, instead of being defined by the cause-effect logic of necessity, God's love is remarkably voluntary. This idea is elaborated upon in the experience of Hosea and his unfaithful wife.

Through the narrative of their experience, as we shall see, the concepts emerge that God's love does not imply the necessity for the existence of creation and that God's love freely gives.

Hosea and the freedom of God's love: Hosea 14:4 connects God's promised healing of Israel's unfaithfulness with His pledge to love His people freely. This promise reiterates the merciful restoration of God's apostate people, envisaged in Hosea 2:14–23, and as illustrated in Hosea's own merciful relationship with his unfaithful wife (*Hos. 3:1–5*). The comparison with Hosea's biographical experience suggests that God's love is utterly generous. “This is a love which will not be earned—what could Israel possibly present to Yahweh as an acceptable payment?” Instead, the Hebrew term *nedabash*, which emphasizes that God will love Israel *freely*, conveys the idea of a “‘voluntary offering’ or ‘offering made out of generosity.’” —Douglas Stuart, “Hosea–Jonah,” *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1987), vol. 31, p. 215. Hence, God's love is not caused or necessitated by any action performed by Israel. Rather, it is an expression of His freedom and, therefore, completely voluntary. In fact, the language of divine healing in Hosea 14:4 (*see also Hos. 5:13, Hos. 6:1, Hos. 7:1, Hos. 11:3*) seems to underline the voluntary nature of God's love, because Israel is incapable of becoming faithful by means of its own strength. Thus, the voluntary nature of this love implies that those being loved by God are truly undeserving of it.

God's love and creation: The notion that love requires a relationship with the other seems to suggest that God needed to make creatures in order to become a loving God. In other words, creation would be necessary for God's love. However, this idea is not supported by Scripture, which emphasizes the freedom and autonomy of God. He does not need anything from His creatures (*Acts 17:25*). Furthermore, divine love eternally existed before the creation of the universe, as Jesus underscored when He stated that the Father loved Him “before the foundation of the world” (*John 17:24*). Thus, the creation of the world was not a necessity for the existence of God's love. Instead, creation was a divine voluntary activity that resulted from the freedom of His eternal overflowing love.

God's love freely gives: Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross was a voluntary love offering. He was not merely a victim of violent execution. As Jesus Himself highlights: “‘I lay down My life. . . . No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself’” (*John 10:17, 18, NKJV*). Likewise, Paul explains that Christ “‘loved me and gave Himself for me’” (*Gal. 2:20, NKJV*). Therefore, the crucifixion of Jesus was not a necessity, framed by the evil actions of His executioners. Rather, He voluntarily gave Himself as an extraordinary manifestation of the freedom of divine love.

2. The Scope of God's Love Is Not to Be Calculated.

The notion that God's love does not follow the logic of cause and effect means that it should not be calculated, leading, therefore, to a presumable, reasonable, expectation. Two instances of intercession before God in the Pentateuch exemplify the problem of such a presumption.

The first instance is Abraham's intercession (*Gen. 18:23–33*) in the context of the divine judgment announced against Sodom and Gomorrah (*Gen. 18:20*). Initially, Abraham appeals to God's justice and asks whether He would actually destroy the city if there were 50 righteous people in it (*Gen. 18:24, 25*). Arguably, 50 sounded like a reasonable number to Abraham in his invocation of divine justice. However, inasmuch as this number progressively decreases in the persistent continuation of Abraham's intercession, from 50 to 45 (*Gen. 18:28*), from 45 to 40 (*Gen. 18:29*), from 40 to 30 (*Gen. 18:30*), from 30 to 20 (*Gen. 18:31*), and from 20 to 10 (*Gen. 18:32*), he does not appeal to divine justice anymore but rather to God's mercy (*Gen. 18:27, 30, 32*). It seems that 50 would be reasonable for justice, but 10 is way beyond a fair expectation. If the beginning of the intercession gives the impression that Abraham was trying to convince God to be just and then merciful, the progression of the intercessory dialogue reveals that such an intention is definitely not the case. Rather, the intercession process actually reveals that God's loving mercy is higher than could be reasonably expected or presumably calculated.

The second instance of intercession is Moses' intervention on behalf of the Israelites at Sinai. To be sure, the initial impression is that he was trying to convince God to be merciful toward them (*Exod. 32:11–14, 31–33*). But again, this is not the case. The climax of the interaction between Moses and the Lord is the revelation of divine glory, which is a remarkable manifestation of God's love (*Exod. 34:6, 7*). Besides the affirmation of the divine freedom to be merciful to those who clearly do not deserve God's love (*Exod. 33:19*), the acute asymmetrical comparison between “‘keeping mercy for thousands’ ” and “‘visiting the iniquity . . . to the third and the fourth generation’ ” (*Exod. 34:7, NKJV*) suggests that, ultimately, the scope of God's love cannot be calculated, which particularly highlights the freedom of His love.

3. God's Love Can Be Resisted.

The freedom of divine love also means that it does not predetermine humanity's reaction to this love. Once again, God's love is essentially voluntary and does not involve a necessary logic of cause and effect. In His lament over Jerusalem, Jesus sadly reveals unfulfilled desires regarding the salvation of its children. He emphasizes “‘how often’ ” He

“ ‘wanted to gather’ ” His “ ‘children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but [they] were not willing’ ” (*Matt. 23:37, NKJV*). The Greek verb *thelo* is used twice in this passage, but in different ways. The first occurrence depicts Christ’s will regarding those whom He wanted to save, whereas the second instance indicates that they did not share the same desire. Therefore, what divine love offers does not determine a loving reaction on the part of those who receive this offering. Unfortunately, because this loving desire is not reciprocated, it cannot actually be fulfilled.

Another Bible example of resistance to divine love is found in the parable of the wedding banquet, to which many are called, but they reject the invitation (*Matt. 22:3*). Then the call is extended to others, who indeed come to the wedding (*Matt. 22:9, 10*). However, even among those who do come, there is someone “ ‘who did not have on a wedding garment’ ” (*Matt. 22:11, NKJV*). The conclusion of the parable emphasizes that “ ‘many are called, but few are chosen’ ” (*Matt. 22:14*). In this parable about “ ‘the kingdom of heaven’ ” (*Matt. 22:2*), the language of being chosen does not convey the idea of a deterministic divine choice (predestination) but is related to the people’s acceptance or rejection of God’s invitation. In other words, “Many are invited; but some refuse to come, and others who do come refuse to submit to the norms of the kingdom and are therefore rejected. Those who remain are called ‘chosen.’ ”—D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), p. 457. Thus, our ability to choose is another indication of the freedom of God’s love, which is open to truly free reactions of acceptance or resistance. We are invited to freely accept it.

Part III: Life Application

Based on the aforementioned perspective regarding the freedom of God’s love, discuss the following questions:

- 1. How does the understanding that God’s love is not caused by any action on our part draw us closer to His presence? Give at least one practical example.**

2. What aspects of the fascinating notion that God's love surpasses reasonable expectation, as He freely shows compassion to the most undeserving of people, could be used in dialogues with unbelievers?

3. In what practical ways can we, unfortunately, resist God's love?

4. Considering that God's love does not employ coercion, what should we learn from this love as we think about the ways in which we, as Christians, may love others more authentically?

Covenantal Love



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: 2 Pet. 3:9, Deut. 7:6–9, Rom. 11:22, 1 John 4:7–20, John 15:12, 1 John 3:16.

Memory Text: “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him’ ” (John 14:23, NKJV).

Many have been taught that the Greek word *agape* refers to a love that is unique to God, while other terms for love, such as *phileo*, refer to different kinds of love, more deficient than *agape*. Some claim, too, that *agape* refers to unilateral love, a love that only gives but never receives, a love entirely independent of human response.

However, careful study of divine love throughout Scripture shows that these ideas, though common, are mistaken. First, the Greek term *agape* refers not only to God's love but also to human love, even sometimes misdirected human love (2 Tim. 4:10). Second, throughout Scripture, many terms other than *agape* refer to God's love. For example, Jesus taught, “ ‘The Father Himself loves [*phileo*] you, because you have loved [*phileo*] Me’ ” (John 16:27, NASB). Here, the Greek term *phileo* is used not only of human love but also of God's love for humans. Thus, *phileo* does not refer to a deficient kind of love but to God's love itself.

Scripture also teaches that God's love is not unilateral but deeply relational, in that it makes a profound difference to God whether or not humans reflect His love back to Him and to others.

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

The Everlasting Love of God

Scripture is clear: God loves everyone. The most famous verse of Scripture, John 3:16, proclaims this truth: “ ‘For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life’ ” (NKJV).

Read Psalm 33:5 and Psalm 145:9. What do these verses teach about how far God’s loving-kindness, compassion, and mercy extend?

Some might think that they are unlovable or that God might love everyone else but not them. Yet, the Bible consistently proclaims that *every single person* is loved by God. There is no one whom He does not love. And because God loves everyone, He also wants everyone to be saved, as well.

Read 2 Peter 3:9, 1 Timothy 2:4, and Ezekiel 33:11. What do these texts teach about God’s desire to save everyone?

The verse after John 3:16 adds: “ ‘For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved’ ” (John 3:17, NKJV). If it were up to God alone, every human being would accept His love and be saved. Yet, the Lord will not force His love on anyone. People are free to accept or reject it.

And even though some do reject it, God never stops loving them. In Jeremiah 31:3, He proclaims to His people: “ ‘Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you’ ” (NKJV). Elsewhere, the Bible repeatedly teaches that God’s love endures forever (*see, for example, Psalm 136*). God’s love never runs out. It is everlasting. This is hard for us to understand because we often find it easy not to love others, don’t we?

However, if we as individuals could learn to experience the reality of that love—that is, to know for ourselves God’s love—how differently we might live and treat others.

If God loves everyone, this means He must love some pretty despicable characters because there are some (a lot, in fact) despicable characters out there. What should God’s love for these people teach us about how we should seek to relate to them, as well?

Covenantal Love

The Bible often depicts God’s special love relationship with us by using family or kinship metaphors, particularly metaphors of the love between a husband and wife or of a good mother for her child. These metaphors are used particularly to depict the special relationship between God and His covenant people. This is a relationship of covenantal love, which involves not only God’s love for His people but also expectations that people will accept this love and will love Him (and one another) in return.

Read Deuteronomy 7:6–9. What do these verses teach about the relationship between God making covenants and God’s loving-kindness?

Deuteronomy 7:9 describes a special kind of love that God has with His covenant people, a relationship that is partially dependent on whether or not they remain faithful. God’s love is not conditional, but the covenant relationship with His people is.

The word translated “lovingkindness” or “mercy” in Deuteronomy 7:9, *hesed*, itself exemplifies the covenantal aspect of divine love (and much more). The word *hesed* is often used to describe the greatness of God’s mercy, goodness, and love. Among other things, *hesed* refers to the loving-kindness, or steadfast love, for another within an existing reciprocal love relationship. It also initiates such a relationship with the expectation that the other party will show this loving-kindness in return.

God’s *hesed* shows that His loving-kindness is extremely reliable, steadfast, and enduring. Yet, at the same time, the reception of the benefits of *hesed* is conditional, dependent upon the willingness of His people to obey and to maintain their end of the relationship (see 2 Sam. 22:26, 1 Kings 8:23, Ps. 25:10, Ps. 32:10, 2 Chron. 6:14).

God’s steadfast love is the basis of all love relationships, and we could never match that love. God not only freely gave us existence but also in Christ He freely gave Himself for us. “ ‘Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends’ ” (John 15:13, NKJV). No question, the greatest expression of God’s love was revealed when the Lord “humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Phil. 2:8, NKJV).

What are ways that you can constantly keep the reality of God’s love in your thoughts? Why is it important to do that?

Conditional Relationship

God calls and invites every person into an intimate love relationship with Him (*see Matt. 22:1–14*). Responding appropriately to this call involves obeying God’s command to love God and to love others (*see Matt. 22:37–39*). Whether one enjoys the benefits of this relationship with God depends on whether one freely decides to accept or reject His love.

Read Hosea 9:15, Jeremiah 16:5, Romans 11:22, and Jude 21. What do these texts teach about whether the benefits of God’s love can be rejected—even forfeited?

In these and other texts, enjoying the benefits of a love relationship with God is repeatedly depicted as conditional upon the human response to His love. Yet, we should not make the mistake of thinking that God ever actually stops loving anyone. As we have seen, God’s love is everlasting. And, although Hosea 9:15 includes God saying of His people, “ ‘I will love them no more,’ ” it is important to remember that later in the same book God declares of His people, “ ‘I will love them freely’ ” (*Hos. 14:4, NKJV*). Hosea 9:15 cannot mean that God entirely ceases to love His people. It must refer, instead, to the conditionality of some particular aspect or benefit of a love relationship with God. And how we respond to His love is crucial for this relationship to continue.

“ ‘He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him’ ” (*John 14:21, NKJV*). Likewise, Jesus proclaims to His disciples, “ ‘The Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me and have believed that I came forth from the Father’ ” (*John 16:27, NASB*).

These and other texts teach that maintaining the benefits of a saving relationship with God depends upon whether we will accept God’s love (which involves willingness to be vehicles of that love, as well). Again, this does not mean that God’s love ever ceases. Rather, just as we cannot stop the sun from shining but can cut ourselves off from the rays of the sun, we cannot do anything to stop God’s everlasting love, but we can finally reject a relationship with God and, thus, cut ourselves off from what it offers, especially the promise of eternal life.

What are ways that people can see and experience the reality of God’s love, whether or not they return it? For example, how does the natural world, even after sin, reveal His love?

Mercy Forfeited

God's love is everlasting and always unmerited. However, humans can reject it. We have the opportunity to accept or reject that love, but only because God freely loves us with His perfect, everlasting love *prior to anything we do* (Jer. 31:3). Our love for God is a response to what has already been given to us even before we asked for it.

Read 1 John 4:7–20, with specific emphasis on verses 7 and 19. What does this tell us about the priority of God's love?

God's love always comes first. If God did not first love us, we could not love Him in return. While God created us with the capacity to love and to be loved, God Himself is the ground and Source of all love. We have the choice, however, whether we will accept it and then reflect it in our lives. This truth is exemplified in Christ's parable of the unforgiving servant (*see Matt. 18:23–35*).

In the parable, we can see that there was no way the servant ever could have repaid what he owed the master. According to Matthew 18, the servant owed his master 10,000 talents. One talent amounted to about 6,000 denarii. And one denarius was what an average laborer would be paid for one day of work (*compare with Matt. 20:2*). So, it would take an average laborer 6,000 days of labor to earn one talent. Suppose, after accounting for days off, that an average laborer might work 300 days per year and, thus, earn 300 denarii in a year. So, it would take an average laborer approximately 20 years to repay one talent, which consisted of 6,000 denarii ($6,000/300 = 20$). In order to earn 10,000 talents, then, an average laborer would have to work 200,000 years. In short, the servant could *never* repay this debt. Yet, the master felt compassion for his servant and freely forgave his huge debt.

However, when this forgiven servant refused to forgive the far smaller debt of 100 denarii of one of his fellow servants and had him thrown in prison over the debt, the master was moved with anger and rescinded his merciful forgiveness. The servant forfeited the love and forgiveness of his master. Although God's compassion and mercy never run out, one can finally reject, even forfeit, the benefits of God's compassion and mercy.

Think about what you have been forgiven and what it cost you to be forgiven by Jesus. What should this tell you about forgiving others?

You Have Freely Received; Freely Give

Just as the servant could never repay his debt to his master, we can never repay God. We could never earn or merit God's love. "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (*Rom. 5:8, NKJV*). What amazing love! As 1 John 3:1 puts it, "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!" (*NKJV*).

However, what we can and should do is to reflect God's love to others as much as we possibly can. If we have received such great compassion and forgiveness, how much more should we bestow compassion and forgiveness on others? Recall that the servant forfeited his master's compassion and forgiveness because he failed to bestow them on his fellow servant. If we truly love God, we will not fail to reflect His love to others.

Read John 15:12, 1 John 3:16, and 1 John 4:7–12. What do these passages teach about the relationship between God's love, our love for God, and love for others?

Just after John 15:12, Jesus told His disciples, " 'You are My friends if you do whatever I command you' " (*John 15:14, NKJV*). And what did Jesus command them? Among other things, Jesus commanded them (and us) to love others even as He loved them. Here and elsewhere, the Lord commands us to love God and to love one another.

In short, we should recognize that we have been forgiven an infinite debt, one that we can never repay, a debt paid only at the cross for us. Therefore, we should love and praise God and live with love and grace toward others. As Luke 7:47 teaches, the one who is forgiven much loves much, but " 'to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little' " (*NKJV*). And who among us doesn't realize just how much he or she has been forgiven?

If to love God entails that we love others, we should with urgency share the message of God's love, both in word and in deed. We should help people in their daily lives here and now, and also seek to be a conduit of God's love and point people to the One who offers them the promise of eternal life in a new heaven and a new earth—an entirely new creation from this world, which is so marred and ravaged by sin and death, the doleful fruits of rejecting God's love.

What specific steps can you take to love God by loving others? What could you do today and in the coming days to show people God's love and (eventually) invite them to enjoy what it means to have the promise of eternal life?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Privilege of Prayer,” pp. 93–104, in *Steps to Christ*.

“Keep your wants, your joys, your sorrows, your cares, and your fears before God. You cannot burden Him; you cannot weary Him. He who numbers the hairs of your head is not indifferent to the wants of His children. ‘The Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.’ James 5:11. His heart of love is touched by our sorrows and even by our utterances of them. Take to Him everything that perplexes the mind. Nothing is too great for Him to bear, for He holds up worlds, He rules over all the affairs of the universe. Nothing that in any way concerns our peace is too small for Him to notice. There is no chapter in our experience too dark for Him to read; there is no perplexity too difficult for Him to unravel. No calamity can befall the least of His children, no anxiety harass the soul, no joy cheer, no sincere prayer escape the lips, of which our heavenly Father is unobservant, or in which He takes no immediate interest. ‘He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds.’ Psalm 147:3. The relations between God and each soul are as distinct and full as though there were not another soul upon the earth to share His watchcare, not another soul for whom He gave His beloved Son.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 100.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Dwell on the sentence above: “The relations between God and each soul are as distinct and full as though there were not another soul upon the earth to share His watchcare, not another soul for whom He gave His beloved Son.” What comfort does this give you, and how should you live, knowing the closeness of God to you and His care for you? How can you learn to live with the reality of that wonderful promise? Imagine if, day by day, you could truly believe it.
- ② In light of this week’s lesson, how do you understand Psalm 103:17, 18? What does it reveal about how God’s love is everlasting and yet how the benefits of a relationship with God are dependent upon whether we will accept His love?
- ③ In what ways does knowing this make a difference in your relationship with God? How does it affect the way you think of the sorrows of others?

Sibú of the Bible

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Melvin wasn't sure whether man was created from dust or corn. In the Bible, he read that "the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (*Genesis 2:7, NKJV*). But the Cabécar, the largest indigenous group in Costa Rica with a population of about 17,000, taught him that Sibú, which means "God" in their native language, created man from corn.

Growing up, Melvin always had thought that the Sibú of tradition and the Sibú of the Bible were the same deity. But as he studied the Bible with a Seventh-day Adventist, he realized that Sibú's characteristics in the Bible were very different from those of tradition. He decided to accept the Sibú of the Bible, and he was baptized with his parents and two siblings.

A year later, his mother suffered a stroke at the age of 40 and died.

Melvin, who was 22, believed that death was an unconscious sleep. But Cabécar tradition taught that his mother remained alive and risked being lost in darkness forever unless her family partook in four days of rituals that guided her to the next world. As part of traditional funeral rituals, they needed to slaughter two pigs and three chickens and feed them to mourners. Refusing to do so would be considered very selfish. Cabécar tradition condemned selfish people as an abomination. Despite tremendous pressure from grandparents and other relatives to conform to tradition, Melvin and his family decided to follow the Bible. An Adventist pastor helped them find a place outside of Cabécar territory to bury their mother.

It was then that Melvin decided to become a pastor. He had sensed God calling him to gospel ministry since his baptism, but he had resisted. After his mother died, he resolved to dedicate the rest of his life to sharing the Sibú of the Bible. He wanted to lead his people away from the Sibú who created man from corn to the Sibú who formed man from dust. He wanted them to rejoice in the knowledge that animal sacrifices were not required to gain eternal life in the next world because the Sibú of the Bible gave His own life as a sacrifice to save all.

Today, Melvin Madriz is a 24-year-old pastoral student at Central



America Adventist University in Costa Rica. Upon graduating, he will be the Adventist Church's first Cabécar pastor. Only about 30 Cabécar people are currently Adventists.

"I believe in Sibú, but only the Sibú of the Bible, not the Sibú of tradition," Melvin said.

Pray for the God of the Bible to be proclaimed to the Cabécar and all indigenous people worldwide. Thank you for your mission offerings that help share the gospel with unreached and underreached people groups.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *John 14:23*

Study Focus: *Deut. 7:9, Ps. 145:9, Ezek. 33:11, Matt. 18:23–35, 2 Pet. 3:9, Jude 21.*

Introduction: God's love is profoundly relational. A loving and intimate relationship with God cannot exist without human reciprocity in response to His loving benevolence.

Lesson Themes: This week's lesson focuses on three key ideas:

1. The love of God is unconditional. God loves everyone and wishes to establish a mutually binding relationship. The manifestation of His love is not dependent on human action or restricted to a certain type of people. He sees value in each person and considers him or her an object of His benevolent blessings.
2. The love of God intends to initiate a conditional relationship. God's loving benevolence is universal and unconditional, but He desires to have a specific and intimate relationship with human beings, which implies conditionality. That is, He expects a response to the love that they receive from Him, a spontaneous corresponding love in the form of obedience and loyalty.
3. The love of God was intended to be reflected in human relationships. God universally seeks a relationship of reciprocal love; the continuation of an intimate relationship implies an appropriate human response. The human side of the covenant-maintaining love involves keeping God's commandments and loving one another, which are human activities, empowered by God's love.

Life Application: God desires to have a loving relationship with human beings, but this relationship requires a genuine response and obedience on our part. Ask your students to silently reflect upon what is endangering their covenant-love relationship with God (and with others).

Part II: Commentary

1. The Love of God Is Unconditional.

Psalm 145:8, 9 highlights the remarkable and all-encompassing reality of

God's love: "The LORD is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and great in mercy. The LORD is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works" (*NKJV*). The idea of love in this passage is spelled out in terms of graciousness, compassion, patience, mercy, and goodness. This list echoes the revelation of God's glory and character to Moses in Exodus 34:6. In Psalm 145:8, the Hebrew term *khesed*, which also appears in Exodus 34:6, is rendered by the NKJV as "mercy" and translated as "love" in several other versions: "lovingkindness" (*NASB1995*), "steadfast love" (*ESV, NRSV*), "loyal love" (*NET*), and "rich in love" (*NIV*). The term *khesed* conveys the notions of loyalty, faithfulness, goodness, and graciousness (Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000], pp. 336, 337) and belongs to the semantic domain of (loyal/faithful) love (James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Hebrew [Old Testament]* [Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997]).

The all-encompassing reality of God's love is more precisely emphasized in Psalm 145:9, which underscores that "the LORD is good to all." The universal scope of divine goodness stated in this verse implicitly indicates that the love of God is unconditional; that is, it does not depend on human actions or reactions. In Psalm 145, universal language is used in verse 12 to describe "the sons of men," who are supposed to hear about God's wonderful deeds. Moreover, Psalm 145:15 depicts "the eyes of all" looking at the Lord with expectation and receiving from Him "their food in due season" (*NKJV*). Then Psalm 145:16 adds, "You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing" (*NKJV*). Finally, the psalm concludes with a general invitation, according to which "all flesh shall bless His holy name forever and ever" (*Ps. 145:21, NKJV*). This universal language highlights the all-encompassing reality of God's love and its unconditional nature, as all creatures are the objects of His benevolent blessings.

This picture of God's unconditional love is consistent with the idea that the Lord has "no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (*Ezek. 33:11, NKJV*). The same conception is affirmed in 2 Peter 3:9, which points out that God is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (*NKJV*). As 1 Timothy 2:4 indicates, the Lord "desires all men to be saved" (*NKJV*).

2. The Love of God Intends to Initiate a Conditional Relationship.

While Psalm 145 emphasizes the all-encompassing and unconditional reality of God's love, the psalm also distinguishes between faithful (*Ps. 145:10, 11*) and wicked (*Ps. 145:20*) people. Furthermore, the chapter highlights a more specific and conditional relationship of God with those

who seek and serve Him. “The LORD is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth. He will fulfill the desire of *those who fear Him*; He also will hear their cry and save them” (*Ps. 145:18, 19, NKJV; emphasis supplied*). Interestingly, according to Psalm 145:20, the key distinction between faithful and wicked ones is that the former group loves the Lord: “ ‘The LORD preserves all who love Him, but all the wicked He will destroy’ ” (*NKJV*). This distinction suggests that whereas God’s loving benevolence is universal and unconditional, He desires to have a loving relationship with human beings individually, and this relationship implies conditionality; that is, it cannot be established without a loving human response to the love of God. To be sure, God’s benevolent love is unconditional and all-encompassing. But a loving relationship with Him is conditional, inasmuch as a loving relationship cannot really exist if human beings do not respond with love to the love they have received from God. In other words, a genuine loving relationship implies some level of reciprocity.

This idea of a measure of reciprocity in a genuine loving relationship is crucial for the understanding of God’s covenantal relationship with His people. First of all, this covenant is based on God’s unconditional love. As Deuteronomy 7:6–8 points out regarding Israel: “The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you” (*NKJV*). However, even though God’s love is not based on what Israel is or does, the covenantal relationship between God and Israel requires some level of loving reciprocity as a response to God’s love. God certainly keeps His covenant with faithfulness and mercy. The people’s adequate response is to love God and keep His commandments. As Deuteronomy 7:9 emphasizes, God is “ ‘faithful’ ” and “ ‘keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments’ ” (*NKJV*).

3. The Love of God Was Intended to Be Reflected in Human Relationships.

If the relationship with our loving God (not the love of God itself, which is everlasting [*Jer. 31:3*]) is conditional, it can be forfeited, considering the human part of the relationship. For instance, because of the evil and wickedness of Israel, Hosea 9:15 underlines that their loving relationship with God does not exist anymore. A similar idea appears in Jeremiah 16:5. Romans 11:22 underscores the notion that the continuation of the loving relationship with God depends on human beings, who are supposed to “continue in His goodness” (*NKJV*). It is from this overall perspective that Jude 21 appeals to believers to “keep yourselves in the love of God.”

A loving relationship with God involves, on the part of humans, keeping His commandments (*John 14:21*) and loving one another (*1 John 4:7*). These things are not merely human actions but are actually human activities empowered by the love of God, who has loved us first (*1 John 4:19; compare with 1 John 4:7*).

The parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:23–35 indicates that God’s loving relationship with us can be forfeited if His love, first offered to us, is not reflected in our relationship with others. The parable compares the master’s merciful act of forgiveness toward his servant with the astonishing lack of mercy and forgiveness, on a much lesser scale, of this same servant toward a fellow servant. In light of the discrepancy of this comparison, Jesus teaches that God’s loving forgiveness, which comes first, depends on our forgiving attitude toward others. In other words, the loving relationship with God is conditionally supposed to be reflected in human relationships (see *John 15:12, 1 John 3:16, John 4:7–12*). Otherwise, our loving relationship with God will be forfeited. This unfortunate possibility should not be taken as a cold conditionality on God’s part but as a serious lack of understanding, on the part of humans, as to the depth of God’s loving mercy. As Luke 7:47 points out, the sense of how much we have been forgiven by God is observed in our expressions of love. Hence, if we do not express love to others, we have not really understood, nor sufficiently appreciated, the depth of God’s love toward us.

Part III: Life Application

God unconditionally loves everyone. As we accept and respond to His love, in the sense of allowing a loving relationship with Him, we also feel, as a practical effect of our loving relationship with God, the desire to establish a loving relationship with others. Therefore, God not only bestows His love on His creatures but also lets them freely respond (either positively or negatively) to His love and is willing to enable each person to express love to Him and to others. Based on this idea, discuss the following questions:

- 1. How can we unconditionally show our love and respect for every human being, regardless of social position, individual characteristics, or personal achievements?**

2. Think of a story that exemplifies the distinction between unconditional love and a conditional loving relationship. How does this example illustrate the notions of unconditionality and conditionality in our explanation of God's love and of His loving relationship with us?

3. Our loving relationship with God leads us to desire and take pleasure in doing good to others, which is contrasted with being indifferent to other people's needs. How does our relationship with God change the way we behave and act with people from our family, work, and neighborhood?

4. How can you still show unconditional love to someone who does not want to enter into a respectful, loving relationship with you? Do you think that a continuous attitude of unconditional love has the potential to influence this person to change his or her mind? Explain.

5. What could we do to bond with and to show unconditional love, respect, and support for teenagers in our church? How can we develop positive intergenerational connections for a more loving relationship with younger people?

To Be Pleasing *to* God



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Luke 15:11–32, Zeph. 3:17, Eph. 5:25–28, Isa. 43:4, Rom. 8:1, Rom. 5:8, Mark 9:17–29.*

Memory Text: “The LORD your God in your midst, the Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing” (*Zephaniah 3:17, NKJV*).

Imagine the following scenario: a five-year-old child comes to his father with a poorly wrapped gift on Father's Day. Excitedly, he hands the gift to his father.

Imagine that the father says, “Son, I do not care about your gift. After all, there is nothing you could give me that would please me. Anything you could give me, I could get for myself, and anything you give to me was either bought with my money or made from materials that I paid for. So, keep your gift. I do not need it or want it. But I love you, anyway.”

Ouch!

What do you think of this father's reaction? Such words as *heartless*, *cold*, and *unfeeling* come to mind. Is this the way God responds to us? Can we actually be pleasing to God? Hard as it is to imagine, even we as fallen beings, corrupted by sin, and prone to evil—yes, we can be pleasing to God! In other words, God does not look upon us, or the gifts that we bring Him, with the attitude of that father. On the contrary, we can be pleasing to God, but only through Christ.

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

More Valuable Than You Can Imagine

As we saw in an earlier lesson, there is no one—even the worst sinner or worst evildoer—whom God does not love. And because God values people more than we could possibly imagine, He is displeased by sin because He loves us and knows what sin does to us, as well.

Read Luke 15:11–32. What does the parable of the prodigal son reveal about God’s compassion and love? What warning does it provide for those who, like the other son, remained home?

In this story that Jesus tells, the man’s son requested his inheritance early, effectively rejecting his father and his father’s household. The prodigal son then goes on to squander his inheritance and is reduced to poverty and hunger, envying pigs that eat from a trough. Realizing that the servants in his father’s house have more than enough food, he decides to return home in hopes of becoming a servant.

What follows is powerful. Some fathers would turn such a son away upon his return. “You took your inheritance and cut yourself off from my house. You no longer have a home here.” That would be a logical, even reasonable, attitude, would it not? In the eyes of some human parents, the son had gone too far to be accepted back home, especially as a son.

But, in the parable, the father (representing God Himself) does not respond in any of these ways. Rather, “ ‘when [the prodigal son] was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him’ ” (*Luke 15:20, NKJV*). Even though it was considered less than dignified in such times for the master of the house to run out to meet someone, the father in his great compassion ran out to meet his son and, more astonishingly, restored him to his household, even throwing a celebration in his behalf, signifying the great compassion of God for each wayward person and the delight He takes in even a single person returning home. What a picture of God!

Interesting is the reaction of the other son. Why was this reaction such a human reaction, based at least in part on fairness, and so understandable, as well? What, however, does his part of the story teach us about how human concepts of fairness don’t capture the depth of the gospel or of God’s love for us?

Rejoicing With Gladness

Hard as it is for us to imagine, God considers each person of incalculable value, which is why He rejoices over the salvation of even one soul.

Read Zephaniah 3:17. How does this verse shed light on the parable of the prodigal son?

Zephaniah 3:17 emphatically displays the delight of God over His redeemed people. Just about every word for joy and delight in the Hebrew language is packed into this single verse, descriptive of God's delight over His redeemed people. It's almost as if no one of the terms by itself is sufficient to describe the magnitude of God's delight on that day.

Notice, too, where God is according to this verse—in the “midst” of His people. The reconciliation that arises from the relationship of love comes with the immediate presence of God. Just like the father—when he sees the son afar off, he comes running—here God is in the midst of His people.

In Isaiah 62:4, similar imagery is couched with a marriage analogy. According to Isaiah 62:4 (*NKJV*), God's people will “be called Hephzibah,” which means “My delight is in her,” and the land will be called “Beulah,” which means “married.” Why? Because, the text says, “The LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married.” The very pinnacle of God's joy is reserved for the day of restoration, when He will receive His people and rejoice over us, even as the father rejoiced over his prodigal son.

Read Ephesians 5:25–28. What does this say about the kind of love we are also called to display?

This passage exhorts husbands to love their wives “just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her,” and to love their wives “as their own bodies” (*Eph. 5:25, 28, NKJV*). These texts not only highlight the kind of unselfish and sacrificial love a husband is to have for his wife but also show that Christ Himself loves His people (the church) *as part of Himself*.

Pleasing God?

How could it be that the God of the universe takes delight in mere humans, fleeting blobs of protoplasm on one tiny planet amid what is probably an infinite universe? How could it be possible that humans could matter so much to the Supreme Being, who is all-powerful and who needs nothing? These questions can be parsed into two aspects. First, how could God Himself be delighted? Second, how could humans bring Him delight, particularly given our sinfulness? The first aspect of these questions is the topic for today and the second for tomorrow.

