### Contents

1. **The Triune God**—December 31–January 6 .................................................. 5  
2. **In the Beginning**—January 7–13 ................................................................. 17  
3. **God as Redeemer**—January 14–20 .............................................................. 29  
4. **The God of Grace and Judgment**—January 21–27 .......................................... 41  
5. **The Holiness of God**—January 28–February 3 .............................................. 53  
6. **God the Lawgiver**—February 4–10 ............................................................. 65  
7. **Lord of the Sabbath**—February 11–17 ......................................................... 77  
8. **Creation Care**—February 18–24 ................................................................. 89  
9. **The Bible and History**—February 25–March 2 ............................................. 101  
10. **The Promise of Prayer**—March 3–9 ............................................................ 113  
11. **God as Artist**—March 10–16 .................................................................... 125  
12. **Love Stories**—March 17–23 .................................................................... 137  
13. **The Promise of His Return**—March 24–30 ..................................................... 149

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**Editorial Office** 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904  
Come visit us at our Web site at [http://www.absg.adventist.org](http://www.absg.adventist.org)

**Principal Contributor**  
Jo Ann Davidson

**Associate Editor**  
Soraya Homayouni

**Publication Manager**  
Lea Alexander Greve

**Pacific Press® Coordinator**  
Wendy Marcum

**Art Director and Illustrator**  
Lars Justinen

**Editor**  
Clifford R. Goldstein

**Editorial Assistant**  
Sharon Thomas-Crews

**Concept Design**  
Dever Designs

The teachers edition components were written by the following:  
1. **The Lesson in Brief and Learning Cycle, Lessons 4 and 5**: Cheryl Des Jarlais, freelance writer, Ringgold, Georgia, U.S.A.  
2. **Learning Cycle, Lessons 1, 2, and 3**: Alan Hecht, librarian, Rebok Memorial Library, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A.  
4. **Learning Cycle, Lessons 9, 10, and 11**: Dwain Esmond, editor, *Insight* magazine, Review and Herald® Publishing Association, Hagerstown, Maryland, U.S.A.  
5. **Learning Cycle, Lessons 12 and 13**: Fylvia Fowler Kline, freelance writer, Medford, Oregon, U.S.A.

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

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

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

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

The picture of God in the Bible is very expansive. Yes, God’s love is underscored...
again and again, but there is so much more about Him that He wants us to know. For example, there are hundreds of different names for God in Scripture. Each one of them could give a deeper and more informed understanding of the great God of heaven and earth. He is so much more than a benign Santa Claus in the sky who doles out assistance at our request. (A professional poker player recently won millions of dollars in a tournament and then publicly thanked Jesus for it!)

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

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

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

Jo Ann Davidson is a professor of theology at Andrews University Seminary in Berrien Springs, Michigan.
How to Use This Teachers Edition

Get Motivated to Explore, Apply, and Create

We hope that this format of the teachers edition will encourage adult Sabbath School class members to do just that—explore, apply, and create. Each weekly teachers lesson takes your class through the following learning process, based on the Natural Learning Cycle:

1. Why is this lesson important to me? (Motivate);
2. What do I need to know from God’s Word? (Explore);
3. How can I practice what I’ve learned from God’s Word? (Apply); and

And for teachers who haven’t had time to prepare during the week for class, there is a one-page outline of easy-to-digest material in “The Lesson in Brief” section.

Here’s a closer look at the four steps of the Natural Learning Cycle and suggestions for how you, the teacher, can approach each one:

Step 1—Motivate: Link the learners’ experiences to the central concept of the lesson to show why the lesson is relevant to their lives. Help them to answer the question, Why is this week’s lesson important to me?

Step 2—Explore: Present learners with the biblical information they need to understand the central concept of the lesson. (Such information could include facts about the people; the setting; cultural, historical, and/or geographical details; the plot or what’s happening; and conflicts or tension of the texts you are studying.) Help learners to answer the question, What do I need to know from God’s Word?

Step 3—Apply: Provide learners with opportunities to practice the information given in Step 2. This is a crucial step; information alone is not enough to help a person to grow in Christ. Assist the learners in answering the question, How can I apply to my life what I’ve learned?

Step 4—Create: Finally, encourage learners to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22). Invite them to make a life response to the lesson. This step provides individuals and groups with opportunities for creative self-expression and exploration. All such activities should help learners answer the question, With God’s help, what can I do with what I’ve learned from this week’s lesson?

When teachers use material from each of these four steps, they will appeal to most every student in their class: those who enjoy talking about what’s happening in their lives, those who want more information about the texts being studied, those who want to know how it all fits in with real life, and those who want to get out and apply what they’ve learned.
**Lesson 1**

*December 31–January 6

(page 6 of Standard Edition)

The Triune God

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**Sabbath Afternoon**

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 7.*
The Oneness of God

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

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

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

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

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


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

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

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

Phil. 2:6.

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

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

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


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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

____________________________________________________________________________

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

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

____________________________________________________________________________

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Think for a moment: the Creator of the universe died in your stead, in your place, so you could have the promise of eternal life in Him. How can you learn to draw hope and assurance from this amazing truth? In light of this reality, what else really matters?
Further Study: In the doctrine of the Trinity, we do not find three different divine roles displayed by one Person (that is modalism). Nor are there three gods in a cluster (that is tritheism or polytheism). The one God (“He”) is also, and equally, “They,” and “They” are always together, always closely cooperating. The Holy Spirit executes the will of both Father and Son, which is also His will. This is the truth that God reveals about Himself all throughout the Bible.

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

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

Discussion Questions:

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

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

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

**Key Text:** Jude 20, 21

**The Student Will:**

- **Know:** Outline the biblical basis for an understanding of the Trinity.
- **Feel:** Be in awe of the largeness, complexity, and intertwining righteous work of the Three in One.
- **Do:** Worship the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

**Learning Outline:**

I. **Know:** Three in One

- A. How have the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit worked together in our behalf from before the foundation of the world?
- B. What expressions and demonstrations in the Gospels demonstrate Christ’s divinity?
- C. How do Scriptures describe both the plurality and the unity of the Godhead?

II. **Feel:** The Power and the Glory

- A. What aspects of the Godhead awaken awe, fear, and respect?
- B. What feelings toward God are stirred by descriptions of the ways in which the Father, Christ, and the Holy Spirit cooperate for our salvation?
- C. What aspects of God’s triune nature increase a sense of intimacy in our relationship with Him?

III. **Do:** Thou Art Worthy

- A. In what ways do all the qualities of the Godhead work together to enhance our concept of a God worthy of worship?
- B. How has your worship of God changed as you have learned about the unique aspects and intertwining relationships of the Trinity?

**Summary:** While we have a hard time comprehending the nature of the Author of the universe, Scriptures help us to understand that God exists in three distinct Persons, each with different functions. Yet, They work together as One.
Learning Cycle

STEP 1—Motivate

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The Bible teaches the unity of God, but further study reveals that this unity is a dynamic relationship among three distinct Persons.

Just for Teachers: Many people think of the doctrine of the Trinity as mysterious, or even as a doctrine that is best left unexamined and “taken on faith.” Emphasize that if the doctrine is properly understood, it really helps us to better understand God and our faith in Him. Indeed, many foundational Christian doctrines are based upon the understanding of God that is implicit in the doctrine of the Trinity.

The atomic theory, the idea that matter is composed of innumerable submicroscopic units we call atoms, is one of the pillars of modern science. It was a Greek, Democritus (circa 450 B.C.), who coined the term atomos, meaning literally uncuttable. The atom, Democritus believed, was the hidden, indivisible unity underlying the multiplicity of the things that we see around us.

As scientists began to rediscover and confirm Democritus’ hypothesis in modern times, they made further discoveries. The atom, that primal unity, was, in fact, a name for a complex relationship between the particles that composed it. The protons were not more “atomic” than the electrons, or vice versa. If you were lacking either of them, you were lacking an atom.

In the same way, the Old Testament of the Bible informs us that God is One. But as we look into this fact further, we discover that this unity is the product of a harmonious relationship among Three distinct Beings, all equally divine and all coeternal. While the atom can be, and has been (in contradiction to its name), split, this triune God really is the indivisible unity underlying all reality.

Discuss With the Class: What other examples of unity in multiplicity can we find in the world around us that help us to understand the Three-in-One nature of the Trinity?

STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: The Bible introduces us to a God who is One, a God characterized by echad, or unity. And yet, from the very beginning we also are presented with a picture of a multifaceted God. Emphasize...
that the unity of God spoken of in the Old Testament does not refer merely to a mathematical singleness but rather to a singleness of purpose and essence. Also, emphasize that the plurality of the Godhead is in no way to be confused with polytheism. Bring out clear teachings about God’s plurality in the Old Testament and His unity in the New.

Bible Commentary

I. The Oneness of the Triune God (Review Deuteronomy 6:4 with your class.)

Deuteronomy 6:4 tells us that God is One. Why is this important? Most of us are aware, to some degree, of the pantheons (literal meaning in Latin: “every god”) and mythologies of the ancient peoples surrounding biblical Israel. As people forgot the God who had created them in His image, they created gods in their own image.

Many of the gods in these pantheons had started out as objects of worship for a distinct class or group of people. Perhaps they were tribal or familial gods. Or perhaps they were gods who personified an admired trait, or even a profession or occupation. As the New Testament says, it is difficult or impossible to serve two masters; so, most people had a favorite, keeping the others at bay with an occasional, well-timed offering or pinch of incense.

As kings and priests gained power, they found it useful to gather these gods into pantheons that resembled a royal court of the time. These were unities of a sort, usually with one god who ruled over an uneasy collection of lesser deities with their own mutually exclusive agendas that reflected their diverse origins. But this was not the unity connoted by the Hebrew word echad, which could just as usefully be translated as harmony, a concept that definitely did not apply to ancient polytheism.

The inspired writers of the Bible rejected this polytheism because they knew that God was One. But this oneness is not merely a number. It means that the God of the Bible is unique. But His uniqueness alone is not what makes Him worthy of worship. Otherwise, we could just as easily worship snowflakes or our own fingerprints.

Consider This: While we may not seek out other gods, per se, as ancient polytheists did, don’t we put other things above the true God? How does this divide both our loyalty and our focus? What can we learn from the unity and singleness of purpose displayed in the Godhead? See John 17:22.

II. Kenosis (Review Philippians 2:6–8 with your class.)
As the lesson notes, doubts about the Trinity tend to focus upon the deity of Christ. Normative Christianity teaches that God took the form of the Man Jesus Christ in the first century A.D. in a minor province of the Roman Empire. He was executed as a criminal in a particularly ignominious manner, and three days later He was resurrected to life.

As Paul notes (1 Cor. 1:22–25), these facts were unacceptable to many. Jews who thought that they understood the Scriptures believed Christians were not just wrong but heretical. Yes, a Messiah was coming, but not in that way. Greeks, perfectly willing to assimilate all the wisdom of the world into their philosophical tradition, found this seemingly errant nonsense not very wise at all.

Even Christians found this story hard to accept. Christian heresies sprang up, mostly concerned with the deity of Christ but especially with the atonement. Such groups as the Ebionites taught that Jesus was just a man, a prophet at best. Others taught that Jesus really was God but that He only appeared to be human during His ministry. He only appeared to suffer on the cross. This view was called docetism, a word rooted in the Greek verb that means “to seem.” Arianism taught that Christ was “sort of” divine but that He was a created being.

All of these heresies set out to resolve what their formulators regarded as difficulties with the plain message of Christ’s divinity, humanity, and atonement, as preached by the apostles and the four canonical Gospels. But as they resolved these perceived difficulties, their solutions essentially nullified the power of the true gospel. If Christ were just a man, how did His sacrifice help anybody? He was just a wise teacher who stumbled into a very bad predicament and faced it bravely. If He only seemed to suffer on the cross, again, what was the point? And if He were not truly divine but more of a super angel or demigod, how could His death and resurrection atone for offense against God?

In contrast to all that, the apostles taught that Christ was, in every sense, God but that He let go of His status and emptied Himself (kenosis in Greek) of the prerogatives of divinity, even to the point of dying a criminal’s death on the cross. He had, and was, everything, but out of love He gave it all to us and became nothing. If you know that, you know the gospel.

**Consider This:** Why is a correct understanding of the true nature and divinity of Jesus Christ so essential to our understanding of His saving life, death, and resurrection?

**STEP 3—Apply**

**Just for Teachers:** Use the following questions to help your students to reinforce what they have learned about the nature and importance of our knowledge of the One triune God.
Thought Questions:

1. What do you think is meant by the biblical authors when they say God is One? Why is this Oneness so important?

2. Why do you think that the deity of Christ is the thing most often challenged when people attempt to cast doubt on the doctrine of the Trinity? Why is the divinity of Christ so difficult to accept in spite of the clear biblical and historical evidence?

Application Question:

What can we learn about that which God wants for us in our individual lives, families, and churches by examining the doctrine of the Trinity and His unity in multiplicity?

STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: This week you and your students have learned the importance of both God’s unity and His multifaceted nature, as seen in the doctrine of the Trinity. The following activities will help your students to remember and apply the lessons learned in their future study and spiritual growth.

Activity 1: An important aspect of the Oneness of God that is taught in the Bible is His utter uniqueness. Nothing and no one else is like God. Have a blackboard or whiteboard at hand, if available, and briefly discuss the uniqueness of God. (Pen and paper are an equally adequate substitute.) Then ask the class to suggest ways in which God is unique. As students think of them, write down the characteristics that define God’s uniqueness. Then lead the class in a prayer of praise to God for these qualities and the ways in which He manifests them in our behalf. You can either begin or end the class this way.

Activity 2: Everyone knows that the Old Testament teaches the Oneness of God, while the New Testament introduces the Son and the Holy Spirit. But is this true? Ask your class members to look in the Old Testament for examples of manifestations of the Holy Spirit or the Son. Some examples: Exodus 31:3, 1 Chronicles 28:12, or Job 33:4 for the Holy Spirit; Genesis 18:3, Daniel 7:13 for appearances of Christ. You may want to give this as an assignment the week before you teach the lesson, if possible.
In the Beginning

SABBATH AFTERNOON

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

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

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

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

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

*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 14.
Creation Week

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

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

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

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

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

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

Matt. 19:4
Exod. 20:8–11
1 Tim. 2:13
Isa. 40:26

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Try to imagine what our world was like in its pristine beauty. Imagine, too, what it will be like when it is created over. Our minds and hearts can only begin to wrap around what that will be like. Why is nothing in this world worth having if we lose out on what is promised us?*
Further Study: Throughout all her ministry, Ellen G. White was uncompromising in her rejection of the theory of evolution. “It is,” she wrote, “the worst kind of infidelity; for with many who profess to believe the record of creation, it is infidelity in disguise.” —The Signs of the Times, March 20, 1879.

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

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

Discussion Questions:

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

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

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

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

Key Text: Colossians 1:16

The Student Will:

Know: Discuss how belief in God as the Creator affects our understanding of other biblical teachings, such as the Cross and the new earth.

Feel: Sense the difference that the belief in a personally caring Creator makes in a life philosophy.

Do: Accept and honor God as Creator, as well as Re-creator.

Learning Outline:

I. Know: Foundation of Belief

A How does the acceptance of a biblical Creation help us to understand the power that God has to save us from our sins?

B How does our understanding of God’s role as Author of the universe and a seven-day Creation affect our belief in the Sabbath, the resurrection, and the re-creation of the earth to come?

II. Feel: Created by Chance or by Design?

A What feelings of awe, joy, and praise are awakened as we contemplate the works of our Creator?

B What difference does the belief that we are created by God’s design (rather than by meaningless accident) make in our attitudes toward God and one another?

III. Do: Made by God

A How can we best honor our loving, personal Creator?

B How does the fact that God has not only created us but has given the best gifts of heaven to redeem us affect the ways in which we respond to Him?

