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Precursors for Prophecy



During the First Gulf War (1991), a well-known Protestant writer and speaker was convinced that the book of Revelation predicted this conflict. His argument was based on the fact that some of the helicopters in the war looked like the locusts depicted in Revelation 9. “And he opened the bottomless pit, and smoke arose out of the pit like the smoke of a great furnace. And the sun and the air were darkened because of the smoke of the pit. Then out of the smoke locusts came upon the earth. And to them was given power, as the scorpions of the earth have power” (*Rev. 9:2, 3, NKJV*).

Not exactly the best way to interpret biblical prophecy, is it? Yet, interpretations like this are fairly common. In fact, over the decades multiple books, articles, videos, and now websites, all dedicated to prophecy, have made many predictions, including date setting about final events—usually centered around wars or turmoil in the Middle East.

And, surprise of surprises, in every case those predictions have not come true.

As Seventh-day Adventists, we take a different approach, a Christ-centered approach, in which the focus of prophecy is no longer on a single geographic location in the Middle East and whatever military conflicts unfold there. Instead, we view the prophecies through the lens of the great controversy between Christ and Satan—a worldwide spiritual struggle that will climax when God’s people, Jew and Gentile (*see Rev. 12:17, Rev. 14:12*), face the final crisis, which centers around worshiping the Creator (*see Rev. 14:7*), as opposed to the beast and his image.

A key element in understanding these last-day prophecies is Daniel 2, which contains

not only the historical outline of the prophecies but the interpretive key to unlocking their meanings, as well.

Daniel 2 depicts four world empires—Babylon, Media-Persia, Greece, Rome—followed by God’s establishing His eternal kingdom, “ ‘which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever’ ” (*Dan. 2:44, NKJV*).

The parallel prophecies in Daniel 7 and 8 contain this same basic outline, that of these worldly empires arising and vanishing until God’s kingdom is forever established.

In Daniel 7, the angel interpreter sets it all out for us: “ ‘ Those great beasts, which are four, are four kings which arise out of the earth. But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom forever, even forever and ever’ ” (*Dan. 7:17, 18, NKJV*).

Four worldly empires (Babylon, Media-Persia, Greece, and Rome) move in an unbroken succession through history until, after the second coming of Jesus, God establishes His eternal one.

Of course, we are still here, in the time of the division of Rome, the fourth and final earthly kingdom before Christ returns.

With this historical perspective as the foundation for understanding prophecy, we are going to study this quarter the theme of how to interpret Bible prophecy, specifically some of the allusions, stories, images, and metaphors that unlock prophetic truth and final events.

We go from the Genesis Creation account—important for understanding not only prophecy but for what follows, especially the cross and the atoning death of Jesus—to the tower of Babel, to the sanctuary service, to the Psalms, even to some Old Testament marriages. In all these, and more, we can find images, symbols, and metaphors that, when studied prayerfully and with a humble, submissive spirit (if you go to the Bible with a rebellious heart, you are wasting your time), will help make end-time prophecies, specifically in Revelation, come alive.

One quarter is certainly not enough even to begin to study all the stories and images that help unlock prophetic truth. Who knows—we might need eternity for that! Until then, by God’s grace, we will study what we can.

We can find images, symbols, and metaphors that, when studied prayerfully and with a humble, submissive spirit. . . , will help make end-time prophecies, specifically in Revelation, come alive.

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How to Use This Teachers Edition

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

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

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

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

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

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

Some Principles of Prophecy



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Jer. 29:23, 24; Ps. 139:1–6; Dan. 12:4; Rev. 22:10; 2 Tim. 3:15–17; Heb. 4:12.*

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

As with most everything else in Scripture, Christians disagree about prophecy, which often convinces others that Bible prophecy is a waste of time. After all, if Christians fight over every prophetic jot and tittle, how valid could it be? Unfortunately, many believers also begin to think that some books of the Bible, such as Revelation, are simply incomprehensible. Instead of reading them, they avoid them, sometimes with the encouragement of a well-meaning pastor who thinks that studying prophecy causes more problems than it solves.

It was not always so. For the first eighteen centuries of Christian history, most Christians were very comfortable with biblical prophecy, and there was a surprising level of agreement on what the key messages of the prophecies were. This is how God intended for it to be: “Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (*1 Cor. 1:10, NKJV*).

This week, we will explore some principles that yield a consistent and reliable understanding of prophecy.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 5.

Whoever Reads, Let Him Understand

Walk into any Christian bookstore and scan through the titles on Bible prophecy. You will quickly discover that there is a mind-boggling assortment of views and interpretations, and it can be tempting to believe that no one can truly understand what books such as Revelation are saying. For example, one author says the antichrist is nothing but a metaphor; another says he is still coming in the future; and another that he was a reference to something or someone in the days of the pagan Roman Empire. As one old preacher put it, “Perhaps the Bible is like an old violin; you can play any tune you’d like on it.”

The Bible itself, however, does not suggest any such thing. Instead, it invites us to read, assuming that God is not speaking in vain and that we can know the truth of what He is saying through His Word.

Read Matthew 24:15; Revelation 1:3; Matthew 11:29; and Jeremiah 9:23, 24. What do these texts suggest about God’s intention to make Himself understood?

Many universities offer courses named “The Bible as Literature” or something similar. For the believer, it can be astonishing to sit through countless lectures, only to discover that the professor reads the Bible the same way one might read pagan mythology. The idea is that there may be a kernel of moral “truth” in the stories, but one can make of the stories whatever one wishes. To these teachers, the idea that this book was inspired by God is laughable.

Thus, the instructor reads the Bible but does not hear the voice of God speaking. Others come to conclusions clearly at odds with the message of the Bible. Without being surrendered to the Lord, and without a heart open to learning the truth, those who read the Bible will likely come away not only missing its message but misunderstanding the loving and holy character of the God revealed in its pages. This could be easier to do than many realize, which is why just reading the Bible without the right tools and (most important) the right attitude under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, can be hurtful.

Someone not known to be pious was found reading the Bible. When asked what he was doing, he responded, “Looking for loopholes. Looking for loopholes.” Why is that exactly the *wrong* attitude to have when reading God’s Word?

God Wants to Be Understood

Nothing is quite as frustrating as urgently needing to communicate, perhaps at a clinic or pharmacy, while in a foreign country where you barely speak the language. You know what you need to say, but you do not have an adequate vocabulary to say it.

With God, a different problem emerges. “ ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth,’ ” He says, “ ‘so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts’ ” (*Isa. 55:9, NKJV*). The problem isn’t that God doesn’t have the vocabulary to communicate with us; the problem is that we don’t have the vocabulary or intellectual capacity to understand Him fully.

What do the following passages suggest about God’s understanding in comparison to our own?

Ps. 139:1–6 _____

Ps. 147:5 _____

Rom. 11:33 _____

1 John 3:20 _____

The truth of the matter is that we will never fully understand the mind of God because He is infinite and omniscient. After all, we can barely understand everything about the creation; how would we fully understand its Creator? We can’t.

Though we will never understand everything, we can understand what is necessary for our salvation. (*See 2 Tim. 3:14, 15.*) When the apostles explained the gospel to their audiences, they frequently referred to fulfilled prophecy, from which we can deduce that one of the key purposes of prophecy is to illustrate the plan of salvation. Indeed, in the end, Bible prophecy must ultimately, in one way or another, lead us to Jesus and the promise of salvation that He offers to all humanity.

After all, the Lord, through whom all things were created (*see Col. 1:16, John 1:1–3*), comes down to this earth and then offers Himself as a sacrifice on the cross for the sins of every human being, even the most wretched. That is how much God loves all of us. Having done all that for us, the Lord would obviously want everyone, wretches included, to know what He offers us in Jesus. And prophecy can do just that.

Though, yes, there is much that we don’t know, why is it crucial to focus now on what we do know and to follow what we know—as opposed to obsessing over what we don’t know?

Daniel—Shut Up the Words

Read Daniel 12:4. What was the Lord telling Daniel here? (Contrast this with Rev. 22:10.)

It is not uncommon to hear preachers use Daniel 12:4 to predict the rise of technological and scientific knowledge just prior to the advent of Christ. Many also use it to describe the advances in rapid travel that have taken place over the past century or so. Many of our own books have taken this approach. Though certainly reasonable interpretations, it might mean something else, as well.

Read the passage again. The angel's instruction to Daniel begins with an injunction to "shut up the words, and seal the book." The subject being discussed is the book of Daniel itself. Perhaps, then, could that knowledge which would suddenly increase at the end of time be knowledge of the book of Daniel itself?

This makes the book of Daniel somewhat different from Revelation, in that John was told *not* to seal his book (*Rev. 22:10*). Revelation was meant to be understood from the first, because " 'the time [was] at hand.' " In contrast, Daniel would be understood more clearly at some point in the distant future.

Over the centuries, many fine Christian thinkers attempted to explain the book of Daniel, and some made great headway. Understanding of Daniel increased rapidly, however, after the end of the 1,260-year prophecy, which ended in 1798, when multiple expositors around the globe started concluding that something spectacular was going to happen around 1843. The most notable of these, however, was William Miller, whose preaching launched the Great Advent Movement of the nineteenth century and began a chain of events that would give birth to the "remnant" church and a clear understanding of the three angels' messages.

The birth of our global movement, in other words, is a fulfillment of Daniel's prediction that "knowledge shall increase" at "the time of the end."

In contrast, and without judging people's salvation, think about the "darkness" that so much of Christendom exists in. Something as basic as the seventh-day Sabbath, established in Eden, is ignored, even dismissed, in favor of Sunday, a day rooted in Roman paganism. Or think of the utter ignorance about death, with the vast majority of Christians believing the pagan idea that the dead immediately go soaring off to another existence, which for some means an eternally burning hell.

In contrast, we should be thankful—and humbled—by the knowledge of the truth.

Studying the Word

Seventh-day Adventists owe much to William Miller for their understanding of Bible prophecy. While his understanding of key passages (such as Daniel 8:14) was not perfect, Miller's methodology was, nonetheless, important, because it paved the way for the birth of our last-day remnant movement.

Read Matthew 5:18, 2 Timothy 3:15–17, and Luke 24:27. What do these verses teach us about the way we ought to approach Bible prophecy?

In some ways, studying the Bible is not unlike assembling a large jigsaw puzzle. If you gather just two or three pieces together, it is nearly impossible to discern the entire picture. Perhaps in those two or three pieces, you can see a horse, and so you conclude that you are assembling a picture of horses. But a few more pieces reveal a chicken and a cow, and then once you have assembled hundreds of pieces, you can finally see that you have been working on a picture of a landscape, which includes a city, a farm, and a range of mountains in the distance.

One of the central ways in which some Christians err in their study of the Bible is that they treat the Scriptures as a loose collection of sayings or proverbs that they can use to address a specific situation. Some will turn to the simple study guide at the front of a Gideons Bible, where they can find helpful verses on a number of topics, and assume that it represents the sum total of the Bible's teachings on a given subject.

Unfortunately, they take the same approach to prophecy, lifting an individual text out of its context and comparing it to current events instead of the rest of the Bible. This, in part, has led to the constant stream of modern books on prophecy that have to be updated every few years because they were wrong on what they said was going to happen—and when.

That's why it's so important not merely to select some specific texts on any given topic but instead to study carefully everything the Bible says about that topic and to take into consideration the context in which it says it, as well. It is very easy to pull a passage out of context and make it say whatever we want.

What has been your experience with those who use only certain selected texts to try to make their point about, say, the state of the dead? Or even the Sabbath? What is the best way to respond?

Figurative or Literal?

One of the key issues students of prophecy need to deal with is how to determine whether the language of the Bible is to be taken literally or figuratively. How does one determine if the author was using symbolic language, and how does one know what the symbol represents? The crucial way to do this is to see how that figure, the symbol, has been used all through the Bible, as opposed to looking at how a symbol is used in contemporary times. For example, some see the bear symbol in Daniel 7 as pointing to Russia, because that image is often used today as a symbol of Russia. This is not a sound or safe way to interpret prophetic symbolism.

Look up the following texts, allowing the Bible to be its own expositor (to define its own terms). What is the prophetic symbol common to the texts in each case, and what does the Bible say it represents?

Dan. 7:7, Dan. 8:3, Dan. 7:24 _____

Rev. 1:16, Eph. 6:17, Heb. 4:12 _____

Rev. 12:1; Rev. 21:2; Eph. 5:31, 32; Jer. 6:2 _____

By following the simple rule that the Bible must be allowed to define its own terms, most of the mystery behind prophetic symbolism simply disappears. For example, we see that a horn can symbolize a political power or a nation. A sword can symbolize the Word of God. And, yes, a woman can symbolize the church. Here we can clearly see the Bible explaining itself.

What remains to be answered, however, is why God would speak in symbols instead of being forthright? Why, for example, would Peter cryptically refer to the city of Rome as Babylon, in 1 Peter 5:13?

There may be many reasons why God has chosen to communicate symbolically in prophecy. In the case of the New Testament church, for example, if the book of Revelation had plainly named Rome as the perpetrator of so much evil, the already bad persecution of the church might have been even worse. Whatever the reasons, we can trust that God wants us to understand what the symbols mean.

Even if some symbols and prophecies remain mysteries, how can focusing on what we do understand strengthen our faith?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “An American Reformer,” pp. 319–324, in *The Great Controversy*.

“Ministers and people declared that the prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation were incomprehensible mysteries. But Christ directed His disciples to the words of the prophet Daniel concerning events to take place in their time, and said: ‘Whoso readeth, let him *understand*.’ Matthew 24:15. And the assertion that the Revelation is a mystery, not to be understood, is contradicted by the very title of the book: ‘The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto Him, to show unto His servants things which must shortly come to pass. . . . *Blessed* is he that *readeth*, and they that *hear* the words of this prophecy, and *keep* those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.’ Revelation 1:1–3. . . .

“In view of the testimony of Inspiration, how dare men teach that the Revelation is a mystery beyond the reach of human understanding? It is a mystery revealed, a book opened. The study of the Revelation directs the mind to the prophecies of Daniel, and both present most important instruction, given of God to men, concerning events to take place at the close of this world's history.

“To John were opened scenes of deep and thrilling interest in the experience of the church. He saw the position, dangers, conflicts, and final deliverance of the people of God. He records the closing messages which are to ripen the harvest of the earth, either as sheaves for the heavenly garner or as fagots for the fires of destruction. Subjects of vast importance were revealed to him, especially for the last church, that those who should turn from error to truth might be instructed concerning the perils and conflicts before them. None need be in darkness in regard to what is coming upon the earth.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 341, 342.

Discussion Questions:

① How can the study of prophecy greatly increase your faith? What prophecies—some written thousands of years ago about events that would happen hundreds, if not thousands of years later—have helped increase your trust in the Bible and, more important, in the God who inspired it? How, for example, does Daniel 2 give us powerful, and logical, reasons to trust not only that God exists but that He knows the future?

② What are the best ways to protect ourselves from the many wild and speculative attempts to interpret prophecies, sometimes even from those within our own church? Why must we be careful to “test all things; hold fast what is good” (1 Thess. 5:21, NKJV)?

“I Want That Book!”

By LAURIE DENSKI-SNYMAN

Tim was a new missionary, and he was scared. He was selling Christian books on a predominantly non-Christian island in Southeast Asia, and he didn't want any trouble.

As he made his way down a street, Tim prayed and nervously stepped into the store of a seamstress. Ahead of him, he saw four people waiting in line. The minutes seemed to drag by.

The wait was taking longer than Tim had expected. He was tempted to leave, but something stopped him. He noticed that the seamstress kept glancing over in his direction with an odd expression on her face. From time to time, she even moved over to one side of the counter, close to the wall, so she could peer around the other customers and get a better look at his face.

Finally, the last customer left the store, and it was Tim's turn in line. But before he could say a word, the seamstress pointed to the books sticking out of his bag.

“I want that book!” she exclaimed. “I want that book, and I want that book!”

“What?” Tim said. “How do you even know that I have books for sale?”

“I had a dream,” the seamstress said. “In the dream, I saw a young man who looked just like you. He had books with him that I needed to read, and one of those books was called *The Great Controversy*. So, I knew that you were going to come. I knew that I had to purchase *The Great Controversy*. Do you have that book?”

Tim's fears about having trouble as a missionary instantly disappeared. He grew excited about selling books. He realized the truth of Deuteronomy 31:8, which says, “And the Lord, He is the One who goes before you. He will be with you, He will not leave you nor forsake you; do not fear nor be dismayed” (NKJV). He knew that God was going ahead of him, paving the way for him to share the good news about Jesus and His soon coming.

Pray for Tim and other missionaries seeking to reach unreached people groups in the Southern Asia-Pacific Division, where this story took place. Thank you for your Thirteenth Sabbath Offering this quarter that will help spread the gospel in the Southern Asia-Pacific Division.

This Inside Story illustrates the following objectives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's “I Will Go” strategic plan: Mission Objective No. 1, “To revive the concept of worldwide mission and sacrifice for mission as a way of life involving not only pastors but every church member, young and old, in the joy of witnessing for Christ and making disciples,” and Mission Objective No. 2, “To strengthen and diversify Adventist outreach in large cities, across the 10/40 Window, among unreached and under-reached people groups, and to non-Christian religions.” For more information, go to the website: IWillGo.org.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Jeremiah 9:24*

Study Focus: *2 Tim. 3:15–17.*

At the beginning of his Bible classes each semester, a seminary professor engaged his students with a simple, yet challenging, question: “What is the most important tool you have to help you understand the Bible?” The students offered what they considered were the best answers: “Bible dictionaries,” “prayer,” “the Holy Spirit,” “biblical languages” (Hebrew, Greek), “Bible software,” and so on. After listening to all their answers, the professor informed them that, while all these things were, indeed, undoubtedly helpful, there was one tool that they did not mention, which was, besides prayer and the Holy Spirit, their most important resource of all: time.

Undeniably, one of the most important tools needed when approaching the Scriptures is the one tool of which, all too often it would seem, we have the least: time. Once we are ready and willing to invest time in the enterprise of studying the Bible, we are then led to consider the following question: How do we read the Bible? That is, what are the principles that should guide us on the path of searching and understanding this particular Book?

Lesson Themes: This week, we will examine ten principles for reading the biblical text of prophecy. The first five principles will focus on the text itself: reading it candidly (as a new text), reading it carefully (as an important text), reading it esthetically (as a beautiful text), reading it contextually (within its biblical setting), and reading it intertextually (in light of other biblical passages).

The next five principles will focus on our response to the text to ensure that we are listening to the Word of God: the principle of reading the text spiritually (as an inspired text), reading it intelligently (as a difficult text), reading it corporately (as a text for the community), reading it existentially (as a text that engages our lives), and reading it ethically (for a responsible interpretation).

Part II: Commentary

Attention to the Text

The biblical text is the basis of any discussion on Bible prophecy. The reader’s first intention, therefore, should be to read the biblical text of prophecy with a searching mind.

1. *Reading Candidly.* Read the text as if it were a new text that you do

not understand. It is interesting that Daniel himself began to understand his prophecy, in Daniel 9:2, only after he recognized that he did not understand it: “it was beyond understanding” (*Dan. 8:27, NIV*). Humans, the Bible tells us, are naturally in “darkness” (*John 1:5, NKJV*). Indeed, the most common temptation when we approach Bible prophecy is to believe that we understand its message, even before having read the text. Thus, we impose our thought onto the text (*eisegesis*), instead of permitting the text to speak for itself (*exegesis*). This is the case when we read Bible prophecy from the point of view of our own reasoning or in the light of events that happen in our time.

2. *Reading Carefully.* Bible prophecy contains important information about the fate of the world and vital truths of salvation (*2 Tim. 3:15–17*). The Bible prophets carefully chose their words and forms of expression to convey their inspired vision. Therefore, read the text slowly, paying close attention to its words. Read it several times to ensure that nothing is missed in the reading of the text. Thus, “we shall find living springs bubbling up where the careless reader discerns only a desert.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 191. It is preferable to recognize that you do not understand something than to content yourself with a shallow or false understanding of a text.
3. *Reading Esthetically.* The literary forms of the text (its structure, its parallelisms) will aid in deciphering the message of prophecy. Daniel’s prophecy of the image in Daniel 2 is clarified by its parallel with Daniel’s prophecy of the four beasts in Daniel 7. There are also parallels between prophecies in the book of Daniel and in the book of Revelation. See the following chart in which the apocalyptic vision in Revelation 13, 14 parallels, in many respects, the prophecy of Daniel 7, which also parallels the prophecy of Daniel 8, as follows:

Daniel 7	Revelation 13, 14
Beasts from the sea (<i>Dan. 7:1–3</i>)	Beast from the sea (<i>Rev. 13:1a</i>)
Lion (<i>Dan. 7:4</i>)	Beast with 10 horns (<i>Rev. 13:1b</i>)
Bear (<i>Dan. 7:5</i>)	Leopard (<i>Rev. 13:2a</i>)
Leopard (<i>Dan. 7:6</i>)	Bear (<i>Rev. 13:2b</i>)
Beast with 10 horns (<i>Dan. 7:7</i>)	Lion (<i>Rev. 13:2c</i>)
Usurping power—the little horn (<i>Dan. 7:8</i>)	Usurping power—the beast from the sea (<i>Rev. 13:3–18</i>)
Day of Atonement (<i>Dan. 7:9–12/Dan. 8:14</i>)	Three Angels’ Messages (<i>Rev. 14:1–13</i>)
Son of Man (<i>Dan. 7:13, 14</i>)	Son of Man (<i>Rev. 14:14–16</i>)

The present parallels show that the heavenly Day of Atonement/Day of Judgment, in Daniel 7 and 8, corresponds to, and is contemporaneous with, the earthly proclamation of the three angels' messages, in Revelation 14.

4. *Reading Contextually.* In its historical context, the event of the military encounter between the northern Babylonian army and the southern Egyptian army in Carchemish (*compare Dan. 1:1 with Jer. 46:2*) will be used by the prophet Daniel as a template for his prophecy of the eschatological wars between the king of the north and the king of the south, in chapter 11. In its literary context, the fact that Daniel 7 is written in Aramaic, the lingua franca of that time, while Daniel 8 is written in Hebrew, the language of Israel, indicates that the prophecy of Daniel 7 focuses on the kingdoms of the earth and has universal impact, while the prophecy of Daniel 8 focuses on God's people and has a spiritual impact.
5. *Reading Intertextually.* Given that the prophetic text is its own interpreter, it is necessary to search for the meaning of the text primarily from within the text itself. This approach is also rooted in the fundamental principle that was laid down by Ellen G. White in echo of the Reformer Martin Luther: "Scripture interprets Scripture, one passage being the key to other passages."—*Evangelism*, p. 581. For instance, the association of the ram and the goat, in Daniel 8, in addition to its many linguistic links with Leviticus 16, suggests that the prophecy of Daniel 8 refers to the Day of Atonement.

Focusing on One's Personal Response

The quality of one's study of prophecy depends also upon the mind of the person who approaches the text.

1. *Reading Spiritually.* The Holy Scriptures are inspired by God. It is, therefore, logical that, in order to fully and truly apprehend a particular text, a spiritual factor must be involved. For such things must be "spiritually discerned" (*1 Cor. 2:14, NKJV*). Practically, this idea means that faith and prayer constitute important factors in the success of the exegetical operation. Prayer will bring God's assistance to one's study. Having faith that God inspired the biblical text of prophecy, and believing that prophecy will be fulfilled, will impart to the mind the capacity to see its fulfillment where others will see nothing.
2. *Reading Intelligently.* The task of understanding the inspired text requires diligence and painstaking effort on our part. Ecclesiastes has called this effort "a heavy burden God has laid on mankind!" (*Eccles. 1:13, NIV*). The verb "understand" is a keyword in the book of Daniel (appearing 15 times). For "'let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me'" (*Jer. 9:24, NKJV*). In other words, knowing God is the ultimate goal of wisdom.

3. *Reading Corporately.* Just as the biblical text of prophecy has come to us through the testimony of the community of God's people, such prophecy is likewise destined for the community of God's people. Although the study of the Word of God does not exclude the creative contribution of the individual, it involves other brothers and sisters in faith, as well. When God speaks, He generally addresses His people as a worship community: " 'Hear, O Israel' " (*Deut. 6:4*). Daniel predicts that, at the end of time, " 'many' " (that is, God's people, the " 'wise' ") " 'shall understand' " (*Dan. 12:10, NKJV*).
4. *Reading Existentially.* Unless the Scriptures change us and affect our lives, we will not understand them. To illustrate this point, we would do well to consider a story about a European tourist in Africa who mocked his African servant because he was reading the Bible: "Why do you read the Bible?" The missionary then added, "This is just a bunch of fairy tales." The African servant responded: "If I had not read the Bible, I would have already eaten you." This lesson contains an important principle about the powerful effect of the Word of God, which is compared to "any two-edged sword" (*Heb. 4:12, NKJV*). Thus, the prophetic Word of God is such that it may not only cut sharply through the sins of our enemies and oppressors, but it also may speak or testify " 'against' " us (*Jer. 28:8, NKJV*).
5. *Reading Ethically.* Sad to say, Bible prophecies often have been used to support human iniquity. Racist theories, which promoted the idea of the superiority of the white race over the black race in order to justify apartheid and slavery, were founded on a distorted understanding of the prophecy of Genesis 9:25. Antisemitism, which led to pogroms and the Crusades and played a significant role in the murder of six million Jews, was based on and nurtured by a misinterpretation of biblical prophecies (*Dan. 9:24*). Throughout history, the abuses and crimes perpetrated against women within the private circles of families were often justified by the reference to the prophecy of Genesis 3:16. As we study God's prophetic Word this quarter, let us permit inspired Scripture to take complete control of our minds and of our hearts, for the purpose of imparting "instruction in righteousness" (*2 Tim. 3:16*).

Part III: Life Application

Apply the lessons of this week to the questions below, focusing on 2 Timothy 3:15–17.

Attention to the Text:

1. What are the keywords of 2 Timothy 3:15–17?
2. Discuss and reflect on the importance of the following words: “Scriptures,” “wise,” “given,” “complete.”
3. Why does the study of Scripture inspire creative thinking?
4. What is the structure of this text?
5. What is the context of this passage?
6. Find two other biblical texts with the same theme (for example, Psalm 119:97–104 and John 5:39). Identify the parallels between these texts and compare and contrast their themes. How are they the same or different?

Focusing on Your Personal Response:

1. Which words in 2 Timothy 3:15–17 refer to the importance, and necessity, of approaching the study of Scripture with an attitude of reverence? For example, reflect upon, and discuss, the following words: “Holy Scripture” (implies the need for a spiritual approach), “given” (gift from God), “inspiration” (work from the Holy Spirit).
2. Which words in the text refer to the need to read intelligently? For example, reflect upon and discuss the following words: “know” (cognitive function; information to learn), “wise” (exercise of thinking), “instruction” (ability to receive directions and learn new lessons).
3. Which words refer to the need for corporate reading? For example, reflect upon and discuss the following words: “from childhood” (involvement of parents), “correction” (involvement of parents and teachers), “good work” (something done on behalf of people in need).
4. Which words refer to the need for the application of the text in one’s personal life? For example, reflect upon and discuss the following words: “make you wise” (hones one’s sense of discernment and personal judgment). Which words refer to the need for ethical sensitivity? For example, reflect upon and discuss the following words: “in righteousness” (develops the capacity to discern what is right).

The Genesis Foundation



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 40:7, 8; Gen. 22:1–13; John 3:16; Rev. 5:5–10; 1 Cor. 15:15–19; Rev. 12:1–9.*

Memory Text: “The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’ ” (*John 1:29, NKJV*).

One of the key problems with modern interpretations of Bible prophecy, such as in Revelation, is that they fail to recognize the ancient roots of Revelation. The author assumes a knowledge of the Old Testament and uses concepts that would have been well-known to his audience. While searching the entire Bible for passages that resemble the text you are studying in Revelation is useful, there are also core texts that set the stage for understanding the book better than other texts do. This is particularly true of Genesis, which lays out the path by which our world descended into sinful chaos. Nearly every key concept mentioned in Revelation appears—in some form—in the opening chapters of the Bible.

This week, we are going to study a handful of big concepts at the core of Revelation. There are many, and so we will choose a few to illustrate the all-important point that understanding the ancient foundations behind Revelation enables the student to see countless nuances in the text, each of which can yield important lessons about the nature of humanity, of God, and of the conflict being waged in our universe and, thus, in our lives, as well.

** Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 12.*

The Principle of “First Mention”

Most academic programs begin with a general survey course (often given the number “101”), a course that covers broad and basic principles that will form the basis for further study as you dig deeper into the subject. Likewise, when you read through the entire Bible, you quickly discover that God also has a general survey course in the book of Genesis, where He introduces ideas that will be examined in more detail throughout the rest of the Bible.

Generally speaking, the first time a concept or symbol is mentioned in the Bible—particularly in the opening chapters of Genesis—you will discover that it establishes a general understanding of that concept, which will help you understand how it’s being used later on.

Some Bible students refer to this as the “law of first mention,” although it would more properly be labeled a principle (or a pattern) rather than a law, because it is certainly not ironclad, and there are many exceptions to the rule. The pattern that seems to emerge, both in general Bible study and in Bible prophecy, is that God slowly feeds His children information over time, beginning with a basic concept and then enlarging on it many times over the years, or even the centuries.

Read Isaiah 40:7, 8; Malachi 3:6; and Hebrews 13:8. What principle can you derive from these texts that would help you properly anchor your study of prophecy?

Much of the modern world speaks about “truthiness” instead of “truth,” because it is assumed that “truth” is a malleable thing that can change over time. Or, in some cases, the very concept of “truth” itself is deemed suspect.

When God establishes truth, however, He does not change His mind. Once He begins teaching His people truth, we can count on the fact that repetitions of the same biblical principle or theme do not change its meaning but, in contrast, shed further light on that meaning. It makes great sense in studying prophecy, therefore, to develop a good understanding of the book of Genesis, where you find many key concepts explained for the first time, and then take that foundational understanding with you as you explore the rest of the Bible.

Why is it so important that we not allow anyone or anything, no matter how smooth or logical, to weaken our faith in the Bible and the infallible truths it teaches? What are subtle ways that this weakening can happen?

Understanding God's Love

Part of inheriting a sinful nature means that our perception of the universe has been tainted by our own propensities toward selfishness and pride. We see the world from our own limited perspective rather than from God's omniscient one (obviously). Perhaps no concept has been more skewed by the sinful human race than that of "love." Popular culture tends to promote an understanding of love that centers on self-fulfillment rather than on others. This self-centered approach to the subject makes it hard for us to understand how God views the subject.

Understanding the nature of love is an important key to understanding Bible prophecy. One of the key themes in the great controversy is the existence of a substantial misunderstanding about God's character. Ellen G. White, after all, ends her summary of *The Great Controversy* by writing: "The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation. From Him who created all, flow life and light and gladness, throughout the realms of illimitable space. From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love."—Page 678.

Read Genesis 22:1–13. The first mention of "love" in the Bible is found in Genesis 22:2. What does this story teach us about the nature of God's love?

Occasionally, in addition to finding the first occurrence of a concept in the Bible, it can be useful to find the first mention of that same concept in individual books of the Bible—especially in the Gospels. In Matthew 3:17, Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22, and John 3:16, we find the first mention of "love" in each of the Gospels.

For example, the first mention of "love" in John (*John 3:16*) is particularly enlightening: it appears to allude to the story of Isaac on the altar. Abraham's faith in God was such that he trusted Him, choosing to believe that God could raise his son if he went through with the sacrifice (*Heb. 11:19*). It foreshadowed God's love for the human race. He loved us to the point where He "gave His only begotten Son" (*see Gen. 22:2, 12, 16*)—and, then, raised Him from the dead. Thus, we are given a revelation of the kind of love, the self-sacrificing love, that God has for us.

How do we even begin to manifest to others the kind of self-sacrificing love that God has for us? Why, for most of us, is this kind of love not necessarily basic to us?

Isaac's Question: Where Is the Lamb?

The Bible's first mention of a *seh* (Hebrew: a lamb) occurs in the same story as the first mention of love: Genesis 22. The lamb, of course, is one of the most persistent symbols found in the book of Revelation, in which Jesus is called "the Lamb" more than 20 times. In one of the most powerful scenes of Revelation—John's visit to the throne room of God in chapters four and five—the Lamb plays the central role.

Read Genesis 22:7, 8; Exodus 12:3–13; and Revelation 5:5–10. How does the story of Isaac's near-sacrifice help us understand how lambs are used symbolically? How does this story tie into what John sees in Revelation 5?

The first mention of a *seh* (lamb) in the Bible comes in the form of Isaac's question: "Where is the lamb?" (*Gen. 22:7*). Interestingly enough, the rest of the Bible answers that question in great detail. The other 38 books of the Old Testament lead the reader along a path where Isaac's question is progressively answered with more and more details, from the Passover rituals to David's early occupation and onward. The entire story is punctuated with countless Messianic prophecies that anticipate the answer to Isaac's question. Then in the New Testament, the question is answered when Jesus appears in flesh and blood, ministers among His people, and finally sacrifices His life at the cross.

Meanwhile, look at the first mention of a Lamb in John's Gospel, in John 1:29–34. It would almost seem as if John the Baptist is personally answering Isaac's question, and the setting couldn't be more apropos. Sinners are repenting and going under the water in baptism, symbolizing the death of the sinner and the beginning of a new life. In this context, Jesus, the Lamb of God, suddenly appears and, according to Matthew's account, the heavens open to announce Him: " 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased' " (*Matt. 3:17, NKJV*). Notice how a voice, the Angel of the LORD, also announces from heaven the solution to Abraham and Isaac's problem (*Gen. 22:11–14*).

When you weave all the threads together, it is clear that Jesus, the Lamb of God, is our Substitute. That sheds much light on our understanding of the slain Lamb in John's vision.

Why is knowing that Jesus is our Substitute so foundational to our salvation? What hope would you have without Him, as that Substitute, especially in the judgment?

Dealing With Death

Perhaps the cruelest aspect of living in a world detached from its Creator is the way that death lurks in the background of every life, ready to strike at any moment. It is the “wages of sin,” the penalty that we pay for having been disconnected from the only Source of life in the universe: the Creator. As such, it plays a major role in Bible prophecy, both its reality and, even more important, its solution, which is found only in Jesus and His death and resurrection.

Both the first mention of death in the Bible and its first occurrence shed much light on this major theme in prophecy, helping us to understand the gravity of the sin problem and giving us important tools to understand God’s solution to the problem.

Read Genesis 2:15–17, Genesis 4:8–15, 1 Corinthians 15:15–19, and Revelation 1:18. What do these passages—which include the first mention and occurrence of death—tell us about why people die, how God views death, and what His solution is for our problem?

We often say that “death is just part of life.” That is a lie. Death is the opposite of life, the undoing of life; it is an alien intruder that was never meant to be part of our experience here. Even though we have become accustomed to death, our hearts still protest strongly when we encounter it, as if the human race still collectively realizes that there is something fundamentally wrong with it. As painful as death is, there are some instances of death that seem even more tragic than others, such as the death of a child. For the most part, we expect that parents will precede their children in death, and we have come to accept that as the normal order of things.

The first death recorded in Scripture, however, goes against the expected norm. Before Adam and Eve went through death themselves, they experienced the tragedy of death when their righteous son was murdered by his unrighteous brother. It was a particularly unjust death.

Think about Jesus, the righteous murdered by the unrighteous, as was Abel. What death could have been more unjust than Christ’s? What other parallels might one find between the death of Abel and of Christ on the cross? How might the nature of Abel’s death help us to understand why Jesus has “the keys of Hades [the grave] and death” and what God is offering us in Him?

Without the problem of death being solved, why are our lives ultimately useless, meaningless, and futile? What does this fact teach us about how thankful we should be for what Jesus has done for us?

The Serpent

The issue of worship is a key subject in the book of Revelation. The perpetrator and enabler of false systems of worship is identified as the “dragon” (*Rev. 13:2–4*), and the serpentine description of this fallen cherub is no accident. It clearly points us back to the Garden of Eden, where a serpent entered Paradise and persuaded Adam and Eve to follow him into rebellion against the Creator.

Compare Genesis 3:1–5 with Revelation 12:1–9. What are some of the common themes in each account? How do the details found in the introduction of the serpent in Genesis help us to understand some of the issues that had previously led to the war in heaven mentioned in Revelation?

There are two accounts in the Scriptures in which Satan leads the whole world astray. In Genesis, at a moment when there were only two people in existence; and then in the account given in Revelation 12 and 13, in which Satan is identified as the one who “deceives the whole world” (*Rev. 12:9*) and as the one who enables the sea beast power so that “all the world” marvels and follows it (*Rev. 13:2, 3*). One of the themes found in Bible prophecy is the unchanging nature of the great controversy. God’s character and Word do not change, and neither do the ambitions of the devil.

Fortunately, because the nature of the great controversy does not change, and because we have clear reference points in the prophetic Scriptures, Christians are able to sift through trends and begin to recognize where spiritual pitfalls might lie. God will always be who He is, and the same is true of the devil. Satan may wear a thousand disguises, but millennia of fallen human history, coupled with the prophetic scenario painted in Revelation, demonstrate that he never strays from the game plan he used in Eden. God has promised us wisdom and discernment (*James 1:5*), and armed with the certainty of the Scriptures, we need not fall for the devil’s lies. Unfortunately, many have fallen for them, and many more—the majority—will, as well.

Consider how culture changes over time. Societal norms shift; things that were once acceptable become unacceptable and vice versa. Given that the underlying issues and actors in the great controversy do not change, what things should a Christian consider in examining the shifting cultural landscape? For example, the original lies that the devil told, such as you shall not die and you shall be as gods: where can you find them being told in your culture today?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Revelation,” pp. 578–581, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

Many world religions simply deal with ideas; in powerful contrast, the ideas found in the Christian religion are anchored firmly in historical events. The Bible is the story of God’s interacting with humanity throughout history, and by studying thousands of years of such interactions, we can learn much about the consistent character of God.

