

Adult  
Sabbath School  
Bible Study Guide  
Jan | Feb | Mar 2025

# GOD'S LOVE AND JUSTICE



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# The God of Love and Justice



**G**od is love. So says 1 John 4:8 and verse 16. The entirety of the Bible testifies to this fact. The Christian faith is centered on God's character of love. Love is at the core of who God is, at the core of everything that we believe, and should be at the core of everything we do. Accordingly, the way we understand love affects the entirety of our faith and practice. If, for example, one believes that God's love must be earned or merited, a person might think that God does not love them because they are sinful and unworthy. And, in relation to others, one might expect others to merit love—a recipe for disaster.

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

For example, Christians offer different answers to such questions as:

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

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The answers to some of these questions might seem obvious but are often disputed in Christian treatments of divine love. And many answers that are sometimes taken to be obvious, turn out on closer inspection to be incompatible with what Scripture teaches about God's love.

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

And, as we continue on, we will see how divine love and justice are inextricably connected. The God of the Bible loves justice (*see, for example, Isa. 61:8*).

And, as the Bible portrays them, divine love and justice go together in such a way that you cannot have one without the other. Because God is love, He is deeply concerned about injustice and suffering in this world, and He identifies Himself with the oppressed and the suffering, willingly entering into the pain and grief that evil has wrought in creation—Himself suffering most of all, so much so that God Himself is the greatest victim of evil.

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

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

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

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# God Loves Freely



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

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

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

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

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

Everything depends on our answer to that question.

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

## Beyond Reasonable Expectations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Unrequited Love

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Love Freely Given

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## Many Are Called, but Few Are Chosen

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Crucified for Us

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Discussion Questions:

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

# Covenantal Love




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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The Everlasting Love of God

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Covenantal Love

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## Conditional Relationship

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Mercy Forfeited

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

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

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

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

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

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

## You Have Freely Received; Freely Give

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Discussion Questions:

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

# To Be Pleasing *to* God



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

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

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

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

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

Ouch!

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

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

## More Valuable Than You Can Imagine

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Rejoicing With Gladness

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## Pleasing God?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Living Stones

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

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

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

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

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

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

## A Worthy Goal

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Discussion Questions:

- ① What might it mean to “unselfishly receive”? What do you think the relationship of giving and receiving will be like in heaven and in the new earth?
- ② Coming from a distant part of the cosmos—farther perhaps than the James Webb Space Telescope’s most squinting eyes can reach—heavenly messengers referred to the prophet Daniel as *chamudot*, “beloved, desirable, precious.” And they did so three times. In Daniel 9:23, Gabriel says *ki chamudot attah*, “for you are greatly beloved.” In Daniel 10:11, a heavenly being (perhaps Gabriel again) calls him *ish chamudot*, a “man greatly beloved,” a phrase repeated to Daniel later (*Dan. 10:19*). Think about what it says about God and how close He is to us. What hope can you draw for yourself from this amazing truth?
- ③ How do the examples of the heroes of faith discussed in Hebrews 11 relate to the content of this week’s lesson? Specifically, what do such examples reveal about how one can be “pleasing to God” by faith? What can you learn and apply to your day-to-day life from such examples of faith and faithfulness?

# God Is Passionate *and* Compassionate



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

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

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

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

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

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

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

## More Than a Mother's Love

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Gut-Wrenching Love

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The Compassion of Jesus

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## A Jealous God?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## The Significance of Pentecost

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Discussion Questions:

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

# God's Love of Justice



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Love and Justice

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## God Is Entirely Good and Righteous

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## God's Changeless Character

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## A Repenting God?

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

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

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

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

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

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



## Hold Fast to Love and Justice

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Discussion Questions:

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

# The Problem of Evil



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## “How Long, O Lord?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## “There Are Many Things We Do Not Know”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## The Skeptical Theist

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The Freewill Defense

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Love and Evil?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

## Discussion Questions:

- ① “Theodicy” is a term for the justification of God in the face of evil. But it is not the justification for evil itself. Imagine someone in heaven saying, “Oh, yes, Jesus, now I understand why my family was tortured and murdered before my eyes. Yes, it all makes great sense now. Thank You, Jesus!” That’s absurd. How can we come to understand that it is God, not evil, that is ultimately vindicated in the great controversy? (See lesson 9.)
- ② Have you ever felt somewhat like Job? Have you ever been tempted to think that there could not possibly be a good explanation for the suffering you or your loved ones have experienced? How does Job’s final realization that he “uttered what” he “did not understand” (*Job 42:3, NKJV*) shed light on the position we are in relative to our own questions?

# Free Will, Love, *and* Divine Providence



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Our Sovereign God

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## *Pantokrator*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## To Love God

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## God's Ideal and Remedial Wills

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Christ Has Overcome the World

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Discussion Questions:

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



# The Cosmic Conflict



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## An Enemy Has Done This

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The Origin of the Controversy on Earth

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The Origin of the Controversy in Heaven

Genesis 1–3 alone shows that evil existed *before* the fall of Adam and Eve. Conceptually, “evil” has already appeared, in the name of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (*Gen. 2:9, 17*). Then the serpent accuses God of lying when, in fact, he, the serpent, is the one lying. The existence of the serpent (*Rev. 12:9*), along with his lying, shows the reality of evil there. Thus, even in Eden before the Fall, the presence of evil is manifest.

