

# Christ's Church *and the Law*



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Gen. 2:16–3:7, Genesis 6, Genesis 12, Deut. 7:6–12, Gal. 3:6–16, Rev. 12:17, 14:6–12.*

**Memory Text:** “Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” (*Revelation 14:12, NKJV*).

In a relay race, a team usually consists of four runners. Team members may have competed against each other at another time, but now, as a part of the same team, they must learn to think as one. In the race itself, the length of the course is equally divided between the participants. One team member alone can race at any given time—the one who is holding the baton. The baton is skillfully passed from one team member to the next until the race is finished. In a sense, the baton is the only symbol of continuity among the members of the relay team.

God's church is something like a relay team. Starting with Adam in the garden, the baton has been passed through several phases of salvation history: from Noah to Abraham to Sinai to the New Testament church to the Reformation church, and now to those who proclaim the three angels' messages.

The symbol of continuity for God's church is His law, which, after the Fall, must always be coupled with God's saving grace. Together, both are the essence of the gospel.

This week's lesson traces the continuity of the law (and grace) in God's church through the ages.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 21.

## From Adam to Noah

In one sense, we can speak of a “church of Christ” only since the New Testament era, when believers first testified to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. However, we can see “Christ’s church” in a broader context. The Greek term for “church” is *ekklesia*. Borrowed from the secular world, it refers to those who have been “called out.” In every generation God has “called out” a people to reflect His will by lives of faithfulness, trust, love, and obedience.

**Read** Genesis 2:16–3:7. What test was given to Adam and Eve? Why would such a test be needed for perfect beings?

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In order to be able to love, Adam and Eve had to be created as morally free agents. They had to have the ability and the freedom to do wrong, even if they had no valid reason to do so. The test at the tree was a moral test: In what way would they use their God-given moral freedom?

We know the answer.

At the center of morality is law, God’s law, which defines good and evil for us (note that the tree is called the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil”). What’s the purpose of a law that forbids lying, stealing, and killing if these beings were incapable of doing any of those things to begin with? The law itself would be meaningless in a universe of automatons—beings able to do only good. That’s not, however, how God chose to create us. He couldn’t—not if He wanted beings who could truly love.

Though after the Fall, Adam and Eve were to “pass the baton” to the next generation, humanity’s moral spiral downward was quick and dirty. Of their first two sons, only Abel chose to join God’s church, while Cain became possessed by the spirit of covetousness, lying, murder, and parental disrespect. Things went from bad to worse until evil overshadowed the good, and by the time of the Flood only Noah and his family could truly claim to be members of Christ’s church.

**How many times in the past 24 hours have you made moral choices, using the freedom given to us from Eden? What were those choices, and how much were they in harmony with God’s moral law?**

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## From Noah to Abraham *(Gen. 6:5–9)*

The world into which Noah was born was worse than any society that has ever existed, which means that it must have been pretty bad. With people living for almost a thousand years, it is not difficult to see how evil could become ingrained in society to the point that God became sorry that He ever created people to begin with!

**Read** Genesis 6 and then answer the following questions:

**1. How are we to understand the idea that God was “sorry” that He had created humanity? Why does this not mean that God had been unaware of what was going to happen? *(See Deut. 31:15–17.)***

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**2. Ellen G. White wrote that the designations “sons of God” and “daughters of men” refer to faithful men marrying unfaithful women. What lessons, then, can we learn from Genesis 6 about the church’s interaction with the world?**

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**3. What were some of the things that these people did that displeased God, and how do these things relate to His law?**

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**4. Look at the description of Noah in Genesis 6. What does the text say about him that helps us to understand the kind of man that he was, especially in such a corrupt world? At the same time, why did Noah need “grace” in the eyes of the Lord? What does this tell us about the relationship between faith and God’s law, even back then?**

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## From Abraham to Moses

After the Flood, it was the responsibility of Noah and his sons to share God's will with their descendants. Noah's family knew that global destruction had come to the world as a result of humanity's refusal to obey God's law, and having experienced God's grace, they could do something to help develop a more faithful generation. Unfortunately, not too long after the Flood, the inhabitants of the earth again rebelled (*Gen. 11:1–9*). "Many of them denied the existence of God and attributed the Flood to the operation of natural causes. Others believed in a Supreme Being, and that it was He who had destroyed the antediluvian world; and their hearts, like that of Cain, rose up in rebellion against Him."—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 119.