Summary: A belief in the biblical story of Creation affects not only our acceptance of an all-powerful Creator God but impacts our understanding of the Sabbath, the Cross, the resurrection, and many other doctrines.
**Learning Cycle**

**STEP 1—Motivate**

*Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:* God’s role as Creator is inextricably linked to what we know about His character and, most important, about His role as our Redeemer.

*Just for Teachers:* Emphasize the importance of our understanding of God as Creator and how it relates to the other aspects of God’s character and His work on our behalf. Explain how we can know more about God by way of a correct understanding of His act of Creation and its results.

Most scientists today work with an assumption known as “methodological naturalism.” In essence, this is the view that everything that has happened, is happening, or will happen, has a natural cause and, specifically, not what we would call a “supernatural” cause. Critics, however, have also labeled the concept “methodological atheism,” because, strictly applied, it rules out God as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer.

Yet, many people find it to be a persuasive assumption because most of the events that occur in our daily lives or in our observable environment do not appear to have direct supernatural causes. Even events or phenomena in which we, as Christians, can see the hand of God could be explained, however implausibly to us, as resulting from circumstances alone. Methodological naturalists also assume that if this is the way it is now, this is how it has always been. Their position might be compared to the skeptics who are given voice in 2 Peter 3:4: “everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation” (*NIV*).

For this to be true, methodological naturalists need time, a lot of it; as well as some very improbable throws of the dice that somehow resulted in the beautifully designed and ordered world in which we live. But where methodological naturalists see blind chance, Seventh-day Adventist Christians see a world that came into being in a state of perfection at the will of a benevolent Creator—but it is a world now marred by sin. And we await a Redeemer who will restore it to its original perfection.

*Discuss With the Class:* The current cosmological and evolutionary theory that Creation merely stumbled into being is quite foreign to the worldview of the Bible. How do we see nature (as the psalmist writes) declaring “the glory of God” (*Ps. 19:1*)?

**STEP 2—Explore**

*Just for Teachers:* Emphasize the importance of Creation to the
understanding of God in both the Old and New Testaments. That this relationship exists in the Old Testament comes as no surprise. After all, the first question the Bible answers is how we got here, and why. But Creation is foundational to the Redemption story of the New Testament. It also erases the false impression that the God of the New Testament is somehow separate or distinct from the God of the Old Testament.

Bible Commentary

I. “All Things” (Review Colossians 1:16 with your class.)

Neither the Old nor the New Testament ever seriously entertains the possibility that God did not create the universe. Most of the peoples and religions surrounding Israel also believed that the universe did have a creator or creators. Some exceptions were the philosopher Epicurus and his successors, such as Lucretius, who believed that the universe was eternal, self-sufficient, and unchangeable in its essence.

The important difference was that the Bible taught that God was the source of all things. Some religions and philosophies—Platonism, for example—taught that the material world was created by what they called a Demiurge. In Greek, this word referred to an artisan or a craftsman. This demiurge did not create matter but was merely a clever mechanic who organized it in a functional and more or less aesthetically pleasing way. The imperfections of the visible universe were explained by the imperfect skill of the demiurge. Of course, the demiurge was believed to be ignorant of, or indifferent to, the higher spiritual world.

Zoroastrianism, the religion of ancient Persia, is based on a belief in two gods, one good and one evil. The good god created those animals and plants that adherents regarded as noble and beautiful. The evil god created the “creeping things” and animals and plants that were seen as unpleasant or noxious.

Today, many who want to reconcile the Bible with such theories as evolution, propose that God created the world or the universe, left it on its own to develop for a given period of time, and reappeared to bestow a “soul” on the hominids who had evolved while He was away.

None of these conceptions agree with what the Bible teaches. This passage and others make it clear that God created all things. This includes things too small for us to see and things that we simply don’t: unseen spiritual realities and the most mundane details of our immediate environment. In their original state, they reflected His perfection and goodness, and someday they will again.

Consider This: Why is it so important to specify that God created all things? What do you make of the age-old human tendency to leave God out of His creation or to confine Him to a neat, small corner of it?
II. Present at the Creation (Review John 1:1–13 with your class.)

This passage can be read as an elaboration on the Creation story given in Genesis, with a more explicit introduction of God the Son, or the Word. Some commentators characterize the author’s approach as polemic, in that he seems intent upon affirming some points while he dismisses or refutes others. For example, in verse 3 he makes the point (also made by Paul in Colossians 1:16) that God, through Christ, made all things. The author reemphasizes that “without him nothing was made that has been made” (NIV). Again, the author lived in a world in which a significant number of people did not regard this fact as self-evident.

Clearly, the author’s point is not so much to give a recap of the Creation as it is to show how the Creation—and, implicitly, all the sacred history recorded in the Old Testament—was foundational to the message of redemption in Christ. Then, as now, there were people who wanted to jettison or alter parts of the Old Testament (particularly the Creation account) while still holding on to Christ as Redeemer. In contrast, the author shows how Creation and Redemption are parts of the same story.

Consider This: Why are Christ’s roles as Creator and Redeemer so inseparable? In what ways does the plan of Redemption depend on the literal truth of the Creation account as given in Genesis?

III. “Through One Man . . .” (Review Romans 5:12–15 with your class.)

While Paul’s major point was not to buttress the historicity of Adam, his argument assumes and depends on it. Paul knew of Jesus Christ as a historical figure. The ancient world had no shortage of dying and rising gods who presumably restored fertility to the crops or brought some unspecified, but sublime, state of enlightenment to the adherents of their mystery cults. Most of these gods existed in some mythical dream time. But Jesus Christ was a real man who lived in a distinct historical era and was written about by hard-nosed historians, such as Josephus and Tacitus. He died a real death to redeem real people from real sin. Paul, in addition to his experience with the risen Christ, regularly interacted with people who had walked and talked with the historical Jesus.

If we know that to be the case, why would Paul choose to parallel Him with a figure he regarded as mythical? What would be the purpose of one’s sins being redeemed by a fictional character? If the historical Christ is (as the name implies) the central figure of Christianity, then the historical Adam is only slightly less central.

Consider This: If we claim to trust Christ, why must we make a firm decision to trust His Word?
STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Use the following questions to help your students to understand what we as Seventh-day Adventists mean when we refer to God as Creator.

Thought Questions:

1. In what ways are all other Christian doctrines built upon a correct understanding of God as Creator? For example, the plan of Redemption or the authority of Scripture?

2. What is it about currently popular and accepted theories of the evolution of all life that makes them utterly incompatible with the essential Christian understanding of God’s creatorship?

Application Question:

1. When we look at the care and precision with which God created and continues to sustain the earth, what do we learn about the ways in which we should relate to God’s creation? How can such an understanding keep us from the extremes of profligacy or the worship of the creation at the expense of the Creator?

2. How should we as a church react to people who have honest questions or even skepticism about the way in which we view issues of origins and Creation? How can we maintain a firm position on Creation and keep the church a “safe place” for those who are honestly struggling with these questions?

STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: The more we understand the nature and purpose of God’s creation and the care that is evident in the things He created, the less likely we are to seek out explanations that attempt to negate Him or confine Him to the edges or gaps of understanding. The following activity will help your students to see examples of God’s providence in the ways in which He chose to create.

Activity: It is clear, even to the most casual observer, that each animal, plant, and so on, is specifically suited to the environment in which it finds itself. During the week, search for examples of interesting animals or plants that live in unique environments. Show how God has given them the means by which to survive in those environments. Illustrate with photos, videos, anecdotes, etc.

Alternatively, give this as a homework assignment to your students the week before, if you can arrange it.
God as Redeemer

SABBATH AFTERNOON

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 21.*
At the Cross

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How seriously do you take the sin in your life? And what criteria do you use to justify your answer?
When is the first promise of salvation given, and what does it mean?

Gen. 3:15.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And now the Lord of Glory was dying, a ransom for the race. . . . Upon Christ as our substitute and surety was laid the iniquity of us all. He was counted a transgressor, that He might redeem us from the condemnation of the law. . . . The Saviour could not see through the portals of the tomb. . . . He feared that sin was so offensive to God that Their separation was to be eternal. . . . It was the sense of sin, bringing the Father’s wrath upon Him as man’s substitute, that made the cup He drank so bitter, and broke the heart of the Son of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 752, 753.

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

Three Gospels record that Jesus cried out with a loud voice from the cross as He was dying. These loud cries are even mentioned in the book of Hebrews: “who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death” (Heb. 5:7, NKJV). Jesus’ “cry of dereliction” is the most piercing cry in the Bible. There is no statement in all the Gospels to rival this one from Jesus on the cross, and in that cry we get a glimpse of what the Lord Himself was willing to go through in order to bring us salvation.
Further Study: “Oh, how inefficient, how incapable I am of expressing the things which burn in my soul in reference to the mission of Christ! . . . I know not how to speak or trace with pen the large subject of the atoning sacrifice. I know not how to present subjects in the living power in which they stand before me. I tremble for fear lest I shall belittle the great plan of salvation by cheap words.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 3, p. 115.

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

Discussion Questions:

1. In Scripture, God is portrayed both as a great Lover of sinners as well as extremely wrathful against sin. Some Christians try to pick one or the other as representing God’s nature. Why is that unnecessary? In fact, why is God’s love for sinners one of the main reasons why He is wrathful against sin?

2. God’s love is not like the feeble and sometimes irregular affection that we bestow on one another. What does Christ’s act as Savior teach us about divine love?

3. How does your understanding of God’s holiness, in contrast to your sinfulness, help you to understand better why salvation cost so much?

4. Dwell more on the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22. In what other ways does it help us to understand the nature of Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf? At the same time, in what ways does it barely do justice to what it was intended to symbolize?

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

Key Text: Revelation 5:12

The Student Will:

Know: Review the various Old and New Testament stories and symbols that emphasize the Cross as the heart of the revelation of God’s nature.

Feel: Identify with the suffering Christ on the cross and the agonizing Father hidden in a veil of darkness.

Do: Share in God’s suffering as part of the life we live through Christ.

Learning Outline:

I. Know: The Heart of the Gospel
   A In the Garden of Eden, the promise to vanquish Satan came with an acknowledgment of the cost of this victory. What was this cost?
   B What other biblical stories and verses demonstrate the suffering of God that purchased our healing?

II. Feel: By His Stripes
   A Why is it so important for us to meditate on the suffering of Christ and of the Father during the crucifixion?
   B Visualizing and dwelling on these pictures of the Suffering Servant have what effect on our emotions and attitudes toward God?

III. Do: Sharing in His Cup
   A How do we share in the cup of Christ’s suffering?
   B How are we changed as we dwell on the costs that the Father and Son paid for our salvation?

Summary: The agony and horror of Christ’s suffering on the cross and of the Father’s pain from sending His Son into this torment illustrate both the terrible cost of sin and the boundless love of God that led Him to take upon Himself the penalty for our transgressions.
Learning Cycle

**STEP 1—Motivate**

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** God’s justice is revealed in His wrath against sin. His mercy is revealed in the lengths to which He went to make sure that we did not have to share sin’s fate.

**Just for Teachers:** Emphasize the importance of a balanced understanding of Christ’s redemptive act. The fact of our redemption is not an excuse to take sin lightly but, rather, a call to grateful obedience to, and praise of, the God who revealed His character in the mighty acts of His Son.

Cynics are often bemused by the Christian’s use of the cross as a symbol, particularly when worn as jewelry or otherwise prettified or domesticated in popular Christian art. They may point out that this is much like using a stylized electric chair as a symbol or any other instrument of execution or torture. In a way, they’re right. The cross was an instrument of both execution and torture. One can only wonder at the mind of the person who first conceived of killing his enemies in this way. What could possibly be more diametrically opposed to what Jesus Christ represented and wanted for His children than an instrument of death that not only killed, but killed painfully over a period of days, and enlisted the forces of nature themselves (sun, rain, et cetera) in its work?

Early Christians knew all about this. They were highly ambivalent about the use of the cross as a symbol, even though they understood Christ’s sacrifice as well as or better than we do. One rarely finds anything like the modern cross or crucifix in the Christian iconography of the first few centuries. Christ is symbolized by fish or anchors but almost never by this instrument of death and torture. Even the Emperor Constantine’s favored Christian symbol wasn’t the cross but the Chi Rho, the first two Greek letters in the name of Christ.

But in His atoning death, Christ took the cross, which should have been a symbol of all the evil that had come upon the world as a result of sin, and made it a symbol of the opposite: ultimate good and selflessness. If He could do that for the cross, what can He do for us?

**Discuss With the Class:** The Cross can often become trivialized, particularly if we live in a place in which most people identify as Christians. We may see it but not actually look at it. What does the Cross really mean to us?
STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: It is all too easy for us to glory in our redemption in Christ without fully understanding the real cost of it or what made such a redemption necessary. Emphasize that sin is not a trivial thing or a joke, such as when we refer to a piece of chocolate cake as “sinfully delicious.” Left to ourselves, we would be destroyed by sin. Our need for redemption from it caused the painful and lonely death of God’s Son.

Bible Commentary

I. Is God Angry at You? (Review Romans 1:18 with your class.)

The wrath of God is a difficult concept for many. If we could, many of us would banish it to the outer edges of the Old Testament. And yet, here it is near the beginning of a book (Romans) that most people associate with the love and grace of God. So, what is the wrath of God? Against what or whom is it directed? Is it really what we think of as wrath or anger, or is it just a way of referring to the natural consequences of sin?

First, we’ve all experienced human anger and angry people. Almost by definition, the experience was not positive. Perhaps the anger was justified, or perhaps it was arbitrary or unfair. In any event, anger of this sort is an emotion, a human emotion. In this sense, the wrath of God is entirely different from human wrath or anger.

The wrath described in this passage is linked with the judgment of God. Therefore, it is not the result of an impulsive flash of anger. God has judged sin, or unrighteousness, and has marked it for destruction. At the same time, this sin or unrighteousness didn’t just appear out of thin air. It is the “unrighteousness of men.” So, necessarily, while the wrath is directed against the sin itself, it is also directed against those who entertain and practice it while knowing better, “holding the truth in unrighteousness.”

Paul also uses the phrase “is revealed,” or even more to the point, “is being revealed,” in relation to God’s wrath. On one level, this refers to the natural results of sin. Sin has certain consequences in the real world that can be seen by anyone who cares to notice. The consequences also will be revealed in the final judgment of God, in which sin and unrighteousness will be destroyed.

In short, God is not angry with you. He is angry with sin. He wants you
to separate yourself from it and accept the gift of new life and righteousness that He is also revealing. There is no need for any of us to cling to sin and share its fate.

**Consider This:** God has revealed His wrath but also how to escape from it. Are you clinging to unrighteousness? If so, what will it take to pry you away from it?

**II. “Who Has Believed Our Report?” (Review Isaiah 53 with your class.)**

Most of us are familiar with the doctrine of justification in which Christ’s sacrifice causes His righteousness to be attributed to us. In some sense, it causes God to view us as if we had Christ’s virtues. We like this idea. But in order for that to happen, Christ had to allow Himself to bear our sinfulness. This is a little more difficult to take. Isaiah 53 begins on a note of disbelief, culminating in dismay. Rhetorically, the prophet asks, “Who has believed our report?” The answer is, very few.

Jesus’ contemporaries looked at Him on the cross and saw, at best, a victim of the worst circumstances possible. They didn’t know what to say. Perhaps they were afraid that His misfortune and wretchedness would rub off on them. Or, even, that maybe He had really done something bad to deserve it. They turned away and tried to forget about it.

Others probably looked on and saw what their religious leaders and the principalities and powers of the world wanted them to see: a criminal, a blasphemer, possibly a madman. After all, He was tried and convicted by the wisest and most influential men in the nation, selected from among each of the influential factions. When was the last time they had agreed on anything? In any case, better not to get involved, better not to even look.

**Consider This:** We’ve all heard the phrase “cheap grace,” and undoubtedly we’re all guilty of acting as though grace is cheap. How might meditating on the real significance of Christ’s sacrifice affect such notions?