Sometimes, however, Christians complain that they are getting tired of hearing the same things. Sometimes, when our distinctive prophetic message is being preached publicly, we think that we already have heard it and have nothing new to learn.

The fact that our message is unchanging and consistent, however, does not mean that it is simplistic or unchallenging. Quite the opposite: when you are studying information relayed to us from the mind of an infinite God, you quickly discover that you will never reach the end of a subject.

Ellen G. White states that one of the reasons the book of Revelation was written was to anchor the Christian church in its historical message for all time. “Some of the younger workers [at that time] . . . had become weary of oft-repeated truths. In their desire for something novel and startling they attempted to introduce new phases of doctrine.”—*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 580. To that extent, it is not merely a book about the future; it is also a book about the past, designed to keep us rooted in our historical faith so that we are not led astray by a desire to seek originality.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ The Scriptures never fail to yield new information and new understanding. How does one balance the desire to learn something new with the importance of staying anchored in the truths that we already have been given?
- ❷ How should the church respond to new interpretations of prophecy? Though we know that there is always more to learn, how do we discern whether the new light is essential or just a fad, or even error?
- ❸ In World War II as a sailor in the Pacific lay dying, he cried out to the medic, “I am an orphan. When I die, who will remember me?” The medic responded, “I will always remember you.” However well-meaning the medic’s words, sooner or later he also would die, and so would the memory of the orphaned sailor. How does this account help us realize the futility and meaningless of all our lives if death, ultimately, has the final say?

The Milk Miracle

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

No cow stood in the yard when Mother returned home from the market.

Mother looked around the yard. No cow. She knew her two small children were waiting for her in the house. Tears filled her eyes. How could she tell them that the cow, their only source of income, had been stolen? Without the cow, they would die.

Mother decided not to tell the children. She didn't want them to see her tears. Walking over to some bushes, she poured out her heart to God. She reminded Him that her husband, a Seventh-day Adventist pastor, had been arrested for keeping the Sabbath and sentenced to eight years of hard labor far from their home in the then-southern Soviet republic of Tajikistan. She thanked God for the now stolen cow, whose milk she had traded for flour, potatoes, carrots, onions, garlic, tomatoes, and cucumbers at the village market.

"What next?" she wept. "How can my children and I survive?"

As she cried and prayed, she looked at the bushes and saw something caught in the branches. She looked closer and saw that it was a banknote for a large sum of money. "Thank You, God!" she prayed. "You have sent money to buy another cow."

Mother dried her tears and returned to the market to look for another cow. But every seller wanted more money than she had found in the bushes.

Finally, a man agreed to lower his price.

"I'll give you my cow for the amount of money that you have," he said.

It was the smallest, scrawniest cow in the market.

Mother handed over the money and took the cow home.

"God, this cow is in Your hands," she prayed.

At home, Mother fed the cow, and the two children played with it. With food and love, the cow grew and grew. Before long, it was producing twice as much milk as the cow that was stolen.

"God saved our lives during this difficult time," said Liubov Brunton, the granddaughter of the mother in the story.

She said the miracle with the milk serves as a powerful reminder that God protects and cares for His mission workers, no matter where and when they serve. But the story of the cow didn't end there. Liubov's grandmother was about to witness another miracle. Read about it next week.



Thank you for your mission offerings that support the spread of the gospel around the world.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *John 1:29*

Study Focus: *Gen. 22:1–18, John 3:16.*

Genesis, the first book of the Bible, contains foundational truths that encompass the core of Scripture's salvific and prophetic message. From the cosmic story of Creation (*Genesis 1 and 2*), in which God turned the chaos and void into life, to the story of Joseph, in which God wrought a redemptive outcome from evil actions (*Gen. 50:20*), the book of Genesis testifies to God's plan of salvation. In the middle of Genesis, the story of the binding of Isaac (*Gen. 22:1–18*) lays down the basic themes of this divine plan.

In this week's lesson, we will discover the various themes of God's plan of salvation as they emerge from the dramatic story of the *Akedah* ("binding of Isaac"). The first theme is "love," from which derives all the rest of God's actions.

In this story, the Hebrew word *'ahab*, "love," is used for the first time in the Bible, specifically, in God's speech referring to a father's love (*Gen. 22:2*).

The second theme of the *Akedah* is the expression of God's love through the sacrifice of His Son, which is foreshadowed by Isaac in his identification with the lamb (*Gen. 22:7–10*). The third theme is the actual manifestation of God's love in history, specifically, in the great conflict that will put the "seed" in opposition to the serpent and will end with the victory of the "seed" over evil and death. This event is profiled in the unexpected appearance of the "ram" (*Gen. 22:13*), which prefigures the eschatological event of the Day of Atonement.

Part II: Commentary

The Love of God

It is impossible to understand God's love, because it is impossible to "comprehend . . . what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge" (*Eph. 3:18, 19, NKJV*). The fact that the verb *'ahab*, "love," appears for the first time in the Scriptures in reference to a father's love—Abraham's love for Isaac, his "only son" (*Gen. 22:2*)—is, however, significant. It is in the particular context of Abraham's love for his unique son that the quality of Abraham's love for God was to be "tested" and thus revealed (*Gen. 22:1, NKJV; compare with Gen. 22:12*).

But it was not just Abraham's love for God that was to be tested and

revealed. During Abraham's personal experience, God's love also was revealed to Abraham. Abraham understood, then, the depth of God's love. Ellen G. White explains: "It was to impress Abraham's mind with the reality of the gospel, as well as to test his faith, that God commanded him to slay his son. The agony which he endured during the dark days of that fearful trial was permitted that he might understand from his own experience something of the greatness of the sacrifice made by the infinite God for man's redemption. . . . *What stronger proof can be given of the infinite compassion and love of God?*"—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 154; emphasis supplied.

God did not give Abraham a philosophical, theological, or a psychological explanation of His love. God chose to permit Abraham to endure (on his finite level) what God was to endure (on His "infinite" level). This parallel between Abraham, who offered his "only son," whom he loved, and God, who offered His only Son, whom He, "the Father loves" (*John 5:20, NKJV*), is endorsed by John who uses the same language (intertextuality) in his definition of "love": "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (*John 3:16, NKJV; compare with 1 John 4:9, NKJV*).

The Lamb of God

The title "lamb of God" is used by John to identify Jesus: "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!' " (*John 1:29, NKJV, compare with John 1:36*). It is interesting and significant that the reference to a "lamb" appears for the first time in the Scriptures in the context of the story of the binding of Isaac to refer to the sacrifice of "a burnt offering" (*Gen. 22:7*). It is, however, not the first time that a lamb is used as a sacrifice. Abel offered a lamb for burnt offerings (*Gen. 4:4, NKJV; compare with Num. 18:17*). But it is the first time that the word *seh*, "lamb," is explicitly mentioned. It is also the only passage of the Hebrew Bible in which the word *seh*, "lamb," is definite. All other Scripture passages that contain this word use it in an indefinite sense. This unique case testifies to a special and unique application. Isaac (with Abraham) refers to a unique lamb that transcends all the others.

The fact that the word "lamb" is used by John in his Gospel (*John 1:29, 36*), and especially in his apocalypse (23 times), in the definite sense as "the lamb," suggests that John is alluding to "the lamb" of Isaac's question, "Where is the lamb?" (*Gen. 22:7*). This intertextual relation allows us to surmise that "the lamb" of Isaac refers to the Son of God, as understood by John. This interpretation is, in fact, confirmed in Abraham's response to Isaac's question: "God will provide for Himself

the lamb for a burnt offering' ” (*Gen. 22:8, NKJV*).

The construction of the opening phrase of Abraham's statement in Genesis 22:8 is particularly telling. First, though Hebrew typically puts the verb first, followed by the subject, here the word “God” is put at the beginning of the sentence before the verbal form to emphasize the fact that the solution is only in God. It is God who will see. Second, this opening phrase of Genesis 22:8 has the same reflexive construction as the phrase *lek leka*, “go yourself,” which introduced God's call (*Gen. 22:2, author's literal translation; compare with Gen. 12:1*). In that case, the phrase in Genesis 22:8 could be translated as follows: “God will see Himself as the lamb” (apposition), which means that God will provide Himself as the lamb. As such, the lamb is identified as God. Thus, the lamb that is referred to here is not merely the physical animal that Isaac had in mind; it is God Himself.

The Victory of God

Isaac expected a lamb to be provided by God. Yet, a ram appeared instead: “Abraham lifted his eyes and looked, and there . . . was a ram” (*Gen. 22:13, NKJV*). The appearance of the ram points to the ram of the Day of Atonement (*Lev. 16:3, 6*). There is indeed a unique intertextual connection between this passage of the sacrifice of Isaac and the text of the Day of Atonement. More than any other biblical passage, the text of the binding of Isaac shares common language with the text of the Day of Atonement. We find the same association of the words ‘*olah*, “burnt offering” (*Gen. 22:13; compare with Lev. 16:3, 5, NKJV*); *ra'ah*, “appear,” in the same passive form *niphal* (*Gen. 22:14; compare with Lev. 16:2, NKJV*); and *yiqqakh*, “he took” (*Gen. 22:13; compare with Lev. 16:5, NKJV*). This important intertextual connection between the two passages indicates that the writer of the legislation of the Day of Atonement, in Leviticus 16, had the text of the sacrifice of Isaac in mind.

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that the text of the binding of Isaac is also present in the text of Daniel 8, which is a prophecy precisely concerning the eschatological Day of Atonement. The first line introducing Daniel's vision—“I raised my eyes and saw, and behold, a ram” (*Dan. 8:3, ESV*)—clearly alludes to the text of the sacrifice of Isaac, given that Daniel's phrase is a quotation of Genesis 22:13. This allusion to the text of the sacrifice of Isaac is further reinforced by the important intertextual connections between Leviticus 16 and Daniel 8 (see especially the common usage of the verb *ra'ah*, “saw,” a keyword in both passages). In light of Daniel 8, we understand, then, that the ram in the story of the *Akedah* points typologically to the eschatological Day of Atonement.

This cosmic perspective is indeed confirmed in the divine blessing

that concludes the text of the *Akedah* (*Gen. 22:17*). God's promised blessing concerns not only the future descendants of Abraham himself but also concerns the future of the nations. The Lord promises that Abraham's seed will "possess the gate of their enemies" (*NKJV*). This promise refers to the victory of Christ over the serpent and the victory of life over death, which is predicted in Genesis 3:15. The story of the binding of Isaac leads, then, to the ultimate atonement for God's people during the eschatological Day of Atonement (*compare with Dan. 8:14*). This lesson seems to have been retained in the Epistle to the Hebrews, which applies the concluding blessing of the *Akedah* (*Heb. 6:14*) to the extraordinary moment of the Day of Atonement during which the High Priest could penetrate "behind the veil" (*Heb. 6:19; compare with Lev. 16:2, 15, NKJV*).

Part III: Life Application

Read the following comments on the silences and questions between Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22:6–8. What spiritual lessons do these silences and questions teach us?

Genesis 22:6: "The two of them went together" (*NKJV*). The phrase occurs twice (*Gen. 22:6, 8*) and sounds tragic, emphasizing the silent walk of father and son.

Genesis 22:7, 8: "But Isaac spoke" (*NKJV*). In Genesis 22:7, 8, the silence is eventually broken by Isaac's voice. His dialogue in these two verses constitutes the first and only time that Isaac speaks in this story:

"And [Isaac] said, 'My father!' " (*Gen. 22:7, NKJV*). When Isaac speaks for the first time, he initially utters one Hebrew word *'abi*, "my father!" which reminds us of his relationship with Abraham, who is preparing for the slaughter.

"And he [Abraham] said, 'Here I am, my son' " (*Gen. 22:7, NKJV*). The words "my son" (*beni*), correspond to the words "my father" (*'abi*). In spite of the killing agenda, the father loves his son, and the intensity of that love for his only son makes the sacrifice all the more painful (*compare with John 5:20*).

"Then he [Isaac] said, 'Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?' " (*Gen. 22:7, MEV*). This question is another way of referring to the unspeakable reality, without having to explicitly state: "Am I the lamb?"

Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Images From Marriage



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 2:23–25, Eph. 5:29–32, Ezek. 16:4–14, Rev. 18:1–4, Gen. 24:1–4, Rev. 19:1–9.*

Memory Text: “Then he said to me, ‘Write: “Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!” ’ And he said to me, ‘These are the true sayings of God’ ” (*Revelation 19:9, NKJV*).

The Bible is replete with love stories that powerfully reveal aspects of salvation and of God’s love for His people. The most intimate of relationships, marriage, proves to be a school in which, if we allow ourselves to experience it the way that God had intended, we can discover deep lessons about His love for us, about our relationship to Him, and about the lengths to which He has gone to redeem us.

Modern conceptions of love and marriage have skewed our ability to appreciate what God is trying to teach us through the marital covenant. Though human sinfulness has greatly perverted marriage (and just about everything else), marriage can still be a powerful way of revealing truth, even prophetic truth. More than just to make us happy, marriage should be a school in which we learn deep lessons about ourselves and our relationship to God.

This week we will explore different ways the Word of God talks about marriages, good and bad. We can then draw lessons from these examples to understand better how God relates to His people, even when they fall short, and we can learn some truths about His love that can help us better grasp last-day events.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 19.

One Flesh

Few biblical metaphors underscore the intimacy that God desires with the human race more than that of marriage. This metaphor is used so frequently in the biblical narrative—and shows up so pointedly in Revelation—that it is imperative for Bible students to grasp what God is driving at when He uses it in the Word.

Read Genesis 2:23–25 and Ephesians 5:29–32. In what ways does a human marriage mirror Christ’s bond to humanity?

On an occasion when Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees, He quoted the Genesis account of Adam and Eve’s marriage, to which the Pharisees quickly raised the question, “ ‘Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?’ ” (*Matt. 19:7, NKJV*).

Moses, of course, was deemed a founding prophet for the nation. Imagine questioning the Author of the institution of marriage by pitting Him against His own prophet. Their tact was typical of their approach to Jesus; they often attempted to prove that His teachings contradicted the Scriptures.

Lifetime, faithful marriage was the ideal established by God at the foundation of the human race. Fallen humanity, unfortunately, damaged this foundational gift from God.

Perhaps, given the importance that Scripture assigns to marriage, it is not a coincidence that the institution has always been under relentless attack. Along with the Sabbath, it is one of the two gifts bestowed on us in Eden, and both were intended to demonstrate God’s desire for an intimate relationship with His creation.

Marriage, the intimate pairing of two imperfect people, will always give cause for tension. A marriage between the church and Christ is the pairing of a perfect Savior with a very imperfect bride. Nevertheless, we can learn about God’s love from what a good marriage offers.

Here are three principles for marriage. First, forgive your spouse, however undeserving, just as Christ forgives us, however undeserving. Second, accept your spouse, faults and all, just as Christ accepts us, faults and all. Third, just as Christ put us before Himself, put your spouse before yourself. How could all three of these gospel-based principles help us not only to understand how God relates to us but also to help any marriage?

The Beautiful Bride

Ezekiel 16 shows us an astonishing picture of God’s regard for His people. He describes the nation of Israel as an abandoned baby, left in a field to die. He takes her home, cleans her up, and when she is fully grown, he marries her. It is a powerful picture of an unlikely marriage.

Read Ezekiel 16:4–14. What do the details about this bride’s exaltation teach us about God’s intentions toward us?

God told Israel that, under His care, she grew “ ‘exceedingly beautiful’ ” (*Ezek. 16:13, NKJV*). When God first found her, nobody found her beautiful; she was a reject among other children, cast aside in the hopes that she would die. But as God showered His attention on her, she became more and more beautiful, until she was the talk of the world. In the earliest days of the Hebrew kings, under David and Solomon, this was particularly true. The queen of Sheba even made a special trip in order to see the splendor of Israel for herself!

Israel’s beauty, however, was entirely the gift of God. She was beautiful—the talk of the nations—precisely because she was His bride. God says that her beauty “ ‘was perfect through My splendor which I had bestowed on you’ ” (*Ezek. 16:14, NKJV*).

This is a recurrent theme in the Bible: God’s bride is beautiful, not because of anything she has done but because God has showered His favor on her and made her that way. In a similar way, believers appear beautiful in the estimate of heaven, not because of anything we have done to earn it but because of the favor of God, the salvation that He has showered on us. We are beautiful because we are covered in His righteousness, the “righteousness of God” Himself (*2 Cor. 5:21*).

All was good, however, until the next verse in Ezekiel: “ ‘But you trusted in your own beauty, played the harlot because of your fame, and poured out your harlotry on everyone passing by who would have it’ ” (*Ezek. 16:15*).

We were created to reflect the goodness and glory of God. When God’s creations assume that their beauty is their own, that beauty is cheapened, and trouble awaits.

What are the dangers of us trusting in our “own beauty”? That is, how might we think that there is anything in and of ourselves that gives us merit with God or makes us deserving of His love? How can we always guard against spiritual pride?

Hosea's Harlot Wife

God's request of the prophet Hosea may be one of the strangest assignments ever given to one of His servants: marry a harlot—on purpose! But God was using Hosea to help us understand, from His own perspective, the pain of human sin and rebellion. God had lovingly chosen a wife, Israel, who repeatedly cheated on Him, and yet, astonishingly enough, He took her back and restored her.

Compare Hosea 1:2; Hosea 3:1; Revelation 17:1, 2; and Revelation 18:1–4. What is the harlotry mentioned here? What lessons can the Christian church learn from the story of Hosea? In what ways has the church repeated the sins of the Old Testament?

The Bible reveals that the errors of Israel in the Old Testament would be largely repeated by Christ's New Testament church. God's covenant people went wildly astray prior to their exile, bringing the idolatrous practices of neighboring nations into God's covenant nation. "Concerned over the growing rift within the church over Arius's ideas, Constantine both convened and intervened in the Council of Nicaea." — Christopher A. Hall, "How Arianism Almost Won," *Christianity Today*, (2008). In each case, God's people wandered outside of their relationship with Him in order to find "solutions" for perceived problems.

God's choice of words makes it seem obvious that He is not only trying to show us what we've done wrong but also sharing how it makes Him feel. Those who have been betrayed by a spouse can begin to grasp the feelings of devastation that our infidelity to Christ might stir in the courts of heaven. Perhaps the most amazing part of Hosea's story is the lengths to which the prophet went to redeem his wayward wife.

When we see the final cry to humanity, calling God's people to come out of Babylon, it is noteworthy that He is calling *His own people*, and not strangers. He knows them intimately. He loves them. And as the world pitches toward its worst hour, He is still offering the redemption price that He had paid in order to purchase us back with His own blood. The cross of Christ, more than anything else, should show us just how earnestly the Lord wants to save His wayward people.

What are the ways today that any church, even our own, can be dallying with spiritual fornication?

Isaac and Rebekah

When Abraham was old and no doubt thinking about the promises made to him by God about his posterity (*see Gen. 15:5*), he gave his oldest and most trusted servant a solemn task.

Read Genesis 24:1–4. Why was it so important to Abraham that his son not marry “‘from the daughters of the Canaanites’ ” (*Gen. 24:3, NKJV*)?

However exclusivist his admonition could seem, the issue for Abraham was spiritual, not ethnic; it was theological, not national. Abraham knew very well the moral degeneracy of Canaanite religious practices, not to mention their worship of false gods, and he knew how easy it would be for his son to fall into these practices were he to marry from among them.

Indeed, the story of so much of ancient Israel, and even of the Christian church through the centuries, has been one in which God’s people—who should have been witnessing to the world—get caught up instead in the world and in its false teachings and religious beliefs. Perhaps the greatest example of this sad reality has been the introduction of Sunday, the pagan day of the sun, in place of the biblical seventh-day Sabbath, a reality that will play a prominent role in the last days.

Read Genesis 24:57–67. What lessons can we glean about Christ and His church from some details we find in this story? What is there to learn, for instance, about our fallen state from the fact that Rebekah was a distant, separated relative to Isaac?

We are undoubtedly related to our Creator, having originally been made in His image. We have been separated from Him by sin, and yet, we are still considered to be the right bride for Him though our choices can make the marriage more turbulent than it needs to be.

Yes, God loves us, His bride, more than we love Him. What are the choices we can make—and should make—every day that can strengthen our love for God? At the same time, what choices will only deaden our love?

The Harlot Is Judged

Read Revelation 19:1–9. Two things are celebrated simultaneously: the end of the harlot and the marriage of Christ with His bride. How is it possible that both events are actually demonstrations of God’s righteous and loving character at the same time?

Infidelity comes with a very painful price tag. The fallout spills over into the lives of children and others. Even the most patient of wronged spouses may eventually discover that there is a moment of no return, past which the marriage can no longer be redeemed. When our world reaches a point where hearts have hardened deeply enough that there will be no more repentance, no point exists in continuing history and allowing the unbridled suffering of sin to continue. Even though there is heartbreak over the lost, those who have suffered under this world’s dispensation of sin can celebrate that it is finally over—and that the world is being restored to the way God originally designed it. This time there will *not* be a turning away from God, because we have learned, the hard way, that God was correct about the devastation that comes from separating ourselves from Him.

Read Revelation 21:1–4. What does the marriage imagery here mean, and why is it full of hope and promise? What is our assurance of the hope presented in these verses?

“Marriage, a union for life, is a symbol of the union between Christ and His church. The spirit that Christ manifests toward the church is the spirit that husband and wife are to manifest toward each other.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, p. 46.

Christ suffered unimaginable pain as the human race rejected Him and gave the affection that belongs to Him to other gods. And yet, even then, He gave Himself for us, paying in Himself for our infidelities and adulteries so that, if we repent and turn away from them, we have the promise of eternal life.

Read 1 Peter 1:18, 19. What are we told in these verses that gives us the assurance of the end as depicted in Revelation 21:1–4?

Further Thought: Read John 2:1–11, Matthew 22:1–14, 2 Corinthians 11:1–5, and Matthew 25:1–13.

Once you realize how much data is available in the rest of the Bible to help you broaden your understanding of prophecy, it can be tempting to over-apply it. Throughout the centuries, some Christians have emphasized the symbolism and imagery found in Bible stories to the point where they virtually begin to treat the historical narrative as a myth. While layers of meaning are to be found just about everywhere in Scripture, we must always remember that God has a way of taking real events that involve real people and using them to teach us things about His future interactions with the church.

The wedding feast in Cana, for example, may offer insights into the metaphor of marriage used by prophecy, but the wedding was a literal event. “The word of Christ supplied ample provision for the feast. So abundant is the provision of His grace to blot out the iniquities of men, and to renew and sustain the soul.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 149.

Or as she writes here: “ ‘The Lord God will do nothing, but He revealeth His secret unto His servants the prophets.’ While ‘the secret things belong unto the Lord our God,’ ‘those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever.’ Amos 3:7; Deuteronomy 29:29. God has given these things to us, and His blessing will attend the reverent, prayerful study of the prophetic scriptures.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 234.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Read John 2:1–11. There are many elements in John’s Gospel that foreshadow Christ’s future work, and commentators have noticed the deliberate way in which John moves his readers forward to the Cross. Where do you see various aspects of Christ’s character and future kingdom being demonstrated in this story? What does it teach us about the plan of salvation or about the ultimate marriage feast that has been promised to God’s Son?
- ② The parable of the ten virgins is widely known and much loved by students of the Bible. What does this important story teach us about last-day events? Is it significant that the groom is delayed? What lessons might this parable teach about our individual relationships to Christ versus the way that Christ relates to the church corporately?
- ③ Think about false practices that have entered into Christianity from outside the faith. Besides the obvious one, Sunday, as opposed to the biblical Sabbath, what other false beliefs have come in? How have they come in, and what can we do not only to protect ourselves from them but to help others see what they really are? In what ways are the three angels’ messages an attempt to do just that, to help people see the false beliefs that have entered the faith?

Big Bucket of Butter

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

After someone stole the family cow, Mother got a dog to watch their new cow. Mother also wanted the dog to guard the tithe: a big bucket of butter.

Father, a Seventh-day Adventist pastor, was far away in a Soviet labor camp on charges of keeping the Sabbath. The cow was the only source of income for Mother and her two small children in the then-southern Soviet republic of Tajikistan. Mother milked the cow and exchanged the milk for food at a market. Mother also set aside 10 percent of the milk as tithe, churning it into butter and storing it in a bucket. When the bucket was full, she sold it.

One day, Mother milked the cow and told the two children to wait as she went to the market. “Don’t open the door,” she said. She checked that the bucket of butter was near the dog, who was tied up in the yard, and she left.

The children waited and waited. Then the gate opened, and a stranger entered the yard. The dog didn’t bark. The man, who was wearing Muslim clothes, walked over to the dog. It was as if the dog didn’t see him. The man picked up the butter bucket, turned around, and left. Later, the children excitedly told Mother about the man. No one understood what had happened.

Many years passed. Father was freed from the labor camp and resumed his duties as a pastor. He and Mother had five more children. Their eldest daughter, Nina, married and had children of her own. She also got a job, cleaning the offices of a fertilizer company. Now to get paid, Nina had to go to the company’s accountant. One day, as she was waiting for her salary, she told the accountant about the bucket of butter. The accountant listened politely until Nina described seeing the man in Muslim clothes. The accountant blurted out, “When did that happen?” Nina told her. The accountant began to cry. “Do you want to know how the story ended?” she asked. She said she and her four siblings grew up in Siberia. Their parents were killed during World War II, and they lived with their grandmother. Times were tough, and the day came when the food ran out. Grandmother called the five children to pray around the empty table. After praying, a knock sounded on the door. Outside stood a man wearing Muslim clothes. In one hand, he held a bucket of butter. In the other, he held a loaf of bread.

At the fertilizer company, the accountant begged Nina to tell her more about God. In time, the accountant and her daughter gave their hearts to Jesus and joined the Adventist Church.

To this day, no one knows the identity of the mysterious man. But Liubov Brunton, Nina’s daughter, has no doubt that he was an angel.

“For an angel, it took only a split second to transport the bucket of butter from Tajikistan to Siberia,” she said. “I just wonder where the angel found the bread. I can’t wait to get to heaven to hear the rest of the story.”

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Revelation 19:9*

Study Focus: *Gen. 2:18–23, Ezek. 16:3–32.*

In the literary structure of the Genesis Creation account, the institution of marriage, which appears in the seventh section of Genesis 2:21–24, parallels the institution of the Sabbath, which appears on the seventh day, in Genesis 2:1–3. This numerological parallel highlights a lesson of high significance: the relationship between God and the human family is to be understood in light of the sacrament of marriage.

The marital trope will be repeated in the early steps of the people of Israel at the time of the Exodus. The motif of jealousy, often associated with the motif of marital adultery, is found, for instance, in the covenant document of the Decalogue (*Exod. 20:5; compare with Num. 25:1; Deut. 4:23, 24*). The covenant between God and His people is thus understood in conjugal terms. God “loves” His people (*Deut. 7:8, NKJV*), and Israel is supposed to “love” God in return (*Deut. 6:5*). The Hebrew word *yada*’, “to know,” that describes the sexual, intimate, and personal relationship between husband and wife (*Gen. 4:1, Gen. 19:8, NKJV*), is used to refer to the relationship between God and His people (*Ps. 16:11; Jer. 2:2, 3; Ezek. 16:3–32*).

For these reasons, it is imperative to study the biblical dimensions of the conjugal relation in order to better understand the significance of the conjugal metaphor.

Part II: Commentary

Let us first look at the biblical model of marriage as exemplified by the union of two couples in the book of Genesis: Adam and Eve, and Isaac and Rebekah. Subsequently, we shall examine the conjugal symbolism in its prophetic applications: namely, how the “harlot” and the “bride” tropes illustrate, respectively, the failure and the success of God’s relationship with fallen humanity.

Adam and Eve

According to the biblical record, the institution of marriage took place in the Garden of Eden, on the first day of human history (*Gen. 1:26, 27; Gen. 2:18, 20–23*). It is, then, expected that these ancient, inspired texts of Genesis contain the foundational principles of marriage and are, therefore, useful in our inquiry.

“In the image of God” (Gen. 1:27, NKJV). It is interesting that the regular plural is used to describe God’s initiative to create the human couple: the plural of the verb *na’aseh*, “let us make” (*Gen. 1:26*), refers to the interrelationship existing within the Godhead. The fact that God created the couple “in His own image” (*Gen. 1:27*) implies that, as a couple, Adam and Eve must reflect the model of the divine interrelationship. This parallel should not, however, be taken literally to mean, for instance, that there is sexual relationship or hierarchy within the Godhead. The idea is simply that, just as there is love and unity between the Three Persons of the Godhead, there should be love and unity between the man and the woman (*see Gen. 2:24; John 15:9, 12, 17; Eph. 4:1–6*).

“‘A helper comparable to him’ ” (Gen. 2:18, NKJV). The word *‘ezer*, “helper,” is generally used to refer to God’s act of salvation (*Exod. 18:4, Ps. 33:20, etc.*). The word *kenegdo*, “comparable to him,” literally means “like” (*ke*) and “before each other” (*negdo*). The couple is thus described as being “like” each other and “before each other.”

The reciprocal dynamic that exists between the man and the woman in Creation and after the Fall serves also as a figure to signify the covenant between God and His people (*compare Song of Sol. 6:3, Gen. 3:16, Eph. 5:21–28*).

Isaac and Rebekah

The story of the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah is recorded in Genesis 24, the longest chapter of Genesis. This story contains a lesson about God’s presence. The LORD (*YHWH*), who never speaks in this chapter, is, however, mentioned 17 times. Another keyword of the chapter is the verb “go” (*halak*), which also occurs 17 times, seven of which are related to Rebekah. The word “go” is the verb that initiated Abraham’s journey in response to God’s call (*Gen. 12:1, 4*). Rebekah is thus understood as a second Abraham. The general idea of this chapter is that marriage is the place of God’s presence, the place of God’s salvation. The marriage of Isaac and Rebekah displays, therefore, a number of instructive elements that enlighten our understanding of God’s covenant with His people.

God initiates the covenant. Just as Abraham symbolically moved to the place of the future bride by sending his servant Eliezer, God is the One who takes the first move toward His people, His bride. Yet, God does not force His covenant. In the same manner, Eliezer takes into consideration the freedom of the bride, who may decide not to follow him: “ ‘Perhaps the woman will not be willing to follow me’ ” (*Gen. 24:5, NKJV*).

The bride's response. Rebekah does not hesitate to follow and responds with one word: *'elek*, “ ‘I will go’ ” (*Gen. 24:58, NKJV*), which marks the last occurrence of the key verb *halak* (“go”) in connection with Rebekah. That Rebekah is consulted is striking in her cultural context in which the woman was not supposed to have a say in her marriage. In this case, all depends on her “yes” or “no,” as she has the last word in this matter. Moreover, Rebekah’s response is the same as the response of the patriarch Abraham. The verbs echo the departure verb of Abraham when he left Mesopotamia: *wayyelek*, “departed” (*Gen. 12:4, NKJV*). In this sense, Rebekah’s steps follow Abraham’s steps.

The part of prayer. Eliezer prayed for the success of his journey (*Gen. 24:12*) and also that Rebekah would give him a drink (*Gen. 24:14*). Then, in accordance with his prayer, Rebekah “gave him a drink” (*Gen. 24:18, NKJV*). Also, Isaac prayed for the success of his meeting with Rebekah (*Gen. 24:63*). Then Rebekah’s eyes met Isaac’s eyes (*Gen. 24:64*).

The part of love. The biblical text reports that Isaac loved Rebekah only after his marriage (*Gen. 24:67*). Love implies faithfulness, the duty to “live joyfully with the wife whom you love” (*Eccles. 9:9, NKJV*). This Hebrew concept of love has inspired the Hebrew theology of religion. The experience of conjugal love has been used as a model for the covenant between God and His people (*Hos. 2:2, Hos. 3:1*). “Love” in the Old Testament is an integral part of the concept of “covenant” (*Deut. 7:9*). Thus, when God calls humans to love Him, He is not referring to a momentary sentimental experience; to love God implies the commitment to live with Him for life (*Deut. 6:5–9, Exod. 20:6*).

The Harlot and the Bride

The conjugal experience inspired the prophets. When God’s people were unfaithful to God by going after other gods, they were compared to a harlot, and the marriage covenant was described as broken. On the other hand, when God’s people were faithful to God, the marriage covenant was celebrated, and Israel, or the church, was compared to a beautiful bride.

The Harlot. In the book of Hosea, the conjugal symbolism refers to both a spiritual idea and a historical reality. The prophet Hosea is called by God to take “ ‘a wife of harlotry . . . for the land has committed great harlotry’ ” (*Hos. 1:2, NKJV*). These words need to be taken both literally and spiritually. This woman “ ‘is loved by a lover [someone other than her husband]’ ” and is committing adultery, just as the children of Israel, whom God loved, took to other gods (*Hos. 3:1*,

NKJV); in this sense, she is a real professional prostitute in the manner of such women at that time in the country of Canaan. Thus, when the people of Israel saw the prophet marrying a harlot, they identified themselves as the harlot that God married.

The Bride of God. In the book of Ezekiel, the woman or bride, as a symbol of God's people, is described in progression. When God found her, she was just a dirty and ugly newborn babe of pagan origin (*Ezek. 16:3*). Then, God took care of her. He cleansed her and fed her, and she grew “‘exceedingly beautiful’ ” (*Ezek. 16:13, NKJV*), representing God's splendor, which He bestowed upon her (*Ezek. 16:14*). The same Hebrew qualification *me'od me'od*, “exceedingly,” is used in the book of Ezekiel to characterize the woman in her iniquity, which was “‘exceedingly great’ ” (*Ezek. 9:9, NKJV*). What God made “exceedingly” good turned out to be “exceedingly” bad.

The Harlot and the Bride. In echo of the Hebrew prophets, the book of Revelation uses the conjugal metaphor to signify the contrast between the two versions of the woman. The “bride adorned for her husband” (*Rev. 21:2, NKJV*) represents God's people with whom God will dwell in the “New Jerusalem” (*Rev. 21:3*). On the other hand, “‘the great harlot’ ” represents the adulterous church “‘who corrupted the earth with her fornication’ ” (*Rev. 19:2, NKJV*).

Part III: Life Application

The conjugal metaphor may have application in three areas of a Christian's life: in one's personal relationship with God, in one's relationship with one's spouse, and in the church.

(1) With God. In what ways does the conjugal metaphor apply to and illuminate your personal relationship with God? How does the metaphor help you bring your religion more fully into your life? How does it teach you that God is not only to be present when you pray and when you worship in church but everywhere and at all times? In what ways does the figure of marriage teach you to walk with God: in the night when you sleep; in the day when you work, think, speak, sing, eat, play, and laugh; as well as times when you suffer, weep, and struggle? List specific examples of when you feel and understand that God is close to you and when you feel He is far from you or sad for you.

(2) With One's Spouse. In the light of the biblical model of marriage, consider, if married, your relationship with your spouse. Pay joyful attention to each other “whom you love all the days of your . . . life” (*Eccles. 9:9, NKJV*), “submitting to one another in the fear of God”

The Nations: Part 1



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 10:1–12, Gen. 12:1–9, 1 Sam. 8:4–18, Matt. 20:25–28, Rev. 18:1–4.*

Memory Text: “ ‘Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed’ ” (*Daniel 7:14, NKJV*).

The book of Revelation shows us God's solutions for our fallen world. In the final chapters, access to the tree of life is restored, the curse is lifted, and we are readmitted into the presence of God. Revelation, in some ways, is the book of Genesis in reverse, which is why Genesis remains an important key to understanding how the world's problems developed in the first place.

One of the key issues in both Daniel and Revelation is worldly government, a succession of human attempts to control a planet that rightfully belongs to God, who will—once this horrible episode of sin and rebellion is forever ended—ultimately rule in righteousness.

It is a very long process that leads to this moment, covering thousands of years of human experiments in self-government. They have never worked; even those expressing the highest ideals have always fallen short, often terribly short, of those ideals. So much of the sad history of humanity through the millennia is nothing but accounts of the tragedy that these failed systems have brought upon us. And it only will get worse until God's “everlasting kingdom” (*Dan. 7:27*) finally is established.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 26.

Nimrod and Nineveh

Eden was created as the ideal home for the human race. Once sin entered, God had no choice but to separate humanity from the Garden and the tree of life, at least for now.

Outside of the Garden, humans were required to work hard to provide for their own continued existence. Life became harder; we had to live with pain and by the sweat of our brow (*Gen. 3:16–19*). Our first parents trusted that the rightful King would provide a path back into the Garden, and they brought sacrifices to the gates of Eden in faithful anticipation of the redemption that God, right from the start, offered the fallen world.

“The Garden of Eden remained upon the earth long after man had become an outcast from its pleasant paths. . . . Hither came Adam and his sons to worship God. Here they renewed their vows of obedience to that law the transgression of which had banished them from Eden. When the tide of iniquity overspread the world, and the wickedness of men determined their destruction by a flood of waters, the hand that had planted Eden withdrew it from the earth. But in the final restitution, when there shall be ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ (*Revelation 21:1*), it is to be restored more gloriously adorned than at the beginning.”
—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 62.

Others, however, worked on man-made “solutions” to our newfound problems, and we see the birth of city-states, an attempt to create an easier life, and perhaps to try to recapture what was lost in Eden.

Read Genesis 10:1–12. This is where the Bible introduces a number of key political players found throughout the rest of the Bible, including Nineveh and Babylon. Given what we know about the roles of those cities later on, what can we deduce from these texts?