**What** do Genesis 12 and 15:1–6 tell us, as well, about how law and grace work together?

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God called Abraham, a descendant of Shem, and made a covenant of blessing with him (*Gen. 12:1–3*). The Bible gives no criteria for God's call of Abraham. He does not appear to have had the righteous profile of Noah. In fact, soon after the call he proved himself to be cowardly and deceptive (*vss. 11–13*), violating God's law. Nevertheless, Abraham was a man of true faith, and by God's grace this faith was credited to him as righteousness. Although he was not perfect, he was willing to listen to the voice of God, even if it meant trusting God for things that seem all but impossible from a human standpoint.

Abraham was not alone among those who were willing to listen to God's voice and obey His commandments. Pharaoh, the two Abimelechs, and Joseph were well aware that God did not approve of adultery and lying. The second Abimelech even rebuked Isaac for exposing Abimelech's people to temptation (*Gen. 26:10*). Although God had chosen Abraham for a specific task, there were people in many different nations who feared Him. In fact, after Abraham and his military alliance had defeated Chedorlaomer and his coalition, Abraham was blessed by King Melchizedek, who was a "priest of the Most High God" (*Gen. 14:18, TEV*). This is more evidence that knowledge of God existed in the world at that time, even before the work and ministry of Moses.

## From Moses to Jesus

Though ancient law codes found in Egypt and Mesopotamia also provide evidence for a widespread knowledge of the principles and precepts found in God’s law, none of them is complete. In fact, many of these codes also contain laws that promote idolatry and other practices that God later condemned. So, God chose a people to be the stewards of His true law. These people were the Hebrew nation, the descendants of Abraham and heirs to the covenant promise made to him many centuries earlier—a promise whose ultimate fulfillment was found only in Jesus.

**Read** Deuteronomy 7:6–12. How does this passage reveal the close relationship between law and grace?

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When God chose Israel to be the depository for His law, He knew that they were an imperfect people. Nonetheless, He entrusted them with the task of sharing His will with other imperfect people. The very designation “‘kingdom of priests and a holy nation’” (*Exod. 19:6, NKJV*) shows that Israel was to be God’s mediating priesthood for the entire world. Israel was the one chosen to bring the truth of God’s will to the confused nations. And, despite Israel’s mistakes, failures, and, at times, outright rebellion, it was still among these people that the Messiah came, lived, ministered, and died, fulfilling the covenant promise made to Abraham many centuries earlier.

**Read** Galatians 3:6–16. What does Paul write that helps to better clarify the true meaning of the covenant promise?

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Though many in ancient Israel understood the single noun form of “seed” to mean Israel as a single corporate entity, Paul here presents Jesus Himself, as the true and complete fulfillment of the covenant promise. So, the gospel itself, with its clear emphasis on both law and grace, most fully manifests and reveals the covenant.

**Think about all the long ages that passed from the time Abraham first received the covenant promise to the time of Christ. What does this tell us about the need for patience when it comes to trusting God?**

## From Jesus to the Remnant

Since Eden, God’s church has always been filled with fallible people. The very institution that was supposed to be a witness to God’s righteousness was itself in need of that same righteousness. As “the baton” passed from generation to generation, no runner was worthy enough to cross the finish line. None who received the law was able to reach its level of righteousness. Humanity, it appeared, was trapped in a wheel of futility in its quest for God’s approval.

However, when it seemed as if all hope was gone, God sent His Son “to receive the baton.” As the Second Adam, Jesus came to this earth without sin, and through constant devotion to His Father managed to maintain His obedience all the way to the Cross. With His resurrection, Jesus crossed the finish line, for He broke the chain of death. Now, through the power of the Spirit, the resurrected Christ shares His righteousness with every believer. This message, always the center of the covenant promise, was most clearly understood after Jesus completed His earthly ministry, and the New Testament church began.