**STEP 3—Apply**

**Just for Teachers:** Use the following questions to help your students to see the significance of the plan of salvation and how it arises from the very nature and character of God.

**Thought Questions:**

1. At the root of Redemption is sin. If there was no sin, there would be
no need for Redemption. Why, then, do people seem to want the joy of Redemption without the sorrow for sin?

2 What do you think of the idea, pushed by some Christian thinkers, that the plan of Redemption is so implausible, so contrary to established modes of merely human thought, that it must be true? The idea is, who would have made up something so implausible? Discuss.

Application Question:

1 Because good works in no way increase our salvation “score,” what role do obedience and good works play in the life of the redeemed person?

2 In our interactions with others, how often do we wait for indications that they are worthy of, or ready for, our kindness or forgiveness? Is this how God viewed us in our situation? (See Rom. 5:8.)

STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: The story of Redemption is yet another area in which we tend to make a false distinction between an “angry” Old Testament God and “merciful” Jesus. The following activity should enable your students to start to question these false distinctions and develop a more balanced view of God.

Activity: Find passages in the Old Testament that refer to God’s mercy or that show examples of God’s forgiveness or providence toward people, even people who might have been considered outsiders. Good examples of the latter might include Rahab (Joshua 2, 6:17–25), Ruth, or the repentant Ninevites of the book of Jonah. Ask your students to look up and read these passages aloud from their Bibles. Also note prophecies of the coming redemption, such as Jeremiah 31:31–34. Make it clear that God the Father did not need to be flattered or cajoled into redeeming us, as the popular image might seem to indicate.
Lesson 4  
*January 21–27

(page 30 of Standard Edition)

The God of Grace and Judgment

SABBATH AFTERNOON

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

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

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

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

The soldier then shot the old man dead.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Eccles. 12:13, 14
1 Cor. 3:13
2 Cor. 5:10
Heb. 10:30
Matt. 16:27
Rev. 20:12
Rev. 22:12
Matt. 12:36, 37
1 Pet. 4:17
Rev. 14:6, 7

These are a sample of the texts that clearly teach judgment. Many of the most explicit judgment texts, texts that clearly reveal the reality of divine judgment, or judgments, appear in the New Testament. This fact works against the notion that judgment is contrary to the new-covenant concept of God’s grace, which is also taught in the New Testament. What this should teach us is that, however we understand judgment, and however we understand grace, we must understand them as divine truths that work together. To pit one against the other is to misunderstand the fullness of the gospel, which we looked at last week.
Monday January 23

Judgment and Grace in Eden

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What role are you playing in helping to spread this message of judgment and grace to others? What more could you do to help spread it because, most likely, you could be doing more, right?
**Further Study:** How do grace and judgment work together? Here’s how inspiration reveals it:

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

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

**Discussion Questions:**

1. How does the above quote help you to understand the role of grace in the judgment? How does Ellen White describe God’s faithful people, and why is that important? How clearly do you see yourself described there?

2. Imagine standing before God with everything that you have ever done, good and bad, exposed. How well would you fare? Would you be able to stand before God on the basis of your good deeds, even the ones done out of the sincerest and most honest of motives? Do you really think that they would be enough to commend you before your Maker? How does your answer help you understand the need of grace?

3. What’s the deadly spiritual trap of thinking that it doesn’t matter what we do because we’re saved by grace? How can you protect yourself against falling into that deception?

4. People sometimes warn us about “cheap grace.” Yet there’s no such thing. Grace isn’t cheap—it’s free! What’s cheap is when people, in claiming that grace, try to use it as an excuse to sin. What examples of that deception can be seen in the Christian world? Or even in our own church?

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

Key Text: Ecclesiastes 12:14

The Student Will:

Know: Explain the ways in which the twin aspects of God’s character—mercy and justice as illustrated in His acts of grace and judgment—work together from Genesis to Revelation.

Feel: Sense the beauty, balance, and overreaching power of a gospel that both eradicates sin through judgment and saves the penitent believer through grace.

Do: Take hold of the offered gift of grace that delivers the believer from the condemnation that otherwise would fall on us as sinners.

Learning Outline:

I. Know: God’s Grace in Action

A How has God offered deliverance, even while passing judgment on the guilty, in such stories as the Fall and the Flood?

B How does the third angel’s message speak of both the grace and judgment?

II. Feel: The Beauty of Mercy and Justice

A How does a believer escape both the extremes of cheap grace and the terrors of a vengeful judgment?

B Why is a rainbow a good illustration of the beauty and power of mercy and justice working hand in hand?

III. Do: Grace for the Condemned

A Because we all have sinned and deserve death, what is our only hope? How do we obtain grace?

B What joy can we find in the judgment of God?

Summary: Judgment for our sins condemns us to die. Yet, if we accept Christ’s suffering on our behalf, God gives us the life that Christ deserves. This substitution is the grace that delivers us from condemnation and death.
Learning Cycle

**STEP 1—Motivate**

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** Because of the entrance of sin, God responded with both judgment and grace. Judgment is required for justice to be met, but for those who believe in Christ’s sacrifice on their behalf, mercy provides the grace that restores us to union with God.

**Just for Teachers:** Use this opening myth to help your class to compare and contrast the origins story in the Bible with this version, which passed down through the Kono culture:

**Opening Story:** “In the beginning there was darkness. And in it lived Death, called Sa, with his wife and daughter. The three of them were all that was.

“There was nowhere for them to live comfortably, so Sa started it. He used his magic power, and he made an endless mud sea. In this mud place, Sa built his house.

“After that, the god Alatangana came to visit Sa. He found Sa’s house dirty and dark. Alatangana thought Sa should do better than that, and he said so.

“‘Nothing can live in such a place,’ the god told Sa. ‘This house needs fixing up. Everything is too dark.’

“So Alatangana thought he’d better take things in hand. He made the mud solid. We know it now as Earth. ‘The earth feels sad,’ the god said. ‘I will make plants and animals to live on it.’ So he did.”—Virginia Hamilton, *In the Beginning: Creation Stories From Around the World* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1988), p. 15.

The story goes on to relate how the god Alatangana eventually eloped with Sa’s daughter without Sa’s permission and had a large family of both black and white children. Sa punished the family by causing all the children to speak different languages so that they couldn’t understand each other. In addition, Sa would occasionally take a child in death as an offering.

**Consider This:** What aspects of judgment are found in the story? Where is grace found in this story, if at all? What are some critical differences between the Kono origin story and the biblical version of Creation? How are we blessed by having God’s Word as our origin story?
STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Use this time to study the relationship between judgment and grace as God has used them to meet the human need for both justice and mercy.

Bible Commentary

I. The Origin of Judgment and Grace (Review Genesis 3 with your class.)

There were immediate consequences to Adam’s and Eve’s disobedience at the tree of good and evil; they realized they were naked, and they felt afraid and guilty. Consequences are one form of judgment, but a court hearing came not long after. In the cool of the day, God visited Adam and Eve and, through a series of questions, got to the bottom of what had happened. And then God convened judgment.

Although Adam and Eve had sinned, Satan was the first to receive the sentence of judgment: a death sentence, eternal annihilation for the one who had originated and perpetrated sin on this planet. But that death sentence was also a promise of the demise of evil through the efficacies of the Seed. Much of this work has been done, although we are still waiting for the complete fulfillment of that promise.

This wasn’t the origin of grace or judgment, however. Examine Revelation 13:8; Ephesians 1:4, 11, 12; and Matthew 25:34. God had a plan in place even before Creation and the Fall; judgment and grace were already in operation. “The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8, NKJV) took on Himself the consequences of sin and the judgment that should have fallen on us in order that we might have our names written in the Book of Life. It is a long-term plan of such mystery, complexity, and depth that even the angels have been amazed as different events have unfolded.

Consider This: List the promises and provisions for God’s people that were laid down at, or before, the foundations of the earth, as described in Revelation 13:8; Ephesians 1:4, 11, 12; and Matthew 25:34. What do these provisions tell us about the nature of God?

II. Judgment, Grace, and Catastrophe (Review Genesis 6–8 with your class.)

The Flood was the result of judgment. Yet, grace in the form of Noah’s
long pleading, and the provision of the ark, mediated this catastrophe. When God visited the earth again, this time to see the tower of Babel, He brought judgment (see Gen. 11:1–9). The origin story from the Kono people of Guinea has a shadow of memory about this. The city of Babel was established by men who were determined to act independently of God, and, unchecked, they would have destroyed the moral sensibilities of the young world. However, God listened to the righteous of the city who cried out for God’s intervention. He came down to see the city and destroyed the tower. “In mercy to the world He defeated the purpose of the tower builders and overthrew the memorial of their daring. In mercy He confounded their speech, thus putting a check on their purposes of rebellion.”—Ellen G. White, Patriarchs and Prophets, p. 123.

Consider This: Examine the story of Jonah for similar patterns of judgment and mercy. In this case, God visited mercy on the city by not bringing about the predicted catastrophe. Why?

III. The Father’s Grace, The Father’s Judgment (Review Ephesians 1, 2, 3 with your class.)

When we view the manner in which God met the horrors of sin, we glimpse a better picture of who He is. In Ephesians 1, as Paul tries to explain the Father’s role in this whole business of salvation, he pulls out superlative after superlative in his attempt to describe His goodness. Paul knows that it is the Father who blesses us with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Because of this, Paul offers “praise of his glorious grace” (vs. 6, NIV). He speaks of “the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us” (vss. 7, 8, NIV), the “riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe” (vss. 18, 19, NIV).

Continuing in chapter 2, Paul refers to the “incomparable riches of [the Father’s] grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus” (vs. 7, NIV). In chapter 3, Paul kneels in prayer to the Father, asking that “out of his glorious riches” (vs. 16, NIV) He will send the Spirit in power, that we might understand how wide, long, high, and deep Christ’s love is and so be filled with the fullness of God. The Father is so able to do “immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine” (vs. 20, NIV). He loves to bless us. He lavishes us with His riches, His power, and His grace. He takes pleasure in doing all this for us because He loves us. It was because He loves us that He sent the greatest gift of all, His only begotten Son, to die for us.

All the superlatives we can muster are not adequate to describe the tenderness, the compassion, the loving kindness of the Father, expressed in the riches of His grace to us and poured out through the gift of His Son Jesus. In the giving of this gift, He broke His own heart so that we might be saved.
Christ’s heart, too, was broken. It took a consequence far greater than we could ever imagine (much less bear) to answer the just requirements of the beautiful and righteous law, which is the foundation of God’s character and the universe. It took God Himself to bear the consequence of sin for us. It was God’s grace, and only God’s grace, that could answer to God’s judgment which was called forth by the horrific effects of sin. And it is the riches of God’s grace, lavished on those who believe, that can fill us with the fullness of God Himself. What can we do but praise Him and give Him glory?

**Consider This:** Did God show mercy to Christ on the cross? Explain your answer.

►**STEP 3—Apply**

**Just for Teachers:** Discuss this question to help your class make a personal application of the lesson.

**Life Application:** If you are a parent, what examples from your child-rearing experiences illustrate the importance of consequences and just judgment, tempered by grace? Or perhaps you are in a position of authority in your field of employment, responsible for supervising your coworkers? In any of these situations in which judgment or discipline was required, have you had to take upon yourself the consequences earned by the child or coworker? How does this experience correlate with, and deepen your appreciation for, that which Christ did for us on the cross?

►**STEP 4—Create**

**Just for Teachers:** Suggest the following activities to your students to do during the week.

1. Write a poem expressing joy and praise to God for the beauty of His judgments and the blessings of His grace.

2. A rainbow is a symbol of the blending of God’s justice and mercy, and one surrounds His throne. Design a piece of art for your kitchen window that reminds you of this aspect of God’s character.
Lesson 5
*January 28–February 3
(page 38 of Standard Edition)

The Holiness of God

SABBATH AFTERNOON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 4.
“It Is Written”

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

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


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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What did John hear the heavenly beings around the throne saying?

Rev. 4:8, 9.

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

In all of the human encounters of the divine as depicted in Scripture, one never finds a suggestion that God is frightening. What we see instead is that, in the piercing light of His holiness, human beings finally see themselves for who they really are. And that is scary. In Scripture, when people truly encounter the God of heaven, we find no hand clapping, backslapping, and lighthearted singing. Rather, there is abject personal repentance. All see and admit their personal guilt without any excuses and without reference to the faults of anyone else. How different our words, our lives, and our actions would be were we all to live with the constant sense not only of God’s presence but of His holiness, as well.
Further Study: As Christ stands before the trafficking crowd in the temple, “the confusion is hushed. The sound of traffic and bargaining has ceased. The silence becomes painful. A sense of awe overpowers the assembly. It is as if they were arraigned before the tribunal of God to answer for their deeds. Looking upon Christ, they behold divinity flash through the garb of humanity. The Majesty of heaven stands as the Judge will stand at the last day . . . with the same power to read the soul. His eye sweeps over the multitude, taking in every individual. His form seems to rise above them in commanding dignity, and a divine light illuminates His countenance. He speaks, and His clear, ringing voice—the same that upon Mount Sinai proclaimed the law that priests and rulers are transgressing—is heard echoing through the arches of the temple: ‘Take these things hence; make not My Father’s house an house of merchandise.’

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

Discussion Questions:

1. In class, go over your answer to Monday’s last question. What are the major differences between us and a holy God? What are ways in which some of those differences can be eradicated, if any?

2. Given what we have looked at this week, why is it so much easier to see why self-righteousness and self-satisfaction, especially about one’s own spiritual state, are very dangerous deceptions?

3. Think about someone you know who is “holy”; that is, who seems to be upright, honest, pure, and so forth; someone quite “set apart” from most people. How do you respond to the person? Does he or she make you feel good or bad, and why?

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

**Key Text:** Psalm 99:9

**The Student Will:**

**Know:** Compare and contrast the reactions of demons, fallen humanity, and unfallen angels to the holiness of God.

**Feel:** Discern, to the depths of his or her being, the differences between a holy and righteous God and the nature of fallen humanity.

**Do:** Worship daily at the feet of our awesome and holy God.

**Learning Outline:**

I. **Know: At the Awesome Gate of Heaven**

A What are the reactions of those in Scripture who had seen God in vision or witnessed the divinity of Christ flashing through humanity?

B Why did they respond to the divine Presence in these ways?

II. **Feel: In the Presence of a Holy God**

A Why is it important to focus on how holy God is in order to sense what makes Him holy?

B How do we respond appropriately to God’s holiness, as the angels before the throne do, when we are so full of sin?

III. **Do: Worship at His Feet**

A What can we do to daily keep before us the scriptural descriptions of God’s throne and His holy Presence?

B While we may approach His throne confidently because of Christ’s cleansing blood, how do we yet respond to His holiness with our bodies, minds, and souls in worship?

**Summary:** God is so exalted that even the celestial beings who are continuously before the throne are constantly awestruck by His holy nature. How vital, then, and necessary, that we, as fallen beings, acknowledge His holiness and seek His cleansing blood and righteousness.
Learning Cycle

STEP 1—Motivate

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: God’s righteousness sets Him far above us in purity, perfection, glory, and light, and we should honor His holiness.

Just for Teachers: Use visuals, if possible, to help your class to picture the stories of some of the sacred encounters mentioned in the Scriptures.

Opening Activity: Make rough drawings of the items below or ask someone to draw them for you. Or divide your class into groups and ask each group to act out one of the stories for the rest to guess: the number seven (Gen. 2:2); the ladder in Jacob’s dream with angels on it (Gen. 28:10–19); the throne and a burning coal touching Isaiah’s mouth (Isa. 6:1–6); the burning bush (Exodus 3); Nadab and Abihu’s censers (Leviticus 10); the cloud resting above the tabernacle in the wilderness (Num. 9:15–20, Numbers 12); a shining warrior such as appeared to Joshua (Josh. 5:13–15); a cart with the ark on it and a priest trying to steady the ark (2 Sam. 6:1–7); the ark in the temple of Baal with the idol in pieces before it (1 Samuel 5, 6).