Some have read about Nimrod and concluded that he is a noble hero, much like the conquering heroes of pagan mythology. But when the Bible describes him as “a mighty one on the earth,” and a “mighty hunter before the LORD,” it is not a compliment. Nimrod is great in his own estimation, and he stands “before” the Lord in the sense that he defies God. What we see in these texts is the spreading of the rebellion against God, a rebellion that will exist until, ultimately, all rebellion will be forever eradicated.

Why is the sin of rebellion against God more subtle than we might realize? How can we protect ourselves against this very human trait?

Abraham's Call

In the tenth chapter of Genesis, we see the birth of various nations. The word usually translated “nations” is *goyim*, which also can refer to Gentiles. Genesis 10 tells us that the human race divided up into lands, languages, families, and “nations” (*Gen. 10:5; see also Rev. 14:6*).

Almost immediately after the introduction of this concept, God calls Abraham out of one of those nations to be different from them and from what they represent.

Read Genesis 12:1–9. Why did God call Abram (later Abraham) out from his country of origin?

God intended to use Abraham to establish a nation that would stand in contrast to human kingdoms. They were not to have a king other than God Himself. The people were to show what would happen if the human race returned to their Creator. Israel was established to be a blessing to “ ‘all the families of the earth’ ” (*Gen. 12:3, NKJV*). God had poured out upon the Israelites light and privileges that had not been seen in the world since, perhaps, before the Flood.

Read Deuteronomy 4:5–9. What was the Lord telling the children of Abraham, the nation that had become a fulfillment of the promise God had made to Abraham?

This was not a single individual bearing witness in a single community; this was an entire *nation* that, by working together and in cooperation with God, could exhibit the glory of His character. Notice, too, in the words spoken to them that it wasn't just “statutes and judgments” that God had given them that made them so special, but their adherence to them that would cause the other nations to say, “ ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’ ” (*Deut. 4:6, NKJV*). However wonderful the truths given to the people, their failure to live up to them, to obey them, would bring curses instead of blessing and death instead of life.

How does the same principle, that of not just knowing these truths but obeying them, apply to us as Adventists today?

Given What You Asked For

As originally established, Israel was not to have a human monarch, the way that other nations did. In time, however, the people's faith faltered, and they found themselves pining for the things that "the nations," the Gentiles, had.

Read 1 Samuel 8:4–18. Why do you suppose the elders found the idea of a king appealing? In what ways do we fall prey to similar temptations?

It is important to notice that the request for a king was a rejection of God's reign over His people. As established, the nation was to answer directly to the Creator, and their relationship to Him was put on display through the sanctuary and its services, among other things. By requesting a king, they would bring the same kinds of suffering on themselves that the Gentile kingdoms experienced: military conscription in the king's wars, confiscation, taxation, and other ills. They would discover that human potentates tend to rule in their own favor instead of benevolently, as God does.

Also, the new arrangement would be permanent: Israel would be given what they asked for, but when they realized that it was a downgrade, they would be stuck with it. " 'And you will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, and the LORD will not hear you in that day' " (*1 Sam. 8:18, NKJV*).

God knows the weakness of His people, and He predicted early on that Israel would request a human king. They did, and so much of sacred history is the story of the consequences of that choice.

Read Deuteronomy 17:14–20. Notice that God does not say, "I will give them a king," but rather, His people decide that they want one. God put safeguards in place to protect His people from some of the evils of human government—though, as the history of the nation and its kings showed, the safeguards often were ignored.

One simply has to look at the history of Israel after they decided to have a king in order to see just how badly things went for them under these kings. Though some kings were better than others, even the "good" ones had done wrong (think of David and Bathsheba). In many cases, the nation lived under the rule of one king after another who did "evil in the sight of the LORD" (*see 1 Kings 11:6, 1 Kings 15:26, 1 Kings 16:30, 2 King 3:2, etc.*).

Back then, or even today, all human governments share one thing in common: sinners governing other sinners. *What possibly could go wrong?*

The Rulers of the Gentiles

God's dealings with Israel provide rich insights into His dealings with the New Testament church. In fact, in many ways, the nation of Israel served to foreshadow the errors of the church. Far from being able to claim any kind of superiority to ancient Israel, Christians have been, and still are, very much susceptible to the same temptations.

Read Matthew 20:25–28. What error did Jesus warn His disciples to avoid in establishing the work of the Christian church?

Israel asked for a human king, a request that led to the moral downfall of the nation. The kings became progressively more wicked until God allowed the Babylonians to take His people captive as a matter of course correction.

Something similar happened in the history of the Christian church. Even though they were not to structure themselves like a Gentile nation, when Constantine came to power and professed to be a Christian, believers were relieved—persecution was now ended! That in itself was a blessing, but then it occurred to the church that they might be able to leverage the power of the emperor to their own advantage.

Several major disputes broke out among Christians in the fourth century, and when the church found itself incapable of resolving them, it allowed the emperor to intervene. Gradually the bishop of Rome rose in prominence, where he had once been one senior bishop among equals. The church allowed the state to intervene in the religious matters, and once the state had a foot in the door, things went from bad to worse.

Like Israel of old, many of the darkest chapters in Christian history are the direct result of the church compromising with the world. Where Israel turned to idol worship and her kings were corrupted by their appetite for power—to the point of offering children to idols—the church gradually adopted many of the means and methods of a pagan empire to the point that many faithful believers were martyred because they were perceived as threats to the church-state institution.

In your own culture, your own society, what are the ways in which these same temptations can jeopardize the integrity of our faith?

A Light to the Gentiles

The primary purpose for which God established the nation of Israel was not to condemn the rest of the world but to save it. Certainly, most of us feel condemned when we are confronted by righteous behavior in someone else; so the existence of Israel also served to highlight the sin and selfishness of the nations around it. Believers living in harmony with God highlight His righteous character, which naturally leads to conviction. Ideally, the lives of people who “keep the commandments of God” (*Rev. 14:12*) should showcase His character.

However, had the Israelites acted as they should have and done what they had been told to do, the nations would have come to them in peace, seeking to know more about them and their God. Tragically, as the Babylonian captivity showed, these nations came to wage war instead.

The ultimate showcase of God’s character, of course, was Jesus—the only human who has perfectly demonstrated it. But His perfect example, which certainly brought conviction to hearts, was intended as an invitation (*see John 3:16–21*).

The ultimate purpose for establishing the nation of Israel was the same as God’s purpose in establishing the church: He longs to use His people to draw sinners toward Christ. The call of the three angels’ messages, delivered through His church, goes out, not to a select few but to “every nation, tribe, tongue, and people” (*Rev. 14:6, NKJV*). Revelation 18:1 predicts that the whole earth will be lighted up with the glory of God prior to Christ’s return.

What do the following passages teach us about God’s intended role for His people in this world? How can we apply these principles to ourselves?

(a) *Num. 14:17–21* _____

(b) *Isa. 42:6, Isa. 49:6, Isa. 60:3* _____

(c) *Rev. 18:1–4* _____

Read again Revelation 18:1–4, the call for “my people,” that is, God’s people, to come out of Babylon. How is that going to happen? In other words, how can we, as a church that is not in Babylon, be used by God to call out God’s people who are still in Babylon?

Further Thought: Read Isaiah 44:24–45:13.

“Little by little, at first in stealth and silence, and then more openly as it increased in strength and gained control of the minds of men, ‘the mystery of iniquity’ carried forward its deceptive and blasphemous work. Almost imperceptibly the customs of heathenism found their way into the Christian church. The spirit of compromise and conformity was restrained for a time by the fierce persecutions which the church endured under paganism. But as persecution ceased, and Christianity entered the courts and palaces of kings, she laid aside the humble simplicity of Christ and his apostles for the pomp and pride of pagan priests and rulers; and in place of the requirements of God, she substituted human theories and traditions. The nominal conversion of Constantine, in the early part of the fourth century, caused great rejoicing; and the world, cloaked with a form of righteousness, walked into the church. Now the work of corruption rapidly progressed. Paganism, while appearing to be vanquished, became the conqueror. Her spirit controlled the church. Her doctrines, ceremonies, and superstitions were incorporated into the faith and worship of the professed followers of Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 49, 50.

In line with the question at the end of Wednesday’s study, are we not all in danger, especially the longer we are here, of setting “aside the humble simplicity of Christ and his apostles” for the pomp, power, accolades, and temptations of the world? If we think we’re not, we are fooling ourselves.

Discussion Questions:

① When God exiled His people to Babylon, it was a particularly painful moment. Abraham had been called *out* of Chaldea to establish a covenant people as a light for the planet, and now they were taken away in chains. During their captivity, God showed Israel what might have been if they had been faithful. Nebuchadnezzar, the very head of a system utterly opposed to God, comes to Christ (*Daniel 4*). At the end of the Israelites’ captivity, God raises up a Persian king to serve as a type of Christ, releasing His people from Babylon and returning them to the Promised Land. Cyrus was not an Israelite, and yet God chose him to demonstrate the plan of salvation to the world as he returned God’s covenant people to Jerusalem. What lessons can we learn about how God views humanity from the fact that He was now using people *outside* of Israel to accomplish His goals?

② We might not be in Babylon, but how much of Babylon might be in us? How do we recognize this problem, and how can we change?

Unlikely Church Planter

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

When Sunita got married, her new family assumed that she would automatically become a Seventh-day Adventist. In her Asian culture, the wife does whatever the husband says, so her husband, Manoj, and his parents thought that she would adopt his faith as a matter of course. But Sunita didn't.

When her in-laws saw that she still worshiped images of stone and wood, they tried their best to tell her about Jesus. The extended family lived in the same house, and the in-laws invited her to family worship. But she wasn't interested. No one forced her to come, and she avoided the gatherings.

A year and a half passed, and Sunita and Manoj moved from their small town to a big city. Now Manoj tried to turn his wife away from her worship practices.

"We as a family don't believe in image worship," he said. "It's not right. We should not do it."

But Sunita didn't know any other way of life, and Manoj didn't try to force her to stop. As time passed, Sunita gave birth to two sons. Then she fell seriously ill.

"Let's go to the Adventist church," Manoj said. "You've tried so many pills and other things, but nothing helps. Let's go just once."

Sunita didn't see any way out. She had no hope, so she agreed to go. It was her first time entering an Adventist church—or any church.

Sunita felt very good inside the building. Even though the service was in English and she understood little, she felt the warmth of church members as they welcomed her. The next week, Sunita returned and asked the pastor to add her name to a list of prayer requests made during the divine worship service. After the prayer, Sunita began to feel better. Her health slowly improved, and eventually she made a full recovery.

Sunita regularly attended church for the next four years. When an assistant pastor who spoke her language joined the church, she took Bible studies and was baptized. From that moment, she began to pray, "Let me serve You."

A few years passed, and Sunita was invited to plant churches as a Global Mission pioneer. She happily agreed. Today, she leads a church plant in an impoverished district of her city. She started the church by praying with people. As her prayers were answered, other people heard by word of mouth and came to her to ask for prayers. Fifteen people have been baptized.

"I never thought that I would come out of my faith and get to know the true God," Sunita said before taking Adventist Mission on a Sabbath visit to her church plant. "It was His will to bring me out, and He's using me for His glory."

Thank you for your prayers for Global Mission pioneers who, like Sunita, face huge challenges planting churches among unreached people groups around the world. Learn more about Global Mission pioneers on the Adventist Mission website: bit.ly/GMPioneers.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Daniel 7:14*

Study Focus: *Gen. 12:1–9.*

When God created the earth, He had a plan of happiness and love for the people who would live there. However, instead of fulfilling God's plan for them, people fell into the temptation of choosing their own ways. In the next two lessons, we will study how nations failed to find the right path and how God guided people in their struggle to find light in the darkness. This darkness was produced by their desire for self-government.

The desire for self-government first manifested in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve, under the influence of the serpent, disobeyed God and fell under the temptation of longing to be “ ‘like God’ ” (*Gen. 3:5, NKJV*). Consequently, Adam and Eve, as fallen beings, gained a knowledge of sin and thus lost the moral power to choose good over evil (*Gen. 3:22*). Later in the early history of humanity, the men of Babel decided to erect a tower in order to get to the door of God (“Bab-El”) in heaven so that they might usurp God's place (*Gen. 11:1–4*). But the builders of Babel became confused and, as a result of their presumption, God dispersed them over the earth.

Even the people of Israel tried to govern themselves, and instead of embracing God's rule, they looked for a king from the men among their tribes. God responded to all of these human movements with divine initiatives. First, God called Abraham to become a blessing to the nations. Then Israel and later the church were called to witness to the nations about the kingdom of God. Against the temptation to rely on human power to build the kingdoms on this earth, and thus fall into darkness, the Bible brings the hope of the kingdom of God, the only light for the nations.

Part II: Commentary

Adam and Eve

In the Garden of Eden, the story of the confrontation between Eve and the serpent reveals the root cause of human failure; namely, the ambition to replace God. The serpent appears first in the narrative. When

he speaks, he sounds like God, the Creator Himself. The serpent “said” (*Gen. 3:1, NKJV*), just as God “said” ten times in the Creation story. The same verbal form *wayyo’mer*, “He said,” is used in both stories. The construction of the phrase is troubling, for the subject of the verb “he said” is not indicated. In fact, this is the only case in this entire passage that the subject is not clearly given. And to add to the confusion, the verb is even preceded by the name *Elohim*, “God,” giving the impression that God is speaking. The Hebrew text has the following sequence of words: “God [he] said to the woman.” Thus, the serpent seems to have replaced God.

Interestingly, the same phenomenon occurs when the woman engages in disobeying God. The phrase describing her behavior, “the woman saw . . . was good” (*Gen. 3:6, NKJV*), is reminiscent of God’s evaluation of His creation: “God saw that . . . it was good” (*Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 25, 31*). This echo between God’s words and Eve’s words suggests that she has already replaced the divine Creator with her own opinion. Indeed, she behaves like God: “She *took* of its fruit and *gave* to her husband with her, and he *ate*” (*Gen. 3:6, NKJV*). These three verbs (italicized in the quotation) have so far been associated only with the Creator. God “gave” to eat (*Gen. 1:29*). God “took” the man (*Gen. 2:15*), and God “took” one of his ribs (*Gen. 2:21, NKJV*). Thus, Eve identifies herself as the Creator and one-sidedly imposes her “rule” over Adam.

Later, both Adam and Eve will attempt to take God’s place again when they realize that they are naked. The biblical text reports that they “made themselves coverings” (*Gen. 3:7, NKJV*). The verb “make” has so far been used only in conjunction with God, the Creator (*Gen. 1:31, Gen. 2:2, etc.*). Significantly, Adam and Eve attempt to solve their problem by putting themselves in the place of God, the Divine One, a move that already had been initiated by the woman. It is troubling that the human couple has now joined the serpent’s agenda, which is to usurp God’s role. Their blasphemy is also suggested in echo between the word *’arom*, describing their “nakedness,” and the word *’arom*, describing the serpent’s “cunningness” (*Gen. 3:1, NKJV*).

The Builders of Babel

The language that is used to describe the work of the builders of Babel echoes the Creation account, with the deliberate intention of reversing the work of Creation and replacing the God of Creation. Already this intention is indicated in the table of nations in which Nimrod’s foundation of the kingdom of Babel is introduced with the technical word *re’shit* “beginning” (*Gen. 10:10*), which echoes the divine Creation

account (*Gen. 1:1, NKJV*). Nimrod, whose name means “we shall rebel,” is presented as the creator of Babel, just as God is the Creator of the heavens and the earth.

In the story of the tower of Babel, we observe the same usurpation. The phrase, *‘al peney*, “on the face of,” which was used to refer to the condition of the earth before Creation (*Gen. 1:2, NKJV*), reappears here (*Gen. 11:4*). While the Creation account moved from one element (waters) to multiplicity and diversity, Babel reverses the state of multiplicity into one element. The word of God, *wayyomer ‘Elohim*, “God said,” has been replaced by the builders’ word, *wayy’omeru*, “they said” (*Gen. 11:3, 4, NKJV*). The divine fulfillment of Creation *wayehi*, “and there was” (*Gen. 1:3, NKJV*), has been replaced by human achievement *wattehi*, “and it was” (*Gen. 11:3, NKJV*). The divine self-deliberation or consultation *na’aseh*, “let us make,” of the divine Creator (*Gen. 1:26*) has been replaced by human self-deliberation *na’aseh*, “let us make” (*Gen. 11:4*). The builders of Babel have the same ambition as Eve: they want to be like God.

The Call of Abram

With these words, God calls Abram: “‘I will make you a great nation . . . and make your name great’ ” (*Gen. 12:2, NKJV*). God’s calling of Abram responds to, and stands against, the designs of the builders of Babel. Thus, it is no accident that God’s call to Abram to leave happens in the land of Ur of the Chaldeans. It is indeed striking that the ancient Sumerian city of Ur is located in the region of Babylonia that has the closest association with the incident of Babel.

That Abram heard the call to leave a place saturated with the memory of Babel makes sense and should not surprise us, not only because of historical and geographical considerations but also because of its theological implications. From the cry of the prophets to the apocalyptic supplication, the divine call to “get out of Babylon” (the Greek name for Babel) has a long theological history in biblical tradition (*see Isa. 48:20, Rev. 18:4*). The divine call means not only deliverance from oppressive exilic conditions, as well as national restoration to the Promised Land, but also implies a return to the covenant.

The builders of Babel wanted to make for themselves a great name and make themselves into a unique universal nation (*Gen. 11:4*). But it is God who makes a name great and only God who makes one particular nation great and unique in contradistinction to the other nations. Interestingly, the verb “make” is a keyword of the Creation account, where it occurs seven times, with God as the subject (*Gen. 1:7, 16, 25, 26; Gen. 2:2 [twice in this verse], 3*). The same verb was used three

times to describe the activity of the builders of Babel (*Gen. 11:4, 6 [twice in this verse]*), and one of them, in particular, in relation to their “name” (*Gen. 11:4*). Babel stood, then, in place of the Creator. The call to Abram restores God’s prerogatives. Only God, as the Creator, can truly “make”; and only God can “make a name.” Moreover, only the name of God is described as “great” (*Josh. 7:9*).

The Blessing of Abram

The word *barak*, “bless,” is a keyword in God’s call to Abram, where it appears five times. The use of this word is particularly prominent in the book of Genesis, where it occurs 88 times (in comparison to 356 times in the rest of the Hebrew Bible). The Hebrew concept of “blessing” is often associated with the prospect of fruitfulness (*Gen. 1:21–23*). Thus, the call to Abram overturns the ideology of Babel. Against the builders of Babel, who refused to go along with the divine plan of creation to multiply, the blessing of Abram restores the forces of creation and the promise of the future.

While the builders of Babel founded their security only on themselves, the blessing of the nations is solely dependent on God’s blessing to Abram. The essential reason for this blessing lies in a future historical event: “‘in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’ ” (*Gen. 12:3, NKJV*). The prepositional phrase “in you” means “in your seed” or “through your seed.” That is, it is not “in Abram” that the blessing is obtained, but “in the seed” of Abram, which is the same Messianic “seed” as in Genesis 3:15, with which our text shares many common words, grammatical forms, and associations of words and themes. The same language is used by Paul to describe the universal effect of the covenant “in Christ Jesus” (*Gal. 6:15, NKJV*).

Part III: Life Application

Replacing God. Knowing that the essence of sinning is to replace God, ask yourself this question: How, if we are not careful, may God be replaced in every level of our lives? Discuss the following aspects in your class:

In your words: when you lie, you hide or distort a fact. You have replaced the truth (what God sees) with your version of it. When you boast, you generally exaggerate your value at the expense of your neighbor or even at the expense of God Himself, just as Nebuchadnezzar did when he built the city of Babylon (*Dan. 4:30*).

In your work: when you overwork, you ignore the laws of health or your

The Nations: Part 2



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 2:9–17; Dan. 2:31–35; Isa. 17:12, 13; Dan. 7:1–3; Rom. 3:10–19; Rev. 12:15, 16; Rev. 10:1–11.*

Memory Text: “Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!” (*Psalms 46:10, NKJV*).

Through the centuries, some people have argued that God wanted the Fall, that it was His intention for humans to descend into sin and death and thus lead Him—in the person of Jesus—to the cross. After all, how else could He have so powerfully and graphically displayed the depth of His love for humanity than by dying on the cross for them? In short, the thinking goes, God needed humanity to fall.

That is a horrible and wretched position to take. It was never God's intention for either Satan or humanity to fall. The rebellion of Satan, and then of humanity, was a tragedy of immense consequence, and our joy in Him would have remained complete had our first parents not fallen.

This week, we will continue looking at the problems caused by the Fall and the desire for human government as opposed to God's governance. These truths are powerfully revealed in the book of Daniel, which shows that God was right when He warned His people about what would happen when they turned away from Him and chose earthly monarchs instead. This is exactly what they got: earthly monarchs and sinners lording it over sinners—never a good combination.

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

The Very First Commandment

The Garden of Eden was a classroom for God's first people, a place where their interaction with the creation would endlessly teach them and their offspring more about the Creator. "The holy pair were not only children under the fatherly care of God," Ellen G. White pointed out, "but students receiving instruction from the all-wise Creator. . . . The mysteries of the visible universe—the wondrous works of Him which is perfect in knowledge' (*Job 37:16*)—afforded them an exhaustless source of instruction and delight."—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 50, 51.

Read Genesis 2:9–17. What was the first command, a prohibition, that God gave to humanity, and why was it so important?

The first use of the root verb *tswh*, "to command," that God gave to humans was in Genesis 2:16, 17, the command not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. How can some knowledge be forbidden? Isn't it always useful to experience and to know more?

Not according to Scripture: God was intent on educating His people thoroughly while sparing them from the long-term suffering that some knowledge would cause, such as what would later happen when people chose to rule themselves rather than to be ruled by the Lord Himself.

Millennia later, when Israel asked for a king, the Lord laid out the consequences (as we discovered last week), and He informed His people that the decision to step away from His direct rule would last until the end of time.

As the kings of Israel became progressively more wicked, God's covenant people became so worldly and so removed from their purpose that He gave them even more of what they wanted: human government.

Approaching the book of Daniel with this background in mind can be enlightening. Not only is the march of empires depicted in the book's visions an indictment of "the nations"—the Gentiles—it is also an indictment of Israel's failures, their refusal to follow His *mitsvot* (commandments). Centuries of subjection, instead of the freedom first given in Eden, would become a new classroom in which willing hearts could witness the striking contrast between the kingdoms of this world and God's kingdom.

Think about the kinds of knowledge, even now, that many of us would be better off not knowing. How does this help us understand what was forbidden in Eden?

Daniel 2

It was during the Babylonian captivity, through the prophet Daniel, that God presented the most compelling descriptions we have of the relationship between His people and the kingdoms of this world. His people were no longer autonomous; they would now be reaping the consequences of their choices. (And, perhaps, learning from them?)

Read Daniel 2:31–35, which gives a sweeping panoramic view of world history until the end of time. What important truths can we learn from this amazing prophecy?

At the end of the nineteenth century, many people were exuding a new confidence in human progress. The Paris Exposition (1900), for example, was a remarkable showcase of optimism about the future. Surely, with all of our technological and scientific advances, many of humanity's worst problems would be at an end! As humanity entered the twentieth century, among many thinkers there was this great optimism that Enlightenment ideals—such as human perfectibility and the power of reason—would usher in a wonderful new era for humanity.

World War I, however, quickly shattered those dreams, and by the end of the twentieth century, we had lost more than 200 million people to warfare. We may have advanced in a technological sense, but certainly not in a moral one. To paraphrase Martin Luther King Jr., we have guided missiles but misguided men. And *that's* a very scary combination.

Many students of prophecy have noticed that the metals in Daniel 2 move from most valuable to least valuable: gold devalues to silver, silver devalues to brass, and brass to iron, until we end up with only iron and clay.

Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, and other nineteenth-century thinkers attempted to convince us that humanity is somehow tracking upward—that we are evolving biologically and socially. And though in some ways human existence has improved (at least at a physical level), who actually looks ahead to the future of this world, as it is now ruled and governed, with much optimism about peace, security, and prosperity?

Jesus warned, “‘And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. . . . For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places’ ” (Matt. 24:6, 7, NKJV). Despite these warnings, how can we draw comfort from knowing that we have been warned beforehand about them?

Daniel 7

The dream of Daniel 2 was first presented to a Babylonian king. The vision of Daniel 7, in contrast, was presented to a Hebrew prophet, a member of God's covenant people.

Daniel is shown the same subject as was Nebuchadnezzar but from a different perspective. Instead of a statue, he sees a series of nations rising up out of the sea, the result of wind churning up the water. These nations were in a continual state of strife, causing a perpetual shift in power among them. Such passages as Psalm 65:5–8; Isaiah 17:12, 13; and Jeremiah 46:7, 8 use the analogy of floods and waves to depict the tumult among the nations.

In contrast, the Promised Land existed, at least for a period of time, as an island of peace and safety amid a sea of Gentile kingdoms—a sacred nation established on the solid foundation of God's government, as opposed to the unruly nations around it.

Read Daniel 7:1–3. There is a lot of movement in this scene. What lessons can we draw from this imagery, such as the beast first arising from the sea?

Daniel watches the chaos of Gentile warfare from the shore, when suddenly the beasts start *coming up on the land*—into his territory! Gentile problems had now become his people's problems. They had chosen to live *like* Gentiles, so now they would live with (and under) Gentiles. Starting with Babylonian domination, God's covenant people never again enjoyed complete or long-lasting autonomy.

This loss of autonomy for God's people today will persist until the close of time, when Christ is finally restored to His rightful place as our King. In the New Testament, God's people continued to suffer under the thumb of the Roman Empire and then under the persecutions of the little horn, pagan Rome's successor.

Though, historically, some nations have been better than others, and some eras have been more peaceful than others, the vast majority of the history of nations, peoples, and empires has simply been going from one tragedy to another, from one oppressor to another. And often this is all done under rulers claiming only the best of intentions for their own people. What a contrast to the rule that God had wanted for His people, if only they would have chosen it.

How does Romans 3:10–19 help explain so much of our world? How does verse 19 especially show why we so desperately need the gospel in our lives?

Between Land and Sea

The land and sea imagery in the Bible, especially for prophecy, can be very instructive. Consider the case of the symbols of *land* and *sea* in Bible prophecy, which are contrasted sharply.

“Symbolically, when earth and sea are juxtaposed, *earth* often represents the ordered world, or even the land of Israel, while *sea* refers to the Gentile nations that menace it as the sea menaces the land.”—Beatrice S. Neall, “Sealed Saints and the Tribulation,” in *Symposium on Revelation*, book 1, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), p. 260.

In this thinking, *land* is a place of stability, established on the government of God; *sea* represents the unstable turmoil of nations established on human pride.

With the idea expressed above as the background, read Revelation 12:15, 16 and Revelation 13:1, 11. Notice the juxtaposition between water and earth. How are they used, and what can they teach us about how to understand prophecy?

Notice that the dragon uses *water* to persecute the woman (the church). As we have seen, in prophecy water often symbolizes worldly governments and the turmoil and chaos that often attends them. Hence, we can see how Satan was able to use the masses, prodded by their leaders, to persecute God’s people through much of church history.

Also, Seventh-day Adventists have understood Revelation 12:16 to refer to the migration of persecuted believers to the New World. If our understanding of *land* and *sea* is correct, what does this say about the founding of the American republic?

Could we consider it to be “the earth” in the same way that the “Promised Land” was—a place set aside for God’s people? Could this be why the land beast first appears to be lamblike? Though America has never been the “New Israel” as some of its early founders liked to see it, for a long time it has been a land of religious freedom for millions of the world’s religiously oppressed.

Unfortunately, this lamblike beast will one day speak “like a dragon” (Rev. 13:11, *NKJV*). The United States, so long a beacon of religious freedom for the persecuted, will become the dominant religious persecutor! This is another example of what happened when humanity chose to rule itself instead of being ruled by God.

Prophecy Again

The remnant church was born in the New World, precisely where those seeking religious liberty had fled during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Given the long-standing religious and political obstacles that existed elsewhere, it is doubtful that the launch of this movement would have been as swift or powerful in some other location as it was in the new land that became the United States.

Read Revelation 10:1–11, which describes the birth of the movement. Look for some of the elements we have studied, such as “the nations,” the land, and the sea. Applying appropriate caution so that you do not read too much into the passage, what potential insights can you find in this account?

The angel cries with a loud voice, much as the three angels of Revelation 14 and the angel of Revelation 18 do. This is an urgent moment in history when the work of the remnant church is established for the sake of “ ‘many peoples, nations, tongues, and kings’ ” (*Rev. 10:11, NKJV*).

The angel holds a “little book”—likely the book of Daniel (*see Dan. 12:4*)—which is open for the first time in many generations. He has one foot on the sea and another on the earth. This might be in reference to the idea that the message covers the globe, both the Old World and the New. It might also be a reference to the idea that this message is for *all* nations: those who live on the land and those who live in the “Gentile” sea.

The world, at long last, will be lighted up with the glory of God, and the final messages of Revelation 14 are carried to *everyone*. As with Israel, our mandate as a church is to preach the gospel “ ‘in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come’ ” (*Matt. 24:14, NKJV*).

God is pushing human history toward its grand conclusion: the end of human empires and the permanent enthronement of Christ. Read Daniel 2:34, 35, 44, 45. The Bible makes it perfectly clear, without any ambiguity, that all these worldly kingdoms will be eradicated, without a trace of them and their ugly legacies left, and will be replaced by God’s eternal kingdom, where sin, suffering, sickness, evil, and death will never rise again.

Look at how accurately the prophecies of Daniel 2 and 7 predicted the rise and fall of all these worldly empires. Why should that accuracy, amazing if you think about when Daniel was written, help us trust Him on the promise of God’s final and eternal kingdom?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Tower of Babel,” pp. 117–124, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“ ‘I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away.’ Revelation 21:1. The fire that consumes the wicked purifies the earth. Every trace of the curse is swept away. No eternally burning hell will keep before the ransomed the fearful consequences of sin.

“One reminder alone remains: our Redeemer will ever bear the marks of His crucifixion. Upon His wounded head, upon His side, His hands and feet, are the only traces of the cruel work that sin has wrought. Says the prophet, beholding Christ in His glory: ‘He had bright beams coming out of His side: and there was the hiding of His power.’ Habakkuk 3:4, margin. That pierced side whence flowed the crimson stream that reconciled man to God—there is the Saviour’s glory, there ‘the hiding of His power.’ ‘Mighty to save,’ through the sacrifice of redemption, He was therefore strong to execute justice upon them that despised God’s mercy. And the tokens of His humiliation are His highest honor; through the eternal ages the wounds of Calvary will show forth His praise and declare His power.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 674.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ In the end, all earthly accomplishments, no matter how grand, no matter how great, no matter how awe-inspiring and glorious, will be turned to dust, to ashes, and ultimately vanquished forever. That includes whatever great and glorious earthly things you might have accomplished or are accomplishing now. Why is it always important to keep this perspective in mind? How should this perspective help you keep your priorities straight?
- ❷ Have a careful look at the sea beast of Revelation 13:1–10. In what ways is this beast the natural consequence of the mindset of Babel? It is clearly the sum total of all human “nations,” from Babylon through to the little horn power. What characteristics of each empire have you noticed that have persisted throughout time? In what ways does the world still reflect the values of Babylon or Rome, for example?
- ❸ How do we as Adventists strike the right balance between following the Lord and obeying the laws of whatever nation or government we live under? What happens when obedience to one leads to disobedience to the other?

Part 1: A Girl's Religion

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

When she was 12, Diana began drinking alcohol, smoking marijuana, and listening to hard rock music. Amid the partying, her thoughts turned to God.

God hadn't been much of a part of Diana's early childhood. Her father spent a lot of time overseas as a sailor in the Navy, and the family, like many military families, moved every two or three years. A few times, her mother took her and her sisters to church on Sundays when they were very young and lived in Florida.

Diana had the chance to attend Vacation Bible School, at the age of 10, while living in Norfolk, Virginia. A bus came around her neighborhood from the Baptist church and picked her and her older sister up. She memorized John 3:16 and the books of the Bible. She learned about missionaries and respecting the unchangeable Word of God. She chose to be baptized. The church gave her a spiritual foundation. Outside of church was a different story. Diana was being molested, and the trauma would impact her for years.

Then the family moved again when she was 12, this time to Albuquerque, New Mexico. Many of the neighborhood children used alcohol and drugs, and Diana joined them.

At 14, Diana moved with her family to Monte Vista, Colorado. While smoking marijuana with her new friends, she sometimes spoke about God. When she was 16, many of her friends were required to take religious classes. Wanting a deeper relationship with her friends, Diana attended the classes with them. During one class, the priest declared that the authority of their church was above the authority of the Word of God because the church had changed God's day of worship from the biblical seventh day, Saturday, to the first day, Sunday.

Diana was shocked and concerned. She remembered learning that God's Word could not be changed. She wondered, "Why do people worship on the first day when the Bible clearly says to worship on the seventh day?" Diana decided to finish the religious classes but not to attend the church.

She kept on drinking, using drugs, and listening to hard rock music. Over time, they became her identity, her life, her religion.



This mission story offers an inside look at how God miraculously worked in the life of Diana Fish, development director of the US-based Holbrook Seventh-day Adventist Indian School, which received the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering in 2021. Thank you for supporting the spread of the gospel with this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering on June 28. Read more about Diana next week.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Psalm 46:10*

Study Focus: *Gen. 1:29, Dan. 2:44, 45.*

One day a father, seeing that his child was bored, took him to see a film about nature. The film was about the life of animals. The father's intention was to teach his child the beauty of Creation so that he might better understand God's beautiful character and thus exalt Him for His wonderful plans on behalf of humanity. Unfortunately, the movie was full of violence. The animals displayed unbearable cruelty. The strong vulture crushed the weak sparrow. The wicked overcame the gentle. And death prevailed over life. The child got scared and started to cry. He shouted at his father to take him home. Obviously, the father's pedagogical method was less than successful.

When we ponder the course of human history, we are confronted with the same reality. Human history is full of wars, abuses, and deceptions. The strong nations crush small nations, and, all too often, worldly power prevails over wisdom and justice. Solomon, in his book of Ecclesiastes, saw the same thing: "In the place of judgment, wickedness was there; . . . iniquity was there" (*Eccles. 3:16, NKJV*).

From the child who cries at the violence of animals to the wise philosopher who ponders the vagaries of human life, the same disturbing questions arise: Why is this happening? Is this what God planned for the world? Where is God in this evil confusion? To these questions, the Bible gives two answers. The first answer is found in the far distant past of humanity, in the story of the Fall when God's first commandment was transgressed. The second answer is found in prophecy. In both answers, the solution to human tragedy is profiled.

Part II: Commentary

The First Commandment

The first time that the Bible refers to a commandment is found in the context of the second Creation account (*Gen. 2:16, 17, NKJV*), in connection to food, God's first gift to man (*Gen. 1:29*). The verb *tsawah*, "command," is etymologically related to the word *mitswah*, "commandment." The "commandment" is more than just an imperative order that has to be

obeyed by men, an act that God asks His people to do. The fact that God “commanded” the works of Creation (*Prov. 8:29*) suggests that what we call a “commandment” is, in fact, a gift from God to man (*Exod. 24:12, Neh. 9:13, NKJV*).

This gift is for man’s happiness and life, and thus “ ‘he shall live by them’ ” (*Lev. 18:5, NKJV*). For this reason, the psalmist prays, “Give me the grace of your law” (*Ps. 119:29, author’s literal translation*). Significantly, the first commandment also begins with grace, the gift of all the trees but one: “ ‘Of every tree . . . you may freely eat’ ” (*Gen. 2:16, NKJV*).

The first response to God’s commandment is, therefore, to receive God’s grace and enjoy His gift. The second response is to refrain from eating from the forbidden tree. Both promises of life and death are certain. Both verbs are in the absolute infinitive, which expresses the idea of certainty. The promise of the gift of life is as certain as the warning of death that is attached to disobedience. From the very beginning, the two ways are clearly outlined. Either we receive God, and we enjoy life, or we reject Him, and we die. Both prospects are certain: “ ‘I have set before you today life and good, death and evil’ ” (*Deut. 30:15, NKJV*).

The Prophecies of the Nations

The book of Daniel is written in two languages. When the prophet is concerned with the Gentile kingdoms, he writes in Aramaic, the lingua franca of that time. When the prophet is concerned with the spiritual destiny of his people, he writes in Hebrew, the language of God’s people at that time. Daniel’s prophecies in chapters 2 and 7 are located in the Aramaic section and are concerned, then, with the fate of the Gentile nations. Therefore, these are the prophecies that will command our attention.

In Daniel 2, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar has a prophetic dream of a statue representing the succession of world empires related to the history of God’s people. The message to Nebuchadnezzar, the builder of Babylon, is that his kingdom will not stand forever, but it will be followed by other kingdoms, until the end of time when all the kingdoms will be destroyed and be replaced by the kingdom of God, which is the only kingdom that “ ‘shall never be destroyed’ ” and “ ‘shall stand forever’ ” (*Dan. 2:44, NKJV*). Nebuchadnezzar refuses to acknowledge this divinely appointed prophecy. In reaction to the prophecy, Nebuchadnezzar decides immediately to erect a statue of solid gold. This statue signifies his intention to counter and replace God’s plan for the nations. Instead of God’s kingdom replacing all the previous empires of the earth, Nebuchadnezzar’s plan is to gather all the nations under his rule (*Dan. 3:7*).

In Daniel 7, Daniel's dream of the animals is related to Darius, the Medo-Persian king who represents the next fulfillment in the prophecy of the statue. Darius had just honored God and acknowledged Him as the ruler of the nations (*Dan. 6:25–27*). Although the two prophecies of Daniel 2 and 7 concern the same succession of four nations (Babylon, the Medes and Persians, Greece, and Rome), the focus of the end of history is different in each prophecy.