Unfortunately, the Christian church—even with all this light—proved itself at times less faithful to the covenant than was ancient Israel, and deep apostasy soon took over almost everywhere. The Reformation, beginning in the sixteenth century, started to reverse this trend, but even it faltered, and many false doctrines and teachings have remained in the Christian world, including (as we have seen) wrong views about the role and purpose of the law in the life of New Covenant Christianity. God would call out a remnant people to restore many lost truths.

**Read** Revelation 12:17 and 14:6–12. How do these verses reveal both law and grace in God’s final warning message to the world?

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As we have seen, keeping “the commandments of God” is God’s appointed way of manifesting true love. In what ways, though, might we be outwardly keeping these commandments but not really manifesting love as we should? Why can’t we really be keeping the commandments if we don’t show love?

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**Further Study:** “The three angels of Revelation 14 represent the people who accept the light of God’s messages and go forth as His agents to sound the warning throughout the length and breadth of the earth. Christ declares to His followers: ‘Ye are the light of the world.’ Matthew 5:14. To every soul that accepts Jesus the cross of Calvary speaks: ‘Behold the worth of the soul: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.” ’ Mark 16:15. Nothing is to be permitted to hinder this work. It is the all-important work for this time; it is to be far-reaching as eternity. The love that Jesus manifested for the souls of men in the sacrifice which He made for their redemption, will actuate all His followers.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, pp. 455, 456.

“The theme of greatest importance is the third angel’s message, embracing the messages of the first and second angels. All should understand the truths contained in these messages and demonstrate them in daily life, for this is essential to salvation. We shall have to study earnestly, prayerfully, in order to understand these grand truths; and our power to learn and comprehend will be taxed to the utmost.”—Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 196.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Revelation 12:17 describes the “remnant” as those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus. With the presence of hundreds of other Sabbath keeping Christian churches around the globe, what is the specific purpose of Seventh-day Adventism? What are we proclaiming and teaching that these other churches aren’t, even those who might be keeping the seventh-day Sabbath?
- 2 Read Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6, and James 2:23, all in context. How do these verses help us understand salvation by faith?
- 3 Notice that in the first angel’s message, which begins with the “everlasting gospel,” there is also a proclamation that the “hour of his judgment has come.” So, the gospel, the law, and judgment all appear together in the three angels’ messages. How do we understand the role of the law and grace in judgment? How do they all fit together?

## Taking God at His Word

Austin's parents worked hard, but finances were difficult. The family had other problems, too, and felt little peace in their home. Then they met a Global Mission evangelist who shared the Bible with the family. Although the family had been Christians for years, this man taught a message they had never heard before. He visited the home and studied with Austin's mother. After the man left, she read the Bible passages for herself to be sure that what the man taught was true. She could find no error in the man's teachings. Convinced, she asked to be baptized and to become a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. A year later, Austin's father also joined the Adventist Church.

"Our financial problems didn't clear up," Austin says. "But we had a peace we had never known before. We realized that no matter how big our problems are, God can carry us through."

The family moved to Mumbai, a large city in western India. Austin's father worked hard to support the family. Mother began tutoring neighborhood children to earn extra money. Joyfully, she tithed her meager earnings. Father worried that the family wouldn't have enough money to meet their needs if Mother tithed, but he saw that God blessed her faith, and more students wanted her tutoring services. Today she has more than 100 students, and Father has begun tutoring now. And he gladly returns God's tithe and his offerings.

When people ask the family why they don't tutor on Saturday, the family shares God's love through His commandments. There is no Adventist church in the area where the family lives, so they welcome those who wish to worship to their home on Sabbath. About 15 people regularly attend, ten of whom are baptized members.

Austin's parents have been strong examples of sharing God's love with others. His mother visits homes of those in need and shares what she can along with God's Word. Many people know the truth now because of her ministry. Austin and his brother also are sharing God's truth with teachers and fellow students and inviting them to worship in their home. "It's a great privilege to have a part in spreading the everlasting gospel," he says. "I'm grateful for the faithfulness of that Global Mission evangelist who first taught my parents God's truth. It's changed our lives forever."

Our mission offerings help support the work of Global Mission in the most spiritually needy places in the world. Thank you for sharing your mission offerings so that those like Austin's family can respond to God's message of love.

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AUSTIN NAVIS *and his parents share their faith in Mumbai, India.*