Discuss the following: What stories do these pictures/charades bring to mind? What is common about these stories? How did the people in these stories know that these items or people were holy? What made these items holy? What were the reactions of the characters in the stories to the holy items (or people)? Why did God want to teach His people about holiness?

Consider This: Talk about some of the holy things we deal with today, such as the Lord’s Supper, marriage, the pulpit, the sanctuary, and the Bible. What makes them holy? In what ways do we relate to these items and circumstances differently from the ways in which we relate to that which is secular?

STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: What an honor to be able to take the time to consider God’s holy nature. This might be a good time to kneel in prayer again, asking God’s blessing on this special study.
Bible Commentary

I. Sacred Time and Relationships *(Review Genesis 2:2, 3 and Exodus 20:8 with your class.)*

Everything that God makes is good and is to be honored and respected, including our bodies. However, God made two things at Creation that He particularly blessed and made sacred. “Then marriage and the Sabbath had their origin, twin institutions for the glory of God in the benefit of humanity.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 341. The Creator Himself joined the hands of Adam and Eve and instituted the law of marriage whereby they became one. “That which the eternal Father Himself had pronounced good was the law of highest blessing and development for man.”—Page 341.

The Sabbath was essential for humanity, even before the Fall, and before work as we know it today became a part of our lives. Even in paradise, it was important for our first parents to lay aside their own interests and employments, wonderful as they were, and take special time to more fully contemplate that which God had made. This awakened their gratitude as they reflected on their Creator’s beauty, wisdom, and power, and acknowledged that all that they enjoyed came from His hand.

Being able to share their delight in the beautiful scenes of nature made Adam’s and Eve’s happiness perfect in a way that even the companionship of angels could not have done. (See Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 46.) Sabbath is a time when family and friends can strengthen their bonds of relationship while enjoying the things of God together.

**Consider This:** How did Christ honor the Sabbath? What kinds of activities did He make a special point of doing on the Sabbath? What is the significance of His final act of rest on the Sabbath?

II. Sacred Encounters *(Review Genesis 28:10–19, Exodus 3, and Isaiah 6:1–6 with your class.)*

On the second day of his flight from home, Jacob, feeling guilty, outcast, lonely, and despairing, wept as he pled for forgiveness and the assurance that he was not forsaken. He didn’t feel relief, or even confidence that God had heard him. But that night he dreamed that heaven was open to him, with a ladder bridging the gap, and angels ascending and descending. Although it took a lifetime to fully understand what God was showing him in this dream, he realized he had a Savior and a connection to heaven. This
wonderful revelation of God made such an impact that he marked the spot as sacred and named it Bethel, meaning the house of God.

Bethel became a special place to which God directed Jacob after his sons had demonstrated such cruelty and falsehood in the massacre of Shechem. Jacob was horrified and heartsick at their course of action and bowed down with worry about vengeance from the surrounding nations. However, as the family traveled to Bethel, Jacob recounted to his family the story of his first journey away from home and the dream that God had given him at Bethel. In the recounting, his own heart was softened and his children’s hearts were touched by God’s subduing power. They gave up their idols and earrings, and, by the time they arrived at Bethel, they were prepared to worship Him there. God renewed His covenant promise to Jacob at Bethel and changed his name to Israel (Gen. 35:9–15).

Other places where God encountered His people were not always marked, including the burning bush where God talked with Moses or the spot where God, as warrior, revealed Himself to Joshua. But they were sacred at the time, noted so by God, and Moses and Joshua were required to remove their shoes. Sacred encounters required other behaviors, such as strict cleanliness (at Mount Sinai, for example). Those encountering God bowed and hid their faces.

“Humility and reverence should characterize the deportment of all who come into the presence of God. In the name of Jesus we may come before Him with confidence, but we must not approach Him with the boldness of presumption, as though He were on a level with ourselves. . . . These should remember that they are in His sight whom seraphim adore, before whom angels veil their faces. God is greatly to be reverenced; all who truly realize His presence will bow in humility before Him, and, like Jacob beholding the vision of God, they will cry out, ‘How dreadful is this place! This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’ ”—Ellen G. White, Patriarchs and Prophets, p. 252.

Consider This: Of what other sacred encounters in the Scriptures are you reminded? What were the circumstances of these encounters?

III. Sacred Spaces and Things (Review Leviticus 10, Genesis 9:15–10, Genesis 12.)

Nadab and Abihu had gone up on the mountain with the 70 elders and had witnessed God’s glory in a special way. They had just finished helping their father, Aaron, and Moses dedicate the tabernacle, and they, too, had gone through a special cleansing and dedication service as priests. God’s holy presence was evident at the tabernacle in the cloud of fire. But because their
father had been yielding, not requiring respect for his authority, they had not learned to respect and honor the exact requirements of God. Although they knew that worship in the tabernacle required careful and solemn preparation, they were partially intoxicated. This dulled their moral perceptions, and they failed to see the difference between what was sacred and what was secular.

Judgment came swiftly, in full view of the congregation. God told Moses to tell Aaron not to show grief. Even though the father realized that, to a large degree, his sons’ sins were a result of his own neglect of duty, and even though his heart was torn in anguish, he could not sympathize with sin or lead the people to murmur against God’s judgment.

Consider This: See Patriarchs and Prophets, pp. 704–711, for further study.

STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Discuss these questions in order to help your class members to make a personal application of the lesson.

Application Questions:

1. What preparations are necessary in order to help you not only to keep the hours of Sabbath holy but to take special care with the edges of the Sabbath, the entering and exiting hours?

2. What things can you as a class do to create a more sacred atmosphere for your worship services at church, as well as for family and personal devotions?

STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Suggest the following activity: Plan some special meals and activities with your family and friends for the coming Sabbath. Perhaps make some long-term plans with your family for the next few months of Sabbaths. Or honor your marriage in the next week by creating a special date night.
SABBATH AFTERNOON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 11.
The Law at Sinai

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Isa. 48:17, 18*

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

*Ps. 119:69–72*

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

*Ps. 119:97–103*

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

*Jer. 31:33*

__________________________________________

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

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

Is it any different today?

**Think about what God has given us as a people. How can we live out the wonderful light with which we have been blessed?**
The Law in the New Covenant

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dwell more on the links between God’s law and love. Law-keeping without love leads to what? Love without law-keeping leads to what? Write out your thoughts and bring them to class on Sabbath.
Further Study: “The ten holy precepts spoken by Christ upon Sinai’s mount were the revelation of the character of God, and made known to the world the fact that He had jurisdiction over the whole human heritage. That law of ten precepts of the greatest love that can be presented to man is the voice of God from heaven speaking to the soul in promise. ‘This do, and you will not come under the dominion and control of Satan.’ There is not a negative in that law, although it may appear thus. It is DO, and Live. . . . The Lord has given His holy commandments to be a wall of protection around His created beings.” —Ellen G. White, Sons and Daughters of God, p. 53.

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

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

Discussion Questions:

1. Discuss your answer to Thursday’s questions about law and love. What is law-keeping without love like? How is it often manifested? At the same time, what is love without law-keeping like? What kind of love is it, if love at all? Why do they need to be linked?

2. In what ways does the law reveal the character of the Lawgiver? How does God’s law reveal to us what God is like?

3. What does Ellen White mean when she talks above about the law being a “law of liberty”? How can the keeping of the law be equated with “liberty”?

4. What examples can we find in the world, and all around us, of what happens when people violate God’s law? How powerful a testimony are these examples of the value and continued validity of that law?

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

Key Text: Isaiah 33:22

The Student Will:

Know: Describe the unchanging character of God, as outlined in His law.
Feel: Empathize with the feelings of Moses and the people of Israel as God proclaims His law from Mount Sinai.
Do: Accept the instruction of the law because it teaches us our need for a Savior, and rejoice in the law because it protects and liberates us to be our truest selves in Christ.

Learning Outline:

I. Know: The Picture of God’s Character
   A How are the seemingly negative statements of some of the Ten Commandments really positive examples of who God is and the ways in which He created us so that we may function at our fullest potential?
   B What can we learn about God’s character from the natural laws that govern the universe?
   C How is it evident that God’s law was known and in operation before Mount Sinai?

II. Feel: The Importance of Being Afraid
   A Why was it important for God to share His law at Mount Sinai in such an awe- and fear-inspiring display of power?
   B How does a healthy fear of the law send us to the Savior?

III. Do: Rejoicing in the Law
   A What aspects of the law awaken a sense of joy, praise, and love for the Lawgiver in your heart, and how can you share this joy?

Summary: Because the law describes how God lives and how He designed us to live, it follows that when we let Him write these laws in our hearts that we are free to live joyously, as our true selves.
Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The law of God, as summarized in the Ten Commandments and the specific teachings of Jesus, provides direction and purpose for our lives, as well as profound insight into the nature of God.

Just for Teachers: Obtain a copy of the official rules of one or more sports popular in your local area or among class members. These might be accessed online; for football (soccer), for example, rules can be found at www.fifa.com/worldfootball/lawsofthegame.html or perhaps obtained from a local sporting club or association. Familiarize yourself with these rules and, if you have the opportunity, perhaps research the history of where and when these rules were developed and how they have changed over time. Make the rules available for class members to peruse, whether by making copies or projecting the rules on a screen from a computer. As described below, keep the discussion of sporting rules lighthearted. Try to ensure that class members are not too distracted by the sporting metaphor and that they don’t move too precipitously from thinking about the rules of the sport to the law of God and its purpose for living the life God wants for us.

Opening Activity: If possible, distribute or display copies of the rules to a sport. Ask class members to reflect on the complexity or simplicity of the outlined rules. Perhaps ask class members to suggest changes to the rules and what, if applicable, these rules reflect about the time and place in which the rules were developed. Then ask them to imagine how the game might change if all or most of the rules were removed. Would the game be possible without rules? In what ways are these rules similar to the law of God? How are they different? How are rules beneficial to the game? How are God’s laws beneficial to our lives?

Just for Teachers: This section provides an opportunity to consider the law of God in its role in the developing relationship between God and humanity.
Bible Commentary

I. Introductions to God’s Law (Review Genesis 4:3–16; 9:5, 6; 26:4, 5; 35:2, 3; Exodus 16:23–30; Job 24:14, 15 with the class.)

Many people who have set out to write an introduction to Christianity have sought to connect with human beings’ innate sense of right and wrong, of fairness and injustice. For example, in the twentieth-century classic *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis describes a kind of natural law that governs human actions in almost all societies and seems innate in us all to some degree. Observing the simplest human interactions, he argues, “We are forced to believe in a real Right and Wrong.”—(London: Fount Paperbacks, 1977), p. 18. And it seems it has always been this way. We are told little of how the first followers of God were told about God’s law and the reality of right and wrong. But from the first sin came a sense of guilt that must have been one of the ways in which God communicated to those first human beings about their brokenness and their need for a new relationship with Him.

**Consider This:** Do you think human beings have an innate sense of right and wrong?

II. Receiving the Law (Review Exodus 19:16–25, 20:18–21 with the class.)

Imagine you are among the people of Israel, camped at Mt Sinai. You have experienced the plagues in Egypt, the miraculous escape, and the crossing of the Red Sea. You are now eating manna every day. You have seen God acting on behalf of your people. But now God says that you must prepare to meet Him at the mountain. The earth shakes. You see, hear, and feel God’s presence. You are afraid and somehow also in awe. How might this change your understanding of God?

**Consider This:** Why do you think that God appeared to the Israelites in this way at this time?

■ *How do you think that God chooses to present Himself throughout the Bible stories when He does so in such different ways at times? Why is He sometimes a great physical presence, sometimes a still, small voice? Why is He sometimes a humble Baby and sometimes a conquering King?*

III. Jesus Affirms, Fulfills, and Expands the Law (Review Matthew 5:17–30, 33–48, 7:12 with the class.)
Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17, NIV). In His teaching He sought to both affirm and enlarge the understanding that His hearers had of the law of God. The specific examples above, taken from the Sermon on the Mount, demonstrate His approach to God’s law. He was keen to emphasize that life lived at its best, and in the kingdom of God, was lived with a deep understanding of, and commitment to, the law of God.

**Consider This:** How does your understanding of what Jesus lived and taught help your understanding of the law of God?

- *How do Jesus’ expanded explanations of some of the commandments affect your understanding of what they mean for you?*

**IV. Written by God** *(Review Exodus 32:15, 16; John 8:6; Hebrews 8:10; 10:16 with the class.)*

Despite the Bible itself being a work of literature, there are only a few examples of God actually writing. The covenant, traditionally considered to be the Ten Commandments, is one of those rare examples. God created a physical reference point to which His people could refer. It becomes clear that the encounter at Mount Sinai was more about establishing a relationship, a covenant, than simply instituting a legal system. And this same idea is carried over in the promise of later writers that God would write His laws on the hearts of His people. Again, it is more about relationship and covenant than mere legalities.

**Consider This:** Why does it say that God wrote His laws in stone but that Jesus wrote the people’s sins in the dust *(see John 8:6)?*

- *What does it mean to you to have God’s law written on your heart?*

►**STEP 3—Apply**

**Just for Teachers:** When God met His newly freed people at Mount Sinai, He was keen to establish a new, healthy, and lasting relationship with them. His law given at that time was not simply about making rules; it was about formalizing a covenant that would be the basis of that relationship. In doing so, He also showed a representation of His character, demonstrating that He, as Creator and Redeemer, wanted what was best for His people.
Application Questions:

1. How would you explain “the law of God” to someone who knows little or nothing about God?

2. What are the benefits for nonbelievers who might choose to keep God’s law? Does this question even make sense?

3. In what ways is the law of God like the rules of a sport or the laws of a nation? In what ways is it different?

4. Why do you think so many of the Old Testament writers spent time singing the praises of the law of God in particular? Should we share their sentiments? If so, how can we do that?

5. Why did Jesus spend so much time talking about God’s law?


7. How can you make God’s law become a larger part of your everyday life?

STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: These activities are intended to prompt class members to explore the Ten Commandments and their application to our lives in various ways.

Suggestions for Individual Activities: If supplies are available, provide paper and pens or pencils and ask class members to spend time with their Bibles reflecting on how each of the Ten Commandments gives us a glimpse of the nature of God. Working through Exodus 20:1–17, ask class members to journal, or discuss in class, their insights either verse-by-verse or commandment-by-commandment. Suggest that class members use some, or all, of the following questions to aid their reflection: What aspect of God’s character is reflected in each commandment? What do we learn about life lived as a follower of God from each commandment? How would the world be different if everyone lived by each commandment? How might the church be different? How might we be different? After allowing sufficient time for personal reflection and journaling, encourage class members to share their most significant insights either in pairs or with the rest of the group.
Lord of the Sabbath

SABBATH AFTERNOON

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

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

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

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

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

*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 18.
The Sabbath in Genesis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Think about the march of time, how it sweeps us along moment by moment, day by day, and year by year. Although we have no control over time itself, what we can control to some degree is what we do with it. How well do you use your time? What things occupy your time? How might you use your time better?
Read Exodus 20:8–11. What does the Lord tell us to do, and what reason does He give us to do it?

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

This commandment is also a carefully structured literary unit:

A. **Introduction:** “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (vs. 8, NKJV).

B. **Command:** “Six days you shall labor and do all your work” (vs. 9, NKJV).

C. **Motivation:** “but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God” (vs. 10a, NKJV).

   B1. **Command:** “In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor . . .” (vs. 10b, NKJV).

   C1. **Motivation:** “For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, . . . and rested . . .” (vs. 11a, NKJV).