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

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

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

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

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

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

## If You Worship Me

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The Nature of the Cosmic Conflict

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Discussion Questions:

- ① Many people wonder how a sinless creature like Lucifer could sin for the first time. Why is sin so “mysterious” and “unaccountable”? How can we explain this first sin without excusing it or justifying it? That is, why would explaining its origin be the same as justifying it?
- ② Why did God not simply blot Satan out of existence right away? Why must evil “be permitted to come to maturity”? How is this “for the good of the entire universe through ceaseless ages”?
- ③ Why is it so important to understand that the conflict between God and Satan is not one of sheer power but a conflict of a different kind? How does a conflict over character make sense in ways that a conflict over sheer power could not?
- ④ How does understanding the nature of the conflict pull back the curtain, so to speak, on ways in which your own life might be a microcosm of the cosmic conflict? In what ways are you even now experiencing the reality of this conflict? How should you respond in ways that show whose side you truly are on?

# Rules of Engagement



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## An Angel Delayed

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The Dragon of Revelation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The Case of Job

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The (Temporary) Ruler of This World

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Limits and Rules

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Discussion Questions:

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

# What More Could I Have Done?



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *John 18:37, Rom. 3:23–26, Rom. 5:8, Isa. 5:1–4, Matt. 21:33–39, Isa. 53:4, Rom. 3:1–4.*

**Memory Text:** “Pilate therefore said to Him, ‘Are You a king then?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice’ ” (*John 18:37, NKJV*).

Some years ago, an insightful children's story was printed in *Guide* magazine. The story focuses on a boy named Denis, an orphan living as a foster child with a family in medieval times. Denis passionately hates the king of his land because, when his parents were sick, the king's soldiers carried him away, and he never saw them again. Only later did he learn that the king separated them in order to spare the living all the horrors of the Black Plague. The truth about the king sets Denis free from the hatred that he had harbored almost his entire life. The king had always, and in every case, acted out of love for his people.

Many people today view God somewhat like Denis viewed the king. The evil they have witnessed or experienced brings them to hate or dismiss God. Where is God when there is suffering? If God is good, why is there so much evil? The cosmic conflict sheds light on this crucial issue, but many questions remain. Yet, when all our attempts at answers fail to satisfy, we can look to Jesus on the cross and see in Him that God can be trusted, even with all the questions that remain unanswered for now.

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

## Christ the Victor

Although there is an enemy at work whom Christ Himself refers to as the (usurping) “ruler of this world,” the true king of the universe is Jesus Christ. Jesus wins the victory for us, and in Him we can have victory, even in the midst of hardship and suffering. Indeed, the work of Christ counters the enemy at every turn.

We have seen that Scripture describes the devil as:

1. The deceiver of the whole world from the beginning (*Rev. 12:9, Matt. 4:3, John 8:44, 2 Cor. 11:3, 1 John 3:8*);
2. The slanderer and accuser of God and His people in heaven (*Rev. 12:10; Rev. 13:6; Job 1, 2; Zech. 3:1, 2; Jude 9*); and
3. The usurping ruler of this world (*John 12:31, John 14:30, John 16:11, Acts 26:18, 2 Cor. 4:4, Eph. 2:2, 1 John 5:19*).

**Read John 18:37.** What does this tell us about Christ’s work to counter the deceptions of the enemy? What does it mean that Jesus is King?

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Though Scripture teaches that Satan is the arch-deceiver, slanderer, accuser, and usurping ruler of this world, it also teaches that Jesus is the victor over Satan in every way:

1. Jesus came “ ‘into the world, to testify to the truth’ ” (*John 18:37, NASB*);
2. Through the cross, Jesus supremely demonstrated God’s perfect righteousness and love (*Rom. 3:25, 26; Rom. 5:8*), thereby disproving the devil’s slanderous allegations (*Rev. 12:10, 11*); and
3. Jesus will finally destroy the kingdom of the devil, who “ ‘knows that his time is short’ ” (*Rev. 12:12, ESV; compare with Rom. 16:20*), and Christ “ ‘will reign forever and ever’ ” (*Rev. 11:15, NLT*).

In the end, no matter what Satan does, he is already a defeated foe, and the key for us is to claim Christ’s victory for ourselves every day, moment by moment, and also to claim the promises that the Cross has offered us.

**In the great controversy, we know which side wins. How do our day-by-day choices impact which side we ultimately end up on? How can we make sure that we are on the winning side even right now?**

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## The Just and the Justifier

At every turn, Christ's work *undoes* the work of the devil. And, according to 1 John 3:8, Jesus "was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil" (*1 John 3:8, NRSV*) and to "destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil" (*Heb. 2:14, NRSV*). Yet, the total defeat of the enemy's rulership takes place in two stages. First, through the work of the Cross, Christ disproves Satan's slanderous allegations. And, later, Satan and his kingdom will be destroyed.

**Read** Romans 3:23–26 and Romans 5:8. What do these passages reveal about the way Christ defeats the allegations of the devil?

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As we have seen, the enemy claims that God is not fully righteous and loving. However, in Christ, God provides the ultimate manifestation of God's righteousness and love, and He did so through the Cross.