Read Isaiah 43:4; Psalm 149:4; and Proverbs 15:8, 9. What do they tell us about God taking delight in His people?

As we partially saw yesterday, God can be pleased by humans because God loves people in a way that takes account of their best interests, as would anyone who loved and cared for others.

Conversely, God is displeased by His people when they do evil. Indeed, Proverbs 15:8, 9 teaches that, while the “sacrifice” and the “way” of the wicked are each an “abomination to the LORD,” the “prayer of the upright is His delight” and “He loves [the one] who follows righteousness” (*NKJV*). This passage shows not only that is God displeased by evil but also that He delights in goodness. It also puts divine delight and love in direct relationship with one another, showing the deep connection between God’s love and His delight, which appears throughout Scripture.

According to Psalm 146:8, “The LORD loves the righteous” (*NKJV*). Second Corinthians 9:7 adds, “God loves a cheerful giver” (*NKJV*). Notice, first, what these texts do not say. They do not say that God loves only the righteous or that God loves only the cheerful giver. God loves everyone. Yet, for these texts to convey anything at all, they must mean that God loves the “righteous” and the “cheerful giver” in some special sense. What we have seen in Proverbs 15:8, 9 provides the clue: God loves these and others in the sense of being pleased with them.

Think about how closely tied heaven and earth must be that God, the Creator of the universe, can be so intimately involved, even emotionally, with us. What hope should this amazing idea give you, especially if you are going through a hard time?

Living Stones

How is it that we, as fallen, sinful beings, can be pleasing to a holy God?

Read Romans 8:1 and Romans 5:8. What do these texts teach about our standing before God?

God bestows grace on people prior to any human response. Before anything we say or do, God reaches out to us and gives us the opportunity to accept or reject His love. As Romans 5:8 puts it, “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (*NKJV*; compare with *Jer. 31:3*). And we can be reconciled to God and even pleasing in His sight, by faith through the work of our Redeemer.

Read 1 Peter 2:4–6 and compare it with Hebrews 11:6. What does this tell us about how we can be pleasing to God?

Without God’s intervention, fallen people are incapable of bringing anything valuable to God. Yet God, in His grace and mercy, has made a way, through the work of Christ. Specifically, “through Jesus Christ” we may “offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God” (*1 Pet. 2:5, NKJV*). Although “without faith it is impossible to please Him” (*Heb. 11:6, NKJV*), by the mediating work of Christ, God will “make” believers “complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” (*Heb. 13:21, NKJV*). Those who respond to God by faith are accounted righteous in His sight through the mediation of Christ, whose righteousness alone is acceptable. And those who respond to God’s loving overtures are accounted worthy through Christ’s mediation (*Luke 20:35*), and He transforms them into His likeness (*1 Cor. 15:51–57, 1 John 3:2*). God’s redeeming work is not only *for* us but *in* us, as well.

Why is the idea of Christ mediating for you in heaven so encouraging?

A Worthy Goal

Under the umbrella of God's mercy and mediation, God takes pleasure in even the smallest positive response to His love. Through the One who alone is worthy of love and is Himself perfectly righteous, each one of us can be counted righteous and counted among God's beloved who will live with Him in perfect love for eternity. This is the great hope of the redemption, which involves Christ's work for us in heaven.

But, you might wonder, can this include even me? *What if I am not good enough? What if I am afraid that I do not have enough faith?*

Read Mark 9:17–29. How does God respond to the man in the story? How much faith is enough faith?

The disciples could not cast out the demon; all hope seemed lost. But Jesus came and told the father, “ ‘If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes’ ” (*Mark 9:23, NKJV*). And the father tearfully replied, “ ‘Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!’ ” (*Mark 9:24, NKJV*).

Notice, Jesus did not say to the man, “Come back to me when you have more faith.” Instead his cry, “ ‘Help my unbelief,’ ” was enough.

Without faith, it is impossible to please God (*Heb. 11:6*), and yet Jesus accepts even the smallest faith. And by faith (through the mediation of Christ), we can be pleasing to Him. Through faith and because of Christ's work on our behalf, we can respond in ways that please God, similar to the way that a human father is pleased when a child brings him a gift that is otherwise worthless.

Thus, we should follow Paul's counsel to make it our goal to “be well pleasing to” God (*2 Cor. 5:9, 10, NKJV; compare with Col. 1:10, 1 Thess. 4:1, Heb. 11:5*). And we should ask God to transform our interests to include the best interests of those whom we love, and to expand our love so that it reaches out to others. “Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality” (*Rom. 12:10–13, NKJV*).

If God accepts us through Christ, how much more should we accept others? What light does the command to love your neighbor as yourself (*Lev. 19:18, Matt. 22:39*) and the golden rule to treat people the way you want to be treated shed on this idea?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “ ‘Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled,’ ” pp. 662–680, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“The Lord is disappointed when His people place a low estimate upon themselves. He desires His chosen heritage to value themselves according to the price He has placed upon them. God wanted them, else He would not have sent His Son on such an expensive errand to redeem them. He has a use for them, and He is well pleased when they make the very highest demands upon Him, that they may glorify His name. They may expect large things if they have faith in His promises.

“But to pray in Christ’s name means much. It means that we are to accept His character, manifest His spirit, and work His works. The Saviour’s promise is given on condition. ‘If ye love Me,’ He says, ‘keep My commandments.’ He saves men, not in sin, but from sin; and those who love Him will show their love by obedience.

“All true obedience comes from the heart. It was heart work with Christ. And if we consent, He will so identify Himself with our thoughts and aims, so blend our hearts and minds into conformity to His will, that when obeying Him we shall be but carrying out our own impulses. The will, refined and sanctified, will find its highest delight in doing His service. When we know God as it is our privilege to know Him, our life will be a life of continual obedience. Through an appreciation of the character of Christ, through communion with God, sin will become hateful to us.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 668.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What might it mean to “unselfishly receive”? What do you think the relationship of giving and receiving will be like in heaven and in the new earth?
- ❷ Coming from a distant part of the cosmos—farther perhaps than the James Webb Space Telescope’s most squinting eyes can reach—heavenly messengers referred to the prophet Daniel as *chamudot*, “beloved, desirable, precious.” And they did so three times. In Daniel 9:23, Gabriel says *ki chamudot attah*, “for you are greatly beloved.” In Daniel 10:11, a heavenly being (perhaps Gabriel again) calls him *ish chamudot*, a “man greatly beloved,” a phrase repeated to Daniel later (*Dan. 10:19*). Think about what it says about God and how close He is to us. What hope can you draw for yourself from this amazing truth?
- ❸ How do the examples of the heroes of faith discussed in Hebrews 11 relate to the content of this week’s lesson? Specifically, what do such examples reveal about how one can be “pleasing to God” by faith? What can you learn and apply to your day-to-day life from such examples of faith and faithfulness?

The Thankful Deacon

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Jong-Moon Yoon is known as the thankful deacon. The first words out of his mouth no matter the circumstances are “thank you.” When someone asks for help, he says, “Thank you.” When he faces a conflict, he says, “Thank you.” When hardships and even losses beset him, he says, “Thank you.”

The deacon at a Seventh-day Adventist church in South Korea has taken to heart the words of the apostle Paul, who said in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, “In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (*NKJV*). People have noticed.

Jong-Moon is the longtime owner of a café on a beach in Jeongdongjin, one of the most popular places to watch sunrises in South Korea, especially on New Year’s Day. Among his customers was Nanum. As a teenager, she occasionally dropped by the café to enjoy the sunrise over a simple breakfast of tea and a toasted sandwich with a fried egg, lettuce, and cheese. As she grew older, she got married and had a daughter, Azsa. The two became regular breakfast customers, and the mother was amazed at Jong-Moon’s thankfulness. When she placed an order, he said, “Thank you.” When she paid for breakfast, he said, “Thank you.” When she thanked him for the meal, he said, “Thank you.”

During one visit, she struck up a conversation and learned that he goes to church on Saturdays. She had never heard about people worshipping on Saturdays. “Can I come to church with you next Saturday?” she asked.

The next Sabbath, she and her five-year-old daughter accompanied Jong-Moon to his church, located about a 30-minute drive from his café. Church members warmly welcomed the mother and daughter, and they eagerly asked how they had learned about the church. She said she had come because of the thankful deacon.

After the church service, Nanum told Jong-Moon that she wanted to come again. “If this is a church that you attend, I will follow you,” she said.

Even though Nanum never heard the name of Jesus at the café, she saw Jesus through Jong-Moon’s thankful spirit. The gospel is not only spoken but also conveyed through a person’s life. Through Jong-Moon’s example, the young mother and her daughter started attending church regularly. Now, she is praying that her husband will join them on Sabbath mornings.



Part of this quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help spread the gospel in South Korea. Thank you for planning a generous offering on March 29.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Zephaniah 3:17*

Study Focus: *Zeph. 3:17, Luke 15:4–32.*

Introduction: Our loving God rejoices, and is pleased, to have a loving relationship with His creatures.

Lesson Themes: This week's lesson highlights three basic points:

1. God's pleasure with His creatures shows how valued we are in His eyes. In God's eyes, every single person is precious and of incalculable value and worth. For this reason, He delights and takes pleasure in His sons and daughters when they repent and seek Him. The parables in Luke 15 highlight God's joy and celebration over the salvation of a lost person. His pleasure in our salvation shows how valuable we are in God's sight.
2. God's pleasure is the reason for human joy and praise. God wants to fill our hearts with overflowing joy, and He takes pleasure in human joy and praise. He invites His people to experience pleasure in Him as they praise Him with joy through prayers and songs. Also, praises to God help us envision, in anticipation, His future pleasure and joy with His people.
3. Because of our indignity, we need Christ in order to please God. We are invited to please God, offering Him spiritual sacrifices by the praise of our lips in thanksgiving and by the practice of doing good and sharing. Yet, we can only do these things through the mediation of Christ. Our faith is pleasing to God only by means of Christ's work on our behalf.

Life Application: God's pleasure with His creatures shows how valued we are in His eyes and how much He treasures His creation. How may we value the worth of each person?

Part II: Commentary

1. God's Pleasure With His Creatures Shows How Valued We Are in His Eyes.

The parable of the prodigal son remarkably illustrates how valuable we are in God's estimation. In fact, all of the three combined parables of Luke 15, which are told to the grumbling Pharisees and scribes (*Luke 15:2*), underscore the incredible value of (lost) human beings in the eyes of God. It is noteworthy that the Pharisees and scribes do not see any worth in the people ("sinners") who are being warmly received by Jesus (*Luke 15:2*).

Ellen G. White points out that “the Pharisees had only scorn and condemnation for them; but Christ greeted them as children of God, estranged indeed from the Father’s house, but not forgotten by the Father’s heart.” —*Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 186.

With the three parables, Jesus reproaches the Pharisees’ dismissive mentality, emphasizing the divine pleasure of retrieving and receiving one who was lost. In other words, the expressions of joy and pleasure in each parable indicate how valuable is the one who was lost. In the parable of the lost sheep, the shepherd eagerly goes after the lost one “ ‘until he finds it’ ” (*Luke 15:4, NKJV*). He comes back with “ ‘it on his shoulders, rejoicing’ ” (*Luke 15:5, NKJV*). The more we realize how joyful the shepherd is, the more we perceive how valuable in his eyes is the sheep that was lost. Indeed, the joy and pleasure of the shepherd overflows as he invites neighbors and friends to rejoice with him (*Luke 15:6*).

The same pattern appears in the other two parables. In the parable of the lost coin, the woman carefully searches for the coin “ ‘until she finds it’ ” (*Luke 15:8, NKJV*). Then, with overwhelming pleasure, she invites neighbors and friends to rejoice with her (*Luke 15:9*). With regard to the parable of the lost son, which is the climax of the three parables, the prodigal son is not only lost, but we are told that he stubbornly took progressive steps toward that condition, as he, initially, did not discern the true implications of his rash and foolish decisions. Eventually, when he comes to his senses, the prodigal son feels that his dignity and value before his father have been lost as a result of his own sin: “ ‘I am no longer worthy to be called your son’ ” (*Luke 15:19, NKJV*).

However, the actions of the father are different from the son’s reasonable expectation. Rather, the father “ ‘ran and fell on his neck and kissed him’ ” (*Luke 15:20, NKJV*). Shockingly, these are not the only expressions of goodwill and pleasure on the part of the father. Without paying attention to the son’s request to be accepted as a servant, the father highlights the dignity of his son by asking the servants to bring “ ‘the best robe,’ ” “ ‘a ring,’ ” and “ ‘sandals’ ” for him (*Luke 15:22, NKJV*). But that is not enough. The affirmation of the value of the son by means of distinguishing clothes is intensified with the remarkable celebration that the father promotes: “ ‘Bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry’ ” (*Luke 15:23, NKJV*). In short, the father not only receives the son but is pleased with his return.

So far, we find in the parable of the prodigal son the same overall pattern identified in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin; namely, the lost is found and there is celebration over these tidings. However, the parable of the prodigal son goes a step further, as the celebration is strongly questioned by the older son (*Luke 15:28–30*). This point is relevant because it illustrates the attitude of the Pharisees in the beginning of

the chapter (*see Luke 15:2*). Both the older son in the parable and the Pharisees highly criticize the reception of sinners and table fellowship/celebration with them. This criticism reveals how they underestimate the value of the people being warmly received. By contrast, the parable teaches how God values his sons and daughters and celebrates when they repent and seek Him. For this reason, the parable ends with the father responding to the criticism of the older son with the following statement: “ ‘It was right that we should make merry and be glad’ ” (*Luke 15:32, NKJV*).

The Greek word for the translated expression “it was right” is the verb *dei*, which literally means “it is necessary, one must, one has to” or underscores that something “should happen because of being fitting” (Frederick W. Danker et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], p. 214). Some Bible versions translate it as “it was fitting” (*ESV, RSV*) or “we had” (*NASB, NRSV, NIV*) in *Luke 15:32*. The underlying concept in this language of necessity is the precious value of the one who was lost but now is found. It is from this perspective that the father underlines that *we must* celebrate. There is no other thing to do in light of the value of the one who is found. Similar to the sentiment in the two previous parables, the father does not want to celebrate alone. The servants seem to be involved (*Luke 15:22–27*), and the father emphatically appeals to the older son to participate, as well. The prodigal son is not only the “ ‘son of yours,’ ” to use the language of the older brother (*Luke 15:30, NKJV*), but, as the father appeals, “ ‘your brother’ ” (*Luke 15:32, NKJV*).

Therefore, the parables told by Jesus in *Luke 15* teach that God’s pleasure with the salvation of His sons and daughters shows how valued we are in His eyes. He wants us not only to feel valued with His loving pleasure, but we should also celebrate with Him (and therefore wholeheartedly value) the salvation of our fellow brothers and sisters.

2. God’s Pleasure Is the Reason for Human Joy and Praise.

Zephaniah 3:17 and Psalm 149:4 are somewhat similar in their emphasis on God’s pleasure. Psalm 149 is an invitation to praise God joyfully: “Let Israel rejoice in their Maker; let the children of Zion be joyful in their King” (*Ps. 149:2, NKJV*). The reason for this invitation is presented in Psalm 149:4: “For the LORD takes pleasure in His people” (*NKJV*). Therefore, the psalm affirms pleasure in a two-way relationship. God is pleased with the people, and, on this basis, the people are invited to experience pleasure in the Lord as they praise Him with joy.

Likewise, Zephaniah 3:14 exhorts God’s people to joyfully praise the Lord. “Sing, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart” (*NKJV*). This exhortation is followed by the

emphasis in Zephaniah 3:17 that the powerful and saving God is in the midst of His people and that “ ‘He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing’ ” (*NKJV*). In Psalm 149, God’s pleasure is the reason for human praise and joy; in Zephaniah 3, the praises to Him are supposed to envision God’s future pleasure and joy with His people.

3. Because of Our Indignity, We Need Christ in Order to Please God.

Among the different ways in which we are invited to please God in Scripture (*see, for instance, Heb. 11:5, 6; 2 Cor. 5:9; Col. 1:10; 1 Thess. 4:1*), Hebrews 13:15 urges us to continually offer spiritual sacrifices to God, which include the praise of our lips in thanksgiving to Him and the practice of doing good and sharing. The next verse concludes, “with such sacrifices God is well pleased” (*Heb. 13:16, NKJV*). It is noteworthy that the first words of Hebrews 13:15 indicate that we are not supposed to offer these sacrifices by ourselves. Rather, we need to offer the spiritual sacrifices to God “through Jesus” (*NIV*). In other words, we are not able to please God with our own praises and good works. It is only through Christ that our praises and works may be offered as spiritual sacrifices that truly please God.

Part III: Life Application

Human beings are endowed with extraordinary value. You are valuable because you are created in God’s image. It is amazing to think that God values humans more than we could possibly imagine. With this perspective in mind, discuss the questions below:

- 1. How may our respect and love for the people whom we encounter in everyday life show them how valuable they are in God’s eyes?**

- 2. In what ways may professed religious people unfortunately despise the dignity and value of others?**

3. Those who love God will want to know how to please Him. But how, in actuality, may we please God? To what extent does the way we value other people relate to God's delight over the salvation of His people?

4. What can you do to value every person to the point of taking pleasure in his or her salvation and of proclaiming God's goodness and steadfast love?

5. Give one practical example of how the mediation of Christ enables us to please God with our actions.

God Is Passionate *and* Compassionate



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ps. 103:13, Isa. 49:15, Hos. 11:1–9, Matt. 23:37, 2 Cor. 11:2, 1 Cor. 13:4–8.*

Memory Text: “‘Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget, yet I will not forget you’ ” (*Isa. 49:15, NKJV*).

Emotions are often viewed as undesirable and to be avoided. For some people, emotions are intrinsically irrational, and thus, the good man or woman would not be described as “emotional.” In some ancient Greek philosophy, the idea of the “rational” man, who is (mostly) either impervious to passions or who rules over his emotions by way of unemotional reason, is prized as the ideal.

Unbridled emotions can be problematic, yes. However, God created people with the capacity for emotions, and God Himself is displayed throughout Scripture as experiencing profound emotions. If God can experience deep emotions, as the Bible consistently portrays, then emotions cannot be intrinsically bad or irrational—for the God of the Bible is perfectly good and possesses perfect wisdom.

In fact, there are beautiful truths to be garnered from the realization that God's love for us is a deeply emotional love, but always with the caveat that though God's love (emotional or otherwise) is perfect, it should not be thought of as identical to emotions as humans experience them.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 25.

More Than a Mother's Love

Perhaps the greatest love common to human experience is the love of a parent for a child. The Bible often uses the imagery of the parent-child relationship to depict God's amazing compassion for people, emphasizing that God's compassion is exponentially greater than even the deepest and most beautiful human expression of the same emotion.

Read Psalm 103:13, Isaiah 49:15, and Jeremiah 31:20. What do these depictions convey about the nature and depth of God's compassion?

According to these texts, God relates to us as His beloved children, loving us as a good father and mother love their children. Yet, as Isaiah 49:15 explains, even a human mother might “forget her nursing child” or “not have compassion on the son of her womb” (*NKJV*), but God never forgets His children, and His compassion never fails (*Lam. 3:22*).

Notably, the Hebrew term *raḥam*, used for compassion here and in many other texts describing God's abundant compassionate love, is believed to be derived from the Hebrew term for womb (*raḥam*). And thus, as scholars have noted, God's compassion is a “womb-like mother-love.” Indeed, it is exponentially greater than any human compassion, even that of a mother for her newborn.

According to Jeremiah 31:20 (*NKJV*), God views His covenant people as His “dear son” and “pleasant child,” despite the fact that they often rebelled against Him and grieved Him. Even so, God declares, “My heart yearns for him” and “I will surely have mercy on him.” The term translated “mercy” here is the term used above for divine compassion (*raḥam*). Further, the phrase “My heart yearns” can be translated literally as “My innards roar.” This description is the deeply visceral language of divine emotion, signifying the profound depth of God's compassionate love for His people. Even despite their infidelity, God continues to bestow His abundant compassion and mercy on His people and does so beyond all reasonable expectations.

For some of us, recognizing that God's compassion for us is akin to that of a loving father or mother is deeply comforting. However, some people might struggle because their parent or parents were not loving. What other ways could God's compassion be revealed to them?

Gut-Wrenching Love

The incalculable depths of God's compassionate love for humanity are manifested in Hosea. God had commanded the prophet Hosea, "Go, take yourself a wife of harlotry and children of harlotry, for the land has committed great harlotry by departing from the LORD" (*Hos. 1:2, NKJV*). Hosea 11 later depicts God's relationship with His people, but with the metaphor of a loving father for his child.

Read Hosea 11:1–9. How does the imagery in these verses bring to life the way God loves and cares for His people?

God's love for His people is likened to the tender affection of a parent for a child. Scripture uses the imagery of teaching a young child to walk; taking one's beloved child in one's arms; healing and providing sustenance; and otherwise tenderly caring for His people. Scripture also states that God "carried" His people just "as a man carries his son" (*Deut. 1:31, NKJV*). In "His love and in His mercy He redeemed them" and "lifted them and carried them all the days of old" (*Isa. 63:9, NASB*).

In contrast to God's unwavering faithfulness, His people were repeatedly unfaithful, ultimately pushing God away and bringing judgment upon themselves and deeply grieving Him. God is compassionate, but never to the exclusion of justice. (As we will see in a later lesson, love and justice go together.)

Have you ever been so upset about something that your stomach churns? That is the kind of imagery used for the depth of God's emotions over His people. The imagery of one's heart turning over and compassions being kindled is idiomatic language of deep emotions, used of both God and humans.

This imagery, of compassions being kindled (*kamar*), is used in the case of the two women who came before Solomon, each one claiming the same baby as her own. When Solomon ordered the infant cut in two (with no intention to harm the child), this imagery described the emotional reaction of the real mother (*1 Kings 3:26; compare with Gen. 43:30*).

Anyone who has ever been a parent knows what the lesson is talking about. No other earthly love begins to compare. How does this help us understand the reality of God's love for us, and what comfort can, and should, we draw from this understanding?

The Compassion of Jesus

In the New Testament, the same kind of imagery as in the Old is used to depict God's compassion. Paul refers to the Father as the "Father of mercies and God of all comfort" (*2 Cor. 1:3, NKJV*). Further, Paul explains in Ephesians 2:4 that God is "rich in mercy" and redeems humans "because of His great love with which He loved us" (*NKJV*).

In various parables, Christ Himself repeatedly uses terms of visceral, gut-wrenching emotion to depict the Father's compassion (*Matt. 18:27, Luke 10:33, Luke 15:20*). And the same language that depicts divine compassion in the Old Testament and New Testament also is used in the Gospels to depict Jesus' compassionate responses to those in distress.

Read Matthew 9:36, Matthew 14:14, Mark 1:41, Mark 6:34, and Luke 7:13. See also Matthew 23:37. How do these verses shed light on the way Christ was moved by the plight of people?

Again and again in the Gospels, Christ was said to be moved to compassion by people in distress or in need. And He not only felt compassion, He addressed the people's needs, as well.

And yes, Jesus also lamented over His people. One might imagine the tears in Christ's eyes as He looks out over the city—" 'How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!' " (*Matt. 23:37, NKJV*). Here, we see that the lament of Christ matches closely with that depicted of God throughout the Old Testament. In fact, many biblical scholars note that the imagery of a bird taking care of her young is imagery only used of divinity in the ancient Near East. Here, many see an allusion to the imagery in Deuteronomy 32:11, of God as a bird hovering over, protecting, and taking care of its young.

There is no greater example of God's great compassionate love for us than Jesus Himself—who gave Himself for us in the ultimate demonstration of love. Yet, Christ is not only the perfect image of God. He is also the perfect model of humanity. How can we model our lives after the life of Christ, focusing on the felt needs of others, and, thus, not merely preaching God's love but showing it in tangible ways?

A Jealous God?

The God of the Bible is the “compassionate God.” In Hebrew, God is called *el rahum* (Deut. 4:31). The term “*el*” means “God,” and *rahum* is a different form of the root for compassion (*rahum*). Yet, God is called not only the compassionate God but also the jealous God, *el qana*. As Deuteronomy 4:24 puts it, “The LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God [*el qana*].” (See Deut. 4:24, Deut. 6:15, Josh. 24:19, Nah. 1:2.)

First Corinthians 13:4 declares that “love is not jealous” (*RSV*). How could it be, then, that God is a “jealous God”? Read 2 Corinthians 11:2 and consider the way God’s people were unfaithful to Him throughout the narratives of the Bible (see, for example, Ps. 78:58). What light do these passages shed on understanding divine “jealousy”?

The “jealousy” of God is often misunderstood. If you refer to someone as a jealous husband or wife, you likely do not mean it as a compliment. The term jealousy often has negative connotations in many languages. However, in the Bible, divine jealousy has no negative connotations. It is the righteous passion of a loving husband for an exclusive relationship with his wife.

While there is a kind of jealousy that is against love (*1 Cor. 13:4*), according to 2 Corinthians 11:2, there is a good and righteous “jealousy.” Paul refers to it as “godly jealousy” (*2 Cor. 11:2*). God’s jealousy is only and always the righteous kind and may better be spoken of as God’s passionate love for His people.

God’s passion (*qana*) for His people stems from His profound love for them. God desires an exclusive relationship with His people; He alone is to be their God. Yet, God is often depicted as a scorned lover, whose love is unrequited (see *Hosea 1–3*, *Jer. 2:2*, *Jer. 3:1–12*). Thus, God’s “jealousy” or “passion” is never unprovoked but always responsive to the infidelity and evil people. God’s jealousy (or “passionate love”) lacks the negative connotations of human jealousy. It is never envious but always the proper righteous passion for an exclusive relationship with His people and for their good.

How can we learn to reflect that same kind of good “jealousy” toward others that God displays toward us?

Compassion and Passionate

The God of the Bible is compassionate and passionate, and these divine emotions are supremely exemplified in Jesus Christ. God is sympathetic (*compare with Isa. 63:9, Heb. 4:15*), deeply affected by the sorrows of His people (*Judg. 10:16, Luke 19:41*), and willing to hear, answer, and comfort (*Isa. 49:10, 15; Matt. 9:36; Matt. 14:14*).

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4–8. In what ways does this passage call us to reflect God’s compassionate and amazing love in our relationships with others?

We long to be in relationship with persons who exemplify the kind of love described in 1 Corinthians 13:4–8. But how often do we seek to become this kind of person toward others? We cannot make ourselves long-suffering and kind; we cannot make ourselves not be envious, conceited, rude, or self-seeking. We cannot muster a love in ourselves that “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things,” and “never fails” (*1 Cor. 13:7, 8, NKJV*). Such love can be exemplified in our lives only as the fruit of the Holy Spirit. And praise God that the Holy Spirit pours the love of God into the hearts of those who, by faith, are in Christ Jesus (*Rom. 5:5*).

By the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, in what practical ways might we respond to, and reflect, God’s profoundly emotional, but always perfectly righteous and rational, love? First, the only appropriate response is to worship the God who is love. Second, we should respond to God’s love by actively showing compassion and benevolent love to others. We should not simply be comforted in our Christian faith but should be motivated to comfort others. Finally, we should recognize that we cannot change our hearts, but that only God can.

So, let us ask God to give us a new heart for Him and for others—a pure and purifying love that elevates what is good and removes the chaff from within.

Let our prayer be: “may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, . . . so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints” (*1 Thess. 3:12, 13, NKJV*).

Why is a death to self and to the selfishness and corruption of our natural hearts the only way to reveal this kind of love? What are the choices that we can make in order to be able to die this death to self?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Beatitudes,” pp. 6–44, in *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*.

“All who have a sense of their deep soul poverty, who feel that they have nothing good in themselves, may find righteousness and strength by looking unto Jesus. He says, ‘Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy-laden.’ Matthew 11:28. He bids you exchange your poverty for the riches of His grace. We are not worthy of God's love, but Christ, our surety, is worthy, and is abundantly able to save all who shall come unto Him. Whatever may have been your past experience, however discouraging your present circumstances, if you will come to Jesus just as you are, weak, helpless, and despairing, our compassionate Saviour will meet you a great way off, and will throw about you His arms of love and His robe of righteousness. He presents us to the Father clothed in the white raiment of His own character. He pleads before God in our behalf, saying: I have taken the sinner's place. Look not upon this wayward child, but look on Me. Does Satan plead loudly against our souls, accusing of sin, and claiming us as his prey, the blood of Christ pleads with greater power.”—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, pp. 8, 9.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Look at what inspiration above said about how, thanks to Jesus, we are presented to the Father. “He presents us to the Father clothed in the white raiment of His own character.” No matter how discouraged we might get at times over our faults and shortcomings, or how often we don't reflect to others the kind of love that God pours out on us, why must we always come back to the wonderful news that we are accepted by the Father because Jesus “presents us to the Father clothed in the white raiment of His own character”?
- ② Imagine how the mother must have felt in the case of the two women who came before Solomon claiming the same baby was their child. Consider again the language of emotion described in 1 Kings 3:26. How does this shed light on the same kind of language that is used to describe God's emotions for His people, in Hosea 11:8?
- ③ Throughout the Gospels, we have seen that Jesus often was moved by the needs of people. And what did He do? He acted in a way that addressed the people's needs. What are practical ways that you as an individual, or even perhaps as a class, can meet the needs of those who need comforting?

Attacked by Drunken Men

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

A drunken man accosted the 21-year-old missionary woman on a public bus and tried to hug and kiss her. As she struggled against his advances, the other passengers looked the other way until an elderly woman yelled something to the bus driver. The bus stopped, then under the guidance of the elderly woman, several passengers threw the man off. She came over to the sobbing missionary, patted her arm, and said something that the missionary couldn't understand.

This was the nightmare that Joanne (Park) Kim seemed to face nearly every week in Mongolia. It was the early 1990s, and she was a single American woman serving as one of the first Seventh-day Adventist missionaries in impoverished, post-Communist Mongolia.

On another occasion, a drunken neighbor mistook Joanne's apartment for his own. He kicked down her flimsy wooden door with his steel-toe boots and started to beat her. Joanne grabbed a broom and, screaming, fought back. It was a losing battle until Joanne used the broom to bang on the ceiling and her fellow missionaries, a married American couple, heard from their apartment above, and rushed down to rescue her.

The last straw for Joanne came when she and a fellow missionary were waiting at a bus stop on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia's capital. A mother had invited them to her child's first haircut, which called for a big celebration in Mongolia. Joanne was instructed to wait at the bus stop because she would never be able to find the *ger* home on the unmarked streets, so she and the other missionary sat on the curb and waited for the mother to arrive.

Then four drunken men sat beside them and tried to hug and kiss Joanne.

Joanne and the other missionary moved away, but the men followed. Everyone at the crowded bus stop looked away. The men dragged the women to a deserted alley. Joanne screamed and kicked and fought back, but she was no match for the four men. Then the men threw the women onto the ground. Joanne thought it was the end.

Suddenly, the men's faces turned pale. They turned and ran away.

Joanne looked around to see who had come to save them. No one was there. At that moment, Joanne knew that the men must have seen an angel.



This mission story offers an inside look at American missionary Joanne (Park) Kim, who helped start the Seventh-day Adventist work in post-Communist Mongolia and continues to serve as a missionary there. You also can participate in the mission work through this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering, part of which will help open a recreation center where children can grow spiritually, mentally, socially, and physically in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Read more about Joanne next week.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Isaiah 49:15*

Study Focus: *Ps. 103:13; Isa. 49:15; Hos. 11:1–4, 8, 9; Matt. 9:36; 1 Cor. 13:4.*

Introduction: God is moved physically and emotionally with profound compassion for His people.

Lesson Themes: This week's lesson highlights three basic points.

1. Our passionate and compassionate God is vividly presented in Scripture with parenting imagery. God's love has strong emotional and affective aspects, similar to parental love. The metaphor of divine love as maternal love conveys the notion of God's remembering and having compassion over His people. Maternal imagery is, to some degree, the best illustration of God's compassion, loving care, and attention to the needs of His people. Scripture also illustrates God's compassion using the image of a loving and compassionate father.
2. Our passionate and compassionate God is strikingly portrayed in Scripture with visceral language. In many Bible passages, visceral language is used to express God's affection, as He is moved physically and emotionally with profound compassion for people. The Hebrew word for compassion depicts a womb-like maternal love, emphasizing a mother's compassion toward her child. Similarly, God shows tender affection and compassion for His people.
3. Our passionate and compassionate God is jealous in a good and righteous way. God seeks an intimate and exclusive covenantal relationship with us and requires faithfulness from His people. In this sense, God is described in Scripture as zealous and jealous. Instead of the negative connotation of being capricious, this language conveys the idea that God acts in our best interests to protect us from self-harm and broken promises.

Life Application: In His passionate and compassionate love, God invites us to be like Him. In our compassion toward others, we need to be considerate of the people around us and be purposeful as a church about actively caring for others.

Part II: Commentary

1. Our Passionate and Compassionate God Is Vividly Presented, With Parenting Imagery, in Scripture.

One of the most vivid pictures of God in Scripture is delineated by the parenting language of mother and father, who are ideally special figures of love and compassion in human relationships.

In the dialogue between God and Zion in Isaiah 49:14–23, which is located in the larger message for the consolation of Israel, in Isaiah 49:14–26, Zion initially complains, “ ‘The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me’ ” (*Isa. 49:14, ESV*). In His answer, the Lord highlights that He always remembers His people; this affirmation is poetically shaped by the image of a mother. “ ‘Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget, yet I will not forget you’ ” (*Isa. 49:15, NKJV*). The image of a mother is connected here with the ideas of remembering and having compassion. By contrast, the idea of forgetting, in this context, describes a lack of compassion.