D. **Conclusion:** “Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it” (vs. 11b, NKJV).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Think about the bondage from which Christ has promised to free you. What promises of freedom do you have in Jesus? How can you learn to claim them and then allow the Lord to make them real in your life?
Jesus and His Sabbath: Part 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ask yourself, What are other ways one can manifest the law without love? Might you be guilty of doing the same thing?
Jesus and His Sabbath: Part 2

“They used to take the Sabbath for a day of rest.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Discussion Questions:

1. It’s easy today, with hindsight, to mock the hardness and coldness of those religious leaders who attacked Jesus for His Sabbath healing. And they certainly will be judged for their actions. At the same time, try to put yourself in their sandals. These man-made rules had been around for so long that these leaders all but thought the rules were the very essence of Sabbath keeping itself; hence, they truly believed that Jesus was violating the Sabbath. How would we feel were someone to come along today and, claiming great light and truth, maybe even doing miracles, yet was in our view trampling on the fourth commandment? How might we react? What important lesson can we learn from this exercise about knowing how to separate truth from mere tradition and why it is not always easy to do so?

2. Further examine in class this idea that God rested after His work of Creation and His work of Redemption. How are we to understand the significance of this amazing fact?

3. Place yourself in the shoes of someone who believes that Jesus’ miracles on the Sabbath showed that He was abolishing it. Compare what the Bible teaches He said and did with what you would imagine Him doing were He really making this change. What do you imagine He would have done differently?

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

Key Text: Mark 2:27, 28

The Student Will:

Know: Trace the biblical teachings regarding the Sabbath from Creation through the law that was given on Mount Sinai to Jesus’ teachings and healings.

Feel: Nurture a sense of the importance of sacred time, made holy by God.

Do: Guard the keeping of the Sabbath as a holy possession of God, given to us as a blessing and a sign of Creation and re-creation.

Learning Outline:

I. Know: Lord of the Sabbath
   
   A. What is the significance of the origins of the Sabbath? How has the meaning of the Sabbath been enlarged to encompass our needs after the Fall?
   
   B. How has God, throughout Scripture, emphasized the importance of the Sabbath? How did Christ highlight the true purpose of the Sabbath?

II. Feel: Temple of Time
   
   A. How does honoring the seventh day as the Sabbath reflect on our relationship with our Creator, as well as our Redeemer?
   
   B. What are the pitfalls of substituting another day for the one God made sacred?

III. Do: Keep the Sabbath Holy
   
   A. How can we keep the Sabbath in a way that reflects its true purpose, as designed by our Creator?
   
   B. How does keeping the Sabbath holy help to improve our relationship with God?

Summary: Keeping the Sabbath holy in obedience to the commandment is a mark of honoring not only our Creator but our Redeemer, who rested in the tomb after completing His work on the cross.
Learning Cycle

**STEP 1—Motivate**

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** When we learn to understand and appreciate the Sabbath more fully in the way that God intended, we will grow in our enjoyment of this day of “delight,” have something special to share with others in our community, and gain a greater insight into the kind of relationship that God wants to grow with us.

**Just for Teachers:** Lead a discussion based on the activity and questions described below. Allow students to spend time imagining an ideal day; then ask them to share aspects of their imagined day with the rest of the class. There would likely be some similarities to Sabbath in some of their responses. But as the discussion develops, also emphasize the extra-special nature of Sabbath as a day focused not just on ourselves, our family, and/or friends, but a day with God, made holy by God, commanded by God, and also—as seen in the example of Jesus—to serve others.

**Opening Activity:** Ask students to describe the best day that they can imagine. What would be some of the activities or experiences that would make up the “perfect” day? With whom would you want to share it? What would make such a day special? Probably many of the responses will include time spent with family and friends, absence of work and everyday responsibilities, and focus on things they enjoy or are more important to them. Ask students to assess how close their observance of Sabbath comes to that imagined ideal day. What does their imagined day have in common with what Sabbath should be? Then ask class members to describe what it is that makes Sabbath more important or special than their imagined “perfect” day.

**STEP 2—Explore**

**Just for Teachers:** This section provides an opportunity to explore an overview of the Sabbath in the Bible, from Creation to Jesus. By recognizing Sabbath as a recurring and special part of God’s law, class members can catch a glimpse of the God who wants the best for us and wants the best possible relationship with us.
Bible Commentary

I. Sabbath Created (*Review Genesis 2:1–3 with the class.*)

At Creation, God declared everything He had made as good, very good, or excellent, but only the seventh-day Sabbath did He describe as “holy.” As such, this “is a radical departure from accustomed religious thinking. The mythical mind would expect that, after heaven and earth have been established, God would create a holy place—a holy mountain or a holy spring—whereupon a sanctuary is to be established. Yet it seems as if to the Bible it is holiness in time, the Sabbath, which comes first.”—Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), p. 9.

**Consider This:** What do we learn about God by His declaration of “holiness in time”? What can we appreciate about the uniqueness of this concept amid the world’s religions?

- *Why do you think that time is more important than place for God?*

II. Sabbath Commanded (*Review Exodus 20:8–11 and Deuteronomy 5:12–15 with the class.*)

Among the Ten Commandments, the fourth is unique in a number of respects. It is the longest and most detailed of the commandments. Additionally, as many people have commented, it is the commandment that most obviously makes the connection between our relationship with God and our relationships with others. Like the pronouncement at Creation, God gives special and specific attention to Sabbath, even above His other creation and His other laws.

**Consider This:** Why do you think that the fourth commandment specifically includes others, such as servants, strangers, and even animals? What does this tell us about what Sabbath is meant to be?

- *What can we learn from the differences between the two versions of the fourth commandment, as recorded in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, respectively?*

III. Sabbath Delight (*Review Exodus 20:8–11 and Isaiah 58:13, 14 with the class.*)

When surveying the Ten Commandments, the unique nature of the fourth commandment has sometimes been a reason for suggesting that it does not really belong to the list, that it is a quirk not really part of the core moral
code and so not applicable beyond the people to whom this law was presented. On the other hand, others look at the Ten Commandments and see the Sabbath command as the most personal and intimate of the commandments, as an invitation for His people to spend a time of “delight” (see Isa. 58:13) with God. More than any other, the fourth commandment says, “This is not a list of rules, as important as that might be, but an invitation to a relationship, a covenant with God, your Creator and Redeemer.”

**Consider This:** How can you take the fourth commandment more personally?

**IV. Jesus’ Sabbath** *(Review Matthew 12:1–13; Mark 2:27, 28; John 9; 19:30 with the class.)*

Jesus lived as a faithful Jew. He attended the temple for festivals and had the habit of regularly going to the synagogue *(see Mark 1:21, Luke 4:16).* But by His actions, He challenged the status quo that assumed Sabbath was simply about keeping the rules. He said that Sabbath was not just another rule; instead, it was a gift to humanity *(see Mark 2:27, 28).* By His choice to heal people on Sabbath, He demonstrated that Sabbath was a day not just for us but a day to help and lift up others in order that they, too, might benefit from God’s gift of the Sabbath.

**Consider This:** Why do you think Jesus specifically chose to heal people on the Sabbath when He could have done it on another day of the week?

* How can we use the Sabbath to serve our communities or to lift up those who are hurting or forgotten?

**STEP 3—Apply**

**Application Questions:**

1. Too often Sabbath keeping is criticized as a kind of legalism. Why is that wrong? In fact, in what way is Sabbath a gift of grace?

2. How would you explain the primary purpose, or purposes, of Sabbath?

3. If Sabbath is not about legalism, why should we still be careful about the ways in which we keep Sabbath?

4. How does Sabbath enhance your spiritual life? In what other ways do you think you could learn to better appreciate or practice Sabbath keeping?
In what ways might it be difficult for you to keep or remember Sabbath?

The Sabbath commandments also focus on allowing others in one’s household to benefit from Sabbath. How might we be able to share Sabbath with our household or community?

What does Sabbath, as explained throughout the Bible, teach us about God?

STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: These activities are intended to prompt class members to reflect on their own experience of Sabbath keeping and to highlight positive memories of Sabbath keeping that they might be able to share with their community.

Suggestions for Individual Activities: Provide paper and pens or pencils and ask class members to reflect on their own experience as Sabbath keepers by creating Sabbath-keeping maps or graphs, and detailing their Sabbath-keeping experiences. Perhaps they could draw graphs to plot their enjoyment of, or commitment to, Sabbath keeping. If at some point in their lives they specifically chose to become Sabbath keepers, this will be a significant memory to reflect upon and perhaps share. If they grew up as Sabbath keepers, they can reflect on their experience and appreciation or frustration with Sabbath while growing up. Explore how the experience of Sabbath has changed over time and how a renewed understanding of Sabbath might help Sabbath become a more spiritually focused event.

Suggestions for Team Activities: As a class, develop a plan to share the positive aspects of Sabbath with your community. Think about what Sabbath gives us to share with others. What are the best things we appreciate about Sabbath, and what differences could those things make in the lives of others? How could your community be a better place because there are Sabbath keepers there? Then brainstorm ideas for inviting people in your community to share the best of Sabbath with you. Perhaps you could invite community members to share the best of Sabbath with you in some way. Plan an event or process to raise awareness and appreciation of Sabbath among your friends, neighbors, and community members. When a plan has been created, perhaps your class could share it with the wider church and seek funding and/or support to put the plan into effect in your community.
Lesson 8  *February 18–24

Creation Care

SABBATH AFTERNOON


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

Key Thought: How should Christians relate to the environment?

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

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

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

*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 25.
The Lobster Liberation Movement!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Exod. 20:8–11

Neh. 13:16–19

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

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

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

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

• How complete was humanity’s control over the earth to be?

• What does it mean to subdue, and to have dominion over, the earth and all that was in it? What, if anything in the texts, gives humanity the license to abuse and defile that creation?

• Genesis 1:28 says that they are to “replenish the earth.” The literal Hebrew means to “fill the earth.” How might that be understood in regard to the question of how the earth should be treated?

No question, humanity was to rule over the earth, at least under the power and direction of the Lord. The fact that these verses were given in the pre-Fall world, a world without sin and death and suffering, should teach us that whatever dominion over the world means, it doesn’t mean a violent exploitation and plundering of the world, for those things certainly would not have happened in a world before sin. Whatever subduing and dominion entailed, it didn’t entail destroying that world.

Of course, a lot has changed since then: the Fall, the Flood, the curse (Gen. 3:17–19), and the general degeneration caused by sin as a whole. Yet, one would be hard pressed to see in these texts anything that justifies the plunder and ruin of the planet itself. If anything, we can see in these texts humankind’s responsibility, as ruler of the world, to take care of it, because God created it, and it was “very good.”
Further Study: “In the beginning, God was revealed in all the works of creation. It was Christ that spread the heavens, and laid the foundations of the earth. It was His hand that hung the worlds in space, and fashioned the flowers of the field. ‘His strength setteth fast the mountains.’ ‘The sea is His, and He made it.’ Ps. 65:6; 95:5. It was He that filled the earth with beauty, and the air with song. And upon all things in earth, and air, and sky, He wrote the message of the Father’s love.

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

Discussion Questions:

1. As a class, go over your answers to Tuesday’s final questions.

2. How would you respond to the person who says, “Jesus is coming soon, so why should I care about the environment”?

3. How can we as Christians strike the right balance in our understanding of the need to be concerned about the environment while at the same time not getting caught up in some of the extremist movements involved in environmental issues? Why is it so important that we don’t get caught up in them, especially those that are very political?

4. If you have the resources, do some research on just how beneficial a vegetarian diet is to the environment in contrast to a meat-eating one. Discuss your findings with the rest of the class.

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

Key Text: Genesis 2:15

The Student Will:

Know: Describe the biblical foundation for the importance of caring for the environment.

Feel: Sense the value of the environment and the need to care for it as a steward of God’s property.

Do: Live a simple life, respecting our natural resources as a gift from God and minimizing our negative impact on the environment in needless consumerism and waste.

Learning Outline:

I. Know: Caring for Our Home

A. What did God ask our first parents to do for their garden home? How does this work help us to understand our own obligation to care for the environment?

B. How does the Sabbath teach us restraint in our pursuit of business and worldly goods?

II. Feel: The Beauty of the Earth

A. Of what value is the natural world? How has the entrance of sin affected the ways in which we are to care for this world?

B. Why would our understanding of Creation and our Creator influence the way in which we care for what He has created?

III. Do: ’Tis a Gift to Be Simple

A. How should we as Christians live in a world that is given to consumerism and “progress”?

B. How can we simplify our lives in order to be more in tune with God’s natural world?

Summary: Because God created this world to be a home, not only for us but for many other plants and animals, and asked us to be its stewards, we have a responsibility to respect and care for our environment in such a way as to bring God glory.
Learning Cycle

STEP 1—Motivate

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: As people of God who believe in His act of Creation and His promise of re-creation, we are called to be stewards of all creation. By doing this, we worship God and serve others, as well as gaining greater insight into God’s Creator care for all His creatures.

Just for Teachers: Of course, many of the political aspects of environmentalism are complicated by other issues and agendas, but we should not let this distract us from our role as God’s stewards of the natural world in which we live and on which we depend. We need to find ways to reclaim this role as God’s representatives in, and to, His world.

Opening Activity: Ask class members to list environmental issues, problems, or concerns. Note these on a blackboard or large sheet of paper, if possible. Encourage class members to focus on some local issues, as well as large-scale issues. Choose just a few from this list and lead a brief discussion about what a Christian response might be to each of these issues: Should we be concerned? Who or what is being affected by this issue? What are others doing in response? What can we do about it? Allow discussion that might reflect and respect a range of views, without necessarily resolving differing opinions or responses. Try to focus discussion on responses that are based on our belief in God as Creator, us as stewards, and others as people we should seek to serve.

STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: This section invites class members to consider creation and its care.

Bible Commentary

I. In the Beginning . . . (Review Genesis 1, 2:15, John 3:16 with the class.)

We live in a world created and loved by God. He spoke, and the world was created not all at once, but piece by piece, with God paying special attention to each component. Then He made extra-special creatures in His image—human beings—to whom He gave the task of caring for the world He had made. Despite the brokenness of our world and our own fallenness, our world is still loved by God, as is the whole cosmos (see John 3:16). And we are still called to be His stewards.
Consider This: How should belief in God as Creator affect our attitude toward creation care? Do you think this is something we talk or think about enough in our discussions about Creation issues?

What does it mean to you to be a steward of this world, of God’s creation?

II. Creation Praise (Review Psalm 8; 24:1, 2; 100 and Revelation 14:7 with the class.)

One of the recurring themes of the Bible is that of praise to God as Creator of this world. Not only is this a topic of human praise, but the Bible also describes creation itself as giving praise to Him. At times, in the book of Job, for example, the wonders of creation are even considered sufficient answers to questions about the way in which God appears to order the world. Creation is regularly referred to as a powerful testament to the nature of God and His goodness. Thus, in caring for that creation, we contribute to this avenue of worshiping the Creator God.

Consider This: Give one example of something in nature that fills you with wonder at God’s creativity.

Are the wonders of nature sufficient to satisfy your questions about God? Or is that too simplistic? Explain your answers.

III. Sabbath Keeping and Creation Keeping (Review Exodus 20:8–11 and Leviticus 25 with the class.)

In The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day, Sigve K. Tonstad urges the imperatives of “creation-keeping” as something broader than “Sabbath-keeping” and deeper than “environmentalism,” which, even by its labeling, places the natural world as a backdrop to the human action on our planetary stage. Quoting Terence Fretheim in his book, he writes, “The Sabbath is thus a divinely given means for all creatures to be in tune with the created order of things. Even more, Sabbath-keeping is an act of creation-keeping. To keep the Sabbath is to participate in God’s intention for the rhythm of creation.” Then Tonstad himself asks, “Is not the absence of ‘creation-keeping’ precisely the reality that is staring at us, people living in the twenty-first century, in the face?”—(Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2009), p. 122.

Consider This: Considering the broader principles of Sabbath, as set out in Leviticus 25, how is Sabbath keeping connected with care for the land?

How might a deeper understanding of this aspect of Sabbath influence your Sabbath keeping?
IV. Toward a New Creation (Review 2 Peter 3:10–14 and Revelation 21:1–5 with the class.)

The Bible is clear that the world as we know it will not go on forever. At and after Jesus’ return, the world will be cleansed by fire. But that is not the end of the story for our planet. We do not merely float off to an ethereal heaven. Ultimately, this world will be our home for eternity. God will re-create this world and, more than that, He will set up His kingdom here.