After the death of Jesus, "Satan saw that his disguise was torn away. His administration was laid open before the unfallen angels and before the heavenly universe. He had revealed himself as a murderer. By shedding the blood of the Son of God, he had uprooted himself from the sympathies of the heavenly beings."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 761.

**Read** Revelation 12:10–12 in light of Genesis 3:15. How does this passage shed light on the cosmic significance of Christ's victory at the cross?

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The history of redemption provides abundant evidence for us to be confident that God always works to bring about in the end what is good for all concerned. The God of Scripture always does what is good and preferable, given the avenues available to Him in the great controversy (*Deut. 32:4, 1 Sam. 3:18, Ps. 145:17, Dan. 4:37, Hab. 1:13, Rev. 15:3, Gen. 18:25*).

**Why is the demonstration of God's righteousness and love in the cosmic conflict so important? When you reflect on the Cross and all of God's works in the plan of redemption, how do God's works give you confidence in the love of God, even amid trials and sufferings?**

## The Song of My Beloved

In amazing ways, God has manifested His love and righteousness amid the cosmic conflict. Yet, some might ask, *Should God have done more than He has done to prevent and/or remove evil?* We have seen a cosmic conflict framework that indicates that God has acted in order to respect the free will necessary for the maximal flourishing of love relationships between Him and humanity. Further, He has apparently acted within moral constraints, or rules of engagement, within the context of a cosmic dispute over His character, which can be settled only by the demonstration of His love.

**Read** Isaiah 5:1–4. Who is speaking in these verses? Whom is Isaiah speaking about? Whom do the vineyard and vineyard owner represent? What is the significance of the actions of the vineyard owner on behalf of the vineyard? What is the result?

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In these verses, Isaiah sings a song of his beloved, a vineyard. The vineyard owner is God Himself, and the vineyard represents God's people (*see, for example, Isa. 1:8, Jer. 2:21*). But the implications here can also be expanded relative to God's broader work in this world. According to these verses, the vineyard owner (God) did everything that reasonably could be expected to ensure the flourishing of His vineyard. The vineyard should have produced good grapes, but it produced only "wild grapes," which other translations refer to as "worthless." Indeed, the Hebrew wording here literally could be translated *stink-fruit*. God's vineyard brings forth rotten grapes.

Isaiah 5:3 shifts to God Himself speaking, inviting people to "judge" between Him and His vineyard. And, in Isaiah 5:4, God Himself sets forth the all-important question: " 'What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes?' " (*NKJV*). What more could He do? How fascinating that He even asks others to judge what He has done.

**When you look at the cross, where God offered Himself as a sacrifice for all our sin, how do His words—" 'What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it?' "—take on an utterly amazing significance?**

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## Christ's Parable of the Vineyard

In the parable of the vineyard owner, in Matthew 21, Jesus picks up where Isaiah 5 left off, shedding additional light on the character and actions of the vineyard owner on behalf of His vineyard.

**Read Matthew 21:33–39 with particularly the question of Isaiah 5:4 in mind. What more could He do than what He has done?**

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The first part of Christ's parable quotes directly from the song of Isaiah 5 about the vineyard owner and His vineyard. Then, Jesus adds, the vineyard owner " 'leased' " His vineyard " 'to vinedressers and went into a far country' " (*Matt. 21:33, NKJV*). Yet, when the vineyard owner twice sent His servants (the prophets) to collect the produce, those renting His vineyard beat and killed His servants (*Matt. 21:34–36*). Finally, He sent His Son (Jesus), saying, " 'They will respect my son' " (*Matt. 21:37, NKJV*). But they murdered His Son, too, saying, " 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him" (*Matt. 21:38, 39, NKJV*).

What more could He do? The Father loved us so much that He gave His beloved Son (*John 3:16*). If the cosmic conflict is of the kind suggested here, it could not be settled prematurely by exercise of divine power but required first a public demonstration of God's character. This demonstration has been set forth ultimately in the work of Christ (*Rom. 3:25, 26; Rom. 5:8*). What more could we ask than that God (in Christ) give Himself to die for us so that He might justify us without in any way compromising His justice and perfect love?

The cross event demonstrates that God has done everything that could be done to mitigate and eliminate evil, but without destroying the context for the flourishing of genuine love. If there had been any preferable avenue available to God, would He not have chosen it? While people suffer greatly in this cosmic conflict, God Himself suffers most of all. When we look at the Cross, we can, indeed, see what suffering and pain sin has brought to God Himself. Yet, so sacred was the freedom inherent in love that Christ was willing to endure this in our behalf.

**Read Isaiah 53:4. Whose "griefs" and "sorrows" did Christ bear on the cross? What should this tell us about all that God has done for us and what salvation has cost Him?**

## The Vindication of God's Name

Ultimately, God's name is vindicated in every way. Through the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the plan of redemption, the perfect righteousness and love of God is manifested beyond any reasonable doubt (*see Rom. 3:25, 26; Rom. 5:8*).

**Read** Romans 3:1–4 in light of Isaiah 5:3, 4. What does this teach about God Himself being vindicated in the cosmic conflict? What more could He do than what He has done?