The overall assumption is that the mother never forgets her nursing child. At least, this level of devotion is what everyone expects from her. Therefore, the image of a mother is probably the best example to illustrate God’s compassion and attention to the needs of His people. Still, not all mothers fulfill this high expectation. While many people may describe their mothers as the most caring and compassionate human beings in the world, others unfortunately might not have good memories of their mothers. Even though Isaiah 49:15 seems to set the mother imagery as the pinnacle of human awareness and compassion, this passage also may account for the negative experiences wrought by a forgetful and merciless mother.

Thus, while such experiences are considered atypical, at the same time, the comparison in this passage acknowledges that some mothers may deviate from that norm and still forget. Unfortunately, this experience is a sad reality in the lives of some people. However, even if this experience lamentably happens, God will never forget His people, as He will always be compassionate toward them. In short, the comparison in this passage of God with a mother provides a beautiful picture of a passionate and compassionate God, both to those who have a caring mother (God is somehow like them) and to those who have, or had, a detrimental experience with an unloving mother (God is definitely different than they are).

Likewise, the scriptural description of God’s compassion employs the comparative language of a father. Psalm 103 praises the Lord for His mercies. “The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy. He will not always strive with us, nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities” (*Ps. 103:8–10, NKJV*). Following

this description, the psalm compares God with a father: “As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him” (*Ps. 103:13, NIV*).

2. Our Passionate and Compassionate God Is Strikingly Portrayed, With Visceral Language, in Scripture.

Compassion in the Bible is portrayed with visceral language. This language makes the descriptions of compassion in Scripture, especially the references to divine compassion, emotionally and physically expressive. For instance, “the Hebrew word for compassion,” which is *raḥamim*, “is etymologically related to *reḥem* (womb)” (Shmuel Himelstein, “Compassion,” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Adele Berlin [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011]). This idea reinforces the comparison of God’s compassion with the compassion of a mother toward the child that came from her womb. To be sure, this strong bodily language should not be taken literally for God. But such a powerful portrayal is probably the ultimate image we can employ in order to truly express, in the limitations of human concepts and language, the profoundness of God’s loving compassion.

In Hosea 11, the Lord expresses His deep love for Israel. He states that “‘when Israel was a child, I loved him’ ” (*Hosea 11:1, NKJV*) and that “‘I taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by their arms’ ” (*Hosea 11:3, NKJV*). However, the Lord points out that His “‘people are bent on backsliding from Me’ ” (*Hosea 11:7, NKJV*). Still, He declares His love by saying, “‘How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?’ ” (*Hosea 11:8, NKJV*). Using visceral language to depict His compassion, more precisely “a change of heart” (*NET*; see also *NIV, Tanakh*), the Lord tells His people, “‘My heart churns [verb *hpk*] within Me; My sympathy is stirred’ ” (*Hosea 11:8, NKJV*).

The Hebrew verb *hpk* also appears in connection with the heart, now to depict human distress, in Lamentations. Once again, bodily visceral language is used: “‘Look, O LORD, for I am in distress; my stomach churns; my heart is wrung [verb *hpk*] within me’ ” (*Lam. 1:20, ESV*). Therefore, visceral language, referring to a human heart in Lamentations, and to the divine heart in Hosea, emotionally describes the depths of God’s passion and compassion for His people.

Similarly, the Greek verb *splanchnizomai* is used in the New Testament, particularly in the Synoptic Gospels, to depict Jesus having compassion on the people (see *Matt. 9:36, Matt. 14:14, Matt. 15:32, Matt. 20:34, Mark 1:41, Mark 6:34, Mark 8:2, Luke 7:13*; see also this language in *Matt. 18:27, Mark 9:22, Luke 10:33, Luke 15:20*). It is noteworthy that the related noun *splanchon*, which conveys the idea of affec-

tion or compassion in many New Testament passages (*see Luke 1:78, Phil. 1:8, Phil. 2:1, Col. 3:12*), literally refers to “the inward parts of a body,” especially “the viscera . . . entrails” (Frederick W. Danker et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], p. 938). As Craig Bloomberg emphasizes in his remarks on Matthew 9:36, Jesus’ “emotions reflect a deep, gut-level ‘compassion’ (a reasonable, idiomatic English equivalent for a term [from Greek *splanchnos*] that could refer to bowels and kidneys)” (*Matthew: The New American Commentary* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992], vol. 22, p. 166). Hence, the New Testament emotionally depicts Jesus’ compassion by employing the visceral language of internal body parts being moved. To put a finer point on it, He is being physically and emotionally moved with profound loving compassion for the people. This is compatible with the Old Testament description of God’s deep compassion for His people.

3. Our Passionate and Compassionate God Is Jealous in a Good and Righteous Way.

As part of the Old Testament picture of our passionate and compassionate God, the Lord is described as jealous/zealous (*see Exod. 20:5; Exod. 34:14; Deut. 4:24; Deut. 5:9; Deut. 6:15; Deut. 32:16, 21; Josh. 24:19; 1 Kings 14:22; Ps. 78:58; Ezek. 39:25; Nah. 1:2; Joel 2:18; Zech. 1:14; Zech. 8:2*). This description appears in the second commandment, which builds upon the first one (“‘You shall have no other gods before Me’ ” [*Exod. 20:3, NKJV*]) and prohibits making any “‘carved image’ ” (*Exod. 20:4, NKJV*). The commandment adds, “‘you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God’ ” (*Exod. 20:5, NKJV*). As in a marriage relationship, God requires exclusivity and faithfulness from His people. Taking into account this covenant relationship, when God’s people break His commandment by making idols and worshiping/serving them, the people move God, or provoke Him, to jealousy and wrath, according to the biblical language (*Deut. 32:16, 21; Josh. 24:19; 1 Kings 14:22, 23; Ps. 78:58; Nah. 1:2, 14*). As a holy God (*Josh. 24:19, Ezek. 39:25*) who is zealous for the relationship with His people (*Joel 2:18, Zech. 1:14, Zech. 8:2*), His jealous reaction is actually a holy response to the unfaithfulness and idolatry of His people.

This Old Testament picture of God’s jealousy is obviously different from Paul’s warning against jealousy among church members in the New Testament (*see 1 Cor. 13:4, 2 Cor. 12:20, Gal. 5:20*). Paul speaks positively of “godly jealousy,” emphasizing, in 2 Corinthians 11:2, that he is jealous for the church. This distinction between a negative jealousy to be avoided and God’s positive jealousy may be discerned in the Greek language, but via the two possible definitions of jealousy in the New Testament: (1) “be

positively and intensely interested” (zeal); and (2) “to have intense negative feelings over another’s achievements” (envy) (Danker et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, p. 427).

Part III: Life Application

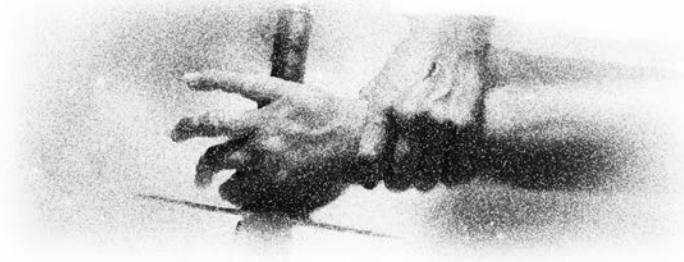
God actively shows compassion and passionate love for His people and invites us to do the same. Taking this idea into account, discuss the following questions:

- 1. As we compare God’s compassion with that of a caring mother, how do remembering and forgetting play a role in the practice, or the lack, of compassion? Give examples.**

- 2. In what ways can you be jealous, in a positive manner, in your relationships in the church, as God is jealous in His relationships with His people?**

- 3. How can we be purposeful as a church about caring for others and about incorporating the cause of others into our own spiritual goals?**

The Wrath of Divine Love



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Psalm 78; Jonah 4:1–4; Matt. 10:8; Matt. 21:12, 13; Jer. 51:24, 25; Rom. 12:17–21.*

Memory Text: “But He, being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity, and did not destroy them. Yes, many a time He turned His anger away, and did not stir up all His wrath” (*Psalm 78:38, NKJV*).

Though God's compassion is often celebrated, many find the idea of His wrath disturbing. If God is love, they think He should never express wrath. That notion, however, is false. His wrath arises directly from His love.

Some claim that the Old Testament God is a God of wrath and that the New Testament God is a God of love. But there is only one God, and He is revealed as the same in both Testaments. The God who is love does become angry at evil—but precisely *because* He is love. Jesus Himself expressed profound anger against evil, and the New Testament teaches numerous times about the righteous and appropriate wrath of God.

God's anger is always His righteous and loving response against evil and injustice. Divine wrath is righteous indignation motivated by perfect goodness and love, and it seeks the flourishing of all creation. God's wrath is simply the appropriate response of love to evil and injustice. Accordingly, evil provokes God to passion in favor of the victims of evil and against its perpetrators. Divine wrath, then, is another expression of divine love.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 1.

Grieved by Evil

The God of the Bible loves justice and hates evil. Sin and evil, therefore, provoke Him to passion, a passion expressed on behalf of those oppressed and abused, and even in cases in which one's evil affects primarily oneself. God hates evil because evil always hurts His creatures, even if self-inflicted. In the biblical narratives, God is repeatedly provoked to anger by what biblical scholars refer to as the cycle of rebellion. This cycle goes as follows:

The people rebel against God and do evil, sometimes even horrendous atrocities, such as child sacrifice and other abominations in His sight.

God withdraws according to the people's decisions.

The people are oppressed by foreign nations.

The people cry to God for deliverance.

God graciously delivers the people.

The people rebel against God again, often more egregiously than before.

In the face of this cycle of egregious evil and infidelity, however, God repeatedly meets human unfaithfulness, but with unending faithfulness, long-suffering forbearance, amazing grace, and deep compassion.

Read Psalm 78. What does this passage convey about God's response to His people's repeated rebellions?

According to the Bible, love and justice are intertwined. Divine anger is the proper response of love against evil because evil always hurts someone whom God loves. There is no instance in Scripture where God is arbitrarily or unfairly wrathful or angry.

And while God's people repeatedly forsook and betrayed Him, over the centuries God continued patiently to bestow compassion beyond all reasonable expectations (*Neh. 9:7–33*), thus demonstrating the unfathomable depth of His long-suffering compassion and merciful love. Indeed, according to Psalm 78:38, God, "being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity and did not destroy them. Yes, many a time He turned His anger away, and did not stir up all His wrath" (*NKJV*).

Surely, you have been angry over the evil done to others. How does this emotion help you better understand, then, God's wrath toward evil?

God Is Slow to Anger

God becomes angry at evil because God is love. God is so compassionate and gracious that one biblical prophet even chastised God for being too merciful!

Consider the story of Jonah and reflect on Jonah’s reaction to God’s compassionate forgiveness of the Ninevites, in Jonah 4:1–4. What does this tell us about Jonah, and about God? (See also Matt. 10:8.)

Jonah’s reaction to God’s mercy is telling in two primary ways. First, it displays Jonah’s own hardheartedness. He hated the Assyrians so much for what they had done to Israel that he did not want God to show them any mercy.

What a lesson for us! We must be careful to guard against this same attitude, however understandable it may be. Of all people, those who have received the grace of God should recognize unmerited grace and thus be willing to extend grace to others.

Secondly, Jonah’s reaction reinforces how central God’s compassion and grace are to His character. So familiar was Jonah with God’s mercy that—precisely because God is “gracious and merciful” and “slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness” (*Jon. 4:2, NKJV*)—Jonah knew that the Lord would relent from bringing judgment against Nineveh. God deals justly *and* mercifully with all peoples and nations.

The Hebrew phrase translated “slow to anger” or “longsuffering” could be literally translated “long of nose.” In Hebrew idiom, anger was metaphorically associated with the nose, and the length of nose metaphorically images how long it takes for one to become angry.

References to God as “long of nose,” then, convey that God is slow to anger and long-suffering. While it does not take long for humans to become angry, God is exceedingly long-suffering and patient, and bestows grace freely and abundantly, yet without justifying sin or turning a blind eye to injustice. Instead, God Himself makes atonement for sin and evil via the cross so that He can be both just and the justifier of those who believe in Him (*Rom. 3:25, 26*).

Have you ever failed to show mercy or grace to someone who has wronged you? How can you best remember what God has done for you so that you become more gracious to others in response to the abundant grace God has shown you? And how do we show mercy and grace without giving license to sin or enabling abuse or oppression?

Righteous Indignation

While there are many inappropriate forms of anger, the Bible also teaches that there is “righteous indignation.”

Imagine a mother watching her three-year-old daughter playing at the playground and then, suddenly, a man attacks her daughter. Should she not be angry? Of course, she should. Anger is the proper response of love in such a circumstance. This example helps us understand God’s “righteous indignation.”

Read Matthew 21:12, 13 and John 2:14, 15. What does Jesus’ reaction to the way the temple was being used tell us about God’s getting angry at evil?

In these instances, Jesus displays the “godly zeal” of righteous indignation against those who were treating God’s temple as common and who had turned it into a “den of robbers” in order to take advantage of widows, orphans, and the poor (*Matt. 21:13; compare with John 2:16*). The temple and services, which were supposed to typify God’s gracious forgiveness and His cleansing of sinners, were instead being used to cheat and oppress some of the most vulnerable. Should Jesus not have been angry at this abomination?

Mark 10:13, 14 and Mark 3:4, 5 offer more examples of His righteous indignation. When people brought little children to Jesus and “the disciples rebuked those who brought them,” Jesus “was greatly displeased”—literally “indignant.” He said to them, “ ‘Let the little children come to Me’ ” (*Mark 10:13, 14, NKJV*).

Elsewhere, when the Pharisees waited to accuse Jesus of breaking the Sabbath by healing on it, Jesus asked them, “ ‘Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?’ ” (*Mark 3:4, NKJV*). He “looked around at them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts” and then proceeded to heal the man (*Mark 3:5, NKJV*). Christ’s anger is associated here with grief at their hardness; it is the righteous anger of love, just as the anger attributed to God in the Old Testament is the righteous anger of love. How could love not be upset by evil, especially when evil hurts the objects of that love?

How can we be careful not to seek to justify selfish anger as “righteous indignation”? Why is that so easy to do, and how can we protect ourselves from that subtle but real trap?

God Does Not Afflict Willingly

Throughout the Bible, God repeatedly displays His passion in favor of the downtrodden and the oppressed and His corresponding righteous indignation against the victimizers and oppressors. If there were no evil, God would not be angry. His anger is only and always against that which harms His creation.

According to Lamentations 3:32, 33, God does not afflict willingly (literally, God does not afflict “from His heart”). He does not want to bring judgment against evildoers, but love finally requires justice.

This truth is exemplified in how long God continued to forgive His people and repeatedly grant them opportunities to repent and be reconciled to Him. Again and again, through the prophets, God called out to His people, but they refused to listen (*see Jer. 35:14–17, Ps. 81:11–14*).

Read Ezra 5:12 and compare it with Jeremiah 51:24, 25, 44. What does this explain about the judgment that came upon Jerusalem via the Babylonians? (*See also 2 Chron. 36:16.*)

According to Ezra 5, after the people persistently and unrepentantly provoked God to anger, He eventually withdrew and “gave” the people “ ‘into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon’ ” (*Ezra 5:12, NKJV*). But God did so only after there was “no remedy” (*2 Chron. 36:16*), and God later judged Babylon for the excessive devastation it inflicted upon Judah (*Jer. 51:24, 25, 44; compare with Zech. 1:15*).

Many other judgments that Scripture describes as brought about by God are explained as instances in which God “gives” the people over to their enemies (*Judg. 2:13, 14; Ps. 106:41, 42*), in accordance with the people’s decisions to forsake the Lord and serve the “gods” of the nations (*Judg. 10:6–16, Deut. 29:24–26*). God’s anger against evil, which will finally culminate in the eradication of all evil once and for all, stems from His love for all and from His desire for the final good of the universe, which itself has a stake in the whole question of sin and rebellion and evil.

How does the fact that God does not want to bring judgment against anyone affect your understanding of divine anger and wrath? If God is slow to anger, should we not be more patient and long-suffering with those around us? How can we do so while also protecting and caring for the victims of wrongdoing?

Show Compassion

While divine wrath is a “terrible” thing, it is by no means immoral or unloving. On the contrary, in the Old and New Testaments, God expresses wrath against evil because of His love. Divine wrath is terrible because of the insidious nature of evil in contrast to the pure goodness and splendor of God.

In this regard, love is essential to God; wrath is not. Where there is no evil or injustice, there is no wrath. In the end, God’s most loving action of eradicating evil from the universe also effectively will eliminate anger and wrath. And that is because never again will there be any injustice or evil. Forevermore, there will be only the eternity of bliss and justice in a perfect love relationship. There will never again be divine wrath because never again will there be the need for it. What a wonderful thought!

Some worry that divine anger might unintentionally be taken as giving license to human vengeance. Read Deuteronomy 32:35, Proverbs 20:22, Proverbs 24:29, Romans 12:17–21, and Hebrews 10:30. How do these texts guard against human vengeance?

According to Scripture, God has the right to bring judgment; and when He does, He always does so with perfect justice. Both the Old and New Testaments explicitly reserve vengeance for God. As Paul writes in Romans 12:19 (*NASB*), “Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,’ says the Lord” (quoting from Deuteronomy 32:35).

While God eventually brings judgment against injustice and evil, Christ has made a way for all who believe in Him. Indeed, it is “Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come” (*1 Thess. 1:10, NKJV; compare with Rom. 5:8, 9*). And this is according to God’s plan: “For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (*1 Thess. 5:9, NKJV*). Divine wrath is not nullified, but those who have faith in Jesus will be delivered from such wrath because of Christ.

In what way has Christ’s atonement upheld justice while also delivering us from wrath? Recognizing that provision had been made for you, despite your shortcomings, how much more gracious should you be to others?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Idolatry at Sinai,” pp. 315–330, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

In the context of the sin of the golden calf, Ellen G. White wrote: “The Israelites had been guilty of treason, and that against a King who had loaded them with benefits and whose authority they had voluntarily pledged themselves to obey. That the divine government might be maintained justice must be visited upon the traitors. Yet even here God’s mercy was displayed. While He maintained His law, He granted freedom of choice and opportunity for repentance to all. Only those were cut off who persisted in rebellion.

“It was necessary that this sin should be punished, as a testimony to surrounding nations of God’s displeasure against idolatry. By executing justice upon the guilty, Moses, as God’s instrument, must leave on record a solemn and public protest against their crime. As the Israelites should hereafter condemn the idolatry of the neighboring tribes, their enemies would throw back upon them the charge that the people who claimed Jehovah as their God had made a calf and worshiped it in Horeb. Then though compelled to acknowledge the disgraceful truth, Israel could point to the terrible fate of the transgressors, as evidence that their sin had not been sanctioned or excused.

“Love no less than justice demanded that for this sin judgment should be inflicted. . . . It was the mercy of God that thousands should suffer, to prevent the necessity of visiting judgments upon millions. In order to save the many, He must punish the few.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 324, 325.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Why do you think so many people struggle with the concept of divine wrath? What helps you to understand it?
- ② What problems always arise when people seek vengeance that never arise when God seeks it?
- ③ How was God’s judgment against Israel after the golden calf rebellion also an instance of divine mercy? What other examples in Scripture show that even God’s judgment is an act of love?
- ④ Even though we understand that God righteously becomes indignant against evil and brings judgment with perfect justice, how important is it for us to refrain from condemning others? Discuss this particularly in light of 1 Corinthians 4:5.

“Do You Want Satan to Win?”

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

American missionary Joanne (Park) Kim locked herself in her apartment after being attacked by four drunken strangers in Mongolia. She was hurt, scared, and crying. She wanted to return home to the United States.

After two days, another missionary came to see her. She thought that he had come to comfort her, but instead he scolded her. “Seriously, Joanne, did you come all the way over here to witness to your closet?” he said. “Do you want Satan to win?”

It was just what Joanne needed to hear. If the missionary had comforted her, she would probably have wallowed in her misery, given up, and gone home. But now she reflected on why she had come to Mongolia. Initially, she had planned to go to Uzbekistan, so she had started learning Russian, including the Cyrillic alphabet. When the plan had fallen through, she had ended up in Mongolia, where the Cyrillic alphabet was the same, but she couldn’t understand a word. For the first couple of months, she had tried unsuccessfully to learn Mongolian. Without the language, she was struggling to witness. Without the language, she couldn’t ask for help or speak up for herself when she was attacked by drunken strangers nearly every week. Complicating matters, people kept assuming that she was Mongolian and spoke Mongolian because of her Korean ethnicity.

Joanne still wanted to share the love of Jesus in Mongolia, but she didn’t feel that she had any love left to share after multiple drunken attacks.

“Lord,” she prayed, “if You are serious about me staying here, please give me a way out of this mess. You need to protect me, or give me a way to handle these situations, or get rid of these drunken men.”

She decided to stay in Mongolia and wait on God.

The drunken attacks didn’t stop. But God gave Joanne a tool to defend herself. Within just three months, she learned to speak Mongolian fluently. It was a miracle. Joanne was able to give Bible studies in Mongolian, and she could speak up for herself and ask for help when she was attacked. But she couldn’t love like Jesus. The pain from the attacks ran very deep.



This mission story offers an inside look at American missionary Joanne (Park) Kim, who helped start the Seventh-day Adventist work in post-Communist Mongolia and continues to serve as a missionary there. You also can participate in the mission work through this quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering, part of which will help open a recreation center where children can grow spiritually, mentally, socially, and physically in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Read more about Joanne next week.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Psalm 78:38*

Study Focus: *Psalm 78; Matt. 21:12, 13; John 2:14, 15.*

Introduction: God's wrath is an expression of His love, which will punish evil and sin.

Lesson Themes: This week's lesson highlights two basic points:

1. God's wrath is His holy and patient response to sin. God's wrath is not based on an arbitrary, uncontrollable, or vengeful initiative. Rather, it is always a loving, firm response against evil and injustice. His anger is a response to continuous and rebellious sin, which harms His creation. Divine wrath is another expression of His love, either to punish evil people for their sins or to deliver His people from their grasp. In Scripture, God's wrath is best understood in the context of its narrative, as in Psalm 78. Despite all the signs and wonders performed by God, His people forgot Him, becoming stubborn and rebellious and having unrepentant hearts.
2. God's wrath is a loving and righteous indignation. In Scripture we find a vivid description of God's wrath as a loving and righteous indignation against the oppression and suffering of His people. God actively intervenes to punish evil, given His righteous indignation, which is motivated by perfect goodness and love. His wrath is the proper response of love against evil, inasmuch as evil hurts His beloved creatures.

Life Application: Taking into account God's responsible response to injustice and evil, how should we work to actively eliminate injustice or alleviate the suffering of others?

Part II: Commentary

1. God's Wrath Is His Holy and Patient Response to Sin.

The Bible's teaching about God's wrath is best understood in the context of the narrative wherein it is mentioned. Psalm 78, which is the second-longest psalm in the Psalter—next to Psalm 119—highlights specific events in the history of Israel, particularly the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings. In this poetic narrative, Asaph encourages God's people to be faithful to the Lord, in contrast to rebellious past generations.

Different from many psalms, Psalm 78 is not addressed to God in the form of song/prayer but rather to the people in the form of song/instruction (see the note on Psalm 78 by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014], p. 1353). Most likely, the psalmist intended to help the people remember God's powerful and loving acts as they sang this poetic narrative, thus ensuring they did not forget as did the wilderness generation (see the note on Psalm 78 by C. John Collins, *ESV Study Bible* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008], p. 1033).

The Hebrew verb for forgetting (*škh*) is used twice in the psalm. In Psalm 78:7, the emphasis on not forgetting the works of the Lord is associated with setting one's "hope in God" and keeping "His commandments" (*NKJV*). Conversely, to forget God's works means to be "stubborn and rebellious" and reveals the deeper problem of not setting the "heart aright"; that is, it shows a spirit that is "not faithful to God" (*Ps. 78:8, NKJV*). Despite all the wonders and blessings in the wilderness, the people rebelliously "sinned even more" (*Ps. 78:17, NKJV*), "tested God in their heart" (*Ps. 78:18, NKJV*), and "spoke against God" (*Ps. 78:19, NKJV*). It is in response to this sin that we hear the reference to God's wrath in Psalm 78:21, "Therefore, the LORD heard this and was furious; so a fire was kindled against Jacob, and anger also came up against Israel" (*NKJV*). The reason for God's wrath is summarized in the following verse: "Because they did not believe in God, and did not trust in His salvation" (*Ps. 78:22, NKJV*), despite all the signs and wonders performed by the Lord before their eyes.

Likewise, the next reference to the wrath of God, in Psalm 78:31, states that "in spite of this they still sinned, and did not believe in His wondrous works" (*Ps. 78:32, NKJV*). To be sure, the psalm even points out that when God struck them, they began to seek Him again and to remember that God is their salvation (*Ps. 78:34, 35*).

However, this reaction was not sincere. As a matter of fact, "they flattered Him with their mouth, and they lied to Him with their tongue; for their heart was not steadfast with Him, nor were they faithful in His covenant" (*Ps. 78:36, 37, NKJV*). It is precisely in this context that we find the most beautiful and loving description of God's wrath in the psalm: "But He, being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity, and did not destroy them. Yes, many a time He turned His anger away, and did not stir up all His wrath" (*Ps. 78:38, NKJV*).

Asaph also reminded God's people that the wrath of God delivered them from the oppression in Egypt, as His judgments came against

the Egyptians (*Ps. 78:49, 50*). But after this wonderful deliverance, the Israelites “tested and provoked the Most High God, and did not keep His testimonies” (*Ps. 78:56, NKJV*). Among the divine commandments, special emphasis is given to the sin of idolatry: “they provoked Him to anger with their high places, and moved Him to jealousy with their carved images” (*Ps. 78:58, NKJV*). It is noteworthy that the wrath of God is described, in this context, in terms of forsaking: “So that He forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh” (*Ps. 78:60, NKJV*) and “gave His people over to the sword” (*Ps. 78:62, NKJV*).

The poetic narrative of Psalm 78 indicates that God’s wrath is not an arbitrary initiative nor an uncontrollable reaction. Rather, His wrath is His firm response to continuous and rebellious sin.

2. God’s Wrath Is a Loving and Righteous Indignation.

The Gospels’ narratives about Jesus cleansing the temple (*Matt. 21:12, 13; Mark 11:15–17; Luke 19:45–48; John 2:14, 15*) provide a valuable example of how divine wrath should be understood as a righteous and responsible indignation, as opposed to a capricious and impulsive attitude on God’s part. In chapter 16 (“In His Temple”) of *The Desire of Ages*, Ellen G. White offers insightful remarks for our reflection on God’s wrath. Many times in this chapter, she argues that it is not only the man Jesus who performed the cleansing of the temple. In her words, “the cleansing of the temple was a manifestation of more than human power.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 164. Also, as the people look “upon Christ, they behold divinity flash through the garb of humanity.”—Pages 158, 162.

Ellen G. White explains that the dealers in the temple area “demanded exorbitant prices for the animals sold, and they shared their profits with the priests and rulers, who thus enriched themselves at the expense of the people.”—Page 155. Thus, instead of truly serving as God’s representatives before the people by correcting “the abuses of the temple court,” the priests and rulers were “studying their own profit.”—Pages 156, 157. As she points out, “They should have given to the people an example of integrity and compassion,” being attentive to the “needs of the worshipers” and “ready to assist those who were not able to buy the required sacrifices.”—Page 157. However, they let greed harden their hearts.

Ellen G. White describes the people in the temple as “those who were suffering, those who were in want and distress. The blind, the lame, the deaf, were there. Some were brought on beds. Many came who were too poor to purchase the humblest offering for the Lord, too poor even to buy food with which to satisfy their own hunger.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 157. But the priests did not have “sympathy or compassion” for, or on, them. “Their suffering awakened no pity in the hearts of the priests.”—Page 157.

In contrast to the priests, Jesus comes to the temple and sees “the unfair transactions” and “the distress of the poor.” Then, Ellen G. White uses the language of indignation to emphasize Jesus’ reaction. “As He beholds the scene, indignation, authority, and power are expressed in His countenance.”—Page 157. It is in this context of indignation that Ellen G. White highlights that Christ’s divinity flashed through His humanity. As “those engaged in . . . unholy traffic” looked at Him, they felt as though they stood “before the tribunal of God to answer for their deeds.”—Pages 157, 158. She qualifies Jesus’ overthrowing of “the tables of the money-changers” as “a zeal and severity that He has never before manifested.”—Page 158.

It is noteworthy that this wrath cannot be properly understood without the emphasis on “Christ’s sympathy for the poor,” which “had been aroused” by the temple traffic (Page 162). “With tears in His eyes, He said to the trembling ones around Him: Fear not; I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me.”—Page 163.

This biblical narrative, beautifully explored by Ellen G. White, christologically shows how God’s wrath is a loving and righteous indignation against the oppression and suffering of His people. Eventually, this divine indignation sets in motion a powerful deliverance of the people, as a result of the judgment of the oppressors.

Part III: Life Application

In the article “Reflections on the Wrath of God,” Marvin Moore ponders the divine response to injustice. Moore mentions a story, which may be briefly adapted as follows: One day, a mother went into the backyard to get something and found her teenager being sexually assaulted by her uncle. Should the mother go to her room and only pray for this situation, or should she intervene to stop both sin and sinner? (See *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 15, no. 2 [2004]: pp. 118–127, especially pp. 121, 122, <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jats/vol15/iss2/8>). With this story in mind, ask your students to discuss the questions and exercises below:

- 1. How must God act when He sees all the abuse and injustice committed against His people? Can God feel intense wrath?**
-

2. Is God's wrath an expression of His love? Explain. Should He intervene to put down sin and sinner? Why, or why not?

Notes

UNITED BY MISSION



What do Yu Jin, Itgel, and Olivia have in common? They represent God working in a mighty way in mission in the Northern Asia-Pacific Division, the recipient of your Thirteenth Sabbath Offering this quarter.

Download the *Children's Mission* quarterly (bit.ly/childrensmisson) and the youth and adult *Mission* quarterly (bit.ly/adultmission).

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A STORY TO TELL



Two options for sharing the mission story about Tamir in Sabbath School:

Option No. 1: Open the *Children's Mission* quarterly and show a photo of Tamir as you tell the story of how the 14-year-old Mongolian boy learned to play the violin. Have the children color a flag of Mongolia as they listen.

Option No. 2: Make Tamir's story come alive with photos of him, Mongolia, and a mission map with Thirteenth Sabbath projects. At the end of the story, show a short video of Tamir playing his violin.

How will you share the mission story next Sabbath?

Learn more in the *Children's Mission* quarterly (bit.ly/childrensmisson) and the youth and adult *Mission* quarterly (bit.ly/adultmission).



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God's Love of Justice



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ps. 33:5, Ps. 85:10, Deut. 32:4, James 1:17, Titus 1:2, Exod. 32:14, Matt. 5:43–48.*

Memory Text: “ ‘But let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD, exercising loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight’ says the LORD” (*Jer. 9:24, NKJV*).

In the ancient Near East, the “gods” of the nations were not only fickle, immoral, and unpredictable, but they also commanded atrocities, such as child sacrifice. And even then, the pagan masses could not count on their favor, and so they dared not cross their tribal “deities.”

According to Deuteronomy 32:17, behind such “gods” were demons (*see also 1 Cor. 10:20, 21*). And their forms of worship were ripe for exploitation, leaving the people in great spiritual and moral darkness.

The God of the Bible could not be more different from these demonic forces. Yahweh is perfectly good and His character changeless. And it is only because of God's constant goodness that we can have any hope, now and for eternity.

In stark contrast to the false gods of the ancient world, and even to the modern “gods” of today, as well, Yahweh is deeply concerned about evil, suffering, injustice, and oppression—all of which He constantly and unequivocally condemns. And, most important, He will one day eradicate them all, as well.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 8.

Love and Justice

Throughout Scripture, love and justice go together. True love requires justice, and true justice can be governed by and meted out only in love. We are not used to thinking of these two concepts together, but that is only because both love and justice have been greatly perverted by humanity.

Read Psalm 33:5, Isaiah 61:8, Jeremiah 9:24, Psalm 85:10, and Psalm 89:14. How do these texts shed light on God’s concern for justice?

These texts explicitly declare that God loves justice (*Ps. 33:5, Isa. 61:8*). In Scripture, the ideas of love and justice are inextricably linked. God’s love and God’s righteousness go together, and He is deeply concerned that righteousness and justice be done in this world.

For good reason, then, the prophets consistently decry all kinds of injustice, including unjust laws, false scales, and injustice and oppression of the poor and the widows or anyone vulnerable. Though people perpetrate many evils and injustices, God is the one constantly “ ‘exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth’ ” (*Jer. 9:24, NKJV*). Accordingly, throughout Scripture, those faithful to God greatly anticipate divine judgment as a very good thing because it brings punishment against evildoers and oppressors, and it brings justice and deliverance for the victims of injustice and oppression.

In fact, righteousness and justice are the foundation of God’s government. God’s moral government of love is just and righteous, quite different from the corrupt governments of this world, which often perpetuate injustice for personal gain and personal power. In God, “mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed” (*Ps. 85:10, NKJV*).

And God makes it clear what He expects of us. “He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (*Micah 6:8, NKJV*). If there is anything that we should reflect of God’s character, love—and the justice and mercy that stems from it—would be central.

What are examples, even now, of perverted human justice? How, then, can we not cry out for God’s perfect justice to come one day?

God Is Entirely Good and Righteous

God does not simply claim to love justice and call people to love and do justice, but God Himself perfectly and unwaveringly *exemplifies* these traits. Scripture teaches that God is entirely holy, faithful, righteous, and loving. God only and always does what is loving, righteous, and just. He never does any wrong.