In the vision of the statue, the end is marked by the destruction of the kingdoms of the earth, followed by the establishment of the everlasting kingdom of God, which “ ‘shall never be destroyed’ ” and “ ‘shall stand forever’ ” (*Dan. 2:44, NKJV*). In the dream of the animals, the end is brought by the coming of the Son of Man, Jesus Christ Himself, in the clouds (*Dan. 7:13, 14; compare with Mark 13:26, 27*).

The Divine Solution

The Genesis story of the Fall and the apocalyptic prophecies concerning the nations not only describe the stumbling and the failure of men when they attempt to replace God; they also provide us with God's only solution to the human problem, namely, the kingdom of God.

According to the text of Genesis, the fall of Adam and Eve took place in connection with the first commandment that related life to the knowledge of good and evil. Significantly, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil were both in the midst of the Garden, near to each other, suggesting the relation between them. As soon as humans took fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they no longer had access to the tree of life (*Gen. 3:22–24*).

There are two lessons to be gleaned from this connection. First, life is not a natural part of humanity. Humans are not immortal. Even in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve depended on an external source for life. And second, life is not just a biological condition; it also has spiritual and moral dimensions.

According to the prophecies of Daniel, the failure of the nations to establish peace and happiness, after the arrogant attempt to erect the tower of Babel, was due to their desire to confederate as one against God, the Creator, who then came down and scattered them (*Gen. 11:4–9*). Alluding to the story of the tower of Babel, the prophecy of Daniel 2 refers to a similar vain attempt at unity: the iron will attempt to mix with the clay. We are told that “ ‘in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed’ ” (*Dan. 2:44, NKJV*).

In Daniel 11:43, the king of the north, followed by “Egypt,” the

“Libyans,” and “Ethiopia,” will stand against the mountain of the Lord with the intention to “ ‘annihilate many’ ” (*Dan. 11:44, NKJV*). Then, the prophecy tells us that, as in Daniel 2, its end will come without any help (*Dan. 11:45; compare with Dan. 2:45*). In the book of Revelation, the vision of the war of Armageddon refers to the same movement toward unity: the kings of the earth will gather against the kingdom of God (*Rev. 16:16*). The prophetic description of the regular rise and fall of the nations that ends with the irruption of God’s kingdom that “shall stand forever” is an affirmation of the only possible solution to the problem of the nations. Only God’s kingdom, which means the return to the condition of the Garden of Eden, will bring everlasting life. Only then, the first commandment will be obeyed, and the nations will be healed from their wounds (*Rev. 22:2*).

Part III: Life Application

Lesson on Leadership. When Nebuchadnezzar learned that his rule would be limited to the head of gold on the statue, he erected a statue made entirely of gold. What lessons can we learn from Nebuchadnezzar’s example about the need for humility in leadership? How does his story teach us that we are not the only ones capable of doing, and available to do, the job right? Also, what do the personal narratives of both Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel teach us about faith (trust in God), even when we are no longer in charge?

Lesson on Politics. At the end of time, human rulers will unite together to replace the kingdom of God, just as the builders of the tower of Babel did. How should you respond to the temptation to scheme and plot to acquire support for your views? Read Daniel 3:8 and Daniel 6:4–13. What can we learn from the mistake of the Chaldeans who plotted against Daniel in order to take his place? How can we successfully resist permitting political maneuvers and personal ambitions and interests to prevail over truth and justice?

Lesson on Perspective. The problem with the earthly kings in the prophecies of Daniel is that they were “present oriented.” Eternity, the future kingdom of God, was not part of their reality. This consideration applies to all aspects of life. Ellen G. White warns, “No scheme of business or plan of life can be sound or complete that embraces only the brief years of this present life.” Then she counsels people to “take eternity into their reckoning.”—*Education*, p. 145. How can we avoid making the same mis-

take that the earthly kings in the prophecies made?

Notes

This image shows a full page of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, providing a template for handwriting practice or general writing. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the page.

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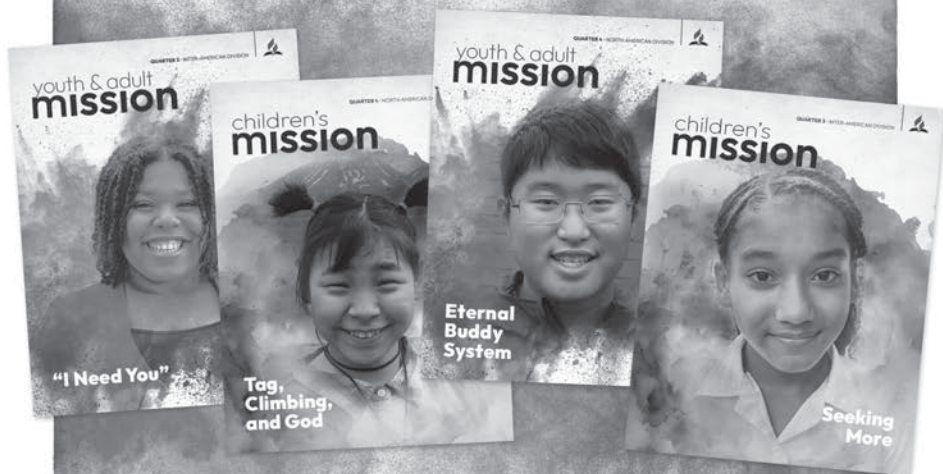


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Understanding Sacrifice



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 1:2–15, Heb. 10:3–10, Exod. 12:1–11, 1 Cor. 5:7, Hag. 2:7–9, Isa. 6:1–5, Rev. 4:7–11.*

Memory Text: “And they sang a new song, saying: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation’ ” (*Revelation 5:9, NKJV*).

When Jesus came toward him, John the Baptist declared: “ ‘Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’ ” (*John 1:29, NKJV*). This was an unmistakable reference to the idea of animal sacrifice, all of which pointed to Christ’s substitutionary death in behalf of all humanity.

In the Bible, we cannot escape the theme of animal sacrifice; it runs like a scarlet thread throughout its pages and plays a central role in the grand scene in Revelation, where John is escorted into God’s throne room (*Revelation 4 and 5*). The fact that Jesus appears in this pivotal scene, looking like a slain lamb (*Rev. 5:6*), is an important key to understanding the entire prophetic episode.

This week we will look at some of the themes of sacrifice that inform our understanding of Jesus, the slain Lamb, the clear protagonist of the throne room scene. He is accepted as worthy, where no one else is, and His unique worthiness speaks volumes about what the Lord was doing through the sacrificial system. It reveals Him as a God of infinite love who made the ultimate sacrifice, an act that we, and the other intelligences in the universe, will marvel at for eternity.

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

Futile Sacrifices?

Sometimes contrasting two ideas can be very instructive. Much can be learned about the nature of sacrifice in the biblical perspective from when God actually *rejected* the sacrifices of His people.

Compare Isaiah 1:2–15 with Isaiah 56:6, 7 and Psalm 51:17. What important lessons about sacrifice are taught here?

This tragic episode in Israel's history was not the first time that God rejected a sacrifice; something similar happened near the beginning of salvation history, when Abel's sacrifice was approved and acknowledged by God, and Cain's was not. That early episode gives us another opportunity to contrast acceptable and unacceptable sacrifices. (See *Gen. 4:3–7* and *Heb. 11:4*.)

In Isaiah's time, Israel was going through the motions, mentally checking off religious boxes in a minimal attempt to appease God, all while living as they pleased. Their sacrifices were anchored in self, just as Cain's were, and not in an attitude of surrender and submission to God.

It is the same spirit that animates the kingdoms of this world: the spirit of self-sufficiency. Cain would live as he pleased and render mere ritual to God on his own terms. One can only assume that he viewed God as an inconvenience, a roadblock to setting his own course, but he feared God just enough to go through the motions.

Abel, however, offered the sacrifice God had requested, the sacrifice that exhibited the promise God had made of a coming Messiah (*Gen. 3:15*): a lamb, pointing forward to the saving act of Christ at Calvary.

"Abel grasped the great principles of redemption. He saw himself a sinner, and he saw sin and its penalty, death, standing between his soul and communion with God. He brought the slain victim, the sacrificed life, thus acknowledging the claims of the law that had been transgressed. Through the shed blood he looked to the future sacrifice, Christ dying on the cross of Calvary; and trusting in the atonement that was there to be made, he had the witness that he was righteous, and his offering accepted."—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 72.

How crucial that we protect ourselves from simply going through the motions! How can each one of us experience what it means to depend totally upon the death of Jesus as our only hope of salvation?

The Blood of Bulls and Goats

Some have criticized the entire concept of sacrifice, claiming that it is cruel, harsh, and, in a sense, unfair. Yet, that's precisely the point. Christ's death was cruel, harsh, and unfair—the innocent dying for the guilty. That's what it took to solve the sin problem. And Christ's death was what all these harsh, cruel, and unfair sacrifices pointed to.

Read Hebrews 10:3–10. What does this passage teach us about the sacrifices God's people offered in the Old Testament? If sinners could not actually be saved by them, why offer them at all?

The lambs and other sacrificial animals were mere symbols pointing forward to the atoning sacrifice of the Lamb of God. They were acts of faith, giving sinners a tangible way to express faith in the work of the coming Messiah. We often refer to these kinds of symbols as *types*, which are fulfilled by an *antitype*, or the appearance of the thing or event they foreshadowed. Some have even described the sacrifices as “mini-prophecies” of the death of Jesus on the cross.

The rituals associated with sacrifice were a little like paying for a trip. When you purchase a train, bus, or airplane ticket, you do not immediately receive the journey you paid for. Instead, you are given a ticket or boarding pass, a symbol or promise of the journey to come. You can sit on that piece of paper all you want, but it will not convey you to any destination. Once you have boarded and the journey begins, however, you have received what you paid for, and the paper ticket becomes unnecessary.

So it was with the sacrificial animals. They had an important role to play, but once the real sacrifice was made, they became meaningless—a reality depicted when the veil between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place in the earthly sanctuary was rent asunder at the death of Jesus. “Then the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (*Mark 15:38, NKJV*). The whole sacrificial system, temple and all, pointed forward to the death of Jesus on the cross. Once Jesus fulfilled His promise at the cross and rose victorious over death, the types became unnecessary.

Think about just how bad sin must be that only the death of Jesus, the incarnate Word (see John 1:1–3, 14), could atone for it. What should this tell us about what our attitude toward sin must be?

The Passover Lamb

The book of Revelation refers to Jesus as “the Lamb” nearly 30 times. From the earliest days in the plan of redemption, God’s people have used lambs as a symbol of the coming Messiah. Abel offered “the firstborn of his flock” (*Gen. 4:4, NKJV*), and before the Israelites departed Egypt for the land of promise, they were instructed to redeem every firstborn person or animal with a one-year-old lamb (*Exod. 12:5*).

Read Exodus 12:1–11; Isaiah 53:7, 8; 1 Corinthians 5:7; and Revelation 5:6. What do these verses teach us about Jesus as the Passover sacrifice? What does that mean for each of us?

Years after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, Peter reflected on what had transpired, and he wrote, “Knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (*1 Pet. 1:18, 19, ESV*).

Jesus lived the one human life that satisfied the holiness of God; the rest of us have sinned, and the way we live our sinful lives quite literally tells lies about the nature of our Maker.

Jesus, however, became the “last Adam” (*1 Cor. 15:45*). Where we had failed, He lived perfectly. In His humanity, He was everything the human race was supposed to be. He reflected God’s glory perfectly. “If you have seen me,” He told Philip, “you have seen the Father” (*John 14:9, CEV*).

Jesus, meanwhile, was crucified on Passover, further demonstrating that He is the antitypical Lamb. In John 18:19, 20, Jesus said that He “spoke openly” (*NKJV*) of His doctrine. In a parallel way, regarding the Passover lamb in Exodus 12:5, 6, the children of Israel were instructed to choose a lamb for Passover, and “keep it,” or put it on display during the days leading up to the sacrifice. When the high priest questioned Jesus about His teachings, Jesus made reference to the fact that He Himself had been on open display in the temple for everybody to consider. His life, His works, His teaching—all revealed who He really was. He is the Lamb without blemish, the most powerful expression of God’s righteousness and glory.

How can we better reflect the perfect character of Jesus in our own lives?

Jesus at the Temple

There is tension throughout the entire story of salvation. God wishes to restore the communion that we once enjoyed with Him and longs to draw close to us. But bringing sinners into His presence would destroy them. “For You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness,” David writes, “nor shall evil dwell with You” (*Ps. 5:4, NKJV*). At the same time, David also writes, “But as for me, I will come into Your house in the multitude of Your mercy; in fear of You I will worship toward Your holy temple” (*Ps. 5:7, NKJV*).

Read Haggai 2:7–9. As the second temple was being constructed, the prophet Haggai made an astonishing promise: the new temple would be more glorious than the previous one. What was meant by that prophecy?

When the first temple was dedicated by Solomon, the Shekinah glory—the presence of God that had accompanied the children of Israel en route to Canaan—filled the temple, and so the priests could not remain to complete their work of ministry (*1 Kings 8:10, 11*). When the second temple was dedicated, the ark of the covenant, representing God’s throne, was missing because some faithful men, upset at the nation’s sins, had hidden it. The literal presence of God did not fill the temple this time. It was heartbreaking. How could Haggai’s promise possibly come true?

It was in the second temple that Jesus, the incarnation of God, appeared in Person, in flesh and blood. God Himself had stepped out from behind the veil to become one of us and to join us in this broken world. Because the Son of God was now the Son of man, we could see His face, hear His voice, and witness, for example, when He touched an unclean leper and made him whole (*Matt. 8:3*). Instead of bringing us closer in *His* direction, God brought us closer to Him by moving in *our* direction. He came down, personally, to us. No wonder the Bible said about Jesus: “ ‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,’ which is translated, ‘God with us’ ” (*Matt. 1:23, NKJV*). Think about what this means: the Creator of the cosmos condescended not only to live among us but to die for us.

The Cross is by far the greatest manifestation of God’s love. What are other ways we can see and experience the reality of God’s love?

For You Created All Things!

On a handful of occasions, prophets have been brought close enough to God in vision that they were permitted to see God's throne. Ezekiel saw it above the firmament (*Ezek. 1:26*); Isaiah visited the temple in heaven to see it (*Isa. 6:1*); and in one of the most explicit descriptions provided to us, John was escorted there in vision in Revelation 4 and 5. The Old Testament types in the sanctuary service indicated that there was only one path by which humanity could enter God's presence: the blood of Christ. (See *Lev. 16:2, 14*, for example.)

Read Isaiah 6:1–5 and Revelation 4:7–11. What elements of these two visions are similar? Pay attention to the order of events: What subject is presented first? What comes next? What truth about God is being stressed in these visions?

In each of these throne room visions, the first thing that happens is that heavenly beings underscore the holiness of God. In Isaiah's vision, the scene is impressive: the temple is filled with smoke, and the "posts of the door" were shaken as seraphim proclaim the holiness of God. In John's vision, cherubim make the same announcement, "Holy, holy, holy." (See Ezekiel 10:14, 15 to find the living creatures described as *cherubim*.) Each prophet was shown a dazzling scene of God's glory.

Then we are shown the prophet's reaction to the scene. Isaiah cries out that he is a man of unclean lips (*Isa. 6:5*), and John weeps because he is faced with the tragic truth that no one worthy can be found (*Rev. 5:4*). When we are directly presented with the worthiness of God, we then finally begin to comprehend the human situation: we are utterly *unworthy*, and we need Christ as our Redeemer.

Satan has hurled many accusations against God, arguing that He is arbitrary, selfish, and severe, but even a brief moment in God's throne room exposes Satan's lies. It is in seeing Christ for who He truly is, "the Lamb who was slain" (*Rev. 5:12, NKJV*), that enables us to see the Father as He truly is. How comforting to know that by seeing Jesus, we see what the Father is like (*John 14:9*). And the greatest revelation of what the Father is like is seen in Jesus dying on the cross for us.

The cross, then, should show us two things: first, just how much God loves us that He would sacrifice Himself for us; second, it should show us just how sinful and fallen we are that only through the cross could we be saved.

Further Thought: The Scriptures make it clear that Christ is the *only* One worthy to secure our salvation. His life was the only sinless human life, the only example of a life that rendered perfect satisfaction to the glory of the Father. He is the *spotless* Lamb of God, and now He stands at the head of the human race as our eternal security. At the same time, He took our guilt on Himself, satisfying the judgment that is God's response to wickedness. As John witnesses the incredible scene of heavenly beings gathered around God's throne, he is told to stop weeping because " 'the Lion of the tribe of Judah . . . has prevailed' " (*Rev. 5:5, NKJV*).

Think, too, just how bad sin is, and just how fallen the human race really is, that only the death of Jesus, God Himself, would suffice to solve the problem of sin. No doubt, if there were some other way that God could have saved us, without violating the principles of His divine government, surely He would have done it.

"The broken law of God demanded the life of the sinner. In all the universe there was but one who could, in behalf of man, satisfy its claims. Since the divine law is as sacred as God Himself, only one equal with God could make atonement for its transgression. None but Christ could redeem fallen man from the curse of the law and bring him again into harmony with Heaven. Christ would take upon Himself the guilt and shame of sin—sin so offensive to a holy God that it must separate the Father and His Son. Christ would reach to the depths of misery to rescue the ruined race."—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 63.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ John sees the Lamb enter the throne room looking as though He had been "slain." Revelation 13:8 informs us that Jesus has been "slain" since the foundation of the world. What can we learn about God through the fact that the plan of salvation was already in place before we needed it?
- ❷ Many atheists believe that we are alone in a cold, uncaring universe. In contrast, the Bible talks not only about God but about how He loved the world so much that He came down *to* it and even died *for* it. How differently should we view the world and our place in it, in contrast to those who don't believe in God at all? In other words, how should the reality of the Cross impact all that we do?
- ❸ Why was the life, death, and resurrection of Christ the *only* means by which the human race could be saved? Again, what does such a cost tell us about how bad sin must really be?

Part 2: A Cry for Help

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Diana's party lifestyle began taking a heavy toll on her by the end of the summer after her high school graduation. One day, alone in a park in Monte Vista, Colorado, Diana looked up into the leaves of the trees and saw sunlight gleaming through. At that moment, she heard a voice say, *"If you don't leave here, you will die here."* Diana knew that the voice was saying that her way of living would lead to an early death and that she needed to get away if she wanted to live.

She spoke with her mother about the future, and her mother asked, "Have you ever thought about the Navy?" Diana was annoyed at what she thought was a silly question, but, three months later, she was enlisted and training in Orlando, Florida. After that, she sailed the world. She saw many things that repulsed her. Every seaport had prostitution, gambling, and worse.

In rapid succession, Diana met and married a sailor, was honorably discharged from the Navy, and gave birth to three sons. They moved to Monte Vista, Colorado, but Diana's husband wasn't happy with family life.

Diana became depressed and began idolizing death. At first, she wished to fall ill and die. Then she thought about taking her own life. In desperation, she prayed, "God, I believe You are real, but I don't know where You are."

Strangely, over the next week, she had conversations with people from four different faith groups. First, two young missionaries came to her door. When she let them in, one missionary opened a book and read a text that said people with dark skin could not enter the highest heaven because they were cursed. Diana was offended. As a child, she had been the only white student in her class during a period of desegregation in Virginia. She knew God loved everyone and told the missionaries, "You have to leave." She wondered, "Why did they read that text to me?"

The next day, three women came to her house. During their visit, Diana asked them about the Sabbath. "We worship God every day," a woman said. Diana thought that made sense, and she agreed to see them again.

Then a tiny old woman knocked on her door on a stormy Friday night. She was collecting funds for a disaster-relief charity. Although the family had very little, Diana gave her the money that she was saving in a tip jar from her job at Pizza Hut. She never saw the woman again.

That same weekend, Diana was invited by a friend to another church. She felt an evil presence upon entering, and she fled after the service.

This mission story offers an inside look at how God miraculously worked in the life of Diana Fish, development director of the US-based Holbrook Seventh-day Adventist Indian School, which received the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering in 2021. Thank you for supporting the spread of the gospel with this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering on June 28. Read more about Diana next week.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Revelation 5:9*

Study Focus: *Gen. 4:1-8, Isa. 53:1-12.*

The ritual of sacrifice was current practice among most of the peoples of the ancient Near East (ANE). In the ANE, sacrifice was considered to be a gift to one's god, providing food for the deity in exchange for help.

The Bible, however, gives a radically different meaning to the ritual of sacrifice; in fact, it reversed its purpose. While in the ANE, sacrifice signified an upward movement from the human condition to the divine sphere. In the Bible, sacrifice signified a downward movement from God to men. In the ANE, the god created humans in order to have slaves who would serve him or her and provide him or her with food. In contrast, the God of the Bible creates humans and gives them food.

In this lesson, we will study the biblical significance of the sacrifices. The biblical meaning of the sacrifices depends on the literary context in which they appear. Historical and legislative texts tend to report the events of the sacrifices as rituals, and thus provide the religious and ethical significance of the sacrifices as they are lived by the people. On the other hand, the prophetic and poetic texts tend to focus on their spiritual and prophetic significance. We have chosen one typical text of each category: the historical sacrifices of Cain and Abel, in Genesis 4, and the prophetic sacrifice of the Suffering Servant, in Isaiah 53, in order to better understand their respective significance.

Part II: Commentary

The Religious and Ethical Significance of the Sacrifices

The first explicit event of sacrifice highlights the diametric opposition between Cain and Abel. While Cain takes his offering only from “the fruit of the ground” (*Gen. 4:3, NKJV*), Abel, on the other hand, brings “also,” or “in addition” to, the non-animal offering “the firstborn of his flock” (*Gen. 4:4, NKJV*). The sacrifice of Abel, therefore, is in conformity with biblical instruction, which required that “in addition to” a vegetable offering, a sacrificial animal be presented for the burnt

offering (*Exod. 29:39–41*). Considering the fact that Abel was “a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground” (*Gen. 4:2*), Cain, the elder brother, was confronted with a problem: he needed the help of his little brother. Cain’s pride may have played a role in his choice of sacrifice and in his subsequent actions.

The biblical story tells us, then, that “the LORD respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering” (*Gen. 4:4, 5, NKJV*). The biblical text does not explain why Abel’s sacrifice was accepted and Cain’s offering not. However, a number of clues in the text suggest the following:

1. God’s first concern is the person who makes the offering, as the following literal translation suggests: “God looked with interest at Abel, therefore [waw] at his offering; but He did not look with interest at Cain, therefore [waw] at his offering.” This translation indicates that the reason for God’s rejection or acceptance of the offering lies primarily in the spiritual condition of the person and not in his offering, per se (*Mic. 6:7, 8; Isa. 1:11*).

2. While Cain offers “to God,” Abel just offers. The phrase “to God” is absent in conjunction with Abel. While Cain thinks of his offering as his gift to God, Abel’s attention essentially concerns the meaning of the sacrifice itself, namely, God’s gift to him. While Cain views his religion as an upward movement to God, Abel understands it as a downward movement from God.

3. Whereas Abel chose from the *bekorot*, the “‘firstfruits,’ ” the most precious produce of the season, according to the Mosaic legislation (*Exod. 23:19, NKJV*), Cain took any fruit from the land. Cain’s offering was the expression of human effort toward God, whereas Abel’s offering was the expression of humanity’s need for God’s salvation.

4. Abel’s offering was related to the promise of the Messianic Lamb of Genesis 3:15, who would be sacrificed to save the world, whereas Cain’s offering was an empty and insignificant ritual. Note that the same contrast appears between the human clothing and God’s clothing (*Gen. 3:7*). Whereas Adam and Eve used the plant that was available to them to cover themselves, God used clothing that implied an animal sacrifice (see *Gen. 3:21*).

5. Ultimately, Cain’s lack of the right religious connection reaches its climax in the act of murder. Because Cain disconnects from God the Father, he loses his connection with his brother.

Fratricide illustrates how sin works. Sin toward one’s brother derives from sin toward God. God perceives this relation between the religious and the ethical when He warns Cain: “ ‘If you do well, will you not be accepted?’ ” (*Gen. 4:7, NKJV*). The phrase “ ‘do well’ ” concerns, first of all, the right sacrifice, which Cain is required to offer; but it also

refers to Cain's personal struggle against evil and, more particularly, to his relationship with his brother. The Hebrew verb *teytib*, "do well," has a strong ethical connotation. The same verb is used by Jeremiah to describe the desired relationship between " 'a man and his neighbor' " (*Jer. 7:5, NKJV*).

It is interesting to note that Jeremiah's address to Israel connects the same issue of religious life to ethics. After a long list of ethical crimes (stealing, lying, adultery, etc.), the prophet confronts his people, who then " 'come and stand before Me in this house which is called by My name' " (*Jer. 7:10, NKJV*). This call has resonated with many other prophets who have emphasized God's rejection of these sacrifices. Micah, in particular, eloquently insists on the worthlessness of such a religion: "Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams? . . . He has shown you, O man, what is good . . . to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (*Mic. 6:7, 8, NKJV*).

The Prophetic Significance of the Sacrifices

One of the most powerful biblical passages on the prophetic significance of the sacrifices is Isaiah's song of the Suffering Servant. The Suffering Servant is identified as a sacrifice, thus predicting the sacrificial ministry of Jesus Christ. In fact, the central idea of the passage is the suffering and dying of the Servant for atoning purposes. This idea appears in eight out of the 12 verses (*Isa. 53:4–8, 10–12*).

It is also intensified in the central section of Isaiah 53:4–6 and described with terms and motifs directly borrowed from the Levitical world. The Servant is compared to a lamb ready for slaughter (*Isa. 53:7; compare with Lev. 4:32; Lev. 5:6; Lev. 14:13, 21; etc.*). The passive form, one of the most characteristic features of the Levitical style, is most prominent in Isaiah 53. It is used 16 times in the text; 12 of them are in the *Niphal*, the technical form of the priestly "declaratory verdict," which is normally used in connection with the sacrifices. This religious-cultic intention is further confirmed by the seven references to "sin," covering all three technical terms (*pasha*, 'awon, *khet*'): "He was wounded for our transgressions [*pasha*], He was bruised for our iniquities ['awon]; . . . And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity ['awon] of us all. . . . He shall bear their iniquities ['awon]. He bore the sin [*khet*] of many" (*Isa. 53:5, 6, 11, 12, NKJV*).

One verse in particular reveals the Levitical process of atonement: "By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities" (*Isa. 53:11, NKJV*). The word "knowledge" (*beda'to*) points to verse 3, where the same root word "to know"

(*Yadu'a*) is used to characterize the Servant as a man who “knows” grief. The verse explains that it is through this knowledge, or this experience, of suffering that the Servant will “justify.” The following phrase explains the operation implied in the verb “justify”: “For He shall bear their iniquities” (*Isa. 53:11*). It is by bearing their iniquities that the Servant will be able to make many just. The next verse again uses the word “many” and confirms this interpretation which makes “many” the object of the verb “justify”: hence, the Servant “bore the sin of many” (*Isa. 53:12, NKJV*).

This language and its association of ideas are quite familiar in the biblical context, suggesting that the Servant is like the sacrificial offering, which in the Levitical system bore the sin and hence permitted justification and forgiveness from God: “ ‘If he brings a lamb as his sin offering, . . . he shall lay his hand on the head of the sin offering. . . . So the priest shall make atonement for his sin [*khet*'] that he has committed, and it shall be forgiven him’ ” (*Lev. 4:32–35, NKJV*). The strong cultic accent in this text upholds the idea that the Suffering Servant plays the role of a vicarious sacrifice, taking the place of the sinner to provide forgiveness.

Part III: Life Application

God’s Sacrifice for Your Salvation. Read Philippians 2:7. Reflect on the expression “emptied Himself” (*ESV*). How does God’s willingness to become “nothing” apply to your relationship with your fellow neighbors or your relatives? How ready are you to become nothing, to “empty” yourself for the advancement of your colleague or the growth of your child?

Notes

TEACHERS COMMENTS

This image shows a single page of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, leaving small margins at the top and bottom. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

Foundations *for* Prophecy



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 6:6–8, Gen. 3:21–24, Ezek. 1:4–14, Rev. 4:1–11, Num. 2:3–25, Isa. 14:12–14.*

Memory Text: “Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?’ Then I said, ‘Here am I! Send me’ ” (*Isaiah 6:8, NKJV*).

God's right to rule the universe is founded upon His position as the Creator of all things (*Rev. 4:11*) and also upon His character. It is in discovering God's righteous character that we begin to understand how and why sinful human beings fall short of the glory of God (*Rom. 3:23*).

This week, we move further into the vision of the throne room and consider how the human race relates to a holy God and how the sacrifice of Christ restores us and brings us close to the throne. God plans to restore us, not just as individuals but also as a race, so that we once again reveal His glory to the rest of creation. By searching through the rest of the Bible, we can find important clues that help us understand and begin to appreciate the high calling that God has extended to us, a race of forgiven and redeemed sinners.

Human rebellion, ultimately and forever, will be ended. And, more than that, God's loving character, His self-denying and self-sacrificing character, will shine even brighter than it did in His original design for humanity. Though God never intended for humanity to fall, through the Cross, God's loving character has been put on display in a remarkable way.

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

Here I Am, Send Me

Years ago, a church decided to renovate an outdated basement to create a new fellowship hall. One of the first things they did was to install new lights, believing that they would make the space seem more beautiful. Once they were installed, however, the space looked even *worse*, because bright lights have a way of revealing flaws.

Isaiah's stunning vision of God's throne left him painfully aware of his shortcomings. " 'Woe is me,' " he lamented, " 'for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts' " (*Isa. 6:5, NKJV*). We would feel the same if we were suddenly escorted into the presence of the Lord. The light is bright enough to remove all of our excuses. In God's presence, we sense that we are lost. Isaiah was in for the surprise of a lifetime.

Read Isaiah 6:6–8. Isaiah knew that sin means that we are “undone.” The wages of sin is death. But instead of leaving us to the consequences of sin, a God of love pulls us closer. What was the outcome of this meeting, and why is it important?

Isaiah was purged of his sin when a seraph took a coal from the altar and touched his mouth with it. This was likely the altar of incense, where intercession was made by and for God's people (*see Rev. 8:3, 4*). His sins were forgiven, and he was now considered fit to stand in God's presence—but, more than that, he was also commissioned to represent God to the world.

Interestingly enough, the word “seraph” means “the burning one.” Notice Jesus' description of John the Baptist's ministry in John 5:35—“ ‘He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light’ ” (*NKJV*). Though, of course, John himself was a sinner in need of grace and salvation, his ministry pointed to the only One who could bring grace and salvation.

Jesus came as the perfect representation of the Father's glory—and God sent a prophet, a sinner, who performed a similar task as one of heaven's seraphim.

Only after Isaiah knew that his sin was purged, did he say, “ ‘Here am I! Send me’ ” (*Isa. 6:8, NKJV*). How can each one of us, our sins purged by the blood of Jesus, respond as Isaiah did here?

The Two Cherubim

As soon as our first parents were expelled from the Garden, God offered the hope of Messiah (*Gen. 3:15*). Then He established a powerful symbol at the gates of Eden: two cherubim with a brilliant flashing light between them. It should not be lost on us that this scene so closely resembles the ark of the covenant, a symbol of God's throne (*Exod. 25:18*).

Read Genesis 3:21–24. What job were the cherubim tasked with—and why?

While the cherubim were certainly given the responsibility to keep sinners from accessing the tree of life (*Gen. 3:22*), they also were a symbol of hope, of promise, that one day humans would be restored to Paradise. “The Garden of Eden remained upon the earth long after man had become an outcast from its pleasant paths. The fallen race was long permitted to gaze upon the home of innocence, their entrance barred only by the watching angels. At the cherubim-guarded gate of Paradise the divine glory was revealed. Hither came Adam and his sons to worship God. Here they renewed their vows of obedience to that law the transgression of which had banished them from Eden. . . . But in the final restitution, when there shall be ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ (Revelation 21:1), it is to be restored more gloriously adorned than at the beginning.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 62.

The wording in Genesis 3:24 is also interesting: the Bible indicates that God “placed” the cherubim to the east of Eden, and the original Hebrew word used is *shakan*, the root word for the sacred “tabernacle” (see *Exod. 25:9, Num. 3:26*), where the presence of God dwelt among His people. Though the common term *Shekinah*, for the presence of God, does not appear in the Bible, it, too, is based on this word often translated “tabernacle.” A literal translation of *shakan* could read, “God tabernacled cherubim at the east of the Garden of Eden.”

In the Bible, cherubim are associated with the presence of God (see *1 Chron. 13:6, Ps. 80:1, and Isa. 37:16*), in particular with His throne, which is the place where His name is proclaimed. We should not fail to notice that the 24 elders who attend God's throne in Revelation 4 and 5 sing His praises and declare His right to rule as the One who created all things (*Rev. 4:11*). This can help us understand the throne room scene and our role as forgiven sinners in relationship to our Maker.

Like Burning Coals of Fire

Cherubim, either as living beings (*Ezek. 10:8*) or the gold symbols of them (*Exod. 25:18*), appear all through the Old Testament. They are often depicted as standing immediately next to God's throne, radiating His glory to the universe. Cherubim also are embroidered into the curtain before the Holy of Holies (*Exod. 26:1*). In the book of Psalms, God's supreme power over creation is poetically pictured as God being borne through the air by cherubim (*Ps. 18:10*). God commanded that the ark of the covenant be topped by two solid gold cherubim with their wings extended toward one another (*Exod. 25:18–20*).

Read Ezekiel 1:4–14. What similarities do you see between this passage and the scenes depicted in Isaiah 6:1–6 and Revelation 4:1–11?

Ezekiel is presented with an impressive display of God's power. It is a confusing scene to begin with, matching the predicament that God's people found themselves living with at the moment: the chosen people not in the land of promise but in Babylonian captivity. As Ezekiel studies the scene placed before him, he looks up and sees God's throne above it all.

Notice the important similarities with other "throne" visions. The living creatures that Ezekiel witnesses have the same faces as the living creatures in John's vision: a lion, an eagle, an ox, and a man.

The mysterious creatures with four faces are not specifically named in Ezekiel's initial description; later, in another throne room scene (*see Ezek. 10:1–21*), they are called "cherubim," and we also find the burning coals from Isaiah's vision of the seraphs. They share the faces of the living creatures mentioned in John's vision.

Whenever we see God's throne—whether in the typical ark of the covenant, which served as God's meeting place with Moses (*Exod. 25:22*), or the breathtaking visions of the prophets—the cherubim are *always* there. They are intimately tied to the throne of God. All of God's creatures were designed to reflect His glory—whether we are talking about the human race made in His image or the angelic beings who are posted immediately next to His glorious throne.

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. How do you measure up in contrast to the holiness that Ezekiel witnesses here? What does your answer tell you about your need of the gospel?

God Among His People

Following the leading of God's presence in the cloud, the Israelites would stop in their journey to the Promised Land, set up the tabernacle, and then the tribes would pitch their camps around it—three tribes on each side. The Presence of God would descend into the Most Holy Place and take up residence in the midst of His people.

There was one dominant tribe on each of the four sides of the tabernacle. According to Numbers 2, who were these four dominant tribes?

Num. 2:3 (East): _____

Num. 2:10 (South): _____

Num. 2:18 (West): _____

Num. 2:25 (North): _____

Notice that each dominant tribe flew its own “standard,” or special flag, to designate who they were. While the Scriptures are not explicit in describing what was on each flag, there is an interesting tradition—loosely based on the tribal characteristics described in Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33—that assigns one of the four faces to each of the four compass points. “According to rabbinical tradition, the standard of Judah bore the figure of a lion, that of Reuben the likeness of a man or of a man’s head, that of Ephraim the figure of an ox, and that of Dan the figure of an eagle; so that the four living creatures united in the cherubic forms described by Ezekiel were represented upon these four standards.”—Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2011), vol. 1, p. 660.

It is possible to read too much into tradition, of course, but it is still interesting to compare this ancient tradition with the Bible’s description of the New Jerusalem. An interesting pattern emerges: there are gates representing three tribes on all four sides of the city (*Rev. 21:12, 13*).

The descriptions of both the camp of Israel and the New Jerusalem underscore one crucial fact: God intends to pull humanity close to His throne. The book of Revelation teaches us that “the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (*Rev. 21:22, NKJV*).

Of course, we don’t live in the camp of Israel. But how can we, in our own lives now, draw close to the presence of God?

The Fall of Lucifer

It seems incomprehensible that Lucifer once held the position of covering cherub, occupying an exalted position next to the throne of God. Surely his existence would have helped reveal the glory of God to the universe. Instead, he began to consider his own glory, not the glory of his Creator; or, to be more precise, he started to imagine that he was not being given the deference due to *him*.

Read Ezekiel 28:11–17 and Isaiah 14:12–14. What led to Lucifer’s downfall? Compare these passages with Revelation 14:1–12. How does the contrast between Lucifer’s fall and humanity’s high position in Christ inform your understanding of what takes place in Revelation 14?

Notice how Lucifer was removed from the holy mountain, while the redeemed stand on Mount Zion with the Lamb of God. Lucifer is said to have been in Eden; the human race was also once there, but in contrast to Satan’s fate, humanity is being restored to Paradise through Christ. (See *Rev. 22:1–3*.)

In this context, the following quote from Ellen G. White is very instructive: “Heaven will triumph, for the vacancies made in heaven by the fall of Satan and his angels will be filled by the redeemed of the Lord.”—*Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 29, 1900.

And they are there, in heaven, only because of the gospel. In fact, the theme of the gospel, of redemption, is found in a graphic manner in the throne room in Revelation 4 and 5. For instance, the angels cry out: “ ‘ “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God, persons from every tribe and language and people and nation” ’ ” (*Rev. 5:9, NIV*). What a picture of the gospel: the death of Jesus for the redemption of humanity!