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In Romans 3 and Isaiah 5, we see that God (in some limited sense) invites mere creatures to judge His character, even though we have no right or standing to do so. In the end, when all the “books” are opened, we will see the evidence that God is perfectly just and righteous. God will vindicate Himself before all intelligent creation.

**Read** Revelation 15:3 and Revelation 19:1–6. What do these passages teach about the vindication of God's name in the end? What more could He do than what He has done?

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Throughout Scripture, God shows concern for His name. Why? You cannot have a deep love relationship with someone whose character you detest or do not trust. If someone told your spouse or spouse-to-be horrible lies about your character, you would do what you could to counter any such claims, for if such claims are believed, they would fracture your love relationship.

In the end, God is vindicated at the cross and through the entire plan of redemption. In the pre-Advent judgment, God is vindicated before the onlooking universe.

Then, in the post-Advent judgment, during which the redeemed will even “judge angels” (*1 Cor. 6:2, 3*), God is vindicated, as the redeemed have been given the opportunity to review the records and see for themselves why God has acted as He has, and that all of God's judgments have always and only been perfectly righteous and loving. Who among us doesn't have a lot of questions that need answering? Before it's all done, we will have those questions answered (*see 1 Cor. 4:5*).

Finally, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord (*Phil. 2:10, 11*). This is all part of the vindication of the character of God.

**Further Thought:** Read Ellen G. White, “The Reward of Earnest Effort,” pp. 285–288, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9.

“All that has perplexed us in the providences of God will in the world to come be made plain. The things hard to be understood will then find explanation. The mysteries of grace will unfold before us. Where our finite minds discovered only confusion and broken promises, we shall see the most perfect and beautiful harmony. We shall know that infinite love ordered the experiences that seemed most trying. As we realize the tender care of Him who makes all things work together for our good, we shall rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 286.

### Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Have you been perplexed in trying to understand the providences of God? How does it comfort you to know that all such things will be made plain in the end?
- ❷ Ponder what Christ gave up in order to become human and to die for this world. Further reflect on what this tells us about God’s love and whether God can be trusted. What more could He do?
- ❸ What is so important about God’s “name”? What implications does this have for those of us who call ourselves Christian? In what ways have Christians sometimes brought disrepute on the name of Christ, and what can we do in our local communities to show people what following Christ looks like in practice?
- ❹ In the end, even our best “answers” relative to the problem of evil are incomplete for now. What can we do in practice to draw close to those who are suffering and be agents of relieving suffering in this world as we await the final, eschatological solution to the problem of evil that only God can bring?
- ❺ Dwell more on Isaiah 53:4, on the fact that Christ bore our “griefs” and “sorrows.” What happened corporately at the Cross that helps us understand the plan of salvation and what it cost God to save us?

# Love *and* Justice: The Two Greatest Commandments



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Matt. 22:34–40, Zech. 7:9–12, Psalm 82, Micah 6:8, Matt. 23:23–30, Luke 10:25–37.*

**Memory Text:** “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?” (1 John 4:20, NKJV).

Though we have confidence that God will make all things right in the end, it still matters what we, as Christians, do in the here and now. Though there may be many injustices and evils that God will not now eradicate (because of the parameters of the cosmic conflict), this doesn't mean that we can't be used to help alleviate whatever suffering and evil we come across, at least to whatever degree possible. In fact, we are obligated, as Christians, to do just that.

As we have seen, love and justice go together; they are inseparable. God loves justice. Accordingly, if we love God, we will love justice, as well.

Likewise, if we love God, we will love one another. Part of loving one another is sharing a concern for the well-being of those around us. When others are afflicted by poverty, oppression, or any kind of injustice, we should be concerned. When others are oppressed, we should not turn a blind eye. Instead, we should ask ourselves what we can do, individually and corporately, to advance God's love and justice in a way that reflects to our broken world our Lord's perfect character of righteousness and love.

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

## The Two Greatest Commandments

To reflect on what we might do, individually and corporately, to advance God's love and justice in our world, it is appropriate to begin by focusing on what God has commanded us.

**Read** Matthew 22:34–40. How did Jesus answer the lawyer's question?

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According to Jesus Himself, the “‘first and great commandment’ ” is “ ‘ “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” ’ ” And, Jesus adds, “ ‘the second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ’ ” These commandments do not stand alone, however. Jesus further instructs: “ ‘On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets’ ” (*Matt. 22:37–40, NKJV*). Indeed, they are themselves quoted from the Old Testament.

**Read** Matthew 19:16–23. How do Jesus' answers to the rich young ruler's questions relate to His answers to the lawyer's question in Matthew 22?

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What was going on here? Why did Jesus answer this man as He did? And what should these encounters say to us all, regardless of our position or station in life?

“Christ made the only terms which could place the ruler where he would perfect a Christian character. His words were words of wisdom, though they appeared severe and exacting. In accepting and obeying them was the ruler's only hope of salvation. His exalted position and his possessions were exerting a subtle influence for evil upon his character. If cherished, they would supplant God in his affections. To keep back little or much from God was to retain that which would lessen his moral strength and efficiency; for if the things of this world are cherished, however uncertain and unworthy they may be, they will become all-absorbing.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 520.