Read Deuteronomy 32:4 and Psalm 92:15. What do these passages teach about the faithfulness and righteousness of God?

These and many other passages declare that God is just and loving—“there is no unrighteousness in Him” (*Ps. 92:15; compare with Ps. 25:8, Ps. 129:4*). God “will do no unrighteousness. Every morning He brings His justice to light; He never fails, but the unjust knows no shame” (*Zeph. 3:5, NKJV*). Notice the direct contrast of God’s character over and against that of those who love injustice.

God knows what is best for everyone, wants what is best for everyone, and continually works to bring about the best outcome for all involved.

Read Psalm 9:7, 8 and Psalm 145:9–17. What do these verses teach about God?

The God of the Bible is “a just judge” (*Ps. 7:11, NKJV*), and no evil dwells with Him (*Ps. 5:4*). As 1 John 1:5 teaches, “God is light and in Him is no darkness at all” (*NKJV*). Indeed, God is not only perfectly good, but according to James 1:13 (*NKJV*), “God cannot be tempted by evil” (*compare with Hab. 1:13*).

In all this, God’s goodness and glory are inextricably connected. While many idolize power, God is all-powerful, but He exercises His power only in ways that are just and loving. It is no coincidence that when Moses asked God, “‘Show me Your glory,’ ” God responded by saying, “‘I will make all My goodness pass before you’ ” (*Exod. 33:18, 19, NKJV*).

Why does such a good God allow for so much of the evil that is in this world? Discuss your answer in class.

God's Changeless Character

Read Malachi 3:6 and James 1:17. What do these passages teach about God's character?

In Malachi 3:6, God declares, “ ‘I am the LORD, I do not change’ ” (*NKJV*). While some read this part of the verse and take it to mean that God does not change in any way whatsoever, the rest of the verse and its immediate context shows that the changelessness of God affirmed here is God's moral *changelessness*. The rest of the verse indicates that God may change relationally, for God says: “ ‘Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.’ ” And in the very next verse, God proclaims to His people, “ ‘Return to Me, and I will return to you’ ” (*Mal. 3:7, NKJV*).

So, God does enter into back-and-forth relationships with His creation, but through all such back-and-forth relationships, and through everything else, God's character is constant. This is likewise affirmed in James 1:17, which proclaims that all good and perfect gifts come from God, with whom there is no variation. God is not the source of evil.

Here and elsewhere, Scripture repeatedly teaches that God's character is unchangeable. In other words, the Bible consistently teaches that God is *morally* changeless. Yet, God can and does enter into real relationship with creatures, to whom God responds, but always with love and justice.

Read 2 Timothy 2:13; Titus 1:2; and Hebrews 6:17, 18. What do these texts teach about God?

God cannot deny Himself; God never lies; and God's promises are unbreakable. We can be confident that the God of the Bible is the same God who (in Christ) willingly gave Himself for us on the cross. He is a God who can be trusted, without reservation, and we can have confidence and hope for the future because, as Hebrews 13:8 puts it, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (*NKJV*).

How can you learn to trust in the goodness of God even when things have gone really badly in your life? What does the image of God on the cross do to help you learn to trust in His goodness?

A Repenting God?

Can God “repent”? If so, what would that mean? We have seen that God’s character never changes. However, some biblical texts speak of God as “repenting” or “relenting.” At least for humans, repentance involves recognition that one has done something wrong. How, then, can some biblical passages depict God as “repenting”?

Read Exodus 32:14 and compare it with Jeremiah 18:4–10. What do you make of these descriptions of God’s “relenting”?

In these and many other passages, God is depicted as relenting of judgment in response to some repentance or intercession by people. God promises that, if the people will turn from their wickedness, He will turn from the judgment He planned. God’s turning from bringing judgment in response to human repentance is a common theme throughout Scripture.

Read Numbers 23:19 and 1 Samuel 15:29. What do these texts teach with regard to whether or not God “relents” or “repents”?

These passages explicitly declare that God “ ‘is not a man, that He should relent’ ” (1 Sam. 15:29, *NKJV*) and “ ‘God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?’ ” (Num. 23:19, *NKJV*). Read in light of the other passages, these texts cannot be taken to mean that God does not “relent” at all, but instead they convey the truth that He does not “relent” or “repent” in the ways that humans do. Rather, God always keeps His promises, and while He will change course in response to human repentance, He does so always in accordance with His goodness and His Word. God relents from judgment in response to repentance, precisely because His character is good, righteous, loving, and merciful.

What is the significance of the biblical depictions of divine “relenting”? What does this convey about the constancy of God’s character alongside the fact that God enters into genuine give-and-take relationships that actually make a difference to Him?

Hold Fast to Love and Justice

Scripture consistently teaches that “the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments’ ” (*Deut. 7:9, NKJV*). His character of goodness and love was supremely demonstrated by Jesus at the cross (*see Rom. 3:25, 26; Rom. 5:8*). According to Psalm 100:5, “The LORD is good; [H]is steadfast love endures forever, and [H]is faithfulness to all generations” (*ESV; compare with Ps. 89:2*). Thus, God can be trusted; He gives only good gifts to His children (*James 1:17; compare with Luke 11:11–13*). In fact, He bestows good things even on those who position themselves as His enemies.

Read Matthew 5:43–48. What does this teach about God’s amazing love? How should we act toward others in light of this teaching of Jesus?

Matthew 5 describes God’s love as perfect love. Imperfect love is the love that loves only those who love you. But God loves even those who hate Him, even those who position themselves as His enemies. His love is complete and, therefore, perfect.

Though God’s love and mercy far exceed any reasonable expectations, it never overrides or contravenes justice. On the contrary, it brings justice and mercy together (*Ps. 85:10*). Likewise, the Bible exhorts us: “ ‘Observe mercy and justice, and wait on your God continually’ ” (*Hos. 12:6, NKJV*). As another version puts it, “Hold fast to love and justice” (*Hos. 12:6, ESV; compare with Luke 11:42*).

In the end, God Himself will bring about perfect justice. Romans 2:5 teaches that His “righteous judgment will be revealed” (*ESV*). Finally, the redeemed will sing: “ ‘Great and marvelous are Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints! Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy. For all nations shall come and worship before You, for Your judgments have been manifested’ ” (*Rev. 15:3, 4, NKJV; compare with Rev. 19:1, 2*).

Isaiah 25:1 proclaims, “O LORD, You are my God. I will exalt You, I will praise Your name, for You have done wonderful things; Your counsels of old are faithfulness and truth” (NKJV). How can we learn to praise God, even in bad times? In what ways can your life itself be an offering of praise to God in a way that furthers justice in your sphere of influence?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “God’s Love for Man,” pp. 9–15, in *Steps to Christ*.

“The word of God reveals His character. He Himself has declared His infinite love and pity. When Moses prayed, ‘Show me Thy glory,’ the Lord answered, ‘I will make all My goodness pass before thee.’ Exodus 33:18, 19. This is His glory. The Lord passed before Moses, and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.’ Exodus 34:6, 7. He is ‘slow to anger, and of great kindness,’ ‘because He delighteth in mercy.’ Jonah 4:2; Micah 7:18.

“God has bound our hearts to Him by unnumbered tokens in heaven and in earth. Through the things of nature, and the deepest and tenderest earthly ties that human hearts can know, He has sought to reveal Himself to us. Yet these but imperfectly represent His love. Though all these evidences have been given, the enemy of good blinded the minds of men, so that they looked upon God with fear; they thought of Him as severe and unforgiving. Satan led men to conceive of God as a being whose chief attribute is stern justice,—one who is a severe judge, a harsh, exacting creditor. He pictured the Creator as a being who is watching with jealous eye to discern the errors and mistakes of men, that He may visit judgments upon them. It was to remove this dark shadow, by revealing to the world the infinite love of God, that Jesus came to live among men.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, pp. 10, 11.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Why is it so important to recognize that God’s glory is bound up with His goodness? How does this correct a theology of glory that emphasizes sheer power without emphasizing the love and character of God?
- ❷ Have you ever questioned God’s goodness? Do you know anyone who has questioned God’s goodness because of the way those who claim to follow God sometimes act, or simply because of all the evil in the world? How did you work through that question for yourself, and how might you be able to help someone struggling with the question of God’s goodness? See next week’s lesson.
- ❸ In class, flesh out the answer to Monday’s question. How does the reality of the great controversy help us understand all the evil that exists now?

“You Can’t Pass By”

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

American missionary Joanne (Park) Kim was walking to her rented apartment in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. It was the dead of winter, and the midafternoon temperature was about minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 40 Celsius).

Then Joanne saw an intoxicated man lying on the sidewalk. She had been attacked by a number of drunken men over the past year in Mongolia, and she didn’t want to stop. What if he also attacked her? She started to walk past him, but then she stopped. A small voice seemed to say, “You can’t pass by.”

Joanne struggled with the idea of helping him. “Lord,” she said, “he weighs nearly twice as much as I do. How can I help him?”

She looked around. The street was empty. No other people were in sight.

Joanne looked at the stranger again. “If I walk by, he will die,” she thought. “His body will freeze in just a couple of hours.”

She saw apartment buildings all around. Each building had a small room on the first floor for a guard, so the entryway was fairly warm. The nearest building was about 1,000 feet (300 meters) away. “OK, Lord,” Joanne said. “I’ll get this guy over there.” Putting her arms under his, she prayed for strength and pulled. Somehow, she dragged him to the building. Placing him in the entryway, she stepped back and looked at him. A new feeling filled her heart. She felt compassion and pity.

This encounter marked a turning point in Joanne’s mission work. No longer did she harbor any ill feelings toward the attackers. Instead, compassion and pity washed over her. At last, she could love like Jesus.

Joanne went on to help plant the first Adventist church in Ulaanbaatar as a pioneer missionary with a supporting mission organization from 1992 to 1998. She returned in 2017, and she now serves as education and development director for the Adventist Church in Mongolia.

Even now, drunken strangers still attack her from time to time, but her love for God and His people is unshakable. “Satan does not give up,” she said. “He knew he could wear me down. But God gifted me with the Mongolian language and a change of heart. God loves even the drunk men who were attacking me all the time, so I need to love them and help them as best I can.”



You also can participate in the mission work in Mongolia through this quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering, part of which will help open a recreation center where children can grow spiritually, mentally, socially, and physically in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Jeremiah 9:24*

Study Focus: *Ps. 33:5, Jer. 18:7–10, Mal. 3:6, James 1:17.*

Introduction: Throughout Scripture, God's love and justice are intrinsic to His character. These attributes reveal His deep concern for justice and righteousness.

Lesson Themes:

1. Love and justice belong together. Although we are not used to thinking about love and justice together, throughout Scripture, true love requires justice, and true justice is driven by love. Conversely, a pretense of love without justice is lenience toward evil; and justice without love consists of cold legalism. Therefore, genuine love and justice describe God's perfect character. He loves justice and intends to see justice practiced in the world.
2. Loving justice requires constancy. Justice is the foundation of God's government. His actions are grounded on the constancy of the divine moral character, not on random decisions and unjust deeds. God's justice emanates from His regularity, as He never lies, and His promises are unbreakable. While Scripture affirms God's moral immutability, it also indicates that His actions may relationally change in response to human decisions.
3. Loving justice takes repentance into account. We find statements in Scripture about God not relenting, meaning that He does not lie. Also, passages of the Old Testament indicate that God repents, in the sense of His not bringing the expected judgment announced by Him due to human wrongdoing. God's relenting does not mean that He lied about His judgment but that He relationally changes His actions toward people if they repent and decide to live a life of fellowship with Him.

Life Application: Considering that God may change relationally toward His people when they choose to accept or reject Him, how can we reflect God's loving justice as we react to injustice and wrongdoing in the world?

Part II: Commentary

1. Love and Justice Belong Together.

Many people think that love and justice are mutually exclusive. According

to this perspective, one cannot be just and loving at the same time. In this view, love is lenient and precludes, or at least blurs, the due application of justice. Conversely, it is argued that justice has to be objective and dispassionate. Thus, it necessarily excludes any form of mercy and love.

However, this view is not the only (nor the best) way of thinking about the distinction of love and justice. In fact, love and justice do not form a dichotomy in the Bible but are, rather, coherently combined in the description of God's perfect character. In the biblical wholistic account of love and justice, one cannot be properly thought of without the other. A pretense of love without justice is actually unfairness/partisanship, whereas the idea of justice without love is really cold legalism. In fact, the Bible goes even a step further in the description of God's character. God does not merely combine love and justice; He actually loves justice (*Ps. 33:5, Isa. 61:8*).

The Hebrew term for justice, in Psalm 33:5 and Isaiah 61:8, is *mišpāṭ*, which conveys the idea of correct government. According to Robert Culver, while modern conceptions of democratic government separate legislative, judicial, and executive functions, *mišpāṭ* is not "restricted to judicial processes only" but actually refers to "all functions of government." From this perspective, if there is no separation of functions, government in biblical times centered primarily on the figure of the ruler rather than on law codes. Also, the ruler/judge had executive and "judicial powers." In other words, the ruler/judge not only made judicial decisions but also executed or caused them to be executed. As an example, when David appealed to God as judge in his contention with Saul, David was not only thinking in terms of a juridical decision but also assumed a judicial execution of deliverance and vindication: "let the LORD be judge, and judge between you and me, and see and plead my case, and deliver me out of your hand" (*1 Sam. 24:15, NKJV*).—Robert D. Culver, "2443 מִשְׁפָּט," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 948.

If we take this broad understanding of justice into account, to say that God loves justice seems to imply at least two important points for our study of God. First, God's justice is not merely related to law codes, but it fundamentally concerns His heart and character. Second, He loves not only the deliberation of justice but also its execution.

2. Loving Justice Requires Constancy.

If justice refers to sound government with good judgment and execution, as pointed out above, it must exclude the possibility of random or capricious decisions on the part of the ruler. From this perspective, justice requires constancy and regularity. There are two main passages in Scripture, one in the Old Testament and the other in the New Testament, that are normally used to affirm God's immutability. While the concept of

immutability is heavily loaded with philosophical assumptions in discussions about the doctrine of God in diverse traditions of Christian theology, it is safe to say that Malachi 3:6 and James 1:17 underscore the constancy of God's moral character. To put a finer point upon it, He is morally immutable or changeless.

Malachi 3 is shaped by the idea of God's justice. The chapter is introduced by the question of divine justice, in Malachi 2:17, namely, "Where is the God of justice?" In other words, what is going to happen to "every-one who does evil" (*Mal. 2:17, NKJV*)? In response to this fundamental question, Malachi 3 highlights the coming of divine judgment. "Who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears?" (*Mal. 3:2, NKJV*). The judgment has in view particularly the rebellious history of God's people, but this serious message is actually intended as a call to repentance. Therefore, the tone of God's future judgment is ultimately a hopeful one.

In this context of judgment and hope, the Lord emphasizes that He does not change, and this fact is, indeed, the reason why His people are not destroyed (*Mal. 3:6*). The idea of God's changelessness is rendered in the New English Translation Bible as "I, the LORD, do not go back on my promises," which captures the notion of God's moral covenantal immutability, suggested by the context of the passage. At the same time, the emphasis of Malachi 3:7 ("Return to Me, and I will return to you" [*NKJV*]) highlights a relational and positive change of attitude on God's part, which is what He desires to do, depending on the people's repentance.

In James 1:17, the idea of divine constancy and moral immutability is also underscored. The context of James 1 indicates that temptations are not prompted by God, as He consistently and constantly gives us good and perfect gifts from above. Thus, instead of a capricious combination of temptations and gifts, He consistently offers us only gifts. As "the Father of lights," He shows "no variation or shadow of turning" (*James 1:17, NKJV*). The connection between God as the Creator of light and His constancy also appears in Psalm 136:7–9, which is part of the iterative emphasis of the psalm: "For His mercy endures forever" (*NKJV*). In these verses, the psalmist underscores the creative power and constancy of God: "to Him who made great lights, for His mercy endures forever—the sun to rule by day, for His mercy endures forever; the moon and stars to rule by night, for His mercy endures forever" (*Ps. 136:7–9, NKJV*).

3. Loving Justice Takes Repentance Into Account.

The Old Testament seems to have paradoxical statements about the repenting and relenting nature of God. On the one hand, we have passages—such as Numbers 23:19 ("God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of

man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?” [NKJV] and 1 Samuel 15:29 (“‘The Strength of Israel will not lie nor relent. For He is not a man, that He should relent’ ” [NKJV])—that affirm God’s constancy. To put it more pointedly, the Lord does not relent. The main point of these statements is that God does not lie, which is consistent with the New Testament teaching about God in Titus 1:2 and Hebrews 6:18.

On the other hand, Old Testament passages narrate God’s relenting or repenting in the sense of His not bringing the judgment He announced against those who did evil. One of the most well-known examples is the divine mercy shown to Nineveh in the book of Jonah (*Jon. 3:10*), where Jonah himself, in the beginning of chapter 4, disagrees with God’s repenting. Jonah’s explanation of why he does not want to announce the coming divine judgment against Nineveh reinforces God’s mercy: “‘LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in loving-kindness, One who relents from doing harm’ ” (*Jon. 4:1, 2, NKJV*).

Jonah 4:2 contains at least three important reasons why this “relenting” on God’s part should not come as a surprise. First, Jonah himself indicates that he suspected, from the beginning, that such an outcome would happen. This anticipation of God’s mercy is the real reason Jonah fled to Tarshish. Second, his statement about God here echoes Exodus 32:14 and Exodus 34:6, 7, where Israel itself was the object of God’s repentance. Hence, well before the divine relenting regarding Nineveh, God did the same with Israel in the past. Third, this type of relenting does not mean that God lied about His announced judgments, for He explains in Jeremiah 18:7–10 that “‘the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it, if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it. And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it’ ” (*NKJV*). Therefore, God relationally changes His attitude toward the people if they relationally change their attitude toward Him.

Part III: Life Application

Scripture affirms God’s moral immutability, but He may change relationally toward His people when they choose to accept or reject Him. With this idea in mind, discuss the following questions:

1. How can we reflect God's justice as we react to injustice and wrongdoing in the world?

2. God repents and changes His judgment depending on the people's attitude toward Him. Is God's justice full of revenge and retribution, or does it envisage some form of restoration? Explain. How is God's repentance related to restoration?

3. God is willing to relent and restore His relationship with His people. From this perspective, how can we cultivate justice and love to restore broken relationships?

4. Have there been times when you tried to confront injustice and it backfired or went poorly? If so, how did you respond? How can you continue to pursue justice and help the most vulnerable?

5. Have you ever been treated unjustly? If so, what was the outcome of your situation? How does your experience influence the way you treat others?

The Problem *of* Evil



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Job 30:26; Matt. 27:46; Job 38:1–12; Psalm 73; Gen. 2:16, 17; Rev. 21:3, 4.*

Memory Text: “ ‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away’ ” (*Revelation 21:4, NKJV*).

Perhaps the greatest problem facing Christianity is the problem of evil—how to reconcile the fact that God is perfectly good and loving, with the fact of evil in this world. In brief terms, if God is all-good and all-powerful, why is there evil, and so much of it, too?

This is not merely an academic problem but something that deeply troubles many people and that keeps some from coming to know and love God.

“To many minds the origin of sin and the reason for its existence are a source of great perplexity. They see the work of evil, with its terrible results of woe and desolation, and they question how all this can exist under the sovereignty of One who is infinite in wisdom, in power, and in love. Here is a mystery of which they find no explanation.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 492.

Many atheists identify the problem of evil as the reason that they are atheists. But as we will see in this week and in coming weeks, the God of the Bible is entirely good, and we can trust Him—even despite the evil that so infects our fallen world.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 15.

“How Long, O Lord?”

The problem of evil is voiced not only in contemporary contexts but also in Scripture itself.

Read Job 30:26, Jeremiah 12:1, Jeremiah 13:22, Malachi 2:17, and Psalm 10:1. How do these texts bring the problem of evil to the forefront of human experience?

These texts raise many questions that are still with us today. Why does it seem as though the wicked prosper and those who do evil benefit from their evil, perhaps not always but still often enough? Why do the righteous suffer so much? Where is God when evil occurs? Why does God sometimes appear to be far from us, even hidden?

Whatever we say about these questions and the problem of evil more generally, we should be sure *not to trivialize evil*. We should not try to resolve the problem by downplaying the kind, or amount, of evil in the world. Evil is very bad—and God hates it even more than we do. Thus, we might join in the cry that rings throughout Scripture in response to the many evils and injustices in the world: “How long, O Lord?”

Read Matthew 27:46. How do you understand these words of Jesus? What do they convey about how evil touched God in the most striking of ways?

On the cross, Jesus Himself voiced the question: “ ‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?’ ” (*Matt. 27:46, NKJV*). Here especially we see that God Himself is touched by evil, an amazing truth powerfully highlighted in the suffering and death of Christ on the cross, where all the evil of the world fell upon Him.

But even here there is hope. What Christ did on the cross defeated the source of evil, Satan, and will eventually undo evil entirely. Jesus quoted those words from Psalm 22:1, and the rest of the psalm ends in triumph.

On the cross, Jesus looked forward to a hope that, at the time, He could not see. How can we draw comfort from His experience when we, too, cannot see hope before us?

“There Are Many Things We Do Not Know”

The end of history will come with the triumph of love over evil. But, in the meantime, many troubling questions remain. How can we think and talk about the problem of evil in a way that might be helpful?

Read Job 38:1–12. How does God’s answer to Job shed light on the problem of evil? How much do we know and not know about what might be going on behind the scenes?

In the narrative, Job had suffered much and had voiced many questions himself about why so much evil and suffering had befallen him. He requested an audience with God in order to seek answers to his questions, not knowing that far more was going on behind the scenes, in the heavenly court (*see Job 1, 2*).

God’s response to Job is striking. Specifically, “the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said: ‘Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge?’ ” (*Job 38:1, 2, NKJV*). One translation puts it this way: “Why do you talk so much when you know so little?” (*Job 38:2, CEV*). And, God adds in *Job 38:4*, “ ‘Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding’ ” (*NKJV*).

Read Job 42:3. How does Job’s response illuminate what we should recognize about our own position?

By His responses to Job, God made it clear to Job that there are many things that Job did not know and did not understand. Like Job, we, too, should humbly recognize that there are many things going on in the world, and behind the scenes, that we know nothing about. The fact that we may not know the answers to our questions does not mean there are no good answers or that one day everything will not be resolved. Until then, we need to trust in the goodness of God, which has been revealed to us in so many ways.

Think about how little we know about anything. Why, then, should we learn to live with unanswered questions about the most difficult of subjects: evil and suffering?

The Skeptical Theist

God proclaims in Isaiah 55:8, 9, “ ‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ says the LORD. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts’ ” (NKJV).

God’s thoughts are far higher than ours. We cannot even imagine the complexities of God’s plan for history. Given this, why should we expect to be in a position to know just what God’s reasons are for what He does or does not do in various situations?

One way of approaching the problem of evil, based on recognizing how little we know, is called “skeptical theism.” The skeptical theist is one who believes God has good reasons for acting as He does, but given our limited knowledge, we should not expect to be in a position to know just what those reasons are. The skeptical theist is skeptical regarding the human capacity to be aware of or to understand fully God’s reasons relative to the evil in this world. Just because one cannot see, for instance, germs floating in the air all around us does not mean there are no germs floating in the air all around us. The fact that one does not know what God’s reasons are certainly does not mean that God has no good reasons.

Read Psalm 73. How does the psalmist approach the evil and injustice around him? What does he see that puts his understanding in a different perspective?

The psalmist was deeply troubled by the evil in the world. He looked around him and saw the wicked prospering. Everything seemed unjust and unfair. He had no answers to give. He wondered whether it was even worth believing in and serving God. Until, that is, he looked into the sanctuary.

The sanctuary provides part of the key to the problem of evil—namely, recognizing there is a righteous Judge who will bring justice and judgment in His own time.

How can the Adventist understanding of the judgment and the sanctuary doctrine shed light on the problem of evil? Is it helpful to you to know that, while we have many questions now, the details of history and God’s righteous judgments will be revealed in the end?

The Freewill Defense

However much we don't understand of God's ways and thoughts, Scripture does reveal some things that help to address the problem of evil. One avenue for addressing the logical problem of evil is known as the freewill defense.

The freewill defense is the view that evil is the result of the misuse of creaturely free will. God, then, is not to blame for evil, because evil is the result of creatures misusing the free will that God has given us for good reasons. Why, however, would God give such free will? In this regard, C. S. Lewis once wrote that "free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata—of creatures that worked like machines—would hardly be worth creating. The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other. . . . And for that they must be free."—*Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan, 1960), p. 52.

Read Genesis 2:16, 17. How do these verses display the moral freedom granted to Adam and Eve?

Why command them unless they had free will to begin with? Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, and since then our planet has been filled with evil. In Genesis 4, the next chapter after the Fall narrative, the terrible consequences of sin are seen in the murder of Abel by his brother. The narrative of the Fall shows how the misuse of Adam and Eve's free will brought sin and evil into the history of our planet.

All through Scripture, we see the reality of free moral will. (*See Deut. 7:12, 13; Josh. 24:14, 15; Ps. 81:11–14; and Isa. 66:4.*) Every day of our lives, to one degree or another, we ourselves exercise the free will given to us by our Creator. Without free will, we would not be recognizably human. We would be more like a machine, or even a mindless robot.

Sony Corporation has created a robot dog called Aibo. It will not get sick, not get fleas, not bite, not need shots, and not shed fur. Would you trade your flesh-and-blood dog for an Aibo? If not, how might your choice help you better understand why God created us as He did, with free will—despite the risks?

Love and Evil?

God has granted creatures free will because it is necessary for love; misuse of this free will is the cause of evil. Again, many questions remain. God allows evil (for a time), while passionately despising it, because to exclude its possibility would exclude love, and to destroy it prematurely would damage the trust necessary for love.

“The earth was dark through misapprehension of God. That the gloomy shadows might be lightened, that the world might be brought back to God, Satan’s deceptive power was to be broken. This could not be done by force. The exercise of force is contrary to the principles of God’s government; He desires only the service of love; and love cannot be commanded; it cannot be won by force or authority. Only by love is love awakened. To know God is to love Him; His character must be manifested in contrast to the character of Satan.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 22.

Without free will, there could be no love, and if God is love, then it seems clear that it is not really an option for God to negate love or the freedom needed for love to exist. One could suppose, too, that if we knew the end from the beginning, as God does, we would not want Him to get rid of our freedom. After all, who would want to live in a loveless universe?

Read Romans 8:18 and Revelation 21:3, 4. How can these texts give us confidence to trust in God’s goodness, despite all the evil in our world?

Even when we cannot see through the darkness, God can see the end from the beginning. He can see, too, the eternal bliss promised to all who place their faith in Jesus. According to Romans 8:18, “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (NKJV). Do we have the faith and trust to believe this amazing promise?

Also, so sacred, so foundational, was love, and the freedom inherent in love, that rather than deny it to us, Jesus knew it would send Him to the cross, where He would suffer greatly. Yet, He granted this freedom to us anyway, knowing what it would cost Him. Why is this such a crucial thought to keep before us always?

How does keeping in mind the fact that God grants us free will help protect us from thinking that everything that happens is God’s will?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Why Was Sin Permitted?” pp. 33–43, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“Even when he was cast out of heaven, Infinite Wisdom did not destroy Satan. Since only the service of love can be acceptable to God, the allegiance of His creatures must rest upon a conviction of His justice and benevolence. The inhabitants of heaven and of the worlds, being unprepared to comprehend the nature or consequences of sin, could not then have seen the justice of God in the destruction of Satan. Had he been immediately blotted out of existence, some would have served God from fear rather than from love. The influence of the deceiver would not have been fully destroyed, nor would the spirit of rebellion have been utterly eradicated. For the good of the entire universe through ceaseless ages, he must more fully develop his principles, that his charges against the divine government might be seen in their true light by all created beings, and that the justice and mercy of God and the immutability of His law might be forever placed beyond all question.

“Satan’s rebellion was to be a lesson to the universe through all coming ages—a perpetual testimony to the nature of sin and its terrible results. The working out of Satan’s rule, its effects upon both men and angels, would show what must be the fruit of setting aside the divine authority. It would testify that with the existence of God’s government is bound up the well-being of all the creatures He has made. Thus the history of this terrible experiment of rebellion was to be a perpetual safeguard to all holy beings, to prevent them from being deceived as to the nature of transgression, to save them from committing sin, and suffering its penalty.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 42, 43.

Discussion Questions:

1 “Theodicy” is a term for the justification of God in the face of evil. But it is not the justification for evil itself. Imagine someone in heaven saying, “Oh, yes, Jesus, now I understand why my family was tortured and murdered before my eyes. Yes, it all makes great sense now. Thank You, Jesus!” That’s absurd. How can we come to understand that it is God, not evil, that is ultimately vindicated in the great controversy? (See lesson 9.)

2 Have you ever felt somewhat like Job? Have you ever been tempted to think that there could not possibly be a good explanation for the suffering you or your loved ones have experienced? How does Job’s final realization that he “uttered what” he “did not understand” (*Job 42:3, NKJV*) shed light on the position we are in relative to our own questions?

A Voice in the Dark

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Grace Babcock woke up suddenly in the middle of the night to the sound of an angry voice. “You don’t know,” the voice said. “You don’t understand.”

Grace wasn’t scared. If anything, she was annoyed about being woken up in her one-bedroom apartment at the Holbrook Indian School, where she worked as a teacher. She listened.

“God is using you like a puppet,” the voice said. “There is stuff that you don’t know. You are following God blindly, and God is tyrannical.”

Grace had been struggling to trust God. The recent death of a Holbrook student in a bus accident had hit her hard. She had many questions for God, but she hadn’t really wanted to talk to Him about them.

Now the voice was accusing God, and she didn’t like that, either.

“Go away,” she said. “I don’t want to talk to you.”

The voice fell silent.

But the accusations against God hung heavily in the room. Grace didn’t want to talk to God, but she thought that it was only fair that He be given an opportunity to respond. She asked God about each specific accusation that she had heard. Silence. She fell asleep.

The next day, Grace went to a nature spot where she often liked to think. Sitting on a brown rock, she brought up the accusations again to God. Silence. As night fell, she went home.

The next day, she returned to the nature spot. Again, silence. But as she walked home, she sensed a voice say, “You don’t need to know the answers to these questions that you are asking. You need to have faith and trust.”

“That’s true,” she said. “I don’t need to know the answers. But I do need to know that You are good. Right now, I don’t know that You are good.”

At home, Grace opened the *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* and began to read. As she read, she sensed a voice say, “Look up.”

Looking up, she saw a picture from a coloring book on her refrigerator. The picture had been given to her by a fifth-grade student, and it depicted Jesus’ cross and the words of John 3:16. “You did that for us, Jesus,” Grace said. “Since You did that, You are good. You really are good. I can trust You, even though I don’t have answers to all my questions.”



This mission story offers an inside look at a previous Thirteenth Sabbath project. Grace Babcock teaches elementary students at the US-based Holbrook Seventh-day Adventist Indian School, which received the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering in 2021. Thank you for supporting the spread of the gospel with this quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering on March 29.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Revelation 21:4*

Study Focus: *Job 38, Job 42:3, Rom. 8:18.*

Introduction: While we struggle to understand the presence of evil in this world, we must recognize our limitations and approach, with hope, the eventual solution.

Lesson Themes: This week's lesson emphasizes three main ideas:

1. The Bible contains open questions about the problem of evil. In moments of suffering, it is hard to reconcile God's love and immense goodness in the presence of evil. In Scripture, we identify characters raising *how long* questions in reference to suffering, and these questions reveal their expectation of divine action. Similarly, in our own suffering and affliction, we hope that God will triumph over evil.
2. Our explanations about the problem of evil are limited. The problem of evil and suffering presents a challenge to humanity. Job raises several questions to God in the midst of his feeling powerless to solve the problem of evil. Yet, instead of providing answers, God asks more questions. In turn, Job recognizes his limitations to properly understand the reality of evil.
3. We are encouraged to approach the problem of evil with hope. We should learn to live with unanswered questions about the problem of evil. Sin is an intruder, and no reason can be given to fully explain its presence in our world. God's love helps us approach the problem with hope.

Life Application: As we deal with the difficult problem of evil and suffering, we need to recognize how limited we are in understanding the many things that happen to, and around, us just as Job was limited in his understanding. How, though, may we be encouraged to approach the problem of evil with hope?

Part II: Commentary

1. The Bible Contains Open Questions About the Problem of Evil.

There are several instances in Scripture in which the question *how long* is raised to God in reference to evil actions and suffering in the world and,

more personally, in the life of the one who interrogates God. This question appears often in Psalm 13:1, 2, as the psalmist is concerned with constant sorrow and the exaltation of his enemies. “ ‘How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily? How long will my enemy be exalted over me?’ ” (NKJV).

Likewise, the psalmist, in Psalm 94:3, is disturbed with what appears to be the unfair triumph of the wicked. “LORD, how long will the wicked, how long will the wicked triumph?” (NKJV). In addition, the introduction of Habakkuk 1:2–4 strongly questions God, using the *how long* expression. Habakkuk asks, “O LORD, how long shall I cry, and You will not hear? Even cry out to You, ‘Violence!’ and You will not save. Why do You show me iniquity, and cause me to see trouble? For plundering and violence are before me; there is strife, and contention arises. Therefore the law is powerless, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore perverse judgment proceeds” (NKJV).