Notice, too, how the language reflects the first angel’s message, in which we are called to preach “the everlasting gospel . . . to those who dwell on the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people” (*Rev. 14:6, NKJV*). What a powerful representation of the fullness of what Christ has done for the world. There is not a human being in all earth’s history for whom Christ has not died. Each person just needs to learn about it and choose to accept it.

What role do we have as a church, and as individuals, in letting people know about what Christ has done for them?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Controversy Ended,” pp. 669–671, 676–678, in *The Great Controversy*.

Satan, once a covering cherub, sought to destroy confidence in God’s throne. God has allowed fallen angels to continue in their rebellion to show the universe the depths of wickedness that come from self-exaltation—and while Satan managed to deceive the human race into joining his war against God, Christ utterly defeated him at the cross, securing a place for humanity where fallen angels once stood. Sinners, in Christ, publicly turn against Lucifer’s claims. The final scenario is, in some ways, an even greater revelation of God’s goodness and love than had existed prior to Lucifer’s fall. Though God never ordained that evil should exist, and it’s a tragedy with eternal consequences, when it’s all done, the goodness and love of God will be revealed in ways they otherwise never would have been.

Christ “looks upon the redeemed, renewed in His own image, every heart bearing the perfect impress of the divine, every face reflecting the likeness of their King. He beholds in them the result of the travail of His soul, and He is satisfied. Then, in a voice that reaches the assembled multitudes of the righteous and the wicked, He declares, ‘Behold the purchase of My blood! For these I suffered, for these I died, that they might dwell in My presence throughout eternal ages.’ And the song of praise ascends from the white-robed ones about the throne: ‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing.’ Revelation 5:12.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 671.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Imagine standing before God with every flaw, every character defect, every wrong act, every wrong thought, every wrong motive fully exposed before Him! What would you rightfully and fairly deserve? What, then, is your only hope? Why must we have “the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe” (*Rom. 3:22, NKJV*) covering us now, and in the judgment, when we need it most? In short, why do we need the gospel?
- ❷ As we have seen, John the Baptist played the role of a seraph—a burning and shining lamp. (*See John 5:35.*) He was, of course, the forerunner to Christ, heralding the Messiah’s first appearance. How do God’s last-day people hold a similar prophetic role?

Part 3: Attempted Suicide

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Diana's husband grew angry when three women persisted in visiting the house to study their religious books. On their wedding day, he had told Diana, "Don't ever try to get me to go to church." Now he opposed the presence of the three women and threw out the books they gave her.

The women invited Diana to their church's evening meetings. However, Diana worked nights at Pizza Hut to make ends meet. One woman pressured her into getting a day job at a newspaper so she could come to the meetings.

As Diana studied, she learned that the women believed Jesus was a created being and not eternal. Reading their literature, she saw that their Jesus didn't match the Jesus whom she had learned about in the Bible as a girl.

Then Diana and her husband separated, and she moved with their three sons to Santa Fe, New Mexico. With no child support, friends, or family, she worked full-time to pay the bills and care for the boys, who were one, three, and five years old. Falling into an abusive relationship, she started thinking about suicide again. One day, after dropping her sons off at day care and school, she went to a gun shop and bought a gun. She knew how to use it from her Navy days.

Sitting on her couch at home, she loaded the gun's chamber, pulled back the hammer, and pressed the gun against her chest. An all-too-familiar accusing voice rang in her head. *"You're a terrible person,"* it said. *"You're a terrible mother."* Diana firmly gripped the trigger. She felt her heart pounding in her head. Then a calming voice interrupted her.

"What about your children?" it said.

Before she could respond, the accusing voice countered, *"They will be better off without you."*

"They need you," the calming voice pleaded.

Diana thought about how her death would affect her children. She became enraged. She had come up with a plan to end her pain, but now she couldn't go through with it. "I can't do this anymore! It's too hard!" she cried out.

"You don't have to," the calming voice said. *"I'll do it for you."*

With those words, Diana put down the gun, collapsed onto the floor, and cried until she couldn't cry anymore. Then she called a trusted coworker. Together, they drove into the desert to fire off the gun. Later, when Diana tried to return the gun, the gun-shop owner refused, saying, "It's been used."

"But you have to take it back," Diana insisted, explaining that she had given a bad check. The owner reluctantly took back the gun and didn't report her to the police. Diana believed that he sensed what had happened.

This mission story offers an inside look at how God miraculously worked in the life of Diana Fish, development director of the US-based Holbrook Seventh-day Adventist Indian School, which received the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering in 2021. Thank you for supporting the spread of the gospel with this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering on June 28. Read more about Diana next week.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Isaiah 6:8*

Study Focus: *Isa. 6:6–8, Rev. 4:9–11.*

God is the foundation of every good thing, simply because He is the Creator of all good things, animate and inanimate. We hear this important truth in the first words of the Bible: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (*Gen. 1:1, NKJV*). In the Hebrew phrase, the verb “create” precedes its subject “God,” a way of affirming that, because God is the Creator, He is God. In this week’s lesson, we will reflect on the significance of this foundational truth, which is the basis for three biblical revelations of God.

Our attention will first center on God’s throne in heaven. Because God is the cause of everything, and all depends on Him, God is the King who rules over everything. God is thus presented as the King of kings, sitting on His throne in heaven (*Isa. 6:1, 6–8; Rev. 4:9–11*). Our attention, then, will move to God’s throne on the earth. Because God rules the universe, His throne also has jurisdiction over the earth. In this second section, we will learn about God’s kingship on the earth, in the Garden of Eden, and later, in Israel, in connection with the ark of the covenant, and in Zion, which are described as places of God’s throne.

In the Life Application section, we will embrace our hope in God’s future throne in the “New Jerusalem” in the new earth. In conclusion, we shall consider the following lesson: What does it mean for us, in our present existence, to have God’s throne in our hearts today?

Part II: Commentary

God’s Throne in Heaven. The existence of God’s throne in heaven pre-dates the creation of the earth. According to Jeremiah, this place exists from the very beginning of the creation of the universe (*Jer. 17:12*). It is in this particular heavenly context that the first rebellion of Lucifer and, hence, the origin of evil, took place. This testimony is important because it shows that the problem of evil is a cosmic one that also concerns other worlds, not just the earth. The only solution to the problem of evil is cosmic, and so it must entail the deposition of Lucifer (*Rev. 20:7–10*). Isaiah describes God’s throne as the place where heavenly beings are serving,

praising, and worshiping the King of the universe: “I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up” (*Isa. 6:1, NKJV*). The situation of the throne in heaven is rich with a number of ideas regarding the divine reality and with lessons that concern us.

The first idea expressed by the image of the throne represents, by symbolism, royalty. As the King of all creation, God rules and controls all the universe. For us, this idea implies obedience to His laws and trust in His power and His leadership. Furthermore, because royalty is often associated with the function of a judge (*Ps. 122:5*), all creatures, including humans, should see God as their judge, which means that God is the One who sees, and can evaluate, all our actions, good and bad (*Eccles. 12:14*). Not only that, we see that God is the One who will save us from evil. In the Bible, the judge is also the “savior” (*Judg. 3:9, 15; Judg. 6:36; Judg. 12:3*). By locating the throne of God in heaven, the Bible shows that judgment and salvation are not in our hands. Only God judges, and only He will save us.

The biblical emphasis on heaven as the location for the throne of God intends to convey several messages. This location implies that God is distinct from His creation; God is not the tree or in the tree. God is not a derivative of human beings. God is the Creator, infinitely far from the earth, and therefore unreachable and beyond our apprehension: “God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few” (*Eccl. 5:2, NKJV*).

Any theology, any human description of God, is inadequate because God is beyond our understanding (*Job 11:7–12; Job 36:26; Isa. 55:8, 9*). When we pray to God, our words, and even our silence, should reflect reverence. The profound mystery of God is evoked by the complexity of the throne, which has the appearance of a supernatural chariot animated by powerful cherubim, other living creatures with wings, and powerful hands beneath (*Ezek. 1:8*). The glorious and sublime beauty of God’s throne conveys an impression of unreachable transcendence. Ezekiel describes the throne as being made of precious stones, in particular “lapis lazuli,” the material associated with divinity in the ancient Near East (*Ezek. 1:26*). Daniel sees the throne composed of flames (*Dan. 7:9*); while in Revelation, it is surrounded by an emerald rainbow, and seven torches or lamps of fire in front of a crystal sea (*Rev. 4:3–6*). Only one human response to this display of magnificent and perfect beauty is appropriate: awe, mingled with humility, and an acute consciousness of our misery and sinful condition apart from God.

On the other hand, this mystery and perfect beauty are an appeal to us to testify to their existence in our worship services. We attest to their existence when we reverently inquire into God’s revelation through His

words and in His creation. God's beauty and mystery are also an appeal to humanity to repent and to allow Him to rehabilitate our sinful characters. Furthermore, the beauty and mystery of God's throne are a call to us, here and now, to testify to both the justice and the reality of God's absolute principles of truth.

God's Throne on Earth. Yet, God did not confine Himself in heaven, far from, and indifferent to, human destiny. Various representations of the heavenly throne were also present on earth.

The Garden of Eden. The first earthly appearance of the "heavenly" throne of God on earth is found in the Garden of Eden, which is described in terms that recall the heavenly temple of God. The cherubim who stand in front of the Garden, with flaming swords (*Gen. 3:24*), remind us of the cherubim who stand around the heavenly throne of God and minister as flames of fire (*Ps. 104:4; compare with Dan. 7:9, Rev. 4:3–6*). The rivers that flow in the Garden of Eden (*Gen. 2:10–14*) point to the water of life, which is as clear as crystal and springs from the throne of God (*Rev. 22:2*). The precious stones also appear in both places, in heaven and on earth (*Gen. 2:12; compare with Ezek. 1:26*).

The Ark of the Covenant. Another important location of the throne of God was the ark of the covenant, which also shares a significant number of features with God's heavenly throne (such as the presence of cherubim) and is considered to be God's throne or His footstool. Evidence of this identification is provided in 1 Chronicles 28:2, wherein the phrase "the ark of the covenant of the LORD" is connected to the " 'footstool of our God' " (*1 Chron. 28:2, NKJV*). It was the place, as with the other thrones, where judgment would take place. The "footstool" is also mentioned later in 2 Chronicles 9:18, where it is situated below the throne of Solomon, according to the ancient Near Eastern custom in which the footstools were placed at the feet of the god in the temple (*see Ps. 99:5, Ps. 132:7, Lam. 2:1*), implying that God stood above it.

Mount Zion. When the Israelites settled in their country, they put the ark of the covenant in the temple of Jerusalem on Mount Zion. The name of Zion was then used as a synonym for the place of God's throne, the seat of judgment (*Ps. 9:4, Isa. 16:5*). All preceding notions concerning the throne of God are, then, transferred to Zion, where God dwells and judges the nations (*Ps. 9:11–15*). This line of thinking will continue in the New Testament, where Christ and His apostles will sit on thrones to judge the world (*Matt. 19:28*). Zion will designate the New Jerusalem in heaven where the biblical hope of peace, love, and eternal life will ultimately be fulfilled (*Rev. 21:1–4*).

We Are the Temple of God. Ultimately, God dwells among His people. The Hebrew verb *shakan*, “dwell,” is used to describe God’s dwelling among His people in the sanctuary (*Exod. 25:8, 9*). This idea of God’s dwelling was so powerful that it produced the word *mishkan*, “tabernacle,” the very place where God would dwell. The verb also refers to the cloud that dwelt, “rested” (*shakan*), on the tabernacle (*Exod. 40:35*). In the New Testament, this notion is extended to the Christian person, including the body: “Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?” (*1 Cor. 6:19, NKJV*). “Therefore,” concludes Paul, “glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s” (*1 Cor. 6:20, NKJV*).

Part III: Life Application

Pedagogy of the Throne. In our day, the notions of kingship and “throne” do not sound particularly relevant. Thus, we have lost the sense of transcendence, respect, and sacredness. Discuss these notions with people of all ages. Consider the following strategies as possible ways for communicating this notion:

1. Organize an outing in nature among the grandeur and splendor of God’s handiwork as a way of instilling a sense of transcendence and awe for His throne.
2. Visit a planetarium or space museum as a way of appreciating our infinite universe.
3. Invite a scientist to explain the complexity and mysteries of the human body.

The Throne in Worship. In light of your study of the throne of God, revisit your worship services: the way you behave in church, the way you pray, sing, and preach. Would boasting about your church’s mission success or its number of Bible studies be appropriate? Why, or why not?

The Throne in Ethics. Recognize and appreciate God’s royal presence in your neighbor, your relative, your brother or sister, your parents, and your spouse. How does the reality of God’s throne and transcendence affect the nature of your relationship with them?

The Throne in Your Personal Life. Ask yourself the following question: “What does the idea that you are the throne of God mean in your daily existence?” That is, how does the idea that you are God’s throne impact the way you treat your body, organize your time, order your household, and conduct yourself in the workplace?

Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

In *the* Psalms: Part 1



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Heb. 9:11–15, Psalm 122, Psalm 15, Psalm 24, Exod. 33:18–23, Psalm 5, Ps. 51:7–15.*

Memory Text: “Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father’s name written on their foreheads” (*Revelation 14:1, NKJV*).

As Seventh-day Adventists, we are used to searching for the symbols of Revelation in the stories of the Old Testament to help us understand those symbols. These narratives, though far from the only good source, are found all through the Old Testament.

One particularly rich source of information is the book of Psalms, a collection of sacred poetry that explores many human experiences and possible interactions with God—ranging from despondency over sin and suffering to unbridled joy in His presence and His repeated promises for forgiveness and salvation.

A careful reading of the Psalms yields details that make the book of Revelation come alive, especially Revelation 14, which describes the final work of God’s remnant church on earth. God’s last-day people have been given the same assignment as Israel of old: we are to be a light to the nations, a final merciful call to all people to worship and obey their Maker.

Some details provided in God’s songbook can give us new ways to understand and appreciate our role in the final moments of earth’s history.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 24.

Our High Priest

When Moses oversaw the construction of the tabernacle, he was not permitted to use just any design he wished. God gave him a blueprint to follow. “ ‘See to it that you make them according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain’ ” (*Exod. 25:40, NKJV*). We discover in the book of Hebrews that the pattern used was that of a higher reality, the heavenly sanctuary.

Read Hebrews 9:11–15, about Christ as our High Priest in heaven’s sanctuary. What does this teach about what He is doing for us?

The earthly sanctuary foreshadowed Jesus in astonishing detail, from the priest and the offerings to the furniture and other design details. *All* of it speaks of Jesus.

The book of Revelation, of course, is very rich in sanctuary imagery. We find the sanctuary lampstand in the opening verses, the ark of the covenant explicitly mentioned in chapter four, and numerous other allusions to the temple. Without an understanding of the Old Testament sanctuary, it becomes impossible to grasp what John is driving at in his descriptions of his visions. The experiences of Israel, Paul writes, “happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (*1 Cor. 10:11, NKJV*).

There is much we can learn from studying the details of the temple. In the book of Psalms, we find an important component for understanding some of these details: how God’s people personally related to the temple. We catch glimpses of how David related to the sanctuary and its services, and we see the heart response of God’s people to what the Messiah would do for them. It is not just the patterns that help us see Jesus; we also can mine the personal experiences of those who understood what God was teaching us through the sanctuary and draw lessons for ourselves and for our own experiences with God.

Read Psalm 122. Though we cannot go literally to the earthly “house of the LORD” (it’s not there, and even if one were built in the same place, it would be meaningless), what elements are found in this psalm that can encourage us about what Christ has done for us? Notice the themes of peace, security, praise, and judgment.

On Mount Zion

In Revelation 14, we find God's people standing on Mount Zion. The original Mount Zion was located just west of the old city of Jerusalem today and was thought of as the seat of God's throne, or presence, among His people. In time, the temple mount, located on Mount Moriah, came to be identified with Mount Zion, as well.

In other words, this important depiction of God's last-day remnant is presented in sanctuary language, as with most of the key scenes in the book of Revelation. Thanks to the Lamb, God's people are on His holy hill!

Read Psalm 15 and Psalm 24, in which David asks an all-important question: "Who shall dwell in thy holy hill?" Compare his reply in these psalms with the description of the people standing on Zion in Revelation 14:1–5. What parallels do you find? How does one join this group? What is the significance of the fact that the Father's name is inscribed in their foreheads? (Rev. 14:1).

The description found in David's psalm of those permitted into the presence of God is a pretty tall order for mere sinners to fulfill. Who among us can honestly say that we have always walked uprightly? Or have always spoken the truth in our hearts (*Ps. 15:2*)? None of us can say that we "shall never be moved" (*Ps. 15:5, NKJV*). If we say that we have never sinned, the Bible teaches that we have no truth in us (*1 John 1:8*).

We can come to no conclusion other than it is the Lamb who enables us to stand on Zion. The Lamb is not mentioned in David's psalm, but He suddenly appears in the description found in Revelation 14. It is almost as if Revelation 14 is answering David's question. Now that the Lamb of God is established on Mount Zion, in the sanctuary, we can also be present there because of His perfect righteousness credited to us by faith. We can have the "boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh" (*Heb. 10:19, 20, NKJV*). Without His blood, what hope would we have? None, actually.

Think about all the Bible promises of victory over sin. Why, even with those promises, do we still find ourselves falling short of the perfect example Jesus has set for us, and why do we need His perfect life as our substitute?

Law in Our Hearts

The remnant gathered on Zion have a name engraved on their foreheads: the name of the Father and the Lamb. (Whether this is two different names is doubtful; Jesus is the very image of the Father!) A “name” in the Scriptures signifies more than a label by which people address each other; it stands for *character*. To this day, many cultures still say that someone has a “good name” when people think highly of their character.

Read Exodus 33:18–23, Exodus 34:1–7, and Psalm 119:55. When Moses asked to see God’s glory, what did God promise to show him? Then when God proclaimed His name to Moses (*Exod. 34:5*), what followed?

Some picture God’s glory as an unapproachable, brilliant light, which is certainly an apt description. But God’s glory is more than simply a visual display; His glory is His character. The same is true with God’s name.

When the Bible describes a remnant with God’s name inscribed in their foreheads, it is not a matter of having literal letters written there; it is a matter of having God’s character inscribed in your mind, your heart, and so now in our lives we reflect the love and character of God. You have been pulled close to God, and you love Him for who He is and what He has done for you.

How interesting, too, that when God describes Himself to Moses, He does it in conjunction with Moses’ receiving another copy of the Ten Commandments, which is also a transcript of His character. Likewise, the people who have God’s “name” in Revelation 14 are described as those who “keep the commandments of God.” Then notice the words found in Hebrews: “ ‘This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them,’ then He adds, ‘Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more’ ” (*Heb. 10:16, 17, NKJV*). What an expression of the gospel: though God’s law is reflected in our lives, we still need our sins to be remembered “no more.”

God’s name is His character. His moral law is a transcript of His character. And those who are gathered on God’s holy hill in the last days are infused with a love for God, a love manifested by obedience to His law.

If we are saved by faith and not by the law, what then is the importance of God’s law? (See 1 John 5:3.)

Psalm 5

Read Psalm 5. In this work, David draws sharp contrasts between those who are lost and those who have been redeemed. Compare this psalm with the language of Revelation 14:1–12. What similarities do you find, and how does this inform your understanding of what it means to be a part of God’s last-day remnant movement?

It is instructive to note that David insists that evil “may not dwell” with God (*Ps. 5:4, ESV*). The point of the tabernacle was that God might dwell among His people, and the same will be true in the kingdom of Christ (*see Rev. 21:3*). Those who would approach the throne of God must be *redeemed*.

It is also noteworthy that David describes an act of worship in Psalm 5:7, which is the core issue at stake in the great controversy. Revelation 13 mentions “worship” five times, and the three angels’ messages call the world to “worship Him who made.” David tells us that he “fears” God, and the message of the remnant calls the world back to “ ‘fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come’ ” (*Rev. 14:7, NKJV*).

Also notice how the redeemed of Revelation 14 are said to have “no deceit” (*Rev. 14:5, NKJV*) in their mouths; they are truth-tellers whose words and deeds reflect the righteous character of God. The wicked, according to David, have “no truth in their mouth” (*Ps. 5:9, ESV*).

It is an astonishing scene that John presents in this key part of Revelation: mere sinners have been pulled back from death and are privileged to stand in God’s presence. They did not earn this right; it is granted to them by the fact that the Lamb of God—the righteous Son of man—stands there with them. They are forgiven, redeemed; they no longer have to bear their own guilt (*compare with Ps. 5:10*), because the Lamb of God has borne it for them (*compare with Isa. 53:12 and 2 Cor. 5:21*).

Once God’s name is inscribed in your heart, it is hard to remain silent. God’s people deliver one final offer of mercy with a “loud voice” (*Rev. 14:7*). “But let all those rejoice who put their trust in You; let them ever shout for joy, because You defend them; let those also who love Your name be joyful in You” (*Ps. 5:11, NKJV*).

Imagine standing before a holy and perfect God in judgment, with every deed you have ever done fully exposed before Him. What does this prospect tell you about your need of Christ’s righteousness?

Teach Transgressors Your Way

After the Lord had appeared to Isaiah in the throne room scene of Isaiah 6:1–8, and after Isaiah had been told that his “iniquity is taken away” and his “sin purged,” he then answered God’s call by saying, “ ‘Here am I! Send me’ ” (*Isa. 6:8, NKJV*). That is, once he knew that he was right with God, and despite knowing his faults, he was ready to work for the Lord.

Is it not the same with us? How can we proclaim salvation to others if we don’t have it ourselves? And we can have it, by faith in Jesus and what He has done for us.

Read Psalm 51:7–15. What does David promise to do after he has been pardoned and purged from his sin?

To be called *into* God’s presence is, ultimately, to be sent back out. In His wisdom, God has commissioned the redeemed to serve as His primary voice to a fallen world. At some point, the impact of His people on earth is going to be powerfully felt. Revelation 18:1 tells us that His final plea with the fallen planet will illuminate the whole world.

“No sooner does one come to Christ than there is born in his heart a desire to make known to others what a precious friend he has found in Jesus; the saving and sanctifying truth cannot be shut up in his heart. If we are clothed with the righteousness of Christ and are filled with the joy of His indwelling Spirit, we shall not be able to hold our peace. If we have tasted and seen that the Lord is good we shall have something to tell. Like Philip when he found the Saviour, we shall invite others into His presence.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 78.

In Revelation 14, the three angels’ messages are founded on the “everlasting gospel” (*Rev. 14:6*). That is, even before the proclamations go out about worshipping the one “ ‘who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water’ ” (*Rev. 14:7, NKJV*) or about the fall of Babylon (*Rev. 14:8*) or about worshipping the “beast and his image” (*Rev. 14:9*), the foundation of the gospel, of salvation in Jesus, is proclaimed. And that is because the warnings and messages of the three angels mean nothing apart from the hope and promise that those who proclaim these messages have in Jesus and what He has done for them. Apart from the “everlasting gospel,” we really have nothing of any value to say to the world.

Dwell more on the fact that, even before the proclamation of the three angels’ messages begins, we are pointed to the “everlasting gospel.” What should this tell us about how foundational this truth is to all that we believe?

Further Thought: “The psalms of David pass through the whole range of experience, from the depths of conscious guilt and self-condemnation to the loftiest faith and the most exalted communing with God. His life record declares that sin can bring only shame and woe, but that God’s love and mercy can reach to the deepest depths, that faith will lift up the repenting soul to share the adoption of the sons of God. Of all the assurances which His word contains, it is one of the strongest testimonies to the faithfulness, the justice, and the covenant mercy of God. . . .

“ ‘I have sworn unto David My servant . . . with whom My hand shall be established: Mine arm also shall strengthen him. . . . My faithfulness and My mercy shall be with him: and in My name shall his horn be exalted. I will set his hand also in the sea, and his right hand in the rivers. He shall cry unto Me, Thou art my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation. Also I will make him My first-born, higher than the kings of the earth. My mercy will I keep for him forevermore, and My covenant shall stand fast with him.’ Psalm 89:3–28.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 754, 755.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ The human race has been a miserable failure in keeping up our end of God’s covenants with us. David, the “man after God’s own heart” despite some big mistakes, was still used powerfully to communicate the terms of our salvation to us. In what sense does David foreshadow Jesus, who *did* keep God’s covenant perfectly in our behalf? And why is what Jesus did in our behalf our only hope?
- ❷ What passages in the Psalms have you found particularly helpful or meaningful in that they reflect the kind of experiences that you have gone through yourself?
- ❸ Why do the Psalms make such frequent reference to the temple? What can we learn from David’s love for the sanctuary? How can this help us appreciate what we have in Jesus, as our heavenly High Priest “who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us” (*Rom. 8:34, NKJV*)? Why do we, even as redeemed people, need Christ interceding for us in heaven?
- ❹ Based on the Ellen G. White quote above, what has been your own experience with how God has lifted your “repenting soul to share the adoption of the sons of God” after the “shame and woe” of sin?

Part 4: Ex-Adventist Boyfriend

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Diana's thoughts returned to God after the calming voice stopped her from committing suicide. That Sunday, she took her three children to a small church in Santa Fe, New Mexico. They sat in the pew until the church musicians began to play. She didn't like the music she heard coming from the platform. It reminded her of a bad part of her life. She walked out of the church with her children.

Diana's life seemed to go from bad to worse. Thieves broke into her apartment and took what little she had. She became pregnant by her abusive boyfriend, and his only response was, "I'll pay for the abortion." One night, after the children were asleep in bed, she sat in the dark in her living room, filled with shame and self-hatred. She cried out in anger to God, "Is this what You saved me for?" The anger turned to sobbing as she remembered her years of struggles. "Jesus," she pleaded, "I need You." Instantly, she felt an intense rush of energy fill her. The room was pitch-black, but it seemed to be filled with light. It was as if she were being hugged by God from heaven. An overwhelming sense of joy, peace, and love filled her whole being. Shortly after, she fell into a deep, peaceful sleep. In the morning, the intense feelings were gone, but she sensed something was different.

A few months later, she met a strange and peculiar person. Loren Fish was a fourth-generation Seventh-day Adventist. His father was a pastor and church planter. But during Loren's first year of college, he had wandered away from God, started drinking, and eventually dropped out. He met Diana at a dance club in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and he asked her for a ride home. Diana found the stranger annoying, but she gave him a ride. After that, Loren wouldn't leave her alone. He found out where she worked and visited her there. Diana wasn't interested in getting into another relationship. She hadn't left the bad one that she was in. Moreover, Loren was four and a half years younger, and he seemed naïve and immature. In truth, she didn't want him to know what a mess she was and didn't want to get hurt again. So, she pushed him away. Loren left Santa Fe and settled down near Chicago.

Then one night, Loren called after Diana's boyfriend turned violent, slashing her car tires and attacking her in the parking lot of the newspaper where they both worked. Diana was happy to hear his voice, and she remembered feeling safe with him. "You can come visit me any time you want," she told him. Loren arrived that weekend, and he never left.

This mission story offers an inside look at how God miraculously worked in the life of Diana Fish, development director of the US-based Holbrook Seventh-day Adventist Indian School, which received the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering in 2021. Thank you for supporting the spread of the gospel with this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering on June 28. Read more about Diana next week.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Revelation 14:1*

Study Focus: *Psalms 15, Psalm 24, Psalm 51, Psalm 122.*

In the middle of the Bible, the Psalms contain testimony about ancient Israel's praying and worshiping. Not only the professional priests are praying. The people of the land, poets, and kings sing praises to the Creator and Savior. But they also weep and cry to the Lord, longing for His judgment and salvation. Among these psalms, which reflect the suffering of the ancient people of Israel, we also may find prophetic flashes concerning the end of time, when the great Judge will finally come in response to the longing of the nations. The eschatological thrust of these psalms has been noted by numerous biblical scholars.

In the next two lessons, we will search these sacred poems and songs to find messages that speak to those of us who live in the time of the end. We will think about our suffering, our frustrations, and our painful experiences in response to God's silence. We will yearn for peace in the moments of trouble and wars. We will cry with the people of the Psalms. But we also will be comforted and strengthened in our hope as we learn about the reality and the certainty of God's promise. Our last response then will be to worship the Lord. We will then grasp better the depth and significance of the longing of Israel. But more important, we will discover how relevant the songs of these poets and priests of the Psalms are for us who live in the time of the end.

Part II: Commentary

For this journey inside the "soul" of the prophetic message, we have chosen four psalms: Psalm 122 for its intense and poignant appeal, "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem" (*Ps. 122:6, NKJV*); Psalms 15 and 24 because both psalms wonder about the absence of the Lord and ask the same puzzling questions: "Who may dwell in Your holy hill?" (*Ps. 15:1, NKJV*), "Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD?" (*Ps. 24:3, NKJV*); and Psalm 51 for its trembling supplication before the presence of the Lord in His temple: "Create in me a clean heart, O God" (*Ps. 51:10*).

Psalm 122: The Peace of Jerusalem. Although Psalm 122 is attributed to

David (*Ps. 122:1*), many biblical scholars have questioned this connection on the basis of the reference to the “house of the LORD” (*Ps. 122:9, NKJV*). It is argued that David could not have mentioned “the house of the LORD,” that is, the Jerusalem temple, simply because the temple was not yet built in his time. Yet, the tabernacle in David’s day is often called the “house of the LORD” (*1 Sam. 1:7, 24; Judg. 19:18*). Thus, what is missed in this argument is the fact that Mount Moriah, which will become the place of the temple of Jerusalem, also is designated as “the mount of the LORD” very early in biblical history (*Gen. 22:14*). The notions of “house of the LORD” and “Jerusalem” are, therefore, to be taken in a spiritual sense that transcends the actual time of David. As David prays about the peace of Jerusalem, we are inspired to dream typologically of the spiritual Jerusalem from which peace and judgment will radiate toward the extremities of the world, as a blessing for the nations (*Gen. 22:17, 18; compare with Gen. 12:3*).

That David, the warrior, thinks of the peace of Jerusalem implies that the world will be at war against Jerusalem. The prophet has in view the event of “Armageddon,” as predicted in Revelation 16:16 and in Daniel 11:45. The name *Armageddon*, which means “mount of gathering,” refers to the mountain of the Lord where God’s people gather to worship. This “gathering” refers also to the gathering of the peoples who will come to attack God’s people. The phrase “mount of the LORD” represents, typologically, spiritual Zion or Jerusalem. David sees prophetically that the peace of the world depends on the peace of Jerusalem. Therefore, he urges us to pray for the peace of Jerusalem on which depends the peace, the blessing, and the salvation of the world.

Psalm 15 and Psalm 24: The Hill of the Lord. In Psalm 15 and Psalm 24, David asks a question that concerns the same event, that is, the occupation of the “holy Mount,” which refers to the New Jerusalem in heaven. Yet, the answer to that question is different in each psalm. In Psalm 15, the focus lies on the human level and concern for God’s people. The description of the righteous contrasts here with the description of the wicked in Psalm 14, who persecute God’s people (*Ps. 14:4*), who are identified as the “generation of the righteous.” God’s people seek “refuge” in the Lord (*Ps. 14:5, 6, NKJV*) and long for His salvation, which will come “out of Zion” (*Ps. 14:7, NKJV*).

Psalm 15 continues in the same vein, and the question arises, then, “Who may dwell in Your holy hill?” (*Ps. 15:1, NKJV*). To answer this question, the psalmist refers to God’s people who, in contrast to the wicked in the preceding Psalm, live according to principles of conduct, all of which equal the Ten Commandments: some are positive (*Ps. 15:2*), and some are negative (*Ps. 15:3–5*). The first principle includes all the others: “He who walks uprightly” (*Ps. 15:2, NKJV*). The Hebrew word

tamim, “uprightly,” means completeness, has the connotation of naiveness, and suggests a truthful religion in which there is no falsity or double-mindedness. The religion of God’s people is based on the fear of the Lord, in the middle of the psalm (*see Ps. 15:4*). Notice, too, that these principles are essentially of an ethical order, dealing with our treatment of others. They concern negative behavior: lying (*Ps. 15:2*), slandering (*Ps. 15:3*), and deceiving (*Ps. 15:5*).

Psalm 24 complements Psalm 15. Whereas Psalm 15 has an existential perspective, Psalm 24 has a cosmic perspective, which is articulated in three sections. The psalm begins with an affirmation of the God of Creation, who rules over the universe (*Ps. 24:1, 2*). The psalm then moves to the call to worship, through the question, “Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD?” (*Ps. 24:3*). In the Psalms, worship is generally a human response to God’s creation (*Ps. 95:6, Ps. 100:1–3*). The second section (*Ps. 24:3–6*) answers the question in Psalm 24:3 by emphasizing that only the ones who have “clean hands and a pure heart” and who have not committed idolatry qualify for ascending into the hill of the Lord, i.e., worship (*Ps. 24:4, NKJV*). The psalm is not referring here to an ideal of absolute perfection. Later, these worshippers are described as “the generation of those who seek” the Lord (*Ps. 24:6, NKJV*).

The third section (*Ps. 24:7–10*) is about the coming of the King of glory. God here is pictured as a victorious warrior, “mighty in battle” (*Ps. 24:8, NKJV*), who has defeated the forces of evil and chaos and thus has restored the order of creation. In other words, the religious ideal of God’s people, who wait for salvation out of Zion, is both vertical and horizontal. This ideal is comprised of personal faith in the invisible God and hope in the coming kingdom; thus, it is both discerning (imparting wisdom) and apocalyptic.

Psalm 51: A Clean Heart. According to the superscription of Psalm 51 (*Ps. 51:1*), this prayer must have been written by David when he was confronted by Nathan the prophet for his sin. But this prayer also may be understood and interpreted as a typical supplication of any person who is aware of his or her iniquity and desires to meet with our approaching God.

The prayer begins with David’s cry to God for forgiveness, with an appeal for His mercy because of his “transgressions” (*Ps. 51:1*). Then the psalm diverges into two parts. The first part of the psalm (*Ps. 51:1–9*) is a plea to God to erase his “transgressions,” which separate him from God. God is described here as merciful (*Ps. 51:1*), the God of “truth” (*Ps. 51:6, NKJV*), and as hiding His face (*Ps. 51:9*). The sin is so great and pro-

found that all the words for sin are used to designate it: *khet'* ("sin"), *pesha'* ("transgression"), and *awon* ("iniquity"). In order to render the magnitude of his sin, the poet uses a hyperbolic image: his sin originates from the time of his conception in the womb of his mother (*Ps. 51:5*). Therefore, the only way for him to approach God and recover his relationship with Him is to have his sin disappear, as if nothing happened. In this first section, keywords expressing this idea of erasing punctuate the prayer: "blot out" (*Ps. 51:1, 9, NKJV*), "wash" (*Ps. 51:2, 7, NKJV*), "cleanse" (*Ps. 51:2*), and "purge" (*Ps. 51:7*).

The second part of the psalm (*Ps. 51:10–19*) concentrates on the idea of renewal. The keywords are "create," "renew," "restore," and "build." God is described as the Creator (*Ps. 51:10, 12, 15*) and Savior (*Ps. 51:14*). The psalm concludes with the vision of "the walls of Jerusalem" and of the sacrifice that is accepted by God (*Ps. 51:18, 19*).

Part III: Life Application

1. In light of our lesson for this week, ponder the following questions: What does the psalmist's call to "pray for the peace of Jerusalem" mean for us today? What must we do to achieve it?
2. Meditate on Jesus' recommendation to pray to our Father above, " 'Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven' " (*Matt. 6:10, NKJV*). Realize that this prayer is not simply about a spiritual solution to our troubling world. This prayer is about Jesus' coming to change the world. Discuss.
3. Why should our hope in the coming of the Lord, the concern over the signs of the times, the sensational events unfolding in the world, and our desire to prepare for God's kingdom complement our personal work in character growth and development as Christians? Why should the sentiments and thoughts of our hearts correspond with our ideals of the kingdom, as well? Discuss why our religious effort toward sanctification, and our ideal of holiness, should make us more sensitive toward our neighbors and ethical in our treatment of them.
4. **Activity:** As we live in times of wars all over the world, we need to learn to pray for the "peace of Jerusalem." This notion means that the peace of the world should be a part of our concern. Organize a week of prayer

to pray for peace on earth. Learn to develop empathy for people who suffer under the conditions of war.

Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

In the Psalms: Part 2



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Psalm 46, Jer. 4:23–26, Ps. 47:1–4, 1 Thess. 4:13–17, Psalm 75, Rev. 14:6–12.*

Memory Text: “Let the peoples praise You, O God; let all the peoples praise You. Oh, let the nations be glad and sing for joy! For You shall judge the people righteously, and govern the nations on earth. Selah” (*Psalm 67:3, 4, NKJV*).

When thinking of final events, we tend to focus on the beasts and the powers of Revelation. And, of course, they have a big role—an important one, too. Otherwise, God would not have put them in the Bible for us to understand them (*see Rev. 1:3*).

Prophecy, however, also deals with key issues associated with sin and suffering, judgment, the battle between good and evil, the nature of justice and injustice, persecution, and more.

The Psalms also deal with these issues in great depth, exploring nearly every possible human emotion—from dark despondency to unbridled joy. We see Israel preparing for battle against the forces of darkness. We read about individuals wrestling with the question of why doesn't God address evil more directly and immediately, a question that no doubt we all have asked. We are directed to the sanctuary for answers, and there also are repeated appeals to God's status as Creator. Are these not issues and questions that we, in our context today, wrestle with, as well?

Of course, this is why we will continue unpacking the book of Psalms in order to learn more about these crucial truths.

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

A Very Present Help in the Time of Trouble

Read Psalm 46. What message of hope can we take from this amid the turmoil of life now and what we know is going to come upon the earth in the last days as the great controversy plays out here?