**Though we might not all be called to sell all that we have, as was this rich young ruler, what might you, personally, be clinging to that, if you don't give up, could lead to your eternal ruin?**

## The Two Greatest Sins

According to Jesus Himself, the two greatest commandments are love for God and love for one another. And carrying out these commands involves sacrifices that tangibly show love to others, which is what following in the footsteps of Jesus is really about.

Now, if the two greatest commandments are love for God and love for others, what are the two greatest sins?

**Read** Psalm 135:13–19. What does this reveal about a common sin emphasized throughout Scripture?

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The Old Testament continually emphasizes the importance of love for God above all (*see Deut. 6:5*). This is closely related to the great sin of idolatry, which is the opposite of love for God.

**Read** Zechariah 7:9–12. According to the prophet Zechariah in this passage, what does God decry? How does it and the sin of idolatry relate to the two great commandments?

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It is not just idolatry to which God responds with the anger of love but the mistreatment of His people, whether individually or corporately. God becomes angry at injustice because God is love.

The two great sins emphasized throughout the Old Testament are failings relative to the two great commandments: to love God and to love one another. The two greatest sins are failings of love. In short, then, you cannot keep the commandments if you do not love God and if you do not love others.

Indeed, 1 John 4:20, 21 states: “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also” (*NKJV*).

**How do you explain why love for God cannot be separated from love for others? How do you understand this unbreakable link?**



## God Loves Justice

Scripture declares that God loves justice and hates evil (*for example, Ps. 33:5, Isa. 61:8*), and He is deeply concerned about injustice, which evokes righteous indignation on behalf of all those who are the victims of injustice. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, God is consistently passionate in favor of the downtrodden and oppressed while expressing righteous anger against the victimizers and oppressors.

**Read** Psalm 82. How does this psalm express God's concern for justice in this world? What might it mean for us today?

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As many commentators understand it, this passage decries both the earthly rulers responsible for the injustice in society and is also a reference to when God judges the celestial rulers (the “gods”) behind corrupt earthly judges and rulers (demonic forces, obviously). Specifically, the rulers are asked, “How long will you judge unjustly, and show partiality to the wicked?” (*Ps. 82:2, NKJV*).

Further, they are charged: “Defend the poor and fatherless; do justice to the afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy; free them from the hand of the wicked” (*Ps. 82:3, 4, NKJV*). Here and elsewhere, the prophets of the Old Testament set forth a clarion call for justice. This is no peripheral concern of Scripture; it is central to the message of the prophets throughout the Old Testament and to what Jesus spoke when here in the flesh.

It is no secret what God desires and requires of those who would claim to love and obey Him. He specifies very clearly in Micah 6:8 (and in similar passages elsewhere): “He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (*NKJV*).

This sentiment is echoed throughout Scripture. For example, Jesus said: “‘By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another’ ” (*John 13:35, NKJV; compare with 1 John 4:8–16*).

**What would our families and churches look like if we focused on Micah 6:8 and intentionally put it into practice in both word and deed? In whatever context you are in, how could the application of these principles be made manifest better?**

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## Called to Establish Justice

The prophets in Scripture continually highlight God's call for justice in society. Again and again, Scripture does not shrink back from highlighting issues of injustice and oppression. Indeed, the call for God to bring judgment was itself the call for God to establish justice.

For example, the prophet Isaiah does not mince words about the injustice in Israel at the time. His words and call for justice should ring loud and clear in our ears today. “ ‘Learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow’ ” (*Isa. 1:17, NKJV*). Further, he proclaims “ ‘woe’ ” against those who “ ‘decree unrighteous decrees’ ” and “ ‘rob the needy of justice’ ” (*Isa. 10:1, 2, NKJV*), warning: “ ‘What will you do in the day of punishment, and in the desolation which will come from afar? To whom will you flee for help? And where will you leave your glory?’ ” (*Isa. 10:3, NKJV*).

Likewise, the prophet Jeremiah proclaims God's message: “ ‘Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness and his chambers by injustice, who uses his neighbor's service without wages and gives him nothing for his work. . . . Did not your father eat and drink, and do justice and righteousness? then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Was not this knowing Me?’ says the LORD” (*Jer. 22:13, 15, 16, NKJV*).

**Read** Matthew 23:23–30. What does Jesus teach here about what is most important? What do you think He means when He refers to “weightier matters”?

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Lest one think that injustice was a concern only of Old Testament prophets, we see clearly here and elsewhere in Jesus' ministry that this was of utmost concern to Christ Himself. As He puts it: “ ‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone’ ” (*Matt. 23:23, NKJV*). In the parallel passage in Luke, Jesus laments that they “ ‘pass by justice and the love of God’ ” (*Luke 11:42, NKJV*).

**If you were to focus on the “weightier matters” today, what would that look like as opposed to whatever “tithe of mint and anise and cumin” we might be focusing on instead?**

## Who Is My Neighbor?

In Luke's account, just after Jesus declares the two greatest commandments of love for God and love for a neighbor, a lawyer, "wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?' " (*Luke 10:29, NKJV*). In response to this, Jesus tells the now-familiar, but then shocking, parable of the good Samaritan.

**Read** the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37. What is this passage saying in light of the cry of the prophets for mercy and justice and of the kinds of injustices that different people groups have inflicted on "others" throughout human history?