Paradoxically, while the prophet Jeremiah is sure of God’s righteousness, he wonders about the divine judgments. “Righteous are You, O LORD, when I plead with You; yet let me talk with You about Your judgments. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are those happy who deal so treacherously?” (Jer. 12:1, NKJV). In addition, he uses the expression *how long* to ask God, “How long will the land mourn, and the herbs of every field wither? The beasts and birds are consumed, for the wickedness of those who dwell there” (Jer. 12:4, NKJV).

In the book of Revelation, the opening of the fifth seal reveals the figurative image of the people “who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held” (Rev. 6:9, NKJV). More specifically, they are “under the altar” and loudly cry to God using the question *how long*—“ ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’ ” (Rev. 6:10, NKJV).

Overall, these *how long* questions imply perplexity in face of the problem of evil and convey a deep longing for divine justice. Whereas Psalm 10:1, 2 does not employ the expression *how long*, the same perplexity and the strong expectation of divine action is present in the question articulated to God in this passage. “Why do You stand afar off, O LORD? Why do You hide in times of trouble? The wicked in his pride persecutes the poor; let them be caught in the plots which they have devised” (Ps. 10:1, 2, NKJV).

2. Our Explanations About the Problem of Evil Are Limited.

Perhaps the most disturbing book in Scripture about the problem of evil

is Job. Job 30:26, 27, 31 seem to provide a basic summary of how Job feels in the situation of deep sorrow. “But when I looked for good, evil came to me; and when I waited for light, then came darkness. My heart is in turmoil and cannot rest; days of affliction confront me” (*Job 30:26, 27, NKJV*). Furthermore, he employs the metaphorical language of musical instruments to describe his negative feelings. “My harp is turned to mourning, and my flute to the voice of those who weep” (*Job 30:31, NKJV*).

While one would expect that the appearance of God at the end of the book would finally offer the explanations needed for the conclusion of the narrative, we are left with more questions. Instead of giving answers, God asks Job several questions (*see Job 38, 39*). Essentially, the Lord asks him about the mysteries of Creation in order to contrast how small Job is as a creature in comparison with the greatness of the Creator. As Job realizes this stark contrast and humbly recognizes his limited understanding about life and the created world, he sees himself as the “‘one who hides counsel without knowledge,’ ” for, as he emphasizes, “I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (*Job 42:3, NKJV*).

Therefore, as we deal with difficult questions about evil and suffering, we need to recognize how limited we are to properly understand and fully explain many things that happen with, and around, us. Paradoxically, we must live with many unanswered questions and, at the same time, do our best, as limited human beings, to understand and explain things according to what God has revealed to us. One of the ways to understand partially, at least, and explain the reasons for the reality of evil and suffering is to explore the idea of free will. Free will is a precious gift from God to His intelligent creatures, but this gift was unfortunately misused in the perfect world created by God.

As Ellen G. White points out, “Adam was a free moral agent. But he abused his freedom. He allowed himself to be overcome by appetite. By disobedience he lost his innocence. By his own free will he became a sinner, separating himself from the favor of God.”—Manuscript 132, 1902. Elsewhere, she argues that “infinite wisdom places before man the distinction between right and wrong, between sin and holiness; but God’s government is a government of free will, and there is no act of rebellion or obedience which is not a free will act.”—Manuscript 79, 1896.

Hence, misused free will turns the perfect world created by God into a world of evil, sin, suffering, and death. While the idea of misused free will does not explain everything about the problem of evil and suffering, it is an important part of the limited understanding and explanation that we

are able to articulate about this problem, at least according to what has been revealed to us by God.

3. We Are Encouraged to Approach the Problem of Evil With Hope.

It is important to highlight that the Bible contains open questions about the problem of evil. Our explanations about the problem of evil are limited because these points indicate that evil is not to be justified. Ellen G. White offers a concise exposition of this argument by saying, “It is impossible to explain the origin of sin so as to give a reason for its existence. Yet enough may be understood concerning both the origin and the final disposition of sin to make fully manifest the justice and benevolence of God in all His dealings with evil. Nothing is more plainly taught in Scripture than that God was in no wise responsible for the entrance of sin; that there was no arbitrary withdrawal of divine grace, no deficiency in the divine government, that gave occasion for the uprising of rebellion. Sin is an intruder, for whose presence no reason can be given. It is mysterious, unaccountable; to excuse it is to defend it. Could excuse for it be found, or cause be shown for its existence, it would cease to be sin. Our only definition of sin is that given in the word of God; it is ‘the transgression of the law;’ it is the outworking of a principle at war with the great law of love which is the foundation of the divine government.”—*The Great Controversy*, pp. 492, 493. Thus, our focus on the discussion of the problem of evil must be the loving character of God and not on evil itself. On the basis of His loving character, we are able to approach, with hope, the difficult problem of evil, not in order to justify evil but to focus on something bigger, namely, the glorious hope (*Rom. 8:18*) of the God who “will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes” (*Rev. 21:4, NKJV*).

Part III: Life Application

Discuss the following questions with your class:

1. Have you ever been in a situation of deep sorrow and suffering in which you felt God was not hearing you when you cried out? If so, how can the experience of Job help you trust God, despite the apparent triumph of evil?

- 2. In difficult times, how can you move from approaching the problem of evil to suffering with hope?**

- 3. How can you dialogue about the problem of evil in a way that might be helpful to the younger generation in the church?**

- 4. What advice and explanation would you give to someone who is facing extremely difficult circumstances?**

Free Will, Love, *and* Divine Providence



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Luke 13:34; Jer. 32:17–20; Heb. 1:3; Deut. 6:4, 5; Eph. 1:9–11; John 16:33.*

Memory Text: “‘These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world’ ” (*John 16:33, NKJV*).

Providence is the term used to describe God's action in the world. How we think about God's providence makes a huge difference in how we relate to God, how we relate to others, and how we think about the problem of evil.

Christians hold various understandings of divine providence. Some believe that God exercises His power in a way that determines all events to happen just as they do. He even chooses who will be saved and who will be lost! In this view, people are not free to choose other than what God decrees. In fact, people who believe this way argue that even human desires are determined by God.

In contrast, strong biblical evidence shows that God does not determine everything that happens. Instead, He grants humans free will, even to the point where they (and angels) can choose to act directly against His will. The history of the Fall, of sin, and of evil is a dramatic and tragic expression of the results of abusing this free will. The plan of salvation was instituted in order to remedy the tragedy caused by the misuse of free will.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 22.

Our Sovereign God

“God is sovereign,” the youth pastor taught his middle school group. “That means He controls everything that happens.” One puzzled middle schooler replied, “So God was in control when my dog died? Why would God kill my dog?”

Trying to answer this question, the youth pastor replied: “That’s a tough one. But sometimes God lets us go through hard times so that we’re prepared for even more difficult things in the future. I remember how hard it was when my dog died. But going through that helped me deal with an even more difficult time later when my grandma died. Does that make sense?”

After a long pause, the middle schooler replied, “So God killed my dog to prepare me for when He’s going to kill my grandma?”—Marc Cortez, quoted in John C. Peckham, *Divine Attributes: Knowing the Covenantal God of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), p. 141.

People sometimes assume that everything that occurs happens just as God wants it to. Whatever happens in the world is precisely as God wanted to have happen. After all, God is almighty. How, then, could anything occur that God does not want to occur? Hence, no matter what happens, no matter how bad, it was God’s will. That, at least, is what this theology teaches.

Read Psalm 81:11–14; Isaiah 30:15, 18; Isaiah 66:4; and Luke 13:34. What do these texts say about the question of whether God’s will is always being done?

While many people believe that God must always get what He wants, the Bible tells a quite different story. Again and again, Scripture depicts God as experiencing unfulfilled desires. That is, what happens often runs counter to what God states that He actually prefers to happen. In many instances, God explicitly declares that what is happening is the opposite of what He wants. He willed one outcome for His people, but they chose another instead. God Himself laments: “ ‘My people would not heed My voice. . . . Oh, that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways! I would soon subdue their enemies’ ” (*Ps. 81:11, 13, 14, NKJV*).

Think through the implications of any theology that attributes everything that happens to God’s direct will. What kind of deep problems, especially in the context of evil, would such a theology create?

Pantokrator

Throughout Scripture, God’s amazing power is made manifest. The Bible includes countless narratives of His exercising His power and working miracles. And yet, despite this, many things happen that God does not want to happen.

Read Revelation 11:17, Jeremiah 32:17–20, Luke 1:37, and Matthew 19:26. Consider also Hebrews 1:3. What do these passages teach about God’s power?

These texts and others teach that God is all-powerful and that He sustains the world by His power. Indeed, Revelation repeatedly refers to God as the “LORD God Almighty” (*for example, Rev. 11:17; compare with 2 Cor. 6:18, Rev. 1:8, Rev. 16:14, Rev. 19:15, Rev. 21:22*) and the word translated “Almighty” (*pantokrator*) literally means “all-powerful.” The fact that God is all-powerful is not only affirmed in words but also manifest in the many amazing instances in which God uses His power to deliver His people or otherwise miraculously intervenes in the world.

However, to say God is “all-powerful” does not mean that God can do anything whatsoever. Scripture teaches that there are some things God cannot do; for example, 2 Timothy 2:13 declares, God “cannot deny Himself” (*NKJV*).

Accordingly, most Christians agree that God is all-powerful (omnipotent), meaning that God has the power to do anything that does not involve a contradiction—that is, anything that is logically possible and consistent with God’s nature. That some things are not possible for God because they would involve a contradiction is apparent in Christ’s prayer in Gethsemane. While Christ affirmed that “with God all things are possible” (*Matt. 19:26*), He also prayed to the Father as the crucifixion neared, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will’ ” (*Matt. 26:39, NKJV*).

Of course, the Father possessed the sheer power to deliver Christ from suffering on the cross, but He could not do this while also saving sinners. It had to be one or the other, not both.

Scripture also teaches that God wants to save everyone (*for example, 1 Tim. 2:4–6, Titus 2:11, 2 Pet. 3:9, Ezek. 33:11*), but not everyone will be saved. What does this fact teach about the reality of free will and the limits of God’s power with beings granted free will?

To Love God

That God is all-powerful does not mean that He can do the logically impossible. Accordingly, God cannot *causally determine* that someone freely love Him. If *freely* doing something means to do something without being determined to do it, then by definition it is impossible to make someone *freely* do something. In short, as we have seen, and must re-emphasize—God cannot force anyone to love Him, for the moment it's forced, it is no longer love.

Read Matthew 22:37 and Deuteronomy 6:4, 5. What do these verses teach about the reality of free will?

The greatest commandment, to love God, provides evidence that God does, indeed, want everyone to love Him. However, not everyone does love God. Why, then, does God simply not make everyone love Him? Again, that is because love, to be love, must be freely given.

Read Hebrews 6:17, 18 and Titus 1:2. What do these texts teach about God?

According to Numbers 23:19, “ ‘God is not man, that [H]e should lie’ ” (*ESV*). God never lies (*Titus 1:2*); God always keeps His word and never breaks a promise (*Heb. 6:17, 18*). Accordingly, if God has promised or committed Himself to something, His future action is morally limited by that promise.

This means that, insofar as God, in most cases, grants creatures the freedom to choose otherwise than what God prefers; it is not up to God what humans choose. If God has committed Himself to granting creatures free will, humans possess the ability to exercise their freedom in ways that go against God's ideal desires. Tragically, many people do exercise their freedom in this way, and accordingly, there are many things that occur that God wishes did not, but that are not, strictly speaking, up to God.

What have you done that you knew God didn't want you to do? What does this teach about the reality—and possible frightful consequences—of free will?

God's Ideal and Remedial Wills

Read Ephesians 1:9–11. What is this text saying about predestination? Are some people predestined to be saved and others to be lost?

The Greek term translated “predestination” here and elsewhere in Scripture (*prohorizo*) does not itself teach that God causally determines history. Rather, the Greek term simply means “to decide beforehand.”

Of course, one can decide something beforehand unilaterally, or one can decide something beforehand in a way that takes into account the free decisions of others. Scripture teaches that God does the latter.

Here and elsewhere (*for example, Rom. 8:29, 30*), the term translated “predestined” refers to what God plans for the future *after taking into account what God foreknows about the free decisions of creatures*. Thus, God can providentially guide history to His desired good ends for all, even while respecting the kind of creaturely freedom that is required for a genuine love relationship.

Ephesians 1:11 proclaims that God “works all things according to the counsel of His will” (*NKJV*). Does this mean that God determines everything to happen just as He desires? Read in isolation, Ephesians 1:9–11 might seem to affirm this view. However, this interpretation would contradict the many texts we saw earlier that show that people sometimes reject “the will of God” (*Luke 7:30, NKJV; compare with Luke 13:34, Ps. 81:11–14*). If the Bible does not contradict itself, how can these passages be understood in a way that is consistent with one another?

This passage makes perfect sense if one simply recognizes a distinction between what we might call God’s “ideal will” and God’s “remedial will.” God’s “ideal will” is what God actually prefers to occur and which would occur if everyone always did exactly what God desires. God’s “remedial will,” on the other hand, is God’s will that has already taken into account every other factor, including the free decisions of creatures, which sometimes depart from what God prefers. Ephesians 1:11 appears to be referring to God’s “remedial will.”

So powerful is God’s foreknowledge of the future that, even knowing all the choices, including the bad choices, that people will make, He can still work “all things together for good” (*Rom. 8:28, CEB*). What comfort can you draw from this truth?

Christ Has Overcome the World

If everything occurred according to God's ideal will, there would never have been evil but only the perfect bliss of love and harmony. Eventually, the universe will be restored to this perfect, ideal will of God. In the meantime, God is working out His will in a way that takes into account the free decisions of His creatures.

Imagine a baking competition in which all participants are required to use some particular set of ingredients, but they can add any other ingredients they want in order to bake any kind of cake they want, as well. In the end, whatever cake a baker ends up making will be determined, at least partially, by some ingredients that the baker did not choose.

Similarly (in this limited respect), because God has committed Himself to respecting creaturely freedom of the kind necessary for love, many of the "ingredients" that make up world history are not chosen by God but are actually the opposite of what God desires.

In this view, divine providence is not simply one-dimensional, as if God unilaterally controls everything that happens. Rather, this requires (at least) a two-dimensional view of God's providence. Some things in this world are caused by God, but other occurrences are the result of the free decisions of creatures (as are all evils). Many things happen that God does not want to happen.

Read John 16:33. What hope, even amid tribulations, does this text offer us?

Particularly in times of suffering or trial, people's faith may waver because they hold the mistaken belief that God will or should spare them from suffering and trials in this life. But Jesus tells us a very different story, warning His followers they will experience trials and tribulations in this world, but there is hope, for Christ has overcome the world (*John 16:33*).

The fact that we encounter suffering and trials does not mean that this is what God ideally wants for us. We must always keep in mind the big picture: the great controversy. However, we can be confident that, while evil itself is not necessary for good, God can bring good even out of evil events. And, if we trust God, God can use even our sufferings to draw us closer to Him and to motivate us to be compassionate and to care for others.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “‘God With Us,’” pp. 19–26, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“The plan for our redemption was not an afterthought, a plan formulated after the fall of Adam. It was a revelation of ‘the mystery which hath been kept in silence through times eternal.’ Rom. 16:25, R. V. It was an unfolding of the principles that from eternal ages have been the foundation of God’s throne. From the beginning, God and Christ knew of the apostasy of Satan, and of the fall of man through the deceptive power of the apostate. God did not ordain that sin should exist, but He foresaw its existence, and made provision to meet the terrible emergency. So great was His love for the world, that He covenanted to give His only-begotten Son, ‘that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’ John 3:16.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 22.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ If God does not always get what He wants, how does this fact impact the way you think about what occurs in this world? What are the practical implications of understanding that God has unfulfilled desires?
- ❷ If we go back to the cake analogy in Thursday’s study, we can understand why, even though “God and Christ knew of the apostasy of Satan,” they went ahead and created us anyway. Love had to be in the mix, and love meant freedom. Rather than not create us as beings able to love, God created us so that we could love, but He did so knowing that, ultimately, it would lead Jesus to the cross. What should it tell us about how sacred, how fundamental, love was to God’s government that Christ would suffer on the cross rather than deny us the freedom inherent in love?
- ❸ Often we lament the evil and suffering in this world, but how often do you take time to ponder that God Himself laments and is grieved by suffering and evil? What difference does it make to your understanding of evil and suffering when you recognize that God Himself suffers because of evil?
- ❹ How does this truth—that many things happen in this world that God does not will—help you deal with your own suffering, especially when it doesn’t make sense and seems to lead to no good at all?

From Rumba to Church

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

As a boy, Nelson was too young to go to rumba in Colombia. But he sensed something was wrong when his parents took him to church on December 31 and then left him at home so they could celebrate New Year's Eve at rumba, a traditional party with music, dancing, and drinking.

In Nelson's culture, Christians went to church to consecrate themselves to God before New Year's Eve and then went to rumba to ring in the New Year. Although he was young, Nelson sensed that church was a holy place and that rumba, which was usually held in bars and nightclubs, was not holy. He wondered, "Why does my family go to church to get sanctified and then go to rumba to get unsanctified?"

Nelson asked his mother, "Why do you go to church and then to rumba?"

She didn't answer.

As a young man, Nelson stopped going to church and began to play *val-lenato* folk music at rumba. He was an excellent accordion player, and he made strides toward fulfilling a dream to become rich and famous.

Then he met his future wife, Laura, a former Seventh-day Adventist.

"Did you know that the dead are not in heaven?" she asked.

Nelson didn't like Laura's ideas, but he liked her. So, they stayed together.

After some time, Laura returned to the Adventist Church, and she invited Nelson to meet her parents. At their first meeting, her father surprised Nelson when they sat down to eat. "Let's pray for the food," he said. Nelson had never prayed before meals.

Nelson and Laura's father became friends. Before long, Nelson started to pray at meals. He also began to go to church with Laura. He didn't enjoy it at first because it seemed strange to go to church on Saturdays. But then he read the fourth commandment in Exodus 20:8–10 and realized that God commanded people to keep the seventh day holy. He wanted to be holy.

Today, Nelson Silva, 30, is an Adventist musician who no longer plays the accordion at rumba. Instead, he plays in restaurants and at birthday parties. He tells listeners about God's mercy and prays for them. He and a group of church musicians also play on public buses.

"Music made me shine in the world, but now I want to shine for Christ," he said.



Pray for the gospel to be proclaimed to all cultures and people groups around the world. Thank you for your mission offerings that help share the gospel with unreached and underreached people groups. Watch a YouTube video of Nelson playing the accordion at bit.ly/Nelson-Silva.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *John 16:33*

Study Focus: *Ps. 81:11–14, Luke 7:30, Luke 13:34, Titus 1:2, Heb. 6:18.*

Introduction: While God is omnipotent and sovereign, He does not determine everything that happens. Moreover, there are things that God will not do, and cannot do, from the standpoint of the nature of His moral character. Yet, divine providence can indeed transform a terrible situation into a blessing.

Lesson Themes: This week's lesson emphasizes three main ideas:

1. God's sovereignty does not exclude unfulfilled desires. God does not determine everything that happens. Even though He is all-powerful, God commits Himself morally to human free will. Consequently, not everything that happens is in accordance with His desires, considering the decisions of morally free creatures. God is sovereign in the sense that He accomplishes His providential purpose (ideal will) and takes into account the free decisions of His creatures, which can be contrary to what He prefers (remedial will).
2. God's omnipotence does not mean that His providential actions have no limits. There are things that God will not do, and cannot do, from the standpoint of His moral character. This notion is significant for our understanding of divine providence in the world. God's providential actions are consistent with His love and are not determined or forced. But His providential actions do not overrule free human choice. Thus, God's omnipotence does not rule out the free will of His creatures.
3. Divine providence includes ideal and remedial actions. God's providential actions are not defined only in terms of ideal will, based exactly on what God desires, but involve remedial actions. Remedial actions depart from what God prefers for His creatures. Even so, God may transform a situation that is against His moral will into something that is aligned with His moral/ideal desire.

Life Application: Is everything that happens in our life the result of God's will? Why, or why not? What have you learned about divine providence from the story of Joseph?

Part II: Commentary

1. God's Sovereignty Does Not Exclude Unfulfilled Desires.

One of the key questions debated in *Four Views on Divine Providence* is whether God always gets “what He wants.” To put it more pointedly, this question poses the challenge of how to “reconcile human beings’ moral responsibility with God’s sovereignty over their acts.”—Dennis W. Jowers, ed., *Four Views on Divine Providence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), p. 10. If the answer to the question is positive (yes, God always gets what He wants), then no one is able to do something different from what God desires, and consequently, everything that happens in the world is in accordance with His desires, including the occurrences of evil. But this picture is contrary to God’s loving benevolence and to the moral freedom of His creatures, as observed in Scripture (see John Peckham, “Providence and God’s Unfulfilled Desires,” *Philosophia Cristi* 15, no. 2 [2013]: p. 234).

There are several places in Scripture where we find people, even God’s people, acting differently from what God desires. In Psalm 81:11–14, a psalm in which God appeals to Israel’s repentance, the Lord complains that His people do “not heed” His “voice, and Israel would have none of Me. So I gave them over to their own stubborn heart, to walk in their own counsels. Oh, that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways! I would soon subdue their enemies, and turn My hand against their adversaries’ ” (*NKJV*). Likewise, in Isaiah 66:4, the Lord sadly underlines that when He “ ‘called, no one answered, when I spoke they did not hear; but they did evil before My eyes, and chose that in which I do not delight’ ” (*NKJV*).

In Ezekiel 18:23, God emphasizes that He does not have any pleasure in the death of the wicked. Rather, His desire is that the wicked may repent and live. In the Gospels, we are told that “the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will of God for themselves” (*Luke 7:30, NKJV*). Similarly, Jesus laments over Jerusalem for living in rebellion against His desires. “ ‘How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!’ ” (*Luke 13:34, NKJV*).

This biblical picture indicates that God’s sovereignty in the world does not exclude the existence of unfulfilled divine desires, considering the decisions of His morally free creatures. At the same time, God is still sovereign, and as Job underscores, “ ‘no purpose of Yours can be thwarted’ ” (*Job 42:2, NASB1995*). Peckham suggests that “God does not always get what he wants (his ideal will) yet God will certainly accomplish his all-encompassing and omnibenevolent providential purpose (his effective will).”—*Philosophia Christi*, vol. 15, no. 2, p. 236. More specifically, “God voluntarily opened himself up to the temporary

discontent brought about by evil. God is nevertheless content in the overarching sense that his purpose will ultimately be fulfilled and bring maximal contentment to the entire universe in eternally harmonious love relationship.”—Page 235.

2. God’s Omnipotence Does Not Mean That His Providential Actions Have No Limits.

As the Almighty God, the Lord can do anything. Nothing is impossible for Him (*Gen. 18:14, Mark 14:36, Luke 18:27*). So, from the standpoint of power and freedom, God can do anything. However, from the standpoint of the nature of His moral character and His free decisions regarding the existence and reality of the created world, there are things that God will not do and, in this sense, cannot do. It is from this perspective that Scripture affirms that God cannot do certain things. For instance, He “cannot lie” (*Titus 1:2; see also Heb. 6:18*), He “cannot be tempted by evil” (*James 1:13, NKJV*), and “He cannot deny Himself” (*2 Tim. 2:13, NKJV*).

This concept of God’s moral character is important for our understanding of divine providence, that is, of God’s actions in the world. While He has the power and the freedom to do anything in His providence, His providential actions are delimited by the moral nature of His character and decisions. Ellen G. White highlights that “God never forces the will or the conscience” of His creatures (*The Great Controversy*, p. 591). In *Steps to Christ*, she mentions that “Christ is ready to set us free from sin, but He does not force the will; and if by persistent transgression the will itself is wholly bent on evil, and we do not *desire* to be set free, if we *will* not accept His grace, what more can He do? We have destroyed ourselves by our determined rejection of His love.”—Page 34.

This principle means that, because of His loving character, God’s omnipotence does not rule out the free will of His creatures. His providential actions do not force the conscience, which explains why He lovingly appeals to our minds to choose life, not death (*Deut. 30:15–20*), and to not harden our hearts to His voice (*Heb. 3:7, 8*). Even though He desires the salvation of all (*Ezek. 33:11, 1 Tim. 2:4–6, Titus 2:11, 2 Pet. 3:9*), the Bible does not teach that everyone will be saved (*see, for example, Matt. 25:31–46; John 5:28, 29*).

God’s providential activity is consistent with His love. By definition, a loving relationship cannot be determined or forced, but necessarily implies free choice. As the source of love (*1 John 4:7, 8*), God does not force or determine our love, but He expresses His deep love for us with the desire to instill His love in us (*John 3:16, 1 John 4:19*). According to *1 John 4:19*, “we love Him because He first loved us” (*NKJV*). A genuine love for God

is founded in a personal conviction about His loving and just character. As Ellen G. White beautifully puts it: “Only the service of love can be acceptable to God, the allegiance of His creatures must rest upon a conviction of His justice and benevolence.”—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 42.

3. Divine Providence Includes Ideal and Remedial Actions.

Taking into account that God’s sovereignty does not exclude unfulfilled desires and that His omnipotence does not mean that His providential actions force the decisions of His creatures, divine providence should not be defined only in terms of ideal actions, which derive from God’s ideal will or desire. Considering that many situations are caused by the decisions of creatures that are incompatible with the moral will of God, several providential actions are more precisely understood as remedial actions, in the sense that God transforms a situation that is against His moral will into something that is aligned with His moral/ideal desire.

The notion of remedial providential action is particularly observed in the history of Joseph. He interprets the ambiguity of his painful, yet astonishing, life journey as paradoxically influenced by both human evil intentions and divine loving providence. The former does not preclude the latter. The latter does not justify the former. In Genesis 50:20, Joseph says to his brothers, “You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive” (*NKJV*). In short, God’s providence transforms a miserable situation, resulting from the unjustifiable evil intentions and actions of human beings, into a blessing that we could never foresee.

Ellen G. White uses the language of overruling to describe God’s remedial providence: “It was envy that moved the brothers of Joseph to sell him as a slave; they hoped to prevent him from becoming greater than themselves. And when he was carried to Egypt, they flattered themselves that they were to be no more troubled with his dreams, that they had removed all possibility of their fulfillment. *But their own course was overruled by God* to bring about the very event that they designed to hinder.”—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 239; emphasis supplied.

Part III: Life Application

Even though we do not always follow God’s desires for our lives, He can transform any terrible situation into a blessing. Based on this point, discuss with your students the following questions:

1. What needs to be changed in our lives so that we can be dependent upon God's will in our spiritual journey? How can we seek to make sure our free choices do not clash with God's will?

2. Our spiritual failure does not affect God's love for us. How does this wonderful truth motivate us in preaching the gospel?

3. How can we explain to small children, in appropriate ways, that not everything that happens is God's direct will?

Notes

The Cosmic Conflict



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 13:24–27; Gen. 1:31; Ezek. 28:12–19; Isa. 14:12–15; Matt. 4:1–11; John 8:44, 45.*

Memory Text: “ ‘And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel’ ” (*Genesis 3:15, NKJV*).

Central to biblical theology is the great controversy between Christ and Satan. Although the idea of a cosmic conflict between God and celestial creatures who have fallen and rebelled against God is a prominent motif of Scripture (*Matt. 13:24–30, 37–39; Rev. 12:7–10*) and also is prevalent in much of Christian tradition, many Christians have rejected or neglected the whole idea.

From a biblical perspective, however, the theme of a cosmic conflict, in which the kingdom of God is opposed by the devil and his angels, is not one that we can neglect without missing a great deal of what the biblical narratives are about. The Gospels alone are filled with references to the devil and demons who oppose God.

To begin with this week, we will address how the two following questions might be answered according to some crucial biblical passages:

1. Where does Scripture teach that there is a cosmic conflict between God and Satan?
2. According to Scripture, what is the nature of the conflict?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 1.

An Enemy Has Done This

Read Matthew 13:24–27. How does the parable help us understand evil in our world?

Jesus tells the story of a landowner who sows only good seeds in his field. However, tares spring up among the wheat. Upon seeing this, the servants of the owner ask him, “ ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?’ ” (Matt. 13:27, *NKJV*). This is similar to the question often asked today concerning the problem of evil: If God created the world entirely good, why is there evil in it?

Read Matthew 13:28–30 in light of Christ’s explanation in Matthew 13:37–40. How does this also shed light on the nature of the cosmic conflict?

The master replies to his servant’s question: “ ‘An enemy has done this’ ” (Matt. 13:28, *NKJV*). Jesus later identifies the one “ ‘who sows the good seed’ ” as “ ‘the Son of Man,’ ” who is Jesus Himself (Matt. 13:37, *NKJV*), and explains that “the field is the world” (Matt. 13:38), and the “ ‘enemy who sowed’ ” the tares is “ ‘the devil’ ” (Matt. 13:39, *NKJV*), explicitly depicting a cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan. Why is there evil in the world? Evil is the result of the enemy (the devil) who opposes the master. “ ‘An enemy has done this’ ” (Matt. 13:28, *NKJV*).

This answer, however, provokes the follow-up question, “ ‘Do you want us then to go and gather them up?’ ” In other words, why not uproot the evil immediately? “ ‘No,’ ” the master replies, “ ‘lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest’ ” (Matt. 13:29, 30, *NKJV*; compare with Mark 4:29). According to the parable, God will finally put an end to evil, but uprooting it prematurely would result in irreversible collateral damage that harms the good.

What are some of the dangers in seeking to uproot the tares from the wheat now? At the same time, why does this not mean simply ignoring the evil that we encounter?

The Origin of the Controversy on Earth

Parallel to the question in the parable—about why there is bad seed in the field if the owner planted only good seed—is another question: if God created the world entirely good, how did evil arise here?

Read Genesis 1:31. What do God’s words reveal about the state of creation when God finished creating, and why is this answer important?

According to Genesis 1:31, when God finished creating the world, it was “very good.” In Genesis 1, there is no hint of evil in God’s creation of this planet. How, then, did evil come into the human experience?

Read Genesis 3:1–7. What does this tell us about how evil got here on earth? What light does this shed on the nature of the cosmic conflict? (See also Rev. 12:7–9.)

In this narrative, we see lies about God’s character raised by the serpent, identified as the devil himself (that “serpent of old” [NKJV]) in Revelation 12:7–9. The serpent first uses a question to cast doubt on God’s command, nearly reversing what God had commanded in his question. Then, the serpent directly challenges what God had said, saying to Eve, “ ‘You will not surely die’ ” (*Gen. 3:4, NKJV*).

Someone, either the serpent or God, lied to Eve, who now has a choice to make about whether she will believe what God told her or what the serpent did.

Here and elsewhere in Scripture, the nature of this conflict is primarily over what and whom to believe, which is itself integrally related to love. And that is because your beliefs about someone, the kind of person that he or she is, and whether he or she can be trusted, deeply impact whether you will love and trust that person and, in this case, listen to what that person tells you.

Read Genesis 3:15. God’s statement to the serpent that the Seed of the woman, referring to the Messiah, would crush the serpent’s head is often identified as the first gospel (*protoevangelium*) in Scripture. How does this both reinforce the reality of the conflict and yet provide hope for us in the midst of it?

The Origin of the Controversy in Heaven

Genesis 1–3 alone shows that evil existed *before* the fall of Adam and Eve. Even if evil was not a concrete reality in Eden, conceptually, “evil” has already appeared, in the name of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (*Gen. 2:9, 17*). Then the serpent accuses God of lying when, in fact, he, the serpent, is the one lying. The existence of the serpent (*Rev. 12:9*), along with his lying, shows the reality of evil there. Thus, even in Eden before the Fall, the presence of evil is manifest.

Read Ezekiel 28:12–19 in light of Exodus 25:19, 20. What is the nature of this being’s fall?

According to this passage, the origin of evil and the cosmic conflict began in heaven.

Before he fell, the being who became known as Satan was a covering cherub. Beyond being identified as this cherub, he was “ ‘the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty’ ” and was “ ‘in Eden, the garden of God’ ” (*Ezek. 28:12, 13, NKJV*). Neither of these things could be said of the human king of Tyre (or any other human). Hence, we know that we have been given here a glimpse into the fall of Lucifer.

Read Isaiah 14:12–15. What additional light does this shed on the origin of the great controversy?

According to Isaiah 14, Lucifer decided to exalt himself and make himself like God. This verse complements what we saw in Ezekiel 28, that his “heart was lifted up” because of his “beauty” (*Ezek. 28:17*), which should have brought him to glorify the God who made him beautiful. Instead, he became proud. Worse, in this pride, he set out to take God’s place and to slander Him. The Hebrew term for “trading” in Ezekiel 28:16 also means “slander,” an indication of how Satan will operate against God and against us, as well.

How do we understand the fact that Lucifer, who fell, was originally “perfect . . . from the day” he was created “till iniquity was found” in him (*Ezek. 28:15*)? How could a perfect being fall unless being “perfect” included true moral freedom?

If You Worship Me

Satan's quest to usurp God's throne is also revealed in the temptation narratives found in Matthew 4 and Luke 4. In the striking encounter between Jesus and the tempter, much is revealed about the nature of the conflict. Here we see the reality of the great controversy between Christ and Satan, but played out in stark and graphic terms.

Read Matthew 4:1–11. How is the reality of the great controversy between Christ and Satan revealed here?

The Spirit had “led” Jesus into the wilderness for the express purpose that Jesus was “to be tempted by the devil” (*Matt. 4:1, NKJV*). And before facing this encounter, Jesus fasted for forty days. So when the devil came, he tempted Jesus to turn stones into bread, playing on Jesus' extreme hunger. But Jesus countered this temptation with Scripture, and Satan's ploy failed.