Psalm 46 appears to touch on a theme that we find in the book of Hebrews: *that of something better*. Jesus is *better* than the earthly high priest, His sacrifice is *better* than all the animal sacrifices, and the heavenly sanctuary is *better* than the types that existed on earth.

This psalm takes a different approach, however. The author is not taking good things and contrasting them with better things; he is contrasting a world in rebellion—and the terrible consequences it has brought—with promise of the better things that God is planning for us.

Indeed, this psalm is filled with hope and promise that, even amid the desolation and trial and suffering and wars that we face, ultimately we are to “be still, and know that I am God” (*Ps. 46:10*) and to rest in the assurance that one day all of this is going to end and that God “will be exalted in the earth” (*Ps. 46:10*).

Notice, too, what is written here. “Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea” (*Ps. 46:2, NKJV*).

One cannot help but be reminded of the scenes that will take place at the Second Coming: “Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place” (*Rev. 6:14, NKJV*). And this: “Looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat” (*2 Pet. 3:12, NKJV*). Our present world, with all its attendant evils, isn’t going to last forever, and what comes afterward promises us something that our minds now can barely fathom. For now, though, we just need to hold on, persevering in faith and clinging to the revelation of God that we have, especially in Jesus on the cross.

However bad things are in this world (and we know they are going to get worse), what hope should you draw from your knowledge of the goodness, power, and character of God (think: the Cross)?

Hope Amid Turmoil

Much of the language in the book of Psalms is symbolic, but when it comes to the language that points forward to the ultimate resetting of our planet, we have little reason to believe that it is *merely* symbolic. Psalm 46 reminds us that the physical earth will be deeply affected by Christ's return. But it is not merely the rocks and ocean that will be affected; the grand climax of earth's history will mean the breakdown of worldly kingdoms—the miserable systems of human government that have caused so much suffering over the millennia.

In the end, all these powers, and all the evil and suffering that they have brought upon humanity, will come to a complete end.

Read Jeremiah 4:23–26. What is this telling us about the fate of this world, at least until there's a “new heaven and a new earth” (Rev. 21:1)?

Bible prophecy shows us what will happen to this world. The vision of Daniel 7, for instance, shows us a stormy sea from which the nations of the world arise. The winds of strife and warfare blow across the Gentile sea (the earth), producing one worldly kingdom after another, and not one of them can solve the very real problems that beset the human race. The worldly leaders we dare to trust almost always prove to be as sinful and selfish as the rest of us.

None of the kingdoms shown to Daniel proved to be a secure home for God's people (though some were better than others). But we know that we have citizenship in the kingdom of God (*Phil. 3:20*), and, high above the chaos of this planet, there is a throne that cannot be moved (see *Ezek. 1:26*). Jesus taught that the world will move into deeper disorder as we approach the moment of Christ's return (*Matthew 24*), but we can hold out in faith, regardless of the condition of our planet, because we know that God has not lost control, and that He will fulfill His promises: “The nations raged, the kingdoms were moved; He uttered His voice, the earth melted. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge” (*Ps. 46:6, 7, NKJV*). Short term, things are not going greatly nor will they. Long term? That—thanks to Jesus—is a whole other matter.

No question, our world seems chaotic and out of control. How should the prophecy of Daniel 7, for instance, help us see that ultimately things will work out well for us if we remain faithful?

Under His Feet

Read Psalm 47:1–4. What does it say about our place, ultimately, in Christ’s kingdom?

Long term, the future is bright. Until then, humanity ceded dominion over the planet to Lucifer, and by the time Satan appeared at the heavenly council in Job, he boasted that this earth belonged to him.

“ ‘From where do you come?’ ” God asked.

“ ‘From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking back and forth on it,’ ” he replied (*Job 1:7, NKJV*).

Satan was declaring *ownership*; the foot was used in antiquity to represent ownership. “ ‘Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land,’ ” God instructed Abraham, “ ‘for I will give it to you’ ” (*Gen. 13:17, ESV*).

Compare 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17 and Zechariah 14:4, and pay attention to Christ’s feet. What differences do you find between these passages, and what do they teach us about these two different, though related, aspects of Christ’s ultimate sovereignty of this world?

Talking about what Christ does at the end of the millennium, Ellen G. White wrote: “Christ descends upon the Mount of Olives, whence, after His resurrection, He ascended, and where angels repeated the promise of His return. Says the prophet: ‘The Lord my God shall come, and all the saints with Thee.’ ‘And His feet shall stand in that day upon the Mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof, . . . and there shall be a very great valley.’ ‘And the Lord shall be King over all the earth: in that day shall there be one Lord, and His name one.’ Zechariah 14:5, 4, 9. As the New Jerusalem, in its dazzling splendor, comes down out of heaven, it rests upon the place purified and made ready to receive it, and Christ, with His people and the angels, enters the Holy City.”—*The Great Controversy*, pp. 662, 663.

Look at the hope we have been given in Jesus. Think about how hard life would be if everything ended, forever, with death. It would all be futile, would it not?

Wine and Blood

Read Psalm 75. Read also Matthew 26:26–29 and Revelation 14:9–12. What does this psalm reveal about some of the issues at stake in the judgment, and how do these other texts help us understand these issues?

There is some thought that this psalm would have been sung upon the miraculous destruction of Sennacherib's army (*2 Chronicles 32, 2 Kings 19*)—a story that appears to point forward to the final destruction of the wicked in Revelation 20. The people of God are inside the Holy City with their righteous king when the armies of evil come up and surround them, and then they are destroyed by God Himself.

One of the things that God corrects in the judgment is the misappropriation of power that has taken place in our fallen world. Fallen humans no longer live for others or for the glory of God but for self. Today, in many ways, we are living with the consequences of choosing to believe that there is no meaning or objective moral standard in the universe. If there is to be a meaning, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche insisted that we must invent it for ourselves and pretend as if the universe exists for our benefit. Each individual, in effect, behaves as if he or she is a god.

(One might justifiably ask: *How well did this philosophy work out for Nietzsche himself?* Not too well, actually. He went insane, collapsing on a street in Italy after trying to stop a man from beating a horse. He then spent the next 11 years of his life in a semi-catatonic state before his death in 1900.)

However bad the problems are, as believers we are reminded to live with hope and not to judge the future by current events. It is easy to despair as we see the pillars of civilization being steadily eroded by the hearts and minds of the godless or by those whose views of God are not found in the Bible. We are currently living in a period in which moral values, even things as basic as human gender, male and female, have come under assault, at least in some parts of the world. Certain types of immorality, things that many people would have been ashamed to talk about, even privately, are now lauded and applauded publicly. That's how bad things are getting.

Though we must do our part now to try to make life better for others, why is it always important to remember that it's going to take the total destruction of this present world and the supernatural re-creation of it before all things are, ultimately, made right?

That Your Salvation May Be Known

Read Psalm 67. How does this hymn of praise inform your understanding of the role of God’s people in Revelation 14:6–12?

Engineers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have created a new black coating that renders objects painted with it nearly invisible. Created from nanotubes, it is many times darker than any black material previously created. This new material can absorb 99.995 percent of all visible light. Even the brightest light fails to make objects covered in this coating visible.

Psalm 67 begins with an appeal for God to “cause His face to shine upon us, that Your way may be known on earth” (*Ps. 67:1, 2, NKJV*). In the plan of salvation, God has provided a way for sinners to be readmitted to His immediate, glorious presence without being destroyed by His glory; and even now, in this life, the cross of Christ makes it possible for God’s face to shine on us.

But there is more: God intends that we reflect His light to the rest of the world. This was the task given to Israel: the temple was to be a house of prayer for all nations: “ ‘Even them I will bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on My altar; for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations’ ” (*Isa. 56:7, NKJV*).

In this psalm, David reminds us that God wants His “way [to] be known on earth, [His] salvation among all nations” (*Ps. 67:2, NKJV*). Tragically, God’s people have often failed in this task. Israel’s record in the Old Testament contains some dark chapters, as does the record of the Christian church during the past two millennia. It is as if we have painted our hearts with an ultra-dark substance, content to absorb God’s light without reflecting it.

Sometimes, we treat God’s last-day movement as a kind of privileged departure lounge reserved for spiritual frequent flyers, and we seem quite content that the rest of the world must sit in the noisy, uncomfortable gate lounge, unprepared for the journey ahead. The remnant church of Revelation 14, however, is not content just to stand on Zion with Christ, basking in His presence. Instead, they fly across the face of the earth, urging the world to join them on God’s holy mountain.

What obligations should we as a church, and as individuals, feel toward teaching others the truths that we love so much?

Further Thought: Read Psalm 133, Acts 1:4–9, and Revelation 5:4–7.

“During the patriarchal age the influence of the Holy Spirit had often been revealed in a marked manner, but never in its fullness. Now, in obedience to the word of the Saviour, the disciples offered their supplications for this gift, and in heaven Christ added His intercession. He claimed the gift of the Spirit, that He might pour it upon His people.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 37.

The disciples were instructed to bear witness to Christ “ ‘to the end of the earth’ ” (*Acts 1:8, NKJV*), a work that would herald the return of Christ (*Matt. 24:14*). We are to continue what they started.

When Christ told us to carry the gospel to the world, He did not leave us alone to figure out how it might happen. The work is directed from heaven’s sanctuary. Our work is intimately wrapped up in Christ: He guides and empowers us. This is *His* work, not ours: we are asked to follow His lead. You will notice this is how it worked with Israel: God asked them to follow His instructions, and then *He* made the impossible happen. The Spirit is already at work in the hearts of our neighbors; we are asked to be there when the moment of decision arrives so that we can invite them to join God’s people as they stand with the Lamb on Zion. We do not have to invent new means and methods because we have never been in charge of the work.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ There are lots of unreached people, even though the three angels’ messages have gone all over the world. In class, discuss how we as a church can better fulfill the task that Christ is using us to fulfill. How can we learn not to despair when we think of all the people who still have not heard of these truths for the last days?
- ❷ In Revelation 5, John witnesses the sealed scroll being given to the Lamb because He is worthy. When the seals on the scroll are opened in Revelation 6, we see the history of the New Testament church clearly predicted down to the end of time. From this description, what lessons can we learn about the way God intends to finish the work?
- ❸ What are the present events we see in the world that could easily lead to what we know is coming in Revelation 13 and 14? What obstacles remain?

Part 5: Love and Marriage

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Diana and Loren were planning to get married in Santa Fe, New Mexico, when they found out that they were expecting a baby. Diana postponed the wedding because she didn't want the baby to be the reason for marriage.

After the baby was born, the couple moved to Salt Lake City, Utah, where Diana's parents were living. They had had enough of life in Santa Fe.

Although Diana and Loren weren't living as Christians, Loren wanted to get married in a church. He chose an Adventist church and contacted its pastor. He also asked his father, an Adventist pastor living near Chicago, to perform the ceremony. This presented a dilemma for both pastors because Diana wasn't a church member and the couple wasn't living a Christian life. But after much prayer, they said they felt impressed to "err on the side of love." Loren's father gave premarital counseling over the phone.

On their wedding day, Diana was surprised to see church members whom they didn't know in attendance. *Who attends a wedding of strangers?* she thought. Her surprise grew when the church members gave them gifts.

Unpacking at home, Diana came across a small book titled *Happiness Digest*. She thought it was a book from the three persistent women who had visited her in Colorado. She began reading it, and she couldn't put it down. When Loren came home from work, she excitedly said, "This is truth!" He said, "Oh, that's *Steps to Christ*, written by a prophet named Ellen White." The idea of a prophet confused Diana, but a desire sprouted in her heart to visit the Adventist church and learn more about what she had been reading.

When Diana showed up in church, members didn't say a word. They accepted her as she was and even took care of her children so she could listen. When she overheard the head elder talking about Bible studies, she told him, "I want to study." Loren interrupted, "I can tell you whatever you want to know." He was embarrassed that he hadn't studied with her. "No, I want to study the Bible for myself," she said.

The elder, Lorell Herold, and his wife, Carol, came to their home every week for 28 weeks. As Diana studied, her worldly appearance began to change. No one spoke to her about it. No one preached about it. She simply lost interest in worldly things as church members loved her and as she learned about God's love that was poured out in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Her enthusiasm for the Bible surprised Loren. He wondered what he had missed growing up and began studying the Bible on his own. The two decided to get baptized together.

This mission story offers an inside look at how God miraculously worked in the life of Diana Fish, development director of the US-based Holbrook Seventh-day Adventist Indian School, which received the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering in 2021. Thank you for supporting the spread of the gospel with this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering on June 28. Read more about Diana next week.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Psalm 67:3, 4*

Study Focus: *Psalm 46, Psalm 47, Psalm 67, Psalm 75.*

Last week, the selected psalms focused on God's people at the time of the end as they prepare for the coming of the Lord. The lesson was about the challenges and the struggles of God's people. The challenges concerned their personal lives. The psalms referred to the need for profound and radical repentance—a complete change of heart. The selected psalms also warned God's people, as a community of faith, of the external enemy, who in moments of harsh persecution brought unbearable troubles upon them. This week, the four selected psalms will draw our attention to God Himself. The first psalm will present God to us as “our refuge,” who comforts us and reassures us, drawing Himself near to us as the One who will bring “help in” times of “trouble” (*Ps. 46:1, NKJV*).

The second psalm will stir our hearts, making us rejoice because God “our King . . . is the King of all the earth” (*Ps. 47:6, 7*). The third psalm will reinforce these emotions, which will transform into thanks because God has finally responded to our cry. God is no longer just the God to whom we repeat our supplications, asking for His deliverance. God is no longer simply the God to whom we complained, venting our frustration because “in the place of judgment, wickedness was there” (*Eccles. 3:16, NKJV*). Ultimately, God is the Judge who will bring justice to the world and finally will restore the right order (*Ps. 75:7, 10*). The fourth, and last, psalm is the fulfillment of the priestly blessing. God, full of merciful blessings, is there among His people (*Ps. 67:7*).

Part II: Commentary

Psalm 46: God Is Our Refuge. This psalm is attributed to the “sons of Korah,” who were Levites (*1 Chron. 6:16, 22*) responsible for the music in the temple. This information may explain the reference to the temple as “the holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High” (*see Ps. 46:4, NKJV*). According to the psalm, the dangers that are encountered here are of a double nature. They are not only of a natural order, as in some kind of cosmic earthquake that involves earthly and watery elements. Mountains also are shaken (*Ps. 46:3*), and mountains are

removed into the midst of the sea (*Ps. 46:2*). The cataclysmic dangers also are due to the violent attack by human enemies, as we see in the phrase “the nations raged.” Their rage catalyzes a parallel movement that culminates in the collapse of all earthly kingdoms (*Ps. 46:6, NKJV*).

God’s people, the immediate victims of this double disaster, are identified as the speakers of the psalm, which contains their reaction to the apocalyptic catastrophe: “we will not fear” (*Ps. 46:2, NKJV*). To the double onslaught from nature and the nations, God’s people respond with a double defense from both nature and God. On one hand, the river from the city of God brings gladness (*Ps. 46:4*). This flowing river evokes the healing waters running out of the New Jerusalem and the rivers that flowed from the Garden of Eden (*Gen. 2:10*). The same image reappears in the book of Revelation to describe the New Jerusalem (*Rev. 22:1*). On the other hand, God Himself is involved: God who stands in the midst of the holy city (*Ps. 46:5*) is called “our refuge,” which is qualified as “help and strength” in the time of trouble (*Ps. 46:1, NKJV*). Note the cosmic harmony between the God of creation and nature: God controls the elements, just as Jesus calmed the sea (*Matt. 8:27*). The cosmic confrontation refers to the last events of the great controversy, which will oppose the camp of God represented by the holy mount (the heavenly Zion) to the nations. The psalm resonates with the vision of the apocalyptic prophecy of the last battle of human history, as described in Daniel 11:45 and Revelation 16:16. The psalm ends with the assurance of God’s presence “with us” (*Ps. 46:11, NKJV*).

Psalm 47: God Is Our King. Psalm 47 continues the hope that was celebrated in the preceding psalm. The same Levitical author from the sons of Korah sings of the victory of the God of Zion. The God of the temple is sitting on His throne, which is Zion. Now that triumph, complete victory, has been achieved over the enemy, God is acclaimed as the King. This psalm belongs to the series of psalms called “royal Psalms” or “enthronement Psalms,” which are characterized by a general praise of God as King (*see Psalms 93, 96–99*).

It is noteworthy that Psalm 47 was used later in the Jewish liturgy of *Rosh Hashanah* (New Year’s Day), the first day of the first month of the Jewish calendar, *Tishri*. The blowing of the trumpet that is mentioned in Psalm 47:5 serves as the basis for blowing the *shofar* on that day, to celebrate the hope that one day God will reign over all the nations. Also, the nations who now are praising God are the same nations who have been defeated in the war (*Ps. 47:3*). The book of Revelation refers to the same phenomenon when it speaks about the “healing of the nations” in the context of the New Jerusalem (*Rev. 22:2, NKJV*). In ancient Israel, the word “nations” (*goyim*) designated

the enemies of Israel. Now, in this new environment, the nations are no longer identified against God's people. They now have become a part of God's people.

The event of the Exodus is used as a template to suggest, spiritually, the conquest of the new Canaan. The parallel expressions "inheritance" and "the excellence of Jacob" (*Ps. 47:4, NKJV*) refer to the conquest of the Promised Land, which included the surrounding nations that had been conquered (*see Deut. 32:8*). The psalm concludes with the eschatological vision of Israel, and all the nations of the world, who recognize God's sovereignty.

Psalm 75: God Is Our Judge. Psalm 75 is memorable for three impressive images used to signify God's three acts of judgment. First, there is the image of the shaking of the earth, which has crumbled and lost all its foundations (*Ps. 75:3*). It is as if the psalm described our world today—full of chaos and disorder, a world that has lost all stability and moral points, or pillars, of reference. God, as Judge, reminds His people that He will restore the stability of the "pillars" (*Ps. 75:3, NKJV*).

The second image is that of the cup full of very strong wine that God pours out on the wicked. The wicked drink this wine thoroughly (*Ps. 75:8*). Similarly, the book of Revelation often refers to the cup of God's wrath (*Rev. 14:10, Rev. 16:19, Rev. 18:6*).

The third image is that of the horns (*Ps. 75:10*). The horns are a symbol of power and dignity (*Num. 23:22, Dan. 7:8*).

At each stage, God's judgment brings justice to the distorted community. God "puts down" the boastful wicked who "lifts" up his horn (*Ps. 75:5, 10 NKJV*). God also exalts the righteous whose horn was thrown down (*Ps. 75:10*). The divine Judge restores, then, the order overturned by the powers of evil.

The same hope is promised in the book of Ecclesiastes. After having deplored the overturning of order on the earth, Solomon hopes that " 'God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work' " (*Eccles. 3:17, NKJV; compare with Eccles. 12:14*). In echo of this sentiment, the angel of Revelation 14 speaks about the same double judgment. On one hand, the angel promises that those who worship the beast, representing the deceptive church, " 'shall . . . drink of the wine of the wrath of God' " (*Rev. 14:10, NKJV*). On the other hand, those who worship the Lord of Creation are described as the "saints . . . who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" and will "rest from their labors" (*Rev. 14:12, 13, NKJV*).

Psalm 67: God Is Our Blessing. Psalm 67, which concludes our series

of psalms, is a prayer, as indicated by the jussive verbs expressing the wish of the suppliant: “that Your way may be known on earth” (*Ps. 67:2, NKJV; compare with Ps. 67:3, 5, 6, 7*). This prayer for blessing reflects the Aaronic blessing: “bless us, and cause His face to shine upon us” (*Ps. 67:1, NKJV; compare with Num. 6:23–26*). Although the speaker is not explicitly identified, the superscription that refers to the chief musician and the evocation of the priestly blessing suggest that it is a priest leading a congregation. What makes this prayer special is its universal scope. The psalm begins with a call for self-blessing: “upon us” (*Ps. 67:1*), then after the wish that God’s way “may be known on earth . . . among all nations” (*Ps. 67:2, NKJV*), the prayer extends to all the converted nations. This psalm has in view the eschatological fulfillment when all the nations, not just Israel, will benefit from God’s blessing. This prayer will be fulfilled only in the New Jerusalem, where there will be “no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it” (*Rev. 21:23, NKJV*).

Part III: Life Application

We do not need to wait until the coming eschatological persecution to feel our need for God’s refuge now. All kinds of present trouble qualify us for this need and are opportunities to experience God’s refuge. In moments of distress, we may feel threatened by our colleagues or our friends who do not share our faith and may even mock and plot against us. Or we may be beset by illness, failure on an examination in school, a lack of money or financial security, and loneliness. Any of these conditions may qualify as opportunities to enable us to experience God’s refuge. God alone can provide us the help we need to find a way out of any trouble. Only He can give us the strength to endure the difficulty.

The notion of “royalty” does not correspond to our modern life. Yet, this is an important notion that will help us in humiliating situations not to feel down and desperate: the great King of all the earth is taking care of us. As His children, we will inherit His promise very soon.

As we experience troubles and injustice, we can meditate upon the following line from Ecclesiastes: “the race is not to the swift . . . but time and chance happen” (*Eccles. 9:11, NKJV*). This observation of the inherent unfairness of life should also remind us of the mechanism of grace. We do not deserve the divine goodness and mercy we have received. Therefore, we must depend on God’s grace. God’s light is our light already, here and now. How may we receive and enjoy God’s gift of mercy in our lives now and walk with trust and joy as we journey in His light?

Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Upon Whom *the* Ends Have Come



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Rev. 6:12–17; Matt. 24:36–44; Gen. 6:1–8; 2 Pet. 2:4–11; Gen. 18:17–32; Dan. 7:9, 10.*

Memory Text: “Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10:11, 12, NKJV).

The Bible is filled with accounts of God's people that point to future events and that hold keys to helping us understand present truth. In fact, some of those accounts foreshadow last-day events with surprising detail, providing us a broader foundation for understanding the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation clearly.

Without violating an individual's freedom of conscience, God can perfectly steer the events that will happen in the last days, events that He revealed to the prophets. Some of these important stories are obvious, because the New Testament refers to them specifically in describing last-day events: Sodom and Gomorrah, the Flood, and so on. Others require careful thought and exploration in order to mine from them the truths that have been given to us in the Word of God.

During the next couple of weeks, we will be searching through a number of key stories in order to see what they might have to say about events such as the Second Coming, the investigative judgment, the final crisis, and more. And, through it all, we find Christ as the center, for He must be the foundation as well as the end goal of all our prophetic endeavors.

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

The Wrath of the Lamb

Read Revelation 6:12–17. Consider the details of these people’s response to seeing last-day events suddenly play out. What do you notice about their response?

It is interesting to note that the lost are not crying out, “What is this?” or “Who is behind this?” They appear to *know* what is happening. They refer to Jesus as the Lamb, which would require knowing something of the story of Christ. They also seem aware that “the great day of His wrath has come,” and that they are caught in a hopeless position: “Who is able to stand?” (*Rev. 6:17, NKJV*).

Prior to the end, the gospel is carried to every nation on earth (*Matt. 24:14*), and the three angels’ messages are delivered to the entire planet. And yet, there will be people who are caught off guard—not for lack of information but because of their refusal to believe and to obey. This will be the reason that such people are lost in the last days.

Read Matthew 24:36–44. What lessons does Jesus tell us we should be drawing from the story of Noah?

Jesus points to the story of the Flood to warn us that His second coming will come as a surprise to many. As with the Second Coming, the Flood did not come as a surprise to the world because of a lack of information. Noah preached for 120 years to a world that refused to believe. All were told what was going to happen. They just didn’t believe.

Meanwhile, many people assure themselves that the passage of long periods of time means that the prophecies are false. Using the Flood story as context, Peter writes “that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to 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 creation’ ” (*2 Pet. 3:3, 4, NKJV*). As each year passes, this sentiment will only grow.

In each person’s own experience, the second coming of Jesus (or in some cases, the third coming) is never more than a moment after death, and we all know how quickly life goes by. How might this perspective help us deal with the “delay”?

Noah's Evangelism

Peter reminds us that many will be unprepared for Christ's return because they "willfully forget" (2 Pet. 3:5, *NKJV*) what happened at the Flood. Today, even though the world has a collective memory of a great deluge (an astonishing number of global cultures tell the story of a devastating flood, from the ancient Greeks to the Mayans), the story of Noah is today perhaps one of the most ridiculed of the Bible's accounts. As predicted, the world is willfully setting the story aside as a myth, no matter how clearly and explicitly it is depicted in the Old Testament and referred to numerous times in the New Testament.

Jesus said that the world situation would resemble "the days of Noah" in Matthew 24:37–39. Compare this passage with Genesis 6:1–8. What were the moral conditions that led to the Flood? What parallels exist between the two times?

There is another important lesson for God's last-day remnant people that emerges from careful study. Hebrews 11:7 tells us that Noah "prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith" (*NKJV*).

Imagine preaching for more than a century with nothing to show for it but your own family in the ark. If Noah had been a modern evangelist, we might be tempted to write him off as a failure: decades of preaching and what would appear to be *no results*.

Fortunately, at the moment, many parts of the world are *very* responsive to the three angels' messages. Evangelistic outreach—the preaching of our unique remnant message—is proving incredibly effective in many places, and many are coming to know the Lord. We have not yet reached the point where there are no results, although we have been told the moment is coming when "probation will close, and the door of mercy will be shut. Thus in the one short sentence, 'They that were ready went in with him to the marriage, and the door was shut,' we are carried down through the Saviour's final ministration, to the time when the great work for man's salvation shall be completed."—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 428.

Until then, we have a work to do as a church.

How can we learn not to get discouraged if our personal evangelistic efforts don't seem to be bearing much fruit for the moment? Why must we continue our efforts? (See John 4:37.)

The Story of Sodom and Gomorrah

There is another key Old Testament story to which Peter makes direct reference when describing last-day events: the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The cities of the plain were legendary for their wickedness and became the first example of population centers destroyed by fire from heaven.

Read 2 Peter 2:4–11, Jude 5–8, and Ezekiel 16:46–50—and note all of the details. What were the moral conditions that led to the destruction of these cities, and what parallels exist today?

The warning offered to the last-day people of this planet through the account of Sodom and Gomorrah is plain: eventually, the wicked will also be destroyed by fire, as described so clearly in Revelation 20. Sin is remarkably deceptive in that it blinds us to the state of our own hearts, veiling our transgressions under a layer of self-approval, while the wickedness perpetrated by others often remains obvious to us. In the same chapter that God talked about how much love He had poured upon His nation, He also has to warn the nation that, while it did not commit the very same sins (*Ezek. 16:47*), it has actually become more wicked than Sodom.

Israel had been “playing the harlot” (*Ezek. 16:41*), committing spiritual adultery. Imagine the surprise of God’s people when they heard that they were *more wicked* than people who were legendary for their wickedness.

This is nothing new, not just with ancient Israel but with all humanity. In Romans 1:18–32, Paul presents a long list of human evil that could have been written based off of today’s newspapers. Paul’s description of Gentile sin was not intended to create feelings of superiority among the Jews but so that God’s people finally could understand the seriousness of their own sins. Nathan did the same thing when he spoke to David: he told the story of a rich man who stole a lamb from a poor man. This story “greatly aroused” David’s anger (*2 Sam. 12:5, NKJV*), because the injustice seemed obvious; even then, it took Nathan’s declaration, “You are the man!” (*2 Sam. 12:7, NKJV*) to make David see himself in the story.

It is important to remember that the Bible is not primarily addressed to the outside world but to God’s own people. When we see the heinous sins of others described in a passage such as Revelation 13 or 17, it is a warning that we, too, can fall into the same trap.

The Judge of All the Earth

Just prior to the destruction of Sodom, there is a curious story that takes place on the plains of Mamre. God, accompanied by two angels, appears to Abraham. When Abraham sees them, he invites the heavenly visitors to a meal, and it is at this point that God promises that Abraham and Sarah will have a son who would lead to the Messiah. Jesus, indeed, came from the line of Abraham (*compare with Gal. 3:16*). Then the story suddenly turns to the matter of the wicked cities of the plain.

Read Genesis 18:17–32. What do we learn from these verses about the character of God and the way He ultimately plans to deal with evil on our planet?

God does not owe us an explanation, but He chooses not to veil His motives and plans from the human race. “Surely the Lord God does nothing,” the prophet Amos tells us, “unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets” (*Amos 3:7, NKJV*).

Before God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah, He declares that the only right thing to do is inform Abraham of what is about to happen, about what he can soon expect to be witnessing.

God lingers with Abraham while the two angels go to the wicked city to call out those who will heed their warning. One cannot help but think of the prophetic angels who perform the same task in the last days, calling those of God’s people who live in Babylon to come out of her (*Rev. 14:6–12, Rev. 18:1–4*). As the final warning is being issued, God discusses with Abraham what is about to happen, and He willingly subjects Himself to the patriarch’s questions.

“‘Far be it from You to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked,’ ” Abraham comments, and then asks, “‘Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?’ ” (*Gen. 18:25, NKJV*). Abraham is not only examining the case of Sodom, but he is also *examining the character of God*. Likewise, before the end comes, God opens the books of heaven (*Rev. 20:4, 11–15*) and allows us to investigate the evidence before He finally brings fire down on the earth. That is, we will have a thousand years to get a lot of questions answered that, for now, remain unanswered.

Before the Lord will bring down final judgment upon the lost, He gives us a thousand years to understand what will happen to whom and why. What does this tell us about His character and about how open He is to scrutiny by created beings—beings fully dependent upon Him for existence—and who have no inherent right to know these things?

The Pre-Advent Judgment

The description of judgment found in Daniel 7 gives us a glimpse behind the veil—to an awe-inspiring opportunity to see how God is resolving the problem of sin while still redeeming those who wish to live in a covenant relationship with Him.

Read the description of the investigative judgment provided in Daniel 7:9, 10, 13, 14, 22, 26, and 27. What is the primary focus in the judgment? What is the verdict rendered at the end of the process? What does this tell us about the plan of salvation?

There is little question that the human race is judged by God. Ecclesiastes 12:14 assures us that “God will bring every work into judgment” (*NKJV*), and Paul reminds us that we do not need to judge each other, because “we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ” (*Rom. 14:10*). God, of course, does not need records to know who is saved or lost, but angels—who have been examining the plan of salvation all along (*1 Pet. 1:12*)—would naturally have questions. They were witnesses to the rebellion of Satan and saw a third of heaven’s angels expelled from heaven (*Rev. 12:4*)—and now God is bringing us into His presence. God opens the books and allows the saints to see everything.

The story of Abraham’s pleading for Sodom and Gomorrah—a type of the judgment—offers us some important insight into judgment. The sins of Sodom were obviously being investigated; God mentions that the wickedness of the city had given it such a reputation that the outcry against it was great (*Gen. 18:20*). But it was not only Sodom and Gomorrah that were investigated prior to their destruction. God also opened the door for Abraham to study whether or not God was acting righteously in His decision to destroy the wicked.

Meanwhile, who appears amid the heavenly judgment, in Daniel 7, but “the Son of man,” Jesus (*Dan. 7:13*; see also *Matt. 20:28*), whose appearance is the only reason why this judgment is “made in favor of the saints of the Most High” (*Dan. 7:22, NKJV*). His perfect righteousness alone gets His people through judgment.

Imagine standing in judgment with all your secrets exposed before our Holy God. What is your only hope at that time of judgment? (See Friday’s study.)

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Flood,” pp. 101, 102, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“The high priest cannot defend himself or his people from Satan’s accusations. He does not claim that Israel is free from fault. In filthy garments, symbolizing the sins of the people, which he bears as their representative, he stands before the Angel, confessing their guilt, yet pointing to their repentance and humiliation, and relying upon the mercy of a sin-pardoning Redeemer. In faith he claims the promises of God. . . .

“Satan’s accusations against those who seek the Lord are not prompted by displeasure at their sins. He exults in their defective characters; for he knows that only through their transgression of God’s law can he obtain power over them. His accusations arise solely from his enmity to Christ. Through the plan of salvation, Jesus is breaking Satan’s hold upon the human family and rescuing souls from his power. . . .

“In his own strength, man cannot meet the charges of the enemy. In sin-stained garments, confessing his guilt, he stands before God. But Jesus, our Advocate, presents an effectual plea in behalf of all who by repentance and faith have committed the keeping of their souls to Him. He pleads their cause, and by the mighty arguments of Calvary, vanquishes their accuser. His perfect obedience to God’s law has given Him all power in heaven and in earth, and He claims from His Father mercy and reconciliation for guilty man.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 583–586.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Jesus told His disciples that they were *in* the world but not *of* the world. (See *John 15:19*, *John 17:14–16*.) How do we balance our responsibility to win the world with the need to keep ourselves “unspotted from the world” (*James 1:27*)?
- ❷ What does Noah’s public ministry prior to the Flood teach us about how the great controversy works? In what ways do we play the same role today?
- ❸ Prior to devouring the wicked with fire from heaven (as He did with Sodom), God raises them from the dead and allows Satan to work with them for a short while (*Rev. 20:7–9*). What reasons can you think of that this would be a necessary last step before God sets everything right?
- ❹ As you consider the stories we studied this week, what cautions do you find for your own life? What do these stories teach you about your hope in Christ?

Part 6: Giving Up Alcohol

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Diana took her last drink of alcohol on US Independence Day. Opening a can of beer, she told friends, “There’s nothing better than an ice-cold beer on a hot summer day.” Then she took a big swig and nearly spit it out. She thought the beer had gone bad, so she got a different brand of beer out of the cooler. That beer also tasted awful. But a friend said both beers tasted fine.

That day, Diana quit drinking. It wasn’t because the Bible said beer was bad but because the Holy Spirit had changed her desire for alcohol.

A short time later, Diana and Loren were baptized by Loren’s father at an annual family reunion of his relatives near Chicago. Diana was surprised when she heard the baptismal vows for the first time. They included the line, “Do you believe that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit; and will you honor God by caring for it, avoiding the use of that which is harmful; abstaining from all unclean foods; from the use, manufacture, or sale of alcoholic beverages; the use, manufacture, or sale of tobacco in any of its forms for human consumption; and from the misuse of or trafficking in narcotics or other drugs?”

Diana shot Loren a quizzical look and thought, *How did we miss this?* She worked in a bar at the Salt Lake City airport. With big tips and easy work, it was considered one of the best jobs for unskilled workers.

Diana’s coworkers were stunned when she told them that she was quitting, and they asked why. The bartender asked several times. He and the others were interested in her new faith. Diana moved to another airport shop, where she made and sold cookies. It didn’t pay as well, but she got Sabbaths off.

Before long, Diana and Loren sensed that God was leading them to move to Tennessee to help Loren’s grandparents. They settled near Southern Adventist University. It was a time of great spiritual challenges. Diana still had many worldly traits to submit to God.

When a relative of Loren’s heard that Diana had newspaper experience, he asked her to apply for a position at Southern’s radio station, where he worked as general manager. Diana didn’t want the job, but Loren urged her to pray. She worked at the radio station for nearly ten years, including seven as its development director. During that time God helped her overcome sins that had troubled her from the time she was molested as a child.

Then Diana was asked to apply for a development director opening with the Adventist hospital system in Florida. She felt unqualified and didn’t want to apply, but Loren again urged her to pray. She worked at the hospital for the next ten years. Then she heard about Holbrook Indian School.

This mission story offers an inside look at how God miraculously worked in the life of Diana Fish, development director of the US-based Holbrook Seventh-day Adventist Indian School, which received the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering in 2021. Thank you for supporting the spread of the gospel with this quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering on June 28. Read more about Diana next week.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *1 Corinthians 10:11, 12*

Study Focus: *Genesis 1, Revelation 21–22, Matt. 24:27, Dan. 1:18, Dan. 12:13.*

The blessed hope of humanity that culminates in last-day events has been revealed, and not just through prophecies alone, which provide us with an explicit vision of the end. God also spoke of the end, existentially and implicitly, in the Scriptures, and thus, in His Word, He gives hints of various aspects of eschatological history. This notion teaches us an important principle: human history, which unfolds from the holy pages of Scripture, is not simply edifying information about what took place in the far distant past, the knowledge of which ensures “that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (*2 Tim. 3:17, NKJV*). Because God’s intention for humanity was, essentially, eternity, we may confidently expect that the message of future eternity also is contained in the biblical stories.

The inspired author of the book of Ecclesiastes was imbued with this intuition when he said, prophetically, that God “has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end” (*Eccles. 3:11, NKJV*). To reiterate, because God’s intention for humanity was essentially eternity, we may expect that the message of future eternity is contained in the biblical stories.

In this lesson, we shall discern the message of the end within the actual events narrated in the Old Testament Scriptures. The events of Creation, the Flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and even the story of Daniel in the court of Nebuchadnezzar testify to the message of the end.

Part II: Commentary

The Event of Creation. Paradoxically, the Creation account is perhaps the most eschatological message of all the events reported in the Scriptures. The Creation account holds this distinction precisely because it is the first event. Because history has a beginning, it is not eternal. History also has an end. God presides over both. Given that the beginning of history has been the work of God, the end also is under His power.

As part of its eschatological significance, the Creation account is linked implicitly with our hope of eternity. Both the Creation account and our hope of eternity have their basis in faith. The Scriptures testify to this notion, which already is affirmed through the canonical structure of the Bible itself, beginning with God's creation of the heavens and a new earth and ending with the creation of new heavens and earth (*Genesis 1 and Revelation 21–22; compare with Isa. 65:17, Rev. 21:1*). We see this idea also clearly stated in the only biblical definition of faith, which associates the two events, Creation and our hope in eternity: "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (*Heb. 11:1, NKJV*). Note that this poem on faith begins with faith in Creation (*Heb. 11:3*) and ends with hope in the "promise" (*Heb. 11:39, 40, NKJV*). We should also note the significance of the Sabbath at the end of Creation. In this position, the Sabbath points to the end of human history. Moreover, the Sabbath contains both our memory of Creation and our hope in the future event of the kingdom of God.