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Jesus did not just talk about justice; He came to bring it. He was and will be the fulfillment of the prophetic call and longing for justice (*see Luke 4:16–21 in light of Isaiah 61:1, 2*). He is the desire of all nations, especially those who recognize their need for deliverance.

In direct contrast to the enemy, who grasped for power and sought to usurp God's throne, Jesus lowered Himself and identified with those under sin, injustice, and oppression (without being infected by sin), and He defeated the enemy by giving Himself in love in order to establish justice as the One who is just and the Justifier of all who believe. How can we claim to be concerned about the law that Christ died to uphold if we are not concerned about what Christ calls the weightier matters of the law?

Psalms 9:8, 9 proclaims, "He shall judge the world in righteousness, and He shall administer judgment for the peoples in uprightness. The LORD also will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble" (*NKJV*). Likewise, Psalm 146:7–9 adds, God "executes justice for the oppressed" and "gives food to the hungry. The LORD gives freedom to the prisoners. The LORD opens the eyes of the blind; the LORD raises those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the strangers; He relieves the fatherless and widow; but the way of the wicked He turns upside down" (*NKJV*).

How much clearer could the Word of God be in regard to how we should seek to minister to those around us who are in need and are hurting?

**What can we learn from the life and ministry of Jesus about reaching out to those in need? Even if we can't perform miracles as He did, for many hurt people, how could our help be deemed "miraculous" enough?**

**Further Thought:** Read Ellen G. White, “The Sabbath,” pp. 281–289, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“The spies dared not answer Christ in the presence of the multitude, for fear of involving themselves in difficulty. They knew that He had spoken the truth. Rather than violate their traditions, they would leave a man to suffer, while they would relieve a brute because of the loss to the owner if it were neglected. Thus greater care was shown for a dumb animal than for man, who is made in the image of God. This illustrates the working of all false religions. They originate in man’s desire to exalt himself above God, but they result in degrading man below the brute. Every religion that wars against the sovereignty of God defrauds man of the glory which was his at the Creation, and which is to be restored to him in Christ. Every false religion teaches its adherents to be careless of human needs, sufferings, and rights. The gospel places a high value upon humanity as the purchase of the blood of Christ, and it teaches a tender regard for the wants and woes of man. The Lord says, ‘I will make a man more precious than fine gold; even a man than the golden wedge of Ophir.’ Isa. 13:12.

“When Jesus turned upon the Pharisees with the question whether it was lawful on the Sabbath day to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill, He confronted them with their own wicked purposes. They were hunting His life with bitter hatred, while He was saving life and bringing happiness to multitudes. Was it better to slay upon the Sabbath, as they were planning to do, than to heal the afflicted, as He had done? Was it more righteous to have murder in the heart upon God’s holy day than love to all men, which finds expression in deeds of mercy?”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 286, 287.

## Discussion Questions:

- 1 Why and how is it true that “Every false religion teaches its adherents to be careless of human needs”? How can we act intentionally so as to avoid such carelessness in our church communities and beyond?
- 2 Who is my neighbor? Who is your neighbor? In what practical ways should following Christ make us more like the Samaritan who crossed the boundaries of his day to act out love?
- 3 If God loves justice and mercy, how should we act in accordance with what matters most to God? How can we be more focused on what Jesus called “the weightier matters of the law”?
- 4 When we think and talk about judgment, how often do we emphasize that a primary way Jesus discusses judgment is in terms of whether, and to what extent, we actively love others, particularly the oppressed and downtrodden? Reflect on this in light of Matthew 25:31–46.

# Love Is *the* Fulfillment of *the* Law




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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Exod. 20:1–17; Rom. 6:1–3; Rom. 7:7–12; Jer. 31:31–34; Matt. 23:23, 24; James 2:1–9.*

**Memory Text:** “Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law” (*Romans 13:8, NKJV*).

While they were dealing with a problematic member, someone on the church board said to the pastor, “We can’t make decisions based on compassion.” *We can’t?* The pastor wondered what this person’s understanding of God and of God’s law must have been. Compassion certainly needs to be central in how we deal with people, especially erring ones. Compassion is part and parcel of love, and as Romans 13:8 tells us, to love one’s neighbor *is* to fulfill the law.

If love is indeed the fulfillment of the law, then we should be careful not to think of law in a way that is separate from love or to think of love in a way that is disconnected from law. In Scripture, love and law go together. The divine Lawgiver is love, and accordingly, God’s law is the law of love. It is, as Ellen G. White put it, the transcript of God’s character. (See *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 305.)

God’s law is not a set of abstract principles but commands and instructions intended for our flourishing. God’s law is, in part, an expression of love as God Himself expresses it.

\* *Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 29.*

## The Law of Love

God's law does not consist of abstract principles; instead, God's law is an expression of relationship. This can be seen explicitly in the Ten Commandments. The basic principles of the Ten Commandments were in place already in the Garden of Eden, the principles of love that were to govern the relationship between God and people and between people themselves.

When the Ten Commandments were written in stone in Exodus 20, they were given to Israel in the context of the covenant relationship. The commandments were written down after the Lord already had delivered the people from Egypt, and the commandments were based on God's love and on His promises to the nation (*see Exod. 6:7, 8 and Lev. 26:12*). One can see in the two divisions of the Ten Commandments that they are aimed at the flourishing of a human relationship with God and of relationships with one another.