Then, in an attempt to get Jesus to act presumptuously, the devil tempted Jesus to throw Himself down from the pinnacle of the temple. Satan twisted Scripture to suggest that if Jesus were truly the Son of God, angels would protect Him. But with Scripture read rightly, Jesus again counters the temptation.

The third temptation clearly reveals just what the devil is trying to accomplish. He wants Jesus to worship him. Satan attempts to usurp the worship that is due to God alone.

And to do so, he shows Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world and their glory” and then claims: “ ‘All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me’ ” (*Matt. 4:8, 9, NKJV*). Indeed, in Luke 4:6, a text that parallels Matthew, the devil claims: “ ‘All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish’ ” (*Luke 4:6, NKJV*).

Once again, Jesus counters the temptation with Scripture, and again Satan fails.

In all three cases, Jesus used Scripture to defend against the enemy's attacks.

Ephesians 6:12 reminds us that “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (*NKJV*). Though we shouldn't live in fear, why must we always remember the reality of the struggle going on around us?

The Nature of the Cosmic Conflict

We have seen some passages that teach a cosmic conflict between God and Satan. But how is such a conflict even possible? How could anyone oppose the omnipotent God? If the cosmic conflict were over sheer power, it would have been over before it started. It must be of a different kind. Indeed, Scripture reveals that the conflict is a dispute over God's character—a conflict over slanderous allegations raised by the devil against God, that (among other things) He is not fully good and loving. Such claims cannot be defeated by power or brute force but by comparing the two competing characters.

“In His dealing with sin, God could employ only righteousness and truth. Satan could use what God could not—flattery and deceit. He had sought to falsify the word of God and had misrepresented His plan of government before the angels, claiming that God was not just in laying laws and rules upon the inhabitants of heaven; that in requiring submission and obedience from His creatures, He was seeking merely the exaltation of Himself. Therefore it must be demonstrated before the inhabitants of heaven, as well as of all the worlds, that God's government was just, His law perfect. Satan had made it appear that he himself was seeking to promote the good of the universe. The true character of the usurper, and his real object, must be understood by all. He must have time to manifest himself by his wicked works.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 498.

Read John 8:44, 45 in light of Revelation 12:7–9. What do these passages reveal about the character of the devil and his strategy?

The devil's plan from the beginning has been to try to make creatures believe that God was not really just and loving and that His law was oppressive and hurtful to them. No wonder Jesus refers to the devil as “a liar and the father of” lies (*John 8:44, NKJV*). In contrast, Jesus came to “testify to the truth” (*John 18:37, NASB*) and directly counter the lies and slander of Satan, defeating and, ultimately, destroying the devil and his power (*1 John 3:8, Heb. 2:14*).

Revelation 12:9, 10 identifies Satan (1) as the “serpent of old” (*NKJV*), (2) as the one who in the heavenly court accuses God's people, and (3) as the dragon ruler who deceives the world. The Greek word translated “devil” just means “slanderer,” showing once again that the nature of the conflict is over beliefs, including beliefs about God's character.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Origin of Evil,” pp. 492–504, in *The Great Controversy*.

“Nothing is more plainly taught in Scripture than that God was in no wise responsible for the entrance of sin; that there was no arbitrary withdrawal of divine grace, no deficiency in the divine government, that gave occasion for the uprising of rebellion. Sin is an intruder, for whose presence no reason can be given. It is mysterious, unaccountable; to excuse it is to defend it. . . . Had he [Satan] been immediately blotted from existence, they [the inhabitants of heaven and of other worlds] would have served God from fear rather than from love. The influence of the deceiver would not have been fully destroyed, nor would the spirit of rebellion have been utterly eradicated. Evil must be permitted to come to maturity. For the good of the entire universe through ceaseless ages Satan must more fully develop his principles, that his charges against the divine government might be seen in their true light by all created beings, that the justice and mercy of God and the immutability of His law might forever be placed beyond all question.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 492, 493, 499.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Many people wonder how a sinless creature like Lucifer could sin for the first time. Why is sin so “mysterious” and “unaccountable”? How can we explain this first sin without excusing it or justifying it? That is, why would explaining its origin be the same as justifying it?
- ❷ Why did God not simply blot Satan out of existence right away? Why must evil “be permitted to come to maturity”? How is this “for the good of the entire universe through ceaseless ages”?
- ❸ Why is it so important to understand that the conflict between God and Satan is not one of sheer power but a conflict of a different kind? How does a conflict over character make sense in ways that a conflict over sheer power could not?
- ❹ How does understanding the nature of the conflict pull back the curtain, so to speak, on ways in which your own life might be a microcosm of the cosmic conflict? In what ways are you even now experiencing the reality of this conflict? How should you respond in ways that show whose side you truly are on?

The Persistent Caller: Part 1

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

The Zoom call just wouldn't go through.

"It's not working!" Matrona exclaimed.

Over her phone, Colette could hear Matrona typing and retying the Zoom password on a facility computer.

It was a call that they had attempted many times that week. Matrona was among many Alaska Native children living in facilities and foster homes in Alaska, and she was eager to get acquainted with Colette.

She tried the password again. "It's not working!" she cried.

"It's OK," Colette said.

"It's not OK! I want to try again," Matrona said.

When it still didn't work, Colette suggested they talk on the phone instead.

Colette Reahl, a Seventh-day Adventist pediatrician in Anchorage, was eager to get acquainted with Matrona, too. An Alaska Native girl, Matrona was eligible for adoption at a facility in Fairbanks, located 360 miles away.

Matrona reluctantly agreed to talk by phone. The first question she asked was, "What are your house rules?"

"That is something we can talk about more when you get to the house," Colette said. "But respect is pretty big in my house."

Matrona quizzed Colette for the next 30 minutes. At the end of the conversation, she said, "You know, my foster mom is going to adopt me, right?"

Colette, a Florida native who had lived with her husband in Alaska for eight years, had not known that. She thought, *Matrona is so interesting, and she has such a huge personality. This is going to be an adventure!*

From her side, Matrona knew that Colette was looking to adopt, but she didn't want to get hurt. So, she made it difficult for Colette to get close.

Colette asked how often she could call, and Matrona proposed once a week on Tuesdays. But when Colette called, Matrona wasn't available or didn't answer. They changed the time to Thursdays and then to Saturdays.

Colette sensed that Matrona was annoyed, but she couldn't understand why. She decided to keep calling every week whether Matrona wanted to talk or not. As she kept calling with unconditional love, Matrona's heart began to thaw.



This mission story offers an inside look at a previous Thirteenth Sabbath project. Pediatrician Colette Reahl is also coleader of Bethel (Alaska) Seventh-day Adventist Church, which received part of a 2024 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering. Thank you for helping spread the gospel with this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering on March 29. Read more about Colette and Matrona next week.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Genesis 3:15*

Study Focus: *Gen. 3:1–4, Isa. 14:12–15, Ezek. 28:12–19, Matt. 13:24–30, John 8:44, Rev. 12:7–9.*

Introduction: The cosmic conflict impacts every human being on a daily basis and the universe at large. Satan attempts to usurp the worship that is due God, but he will be defeated in the end.

Lesson Themes: This week’s lesson underlines three main notions:

1. The cosmic conflict is not a dualistic battle of omnipotent powers. The cosmic conflict centers on the moral perfection of God’s character. The conflict does not involve two equally independent powers fighting over an endless war, as Lucifer was originally created by God and decided to question his Creator’s character.
2. The cosmic conflict involves God’s people. The whole universe feels the effects of the cosmic conflict. In heaven, Christ was the primary target of Lucifer’s rebellion. In the wilderness, Satan questioned Jesus’ Sonship. Yet, Jesus was victorious, and He is empowered to make us sons and daughters of God.
3. The resolution of the cosmic conflict could not be premature. There will come a day when God finally will put an end to evil. Meanwhile, evil is permitted to come to maturity so that the false charges made against God’s divine government might be seen in their true light by all created beings.

Life Application: How should the fact that we are facing the effects of the cosmic conflict on a daily basis make us even more aware and willing to depend on God at all times?

Part II: Commentary

1. The Cosmic Conflict Is Not a Dualistic Battle of Omnipotent Powers.

There are distinct versions of the cosmic conflict in different religious and/or philosophical circles. An influential non-Christian version is dualism. As C. S. Lewis points out, dualism is “the belief that there are two equal and independent powers at the back of everything, one of them good and the other bad, and that this universe is the battlefield in which they

fight out an endless war.” To say that these powers are equally independent means that “they both existed from all eternity.”—*Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), pp. 33, 34. This dualistic engagement is not the type of cosmic conflict emphasized in the Bible. From a biblical perspective, the one who is now called Satan “was created by God, and was good when he was created, and went wrong.” Similar to dualism, the Christian view is that our “universe is at war.” But unlike dualism, “it does not think this is a war between independent powers. It thinks it is a civil war, a rebellion, and that we are living in a part of the universe occupied by the rebel.”—*Mere Christianity*, p. 36.

Therefore, instead of a cosmic conflict fought between two independent omnipotent powers, what we have is a rebellion of the creature against the Creator. According to what we learn about the role of the deceiving serpent in Genesis 3, the conflict centers on the perception of God’s character as reflected in His law. In other words, is God trustworthy? Can we believe His words? Obviously, these two questions are crucial for a loving relationship. It is basically impossible to develop a genuine and deep love relationship with someone we do not trust.

The rebellion of Lucifer against God, which marks the beginning of the cosmic conflict, starts in heaven and is observed in Isaiah 14:12–15 and Ezekiel 28:12–19, especially as we compare these chapters with Genesis 3 and Revelation 12. Whereas the passages in Isaiah and Ezekiel refer directly to the kings of Babylon and Tyre, respectively, “in each passage there is a movement from the local, historical realm of earthly kings to the heavenly supernatural realm describing Lucifer/Satan and the rise of the Great Controversy.”—Richard Davidson, “Cosmic Narrative for the Coming Millennium,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 11, nos. 1, 2 (2000): p. 107. Essentially, Lucifer/Satan wants to make himself exalted like God. More precisely, he wishes to possess/usurp God’s dignified status and power, but not His loving character, given that Lucifer/Satan attempts to exalt himself by means of trading/slander (*Ezek. 28:16*) and lies (*Gen. 3:4, John 8:44*).

2. The Cosmic Conflict Involves God’s People.

Whereas the cosmic conflict began with the rebellion of Lucifer against God in heaven, it eventually involved somehow the universe as a whole. More specifically, it involved angels (*Rev. 12:7–9*) and human beings (*Genesis 3*). Because Eve fell into the devil’s temptation and Adam intentionally followed her, our world became the stage of the cosmic conflict. In a sinful world, human life became characterized by the cosmic conflict. In other words, human creatures face the existence and the effects of the cosmic conflict every day. Obviously, this scenario is also true for the history of God’s people throughout Scripture.

If the divine Christ already was the primary target of Lucifer's rebellion in heaven (*Rev. 12:7*; see also Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, chapter 1 ["Why Was Sin Permitted?"]), His earthly condition as our Redeemer and the new representative of God's people, the second Adam (*Rom. 5:14*; *1 Cor. 15:22, 45*), put the incarnate Christ as the primary target of Satan's intensified attacks in the wilderness.

Luke's account of the temptation of Christ is preceded by the divine affirmation of His Sonship (" 'You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased' " [*Luke 3:22, NKJV*]) in the narrative of His baptism, which is followed by a genealogical list, starting with Jesus as the "son of Joseph" (*Luke 3:23*), and progressively moving backward (*Luke 3:23–38*) to Adam, "the son of God" (*Luke 3:38*). With this background of Sonship language in mind, the attentive hearer/reader of the Gospel sees Satan beginning his temptations in the wilderness by questioning whether Jesus is, in fact, "the Son of God" (*Luke 4:3*), which is clearly and precisely what the divine voice told Jesus a few verses earlier. If we take Adam as an important reference in the genealogy that immediately precedes the narrative of the temptation, there is a stark similarity with the temptation of the serpent in Eden, where Eve also questioned, at least in her mind, (see *Gen. 3:1, 4*) a clear statement from God to her husband and her about the deadly results of eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, as indicated a few verses before (see *Gen. 2:17*).

In any case, the good news of the narrative of the temptation in the Gospels is that we have a different history of humanity in Jesus, the new Adam. While Adam fell in the temptation in Eden, Jesus was victorious in the temptation in the wilderness. His victory opened up a new horizon for the sons and daughters of God in the cosmic conflict, inasmuch as Christ is the new Adam, that is, the new head of the human family.

In Matthew's Gospel, the narrative of the temptation appears right after the account of Jesus' baptism. Instead of Luke's universal reference to Adam, Matthew seems to have in mind the people of Israel. The genealogy focuses on such figures as Abraham and David (*Matt. 1:1–17*), and the decree for the death of children in the context of the history of Jesus (*Matt. 2:13–16*) echoes the history of Moses. The comparison with the people of Israel becomes more emphatic when we notice that all the answers Jesus gave to the devil in the wilderness are scripturally taken from the experience of Israel in the desert (*Deut. 8:3, Deut. 6:16, Deut. 6:13*). In short, where Israel failed, Jesus was victorious, which opens up a new horizon for the people of God in the cosmic conflict, as Christ representatively takes the place of a new Israel.

3. The Resolution of the Cosmic Conflict Could Not Be Premature.

The parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13:24–30 indicates the

presence of a cosmic conflict in Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of heaven. The enemy is able to sow weeds to grow with the wheat (the good seed). This sowing is not only an evil action but also a deceiving one, as any corrective attempt to immediately uproot the weeds in order to fix this problematic situation may endanger the wheat (*Matt. 13:29*). For this reason, the necessary distinction and separation between them must wait until the harvest or the final judgment (*Matt. 13:30*).

It is noteworthy that Ellen G. White's account of God's reaction to Lucifer/Satan in the initial stages of the cosmic conflict in heaven follows the same biblical principle underlined in the parable of the wheat and the tares. As she explains why God did not immediately destroy Satan, Ellen G. White points out that "the influence of the deceiver would not have been fully destroyed, nor would the spirit of rebellion have been utterly eradicated. Evil must be permitted to come to maturity. For the good of the entire universe through ceaseless ages Satan must more fully develop his principles, that his charges against the divine government might be seen in their true light by all created beings, that the justice and mercy of God and the immutability of His law might forever be placed beyond all question."—*The Great Controversy*, p. 499.

Part III: Life Application

Discuss the following questions with your students:

- 1. How could you best explain the nature of the cosmic conflict to a nonbeliever, taking into consideration that we all face the effects of this conflict in the world?**

- 2. As we reflect upon the way God deals with the false allegations raised by the devil, we are moved by His loving and trustworthy**

character. How does building relationships of trust with one another in the church show God's loving character?

- 3. Loving and trusting someone depends on the moral character of the person in question. In your own life, what virtues do you need to cultivate, by God's grace, in order to reflect God's character?**

- 4. When people become distant and stop being intimate with God, oftentimes something changes in their view of God's character. In order to avoid this danger, in what ways can we be more intentional about experiencing God's presence and exalting/expressing His attributes and loving character to others?**

Rules of Engagement



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Dan. 10:1–14, Rev. 13:1–8, Job 1:1–12, Job 2:1–7, John 12:31, John 14:30, Mark 6:5, Mark 9:29.*

Memory Text: “He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8, NKJV).

A powerful narrative that reveals the nature of the cosmic conflict can be found in 1 Kings 18:19–40, Elijah on Mount Carmel, where the Lord exposes the so-called “gods of the nations.” Yet, there is more behind the scenes about these “gods” than that they are mere figments of pagan imagination. Behind the “gods” that the nations surrounding Israel thought they were worshipping was, actually, something else.

“They sacrificed to demons, not to God, to gods they did not know, to new gods, new arrivals that your fathers did not fear” (*Deut. 32:17, NKJV*). Paul adds, “The things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons” (*1 Cor. 10:20, NKJV*).

Behind the false “gods” of the nations, then, were actually demons in disguise. This means, then, that all of the texts of Scripture dealing with idolatry and the foreign gods are “cosmic conflict” texts.

With this background, the cosmic conflict theme is better understood. And this truth has massive implications for understanding more about the nature of this conflict and how it sheds light on the problem of evil.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 8.

An Angel Delayed

As we have seen, the false “gods” of the nations were demons in disguise. And elsewhere we see evidence that demonic celestial rulers are sometimes behind earthly rulers. Even angelic agents sent by God can be opposed by the forces of the enemy.

Read Daniel 10:1–14, with special attention to verses 12, 13. What do these verses teach that is relevant to the cosmic conflict? What do you make of the angel sent by God being “withstood” for twenty-one days?

How could it be that an angel sent by God could be “withstood” for three weeks? Being all-powerful, God possessed the power to respond to Daniel immediately—that is, had He chosen to. If He exercised His power to do so, He could make an angel appear to Daniel right away. Yet, the angel sent by God was “withstood” by the “prince of the kingdom of Persia” for three entire weeks. What is going on here?

“For three weeks Gabriel wrestled with the powers of darkness, seeking to counteract the influences at work on the mind of Cyrus. . . . All that heaven could do in behalf of the people of God was done. The victory was finally gained; the forces of the enemy were held in check all the days of Cyrus, and all the days of his son Cambyses.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 572.

In order for such a conflict to transpire, God must not be exercising all of His power. The enemy must be afforded some genuine freedom and power that is not removed capriciously but is restricted by some parameters known to both parties (the details of which are not revealed to us). It seems there must be parameters in the cosmic conflict that even God’s angels are operating within, which in the coming lessons will be referred to as the “rules of engagement.”

In a certain sense, understanding these limits might not be hard if we grasp the idea, already talked about, that God works only by love, and that love, not coercion, is the foundation of His government. This idea, that God works only through the principles emanating from love, can help us better understand the great controversy.

How have you experienced the limits of working only through the principles of love and not coercion? What lessons did you learn about the limits of power?

The Dragon of Revelation

The overarching perspective of celestial rulers in the cosmic conflict is encapsulated in the book of Revelation, where the devil is depicted as “the great dragon” who opposes God and “deceives the whole world” (*Rev. 12:9, NKJV*).

Read Revelation 13:1–8. What does this reveal about the extent of the dragon’s jurisdiction?

The dragon (Satan) not only wars against God (*Rev. 12:7–9*) and His servants (*for example, Rev. 12:1–6*), but he is depicted as the ruler behind the earthly kingdoms who persecute God’s people throughout the ages.

The dragon “gave . . . his power, his throne, and great authority” to the beast from the sea (*Rev. 13:2, NKJV; compare with Rev. 13:5; Rev. 17:13, 14*). This beast from the sea is “given a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies, and he was given authority to continue for forty-two months” (*Rev. 13:5, NKJV*).

So, Satan (the dragon) gives power and ruling authority to a beast (an earthly religious-political power). This power is exercised in order to usurp the worship due to God. The beast blasphemes God’s name; it also wars against, and even overcomes, God’s holy ones (saints), at least for a period of time. This worldwide authority and jurisdiction is given to him by the dragon, the usurping ruler of this world.

Yet, there are clear limits on Satan and his agencies, as well, including temporal limits. “‘Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time’ ” (*Rev. 12:12, NKJV*).

Satan “knows that his time is short” (*Rev. 12:12, ESV*), and the events described in Revelation proceed along prophetic time lines, which show specific limits (*see Rev. 12:14, Rev. 13:5*) to the reign of these evil forces.

Indeed, God finally triumphs. “‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away’ ” (*Rev. 21:4, NKJV*).

However hard for us to see it now, in the end good will eternally triumph over evil. Why is it so important that we never forget this wonderful promise?

The Case of Job

In the book of Job, we are given some fascinating insights into the reality of the great controversy.

Read Job 1:1–12 and Job 2:1–7. What principles of the great controversy do we see unveiled here?

Many significant details can be gleaned from these verses. First, there appears to be some kind of heavenly council scene, not merely a dialogue between God and Satan; other celestial beings are involved.

Second, there is some existing dispute, signaled by the fact that God asks whether Satan has considered Job. Considered Job for what? The question makes sense in the context of a larger, ongoing dispute.

Third, while God declares Job blameless, upright, and God-fearing, Satan claims that Job appears to fear God only because God protects him. This amounts to slander against both Job's character and God's (*compare with Rev. 12:10, Zechariah 3*).

Fourth, Satan alleges that God's protection of Job (the hedge) is unfair and makes it impossible for Satan to prove his allegations. This indicates some existing limits on Satan (rules of engagement), and that Satan has apparently tried to harm Job.

God responds to Satan's accusation before the heavenly council by allowing Satan to put his theory to the test, but only within limits. He first grants Satan power over "all that he has," but prohibits personal harm to Job (*Job 1:12, NKJV*). Later, after Satan claims that Job cares only about himself, God allows Satan to afflict Job personally, but Satan must spare his life (*Job 2:3–6*).

Satan brings numerous calamities against Job's household, yet in each case Job continues to bless His name (*Job 1:20–22; Job 2:9, 10*), falsifying Satan's charges.

We learn many things here, such as that there are rules of engagement in the cosmic conflict. There are parameters in the heavenly court within which the allegations raised against God can be settled, but without God violating the sacred principles inherent in love, the foundation of God's government and how He rules the universe and the intelligent beings in it.

These heavenly scenes in the book of Job offer us fascinating insights into the reality of the great controversy, and how it is played out here on earth.

The (Temporary) Ruler of This World

We have seen in previous lessons that, within the cosmic conflict, Satan and his cohorts are temporarily granted significant jurisdiction in this world, limited according to some kind of rules of engagement.

These rules of engagement limit not only the actions of the enemy—the devil and his cohorts—but they also limit God’s action to eliminate or mitigate the evil that (temporarily) falls within the jurisdiction of the enemy. Because the Lord will never break His promises, to the extent He has agreed to the rules of engagement—thus affording some limited and temporary rulership to the devil—God has morally limited His future course of action (without lessening His raw power).

Read John 12:31, John 14:30, John 16:11, 2 Corinthians 4:4, and Luke 4:6. What do these texts teach about the rulership of the enemy in this world?

The New Testament sets forth a clash of kingdoms, the kingdoms of light and darkness, with the darkness coming from Satan and his rebellion. Part of Christ’s mission was to defeat the kingdom of Satan: “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8, NKJV).

Nevertheless, there are “rules” that limit what God can do while remaining true to the principles behind His government. These limits include at least (1) the granting of free will to creatures and (2) the covenantal rules of engagement, which we are not privy to, at least now. Such impediments and limitations on divine action have significant implications for God’s moral ability to reduce and/or immediately eliminate evil in this world. Thus, we see continued evil and suffering, which can indeed cause many people to question either God’s existence or His goodness. However, once the background of the great controversy is understood, and the limits God has placed on how He will deal with evil, we can to some degree better understand why things are as they are—at least until the final triumph of God over evil.

How does the fact that Jesus calls Satan the “ruler” of this world help, at least somewhat, our understanding of the evil that exists in the world now? How comforting to know that it is, indeed, only a temporal rule!

Limits and Rules

The cosmic conflict is primarily a dispute over God's character, caused by the devil's slanderous allegations against God's goodness, justice, and government. It is a kind of cosmic covenant lawsuit.

Such a conflict cannot be settled by sheer power but, instead, requires demonstration.

If serious allegations are brought against a person in power, the best (and maybe only) way to defeat the allegations would be to allow for a free, fair, and open investigation. If the allegations threaten the entire government (of love), they cannot simply be swept under the rug.

What does all this mean for understanding the cosmic conflict and relating to the problem of evil? If God makes a promise, would He ever break it? Of course not. Insofar as God agrees to rules of engagement, His future action would be (morally) limited. As such, evil will fall within the temporary domain of the kingdom of darkness.

Read Mark 6:5 and Mark 9:29. What do these texts display about how even divine action might be integrally related to such factors as faith and prayer?

In both these narratives, some limits or rules of engagement seem to be in place, dynamically related to such things as faith and prayer. Elsewhere we see abundant evidence that prayer makes a difference in this world, opening up avenues for divine action that otherwise might not be (morally) available. However, we should not make the mistake of thinking that faith and prayer are the only factors. There are likely many other factors of which we might be unaware.

This fits with what we've seen previously about rules of engagement. As we said, there are certain rules of engagement in the great controversy that limit what God can morally do, at least for now.

Read Romans 8:18 and Revelation 21:3, 4. How do these texts give you confidence that even though there are many things we do not know, we can trust that God knows what is best, wants what is best, and will bring an end to evil and usher in an eternity of bliss?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Power of Satan,” pp. 341–347, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1.

“Fallen man is Satan’s lawful captive. The mission of Christ was to rescue him from the power of his great adversary. Man is naturally inclined to follow Satan’s suggestions, and he cannot successfully resist so terrible a foe unless Christ, the mighty Conqueror, dwells in him, guiding his desires, and giving him strength. God alone can limit the power of Satan. He is going to and fro in the earth, and walking up and down in it. He is not off his watch for a single moment, through fear of losing an opportunity to destroy souls. It is important that God’s people understand this, that they may escape his snares. Satan is preparing his deceptions, that in his last campaign against the people of God they may not understand that it is he. 2 Corinthians 11:14: ‘And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.’ While some deceived souls are advocating that he does not exist, he is taking them captive, and is working through them to a great extent. Satan knows better than God’s people the power that they can have over him when their strength is in Christ. When they humbly entreat the mighty Conqueror for help, the weakest believer in the truth, relying firmly upon Christ, can successfully repulse Satan and all his host. He is too cunning to come openly, boldly, with his temptations; for then the drowsy energies of the Christian would arouse, and he would rely upon the strong and mighty Deliverer. But he comes in unperceived, and works in disguise through the children of disobedience who profess godliness.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 341.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What does it mean to be “Satan’s lawful captive”? Does that mean the devil can do whatever he wants with people? If not, why not? How does this relate to what we might call the “rules of engagement” in the cosmic conflict?
- ❷ Why would God grant Satan any jurisdiction in the cosmic conflict, even if only temporarily? What does this tell us about how God seeks to answer Satan’s accusations?
- ❸ How do you respond to those, even Christians, who deny the existence of Satan as a real, personal being? Though we cannot prove Satan’s existence, what evidence can you marshal that might help someone who is so greatly deceived?

The Persistent Visitor: Part 2

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

To the Seventh-day Adventist pediatrician, the 13-year-old Alaska Native girl resembled a giant.

Four months after their first phone call, pediatrician Colette Reahl made the seven-hour drive from Anchorage to Fairbanks, Alaska, to meet Matrona for the first time at the facility where she lived with 19 other girls and boys. Matrona stood at 5 foot, 7 inches (174 cm). In comparison, Colette was a diminutive 5 foot, 3 inches (162 cm).

When Colette saw the girl, she thought, *She looks like a giant to me. This should be interesting.*

Matrona, who was sitting on the floor in a meeting room, was very shy and didn't want to talk at first.

Colette sat down on a couch near her. A few awkward minutes passed, and then she remembered that she had brought a gift, an encyclopedia about animals, for Matrona. Colette opened the book and silently began to leaf through the pages. Matrona's curiosity was raised, and she slowly inched her way over to Colette. Before long, Matrona was sitting beside Colette and looking at the pictures with her.

It was a pleasant first visit, and it lasted three hours.

The two met again the next month, and Colette gave Matrona a Bible. She suggested reading the Bible together over the phone. But when she called, Matrona made herself unavailable to talk.

Then Matrona moved to a facility in Anchorage. She was lonely and missed her friends in Fairbanks. She began to call Colette every day, trying to persuade her to adopt her.

Colette, meanwhile, started the process of changing jobs. Her work as a pediatrician in Anchorage was ending, and she was preparing to move to Bethel, the largest community in western Alaska, with a population of 6,000. She would work at a hospital there.

"Ewww," Matrona said when she learned about the move. To her, Bethel was a small village, and she thought it would be boring.



This mission story offers an inside look at a previous Thirteenth Sabbath project. Pediatrician Colette Reahl is also coleader of Bethel (Alaska) Seventh-day Adventist Church, which received part of a 2024 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering. Thank you for helping spread the gospel with this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering on March 29. Read more about Colette and Matrona next week.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *1 John 3:8*

Study Focus: *Job 1:1–12, Job 2:1–7, Daniel 10, Luke 4:6, John 12:31.*

Introduction: Satan is limited by God in his rulership. He is an illegitimate ruler, especially from the standpoint of his character.

Lesson Themes: This week’s lesson underlines three main notions:

1. Satan is an illegitimate and temporary “ruler.” God granted Satan limited and temporary rulership after sin entered this world, but this rulership is not a legitimate authority. Although God has limited His own activity to eliminate evil in this world, Jesus has overcome the devil. Christ’s victory over temptation in the wilderness and the defeat of Satan on the cross indicate that Satan’s rulership is illegitimate and temporary.
2. Satan slanders and makes captives under his “rulership.” Despite the fact that Satan is an illegitimate and temporary ruler, human beings can become lawful captives of his rulership. Our human will is inclined to follow Satan’s suggestions, unless Christ dwells in us, guiding our desires and lives.
3. Satan is limited in his “rulership.” Satan has room and time to “rule,” but he is limited by God in this “rulership.” In the unfolding of human history, transcendent powers of goodness oppose evil, and the prayers of believers are an effective resource against them.

Life Application: Satan is limited in his temporary rulership. On the basis of Jesus’ victory, we are not under the bondage of the fear of death. But we still need to be vigilant and depend on the power of God. How can your prayer life help you to successfully resist Satan’s illegitimate rulership?

Part II: Commentary

1. Satan Is an Illegitimate and Temporary “Ruler.”

In the synoptic Gospels, the focus of the antagonism between Satan and Jesus is the temptation in the wilderness (*Matt. 4:1–11; Mark 1:12, 13; Luke 4:1–13*). Among the three synoptics, Luke gives additional details in the third temptation about Satan’s alleged authority. Showing to Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time” (*Luke 4:5, NKJV*),

the devil offered to Him “ ‘all this authority . . . and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish’ ” (*Luke 4:6, NKJV*).

It is debatable whether Satan really had the authority he claimed to have and, if so, how he had acquired it. To be sure, after sin entered the world, “God grants Satan considerable freedom to exercise his baneful influence throughout the world.”—Sydney H. T. Page, *Powers of Evil: A Biblical Study of Satan and Demons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), p. 98. However, this freedom is different from saying that Satan has legitimate authority in the world. In fact, by rejecting Satan’s offering, Jesus does not recognize the legitimacy of such authority.

In the Gospel of John, the antagonism between Satan and Jesus is particularly highlighted in the references to “the ruler [prince] of this world” (*John 12:31, NKJV; John 14:30, NKJV; John 16:11, NKJV*). In John 12:31–33, Jesus emphasizes the judgment of the world and the casting out of its ruler/prince, with particular reference to His death. In John 14:30, Jesus points out in the context of His farewell discourse to the disciples that “ ‘the ruler [prince] of this world is coming’ ” (*NKJV*). Jesus, underscoring the antagonism of this statement, adds, “And he has nothing in Me” (*NKJV*). The statement probably has in view the coming of Judas Iscariot, who is the agent by which “the devil himself precipitates Jesus’ death.” However, the Cross is not the triumph of the devil, but surprisingly his overthrow (see D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991], p. 508). Then, as Jesus teaches the disciples regarding the promised *Parakletos*, the Holy Spirit, He emphasizes again, now in John 16:11, that “ ‘the ruler [prince] of this world is judged’ ” (*NKJV*), which seems to echo the casting out of the devil in John 12:31.

Therefore, whereas the synoptics underline the victory of Christ over Satan in the temptation in the wilderness at the beginning of His public ministry, the Gospel of John stresses the defeat of Satan, the ruler/prince of this world, at the cross (see also *Powers of Evil: A Biblical Study of Satan and Demons*, p. 129); that is, at the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry. In both cases, we learn that Satan is an illegitimate and temporary ruler of a sinful world, a world that is paradoxically loved by God but also judged for rejecting Jesus (*John 1:10, 29; John 3:16, 17, 19; John 9:39; John 12:31, 47; John 14:17; John 15:18, 19; John 16:8; John 17:9, 14, 16, 21*). As Robert Recker indicates, Satan “is a deposed prince, or one in process of deposition.”—“Satan: In Power or Dethroned?” *Calvin Theological Journal* 6, no. 2 (1971), p. 147.

2. Satan Slanders and Makes Captives Under His “Rulership.”

Despite being illegitimate as a ruler, because of sin human beings became

lawful captives of Satan's rulership. Ellen G. White underlines that "fallen man is Satan's lawful captive. . . . Man is naturally inclined to follow Satan's suggestions, and he cannot successfully resist so terrible a foe unless Christ, the mighty Conqueror, dwells in him, guiding his desires, and giving him strength."—*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 341. It is not God who "has made Satan 'the prince of this world,' but . . . human beings have made him such through their sin."—*Powers of Evil: A Biblical Study of Satan and Demons*, p. 129.

Even though Satan is, from the perspective of human sin, a lawful ruler of corrupted human beings, he is still an illegitimate ruler from the standpoint of his character and actions. Jesus emphatically describes him as a liar and a murderer. In His words, Satan " 'was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it' " (*John 8:44, NKJV*). Basically, lies/slander and mortal captivity are the essence of his "rulership," which needs to be overthrown by Jesus.

The Gospel of John seems to underscore that "the ruler [prince] of this world" is defeated and cast out by Christ's sacrifice on the cross, His resurrection, and ascension to the Father (*John 12:31–33, John 16:11*). However, Jesus' intercessory prayer on behalf of His disciples, in John 17, assumes that the influence of Satan over humanity does not end with the cross. "To the contrary, John indicates that the opposition incited by Satan against Jesus will also be directed against the followers of Jesus."—*Powers of Evil: A Biblical Study of Satan and Demons*, p. 130. In John 17:15, Jesus prays that the Father keep " 'them from the evil one,' " because they are in the world but do not belong to it (*John 17:15, 16, NKJV*). In 1 John 5:19, the distinction is made between believers of God and unbelievers (those of the world), contrasting the people of God with those who are under the power of the devil: "We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one" (*NKJV*).