Consider This: How important is it to our understanding of God and His plan that we believe in a physical resurrection and life on a re-created earth?

What difference should it make to our care for our world now that we believe this world will be re-created as our final home?

STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: “Nature and revelation alike testify of God’s love.” —Ellen White, Steps to Christ, p. 9. When the natural world is degraded, this testimony of God’s love is diminished, both in itself and in its provision for human life. In caring for creation, we partner with God as stewards, helping to preserve this testimony of His love.

Thought Questions:

1. Compare “nature” and “revelation” in regard to how they testify to God’s love. Which do you think is more important? Why?

2. Why do you think that God’s role as Creator is such an inspiration for praise throughout the Bible?

3. Why do you think that the end-time message of the first angel of Revelation 14 still cites Creation as the reason to worship God? How important is Creation at the “other end” of history?

4. Many believers in evolution care deeply about preserving creation, as do many creationists. How should the way in which we care for the world be affected by how we believe it began?

5. Do you think that Christians have a good or bad record when it comes to caring for creation? Explain your answer.
6 How important is creation care for the credibility of the church’s witness in the world? Do you think that the Seventh-day Adventist Church should do more to advocate for, and protect, the environment?

7 The Seventh-day Adventist Church has long recommended a vegetarian diet, where appropriate and possible. How is the value of this recommendation increased by the fact that vegetarianism is one of the most significant things an individual can adopt to live a more environmentally sustainable life?

8 List some things that you can do to make less of a negative impact on the environment. What do you need to change in your life to do these?

STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: These activities are intended to prompt class members to actively care for God’s creation in practical ways. Adapt the suggested activities to the opportunities, resources, and needs of your class, church, and community.

Suggestions for Individual Activities: Encourage class members to spend time by themselves contemplating the wonders or beauties of Creation. Depending on your circumstances and situation, this could happen in a variety of ways. It may be spending time outdoors in your church yard, taking time to visit a nearby nature reserve, or watching a DVD that explores some aspect of the created world. Read from, or give copies of, the opening page (p. 9) of Ellen G. White’s *Steps to Christ* for contemplation by class members. Prompt class members to spend some of their time in prayer, praising God for His creation, and asking for His guidance of His people in being His stewards.

Suggestions for Team Activities: As a class, refer back to the list of environmental issues made in the opening activity, with particular focus on local issues, and plan an activity or event that you or your wider church could undertake to make a contribution. Examples might include cleaning up rubbish from a community area, planting trees around the church or in some other public area, assisting a local school with a garden project, or something similar by which a visible difference can be made as a result of your project. Contact community leaders or members with whom you might be able to work, and set a day and time to work on this project. Invite other church members to join you and share in a day or morning/afternoon of action to improve the environment in your community. In planning this event, pray that God can use your group to be His stewards and represent Him as you do this.
The Bible and History

Sabbath Afternoon

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 3.
The Past and the Future

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

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

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

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

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


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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Many scientists declare that the world began by accident and that it will end that way, as well. Hence, there’s not much meaning to all that comes in between (how could there be?). Why, deep down, do you know that this view can’t be right?
Daniel 2 and the Providence of God in History

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why was Satan not destroyed then?

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

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

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

That birth, of course, is of Jesus.

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

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

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

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

If you have accepted Christ, how should your future be different, now that your past history won’t be used to condemn you, no matter how much you deserve to be condemned?
Further Study: “The Bible is the most ancient and the most comprehensive history that men possess. It came fresh from the fountain of eternal truth, and throughout the ages a divine hand has preserved its purity. . . . Here only do we find an authentic account of the origin of nations. Here only is given a history of our race unsullied by human pride or prejudice.

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


Discussion Questions:

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

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

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

Key Text: Revelation 1:8

The Student Will:

Know: Examine history through the lens of the great controversy, which reveals God’s will and character, including a deep respect for free choice.

Feel: Value a God who goes to such lengths to demonstrate the foundations of His government through the events of history, the highlight being the Cross.

Do: Believe the Spirit-authored revelations of history and prophecy and choose to interpret earth’s last-day events according to Scripture.

Learning Outline:

I. Know: The Greatest Story

A How does the great controversy inform our understanding of the past, present, and future?

B Why has God taken such pains to allow free choice? What does this demonstrate about His character?

II. Feel: The Cross at the Center of History

A How does the Cross teach us to value a God who allows Himself to be murdered by His created beings?

B Why is the Cross the apex of history?

C What feelings are awakened in us as we dwell on God’s revelations of the future, which are told through Daniel and other prophets?

III. Do: Free Choice

A How do we demonstrate our appreciation of God’s character as it has been revealed throughout history, especially at the Cross?

B How does our acceptance of prophetic revelation affect our relationship with God?

Summary: The Bible not only chronicles God’s interpretation of history but documents God’s ability to foretell the future. The most critical historical event of all is the Cross, which transformed history, bridging the gap that sin created between God and humanity.
Learning Cycle

STEP 1—Motivate

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Human history opens a window to the working of God’s divine purpose and will. If we look closely, we can trace God’s fingerprints in human affairs. However, tracing God in history will never remove our need to see Him with eyes of faith.

Just for Teachers: After sharing the following introduction to this week’s learning cycle, ask your class to list examples of past and present misrepresentations of history. Examine the reasons why some are prone to “bend” history.

Historical revisionism (the process of altering an accepted, usually long-standing view of events in history) is a practice that has been elevated to a fine art by some in the media. But this practice predates the modern media by millennia. The Bible itself gives an exposé of one of the more infamous and blatant accounts of this distortion. In the Gospels, we find recorded a post-Resurrection plot of attempted revisionism spun against Jesus. In the cruelest twist of irony, this plot is devised and sanctioned by no less authority than the members of the very priesthood that Jesus once set up in ages past. These same priests bribed the Roman soldiers, who had guarded the tomb of Jesus, to get them to spread the rumor that His body was stolen. It was the basest lie, designed to cover up the fact, at any cost, that He had risen from the dead.

History is prone to abuse and misuse. Never underestimate humanity’s desire to remake history to its liking. As someone once noted, those who write the history of an event rarely do so in a manner that reflects negatively upon themselves.

Consider This: Ask the class to consider the following questions: If God is the only Being who knows history perfectly, can we humans with all of our biases and prejudices see His moving in history? How can we be sure that we are not spiritualizing history in an attempt to move God’s existence and intervention in human affairs?

STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Throughout the Bible we see God’s writers telling and retelling the story of God’s work in the scope of humanity’s existence. This section seeks to examine why this retelling is important,
the close connection God has to us through Christ, and how Satan works to cloud God’s narrative.

Bible Commentary

I. Telling and Retelling (Read Revelation 1:8 and Deuteronomy 9:1–29 with the class.)

Our study for this week examines God’s working in history as seen through the lens of His Word, the Holy Bible. The memory text for this week captures the sweep of God’s existence in one of the most quoted verses in all of Holy Writ. God is both the beginning and the end, the One who was, is, and is to come—and, lest we forget, “The Almighty.” John is struggling to reduce the supernatural nature of God to something we humans can grasp.

Throughout Scripture we see efforts written to remind human beings of God’s awesome greatness and magnificent goodness. As the Israelites stood on the borders of the Promised Land, Moses began to recount Israel’s history, specifically God’s goodness in spite of their unworthiness. In verse 5, he made this searing statement, “It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you go in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord your God drives them out from before you, and that He may fulfill the word which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob’” (Deut. 9:5, NKJV).

Moses goes on to remind Israel of its many failures and of God’s abundant grace. In the oral culture in which Moses operated, recounting history was more than mere formality. If history was forgotten, trouble was sure to follow. Sadly, Israel often forgot God’s hand in its history and, when it did, apostasy would follow.

Consider This: Can believers retain a deep connection with the One who is “Alpha and Omega” without a careful understanding of His work in history? Why, or why not? Who in the New Testament retells the history of God’s leading in Israel? How does God’s historical record inform our Christian experience and walk?

II. Nature Talk (Read Psalm 104 and Colossians 1:17 with the class.)

Monday’s study, “The Prophets as Historians,” shares the fascinating idea that processes of nature are not a “self-contained, autonomously functioning mechanism” but rather the place where God is acting every moment. We know that God’s creation speaks to us (Ps. 19:1, 2), but there’s so much more that we do not grasp.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Colossian believers about the prominence
of Jesus Christ in God’s creation and in the sustenance of planet Earth. He commented that Christ was “before all things, and in Him all things consist” (Col. 1:17, NKJV).

According to The SDA Bible Commentary, the word consist means literally “‘to stand together,’ ‘to hold together,’ or ‘to cohere.’ The form of the verb in Greek stresses an original organization and a continued maintenance of the organization. The power that holds the far-flung orbs of the universe on their appointed courses with mathematical accuracy, the power that holds the particles of the atom on their predetermined orbits, is the same. By the power of Christ all things cohere. Not only did He bring them into being, He maintains them each moment.”—Vol. 7, p. 192.

Consider This: As Monday’s study makes clear, some argue that God created the physical world and left it on its own. Many scientists don’t believe that God even exists, to say nothing of His act of Creation. How do we as Christians compete with this thinking? Should we even attempt to address those in and out of our ranks who question the biblical historical record of Creation? Discuss.

STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: This practice section is meant to examine God’s historical record and how it is viewed beyond our Adventist Christian circle.

Thought Questions:

1. Tuesday’s lesson study focused on Daniel 2. History details the rise of the kingdoms spoken of in Daniel 2. In the face of this prophecy being fulfilled, why might some still refuse to believe in the God who gave Daniel this vision of the future?

2. Why don’t historical facts about God’s working compel some people to believe? What problems of faith arise when one seeks to corroborate the biblical historical record with that of secular history? Are the two compatible? Explain.

Application Questions:

1. If God led biblical writers to record His acts in the affairs of human
beings, then we can be sure that it is important for us to remember them. How do you record God’s act in your personal history? What record of God’s working in your life will you leave behind?

One of the truly beautiful points in this week’s lesson is found in Thursday’s study, which makes the point that Jesus’ death for our sins not only washed us clean but also created for us a new history, one that will continue for eternity. If someone asked you to sum up your history pre- and post-Christ, what would you say, and why?

Questions for Witnessing:

1. Read Isaiah 43:12. What word did God use to describe Israel? What was the unique calling that He had for the Israelites? Have they fulfilled that calling?

2. If God singled out the Jews to be His witnesses, what was to form the core of their testimony about who God is? In other words, what were they to tell the world about God by way of their lifestyle and the words that they spoke?

3. What aspects of Israel’s history might they share to show God’s hand in their lives? What aspects of your life do you share to show people God’s hand in yours?

**STEP 4—Create**

**Just for Teachers:** Ask your students to consider how those in crisis might misunderstand God’s working. Then apply what we’ve learned this week to the following situation.

A despondent worker sits in his office after speaking with his boss. The meeting didn’t go well. He knew that layoffs had been coming, but he never thought it would happen to him. As he dwells upon his new reality, he grows angry. He remembers all the slights he endured from coworkers who did not work nearly as hard as he did yet continue to be employed. He even contemplates getting even.

On his way out of the office, he stops at your cubicle and tells you the bad news.

“I don’t know why this is happening to me,” he says, hanging his head. “I try to do everything right. I work hard. I go to church. I take care of my family. Why is God doing this to me?”

Based on what you’ve learned this week, what would you say to this coworker about how God works in our lives and in history?
The Promise of Prayer

SABBATH AFTERNOON

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

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

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

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

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

*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 10.
The Power of Prayer

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

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

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

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

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

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

What is your understanding of prayer? How has it impacted your life? Where would you be in your Christian walk without prayer?
Jesus, the Praying Messiah

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

*Luke 3:21, 22*

*Luke 9:28, 29*

*Luke 6:12, 13*

*Heb. 5:7*

*Math. 14:23*

*Luke 22:31, 32*

*Math. 26:34–44*

Jesus, the spotless Son of God, the One who was without sin, without fault, the One who lived in perfect harmony with the will of the Father, obviously had a powerful prayer life. (The above verses don’t even include Jesus’ prayer in John 17.) If Jesus needed to pray in order to deal with the things He faced, how much more do we? Christ’s example of prayer makes it abundantly clear how central prayer needs to be in our walk with the Lord. It’s hard to imagine anyone having any kind of relationship with God without that person praying. If communication is crucial to maintaining relationships with other people, how much more so in a relationship with God? Jesus gives us an example. It’s up to us to make the choice to follow it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

How much of your prayer life is rote and static, as opposed to deep and heartfelt? How can you move away from the former toward the latter?
Because You Do Not Ask

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

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

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

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

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

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

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

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

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

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

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

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

What’s wrong with this picture?

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

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

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

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

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

**What are the things you’re praying fervently for? As you pray, ask yourself, What could I be doing differently that could help bring about the answer that I so desperately want?**
**Further Study:** “Prayer is the breath of the soul. It is the secret of spiritual power. No other means of grace can be substituted, and the health of the soul be preserved. Prayer brings the heart into immediate contact with the Well-spring of life, and strengthens the sinew and muscle of the religious experience.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, pp. 254, 255.

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

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What do you say to someone who asks, “Why pray, if God knows all things in advance”?

2. Who, at times, doesn’t struggle with the question of answered and unanswered prayer? For instance, someone prays that their car not break down on a trip and, when the car doesn’t break down, they attribute the happy circumstances to answered prayers. This is fine. But what do you say to the person who also prayed, in this case that their child wouldn’t die, and yet the child dies? How do we understand these things? Or can we?

3. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in our prayer life?

4. Imagine that someone new arrives in class and he or she asks, “Can you teach me what it means to pray? How should I pray? Why should I pray? And what should I expect when I do pray, and what should I not expect?” How would you answer?

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

Key Text: Psalm 55:17

The Student Will:

Know: Explain the role of prayer in the Christian’s life as modeled by Christ and others in the Bible.

Feel: Open up to God in humble prayer, acknowledging his or her utter need and dependence on Him.

Do: Pray without ceasing.

Learning Outline:

I. Know: Living by Prayer

A. How does Christ’s prayer life inform us in regard to our great need for prayer?

B. For what kinds of things did Christ pray? Were His prayers always answered with a “Yes”? Why, or why not?

C. What part has prayer played in the lives of other Bible heroes and heroines?

II. Feel: With All Our Heart

A. What are the attitudes with which we need to approach God in our prayers?

B. How did Christ model these attitudes?

C. What part does obedience play in our prayer life?

III. Do: Determined Prayer

A. What stories did Jesus tell that illustrate the importance of persistence, determination, and faith in prayer?

B. How has your prayer life improved your faith?

C. Are there some things that God will not give unless we ask Him? Why, or why not?

Summary: Prayer is a way of communing with God and as such should be engaged in as much as possible. In His prayer life, Christ demonstrated attitudes that will greatly aid our prayers, including humility, submission to the will of God, and persistence.
Learning Cycle

**STEP 1—Motivate**

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** Prayer is the most intimate gift that God has given to humanity. It is much more than a means of communication, however. Prayer represents our opportunity to draw close to the Lord in a special way.

**Just for Teachers:** In this opening section, help your students to think about how closely their lives resemble that of Jesus Christ. Prayer is one of God’s ways of binding us close to Himself so that we look, think, and act in our sphere as He does in His. If you can bring a picture or two of pygmy seahorses to class, please do so.

These tiny creatures rarely grow to be more than one inch. Living most of their lives in one place, they are one of the most well-camouflaged species in the ocean, so much so that they were discovered only when scientists examined a piece of host gorgonian coral in a lab. They bear the same color as the coral in which they live and have large, bulbous tubercules on their bodies similar to those found on the coral. Pygmy seahorses are known to inhabit coral reefs in the tropical western Pacific, including Australia (Queensland), Indonesia, Japan, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, and the Philippines.