**Read** Exodus 20:1–17. How do these verses reveal the two principles, those of love for God and of love for others?

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The first four commandments deal with people's relationships with God, and the last six with people's relationships among themselves. Our relationship both to God and to other people must be regulated by the principles of God's law.

These two parts of the law correspond directly to what Jesus identified as the two greatest commandments—" 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart' ' ' (Matt. 22:37, NKJV; compare with Deut. 6:5) and " 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' ' ' (Matt. 22:39, NKJV; compare with Lev. 19:18).

The first four commandments are the ways in which we are to love God with all of our being, and the last six are ways we are to love one another as ourselves. Jesus makes it explicit that these two great love commandments are integrally related to the law. " 'On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets' " (Matt. 22:40, NKJV).

The entirety of God's law, then, is grounded in God's love. God's love and law are inseparable. We often hear people say, *We don't need to keep the law, we just need to love God and to love others*. Why does that idea not make sense?

**How could we express love to God, or love to others, if we are violating any one of the Ten Commandments?**

## The Law Is Holy and Righteous and Good

Love is the foundation of God's law. When God upholds the law, He upholds love. This is why Jesus died in order to save sinners, so that He could uphold the law while also extending grace to us. Thus, He could be both just and the justifier of those who believe (*Rom. 3:25, 26*). What an expression of love! Accordingly, the law is not invalidated by the process of redemption; rather, it is further confirmed.

**Read** Romans 6:1–3 and then Romans 7:7–12, with particular emphasis on verse 12. What are these verses telling us about the law, even after Christ died?

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While some believe that grace and redemption cancel the law, Paul is clear that we are not to continue in sin so that grace increases. Rather, those who are in Christ by faith have been “baptized into His death” and are therefore to count themselves as dead to sin and alive to Christ.

The law of God is not sin, but (among other things) it makes sin and our sinfulness apparent to us. That is why, yes, “the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (*Rom. 7:12, NKJV*). It reveals, as nothing else does, our great need of salvation, of redemption—the salvation and redemption that come only through Christ. Accordingly, we do not “make void the law through faith” but “on the contrary, we establish the law” (*Rom. 3:31, NKJV*).

Christ came not to do away with the law but to fulfill all that was promised in the Law and in the Prophets. Thus, He emphasizes that “‘until heaven and earth pass away,’ ” not even “‘the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law’ ” (*Matt. 5:18, NASB 1995*).

The law of God itself represents God's holiness—His perfect character of love, righteousness, goodness, and truth (*Lev. 19:2; Ps. 19:7, 8; Ps. 119:142, 172*). In this regard, it is significant that, according to Exodus 31:18, God wrote the Ten Commandments on the stone tablets Himself. Written in stone, these laws are testimony of the unchanging character of God and of His moral government, which is founded on love—a central theme of the great controversy.

**How does this link between law and love help us better understand Jesus' words, “ ‘If you love Me, you will keep My commandments’ ” (*John 14:15, NASB*)?**

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## Law and Grace

As we have seen, law and grace are not opposed to one another. Instead, they serve different functions in accordance with the love and justice of God. A sharp contrast between law and grace would have puzzled ancient Israelites, who saw God's giving of the law itself as a great display of God's grace. While the "gods" of the surrounding nations were fickle and entirely unpredictable, leaving people without a way to know what the "gods" desired and what would please them, the God of the Bible very clearly instructs His people about what pleases Him. And what pleases Him is just what is for the ultimate good of all His people, individually and collectively.

Yet, the law cannot save us from sin or change human hearts. Because of our innate sinfulness, we need a spiritual heart transplant.

**Read** Jeremiah 31:31–34. What does this teach about God's promises to give us a new heart? Compare this with Christ's words to Nicodemus in John 3:1–21 about the new birth. (See also Heb. 8:10.)

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The Ten Commandments were inscribed by God Himself on the tablets of stone (*Exod. 31:18*), but the law was also to be written in the hearts of God's people (*Ps. 37:30, 31*). Ideally, God's law of love would not be external to us but internal to our very characters. God alone could inscribe His law on human hearts, and He promised to do so for His covenant people (see *Heb. 8:10*).

We cannot save ourselves by law-keeping. Rather, it is by grace we are saved through faith, not of ourselves but as the gift of God (*Eph. 2:8*). We do not keep the law in order to be saved; we keep the law because we are already saved. We do not keep the law in order to be loved but because we are loved, and thus we desire to love God and others (see *John 14:15*).

At the same time, the law shows us our sin (*James 1:22–25, Rom. 3:20, Rom. 7:7*), shows us our need of a Redeemer (*Gal. 3:22–24*), guides us in the best ways of life, and reveals God's character of love.

**What is your hope in the judgment? Is it your diligent and faithful law-keeping or is it Christ's righteousness, which covers you? What does your answer tell you about the function of God's law regarding what it can or cannot do?**

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## Love Is the Fulfillment of the Law

The relationship between love and law cannot be overstated. Indeed, according to Scripture, to love is to fulfill the law.