Hebrews 2:14, 15 spells out the power that the devil has over sinful human beings, subjecting them to bondage, in terms of "the power of death." This passage also teaches that Jesus destroys this power by means of His death. Thus, on the basis of Jesus' victory, we are not under the bondage of the fear of death. But we still need to be vigilant and depend on the power of God. The history of salvation is not over yet, and "the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (*1 Pet. 5:8, NKJV*). Furthermore, before his final destruction (*Rev. 20:10*), Satan continues to accuse believers before God (*Rev. 12:10*), and the history of Job suggests that slander (*Job 1:9–11, Job 2:5*) is part of the devil's strategy of accusation.

3. Satan Is Limited in His “Rulership.”

Sinful human beings have made Satan a ruler, and his slanderous accusations are taken into consideration instead of being simply dismissed by God. God allows this to happen in order that these accusations may be clearly proved wrong. For this reason, Satan has room and time to “rule,” but, as the history of Job also indicates (“ ‘do not lay a hand on his person’ ” [Job 1:12, NKJV]; “ ‘spare his life’ ” [Job 2:6, NKJV]), he is limited by God in this “rulership.”

Moreover, we learn, in Daniel 10, about the limits of the evil power. According to this chapter, “the unfolding of human history is not determined solely by the decisions made by human beings, for there is an unseen dimension of reality that must also be taken into account. In particular, there are malevolent forces in the universe that exercise a baneful influence in the sociopolitical realm, especially where God’s people are concerned. Nevertheless, the power of these evil agencies is limited, for transcendent powers of goodness oppose them, and the faithful prayers of believers are also effective against them. However antagonistic the forces of evil may be towards the will of God, they cannot prevent it from being accomplished.”—*Powers of Evil: A Biblical Study of Satan and Demons*, p. 64.

Ellen G. White affirms the existence of a similar cosmic conflict regarding the life of every person, and she also highlights the importance of prayer in this context. In the chapter “The Power of Satan” in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, she underscores that “God alone can limit the power of Satan” (Page 341) and that she “saw evil angels contending for souls, and angels of God resisting them. The conflict was severe” (Page 345). However, she adds, “It is not the work of good angels to control the minds of men against their will. If they yield to the enemy, and make no effort to resist him, then the angels of God can do but little more than hold in check the host of Satan, that they shall not destroy, until further light be given to those in peril, to move them to arouse and look to heaven for help” (Page 345). In this context, she stresses that “the great Commander in heaven and earth has limited Satan’s power” while, at the same time, she highlights the importance of prayer, because “our Savior listens to the earnest prayer of faith, and sends a reinforcement of those angels that excel in strength to deliver him” (Page 346).

Part III: Life Application

Job’s book provides fascinating insights into the reality of the great controversy. Job had decided to fear God in spite of the circumstances. Taking this perspective into account, discuss the following questions:

1. How can God's protection over us inspire us to fear, desire, and love Him even more? In what ways might His protection possibly challenge some of us in, or be a hindrance to, our response to Him?

2. Satan has limitations imposed upon his rulership, which become evident in the heavenly council scene in Job. What do the existing limits on Satan's power tell us about God's power and actions?

3. In the chapter "The Power of Satan" (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 345), Ellen G. White highlights the importance of prayer in order for God to send angels to deliver us. Thus, how important is your prayer life in opening up avenues for divine action?

What More Could I Have Done?



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *John 18:37, Rom. 3:23–26, Rom. 5:8, Isa. 5:1–4, Matt. 21:33–39, Isa. 53:4, Rom. 3:1–4.*

Memory Text: “Pilate therefore said to Him, ‘Are You a king then?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice’ ” (*John 18:37, NKJV*).

Some years ago, an insightful children's story was printed in *Guide* magazine. The story focuses on a boy named Denis, an orphan living as a foster child with a family in medieval times. Denis passionately hates the king of his land because, when his parents were sick, the king's soldiers carried him away, and he never saw them again. Only later did he learn that the king separated them in order to spare the living all the horrors of the Black Plague. The truth about the king sets Denis free from the hatred that he had harbored almost his entire life. The king had always, and in every case, acted out of love for his people.

Many people today view God somewhat like Denis viewed the king. The evil they have witnessed or experienced brings them to hate or dismiss God. Where is God when there is suffering? If God is good, why is there so much evil? The cosmic conflict sheds light on this crucial issue, but many questions remain. Yet, when all our attempts at answers fail to satisfy, we can look to Jesus on the cross and see in Him that God can be trusted, even with all the questions that remain unanswered for now.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 15.

Christ the Victor

Although there is an enemy at work whom Christ Himself refers to as the (usurping) “ruler of this world,” the true king of the universe is Jesus Christ. Jesus wins the victory for us, and in Him we can have victory, even in the midst of hardship and suffering. Indeed, the work of Christ counters the enemy at every turn.

We have seen that Scripture describes the devil as:

1. The deceiver of the whole world from the beginning (*Rev. 12:9, Matt. 4:3, John 8:44, 2 Cor. 11:3, 1 John 3:8*);
2. The slanderer and accuser of God and His people in heaven (*Rev. 12:10; Rev. 13:6; Job 1, 2; Zech. 3:1, 2; Jude 9*); and
3. The usurping ruler of this world (*John 12:31, John 14:30, John 16:11, Acts 26:18, 2 Cor. 4:4, Eph. 2:2, 1 John 5:19*).

Read John 18:37. What does this tell us about Christ’s work to counter the deceptions of the enemy? What does it mean that Jesus is King?

Though Scripture teaches that Satan is the arch-deceiver, slanderer, accuser, and usurping ruler of this world, it also teaches that Jesus is the victor over Satan in every way:

1. Jesus came “ ‘into the world, to testify to the truth’ ” (*John 18:37, NASB*);
2. Through the cross, Jesus supremely demonstrated God’s perfect righteousness and love (*Rom. 3:25, 26; Rom. 5:8*), thereby disproving the devil’s slanderous allegations (*Rev. 12:10, 11*); and
3. Jesus will finally destroy the kingdom of the devil, who “ ‘knows that his time is short’ ” (*Rev. 12:12, ESV; compare with Rom. 16:20*), and Christ “ ‘will reign forever and ever’ ” (*Rev. 11:15, NLT*).

In the end, no matter what Satan does, he is already a defeated foe, and the key for us is to claim Christ’s victory for ourselves every day, moment by moment, and also to claim the promises that the Cross has offered us.

In the great controversy, we know which side wins. How do our day-by-day choices impact which side we ultimately end up on? How can we make sure that we are on the winning side even right now?

The Just and the Justifier

At every turn, Christ's work *undoes* the work of the devil. And, according to 1 John 3:8, Jesus "was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil" (*1 John 3:8, NRSV*) and to "destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil" (*Heb. 2:14, NRSV*). Yet, the total defeat of the enemy's rulership takes place in two stages. First, through the work of the Cross, Christ disproves Satan's slanderous allegations. And, later, Satan and his kingdom will be destroyed.

Read Romans 3:23–26 and Romans 5:8. What do these passages reveal about the way Christ defeats the allegations of the devil?

As we have seen, the enemy claims that God is not fully righteous and loving. However, in Christ, God provides the ultimate manifestation of God's righteousness and love, and He did so through the Cross.

After the death of Jesus, "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."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 761.

Read Revelation 12:10–12 in light of Genesis 3:15. How does this passage shed light on the cosmic significance of Christ's victory at the cross?

The history of redemption provides abundant evidence for us to be confident that God always works to bring about in the end what is good for all concerned. The God of Scripture always does what is good and preferable, given the avenues available to Him in the great controversy (*Deut. 32:4, 1 Sam. 3:18, Ps. 145:17, Dan. 4:37, Hab. 1:13, Rev. 15:3, Gen. 18:25*).

Why is the demonstration of God's righteousness and love in the cosmic conflict so important? When you reflect on the Cross and all of God's works in the plan of redemption, how do God's works give you confidence in the love of God, even amid trials and sufferings?

The Song of My Beloved

In amazing ways, God has manifested His love and righteousness amid the cosmic conflict. Yet, some might ask, *Should God have done more than He has done to prevent and/or remove evil?* We have seen a cosmic conflict framework that indicates that God has acted in order to respect the free will necessary for the maximal flourishing of love relationships between Him and humanity. Further, He has apparently acted within moral constraints, or rules of engagement, within the context of a cosmic dispute over His character, which can be settled only by the demonstration of His love.

Read Isaiah 5:1–4. Who is speaking in these verses? Whom is Isaiah speaking about? Whom do the vineyard and vineyard owner represent? What is the significance of the actions of the vineyard owner on behalf of the vineyard? What is the result?

In these verses, Isaiah sings a song of his beloved, a vineyard. The vineyard owner is God Himself, and the vineyard represents God's people (*see, for example, Isa. 1:8, Jer. 2:21*). But the implications here can also be expanded relative to God's broader work in this world. According to these verses, the vineyard owner (God) did everything that reasonably could be expected to ensure the flourishing of His vineyard. The vineyard should have produced good grapes, but it produced only "wild grapes," which other translations refer to as "worthless." Indeed, the Hebrew wording here literally could be translated *stink-fruit*. God's vineyard brings forth rotten grapes.

Isaiah 5:3 shifts to God Himself speaking, inviting people to "judge" between Him and His vineyard. And, in Isaiah 5:4, God Himself sets forth the all-important question: "What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes?" (NKJV). What more could He do? How fascinating that He even asks others to judge what He has done.

When you look at the cross, where God offered Himself as a sacrifice for all our sin, how do His words—"What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it?"—take on an utterly amazing significance?

Christ's Parable of the Vineyard

In the parable of the vineyard owner, in Matthew 21, Jesus picks up where Isaiah 5 left off, shedding additional light on the character and actions of the vineyard owner on behalf of His vineyard.

Read Matthew 21:33–39 with particularly the question of Isaiah 5:4 in mind. What more could He do than what He has done?

The first part of Christ's parable quotes directly from the song of Isaiah 5 about the vineyard owner and His vineyard. Then, Jesus adds, the vineyard owner " 'leased' " His vineyard " 'to vinedressers and went into a far country' " (*Matt. 21:33, NKJV*). Yet, when the vineyard owner twice sent His servants (the prophets) to collect the produce, those renting His vineyard beat and killed His servants (*Matt. 21:34–36*). Finally, He sent His Son (Jesus), saying, " 'They will respect my son' " (*Matt. 21:37, NKJV*). But they murdered His Son, too, saying, " 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him" (*Matt. 21:38, 39, NKJV*).

What more could He do? The Father loved us so much that He gave His beloved Son (*John 3:16*). If the cosmic conflict is of the kind suggested here, it could not be settled prematurely by exercise of divine power but required first a public demonstration of God's character. This demonstration has been set forth ultimately in the work of Christ (*Rom. 3:25, 26; Rom. 5:8*). What more could we ask than that God (in Christ) give Himself to die for us so that He might justify us without in any way compromising His justice and perfect love?

The cross event demonstrates that God has done everything that could be done to mitigate and eliminate evil, but without destroying the context for the flourishing of genuine love. If there had been any preferable avenue available to God, would He not have chosen it? While people suffer greatly in this cosmic conflict, God Himself suffers most of all. When we look at the Cross, we can, indeed, see what suffering and pain sin has brought to God Himself. Yet, so sacred was the freedom inherent in love that Christ was willing to endure this in our behalf.

Read Isaiah 53:4. Whose "griefs" and "sorrows" did Christ bear on the cross? What should this tell us about all that God has done for us and what salvation has cost Him?

The Vindication of God's Name

Ultimately, God's name is vindicated in every way. Through the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the plan of redemption, the perfect righteousness and love of God is manifested beyond any reasonable doubt (*see Rom. 3:25, 26; Rom. 5:8*).

Read Romans 3:1–4 in light of Isaiah 5:3, 4. What does this teach about God Himself being vindicated in the cosmic conflict? What more could He do than what He has done?

In Romans 3 and Isaiah 5, we see that God (in some limited sense) invites mere creatures to judge His character, even though we have no right or standing to do so. In the end, when all the “books” are opened, we will see the evidence that God is perfectly just and righteous. God will vindicate Himself before all intelligent creation.

Read Revelation 15:3 and Revelation 19:1–6. What do these passages teach about the vindication of God's name in the end? What more could He do than what He has done?

Throughout Scripture, God shows concern for His name. Why? You cannot have a deep love relationship with someone whose character you detest or do not trust. If someone told your spouse or spouse-to-be horrible lies about your character, you would do what you could to counter any such claims, for if such claims are believed, they would fracture your love relationship.

In the end, God is vindicated at the cross and through the entire plan of redemption. In the pre-Advent judgment, God is vindicated before the onlooking universe.

Then, in the post-Advent judgment, during which the redeemed will even “judge angels” (*1 Cor. 6:2, 3*), God is vindicated, as the redeemed have been given the opportunity to review the records and see for themselves why God has acted as He has, and that all of God's judgments have always and only been perfectly righteous and loving. Who among us doesn't have a lot of questions that need answering? Before it's all done, we will have those questions answered (*see 1 Cor. 4:5*).

Finally, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord (*Phil. 2:10, 11*). This is all part of the vindication of the character of God.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Reward of Earnest Effort,” pp. 285–288, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9.

“All that has perplexed us in the providences of God will in the world to come be made plain. The things hard to be understood will then find explanation. The mysteries of grace will unfold before us. Where our finite minds discovered only confusion and broken promises, we shall see the most perfect and beautiful harmony. We shall know that infinite love ordered the experiences that seemed most trying. As we realize the tender care of Him who makes all things work together for our good, we shall rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 286.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Have you been perplexed in trying to understand the providences of God? How does it comfort you to know that all such things will be made plain in the end?
- ❷ Ponder what Christ gave up in order to become human and to die for this world. Further reflect on what this tells us about God’s love and whether God can be trusted. What more could He do?
- ❸ What is so important about God’s “name”? What implications does this have for those of us who call ourselves Christian? In what ways have Christians sometimes brought disrepute on the name of Christ, and what can we do in our local communities to show people what following Christ looks like in practice?
- ❹ In the end, even our best “answers” relative to the problem of evil are incomplete for now. What can we do in practice to draw close to those who are suffering and be agents of relieving suffering in this world as we await the final, eschatological solution to the problem of evil that only God can bring?
- ❺ Dwell more on Isaiah 53:4, on the fact that Christ bore our “griefs” and “sorrows.” What happened corporately at the Cross that helps us understand the plan of salvation and what it cost God to save us?

The Persistent Mother: Part 3

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Pediatrician Colette Reahl hoped to bring the 13-year-old Alaska Native girl home before the Sabbath hours. She had told Matrona that she was a Seventh-day Adventist, but it seemed like a good idea to get settled at home in Anchorage before spending their first Sabbath together.

Alaskan adoption authorities, however, had other ideas. They told Colette that she could take the girl on Sabbath.

The day before the big move, Colette called Matrona at her facility in Anchorage. “I usually go to church on Sabbath,” she said. “Would you like to go with me?”

“No,” Matrona said.

When Matrona arrived the next morning, she announced that she wanted to watch television.

“On Sabbaths in my house, we watch Christian-themed shows or nature videos,” Colette replied.

Matrona was surprised. She asked if she could watch an animated television show about wild animals instead.

Colette and Matrona got to spend two months of quality time together in Anchorage before moving to Bethel, where Colette had a new job at a hospital. During that time, they developed routines and built their relationship. They had morning and evening worship, and Matrona grew spiritually.

Today, Matrona is 15, and she loves living in Bethel, where she goes to homeschool, takes piano lessons, has many friends, and is actively involved in the life of Bethel Seventh-day Adventist Church.

“God just orchestrated everything,” said Colette, who, in addition to working as a pediatrician, serves as a Bible worker and coleader of the church.

“The sassy Matrona whom I first met on the phone is very different from the Matrona now,” she said. “She is a leader for the kids at church and in the community. I see God working in her life and maturing her faith.”

Matrona expressed gratitude for Colette’s persistent phone calls and now her persistent love as a mother. “If she hadn’t tried and tried to get through to me, I wouldn’t know who God is,” she said.

She said God used Colette to change her life. “How she found me was no coincidence,” she said. “I feel that God led her to me and God led me to her. God has brought me to a good place and given me peace.”



This mission story offers an inside look at Bethel (Alaska) Seventh-day Adventist Church, which received part of a 2024 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering. Thank you for helping spread the gospel with this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering on March 29.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *John 18:37*

Study Focus: *Isa. 5:1–4; Matt. 21:33–41; Rom. 3:25, 26; Rom. 5:8; Rev. 15:3; Rev. 19:2.*

Introduction: We are invited to acknowledge and proclaim God’s justice and His loving intentions toward His people.

Lesson Themes: This week’s lesson emphasizes three main points:

1. We need to acknowledge God’s justice. We are invited to acknowledge that God is just. In the parable of the vineyard, the justice of God is figuratively affirmed and acknowledged by the audience. Jesus tells the parable in such a way that the audience would acknowledge the legitimacy of the landowner’s actions in contrast to the vinedressers.
2. We need to acknowledge God’s loving intentions. In Matthew 21:33–41, the audience acknowledges that the landowner had done everything he could before bringing judgment. Also, in Isaiah 5, God Himself points out that He had done everything that He could for His people. The question “ ‘What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it?’ ” is an appeal to the recognition of God’s loving intentions and actions on behalf of His people (*Isa. 5:4, NKJV*).
3. We need to proclaim God’s justice and loving intentions. The Bible invites us not only to recognize God’s justice and His loving actions but also to proclaim that God is perfectly just and righteous. In Revelation 15:3, the saints sing and proclaim: “ ‘Great and marvelous are Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints!’ ” (*NKJV*).

Life Application: How can we acknowledge and proclaim God’s justice and loving intentions in our daily life and in our conversations about God?

Part II: Commentary

1. We Need to Acknowledge God’s Justice.

According to Scripture, we, as feeble and limited creatures, are not in a position to judge God’s ways (*see God’s speech at the end of the book of Job, Job*

38–42; see also *Rom. 9:20*). At the same time, we are invited to acknowledge that God is just. Romans 3:26 indicates that the blood of Christ is a demonstration (the Greek term is *endeixis*) of God's righteousness, because He patiently had not taken into consideration "the sins that were previously committed" (*Rom. 3:25, NKJV*). Therefore, the blood of Christ shows that God is not only forgiving (justifier) but also just. It is noteworthy that the Greek noun *endeixis*, which is translated as "demonstration" (*NASB*)—as in "it was to show" (*ESV*), "it was to prove" (*NRSV*)—conveys the meaning of "someth [something] that compels acceptance of someth. mentally or emotionally, demonstration, proof."—Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 332.

Hence, the use of this noun in Romans 3:26 underscores that God is not only just, but that He intends to demonstrate, to show, to prove to us that He is just. Thomas Schreiner argues that, in this passage, we find God's "desire to demonstrate his righteousness." He adds, "By demonstrating his saving and judging righteousness, God has vindicated his name before the world."—*Romans: Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), pp. 198, 199.

In the parable of the vineyard (*Matt. 21:33–41*; see also *Mark 12:1–12*, *Luke 20:9–19*), the justice of God is figuratively affirmed, and therefore acknowledged, by the audience. In the narrative sequence of the parable, Jesus presents a progression of reasonable decisions taken by the landowner of the vineyard, in response to the unreasonable attitudes of the vinedressers to whom he leased the vineyard. Because the landowner had gone to a far country, it was plausible for him to send servants to receive the fruit of the vineyard, close to vintage time. Absurd was the fact that the vinedressers violently mistreated the servants twice and even killed one of them. Again, it was plausible for the landowner eventually to send his son, assuming that the vinedressers would show him respect. However, in an even more absurd reaction, the vinedressers insanely killed the son, as well, in order to steal his inheritance.

Jesus tells this parable in such a way that the audience is able to follow, and progressively acknowledge, the legitimacy of the landowner's actions, in contrast to the madness of the vinedressers. Jesus is even capable of taking the conclusion of the parable straight from the lips of the audience. He asks them, " 'Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?' They said to Him, 'He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons' " (*Matt. 21:40, 41, NKJV*).

Hence, the audience of the parable is able to conclude that nothing more could be done by the landowner. As they clearly recognize, he did everything

he could to deal with the vinedressers in a proper way. Thus, he is deemed just in the eyes of the audience in the expected punishment of the evil vinedressers. Inasmuch as this parable is a figurative teaching about the justice of God, He is not only just, but He is perceived as such. This perception seems to be part of Jesus' intention, as we observe, from the interactive way in which He concludes the parable. This perception of justice in the eyes of the audience arises from a clear acknowledgment that the landowner had done everything he could to maintain a proper relationship with those acting wickedly, before having to destructively judge them.

2. We Need to Acknowledge God's Loving Intentions.

If, in the parable of the vineyard, as told by Jesus in Matthew 21:33–41, the conclusion of the audience implies that they recognize that the landowner had done everything he could before bringing judgment, then in the “song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard,” in Isaiah 5 (*NKJV*), God Himself affirms that He had done everything He could for His people. While in the parable of the vineyard told by Jesus, the problem was with vinedressers, which is a figurative reference to “the chief priests and Pharisees” (*Matt. 21:45*). But in the song of Isaiah 5, the problem is with the vineyard itself, which figuratively refers to “the house of Israel” (*Isa. 5:7*), the “people of Judah” (*Isa. 5:3, 7, NASB*).

Like the landowner of the parable, who had done everything he could to maintain a proper relationship with the vinedressers, the Beloved of the song did everything in his power to make the vineyard produce good grapes. More specifically, he selected “a very fruitful hill” (*Isa. 5:1*), “dug it up and cleared out its stones,” “planted it with the choicest vine,” “built a tower in its midst,” and “made a winepress in it” (*Isa. 5:2, NKJV*). All these preparatory actions were nurtured by the positive expectation that the vineyard would “bring forth good grapes,” but unfortunately, “it brought forth wild grapes” (*Isa. 5:2, NKJV*). In concrete terms, God “looked for justice” among His people, but what He saw was oppression. He looked for “righteousness,” but what He heard was “a cry for help” (*Isa. 5:7, NKJV*).

While Jesus asks His audience to answer what would be the reasonable action of the landowner after everything he had done in the context of the parable, God invites the people of Judah, in Isaiah, to “judge” between Him and His vineyard (*Isa. 5:3, NKJV*). This judgment should take into account the following question: “ ‘What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it?’ ” (*Isa. 5:4, NKJV*). This rhetorical question should lead to the conclusion that God had done everything He could for His people to produce “good fruits,” so to speak. Therefore, this question is, ultimately, an invitation to acknowledge all the loving intentions, actions, and expectations that God possesses on behalf of His people.

Furthermore, God not only loves His people, as Romans 5:8 underscores, but He also demonstrates this love to them. What is demonstrated can be more naturally acknowledged or recognized by us. As in Romans 3:26 the language of demonstration (*endeixis*) is employed to affirm that God is just, on the basis of the blood of Christ, so also does Romans 5:8 use this language in connection with Christ's death for us, now with the verb *synístēmi*, to affirm that God loves us. This Greek verb conveys the meaning of providing "evidence of a personal characteristic or claim through action, demonstrate, show, bring out."—Danker et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, p. 973. Different Bible versions emphasize this idea using similar words: "God shows his love for us" (*ESV*), "God demonstrates His own love toward us" (*NASB*), "God proves his love for us" (*NRSV*).

3. We Need to Proclaim God's Justice and Loving Intentions.

The Bible does more than invite us to acknowledge or recognize God's justice and His loving intentions toward His people. We also are supposed to proclaim what we acknowledge or recognize in God. For instance, we find this type of proclamation sung by the saints in Revelation. In Revelation 15:3 they sing, " 'Great and marvelous are Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints!' " (*NKJV*). Likewise in Revelation 19:2, a great multitude in heaven says in a loud voice, " 'True and righteous are His judgments, because He has judged the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her fornication; and He has avenged on her the blood of His servants shed by her' " (*NKJV*).

Part III: Life Application

Romans 3:26 highlights that God is not only just, but He also intends to demonstrate, to show or prove, that He is just. With this idea in mind, discuss the following questions with your class:

1. **How reassuring is it to know that God does everything to demonstrate His righteousness and justice for His people? How does this make you feel about God?**

2. How does the acknowledgment of God's justice and His intentions of love toward His people inform our proclamation of His righteousness to others? How can this acknowledgment be highlighted in our preaching of the gospel?

3. How can we be intentional in demonstrating our love for God, even in times of suffering?

Notes

Love *and* Justice: The Two Greatest Commandments



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 22:34–40, Zech. 7:9–12, Psalm 82, Micah 6:8, Matt. 23:23–30, Luke 10:25–37.*

Memory Text: “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?” (*1 John 4:20, NKJV*).

Though we have confidence that God will make all things right in the end, it still matters what we, as Christians, do in the here and now. Though there may be many injustices and evils that God will not now eradicate (because of the parameters of the cosmic conflict), this doesn't mean that we can't be used to help alleviate whatever suffering and evil we come across, at least to whatever degree possible. In fact, we are obligated, as Christians, to do just that.

As we have seen, love and justice go together; they are inseparable. God loves justice. Accordingly, if we love God, we will love justice, as well.

Likewise, if we love God, we will love one another. Part of loving one another is sharing a concern for the well-being of those around us. When others are afflicted by poverty, oppression, or any kind of injustice, we should be concerned. When others are oppressed, we should not turn a blind eye. Instead, we should ask ourselves what we can do, individually and corporately, to advance God's love and justice in a way that reflects to our broken world our Lord's perfect character of righteousness and love.

** Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 22.*

The Two Greatest Commandments

To reflect on what we might do, individually and corporately, to advance God's love and justice in our world, it is appropriate to begin by focusing on what God has commanded us.

Read Matthew 22:34–40. How did Jesus answer the lawyer's question?

According to Jesus Himself, the “‘first and great commandment’” is “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’” And, Jesus adds, “‘the second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”’” These commandments do not stand alone, however. Jesus further instructs: “‘On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets’” (*Matt. 22:37–40, NKJV*). Indeed, they are themselves quoted from the Old Testament.

Read Matthew 19:16–23. How do Jesus' answers to the rich young ruler's questions relate to His answers to the lawyer's question in Matthew 22?

What was going on here? Why did Jesus answer this man as He did? And what should these encounters say to us all, regardless of our position or station in life?

“Christ made the only terms which could place the ruler where he would perfect a Christian character. His words were words of wisdom, though they appeared severe and exacting. In accepting and obeying them was the ruler's only hope of salvation. His exalted position and his possessions were exerting a subtle influence for evil upon his character. If cherished, they would supplant God in his affections. To keep back little or much from God was to retain that which would lessen his moral strength and efficiency; for if the things of this world are cherished, however uncertain and unworthy they may be, they will become all-absorbing.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 520.

Though we might not all be called to sell all that we have, as was this rich young ruler, what might you, personally, be clinging to that, if you don't give up, could lead to your eternal ruin?

The Two Greatest Sins

According to Jesus Himself, the two greatest commandments are love for God and love for one another. And carrying out these commands involves sacrifices that tangibly show love to others, which is what following in the footsteps of Jesus is really about.

Now, if the two greatest commandments are love for God and love for others, what are the two greatest sins?

Read Psalm 135:13–19. What does this reveal about a common sin emphasized throughout Scripture?

The Old Testament continually emphasizes the importance of love for God above all (*see Deut. 6:5*). This is closely related to the great sin of idolatry, which is the opposite of love for God.

Read Zechariah 7:9–12. According to the prophet Zechariah in this passage, what does God decry? How does it and the sin of idolatry relate to the two great commandments?

It is not just idolatry to which God responds with the anger of love but the mistreatment of His people, whether individually or corporately. God becomes angry at injustice because God is love.

The two great sins emphasized throughout the Old Testament are failings relative to the two great commandments: to love God and to love one another. The two greatest sins are failings of love. In short, then, you cannot keep the commandments if you do not love God and if you do not love others.

Indeed, 1 John 4:20, 21 states: “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also” (*NKJV*).

How do you explain why love for God cannot be separated from love for others? How do you understand this unbreakable link?

God Loves Justice

Scripture declares that God loves justice and hates evil (*for example, Ps. 33:5, Isa. 61:8*), and He is deeply concerned about injustice, which evokes righteous indignation on behalf of all those who are the victims of injustice. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, God is consistently passionate in favor of the downtrodden and oppressed while expressing righteous anger against the victimizers and oppressors.

Read Psalm 82. How does this psalm express God’s concern for justice in this world? What might it mean for us today?

As many commentators understand it, this passage decries both the earthly rulers responsible for the injustice in society and is also a reference to when God judges the celestial rulers (the “gods”) behind corrupt earthly judges and rulers (demonic forces, obviously). Specifically, the rulers are asked, “How long will you judge unjustly, and show partiality to the wicked?” (*Ps. 82:2, NKJV*).

Further, they are charged: “Defend the poor and fatherless; do justice to the afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy; free them from the hand of the wicked” (*Ps. 82:3, 4, NKJV*). Here and elsewhere, the prophets of the Old Testament set forth a clarion call for justice. This is no peripheral concern of Scripture; it is central to the message of the prophets throughout the Old Testament and to what Jesus spoke when here in the flesh.

It is no secret what God desires and requires of those who would claim to love and obey Him. He specifies very clearly in Micah 6:8 (and in similar passages elsewhere): “He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (*NKJV*).

This sentiment is echoed throughout Scripture. For example, Jesus said: “ ‘By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another’ ” (*John 13:35, NKJV; compare with 1 John 4:8–16*).

What would our families and churches look like if we focused on Micah 6:8 and intentionally put it into practice in both word and deed? In whatever context you are in, how could the application of these principles be made manifest better?

Called to Establish Justice

The prophets in Scripture continually highlight God’s call for justice in society. Again and again, Scripture does not shrink back from highlighting issues of injustice and oppression. Indeed, the call for God to bring judgment was itself the call for God to establish justice.

For example, the prophet Isaiah does not mince words about the injustice in Israel at the time. His words and call for justice should ring loud and clear in our ears today. “ ‘Learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow’ ” (*Isa. 1:17, NKJV*). Further, he proclaims “ ‘woe’ ” against those who “ ‘decree unrighteous decrees’ ” and “ ‘rob the needy of justice’ ” (*Isa. 10:1, 2, NKJV*), warning: “ ‘What will you do in the day of punishment, and in the desolation which will come from afar? To whom will you flee for help? And where will you leave your glory?’ ” (*Isa. 10:3, NKJV*).

Likewise, the prophet Jeremiah proclaims God’s message: “ ‘Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness and his chambers by injustice, who uses his neighbor’s service without wages and gives him nothing for his work. . . . Did not your father eat and drink, and do justice and righteousness? then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Was not this knowing Me?’ says the LORD” (*Jer. 22:13, 15, 16, NKJV*).

Read Matthew 23:23–30. What does Jesus teach here about what is most important? What do you think He means when He refers to “weightier matters”?

Lest one think that injustice was a concern only of Old Testament prophets, we see clearly here and elsewhere in Jesus’ ministry that this was of utmost concern to Christ Himself. As He puts it: “ ‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone’ ” (*Matt. 23:23, NKJV*). In the parallel passage in Luke, Jesus laments that they “ ‘pass by justice and the love of God’ ” (*Luke 11:42, NKJV*).

If you were to focus on the “weightier matters” today, what would that look like as opposed to whatever “tithe of mint and anise and cummin” we might be focusing on instead?

Who Is My Neighbor?

In Luke's account, just after Jesus declares the two greatest commandments of love for God and love for a neighbor, a lawyer, "wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?' " (*Luke 10:29, NKJV*). In response to this, Jesus tells the now-familiar, but then shocking, parable of the good Samaritan.

Read the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37. What is this passage saying in light of the cry of the prophets for mercy and justice and of the kinds of injustices that different people groups have inflicted on "others" throughout human history?

Jesus did not just talk about justice; He came to bring it. He was and will be the fulfillment of the prophetic call and longing for justice (*see Luke 4:16–21 in light of Isaiah 61:1, 2*). He is the desire of all nations, especially those who recognize their need for deliverance.

In direct contrast to the enemy, who grasped for power and sought to usurp God's throne, Jesus lowered Himself and identified with those under sin, injustice, and oppression (without being infected by sin), and He defeated the enemy by giving Himself in love in order to establish justice as the One who is just and the Justifier of all who believe. How can we claim to be concerned about the law that Christ died to uphold if we are not concerned about what Christ calls the weightier matters of the law?

Psalms 9:8, 9 proclaims, "He shall judge the world in righteousness, and He shall administer judgment for the peoples in uprightness. The LORD also will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble" (*NKJV*). Likewise, Psalm 146:7–9 adds, God "executes justice for the oppressed" and "gives food to the hungry. The LORD gives freedom to the prisoners. The LORD opens the eyes of the blind; the LORD raises those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the strangers; He relieves the fatherless and widow; but the way of the wicked He turns upside down" (*NKJV*).

How much clearer could the Word of God be in regard to how we should seek to minister to those around us who are in need and are hurting?