The Flood. Understanding the event of the Flood in parallel with the event of the Second Coming is recognized by Jesus Himself: " 'As the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be' " (*Matt. 24:37, NKJV*). Jesus then proceeds to unfold the similarities between the two events: the sudden, cataclysmic nature of their occurrences, the materialistic preoccupations of the people prior to the earth's destruction (eating, drinking, marrying), the idea of a remnant, the certainty of the event. The description of the Flood in the book of Genesis points also to what will happen at the end of human history. God does not remain indifferent to the evil of the world. God is sensitive to the reality of evil. God's judgment responds to the "wickedness of man" that "was great" (*Gen. 6:5, NKJV*). The destructive event of the Flood is God's assumed action of destruction: " 'I Myself am bringing the flood' " (*Gen. 6:17, NKJV*). At the same time, the Flood is also a creative-redemptive event, one in which God remembers His creatures. God's act of remembering His creatures is a way of expressing His attentive interest in them (*Gen. 8:1*).

After the story of the end of antediluvian life and civilization, God reaffirms the continuity of life. God provides humanity with food and emphasizes the sacredness of life (*Gen. 9:4–7*), thus pointing to His future gift of eternal life.

And finally, we must consider the rainbow, an artistic and poetic sign of God's forgiveness and love. Note that the rainbow invites us to remember the Sabbath, not only because it comes at the corresponding place in the structure that parallels the Creation story but also because the rainbow contains similar messages of rest and hope. It is particularly striking that the rainbow appears surrounding God's throne, as a sign of His future reign, undisputed and uninterrupted, over all the earth (*Rev. 4:3, Rev. 10:1*).

Sodom and Gomorrah. After God announced to Abraham the promise of a son who would transmit the Messianic seed for the blessing of all the nations (*Gen. 12:3, Gen. 22:18*), the biblical narrative of redemption is interrupted by a divine-human discussion concerning the troubling presence of evil and wickedness. Just as God did with Noah, He shares His concern with Abraham, along with His plan to intervene. God's move toward His human servant-prophets in the times of both Noah and of Abraham may parallel a similar move at the end of time in which God also shares with His human servants His plan to return to save and to judge humanity.

Abraham's response to God's intention showcases the responsibility he feels for his generation, and thus it deserves our attention. As such, his response should inspire and nurture a similar response within us for others. Note that, upon hearing God's intention to judge Sodom, Abraham does not flee to a distant place. Abraham is well-informed of the situation in Sodom and Gomorrah, where some of his relatives reside. Abraham's acute awareness of the situation of his relatives is not a judgment against them. Out of love for them, Abraham stands before God and mirrors God's own mercy in challenging His verdict, pleading with the Judge of all flesh for their forgiveness. Note Abraham's tenacity and perseverance in His prayer: "Abraham still stood before the LORD" (*Gen. 18:22, NKJV*). But also note Abraham's sensitivity to the direness of evil and to the need for justice and grace: " 'Would you also destroy the righteous with the wicked?' " (*Gen. 18:23, NKJV*).

A lesson also is to be taken from the actions of God, who not only comes down and shares His view with His human servant but also seems to encourage his boldness. We may even say that God likes being confronted by Abraham's argument because Abraham's defense resonates with God's own sense of mercy. Indeed, we note that God's last response is the one of grace: " 'I will not destroy it for the sake of ten' " (*Gen. 18:32, NKJV*). The number "ten" in the Bible symbolizes the idea of the bare minimum required to do something. Also note God's sovereignty. He "went His way as soon as He had finished speaking" (*Gen. 18:33, NKJV*). That is, the decision still belongs to God. Regardless of human zeal, it ultimately will not deter God's will. With humility, Abraham responds to God's divine verdict: "Abraham returned to his place" (*Gen. 18:33, NKJV*).

Daniel. One particular illustration of the presence of the future in Daniel's present existence is the phrase "at the end of the days" (*Dan 1:18, NKJV*). This phrase echoes the phrase *qets yamin*, "at the end of the days," marking the end of human history, at which time Daniel and the redeemed of all ages will receive their "inheritance" (*Dan. 12:13, NKJV*). It is also striking and significant that the language describing Daniel's "test" of ten

days echoes the language describing the prophecy of the eschatological Day of Atonement in Daniel 8:14. This prophecy parallels the Day of Judgment in Daniel 7:9–12, signaled by the significant number of common words and grammatical forms that are shared between Daniel 1 and Leviticus 16, the foundational text of the Day of Atonement (*see Dan. 1:13; compare with Lev. 16:2*). This particular echo is certainly significant, as it implies the promise of God’s revelation.

Also note the emphatic repetition of the word *mar'eh*, “countenance, appearance” (three times in Daniel 1:13, 15), which in the book of Daniel also refers specifically to the eschatological vision of God’s revelation in the 2,300 evenings and mornings (*Dan. 8:13, 26*). This eschatological perspective conveys, then, by association, a message of hope. Applied to the case of Daniel and his three friends, these echoes convey the idea that God will be revealed through this “test,” and they will be vindicated at the Day of Atonement. For Daniel, the message of the end of time was part of his present daily life: the way he ate and drank pointed to the ideal of Creation (*see Dan. 1:12; compare with Gen. 1:29*). The way Daniel related to other people, including the chief of the eunuchs who would have been his enemy (*Dan. 1:9*) was shaped by his view of how others were likewise created in God’s image (*Gen. 1:26, Gen. 9:6*).

Part III: Life Application

1. Every morning, when you wake up, begin your prayers with a moment of thanksgiving for the miracle of life. Ask the God of creation to change your life. Let God change your heart and give new direction to your life. Seek in the Bible new ideas to challenge you and inspire you to change. Keep the Sabbath in such a way that it becomes a foretaste of the kingdom of God.
2. Write a list of aspects of the world—both from creation and in your personal life—that inspire your hope in the kingdom of God. If you are an artist, draw and paint a rainbow. If you are a poet, write a poem about the beauty and the wonders of the rainbow. If you are a singer, sing a song about the rainbow.
3. Pray to God about someone you do not like until he or she becomes your friend. Pray to God concerning an important obstacle in your life. Persistently repeat this prayer until you finally see the actual result and you know that God has, indeed, heard your prayer.

Ruth and Esther



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ruth 1:1–5; Ruth 2:5–20; Job 1:6–11; Matt. 4:8, 9; Esther 3:1–14; Rev. 12:14–17.*

Memory Text: “So it was, when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, that she found favor in his sight, and the king held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther went near and touched the top of the scepter” (*Esther 5:2, NKJV*).

This week we continue to explore stories that prefigure last-day events. By using real-life events and people, God helps us to see things from His perspective and helps us understand how to interpret the prophecies that come later, which are given to help strengthen our faith.

Our attention turns to two important women whose stories have touched the hearts of countless generations: Ruth and Esther. One is a dispossessed widow who finds hope after meeting the kindly Boaz, her kinsman redeemer. Their marriage has become a favorite love story for Christians because of the way it reflects Christ's love for us. The other is a young girl living in a foreign land who becomes aware of a plot to destroy her people and finds herself thrust onto the main stage in the drama that unfolds to save them.

In prophecy, of course, a woman is a powerful symbol for God's church, shedding much light on how God regards His people. Let's look at the biblical accounts of these two women, whose life circumstances have been immortalized in the Word of God, and seek to draw whatever lessons we can from their experiences.

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

Famine in “The House of Bread”

Critics of the Christian faith have often pointed to the brutal reality of living in this world as evidence that: (a) God does not exist, (b) He is powerless to intervene when bad things happen, or (c) He doesn't care when we hurt. Many of the stories of the Bible, however, provide abundant evidence that none of these assumptions are correct. True, God is allowing the human race to reap the consequences of rebellion against Him. But without violating our free will, He is always present, always working in human history, always moving us toward the ultimate resolution of the problems of sin and suffering. The story of Ruth provides one such example.

Read Ruth 1:1–5. What hardships fell on Naomi and Ruth, and what caused them? How does this reflect the situation that the entire human race now faces?

There is irony to be found in the opening statement of this story: there was a famine that affected Bethlehem, a town whose name means “house of bread.” One is reminded of the abundance of Eden, where God told Adam and Eve, “ ‘Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat’ ” (*Gen. 2:16, NKJV*). The human race began its existence in abundance, under the care of a generous Creator, but then exchanged its role as caretakers of creation for the slavery of sin. “ ‘In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground,’ ” God told Adam (*Gen. 3:19, NKJV*).

Like Naomi, we have been dispossessed from the inheritance that God originally planned for us to have, and our lives have become a hardship. Eden was given as a gift, but not unconditionally: humans were free to rebel, but that would mean they would have to take responsibility for their own well-being. Originally, we were meant to “subdue” the whole unfallen world under God's blessing, but now we are faced with the task of subduing a fallen one. Selfish human beings competing for scarce resources leads to much heartache and suffering.

The tragedy is unspeakable: the earth still produces abundantly, a powerful testimony to God's love. But between human greed and the ravages of sin, the world at times seems to subdue us more than we subdue it. One day, however, all this will end.

Even after six thousand years of sin and death, how does the earth still reveal the wonders of God's love and creative power?

Ruth and Boaz

Naomi asked that her name be changed to *Mara* because of the bitterness that had fallen over her life (*see Ruth 1:20*). Our relationship with our Creator has been irreparably damaged by sin, forcing us into spiritual poverty. Our prospects are dim, and we spend our lives gleaning what we can from the edges of the field, living on the scraps of joy that can still be found in a broken world. But it all changes the moment we make a remarkable discovery: God has not forgotten us.

Read Ruth 2:5–20. Why is this such a pivotal moment in the story? Why do you think Naomi’s discovery of the benefactor’s identity was such good news?

Naomi could not take possession of her husband Elimelech’s land without obtaining assistance from her husband’s family. She hopes that Ruth can marry a close relative of her deceased husband and bear a child in Elimelech’s name. God had made provision in Israel for individuals to reclaim their inheritance in the Promised Land: a close relative was needed to redeem Elimelech’s inheritance. Boaz was not just a kind farmer; he was a kinsman of Elimelech who could redeem the land.

The discovery that Boaz was not only kindhearted and generous but a *relative* was the best possible news: the poverty in which these two women existed did not have to last forever.

Christians have long understood Boaz to be a type of Christ, who is not only our Creator but chose to become our kinsman—a real, flesh-and-blood human being, one of the reasons why, again and again, He called Himself “the Son of man” (*Matt. 12:8, Mark 8:31, Luke 22:22, John 3:14*).

Far too many people think of God in harsh terms—e.g., “Perhaps He will let us into heaven if we check all the correct boxes on a moral inventory, but He will do so grudgingly because we have scraped by on a technicality.” The picture of Christ revealed in Boaz completely displaces such notions. God not only notices us, but, in spite of our deep spiritual poverty, He wants us as His bride.

Try to wrap your mind around not only the Creator’s becoming part of His own creation but then dying for it. How should this astonishing truth impact how we view our own existence?

Boaz as Redeemer

Boaz falls deeply in love with Ruth and wishes to marry her, but there is a significant barrier: there is a closer relative who also has a claim on the woman and the land. If we consider Boaz to be a type of Christ, this situation may reveal an issue at stake in the great controversy. Christ loves us, but there is a “closer relative” who also has a claim: Satan.

What do the following passages reveal about Satan’s claim on humanity? (*Job 1:6–11; Matt. 4:8, 9; Jude 1:9; Luke 22:31*).

When Satan appeared in the heavenly council, he told God that he had been “‘going to and fro in the earth’ ” (*Job 1:7*), and when God asked him if he had noticed the righteous Job, Satan laid claim to him as one of his own, suggesting that Job’s heart did not *really* belong to God. *That is, he really follows You only because You are good to him. Stop being good to him and see who truly has Job’s allegiance.*

In Jude, we see a brief reference to a story that was well known in Israel: after Moses had been buried by God (*Deut. 34:6*), he was later resurrected. Though we are not privy to the details, the text itself, which says that they disputed over the body of Moses, implies that Satan was making some kind of claim on it.

“For the first time Christ was about to give life to the dead. As the Prince of life and the shining ones approached the grave, Satan was alarmed for his supremacy. With his evil angels he stood to dispute an invasion of the territory that he claimed as his own. He boasted that the servant of God had become his prisoner. He declared that even Moses was not able to keep the law of God; that he had taken to himself the glory due to Jehovah—the very sin which had caused Satan’s banishment from heaven—and by transgression had come under the dominion of Satan.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 478. Obviously, Christ refuted Satan’s claim, and Moses was resurrected (*see Matt. 17:3*).

In Ruth 4:1–12, Boaz travels to the gate of Bethlehem—the town where Christ would enter our world as our close relative. The elders gather, and finally a sandal (a symbol of ownership) is exchanged.

The gate of a village is where cases were decided: this is a type of judgment scene. It reflects the judgment scene of Daniel 7:13, 14, 22, 26, 27. We must not miss this critical aspect of judgment: judgment is in “favor of the saints” but only because Christ paid the price for us, just as Boaz did for his bride.

Haman and Satan

In the story of Esther, we meet Haman, who is hungry for position and power. He is given a great degree of prominence in the empire, above all the other princes (*Esther 3:1*).

If we read Ezekiel 28:11–15 and Isaiah 14:12–15 about Lucifer, we can find some parallels with Haman, an evil antagonist to God’s chosen people, who refuses to bow to God’s supremacy. Satan’s overarching intentions are revealed in the story of the temptation of Christ, where he takes Jesus to a high place to show Him the kingdoms of the world (*Matt 4:8–11*). Christ, as we have seen, came to redeem the world and claim it as His own—and He did it as one of us. Jesus is the kinsman redeemer, and the price He paid to redeem the world was exceedingly high.

In the book of Revelation, we see that Satan’s lust for power and worship brings this world to its final crisis. His deceptions convince the world to “marvel” and follow the beast (*Rev. 13:3, 4, NKJV*), except for notable exceptions who refuse to worship him. With these people, he resorts to force.

Haman notices that Mordecai—one of God’s chosen people—would not defer to him or acknowledge what he believed to be his right to “worship.” He is “filled with wrath” (*Esther 3:5, 6, NKJV*), and he becomes determined to eliminate all of Mordecai’s people from the face of the earth.

Read Esther 3:1–14, Revelation 12:14–17, and Revelation 13:15. What parallels do you find between these passages? How is John’s description of God’s remnant church like Haman’s description of God’s people?

The devil has laid claim to this world, but the presence of people who stay loyal to God—who keep His commandments—disproves his claim of complete supremacy. “When the Sabbath shall become the special point of controversy throughout Christendom, the persistent refusal of a small minority to yield to the popular demand will make them objects of universal execration.”—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, February 22, 1910.

Think about the “small” things that test your faith now. If you compromise on them, the “small” things, how will you do when the big test comes?

For Such a Time as This

There is an unfortunate tendency among some Christians to dwell on the hard things of Bible prophecy. We see that trying times lie ahead, and the study of prophecy can become fear-based, focusing on hardship instead of the promised resolution to the story. While God does not sugarcoat the future, and He is honest about the events that will transpire between now and the close of the great controversy, it is important always to read the story to the end.

There is a general pattern in prophecy in which God reveals the truth about the mess created by our human rebellion, and He shows us the consequences. But then He always holds out hope. Some have looked at the predictions of a final crisis—the “time of Jacob’s trouble”—with fear and trembling. Undoubtedly, the closing moments will not be easy ones for God’s people. But just as the prediction of hard times is reliable, so is the promise of deliverance.

In Revelation 12, the devil pursues Christ’s bride with hateful vengeance, but God intervenes to save her. The story of Esther also has a beautiful queen playing a central role in the drama, and God uses her powerfully to save His people.

Read Esther 4:13, 14; Esther 5:1–3; and Esther 9:20–28. What lessons can we draw from these passages regarding our plight in the closing moments of earth’s history?

God raised up His remnant church for a specific moment in history. As the 1,260 days of the Dark Ages drew to a close, God brought His bride out of hiding (*compare with Rev. 12:14*) to carry His final message of mercy—the three angels’ messages—to the world. We are here “for such a time as this” (*Esther 4:14*).

Esther discovered she was not alone in facing the persecution being unleashed on her people by Haman: she found favor from the king, and her people were ultimately delivered. Neither are we alone as we enter the final moments of earth’s history—the King is on our side, and God’s people will be delivered, as well.

Things worked out well, at least in this story, for God’s people. It doesn’t always happen that way, though, does it? Why, then, must we always take a long-term view of things in order to maintain the hope that we have in Christ?

Further Thought: “The First King of Israel,” pp. 605, 606, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“Satan will arouse indignation against the minority who refuse to accept popular customs and traditions. Men of position and reputation will join with the lawless and the vile to take counsel against the people of God. Wealth, genius, education, will combine to cover them with contempt. Persecuting rulers, ministers, and church members will conspire against them. With voice and pen, by boasts, threats, and ridicule, they will seek to overthrow their faith. By false representations and angry appeals, men will stir up the passions of the people. Not having a ‘Thus saith the Scriptures’ to bring against the advocates of the Bible Sabbath, they will resort to oppressive enactments to supply the lack. To secure popularity and patronage, legislators will yield to the demand for Sunday laws. But those who fear God, cannot accept an institution that violates a precept of the Decalogue. On this battlefield will be fought the last great conflict in the controversy between truth and error. And we are not left in doubt as to the issue. Today, as in the days of Esther and Mordecai, the Lord will vindicate His truth and His people.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 605, 606.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Why do you think God allows His people to pass through trying times? What is the point of allowing it?
- ❷ How does a believer prepare himself or herself for any potential hardship that may come with loyalty to Christ? Where do you find hope in the midst of difficult circumstances?
- ❸ Why do you think we tend to dwell on the harder things of prophecy and allow them to eclipse the bigger picture that provides good news?
- ❹ A friend comes to you after reading the book of Revelation and confides that she finds it “terrifying.” What approach would you use to help her understand more clearly and find peace of mind?
- ❺ Someone says, “I’m not convinced that God loves me or wants me. If you knew what I’ve done, you would understand why.” What response would you give? How do the stories of Ruth and Esther inform your approach?

Part 7: “We Need One of Those!”

By DIANA FISH

Diana and Loren Fish had their dream jobs. She was working in development at the Seventh-day Adventist hospital in Orlando, Florida, and he had a successful counseling practice. But something was missing. They prayed.

On a whim, Diana attended a North American Division Women’s Ministries conference. In the exhibition hall, she stopped at the Holbrook Seventh-day Adventist Indian School booth to admire student-made pottery. When a woman at the booth learned that Diana worked in development, she excitedly said that the school was looking for a development director. Diana dismissed the idea that God might be calling her to work at the school in Arizona.

Six months later, Loren decided at the last minute to attend the 2015 General Conference Session in San Antonio, Texas. In the exhibition hall, he found himself at the Holbrook booth. When a woman at the booth learned he was a licensed clinical social worker, she excitedly said, “We need one of those!” She asked about his wife’s job, and he responded that she worked in development. “We need one of those, too!” the woman said, waving at her husband, who happened to be Holbrook’s principal.

Weeks later, the couple visited Holbrook after a vacation to see family in Colorado. They spent nine hours talking with staff about the school’s mission to provide a safe place for American Indian children to learn and grow. They learned that the staff dreamed of having Christian counseling available around the clock for students dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues. Diana tossed and turned that night in the school guestroom. In the morning, she noticed two identical books on a bookshelf. They looked familiar. Reaching into her backpack, she pulled out the same book, which Loren had gotten at the General Conference Session. It was titled, *Follow: Anytime, Anywhere, at Any Cost*, by Don MacLafferty. Immediately, Diana knew God was calling them to Holbrook. She prayed, “You’ll have to put the same impression on Loren’s heart.”

Several days later, back in Florida, Loren told Diana that he had been praying and sensed God calling them to Holbrook. That evening, they submitted their résumés and began packing. Two weeks later, they were offered the positions. They have worked at the school for the past 10 years. “God is so amazing,” Diana said. “He has shown me every step of the way that He is working in my life. Before I knew Him, He knew me and had a plan.”

This mission story shows how God miraculously worked in the life of Diana Fish, development director of the US-based Holbrook Seventh-day Adventist Indian School, which received the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering in 2021. Thank you for supporting the spread of the gospel with this quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering on June 28. Read more about the school next week.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Esther 5:2*

Study Focus: *Ruth 1, 2, 4; Esther 3:1–14*

The Bible is full of women who played significant roles in the Bible. Eve, whose name means “life,” for she was “the mother of all living,” was the one who transmitted the Messianic seed, which led to the birth of Jesus Christ, the Savior of humanity (*Gen. 3:15*). In the patriarchal period, such women as Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah, as well as Tamar, had a powerful impact on the course of salvation history. Their actions ensured the continuation of the Messianic line.

In the time of the Exodus, Israel owed its survival to women when Pharaoh decreed the killing of all the newborn male babies of Israel. The midwives (*Exod. 1:15–17*), and even the daughter of Pharaoh (*Exod. 2:5*) and other women (*Exod. 2:7*), are remembered in the Torah, the Pentateuch, as those who were instrumental in saving Israel, often at the risk of their own lives. Later, Deborah, the prophetess who judged Israel, is referred to as the one who “arose” and saved Israel in war (*Judg. 5:7, NKJV*). Rahab saved the spies and thus helped save Israel in their fight against the Canaanites. According to Matthew’s genealogy (*Matt. 1:5*), Rahab was the mother of Boaz who married Ruth and became an ancestor of the Messiah. In this lesson, we will focus on two important women who gave their names to biblical books: Ruth and Esther. Despite the differences in times and settings of their stories, in some ways these two women exemplify the character of the many women who God appointed to help save Israel.

Part II: Commentary

The history of ancient Israel may be said to be framed by the stories of Ruth and Esther. Ruth belongs to “the days when the judges ruled” (*Ruth 1:1, NKJV*), during the earliest period of Israel, at a time when the Israelite tribes were still settling in the Promised Land. Esther belongs to the time of the Persian exile. Aspects of Israel’s history are sometimes linked with the voice of a woman, which is significant because, biblically, a woman often symbolizes a church. One then may ask: In what way do these two women typify God’s church, and what

lessons may we, as God's last-day church, learn from them?

It is also noteworthy that nomadic societies tended to give more importance to women than sedentary societies did. In light of this tendency, today, we may do well to consider how the voices and influence of Ruth and Esther, and their modern counterparts, may well be helpful in a world that becomes increasingly unsettled and violent.

Ruth or the Power of Kindness. Reading the story of Ruth through the lens of the plan of salvation during the end times is illuminating. The name of Ruth comes from a root meaning “friend, ally,” with the connotation of softness and freshness. The main theme of the book is kindness. There is no tension, no wicked person nor conflict nor criticism, nor even implicit bitterness in the beautiful and poetic story. Ruth is identified as a Moabite, a qualification that is used twice. The hero of the book is a foreign woman. The message of kindness that permeates the book is thus disconnected from any national belonging; kindness is universal and transcends the borders of all nations.

The story tells us that this Moabite was married to an Israelite husband who died; she decides, then, to follow her mother-in-law, Naomi, not only in her physical journey back to the land of Israel but also in her Israelite religion: “ ‘Wherever you go, . . . I will go; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die’ ” (*Ruth 1:16, 17, NKJV*). The story begins, then, with an evangelistic success, although no report of the missiological strategy is given. Ruth was not converted by a sensational miracle in an evangelistic campaign. Ruth simply followed her mother-in-law out of love for her because she knew her and trusted her judgment.

Note that Naomi did not use any argument to convince Ruth to stay. On the contrary, Naomi even encouraged Ruth to return to her mother's house (*Ruth 1:8*). Naomi stopped arguing with Ruth only when she “saw that she was determined to go with her” (*Ruth 1:18, NKJV*).

The next step of the story takes us to Boaz, Naomi's kinsman, a wealthy farmer of whom Ruth humbly asks permission to glean some grain from his fields. The story says that Boaz spoke “ ‘kindly’ ” to her (*Ruth 2:13, NKJV*) and was generous with her (*Ruth 2:8*). It happens that Boaz is the only near kinsman who is willing to fulfill his responsibility as the *go'el*, the redeemer of the family. The verb “redeem” is a keyword of the passage (*Ruth 4:4, 7, NKJV*).

Note Ruth's zeal and boldness in approaching her redeemer. Also note her humility, as she acknowledges her modest origins as a “ ‘foreigner’ ” (*Ruth 2:10, NKJV*) and her unworthiness in that she is “ ‘not like one of your maidservants’ ” (*Ruth 2:13, NKJV*). Note, too, her kindness toward her mother-in-law, a kindness that has been remarked upon by many

people, including Boaz, her potential redeemer (*Ruth* 2:12). The biblical author never refers to Ruth's faithfulness in her religious and ritual duties, as if her kindness toward others was enough evidence to convince her redeemer of her devotion.

The conclusion of the story is all the more striking: not only did Ruth marry Boaz, thus restoring the dignity of her family, but she received the greatest reward a family could receive, namely, its place in the genealogy of the Messiah. The legacy of the book is of high significance. Ruth was accepted in Israel, despite her foreign origin—perhaps, and paradoxically, because of her foreign origin, as emphasized in the book (*Ruth* 1:4, 22; *Ruth* 2:2, 6, 10–13, 21; *Ruth* 4:5, 10). In Jewish liturgy, the book of Ruth is read during the feast of *Shavuot*, also known as the feast of weeks or Pentecost, a celebration that is associated with the harvest and the gift of the law.

Esther or the Power of Beauty. Equally inspiring, as well as challenging, is reading the book of Esther in light of God's plan of salvation during the last days of human history. Challenging because the book of Esther reads like a secular book, with no explicit religious content whatsoever. There is no reference to God. The course of events seems to run by itself, with no divine, miraculous intervention. All that transpires in the story depends on the shrewdness of Mordecai, a royal courtier, and on the beauty and bravery of Queen Esther, as well as upon timing (*Esther* 3:7, *Esther* 9:24). The roles of priest and prophet are totally absent from the story. Even the end of the story, with the killing of many people, raises suspicions about its spiritual value. More important, Esther and Mordecai's Jewish identity did not prevent them from reaching the highest positions in the pagan court. Neither does anything in the book suggest a tension between them and that environment. No wonder many ancient rabbis and church fathers question the spiritual value of the book, even denying its canonical place.

Yet, this book is also an inspiration, precisely because of the problematic elements mentioned above. The lack of reference to God is, in fact, an important element that makes this book significant and relevant for us who live today in a secular and troubled world. The experience of the silence of God is already a paradoxical component of His providential presence. It happens that Esther is a queen at the very moment when the people are threatened. It also happens that the king, during a bout of insomnia, discovers an act of Mordecai's loyalty which had saved the king's life. On the other hand, the text clearly suggests that the Jewish people are protected. If Esther does not speak to the king, if she remains silent, " 'deliverance will arise . . . from another place' " (*Esther* 4:14, NKJV). Likewise, Jesus in His time uses a similar argument: " 'If these would keep silent, the stones should immediately cry out' " (*Luke* 19:40, NKJV).

Some commentators find evidence of God's providence in the name of Esther, which they relate to the concept of *hester panim*, "hiding of the face," an important dimension of God's relationship with His people when He seems to be absent (*see Isa. 8:17, Isa. 50:6, Isa. 53:3*). The allusion to the Day of Atonement has also been noted on the basis of common elements, such as fasting, the idea of judgment, and the redemption of God's people versus the destruction of the wicked. The ancient rabbis have supported this connection on the basis of the play on the words *pur*, "lot," with the word *kippur*, the Day of Atonement. Also, the book of Esther ends with the same hope and perspective of "peace" and the seeking of "good" (*Esther 10:3; compare with Ps. 122:8, 9, NKJV*) as in the Day of Atonement.

Part III: Life Application

How may the following contemplations on Ruth and Esther be applied to your life?

Ruth: The fact that we believe we belong to God's people and are very religious should not make us sad, angry, or proud, but it implies a serious code of ethics. Just as Ruth was kind and friendly with people around her, we should strive to be kind and friendly to people in our families and in the society around us. Also note Ruth's humility. Ruth does not boast about her qualities or about her piety. Instead, Ruth feels unworthy and never judges others. Ruth is not involved in religious activism; she is not legalistic, thinking she deserves salvation on the basis of her works. She counts only on the grace of her mother-in-law and of the kinsman. Lastly, note that Naomi's missionary method is essentially comprised of her gracious attitude and acts of kindness.

Esther: The story of Esther resonates well with life in our modern and secular world. Wherever we are and whatever we do—in the office, on the road, in college, or even in the family, amid our most menial tasks and humble duties—our presence is important and determines the salvation of others. Who knows whether we have come to a given place for such a time as this (*Esther 4:14*). Be wise—we do not always need to reveal immediately our religious identity (*Esther 2:10, 20*). Make yourself lovable, as did Esther (*Esther 2:17*). Vow to do whatever you can to solve your troubles, and trust in God's grace to reverse the course of events.

Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Precursors



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Dan. 2:31–45; Dan. 3:1–12, 17, 18; Rev. 13:11–17; Rom. 1:18–25; Acts 12:1–17; Matt. 12:9–14.*

Memory Text: “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (2 Timothy 1:7, NKJV).

This week, we will look at two more Bible stories that foreshadow last-day events in remarkable detail.

First, we will examine the account of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, which has obvious allusions to the issues portrayed in Revelation 13. Then we will turn to the New Testament, where we find that the experience of the early Christians also can help us understand what to expect between now and the return of Christ.

Both examples highlight remarkable courage and provide keys to finding peace of mind under the most trying of circumstances.

Again and again, Jesus said such things as “Do not fear,” and “Why do your thoughts trouble you?” It is important to remember that the focus of prophecy is Christ, and, as such, we must be able to find the same counsel throughout the scenes portrayed in earth’s closing moments. “‘Let not your heart be troubled,’ ” He taught His disciples, “‘you believe in God, believe also in Me’ ” (John 14:1, NKJV).

In other words, yes, last-day events will be difficult and trying for those who seek to stay faithful to God. But ultimately, we should view these events with hope, not fear.

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

Daniel 2 and the Historicist Approach to Prophecy

One of the most powerful prophecies in all Scripture is Daniel 2. Writing more than five hundred years before Christ, the prophet set out world history, starting from his time in Babylon and then through Media-Persia, Greece, Rome, and the breakup of Rome into the nations of modern Europe as they exist today.

In fact, talking about these European nations, one text says that “ ‘they will mingle with the seed of men; but they will not adhere to one another, just as iron does not mix with clay’ ” (*Dan. 2:43, NKJV*). This prophecy has been amazingly fulfilled. That is, despite all sorts of intermarriage between the people (from princes to plebes) of these nations, they remain divided.

For example, the British monarchy is called the House of Windsor, a nice English name. However, that name is a relatively recent development—1917, actually. Before then, the family was called Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, a distinctly German name, because many of the British royalty—through mingling “with the seed of men”—were blood relatives with the Germans. However, those blood ties were not enough to keep them from war, and so, during World War I, wanting to dissociate themselves from their hated enemies, they changed the name to the House of Windsor.

Read Daniel 2:31–45. What was Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, and how did Daniel interpret it?

The apocalyptic prophecies in Daniel all follow the foundation set in Daniel 2. That is, the rest of these prophecies, like Daniel 2, follow the sequence of one world empire after another until God establishes His eternal kingdom (*see Dan. 2:44; Dan. 7:13, 14*). In other words, the prophecies go through history in *an unbroken sequence of empires*, starting in antiquity and ending in the future, even to our time. This is the historicist approach to interpreting prophecy and is what the texts demand. This use of the historicist approach is crucial for understanding last-day events, particularly as they are depicted in the book of Revelation.

How does Daniel 2 prove to us that not only does God know the future but that He is, ultimately, in charge of it?

Worshipping the Image

However much fealty Nebuchadnezzar, impressed by what Daniel had done, at first paid to Daniel and to his God (*see Daniel 2, especially vv. 46–48*), it didn't last.

Read Daniel 3:1–12. What significance can be found in the fact that the statue was all gold and that the king demanded that it be worshiped?

The king underscored his defiance of God's message by constructing a statue made *entirely* of gold. The message? Babylon will never fall, and Nebuchadnezzar will always be king. And anybody who dared to challenge that idea would be put to death. It serves as a powerful reminder that our human desire for self-determination can quickly blind us to the truth about how the great controversy will most certainly play out.

In some ways, Nebuchadnezzar displays characteristics of Lucifer: he was ambitious, self-important, and prideful enough to rebel openly against God's authority. In other ways, of course, there are marked differences: Nebuchadnezzar eventually came to faith in the true God, and it is likely that we will meet him in the kingdom he originally fought so hard to defy.

Read Daniel 3:17, 18, the words of the three Hebrew boys in defiance of the king. What does this teach us about faith and what at times it could demand of us?

Think how easily these three men could have rationalized their way out of this dangerous situation. After all, were they not being fanatics, willing to be burned alive over merely bowing down? Couldn't they have just faked it, bowing to tie their shoelaces while praying to their own God? Was it really worth what they were facing? Obviously, they thought so, even though their words showed that they knew that they might not escape with their lives.

How can we avoid the easy rationalizations that present us with opportunities to compromise on our faith? What does this text say that addresses a similar temptation: “ ‘He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much’ ” (Luke 16:10, NKJV)?

Worshipping the Image, Again

Bible students have long seen the connection between Daniel 3 and what Revelation teaches about last-day events. And with good cause, too, because Daniel 3—with the command, punishable by death, to “worship the image” (*Dan. 3:15*)—reflects what Revelation teaches about the command, punishable by death, to worship another image. “He was granted power to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed” (*Rev. 13:15, NKJV*).

Read Revelation 13:11–17; Revelation 14:9, 11, 12; Revelation 16:2; Revelation 19:20; and Revelation 20:4. What contrast is present here that pits the commandments of God against the commandments of men?

God’s people are called to worship “ ‘Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water.’ ” That is, the Creator, as opposed to the beast and its image. The three Hebrew boys, facing a similar threat, refused to worship anything other than the same Creator God. Hence, however different the circumstances between what happened on the plain of Dura, with the command to worship the image, as opposed to the Creator and what will happen worldwide with the call to worship the image as opposed to the Creator—the principle is the same.

Read Romans 1:18–25. (Notice the link between Romans 1:18 and Revelation 14:9, 10 about “the wrath of God.”) In what way is the issue over worshipping the image just another manifestation of this same principle regarding to whom humans ultimately give their allegiance?

Worship doesn’t necessarily mean bowing and offering incense, though it can. We worship whatever holds our ultimate allegiance. When you consider who God is, our Creator and—after what He has done for us in Jesus—our Redeemer as well, then of course He alone should be worshiped. Anything else is idolatry. Perhaps this helps explain Jesus’ hard words here: “ ‘He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad’ ” (*Matt. 12:30, NKJV*). Final events are simply going to be a dramatic manifestation of this truth.

Early Church Persecution

It's not just the Old Testament that gives us precursors to final events; the New Testament does, as well. Life was not easy for first-century Christians. They were hated by many of their own fellow religionists, who saw them as a threat to the faith of Moses. They also faced the wrath of the pagan Roman Empire. "The powers of earth and hell arrayed themselves against Christ in the person of His followers. Paganism foresaw that should the gospel triumph, her temples and altars would be swept away; therefore she summoned her forces to destroy Christianity. The fires of persecution were kindled."—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 39.

There is a story in the book of Acts that demonstrates, quite powerfully, what God's people might expect as we head toward the scenario found in Revelation 13.

Read Acts 12:1–17. What elements of this story might foreshadow last-day events?

James had been beheaded, and Peter was to be next; there was a death penalty against Christians. Perhaps one of the most remarkable aspects of this story can be found in the fact that Peter is *sleeping* on what should be the worst night of his life—so soundly that the angel actually has to strike him to wake him up!

Peter, of course, was miraculously set free and found his way to a meeting of believers who had trouble believing that he had really been delivered, even though they had been praying. The Bible says they were *astonished*—which makes one wonder how often we pray and scarcely dare to believe that God will actually answer us.

Some believers were spared; others were killed. As we approach the end time, the same thing will happen. Even Peter, though spared then, eventually died for his faith. Jesus Himself even told him how: " 'Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish.' This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, 'Follow Me' " (*John 21:18, 19, NKJV*).

Notice that Jesus, after telling Peter how he would die, nevertheless still says to him, " 'Follow Me.' " What should this tell us about why even the threat of death should not keep us from following the Lord?

The Mark of the Beast

As the years have passed and final events—such as the death decree and the enforcement of the mark of the beast—have not yet happened, some have expressed doubt, even skepticism, about our interpretation of final events, including how Sabbath and Sunday could be central to the final conflict.

The book of Revelation is clear: we either worship the Creator or the beast and its image. And because the seventh-day Sabbath is the foundational sign—going back to Eden itself (*see Gen. 2:1–3*)—of God as Creator, it should not be surprising that, in an issue about worshiping the Creator, the Sabbath would be central. Also, it is no coincidence that the beast power is the same power that claims to have changed the Sabbath commandment from the biblical day to Sunday, which has no sanction in the Bible. With this background in mind, the idea of Sabbath and Sunday being involved in the issue of worship—again, either the Creator (*see Rev. 14:6, 7*) or the beast—makes good sense. And we have in the New Testament a precursor to the issue of the seventh-day Sabbath versus human law.

Read Matthew 12:9–14 and John 5:1–16. What issue caused the religious leaders to want to kill Jesus?