These exotic creatures so resemble the coral in which they live that it is nearly impossible to detect them with the unaided eye. Their exotic looks are surpassed only by the perfectly choreographed morning dance, performed by pygmy seahorse couples.

**Consider This:** As you explore these beautiful undersea creatures, ask the class to consider our resemblance to our host, Jesus Christ. What insights can the symbiosis between seahorse and coral reveal about the intimate interplay between God and humanity? In the same way that the pygmy seahorses live in and resemble the gorgonian coral, the Bible tells us that we “live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28) in Jesus. What role should prayer play in our spiritual lives in light of the preceding verse?

**STEP 2—Explore**

**Just for Teachers:** Jesus prayed. He believed in the power of prayer. He believed that prayer could move the hand of God and bring peace in times of distress. More than that, however, prayer was to Him as essential as breathing.
Bible Commentary

I. Stay With It *(Read Psalm 55:17 and Luke 18:1.)*

This week’s lesson makes it clear that we should pray more often than just those times when we find ourselves in crisis (but what a blessing it is to talk to God at these moments). A fleeing David found deep solace in communion with God through prayer. Perhaps when one’s life is constantly at risk, one becomes comfortable in the presence of God. Even in these circumstances, David was confident that “[God] shall hear my voice” *(Ps. 55:17, NKJV).*

As Jesus told His disciples of the coming of the kingdom of God *(Luke 17:20–37)*, the picture He painted frightened them. Read these verses again and place yourself there. Notice that the context here is one of fear. The disciples are afraid, uneasy, and unsettled.

Jesus could have spoken words of encouragement. Indeed, He did *(see John 16).* Prominent in Jesus’ arsenal of peace is a call to prayer. He told the disciples the parable of the persistent widow because He wanted them to know that they needed to seek God persistently. He also wanted them to know that His Father, the Judge, was more inclined to grant their petitions than the judge of the parable was. However, deep soul-searching and earnest, persevering prayer were the keys to these special blessings.

**Consider This:** If prayer is one of God’s means of bringing us peace when our hearts are anxious, why do we often give up praying when situations fail to change according to our time frame?

II. Running on Prayer *(Read 1 Thessalonians 5:17, 2:9, and 3:10.)*

We can sense in the Bible that Jesus was in constant communication with His Father. We see this in the fact that many times Jesus is not recorded praying before performing a miracle or some otherworldly display of divine power.

In Luke 8:22–25, Jesus does not pray that the winds and the waves be still; He simply commands them to do so. In Luke 5:18–25, Jesus does not pray for the paralytic to walk. He sees the faith of the paralytic’s friends and the disbelief of the religious leaders who feel He was blaspheming God for claiming to forgive sins, and He acts.

How could Jesus act in such a bold way? The easy answer is: He was God in human flesh. But if Jesus was accessing some power to which we are not privy, why were the disciples able to exercise this power? *(Matthew 10).* The secret to Jesus’ power was knowing the will of His Father. How did He know it? He prayed.
Examine the decision Jesus makes in Mark 1:35–38. How many of us would have known to leave that place of obvious ministry opportunities and head somewhere else? Because Jesus received His daily plans directly from His Father, He could simply act in their behalf when He came upon people in need. Why? He was acting in accordance with God’s will, a will He knew firsthand through constant prayer.

**Consider This:** Jesus was not alone in this penchant for unbroken communication with God. The apostle Paul was known for the same. In 1 Thessalonians 2:9, it is said that he labored “night and day” for the cause of God. What was his secret? Read 1 Thessalonians 3:10.

**STEP 3—Apply**

**Just for Teachers:** Prayer promises us life-change and the opportunity to move the Hand of Omnipotence. Explore these two concepts with your class by responding to the following questions.

**Thought Questions:**

1. Tuesday’s study lets us know that prayer helps us to empty self of self. What is the connection between this emptying of self and the dying to self written about by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:31?

2. Is there a connection between praying and knowing what to pray for? The lesson makes clear that we should not wait until we are experts at prayer before we begin to pray. Why is this? In what ways does God teach us when we choose to spend time with Him in prayer?

3. Many people hesitate to pray because they are afraid that God will not accept them after the wrongs they’ve done. What are God’s criteria for communing with us? Does He have any? Explain.

**Application Questions:**

1. Which prayers in the Bible speak most to you? Do you have a favorite prayer on which you model some of your prayers? What do Bible prayers teach us about praying?

2. If God knows our needs and desires and how best to meet them, why then does He summon us to pray? Is God out to simply meet our needs, or are our wishes an invitation to closer fellowship with Him?
What do you do when God does not answer your prayers? How do you cope?

Questions for Witnessing:

1. Second Chronicles 7:14 tells us that if God’s people humble themselves and pray, seek His face, and turn from their wicked ways, He will hear their petitions and heal their land. What would you say to a nonbeliever who feels excluded from the blessings offered in this verse?

2. Wednesday’s study reminds us that we must ask God to supply our needs (Matt. 7:7, James 4:2). What should we ask from God? What is unacceptable? How do we help a friend who may be asking God for something that may not be in his or her best interest?

STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Share the following true situation with your class. Have the class members respond to this person’s need.

One friend shared the following struggle with another. He was a believer in God, but an occurrence in his life had greatly discouraged him. As a pastor, he knew intimately the power of God. He had seen God work in the lives of countless people. He had seen God heal people in situations that seemed dire.

So, when a dear member of his church grew sick, he did what he had always done: he prayed. He knew that God had the power to heal this member, and, given God’s track record in His life, he presumed it would be done. He fasted for the dying member and waited on God. God didn’t answer right way, but he continued to pray for the church member and her family. He even anointed her. Yet, to his utter dismay, the member passed away.

The seeming arbitrary nature of this failure of God to heal the woman left him speechless. Within a few short months, he had lost His faith in God.

If you were the friend listening to this tale of sorrow, what would you say to help your friend recover his faith in God and the power of prayer?
God as Artist

SABBATH AFTERNOON

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

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

Key Thought: God as artist?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This collection of details is tedious reading to many modern Christians. But it pleased God not only to present these many instructions to the newly freed slaves but also to include them in Scripture. There are almost fifty chapters in the first five books of the Bible that record God’s precise directives regarding a beautiful sanctuary. He provides not only the architectural blueprints but also the exact directions for the furnishings. It is significant that on Mount Sinai God gave not only the Decalogue, His instructions for obedience within the covenant, but also specific directions for how to fashion a lavish structure involving almost every type of artistic skill.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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


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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sculpting involves chiseling, filing, maybe even the breaking off of parts. What areas in your life need to be sculpted a bit more? How much resistance do you put up during a process that isn’t always fun?
**Further Study:** “Let the converting power of God be experienced in the heart of the individual members, and then we shall see the deep moving of the Spirit of God. Mere forgiveness of sin is not the sole result of the death of Jesus. He made the infinite sacrifice not only that sin might be removed, but that human nature might be restored, rebeautified, reconstructed from its ruins, and made fit for the presence of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 6, p. 11, emphasis added.

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

**Discussion Questions:**

1. **What opportunity have you had to develop and use any artistic skills?** As you created something of beauty, how have you been mindful that this act of creation is one way in which you are reflecting the “image of God”? That is, by being creative, how are you in your own way reflecting the creative power of the Lord.

2. **Look around at the created world, at nature, even after it has been so long defiled by sin.** In what ways does it powerfully testify not only to the creative power of God but to His artistic mastery and love of beauty? What things in nature do you find truly beautiful and why?

3. **As we said in the introduction, Christians have always had some ambivalence about the arts.** Why would that be? What are some of the pitfalls in art? At the same time, how can we use our own artistic gifts in a way that glorifies God and advances His kingdom?

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

Key Text: Psalm 27:4

The Student Will:

Know: Describe how the designs of God—as revealed in the sanctuary, the natural world, and other artistic works—help us to understand and appreciate His character.

Feel: Absorb the beauty whereby God illustrates His inner loveliness.

Do: Accept God’s right to mold us, as well as the personal love that the Divine Potter displays as He models us into vessels for His glory.

Learning Outline:

I. Know: The Great Designer

A How is the prodigious amount of attention that God paid to the details of the sanctuary indicative of God’s character? What does this teach us about worship?

B In what ways does the Great Designer work, and what do they teach about the character of their Maker?

II. Feel: Beauty of Holiness

A What aspects of God’s beauty—as revealed in nature, music, the architecture of worship, and His Word—help to re-create our souls into God’s likeness?

B What environments help us to be most receptive to God’s influence?

III. Do: We Are the Pots

A Sometimes it’s easy to forget that we are the pots being molded and not the Potter doing the molding. What is the benefit of allowing God to fulfill His role as Potter?

B What can we do to make it easier for God to mold us?

Summary: God, the great Artist, has revealed His beauty through many artistic expressions, one of the greatest of which is the development of His likeness in our hearts.
### Learning Cycle

**STEP 1—Motivate**

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** This week’s lesson focuses on the infinite creative genius of God. Although sin has marred God’s creation, it has not blotted out the beauty of God’s creative expression, which is found in the spiritual and physical realms.

**Just for Teachers:** As you lead your class in discussion of this week’s lesson, examine the artistry of God versus that of fallen human beings. While we are capable of tremendous artistic achievements, they still pale in comparison to that of God.

Art is often subjective. The paintings of Monet move many people, but a great many more don’t quite understand why they fetch tons of money at auction. Many also have visited cities and wondered at the “art” dotting business districts and town squares.

When human beings express their creative power, beauty truly is in the eye of the beholder. However, when God creates, few can dispute the elegance and beauty of His work, even if they do not ascribe such beauty to Him.

**Consider This:** Ask the class to share things that they would consider to be beautiful pieces of art. After all have had a chance to share, ask the class to create some criteria for what can be considered beautiful and what cannot.

**STEP 2—Explore**

**Just for Teachers:** As you explore this week’s Bible Commentary section, focus on the elegant solutions that underpin God’s creative genius. In other words, God’s creativity is not simply expressed in order to serve His need to see beauty. The beauty that God creates always has a deeper purpose that blesses humanity and honors God.

### Bible Commentary

**I. The Marriage of Beauty and Purpose** *(Review Exodus 25:1–9 and 1 Peter 2:9.)*

Compare, for a moment, the awesome beauty of the portable wilderness sanctuary with the building made up of human beings alluded to in 1 Peter 2:9. As Monday’s study beautifully illustrates, God leaves no detail to chance in the construction of His temple. God designed it all
Himself, selected all the materials, directed the construction, inspected the workmanship, and blessed the finished product.

Could God be similarly particular about the people who bear His name and claim to follow Him? Consider for a moment 1 Peter 2:9, the oft-quoted call to be God’s witnesses to the world. The people of God are chosen, royal, and peculiar, but this group is more than just a bunch of pretty faces. They are to “proclaim the praises of Him who called [them] out of darkness into His marvelous light” (NKJV). The word *praises* literally means “excellencies” or “perfections,” with emphasis on these qualities actively manifested in deeds. Reference here is to God’s glorious character, abounding love, and gracious provision for the salvation of sinners (see Exod. 34:6, 7). God acquired the church as His own special possession in order that its members might reflect His precious traits of character in their own lives, and proclaim His goodness and mercy to all people.

**Consider This:** Compare and contrast the beauty of God’s wilderness sanctuary with all the beauty that should adorn the people of God. For instance, God was very specific about the priestly garments that should adorn those who minister before Him. Is God any less peculiar about dress today? How do we reconcile God’s beauty standards with the “come-as-you-are” ethic found in Scripture?

**II. More Than a Song** *(Review 1 Chronicles 23:5, 2 Chronicles 29:25, and 2 Chronicles 5.)*

Worship is a key theme in the Bible. The entire great controversy is about whom we human beings will choose to worship. Perhaps no two books in the Bible give us a better picture of God’s response to music in worship than 1 and 2 Chronicles.

We learned this week from 2 Samuel 23:1, 2 and 2 Chronicles 29:25 that God directed King David’s choice of music. How awesome is that? If God delivered an entire nation from captivity so that they could worship Him and He dwell among them (Exod. 25:8), why wouldn’t He be careful about every aspect of the worship experience?

At the dedication of the temple built by Solomon, God responded powerfully to the certain happenings in the dedication service. Once the ark of the covenant arrived, “The trumpeters and musicians joined in unison to give praise and thanks to the Lord. Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals, and other instruments, the singers raised their voices in praise to the Lord and sang: ‘He is good; his love endures forever.’ Then the temple of the Lord was filled with the cloud, and the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the temple
of God” (2 Chron. 5:13, 14, NIV). This gives new meaning to the phrase “inhabits praise,” doesn’t it?

**Consider This:** Music in worship continues to be one of the most controversial subjects in the church today. If we have the blueprint of musical expression in Scripture, why is there so much rancor about what is and is not appropriate in worship? What was it about the music played at the temple dedication service that attracted the presence of God?

►**STEP 3—Apply**

**Just for Teachers:** Encourage your students to answer the personal inventory questions below. Allow time for those who may wish to share their responses.

**Thought Questions:**

1. God’s beauty is always purposeful, meaningful, and ennobling. If humans are created in God’s image, why do we struggle with the way we look? How much of this insecurity is due to secular messages about beauty that are uninformed by Scripture?

2. Read Psalm 139. Why is David so overwhelmed by God’s creativity? Given the awesome craftsmanship of God in the act of creating human beings, how can we become better stewards of our bodies?

3. Thursday’s lesson study documented God’s efforts to sculpt and remake human beings into His image. What most prevents God from finishing the job in our lives? What role does the Holy Spirit play in the process?

**Application Questions:**

1. This week’s lesson makes it clear that God’s sculpting can be painful. What aspects of your character would you most like God to beautify? Have you submitted them to Him?

2. How can you help others to see the beauty in themselves? How can you use God’s Word to show them how valuable they are to Him?

**Questions for Witnessing:**

1. Ellen G. White wrote that “Jesus had called His disciples that He might send them forth as His witnesses, to declare to the world what they had
seen and heard of Him. Their office was the most important to which human beings had ever been called, and was second only to that of Christ Himself.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 291. What beauty do you see in God’s willingness to share such a high and noble responsibility with fallen human beings? What does this tell you about that which God sees in us?

What parts of the Bible are most beautiful to you? Select two or three of your favorite passages and share them with a friend who may not be a believer. When you share, focus on how these passages have helped you in life.

**STEP 4—Create**

**Just for Teachers:** Distribute slips of paper to the class, and read John Keats’ quotation aloud. Then ask the class to answer the following question: what on earth or in heaven is more beautiful than truth? Once the class has answered this question, consider its implications for the groups of people mentioned below.

The introduction to this week’s lesson quoted a snippet of “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” John Keats’s famous poem on beauty. The whole quotation reads, “‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’—that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

In John 14:6, Jesus declares, among other things, that He is the Truth. Did you get that? Truth is a Person. Is there anything more beautiful or more important than knowing Jesus? Broadly speaking, how might the lives of the following groups of people be informed, changed, and enhanced by the truth as it is in Jesus?

1. Orphans
2. Politicians
3. Teenagers
4. Military commanders and soldiers
5. The wealthy
6. The sick and dying
7. Spouses
8. Parents
9. Pastors
10. Lawyers
Lesson 12 *March 17–23

Love Stories

SABBATH AFTERNOON

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 24.
The First Romance

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Romantic love and marriage are, indeed, wonderful gifts from God. We must remember, too, that Jesus was never married, and thus He leaves an example that shows that not everyone has to get married. Single people can live full and productive and joyful lives as well as married people can.
Further Study: In both the Old and the New Testament, marriage is utilized to represent the tender and sacred union that exists between Christ and His people. To the mind of Jesus, the gladness of wedding festivities pointed forward to the rejoicing of that day when He shall bring home His bride to the Father’s house, and the redeemed with the Redeemer shall sit down to the marriage supper of the Lamb. He says, “As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you” (Isa. 62:5, NKJV). “You shall no longer be termed Forsaken” (vs. 4, NKJV). “But you will be called, ‘My Delight’ . . . for the Lord delights in you.’ . . . God will rejoice over you” (vss. 4, 5, NASB). “He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing” (Zeph. 3:17, NKJV).