What can we learn from the life and ministry of Jesus about reaching out to those in need? Even if we can't perform miracles as He did, for many hurt people, how could our help be deemed "miraculous" enough?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Sabbath,” pp. 281–289, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“The spies dared not answer Christ in the presence of the multitude, for fear of involving themselves in difficulty. They knew that He had spoken the truth. Rather than violate their traditions, they would leave a man to suffer, while they would relieve a brute because of the loss to the owner if it were neglected. Thus greater care was shown for a dumb animal than for man, who is made in the image of God. This illustrates the working of all false religions. They originate in man’s desire to exalt himself above God, but they result in degrading man below the brute. Every religion that wars against the sovereignty of God defrauds man of the glory which was his at the Creation, and which is to be restored to him in Christ. Every false religion teaches its adherents to be careless of human needs, sufferings, and rights. The gospel places a high value upon humanity as the purchase of the blood of Christ, and it teaches a tender regard for the wants and woes of man. The Lord says, ‘I will make a man more precious than fine gold; even a man than the golden wedge of Ophir.’ Isa. 13:12.

“When Jesus turned upon the Pharisees with the question whether it was lawful on the Sabbath day to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill, He confronted them with their own wicked purposes. They were hunting His life with bitter hatred, while He was saving life and bringing happiness to multitudes. Was it better to slay upon the Sabbath, as they were planning to do, than to heal the afflicted, as He had done? Was it more righteous to have murder in the heart upon God’s holy day than love to all men, which finds expression in deeds of mercy?”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 286, 287.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Why and how is it true that “Every false religion teaches its adherents to be careless of human needs”? How can we act intentionally so as to avoid such carelessness in our church communities and beyond?
- ❷ Who is my neighbor? Who is your neighbor? In what practical ways should following Christ make us more like the Samaritan who crossed the boundaries of his day to act out love?
- ❸ If God loves justice and mercy, how should we act in accordance with what matters most to God? How can we be more focused on what Jesus called “the weightier matters of the law”?
- ❹ When we think and talk about judgment, how often do we emphasize that a primary way Jesus discusses judgment is in terms of whether, and to what extent, we actively love others, particularly the oppressed and downtrodden? Reflect on this in light of Matthew 25:31–46.

Stuck in the Middle East

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Ki-nam's world came crashing down after she arrived from South Korea to work as a student missionary in the Middle East. She arrived on a short-term tourist visa that needed to be upgraded to a residence visa, allowing her to stay for a full year. Her apartment landlord had agreed to sign the paperwork, giving her proof of residence for the new visa. But suddenly he changed his mind and demanded a large sum of money to sign the document.

Ki-nam didn't have the money. The missionary leader overseeing the small group of student missionaries didn't have the money. The small Seventh-day Adventist community didn't have the money. The community mainly was comprised of poor refugees who worshiped in a house church.

Ki-nam's choices were limited. She couldn't simply move to another apartment because it was difficult to find landlords willing to rent to foreigners. Staying illegally in the country wasn't an option, and she didn't want to bribe an official for the resident visa.

She prayed, "Lord, if You sent me here, You should solve my problem." She prayed every day for two months. Her parents in South Korea prayed. The missionary leader put Ki-nam's name on the house church's prayer list, and church members prayed.

Two months passed, and the landlord didn't sign the document.

Then the day arrived when Ki-nam had to go for an interview for a new visa. But she didn't have any documents to support a new visa.

Shortly before the interview, Ki-nam's cell phone rang. It was the missionary leader. "There may be a solution," he said. "Let's go."

He explained that a church member had felt impressed to stop by a real estate agency just a few minutes earlier. The church member knew the agency owner and had asked, "Can you help my friend?" The owner had replied, "Bring her passport, and I'll give her proof of residence."

Ki-nam was stunned. She could only say, "Thank You, God."

The owner signed the document, and Ki-nam received the resident visa.

After that, Ki-nam had no doubt that God would bless her year in the Middle East. And He did. Seven people were baptized through her work. "God called me and used me to save people," Ki-nam said in an interview with Adventist Mission in Seoul, South Korea. "He was with me every step of the way, helping me. I realized that there are no mistakes in God's calling, and it was a year of gratitude."

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Korea sends missionaries around the world. Thank you for your Thirteenth Sabbath Offering on March 29 that will help South Korean Adventists spread the gospel at home. The student missionary's name has been changed.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *1 John 4:20*

Study Focus: *Matt. 19:16–22; Matt. 22:35–40; Matt. 25:40, 45; Luke 10:30–37; 1 John 4:20.*

Introduction: If we love God, we will love one another and share a concern for one another's well-being.

Lesson Themes: This week's lesson highlights two main ideas:

1. The unbreakable link of loving God and loving others (justice). In Scripture, to love a fellow believer involves concrete loving actions by sharing material goods with a brother or sister in need. Loving one another implies a concern for his or her well-being. Christ's self-sacrificial love for us is the basis for our knowledge and practice of love, in which failing to love others means failing to see the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ.
2. Failings of love—when love and justice are disconnected. If we love God, we will love others and share a concern for justice focused on people's well-being. Conversely, a disconnect between loving God and doing justice to others demonstrates a lack of commitment in keeping God's commandments. This is the case in the history of the rich young ruler, who presumed to obey the commandments but failed to show love to the poor. Another example in the Gospels is the priest and the Levite in the parable of the good Samaritan. They also presumed to follow the rules of purity but failed to express compassion and love.

Life Application: How are you living up to the notion that loving God involves caring about the needs of others?

Part II: Commentary

1. The Unbreakable Link of Loving God and Loving Others (Justice)

The connection between loving God and loving others, in 1 John 4:20, provides an important elaboration of John's pastoral warnings against the failure to love brothers and sisters, as emphasized in previous passages. Karen H. Jobes points out that in 1 John 4:20, "John comes full circle in his discussion of love, especially for fellow believers."—*1, 2, and 3 John*,

Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), p. 206. At least three passages in 1 John deal with this discussion.

In 1 John 2:9–11, John associates the attitudes of loving and not loving/hating fellow believers with the opposing images of light and darkness. In his words, “He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes” (*1 John 2:9–11, NKJV*).

Likewise, in 1 John 3:10, 11, the distinction is between the children of God and the children of the devil. “In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother. For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another” (*1 John 3:10, 11, NKJV*).

Then, in 1 John 3:14–17, we find more details about John’s warnings on this matter, now with the opposition between life and death. “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?” (*1 John 3:14–17, NKJV*).

Two significant details are observed in this passage. First, to love a fellow believer is spelled out in terms of sharing material goods with a brother or sister who is in need. This concrete loving action is an important form of justice, inasmuch as the furtherance of justice or societal welfare is positively understood as the promotion of the well-being of others, which implies the alleviation of suffering in the world. Suffering is seen here as a tangible form of injustice. Second, the love that stands for justice, in the sense of supplying the needs of others, is Christologically grounded in 1 John 3:16 (“By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” [*NKJV*]). That is, Christ’s self-sacrificial love for us is the basis for our knowledge and practice of love.

Therefore, if we read 1 John 4:20 (“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?” [*NKJV*]) in light of 1 John 2:9–11, 1 John 3:10, 11, and especially 1 John 3:14–17, it is possible to draw the following conclusions. First, the failure to love fellow believers is

particularly expressed in the neglect to supply the material needs of brothers and sisters. According to the theological deduction of 1 John 4:20, this failure is an evidence that the professed believer does not love God. Theological anthropology could be the basis for this deduction, as God created human beings in His own image (*Gen. 1:27*).

However, the basis of the deduction of 1 John 4:20 also seems Christological. That is, as already seen in 1 John 3:16, Christ's self-sacrificial love is both the foundation of our knowledge of love and the stimulating pattern/power for our love toward others. This Christological basis is reaffirmed in 1 John 4:9–11.

While “no one has seen God at any time” (*1 John 4:12, NKJV*), His love became visible or “manifested toward us” because He “sent His only begotten Son into the world” (*1 John 4:9, NKJV*). In fact, the statement that “we love” God “because He first loved us” (*1 John 4:19, NKJV*) is Christologically explained in the sense that it was not we who loved God first “but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (*1 John 4:10, NKJV*). And “if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (*1 John 4:11, NKJV*).

The idea that Christ is the visible manifestation of God's love, who is not visible to us (*1 John 4:12*), is reinforced by John's own testimony as an eyewitness of Jesus: “And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world” (*1 John 4:14, NKJV; see also John 1:14, 18*). Hence, as Jobes summarizes, “a failure to love others means that a person has failed to see the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ and therefore is unable to love God at all.”—*1, 2, and 3 John, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 207. This unbreakable link of loving God and loving others (in the sense of promoting justice, that is, the well-being of others), seen from a Christological standpoint, reminds us of what Jesus affirmed in Matthew 25:40: “‘Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me’ ” (*NKJV; see also Matt. 25:45, which employs negative language to express this principle*).

2. Failings of Love: When Love and Justice Are Disconnected.

The connection between loving God and others, particularly in the form of justice (promoting their well-being and alleviating their suffering), provides the necessary articulation in life for all the commandments we find in Scripture. To put it another way, the disconnection between loving God and doing justice to others (loving them) means that there is no real harmony in our lives, as we attempt to keep God's commandments. An example of this principle is the rich young ruler (*Matt. 19:16–22*), who presumed to obey the commandments but failed to show love to the poor with his material possessions and then, ultimately, failed to follow Jesus. Another significant example in the Gospels is the priest and the Levite

in the parable of the good Samaritan (*Luke 10:30–37*), as they presumed to follow the rules of purity, related to the temple, but failed to show mercy and love to the man half-dead on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho.

Jesus emphasizes in a dialogue with a lawyer, as recorded in Matthew 22:35–40, that to love God and one’s neighbors are “two hangers” that hold all the biblical teachings (the law and the prophets). While many translations of Matthew 22:40 render the Greek verb *kremánnymi* as “depending” (“On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” [*ESV*]; see also *NASB 1995*, *NET*, *RSV*), the more literal meaning of hanging is employed in other translations (“ ‘On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets’ ” [*NKJV*]; see also *NRSV*).

Part III: Life Application

In the context of the unbreakable link between loving God and loving others, Christ’s sacrificial love on the cross is the basis for your love to others. From this perspective, discuss with your class the following questions:

- 1. In what ways is God’s love, as revealed on the cross, your example of loving others?**

- 2. What sacrifices do you personally make to love others and to render justice/supply to their needs?**

3. When people are afflicted by poverty, oppression, or any kind of injustice, what can we do as a church to support them?

Notes

Love Is *the* Fulfillment of the Law



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 20:1–17; Rom. 6:1–3; Rom. 7:7–12; Jer. 31:31–34; Matt. 23:23, 24; James 2:1–9.*

Memory Text: “Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law” (*Romans 13:8, NKJV*).

While they were dealing with a problematic member, someone on the church board said to the pastor, “We can’t make decisions based on compassion.” *We can’t?* The pastor wondered what this person’s understanding of God and of God’s law must have been. Compassion certainly needs to be central in how we deal with people, especially erring ones. Compassion is part and parcel of love, and as Romans 13:8 tells us, to love one’s neighbor *is* to fulfill the law.

If love is indeed the fulfillment of the law, then we should be careful not to think of law in a way that is separate from love or to think of love in a way that is disconnected from law. In Scripture, love and law go together. The divine Lawgiver is love, and accordingly, God’s law is the law of love. It is, as Ellen G. White put it, the transcript of God’s character. (See *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 305.)

God’s law is not a set of abstract principles but commands and instructions intended for our flourishing. God’s law is, in its totality, an expression of love as God Himself expresses it.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 29.

The Law of Love

God's law does not consist of abstract principles; instead, God's law is an expression of relationship. This can be seen explicitly in the Ten Commandments. The basic principles of the Ten Commandments were in place already in the Garden of Eden, the principles of love that were to govern the relationship between God and people and between people themselves.

When the Ten Commandments proclaimed in Exodus 20 were afterward written in stone, they were given to Israel in the context of the covenant relationship. The commandments were written down after the Lord already had delivered the people from Egypt, and the commandments were based on God's love and on His promises to the nation (*see Exod. 6:7, 8 and Lev. 26:12*). One can see in the two divisions of the Ten Commandments that they are aimed at the flourishing of a human relationship with God and of relationships with one another.

Read Exodus 20:1–17. How do these verses reveal the two principles, those of love for God and of love for others?

The first four commandments deal with people's relationships with God, and the last six with people's relationships among themselves. Our relationship both to God and to other people must be regulated by the principles of God's law.

These two parts of the law correspond directly to what Jesus identified as the two greatest commandments—" ' "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart" ' ' " (Matt. 22:37, NKJV; compare with Deut. 6:5) and " ' "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" ' ' " (Matt. 22:39, NKJV; compare with Lev. 19:18).

The first four commandments are the ways in which we are to love God with all of our being, and the last six are ways we are to love one another as ourselves. Jesus makes it explicit that these two great love commandments are integrally related to the law. " ' "On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets" ' " (Matt. 22:40, NKJV).

The entirety of God's law, then, is grounded in God's love. God's love and law are inseparable. We often hear people say, *We don't need to keep the law, we just need to love God and to love others*. Why does that idea not make sense?

How could we express love to God, or love to others, if we are violating any one of the Ten Commandments?

The Law Is Holy and Righteous and Good

Love is the foundation of God's law. When God upholds the law, He upholds love. This is why Jesus died in order to save sinners, so that He could uphold the law while also extending grace to us. Thus, He could be both just and the justifier of those who believe (*Rom. 3:25, 26*). What an expression of love! Accordingly, the law is not invalidated by the process of redemption; rather, it is further confirmed.

Read Romans 6:1–3 and then Romans 7:7–12, with particular emphasis on verse 12. What are these verses telling us about the law, even after Christ died?

While some believe that grace and redemption cancel the law, Paul is clear that we are not to continue in sin so that grace increases. Rather, those who are in Christ by faith have been “baptized into His death” and are therefore to count themselves as dead to sin and alive to Christ.

The law of God is not sin, but (among other things) it makes sin and our sinfulness apparent to us. That is why, yes, “the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (*Rom. 7:12, NKJV*). It reveals, as nothing else does, our great need of salvation, of redemption—the salvation and redemption that come only through Christ. Accordingly, we do not “make void the law through faith” but “on the contrary, we establish the law” (*Rom. 3:31, NKJV*).

Christ came not to do away with the law but to fulfill all that was promised in the Law and in the Prophets. Thus, He emphasizes that “‘until heaven and earth pass away,’ ” not even “‘the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law’ ” (*Matt. 5:18, NASB 1995*).

The law of God itself represents God's holiness—His perfect character of love, righteousness, goodness, and truth (*Lev. 19:2; Ps. 19:7, 8; Ps. 119:142, 172*). In this regard, it is significant that, according to Exodus 31:18, God wrote the Ten Commandments on the stone tablets Himself. Written in stone, these laws are testimony of the unchanging character of God and of His moral government, which is founded on love—a central theme of the great controversy.

How does this link between law and love help us better understand Jesus' words, “ ‘If you love Me, you will keep My commandments’ ” (*John 14:15, NASB*)?

Law and Grace

As we have seen, law and grace are not opposed to one another. Instead, they serve different functions in accordance with the love and justice of God. A sharp contrast between law and grace would have puzzled ancient Israelites, who saw God's giving of the law itself as a great display of God's grace. While the "gods" of the surrounding nations were fickle and entirely unpredictable, leaving people without a way to know what the "gods" desired and what would please them, the God of the Bible very clearly instructs His people about what pleases Him. And what pleases Him is just what is for the ultimate good of all His people, individually and collectively.

Yet, the law cannot save us from sin or change human hearts. Because of our innate sinfulness, we need a spiritual heart transplant.

Read Jeremiah 31:31–34. What does this teach about God's promises to give us a new heart? Compare this with Christ's words to Nicodemus in John 3:1–21 about the new birth. (See also Heb. 8:10.)

The Ten Commandments were inscribed by God Himself on the tablets of stone (*Exod. 31:18*), but the law was also to be written in the hearts of God's people (*Ps. 37:30, 31*). Ideally, God's law of love would not be external to us but internal to our very characters. God alone could inscribe His law on human hearts, and He promised to do so for His covenant people (see *Heb. 8:10*).

We cannot save ourselves by law-keeping. Rather, it is by grace we are saved through faith, not of ourselves but as the gift of God (*Eph. 2:8*). We do not keep the law in order to be saved; we keep the law because we are already saved. We do not keep the law in order to be loved but because we are loved, and thus we desire to love God and others (see *John 14:15*).

At the same time, the law shows us our sin (*James 1:22–25, Rom. 3:20, Rom. 7:7*), shows us our need of a Redeemer (*Gal. 3:22–24*), guides us in the best ways of life, and reveals God's character of love.

What is your hope in the judgment? Is it your diligent and faithful law-keeping or is it Christ's righteousness, which covers you? What does your answer tell you about the function of God's law regarding what it can or cannot do?

Love Is the Fulfillment of the Law

The relationship between love and law cannot be overstated. Indeed, according to Scripture, to love is to fulfill the law.

In Romans 13:8–10, Paul teaches that “he who loves another has fulfilled the law” (*Rom. 13:8, NKJV*). After listing many of the last six of the Ten Commandments, Paul declares that these are “all summed up in this saying, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ ” (*Rom. 13:9, NKJV*). Indeed, Paul teaches explicitly, “Love is the fulfillment of the law” (*Rom. 13:10, NKJV*). Again, in Galatians 5:14, Paul explains, “All the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ ” (*Gal. 5:14, NKJV*). But what kind of love is that which fulfills the law? What does such love look like?

Read Matthew 23:23, 24. What are the “weightier matters of the law”? Read Deuteronomy 5:12–15 and Isaiah 58:13, 14. How do these passages demonstrate the relationship between the law (particularly the Sabbath commandment) and God’s concern for justice and deliverance?

Jesus identifies the “weightier matters of the law” as “justice and mercy and faith.” And in relation to one law in particular—the Sabbath—we can see in Scripture that the Sabbath itself is integrally connected with deliverance and justice.

In Deuteronomy 5, the Sabbath commandment is grounded in relation to God’s deliverance of Israel from slavery. That is, the Sabbath is not only a memorial of creation but also a memorial of deliverance from slavery and oppression. And in the context about turning from one’s own pleasure to call the Sabbath a delight by taking delight in the Lord (*Isa. 58:13, 14*), the emphasis is on works of love and justice for others—doing good, feeding the hungry, housing the homeless (*see Isa. 58:3–10*).

Given all of these teachings (and many others), those who wish to fulfill the law through love should be concerned not only about sins of commission but also about sins of omission. Love as the fulfillment of the law involves not merely keeping the law in the sense of refraining from committing sins but also consists of actively doing good—doing the works of love that faithfully advance justice and mercy. Being faithful to God is more than just not violating the letter of the law.

Above All, Love One Another

If love is the fulfillment of the law, then one cannot keep God's law in the full sense simply by refraining from doing wrong things. The law of love itself (expressed in the fullness of Scripture) not only commands us to refrain from doing evil but the law prompts us to do acts that reveal the love of God to others—not only to other church members but also to the world at large, which is so desperately in need of a true Christian witness.

Read James 2:1–9. What crucial messages are we given here?

Here, James strongly decries injustice in society, specifically identifying the dishonoring of the poor and oppression by some who are rich. Then, he calls attention to the law of love for one's neighbor, saying if you fulfill this law, then "you do well" (*James 2:8, NKJV*).

As Ellen G. White has expressed it: "Love to man is the earthward manifestation of the love of God. It was to implant this love, to make us children of one family, that the King of glory became one with us. And when His parting words are fulfilled, 'Love one another, as I have loved you' (John 15:12); when we love the world as He has loved it, then for us His mission is accomplished. We are fitted for heaven; for we have heaven in our hearts."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* p. 641.

When we love the world, as Christ has loved the world—*then we are fitted for heaven*. What a powerful expression of what it means to be a follower of Jesus!

Jesus commands His followers to " 'love one another;' " even as " 'I have loved you' " (*John 13:34, NKJV*). Jesus also proclaims: " 'By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another' " (*John 13:35, NKJV*). Love is so central to Christian faith because God is love (*1 John 4:8, 16*). And those who claim to love God must love one another (*compare with 1 John 3:11; 4:20, 21*).

Accordingly, 1 Peter 4:8 exhorts Christians: "And above all things have fervent love for one another, for 'love will cover a multitude of sins' " (*NKJV; see also Heb. 10:24 and 1 Thess. 3:12*).

Dwell more on the idea of loving the world as Christ loved the world. How might this help us better understand the concept of Christian perfection and how we are made fit for eternal life? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Least of These My Brethren,” pp. 637–641, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“Those who minister to others will be ministered unto by the Chief Shepherd. They themselves will drink of the living water, and will be satisfied. They will not be longing for exciting amusements, or for some change in their lives. The great topic of interest will be, how to save the souls that are ready to perish. Social intercourse will be profitable. The love of the Redeemer will draw hearts together in unity.

“When we realize that we are workers together with God, His promises will not be spoken with indifference. They will burn in our hearts, and kindle upon our lips. To Moses, when called to minister to an ignorant, undisciplined, and rebellious people, God gave the promise, ‘My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest.’ And He said, ‘Certainly I will be with thee.’ Ex. 33:14; 3:12. This promise is to all who labor in Christ’s stead for His afflicted and suffering ones.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 641.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Read 1 Corinthians 13:4–8. How does 1 Corinthians 13 shed light on the kind of people we ought to be?
- ② What separates the sheep from the goats in Matthew 25:31–46? How can we understand what Jesus says here in a way that does not teach salvation by works?
- ③ What does it mean to you that “when we love the world as He has loved it, then for us His mission is accomplished. We are fitted for heaven; for we have heaven in our hearts” (see Thursday’s study)? What does this reveal about the nature of God and the nature of heaven itself? How can we live more like citizens of heaven here in this respect, relative to spreading God’s love in a way that brings light and justice to the oppressed?
- ④ What practical steps should be taken in your local church to reflect God’s concern for love and justice in your local community? What are you doing well in your community? What do you need to improve and focus on more? What tangible steps can you take individually and collectively to act on what we have studied about God’s love and justice?

Bowing to an Image

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Maria is familiar with adoration. As an opera singer, she has sung before admiring audiences in the main opera house of her native country as well as in a dozen other countries. She has received several top prizes.

But nothing prepared her for the adoration that she witnessed in North Korea. The admiration was not for her performance. It took place at a 72-foot (22-meter) bronze statue of North Korea's founder, Kim Il Sung.

Maria is a faithful Seventh-day Adventist. For her safety, Adventist Mission is not identifying her by her real name or nationality. She spoke to Adventist Mission in a Zoom interview.

During the visit to North Korea, Maria and a group of other singers toured the Mansu Hill Grand Monument, a complex of monuments depicting heroes from the country's revolutionary history, in Pyongyang. The centerpiece of the complex was the towering statue of Kim Il Sung. (A second 72-foot statue, of Kim's son, Kim Jong Il, was later added to the complex.)

Crowds of people swarmed around the statue of Kim Il Sung. Maria saw foreign tourists from Italy, France, and other countries. She saw North Koreans. They all bowed before the statue. Then she learned that she also was expected to bow as a sign of respect.

"You need to bow," an interpreter told her group.

Maria's mind flashed back to the first commandment, which says, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (*Exodus 20:3, NKJV*).

Then she noticed a state video operator filming everyone. She didn't want to get into trouble.

As she stood there, she remembered Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego refusing to bow to the 90-foot golden image of King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 3. She thought, *The book of Daniel really is not a legend or a fairy tale. That same scene is acted out in real life every day.*

She stood straight and tall.

Some people might dismiss the bowing at Mansu Hill Grand Monument as a cultural experience connected to Kim Il Sung's cult of personality, but Maria saw it as much more. For her, it was the moment when she was asked to take a public stand for who she adores.

Several days later, as she prepared to leave North Korea, she gave a copy of *Steps to Christ* to her interpreter. She prays that the interpreter and all North Koreans learn about Jesus, the Man whom she admires the most.

Reaching the people of North Korea with the gospel is an important focus of the Northern Asia-Pacific Division, the recipient of this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering. Pray for North Korea, and thank you for planning a generous offering this Sabbath.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Romans 13:8*

Study Focus: *Exod. 20:2, Rom. 13:8–10.*

Introduction: The Ten Commandments are an expression of God’s personal and covenantal relationship with His people.

Lesson Themes: This week’s lesson emphasizes three main points:

1. God’s law refers to relationships, rather than to abstract principles. God’s law is not a set of abstract principles but an expression of relationship. The description of the Ten Commandments implies covenantal relations between God and His people. God’s dialogue with Moses underscores this relational language, in which God is depicted as an eagle, carrying His people on His wings in deliverance from Egypt. The main idea of this depiction is that the people had been brought to God Himself.
2. The Ten Commandments describe the correct expression of our love to God and to others. Before the list of “shall nots,” the Ten Commandments start with a personal loving note: “ ‘I am the LORD your God’ ” (*Exod. 20:2, NKJV*). The list of commandments is a relational loving response to the God of Israel, who saved them. The first four commandments describe the loyal love that people are supposed to show to God. The last six commandments express specific forms of love to others, which ultimately indicate that we love God.
3. God’s law finds its fulfillment in love. In Romans and Galatians, the idea of the fulfillment of the law is related to serving one another through love. Paul, in Galatians, explains that the law is fulfilled as we love our neighbor. In Romans, to love one another is the fulfillment of the law. The last six of the Ten Commandments spell out what it means to love your neighbor as yourself.

Life Application: How does your relationship with God change when you understand that the Ten Commandments are not just a set of rules but an expression of love and a response to God’s personal and loving relationship?

Part II: Commentary

1. God’s Law Refers to Relationships Rather Than to Abstract Principles.

The idea that God’s law consists of cold abstractions or impersonal principles is incompatible with the biblical picture of God giving the Decalogue

to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. It is important to read the description of the Ten Commandments (*Exodus 20*) in light of the covenantal relationship being formed, in Exodus 19. From the time of Israel's arrival at the wilderness of Sinai (*Exod. 19:1*), the dialogue of God with Moses at Mount Sinai underscores the notion of a covenantal relationship between God and the people of Israel. More specifically, Moses was told by the Lord that he should say to the children of Israel the following words: " 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' " (*Exod. 19:4–6, NKJV*).

The relational language of this passage is impressive. The divine deliverance from Egypt is depicted as God bearing or carrying the children of Israel, as an eagle. Interestingly, the emphasis is not merely on the people leaving Egypt or going to the Promised Land. Rather, the main point is that the people had been brought to God Himself.

In this context, the people of Israel are invited to keep God's covenant in the personal sense of hearing the voice of God. While many Bible translations correctly render the Hebrew verb *šm'* in terms of obeying the voice of God (see *NKJV, ESV, NASB, NRSV, NIV*), the verb in Hebrew describes more literally the act of hearing or listening to His voice (see *NET, HCSB*) (Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000], p. 1571). If they decide to listen to the voice of God, the children of Israel shall be God's own "possession" (*Exod. 19:5, HCSB*) or His "personal property" (see the meaning of the noun *sēgūlā* in Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, p. 742). This expression also attests to the personal nature of the covenantal relationship that is being formed between God and His people, which is formalized by the exposition of the Ten Commandments in chapter 20.

2. The Ten Commandments Describe the Correct Expression of Our Love to God and to Others.

It is noteworthy that before the list of "shall nots" in the Decalogue, God introduces the Ten Commandments, in Exodus 20:2, with a personal note (" 'I am the LORD *your* God,' " *NKJV; emphasis supplied*) and emphasizes His loving salvific action on behalf of Israel (deliverance from slavery in Egypt). In other words, the commandments do not start with a cold "shall not" but with a personal loving tone. Moreover, the list of commandments that follow are not to be understood as mere abstract laws but as a relational loving response to the God of Israel, who powerfully and compassionately saved them from Egypt.

It is in light of the personal loving tone of Exodus 20:2 that the first four commandments clearly delineate how the children of Israel are supposed to express their loving relational response toward their personal God. First, they shall not have other gods before the Lord. Love toward God is spelled out here in terms of exclusive loyalty. Second, this loyal love necessarily implies that they shall not make for themselves a carved image (idol) to worship. True worship, instead of idolatry, is a genuine expression of love toward God. Third, love to God is revealed in a respectful reference to His name. As Kenneth Harris points out, to take the name of God in vain particularly refers to “taking a deceptive oath in God’s name or invoking God’s name to sanction an act in which the person is being dishonest (Lev. 19:12). It also bans using God’s name in magic, or irreverently, or disrespectfully (Lev. 24:10–16).”—*ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), p. 176. Fourth, to love God means that the seventh-day Sabbath is kept holy as a necessary reminder of God’s creation. While we are supposed to love God every day, the Sabbath is a special time to express our loving relationship with Him.

To be sure, the first four commandments spell out more directly what love to God entails, whereas the remaining six commandments elaborate specifically on how to love others. However, from a broader perspective, inasmuch as the identification of the Lord as the Savior God of Israel (*Exod. 20:2*) constitutes the introduction of the Ten Commandments as a whole, the specific ways in which we are supposed to express love to others in the last six commandments are, by implication, important forms of loving God in an ultimate sense. The fifth commandment, for instance, connects the love toward parents, which highlights the idea of honoring them, with a long life in the land that the Lord is giving to Israel. Therefore, the loving promise of God is directly related to the way in which the children of Israel love/honor their parents. Likewise, to love the other, and ultimately love God by means of this horizontal love, necessarily involves valuing life (not murdering), being sexually pure and cherishing marriage (not committing adultery), respecting what belongs to others (not stealing), standing for the truth about your neighbor (not bearing false witness against him/her), and nurturing desires shaped by a spirit of contentment (not coveting what belongs to your neighbor).

3. God’s Law Finds Its Fulfillment in Love.

The apostle Paul highlights the idea of the fulfillment of the law in Romans and Galatians. After exhorting the Galatians to serve one another through love, he explains that “all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ ” (*Gal. 5:14, NKJV*). Likewise, in Romans 8:4, Paul speaks of “the righteous requirement of the law” being “fulfilled in us” (*NKJV*) by means of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

In Romans 13:8–10, he mentions twice that love fulfills God’s law: “Owe no one anything except to love one another, for *he who loves another has fulfilled the law*. For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not bear false witness,’ ‘You shall not covet,’ and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore *love is the fulfillment of the law*” (NKJV; *emphasis supplied*).

Moving from the discussion of the Christian duties before civil authorities (Rom. 13:1–7), which includes paying taxes (Rom. 13:6, 7), to the Christian obligation of love, Paul employs the language of financial debt in both discussions. With regard to the Christian obligation of love, “The Christian is to allow no debt to remain outstanding except the one that can never be paid off—‘the debt to love one another.’ The obligation to love has no limit.”—Robert Mounce, *The New American Commentary: Romans* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), vol. 27, p. 245. Just as financial debt implies an obligation to another person or institution, the law imposes obligations upon us to others. In the context of God’s law—with special reference to the last five commandments, concerning our relationships with our neighbors, which goes beyond our obligation to our own family—the essence of our continuous obligation or debt is love.

Part III: Life Application

Discuss the following questions in class:

- 1. How can you respond to someone who questions the law of God and considers it merely a bunch of rules?**

- 2. How can your experience of the Sabbath be more meaningful, a reminder that God’s law invites us to a relational loving response?**

3. How can you show God's love in practical ways to those whom you encounter each and every day, including strangers, friends, and family?

Notes

We view prophecy through the lens of the great controversy—the spiritual struggle that will climax when God’s people face the final crisis centered on worshipping God as opposed to the beast and its image.

A key element to understanding these last-day prophecies is Daniel 2, which contains not only the historical outline of the prophecies but also the interpretive key to unlocking their meanings. Daniel 2 depicts four world empires—Babylon, Media-Persia, Greece, and Rome. These four empires move in unbroken succession through history until God establishes His eternal kingdom after Jesus’ second coming.

We, of course, are still here, in the time of Rome, the fourth and final kingdom before Christ returns. With this perspective as the foundation for understanding prophecy, our study for next quarter (*Allusions, Images, and Symbols: How to Study Bible Prophecy*, by Shawn Boonstra) will examine how to interpret Bible prophecy by looking at some of the allusions, stories, images, and metaphors that unlock prophetic truth and final events. It is our hope that when these elements are studied, they will help make end-time prophecies, specifically in Revelation, come alive.

Lesson 1—Some Principles of Prophecy

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **Whoever Reads, Let Him Understand** (*Matt. 24:15*)

MONDAY: **God Wants to Be Understood** (*Ps. 147:5*)

TUESDAY: **Daniel—Shut Up the Words** (*Dan. 12:4*)

WEDNESDAY: **Studying the Word** (*Matt. 5:18, 2 Tim. 3:15–17*)

THURSDAY: **Figurative or Literal?** (*Dan. 7:24, Heb. 4:12*)

Memory Text—*Jeremiah 9:24, NKJV*

Sabbath Gem: For the first 18 centuries of Christian history, most Christians were comfortable with biblical prophecy, and there was a surprising level of agreement on what the key messages of the prophecies were. This is how God intended it to be.

Lesson 2—The Genesis Foundation

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **The Principle of “First Mention”** (*Mal. 3:6*)

MONDAY: **Understanding God’s Love** (*Gen. 22:1–13*)

TUESDAY: **Isaac’s Question: Where Is the Lamb?** (*Gen. 22:7, 8*)

WEDNESDAY: **Dealing With Death** (*1 Cor. 15:15–19*)

THURSDAY: **The Serpent** (*Gen. 3:1–5, Rev. 12: 1–9*)

Memory Text—*John 1:29, NKJV*

Sabbath Gem: Genesis lays out the path by which our world descended into sinful chaos. Nearly every key concept mentioned in Revelation appears in the opening chapters of the Bible.

Lessons for People Who Are Legally Blind

The *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* is available free in braille, on MP3 disc, and via online download to people who are legally blind and individuals who cannot hold or focus on ink print. Contact Christian Record Services, Inc., PO Box 6097, Lincoln, NE 68506-0097. Phone: 402-488-0981, option 3; email: services@christianrecord.org; website: www.christianrecord.org.