In Romans 13:8–10, Paul teaches that “he who loves another has fulfilled the law” (*Rom. 13:8, NKJV*). After listing many of the last six of the Ten Commandments, Paul declares that these are “all summed up in this saying, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ ” (*Rom. 13:9, NKJV*). Indeed, Paul teaches explicitly, “Love is the fulfillment of the law” (*Rom. 13:10, NKJV*). Again, in Galatians 5:14, Paul explains, “All the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ ” (*Gal. 5:14, NKJV*). But what kind of love is that which fulfills the law? What does such love look like?

**Read Matthew 23:23, 24. What are the “weightier matters of the law”?**  
**Read Deuteronomy 5:12–15 and Isaiah 58:13, 14. How do these passages demonstrate the relationship between the law (particularly the Sabbath commandment) and God’s concern for justice and deliverance?**

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Jesus identifies the “weightier matters of the law” as “justice and mercy and faith.” And in relation to one law in particular—the Sabbath—we can see in Scripture that the Sabbath itself is integrally connected with deliverance and justice.

In Deuteronomy 5, the Sabbath commandment is grounded in relation to God’s deliverance of Israel from slavery. That is, the Sabbath is not only a memorial of creation but also a memorial of deliverance from slavery and oppression. And in the context about turning from one’s own pleasure to call the Sabbath a delight by taking delight in the Lord (*Isa. 58:13, 14*), the emphasis is on works of love and justice for others—doing good, feeding the hungry, housing the homeless (*see Isa. 58:3–10*).

Given all of these teachings (and many others), those who wish to fulfill the law through love should be concerned not only about sins of commission but also about sins of omission. Love as the fulfillment of the law involves not merely keeping the law in the sense of refraining from committing sins but also consists of actively doing good—doing the works of love that faithfully advance justice and mercy. Being faithful to God is more than just not violating the letter of the law.

## Above All, Love One Another

If love is the fulfillment of the law, then one cannot keep God's law in the full sense simply by refraining from doing wrong things. The law of love itself (expressed in the fullness of Scripture) not only commands us to refrain from doing evil but the law prompts us to do acts that reveal the love of God to others—not only to other church members but also to the world at large, which is so desperately in need of a true Christian witness.

**Read** James 2:1–9. What crucial messages are we given here?

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Here, James strongly decries injustice in society, specifically identifying the dishonoring of the poor and oppression by some who are rich. Then, he calls attention to the law of love for one's neighbor, saying if you fulfill this law, then "you do well" (*James 2:8, NKJV*).

As Ellen G. White has expressed it: "Love to man is the earthward manifestation of the love of God. It was to implant this love, to make us children of one family, that the King of glory became one with us. And when His parting words are fulfilled, 'Love one another, as I have loved you' (John 15:12); when we love the world as He has loved it, then for us His mission is accomplished. We are fitted for heaven; for we have heaven in our hearts."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* p. 641.

When we love the world, as Christ has loved the world—*then we are fitted for heaven*. What a powerful expression of what it means to be a follower of Jesus!

Jesus commands His followers to " 'love one another,' " even as " 'I have loved you' " (*John 13:34, NKJV*). Jesus also proclaims: " 'By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another' " (*John 13:35, NKJV*). Love is so central to Christian faith because God is love (*1 John 4:8, 16*). And those who claim to love God must love one another (*compare with 1 John 3:11; 4:20, 21*).

Accordingly, 1 Peter 4:8 exhorts Christians: "And above all things have fervent love for one another, for 'love will cover a multitude of sins' " (*NKJV; see also Heb. 10:24 and 1 Thess. 3:12*).

**Dwell more on the idea of loving the world as Christ loved the world. How might this help us better understand the concept of Christian perfection and how we are made fit for eternal life? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.**

**Further Thought:** Read Ellen G. White, “The Least of These My Brethren,” pp. 637–641, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“Those who minister to others will be ministered unto by the Chief Shepherd. They themselves will drink of the living water, and will be satisfied. They will not be longing for exciting amusements, or for some change in their lives. The great topic of interest will be, how to save the souls that are ready to perish. Social intercourse will be profitable. The love of the Redeemer will draw hearts together in unity.

“When we realize that we are workers together with God, His promises will not be spoken with indifference. They will burn in our hearts, and kindle upon our lips. To Moses, when called to minister to an ignorant, undisciplined, and rebellious people, God gave the promise, ‘My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest.’ And He said, ‘Certainly I will be with thee.’ Ex. 33:14; 3:12. This promise is to all who labor in Christ’s stead for His afflicted and suffering ones.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 641.

### Discussion Questions:

- ① Read 1 Corinthians 13:4–8. How does 1 Corinthians 13 shed light on the kind of people we ought to be?
- ② What separates the sheep from the goats in Matthew 25:31–46? How can we understand what Jesus says here in a way that does not teach salvation by works?
- ③ What does it mean to you that “when we love the world as He has loved it, then for us His mission is accomplished. We are fitted for heaven; for we have heaven in our hearts” (see Thursday’s study)? What does this reveal about the nature of God and the nature of heaven itself? How can we live more like citizens of heaven here in this respect, relative to spreading God’s love in a way that brings light and justice to the oppressed?
- ④ What practical steps should be taken in your local church to reflect God’s concern for love and justice in your local community? What are you doing well in your community? What do you need to improve and focus on more? What tangible steps can you take individually and collectively to act on what we have studied about God’s love and justice?