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

Discussion Questions:

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

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

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

►Key Text: Jeremiah 31:3

►The Student Will:

Know: Review examples of romantic love and intimacy that are portrayed in biblical stories as symbols of the relationship God wants with us.

Feel: Sense the closeness and intimacy that God longs for us to have in marriage and in our relationship with Him.

Do: Foster the development of romance and intimacy in appropriate contexts.

►Learning Outline:

I. Know: A Romantic God

A Which Bible stories reveal the value that God places on romantic love and marriage?

B How does God describe the culmination of His efforts to romance and win His people into spiritual intimacy with Him?

II. Feel: Garden of Love

A How does the Song of Solomon describe the physical and emotional pleasures and intimacies of a healthy marital relationship?

B How does this description translate into the intimacy that God desires to experience with us?

C In what ways can single people fulfill their desires and needs for intimacy?

III. Do: Grow Intimacy

A What kinds of activities and attitudes promote the development of emotional and physical intimacy?

B What are the contexts in which healthy intimacy occurs? What abuses of intimacy are possible, and how can we guard against these problems?

►Summary: From the first marriage in the Garden of Eden to the marriage of the Lamb in Revelation and many stories in between, the Scriptures reveal the sacredness and beauty of romance, love, and intimacy in healthy relationships.
Learning Cycle

▶ STEP 1—Motivate

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** God created human beings as individuals who have an immense ability to give and receive love.

**Just for Teachers:** Because the lesson is primarily about the romantic love between husband and wife, it is important to be sensitive to class members who may be single or in a broken or dysfunctional relationship. Focus on love as an integral part of any healthy relationship, rather than on specifics. Below are two options with which to begin.

**Opening Activity 1:** Ask the students to describe, in one word, their strongest and healthiest relationship with another person. Write these adjectives on a board, if possible, where they may be visible for the remainder of the class. Referring to the compiled list on the board, introduce the lesson:

Imagine what it would be like if you could take the strengths of all the relationships represented here today and infuse them all into one relationship between you and somebody special. Even more wonderful would be if you could seal that relationship with some tamper-proof glue to keep out all negative influences. Imagine the supreme state of bliss and contentment that you would enjoy.

**Opening Activity 2:** Ask the class to identify characteristics of positive, healthy relationships in the Bible: Abraham and Sarah, Paul and Timothy, Naomi and Ruth, Jacob and Rachel, and so forth. Then discuss the ways that a healthy relationship enhances life.

▶ STEP 2—Explore

**Just for Teachers:** Present life as a cluster of relationships in which interactions are more than acts of civility and tolerance. Life is about building connections between one another in a spirit of support and intimacy. God created human beings with the ability to love, to some degree, as He loves. When we practice God’s kind of love, we enrich one another and God’s church.
Bible Commentary

I. Created for Love *(Read Genesis 1:27 with your class.)*

There is a thread of dependency, responsibility, and nurture that connects all creation—plant to animal, animal to human, human to human. This shows that isolation is not God’s idea of existence. On the last day of Creation, God went a step beyond codependency when He created man and woman. They were similar, yet so different: two beings who complemented and connected to each other on a level that other creatures were not capable of reaching. The love that the man and the woman had for each other was a replication of God’s love for them. It was a feeling that thrived and grew because both Adam and Eve nurtured and respected their relationship. In other words, man and woman were given to each other to take care of each other, to complement each other.

So integral is love to human relationships that it still existed in the human heart even after sin made its entrance. Love left the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve and, ever since, has kept the human race from completely destroying itself. No matter how much evil there is in this world, there’s often enough goodness to help us to appreciate life.

Dependency on one another, support during periods of pain, empathy and sympathy—all are expressions of love, not just between human beings but between God and humankind. God created humanity in His own image, to be and to do like God. And even when humankind sinned, God did not strip away their godlikeness. What greater expression of love could He have bestowed upon humans who had sinned than to leave love in their hearts?

**Consider This:** Satan is well aware of the importance of love in our lives. He strives to disrupt loving relationships and promote a selfish existence. What are some of the circumstances you’ve had to overcome in order to show love when you really didn’t feel like loving at all? Why is it important to understand love as a principle and not just as a feeling?

II. Called to Be Loving *(Read Genesis 2:23 with your class.)*

Life really is a string of relationships and connections, between you and a spouse, a child, a parent, God, a job, a friend, or a pet. And the stronger and healthier your relationships, the more content your life.

Therefore, love, in some form or another, is at the crux of a fulfilling life. Jesus emphasized this when He said, “Love the Lord your God...”
“With all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is similar: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matt. 22:37–39, NIV). Jesus couldn’t make it any simpler. He says that building and maintaining good relationships should be a priority of every Christian.

**Consider This:** God created Adam first, and, upon seeing that he needed a mate, He then created Eve. Why do you think God, in His omniscience, didn’t create them together? Did creating Eve after Adam help to foster their love? If so, how?

### III. Chosen as Beloved (*Read Isaiah 62:5 with your class.*)

When communicating with John about His plans and His passion for His church, God used the imagery of a perfect marriage to describe His relationship with His people. God knows that because of our natural, innate longing to love and be loved, we would understand this analogy and be able to more clearly appreciate the characteristics of God.

More important, God then takes the imagery a step further. He says that His love is like that of a groom for his bride—not his wife of many “rote” years (one can grow cold), but his bride. This is the first glow of love that is eager to please, glad to forgive, quick to overlook mistakes. God says He has a forever-honeymoon kind of love for us—every day, all the time. Imagine that. It’s not a relationship of tolerance or compromise, or even one of mutual benefits; it’s a relationship of deep intimacy with care and love for each other.

God longs to restore a love relationship with us. He already loves us. The question is, what about our love for Him?

**Consider This:** This week we learned that we are a people created for love, called to be loving and chosen as beloved. How can you better reflect God’s love with your family? Your coworkers? Your church?

- **God calls the church His bride. What are some ways in which we can maintain the same type of enthusiasm and love for our God?**

### **STEP 3—Apply**

**Just for Teachers:** Use this portion of the lesson to encourage the class to discover relationship principles and strategies from the Bible. Divide the class into two groups to study the following passages. Come together to discuss their findings.
Adam’s soliloquy at his first sight of Eve (Gen. 2:18–25) was made when he was a sinless being, when he most reflected his Creator God. In that pure, selfless state he was able to spontaneously reflect on all the positive characteristics of his union with Eve. What lessons can we glean from this verse that will strengthen our personal relationships? How can having a closer relationship with Jesus enrich our personal relationships?

Read Matthew 26:6–13. These verses describe an incident in which Jesus seemingly approves of love being expressed with abandon and a complete lack of common sense. What could be the explanation for Jesus’ reaction? What are the types of situations in which such extravagant gestures of love are appropriate?

**STEP 4—Create**

**Just for Teachers:** This is an opportunity for your class to explore practical ways in which to implement concepts learned from the lesson.

**Activity:** Ask the class to come up with ways to strengthen personal relationships within the congregation. Here are some examples:

**Date Night Program:** On a scheduled evening, the church provides free babysitting in order to allow couples to spend some quality time together.

**Social Club for Singles:** Create a committee under the church’s administration to coordinate group events on a regular basis.

**Father/Son and Mother/Daughter Events:** Find ways to encourage family bonding.
The Promise of His Return

SABBATH AFTERNOON


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

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

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

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

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

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

*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 31.
The Beginning and the End

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

John 14:2, 3

Dan. 2:44

Acts 3:20, 21

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As the years roll by, do you find yourself becoming at ease in the world, getting comfortable with things, and less focused on the reality of the Second Coming? If so, you’re probably not alone. How can we fight this natural, although potentially dangerous, tendency? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.
Further Study: “Another year has almost passed into eternity. A few more days, and we shall enter a new year. My brethren and sisters, employ wisely the remaining hours of the old year. If you have in any wise neglected your duty, repent before God, and return to the path from which you have wandered. Remember how brief the period of life allotted you. You know not how soon your probation may close. Say not presumptuously, ‘To-day or to-morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain.’ God may have different plans for you. Life is but a vapor, ‘that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth.’ You know not how soon your hand may lose its cunning, your step its firmness. There is peril in a moment’s delay. ‘Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.’ ”—Ellen G. White, Review and Herald, December 23, 1902.

Discussion Questions:

1. In class, discuss your answer to Thursday’s final question. Discuss, too, the irony of the fact that the longer we’re here, the easier it is to put off the sense of Christ’s return, and yet the longer we’re here, the closer we come to that return.

2. What are the reasons that Jesus has not returned yet? Are we responsible for that “delay”? How do you justify your answer?

3. In your mind, what is the greatest reason for trust in the promise of the Second Coming?

4. Although there’s much debate in science about human origins, many scientists argue that the long-term prospects for humanity, the earth, the universe even, are not good. They predict that the universe is going to burn out or collapse back in on itself, leaving no life anywhere. As Seventh-day Adventists, we believe that the long-term prospects for the universe are the opposite: they are wonderful. The point is, if science has the end of all things so wrong, why should we trust that its understanding of the beginning of all things is any more accurate? This is especially true when science’s common understanding of the beginning is centered on various forces, including evolution, that deny a Creator or any purposeful design or intention in the creation itself. How much more wrong could it be?

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

▶ **Key Text:** Revelation 22:12

▶ **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Outline the biblical promises and assurances of Jesus’ second coming.

**Feel:** Anticipate the auspiciousness and nearness of the Second Coming.

**Do:** Wait for His coming actively, improving the hour.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Coming Again

A Why do we believe that Jesus is coming again in a physical, literal sense?

B How long have we had the promises of Jesus’ second coming? Why do we believe that it will be soon?

C What are the connections between Christ’s death and His coming again, and why are these connections so important to the Christian living today?

II. Feel: Coming Soon

A Why is it important to live with the consciousness of Christ’s soon coming, when it appears that He has been delayed?

B What kinds of emotions do Christ’s soon coming elicit?

III. Do: Improve the Hour

A What kinds of activities are important to do while we are waiting for Christ’s return?

B What tendencies that can accompany waiting and Christ’s seeming delay should we guard against?

▶ **Summary:** From the Fall onward, earth’s inhabitants have been pointed forward to the time when God would come to deal out justice, cleansing, and a final solution to sin. Christ reiterated these promises, and we are assured that His coming will be soon. Even though it seems that He is delayed, we need to stay alert and ready in preparation for the day and hour of His return.
Learning Cycle

**STEP 1—Motivate**

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** As Seventh-day Adventist Christians, it is crucial that we stay focused on the second coming of Jesus. After having waited for Jesus’ coming for so many years, it is easy to lose our passion and eagerness for the event.

**Just for Teachers:** The focus of this lesson is to revitalize the hope of Christ’s coming—a hope that is shared by Seventh-day Adventists as a corporate body and as individual Christians.

Think about how different time is for beings like us, who exist only for a short time, than how it is for God. Can we really have any concept of what time is like for God? How can the awareness of just how limited our understanding of time is help us as we patiently wait for Christ’s return?

**STEP 2—Explore**

**Just for Teachers:** The goal of this section is to reexamine ourselves as a people anticipating the Second Coming. The primary areas of focus will be our priorities, our attitude, and our responsibilities.

Disappointment stems from our inability to predict or control the future. As Seventh-day Adventists, we are a people who have been waiting for generations for the Second Coming. How do we handle the inevitable disappointments associated with the waiting?

**Bible Commentary**

I. **Because He Said So** *(Read John 14:1–4 with the class.)*

When you’ve been waiting for a long time for something, it is difficult to stay focused. It is easy to be distracted by the immediate and the urgent. Sometimes you can get so tired of waiting that you give up altogether. It’s the same with the Second Coming: we’ve been waiting for so long that we get distracted by the responsibilities of life and find it difficult to maintain our level of hope and excitement about it. We often settle into a state of complacency within our earthly life and responsibilities, things such as jobs, mortgages, education, and so on. These things fill our time
and preoccupy our minds. The only way to keep up the momentum of hope is to stay focused on Jesus. It is important that we refresh, in our hearts and in our lives, His promise to return and take us home. Because He said He will come again, He will. It’s really as simple as that. There is no ambiguity in His words. He said, “I will come again.”

The disciples heard these words, and they believed. What a sham the years with Jesus would have been if the disciples hadn’t believed the promise of His return! How would they have carried on what Jesus started without faith in Jesus’ return? They were able to overcome adversities and even face death because they took seriously Jesus’ promise. Without that promise, and especially with our understanding of death, what hope would we have?

**Consider This:** If there were no Second Coming, would you still strive to be Christlike? Why, or why not?

- As Christians, our belief in the Second Coming provides us with a unique hope in the face of difficult circumstances. When has your faith helped you to persevere through trying times?

**II. Live Like You Believe** *(Read Matthew 28:16–20 with the class.)*

The waiting church needs to do more than wait and believe that Jesus is coming back. Should Jesus come today and ask you what you’ve been doing, it’s not enough to say that you’ve been waiting patiently for Him. It’s not enough to believe in the church’s theology, to be equally yoked in marriage, or to stay clear of worldly temptations. Jesus calls us to be an active church. He calls each of us to be His disciples. We need to do more than ensure our salvation; we also need to be concerned about the salvation of others.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church, by its name and by its fundamental beliefs, is expected to be a church that actively participates in the gospel commission. And as its members, we must take ownership of the gospel commission. The ways in which we live and respond to the promise of the Second Coming is one of the things that marks us as Seventh-day Adventist Christians.

The disciples of the early Christian church are our examples. Fueled by their hope of the Second Coming, they made evangelism and witnessing their priority. In it they invested all of themselves and all of their earthly resources. And, in return, others joined them to do the same. The disciples’ business plan for the early church was simple, their strategy even more so. And the church would have failed had it not been for their
attitude and their actions. Everything that they said and did was centered on the hope of Jesus’ soon return.

**Consider This:** Why do you think Jesus has delayed His coming for so long? Or is that question itself wrongheaded?

- What are some of the lessons we can learn from the Great Disappointment of 1844?
- It is not enough to simply wait in anticipation of Christ’s return. We must prepare ourselves for the end times—always ready, always vigilant. What are some ways in which you can prepare yourself for the Second Coming?
- Imagine that you had never heard the gospel. Then you discover that God loves you. He sent His Son to die for you. And He is coming back to give you eternal life. Now imagine the excitement you would feel upon receiving this news. How can we maintain this same newness and enthusiasm for the Second Coming?

**STEP 3—Apply**

**Just for Teachers:** This section focuses on the ways each individual Christian should live while waiting for the Second Coming. Do this by reviewing Jesus’ life on earth. Then ask the students to come up with ways in which they can exhibit a more positive attitude in life.

**Consider the life of Jesus.** The four Gospels tell His story from four perspectives, but no matter which perspective you study, Jesus’ life spanned only a third of an average lifetime. And His ministry of about three and half years was a far shorter time of service than is most of ours. Yet, His few years of service have influenced more than two thousand years of history.

Think of simple ways in which you can live the kind of life that everyone will want to be a part of. Use the following questions to get started: What is your mission as a Seventh-day Adventist Christian? What are you doing to accomplish that mission? What is the role of hope in your life? What are some of your positive character and personality traits that can be your assets in the accomplishing of your goals?
STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: When discussing the subject of a positive, optimistic life in a group setting, such as a Sabbath School class, we are easily fueled with enthusiasm. But a few weeks later, the motivation fizzles. We get busy with responsibilities and forget what our priorities should be. That’s why it is important for every person to have his or her own personal motivation tool, or a reminder of what his or her life is all about. We need a tangible way to keep us on the right track.

Activity: Read Habakkuk 3:17, 18. Then ask the class members to spend a few minutes in personal reflection. Next, have the class create a practical tool or way that will help them to maintain a positive perspective, even when things are not going well. Ask people to share how their hope in the Second Coming, and all that comes with it, has helped to sustain them in times of trial and grief.