In Matthew 12, after Jesus healed on the Sabbath the man with a withered hand (*Matt. 12:9–13*), how did the religious leaders respond? “But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus” (*Matt. 12:14, NIV*). *Death because of the seventh-day Sabbath?* In John 5:1–16, after another miraculous healing on the seventh day, the leaders “persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill Him, because He had done these things on the Sabbath” (*John 5:16, NKJV*).

Death because of human tradition (nothing in the Bible forbade healing on Sabbath, just as nothing in the Bible has put Sunday in place of Sabbath) versus the seventh-day Sabbath? Though the specific issue here with Jesus isn’t the same as in final events, it’s close enough: human law versus God’s, and, in both, the contested law centers on the biblical Sabbath.

Dying over one of the commandments of God? How could one easily seek to rationalize one’s way out of that?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “God’s People Delivered,” pp. 635–652, in *The Great Controversy*.

“In all ages, God has wrought through holy angels for the succor and deliverance of His people. Celestial beings have taken an active part in the affairs of men. They have appeared clothed in garments that shone as the lightning; they have come as men in the garb of wayfarers. Angels have appeared in human form to men of God. They have rested, as if weary, under the oaks at noon. They have accepted the hospitalities of human homes. They have acted as guides to benighted travelers. They have, with their own hands, kindled the fires at the altar. They have opened prison doors and set free the servants of the Lord. Clothed with the panoply of heaven, they came to roll away the stone from the Saviour’s tomb.

“In the form of men, angels are often in the assemblies of the righteous; and they visit the assemblies of the wicked, as they went to Sodom, to make a record of their deeds, to determine whether they have passed the boundary of God’s forbearance. The Lord delights in mercy; and for the sake of a few who really serve Him, He restrains calamities and prolongs the tranquillity of multitudes. Little do sinners against God realize that they are indebted for their own lives to the faithful few whom they delight to ridicule and oppress.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 631, 632.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Read 2 Timothy 1:7. Discuss the things in prophecy that have worried you most. How do we shake off the spirit of fear and find God’s message of hope even amid the prophecies that talk about persecution for our faith?
- ❷ Though right now it might be hard to see how Sabbath and Sunday could become front and center in final events, look at how quickly the world can change. What should this truth teach us about not basing our faith on current events, which can change in an instant, but only on the revealed Word of God?
- ❸ Think about Daniel 2 (and even 7). All the empires came and went exactly as predicted. Today, looking back over history, we can see that they did, as predicted. From our perspective today, only one more kingdom is to come. Which one is that, and why can we be assured that it will, indeed, come as predicted?

Epilogue: A Daily Battle

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Seventeen-year-old Anders complained of hearing voices at Holbrook Seventh-day Adventist Indian School in the US state of Arizona. The school counselor, Loren Fish, met with him and determined that it wasn't a mental health issue. Staff members prayed.

But then Anders started acting like a possessed person. While at home during school break, he had attended a traditional ceremony. Back at school, the slightly built teen began to exhibit superhuman strength at times, and Holbrook's staff had trouble controlling him. Other times, his eyes rolled back in his head. After an attack, he'd sleep for hours. When he awoke, he acted normal, but he was scared. One day, he asked the boys' dean, "What does Legion mean?" He'd heard the word "Legion" in his head. The dean remembered how Jesus, before healing a possessed man, asked the demon for his name, and the demon replied, "My name is Legion; for we are many" (*Mark 5:9, NKJV*). The registrar, who was mentoring Anders, asked if he would like for the school staff to pray over him. The boy said yes.

In the school's conference room, staff gathered around Anders and began to pray for him. Suddenly, the boy groaned and fell to the floor. No one was sure about what to do. Several people prayed out loud while others sang hymns. Still others urged Anders to pray, "Jesus, help me." Anders could not get the words to come out of his mouth. It was complete chaos. Then Anders started to laugh at the staff. It was a strange, unnatural laugh.

The school's development director, Diana Fish, felt embarrassed. *The devil knows that we don't know what to do*, she thought. Pulling out her cellphone, she googled, "How to help a possessed person." She found a paper titled, "Ellen White on Confrontation with Evil Spiritual Powers" by Marc Coleman on the Andrews University website. "Listen," she said. "We need to be united. We need to command the spirit to leave in Jesus' name."

Immediately, a staff member commanded the spirit, "Come out in the name of Jesus!" Then Anders gasped, "Jesus, help me!" All of the staff exclaimed in unison, "Praise God!" A loud screech came out of the boy. The school's business manager felt something like a strong whirlwind fly past her and out of the room. Then there was peace. Anders lay, weeping, on the floor. Two staff members brought in a cot, and the boy slept for the rest of the afternoon. After that, Anders was better—until he went home again. When he returned, the harassment resumed, and the student left the school.

"We're still praying for him," Diana said. "We know it's a spiritual battle, and it's not over. We deal with the great controversy daily with our students."

This mission story offers an inside look at a previous Thirteenth Sabbath project, Holbrook Seventh-day Adventist Indian School. Anders is a pseudonym. Thank you for supporting the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering on June 28.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *2 Timothy 1:7*

Study Focus: *Dan. 2:31–45, Rev. 13:11–17.*

For the last two weeks, we have studied biblical stories and psalms that contained allusions to future prophecy. Yet, these projections into the future were just indirect insights that prepared us to receive and to understand the message of prophecy. In this lesson, we will pay attention to prophecies that explicitly refer to the time of the end. We must remember that the Bible is not just a book of beautiful stories written for our entertainment. Nor is the Bible simply a book of spiritual and moral edification. What makes the Bible unique is its message of hope: God will save the world at the end of time.

The message of hope, of course, is present in different forms throughout the Scriptures. But it is particularly the two apocalyptic books, Daniel and Revelation, that focus on the ultimate fate of the world. These two books are inter-related and therefore will be consulted in connection with each other. The lesson this week will first embrace the general line of the prophetic events, as revealed in Daniel's prophecy of the statue (*Dan. 2:31–45*). Then we will consider the last days of human history. We will see how Daniel's prophecy will disclose the power of evil and denounce its mentality, which was already displayed by the Babylonian kings (*Daniel 3*). The prophecy will then reach its fulfillment in the little horn of chapters 7 and 8, and in the beast of Revelation 13 and 14.

Part II: Commentary

The Mentality of Babel. The book of Daniel begins with an allusion to the story of the tower of Babel. As the prophet reports the event of the coming of Nebuchadnezzar against Jerusalem, he mentions the rare and antique word *Shinar*, the very name that referred to the place where the builders of Babel built their tower (*Gen. 11:2, NKJV*). This specific reference reveals, from the beginning of the book, the intention of the biblical author to associate Nebuchadnezzar's move to bring the articles of the temple of Jerusalem to his place, Babylon (*Shinar*), with the builders of the tower of Babel.

In Daniel 2, the same king has a dream that troubles him. Daniel, who has been called to interpret the dream, explains to the king that the God of heaven sent this dream to help him understand, and realize, the iniquity of “the thoughts of your heart” (*Dan. 2:30, NKJV*). Nebuchadnezzar had indeed the same mentality as the builders of the tower of Babel. As Nebuchadnezzar brought the articles of the temple to his own temple, he in fact demonstrated the same intention to take God’s place. From the very beginning, Daniel discloses, then, the key to the dream. This dream concerns first the king’s “Babel” mentality. Later on, in Daniel 3, Nebuchadnezzar’s behavior will confirm this judgment (see below). In fact, this denunciation constitutes the main thread that weaves throughout the whole prophecy of the kingdoms of the earth.

In his first line, Daniel points out Nebuchadnezzar’s pride and usurpation: on one hand, Daniel calls the king by his regular title, “king of kings,” as if he were the one who ruled over other kings. On the other hand, Daniel clearly identifies “ ‘the God of heaven’ ” as the only One to whom the king owes his power (*Dan. 2:37, NKJV*). Daniel describes the king as if he were the Creator Himself (at least, along the lines of Nebuchadnezzar’s thinking); at the same time, Daniel reminds the king that it is the God of heaven who gave him all that he has (*Dan. 2:38*).

Then, Daniel announces that the following world kingdoms will be inferior to Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom, implying, again, that they were just as human and transitory as he and his kingdom are. Significantly, the end of the kingdoms is characteristic of the same mentality that defined Babel: the leaders of the kingdoms will attempt to unite their realms and consolidate their power, just as the builders of the tower of Babel did (*Gen. 11:4*).

It is noteworthy that the main characteristics of this process to attempt to mingle together started right after the fall of pagan Rome (*Dan. 2:41*) and lasted until the end of time, as implied in the phrase that introduces the rise of God’s kingdom: “ ‘In the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed’ ” (*Dan. 2:44*).

It is interesting to note that the last scene of the vision climaxes with the crushing of all the kingdoms.

The Usurping Power. In Daniel 3, Nebuchadnezzar immediately (ironically) discredits the judgment just learned from his dream. He will indeed work hard to take the place of the God of heaven. The dream clearly indicates that “ ‘the God of heaven will *set up* a kingdom which shall never be destroyed’ ” (*Dan. 2:44, NKJV, emphasis supplied*); in contradistinction to God’s will, Nebuchadnezzar endeavors to “set up” an image of gold that will represent himself, the “ ‘head of gold’ ” (*Dan. 2:38, NKJV*). Except that Nebuchadnezzar is not just content to be the head of gold, as the dream indicated; he now styles himself as an eternal king, whose empire

will last forever, indicated by his erecting a statue of solid gold. In essence, Nebuchadnezzar “set up” his image to replace the everlasting kingdom of God. Note the use of the same verb “set up.” The story does not stop there with Nebuchadnezzar’s usurpation.

Nebuchadnezzar’s next step was the violent persecution of all those who would not bow before his image. The story tells us that three Hebrews refuse to worship the image; as a result, they are threatened with death, namely to “‘be cast . . . into the midst of a burning fiery furnace’ ” (*Dan. 3:6, NKJV*). All kinds of strategies are used to convince the Hebrews to bow. The threat of death is explicitly represented by the furnace at the feet of the image. The power of administration at all levels is employed to ensure the control of all the various layers of the population. The power of mass media is used to reach out to the people in all parts of the empire. Even the power of music and art is used to influence and control the emotions.

According to the report of their resistance, these three Hebrews did not waver in their conviction to stand true to God. The two camps of worshipers, the camp of Babel and the camp of the three Hebrews, were thus clearly delineated and contrasted: the camp of Babel is noisy. They “cried aloud” (*Dan. 3:4, NKJV*). The camp of God is silent: “‘We have no need to answer’ ” (*Dan. 3:16, NKJV*). The camp of Babel is powerful: it is comprised of “satraps,” “administrators,” etc. (*Dan. 3:2, NKJV*). The camp of God is humble and lowly in eminence: they are simply identified as “‘certain Jews’ ” (*Dan. 3:12, NKJV*). The camp of Babel is numerous: it is composed of “all the people” (*Dan. 3:7, NKJV*). The camp of God is only “three men” (*Dan. 3:23, NKJV*). The camp of Babel is present-oriented: “When all the people heard . . . all the people . . . worshiped” (*Dan. 3:7, NKJV*). The camp of God is future-oriented: “‘God . . . is able to deliver us’ ” (*Dan. 3:17, NKJV*). The people of the camp of Babel are legalistic and obey out of fear and self-interest. The people of the camp of God serve God by grace, even if He should choose not to deliver them (*Dan. 3:18*).

The Little Horn and the Beast. The characters of usurpation and persecution are more vivid and explicit. The little horn claims to be divine, and its arrogance and usurpation are very pronounced (*Dan. 7:25, NKJV*). The same connection between usurpation and persecution is also present (*Dan. 8:24, 25*).

The book of Revelation repeats the same apocalyptic scenario, yet with different symbolism. Right after the same four animals that we first saw in Daniel 7, the apocalyptic revelation identifies a power of usurpation, which is identified as a beast. Like the little horn of Daniel 7 and 8, this beast claims to be divine (*Rev. 13:4*) and persecutes God’s people (*Rev. 13:5, 7*). This rapid survey of the prophecy is necessary for us to understand the prophetic word of warning and to encourage God’s people (*2 Tim. 1:7*).

Part III: Life Application

1. While the little horn and the beast represent a clear historical entity, the Catholic Church, how should we respond to this identification? How should we relate to Catholic people? Identify the mentality of Babel in history (in the Catholic Church, but also in totalitarian regimes). Analyze the potential mechanism of Babel in your church and in your personal character; in your relationship with other people; in the context of your family or in the context of your work; and in the way you treat your employees, your spouse, and your children. How do we shift from a Babel mentality to a biblical mindset?

2. Compare the camp of Babel and the camp of the three Hebrews. Consider each aspect of that comparison and draw lessons for application: How does this comparison affect your church life? What can we learn from these examples for our worship services? How does the way we play music or the way we preach play a role in how we worship the Creator? What lesson do you learn from the observation that the camp of God is always a minority? How do you apply this truth to the use of the argument of the majority in support of theological truth? Discuss with your class members the need to be future-oriented rather than present-oriented. How does future- or present-oriented thinking affect your choices in ethical and marital decisions? A future-oriented perspective obliges us to consider the aftermath of our actions. Present-oriented thinking that focuses on the immediate reward ends up being shallow, selfish, materialistic, and even dangerous for us and others. Discuss.

Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Images of the End



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 12:38–42; Jonah 3:5–10; Rev. 18:4; Dan. 5:1–31; Rev. 16:12–19; 2 Chron. 36:22, 23.*

Memory Text: “So he said to them, ‘I am a Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land’ ” (*Jonah 1:9, NKJV*).

This week will be our final look at accounts that help elucidate our understanding of last-day events. This time we will look at the mission of Jonah to Nineveh; the fall of Babylon; and the rise of Cyrus, the Persian king who liberated God's people and enabled them to return to the Promised Land.

As with the other stories we've examined, these historical accounts have held profound meaning for every generation. But they also have special relevance to the final generations living before Christ returns. That is, we can mine from these historical accounts various elements that can help us better understand what we call “present truth.”

At the same time, we must remember one thing concerning all these stories that appear to foreshadow last-day events: we must be careful to look at broad themes and allusions and not try to parse every detail to the point of creating prophetic absurdities. As in the parables of Jesus, we should look for the major points and principles. We should not milk every detail in hopes of finding some hidden truth. Instead, we should look for the outlines, the principles; and from these we can discover elements relevant for the last days.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 28.

The Reluctant Prophet

The story of Jonah (*see Jonah 1–4*), while brief, delivers considerable impact. Many believers have found reflections of themselves in this reluctant prophet. The story also contains remarkable overtones of future events.

Read Matthew 12:38–42. Which parts of the story of Jonah does Jesus refer to as He addresses the scribes and Pharisees? What lessons about the judgment are found in His statement?

Jesus declared that He was greater than Jonah. He knew that coming to this world would mean the Cross, and still He came to “seek and to save that which was lost” (*Luke 19:10*). Jonah spent three days in the great fish because of his own sins; Jesus spent three days in the tomb because of ours. That’s what it took to save the lost.

Today, we know Jonah as a reluctant prophet, unwilling to go to Nineveh. From a human perspective, it is easy to understand—the Assyrians ran a brutal regime. Assyrian murals are replete with scenes of unusual cruelty; conquered peoples were put to death by the most cruel methods imaginable. Who would want to face the prospect of preaching repentance in their capital city?

There is an important moment in the story that may point forward to the last-day remnant movement. When Jonah is asked who he is, he responds, “ ‘I am a Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land’ ”—a statement much like the first angel’s message (*Jon. 1:9, NKJV; Rev. 14:7*). Indeed, his emphasis on the Lord as the One “ ‘who made the sea and the dry land’ ” is, of course, pointing to Him as the Creator. This fact is foundational to why we should worship Him, and worship is central to last-day events.

At the same time, we, too, have been charged with preaching a potentially unpopular message in spiritual Babylon. To say “come out of her, my people” (*Rev. 18:4, NKJV*) is to tell the world they must repent—a message that has almost always provoked a negative response from many people, even when delivered in the kindest way possible. Who of us when witnessing has not received negative, or even hostile, responses? It just comes with the job.

How much of Jonah do you find in yourself? How can you move beyond this wrong attitude?

A Work of Repentance

Jonah had a very distinct message for the people of Nineveh. “And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day’s walk. Then he cried out and said, ‘Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ ” (*Jon. 3:4, NKJV*). It seems pretty clear: the place was doomed. After all, was that not a word directly from a prophet of the Lord?

Yet, what happened to Nineveh?

Read Jonah 3:5–10. Why was this prophecy not fulfilled?

Yes, the whole city repented, and the prophesied doom was averted, at least for a time. “Their doom was averted, the God of Israel was exalted and honored throughout the heathen world, and His law was revered. Not until many years later was Nineveh to fall a prey to the surrounding nations through forgetfulness of God and through boastful pride.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 271.

Can we expect something like this in the last days, with the final message to the fallen world? Yes—and no. That is, there will be, all over the world, many people who heed the call, “ ‘Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues’ ” (*Rev. 18:4, NKJV*). All over the world, people will take their stand and, in defiance of the beast, will “keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus” (*Rev. 14:12*). These people, like those in Nineveh, will be spared the judgment that falls upon the lost.

Some prophecies, such as God’s announcement that Nineveh would be destroyed, are conditional. (Nineveh would be destroyed *unless the people turned away from their evil [see Jer. 18:7–10]*.) Yet, some prophecies don’t come with these conditions. They are going to be fulfilled, no matter the human response. The Messianic prophecies of Christ’s first and second comings, the mark of the beast, the outpouring of the plagues, end-time persecution—these are not conditional; they will take place regardless of what humans do. What humans do, and the choices they make, will determine instead what side they will be on as final events, foretold by the prophets, unfold.

What choices are you making now that could help determine what choices you will make when the issue of worshiping God or the image breaks upon the world?

Belshazzar's Feast

After the city of Nineveh had been humbled (612 B.C.) by a coalition army that included both Medes and Babylonians (led by Nebuchadnezzar's father), the city of Babylon experienced a revival, the likes of which the city had not seen since the days of Hammurabi, their great lawgiver. Under Nebuchadnezzar, who was now free from the problem of Assyrian raids, the city of Babylon grew in wealth and influence to the point where the neighboring nations had little choice but to grudgingly acknowledge her dominance. She was queen of the world, and nations who wished to prosper declared their loyalty to her.

Meanwhile, as far as we can tell, Nebuchadnezzar died as a believer, professing that Daniel's God was, indeed, the rightful ruler of all nations (*Dan. 4:34–37*). The next account that Daniel provides is that of his successor, the vice-regent Belshazzar.

Read Daniel 5:1–31. What important spiritual messages can we take from this account? What ultimately tripped up Belshazzar?

Perhaps the saddest, most tragic part of this account is found in Daniel 5:22. After recounting to the king the downfall and then the restoration of Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel says to him, “ ‘But you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, although you knew all this’ ” (*NKJV*). That is, though he had the opportunity to know truth, though he might have even witnessed firsthand what happened to Nebuchadnezzar, he chose to ignore these events and, instead, embarked on the same course that brought his predecessor so much trouble.

As Nebuchadnezzar had done by erecting the golden statue, Belshazzar was openly defying what Daniel's God had predicted. By using the temple vessels in a profane manner, he was likely underscoring the fact that Babylon had conquered the Jews and now possessed their God's religious articles. In other words, they still had supremacy over this God who had predicted their demise.

It was, indeed, an act of total defiance, even though Belshazzar had more than enough evidence, proof, to know better. He had enough head knowledge to know the truth; the problem, instead, was his heart. In the last days, as the final crisis breaks upon the world, people will be given the opportunity to know the truth, as well. What determines their choice, as with Belshazzar, will be their hearts.

The Drying of the Euphrates

One of Babylon's strengths was the way that the Euphrates River flowed underneath its walls, providing the city with an unlimited supply of water. It also proved to be its weakness. Nitocris, an ancient Babylonian queen, had created earthen works along the river to develop it as a route to the city. In the process, she had diverted the river into a swamp to allow crews to work comfortably. Cyrus realized that he could do the same thing: dry up the Euphrates enough that he could comfortably march his troops under the wall. Once inside the city walls, he found the defensive walls that followed the river through the city unguarded, and the city fell in a single night. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus tells us that "those who lived in the centre of Babylon had no idea that the suburbs had fallen, for it was a time of festival, and all were dancing, and indulging themselves in pleasures."—Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Tom Holland (New York: Penguin, 2015), p. 94. Can there be any doubt that this is the same feast as portrayed in Daniel 5?

Read Daniel 5:18–31 and Revelation 16:12–19. What parallels do you find between some of the plagues of Revelation and the story of Babylon's fall?

In explaining how to discern the signs of the times, Jesus warned His disciples, " 'Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into' " (*Matt. 24:42, 43, NKJV*). Just as in the fall of Babylon, the sudden appearance of Christ will catch modern Babylon by surprise. It does not need to be this way, however; we have been given ample evidence of the soon coming of Jesus in a multitude of detailed prophecies.

The world will not be caught by surprise merely because it is ignorant of what God has predicted; it will be surprised because it has chosen not to believe what God has said would happen.

Read Revelation 16:15. Even amid these end-time warnings, what gospel message is found there? What does it mean to not "walk naked"?

Cyrus, the Anointed

When Cyrus sacked the city of Babylon, the years of captivity for God's people were over, and the Persians permitted the Jews to return to the Promised Land and rebuild the temple. Under Cyrus, the Persian Empire became the largest in history, with what historian Tom Holland calls "the largest agglomeration of territories that the world had ever seen."—*Dominion* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), p. 25.

As was the custom among the Persians, Cyrus was even called "the Great King" or "King of kings."

Cyrus foreshadows what will happen when Christ returns for His church: He is the King who comes from the east (*compare with Matt. 24:27*), waging war against Babylon, and liberating His people finally to escape from Babylon and return to the Land of Promise. (*See Rev. 19:11–16.*) This is why God refers to Cyrus as "His anointed" (*Isa. 45:1, NKJV*); not only did this famous Persian liberate God's people, but his campaign against Babylon is also a type of Christ's second coming.

Read 2 Chronicles 36:22, 23. In what ways does the story of Cyrus parallel that of Nebuchadnezzar? In what ways does it differ? What is the significance of the decree? After all, how did it impact the whole first coming of Jesus centuries later?

The original order of Old Testament books has been changed in our day to end with Malachi, but originally, this is where the Old Testament ended—with this declaration from Cyrus. The next episode in the canon of Scripture would be Matthew, which begins with the birth of Christ, the antitypical Cyrus. Cyrus would orchestrate the rebuilding of the earthly temple; Jesus would inaugurate His ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, leading up to His return and our liberation.

Cyrus, of course, was not a *perfect* representation of Christ; no type lines up perfectly with antitype, and we must be careful not to read too much into every tiny detail. Nevertheless, he broadly functions as a type of "Savior."

How fascinating that God would use a pagan king in such a marked manner to do His will. Despite how things appear to us on the outside, how can we learn the truth that, long term, the Lord is going to bring about end-time events as prophesied?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Unseen Watcher,” pp. 535–538, in *Prophets and Kings*.

“Every nation that has come upon the stage of action has been permitted to occupy its place on the earth, that the fact might be determined whether it would fulfill the purposes of the Watcher and the Holy One. Prophecy has traced the rise and progress of the world’s great empires—Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. With each of these, as with the nations of less power, history has repeated itself. Each has had its period of test; each has failed, its glory faded, its power departed. While nations have rejected God’s principles, and in this rejection have wrought their own ruin, yet a divine, overruling purpose has manifestly been at work throughout the ages.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 535.

In Jeremiah 18, Jeremiah observes a potter doing what a potter does: molding and shaping whatever he is working on. It is this imagery, that of a potter molding his clay, that God uses to explain the principle of conditionality in biblical prophecy. And just to make sure we understand, the Lord speaks through Jeremiah, saying: “ ‘The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it, if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it. And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it’ ” (*Jer. 18:7–10, NKJV*).

Discussion Question:

- ❶ Think about Jesus’ statement that the judgment will be easier for Nineveh than for the people of God who had strayed from the truth. (*See Matt. 12:39–42.*) What lesson can God’s church derive from this warning?
- ❷ Notice Ellen G. White’s statement that with each succeeding empire, “history has repeated itself.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 535. What do you see as common threads among all the empires listed in prophecy? In what ways did they follow the same prophetic path? How is our current world following them, as well?
- ❸ Think through the idea that it’s not often the mind, the intellect, that keeps people from faith, but the heart. How might this knowledge impact how you witness to others?

“Let’s Make a Deal”

By LAURIE DENSKI-SNYMAN

Maria was happy when a homeowner invited her in to look at the books that she was selling in a non-Christian country in Southeast Asia. Maria pulled several health books from her bag, but the man stopped her.

“I see what you’re doing,” he said. “You’re bringing out the lighter, more neutral books first, and after I drop my guard, you’re going to bring out the Christian books that you really want me to see. I know your intentions, so share the Christian books first.”

Maria sent up a silent prayer. “Lord, please help me,” she said. “I don’t know what to say.” Out loud, she said, “I have several books on health and religion. I want to share whatever people want to see. If they have an interest in health, I share those books. If they have an interest in religion, I’m happy to share those books, too.”

The man rubbed his chin. “Let’s make a deal,” he said. “If I can ask questions about your religion and you can answer them, I’ll buy all of your books.”

Maria felt anxious. She took a deep breath and said, “I’m not wise enough to answer anything that you ask. I need help. May I pray first?”

The man agreed. Maria prayed out loud. She asked for wisdom and knowledge, and she ended the prayer in the name of Jesus.

Immediately, the man asked, “We say Jesus was a prophet, but you say He is a God. Why do you say that? How can a mere man become God?”

Without pausing, Maria said, “Many people think that Jesus only started to live when He was on earth as a baby, but He was around years before that. Jesus was part of the Godhead, and God sent Him to this earth in the form of a baby as a regular human being. Then Jesus was called to be a prophet, then He was called to be a sacrifice, and then He was called to be a high priest. So right now, He is interceding for our sins. Jesus is not just a prophet. He was called to be more than a prophet. He is a high priest—not just for me but for all who accept Him.”

The man put his head in his hands. “That is about the nicest thing I’ve ever heard,” he said.

That was his first and only question. With tears in his eyes, he bought every book that Maria had. As they bid each other goodbye, he said, “You really explained to me what I wanted to know. Now I look forward to reading all your books.”

Pray for Maria and other missionaries seeking to reach unreached people groups in the Southern Asia-Pacific Division, where this story took place. Maria is a pseudonym. Thank you for your Thirteenth Sabbath Offering this Sabbath that will help spread the gospel in the Southern Asia-Pacific Division.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Jonah 1:9*

Study Focus: *Matt. 12:38–42, Jon. 3:5–10, Rev. 18:4, Dan. 5:1–31.*

Because the Bible essentially is about the kingdom of God, its central message is oriented toward the end and the heavenly kingdom of God. This eschatological illumination is testified to, and revealed, in the apocalyptic prophecies of the Bible, which clearly and explicitly disclose the end-time scenario. This revelation also is found elsewhere in the Scriptures through specific events of judgment and salvation that shall transpire in the end times.

In this week's lesson, three of these events have been selected that have one particular trait in common: they all take place at the end of the history of biblical Israel and involve the Gentiles, the "nations" (*compare with Gen. 12:3, Gen. 22:18*). The first event is dramatic: this is the judgment and repentance of the whole people of Nineveh, following the prophet Jonah's reluctant evangelistic campaign. The second event is tragic: this is the event of the judgment and non-repentance of Belshazzar that ends with the loss of his kingdom. And the third event is glorious: this is the salvation of God's people, thanks to the contribution of the Persian king Cyrus. That the end times are the occasion of the salvation of the nations, who finally join the ranks of Israel, is surprising; yet, it is symptomatic of the cosmic character of the eschatological moment, according to Paul's prediction: "until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so, all Israel will be saved" (*Rom. 11:25, 26, NKJV*).

Part II: Commentary

The Judgment of Nineveh. The prophet Jonah, who was the Israelite missionary to the people of Nineveh, tells us the story of his success-failure. God called him to move from his place in Gath Hepher (*2 Kings 14:25, NKJV*), a little town in the northern part of ancient Israel during the time of Jeroboam II, in the eighth century B.C. (785 B.C.). This time is described in the book of 2 Kings as a bad time for Israel, whose unfaithfulness kindled God's anger against them (*2 Kings 13:3*). Yet, "the LORD did not say that He would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven" (*2 Kings 14:27, NKJV*). Instead, God "saved them" from the enemy (*2 Kings 14:27, NKJV*).

Ironically, it is during this particular time in which Israel was unfaithful that God called Jonah to go to Nineveh in order to preach to its citizens and urge them to repent. Jonah tells us that the whole city did repent, much to his deep dismay. Jonah was so upset by God's call to mission that he refused to obey. Instead of traveling north to Nineveh, as God instructed, Jonah chose to travel south to Joppa and then embarked to Tarshish.

The book of Jonah tells us, then, how Jonah ended up in the belly of a big fish, which vomited him out on dry land (*Jon. 2:10*). Jonah is remembered as the prophet who was swallowed by a big fish because he refused to warn the city of Nineveh about God's judgment. Ironically, the cuneiform language of the people of Nineveh preserved the memory of this wonder: the cuneiform representation of the name Nineveh means "big fish in the city." It is as if the very name of the city itself suggests the lengths to which God, disappointed by His own people, would go to save a Gentile nation who would be more responsive to His mercy.

The story of Jonah at Nineveh is an illustration of how God deals with His people and with the nations. In it we clearly see how God extends grace to sinners and how He still punishes them for their unforsaken sins.

The Judgment of Belshazzar. The story of the judgment of the Babylonian king Belshazzar follows the story of Nebuchadnezzar's judgment and repentance, as if the biblical author intended to bring out the contrast between the two Babylonian kings. While both kings are proud and sin against God, the two kings do not receive the same judgment. Nebuchadnezzar is forgiven, and the chapter reporting his experience ends with his song praising God, who is able to abase the proud (*Dan. 4:37*). On the other hand, Belshazzar who knew about his forefather's experience (*Dan. 5:22*) refuses to repent. On the contrary, he willfully repeats Nebuchadnezzar's actions of usurpation (see lessons 5 and 12) and goes even further than his forefather in his iniquity. While Nebuchadnezzar's intention was only to bring the vessels of the temple into his own temple, Belshazzar drinks, and gets drunk, out of those vessels. Nebuchadnezzar contents himself with dismissing the other metals of the statue (*see Daniel 3*) and retains only the gold, which represents himself. In the end, he finally understands his foolishness and directs his praise to the God of heaven who "lives forever" (*Dan. 4:34, NKJV*).

Belshazzar, on the other hand, praises all the gods represented by these metals (*Dan. 5:4*). Belshazzar intentionally insults God. It is at that moment of his praise of the idols that a hand appears on the white wall and writes God's judgment against him.

Even the respective denouement of the story arc of each king marks the contrast between them. Nebuchadnezzar, who was forced to creep on the ground like an animal as a result of divine judgment against his pride, recovers his standing position. Then his “honor and splendor” were returned to him (*Dan. 4:36, NKJV*). Belshazzar, who was sitting on the throne and had been so sure of himself, now cannot stand up and does not control himself, his knees knocking against each other: “the king cried aloud” (*Dan. 5:7, NKJV*). The king calls his wise men for help, for he cannot read the inscription that the mysterious hand has written on the wall. Even his wise men are not able to understand it.

Then the queen mother, Nebuchadnezzar’s daughter and Nabonidus’ wife, comes and testifies of Daniel’s superior capacity, thus reminding Belshazzar of Nebuchadnezzar’s spiritual experience. Daniel, the representative of the God whom the king had insulted, is the only one who will be able to read and interpret the inscription of judgment, which predicts the end of Belshazzar’s kingdom (*Dan. 5:26–29*). The three words of the inscription on the wall encapsulate the judgment against Belshazzar and thus convey an idea about what the judgment will constitute: “numbered” means accountability; “weighed” indicates evaluation; and “divided” means “rejection.”

The Judgment of Cyrus. The Persian king Cyrus occupies a unique place in the Scriptures. Cyrus is the only Gentile person who receives the title of “Messiah,” or anointed (*Isa. 45:1, NKJV*). The Bible goes so far as to relate Cyrus to the Messianic Savior, Christ Himself. Beyond the salvation of Israel from exile in Babylon by the messiah Cyrus, the prophet Daniel sees the universal Messiah who will deliver humans from the grasp of evil. Furthermore, the prophet does not just predict the event.

By paralleling the 70 years of Cyrus with the 70 weeks of Babylonian captivity, Daniel alerts the reader to the fact that these weeks are to be interpreted prophetically. The 70 years refer to literal years leading to the coming of the messiah Cyrus (*Isa. 45:1*), who restored historical Israel to ancient Palestine. Indeed, the messiah Cyrus supports the historical character of the Messiah Jesus Christ and His event of salvation. The 70 weeks (of years) are prophetic weeks leading to the coming of the universal Messiah, who will save the world from sin and, thus, through atonement, provide forgiveness for sin. This parallel between the two messiahs also is found in the book of Isaiah, wherein the messiah Cyrus, in Isaiah 45, and the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 echo each other on a significant number of linguistic and thematic levels.

The messiah Cyrus played a decisive role in the fall of Babylon, the

archenemy of Israel; he also restored Israel to their land (*Ezra 1:1–3*) and even assisted the Jews in the rebuilding of the temple of Jerusalem under Joshua the high priest (*Ezra 3:2, 3*). Significantly, the book of Revelation parallels Cyrus’s achievement with Christ’s second coming. The event of the drying of the Euphrates that allowed the king of the east, Cyrus, to enter and cause the city of Babylon to fall serves as a template to describe the coming of Christ at the time of the end (*Rev. 16:12*). Cyrus prepared the ground for the future coming of Christ and the salvation of humanity. Moreover, Cyrus was a type of Christ. The role Cyrus played in the first coming of Christ may well hint at the scenario that may take place at the end of time in connection with the second coming of Christ. Thus, we may well conjecture that the last events of salvation will involve individuals outside of the regular ecclesiastic pattern.

Part III: Life Application

1. In what ways is the example of Jonah a warning against religious biases? Discuss.

2. While the church may fail in consistently demonstrating righteousness, how may the people of the world, on the contrary, succeed? As Jesus pointed out to the religious people of His time, “ ‘Tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you’ ” (*Matt. 21:31, NKJV*). What did Jesus mean by these words?

3. That justice is also a part of judgment is a guarantee of God’s seriousness in His act of salvation, which aims at the total eradication of evil and death. In what ways is the tension between justice and grace also a message of comfort and hope?

4. Why can we be saved only on the basis of God's mercy and not on the basis of our merits?

5. There are two important truths that we must understand about God's judgment in the end times: first, everyone will be informed and warned; second, there will come a time when it will be too late to repent. Apply the significance of the three words of the wall inscription to the church at the end times: "numbered" means that we are accountable for all that we do and don't do; "weighed" means that the "good" and the "evil" will be sorted out (only God has that power of discernment); "divided" means that salvation is given to others.

6. Read the following encouragement from Ellen White: "The time is not far off when the people of God will be called upon to give their testimony before the rulers of the earth. . . . There is no time for vanity, for trifling, for engaging the mind in unimportant matters."—*Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 26, 1892. How does this quote encourage you to share God's last-day message and warnings with people in positions of authority and power?

Notes

The God revealed in Exodus is the loving Lord, who, at the appointed time, brought deliverance to His people. The Exodus from Egypt and the Red Sea crossing were pivotal and unique events—God’s spectacular and marvelous acts. No greater or more glorious events ever happened in the Old Testament. It’s the gospel but according to Moses.

God demonstrated His care and protection for the Hebrews despite their backslidings. This series of divine interventions was the beginning of their renewed journey with God from Egypt that led to Canaan.

Exodus, our study this quarter by Jiří Moskala, is a book about the God of love who ultimately went to the cross for us. By studying Exodus, we will get a unique look at what God is really like.

The events in the book should serve as a warning and a source of unforgettable instruction for us now. We should study and learn from them because no matter how different the circumstances, the spiritual principles behind them remain the same.

May the Lord bless us as we study this pivotal book, which reminds us of how God wants to lead His people from slavery to freedom, from death to life, and from the wilderness to the New Jerusalem (*Heb. 12:22*).

Lesson 1—Oppression: The Background and the Birth of Moses

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **God’s People in Egypt** (*Exod. 1:1–7*)

MONDAY: **The Historical Background** (*Gen. 37:26–28*)

TUESDAY: **The Hebrew Midwives** (*Exod. 1:9–21*)

WEDNESDAY: **Moses Is Born** (*Exod. 2:1–10*)

THURSDAY: **A Change of Plans** (*Exod. 2:11–25*)

Memory Text—*Exodus 2:23–25, NIV*

Sabbath Gem: God hears the cry of the oppressed, sees their struggles, notes their tears, and, moved by their agony, comes to help.

Lesson 2—The Burning Bush

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **The Burning Bush** (*Exod. 3:1–6*)

MONDAY: **The Angel of the Lord** (*Exod. 3:7–12*)

TUESDAY: **The Name of the Lord** (*Exod. 3:13–22*)

WEDNESDAY: **Four Excuses** (*Exod. 3:11, 13; Exod. 4:1, 10*)

THURSDAY: **The Circumcision** (*Exod. 4:18–31*)

Memory Text—*Exodus 3:7, 8, NKJV*

Sabbath Gem: It is true that we can be useful to God in many ways, but following God’s call in our lives, and doing what He leads us to do, is surely the path to the most satisfying existence.

Lessons for People Who Are Legally Blind The *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* is available free in braille, on MP3 disc, and via online download to people who are legally blind and individuals who cannot hold or focus on ink print. Contact Christian Record Services, Inc., PO Box 6097, Lincoln, NE 68506-0097. Phone: 402-488-0981, option 3; email: services@christianrecord.org; website: www.christianrecord.org.