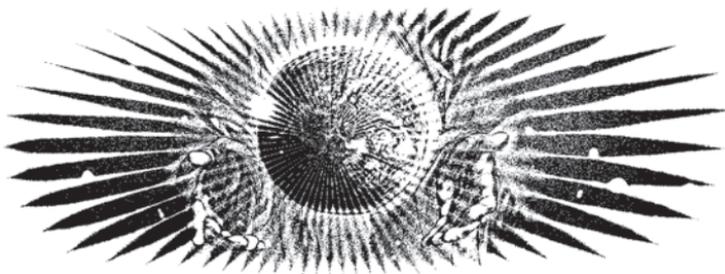


Atonement *and* the Divine Initiative



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Rom. 3:19–22; 5:6–8, 20, 21; Eph. 1:4; Col. 1:26, 27; 2 Tim. 1:8, 9; Titus 1:2.*

Memory Text: “And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ” (*Ephesians 1:9, 10, NIV*).

Key Thought: To show that the Godhead anticipated the Fall, and that a plan was crafted to solve the problem of sin long before it arose.

Human beings were given moral freedom, something not found in any of the other creatures that God had created here on earth. Once God endowed them with this freedom, it was theirs, and He could not take it away from them without radically altering their very nature and being. They could use this freedom either to respond positively by rendering to Him, in love and gratitude, faithful obedience, or they could use that freedom and reject the gift of life and disobey the Lord. (After all, if humans didn't have the option to disobey, they really wouldn't be free.)

God—foreseeing that horrible possibility of disobedience—acted accordingly. Thus, the plan of salvation was conceived in the divine mind long before humans were created and before evil and sin actually appeared, a plan that centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

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

The Mystery of God's Love

Read Romans 5:6–8. According to these texts, what prompted God to bring salvation to us through Jesus?

God was not obliged to save the human race. It was not something that He was forced to do. It is difficult to imagine the Godhead saying, “Had We done this or that, Adam and Eve would not have fallen into sin. Therefore, now We should do something to save them from their predicament.” Instead, humans brought upon themselves the condition in which they found themselves after the Fall: “ ‘God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes’ ” (*Eccles. 7:29, NIV*).

If God felt obliged to save us, salvation would be something that we deserve. But the opposite is true; it is something that we *don't* deserve, and yet, God was willing to give it to us anyway. This makes His work of salvation in our behalf even more remarkable, because He did for us, not what He was forced to do but what He, out of love, chose to do. He, the Creator, was under no obligation to us, the creatures.

Read Romans 3:19–22. What is Paul saying to us here about how we are saved? What role does the law have in solving the problem caused by sin?

Because of sin, it is impossible for humans, through obedience to the law, to reconstruct their original relationship with God (*see Rom. 8:3, Gal. 3:21*). The law could no more save us than feeding a corpse could bring it back to life. If something was to happen, God Himself would have to take the initiative. And He did—through the revelation of His righteousness, revealed through Jesus on the cross. This righteousness comes to the believer by faith and not by works of the law. If salvation was something that we could earn through obedience, God would owe it to us to save us. Instead, God determined that humans will be forgiven and restored to permanent and eternal fellowship with Him only through the work and person of His Son, Jesus Christ.

What means more to you (and why): someone doing something nice to you because he or she was obliged to, or purely out of love?

The Mystery of God's Grace

“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace” (*Eph. 1:7, NIV*).

It would not be difficult to imagine that with the entrance of sin into the world, the intelligent creatures of the universe were wondering how God was going to relate to this rebellious race. They were to be surprised. They were to witness something they probably had never seen before, an aspect of the love and power of God that would now be expressed in the context of humanity’s fall. God was going to defeat sin on this planet through the power of *grace*. Within that context, God showed Himself to be, by nature, kind and mercifully disposed toward these sinful and rebellious creatures. Jesus testified concerning the Father, “‘He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men’” (*Luke 6:35, NASB*).

What is the significance of the contrast Paul makes between the phenomenon of sin and the revelation of God’s grace? *Rom. 5:20, 21*.

In the Bible, grace is an aspect of God’s love, and it is extended in a particular way to sinners. It seems to designate a dynamic, consistent, and permanent aspect of God’s nature, one that constantly seeks to restore sinful creatures to harmony with Him. The biblical concept of grace reaffirms the fact that the atoning work of Christ reaches us as a gift, a work of salvation that we did not deserve. God’s grace implies that our sin is inexcusable, unjustifiable, and deserving eternal death; yet, instead of that death we were given the hope and promise of life, even eternal life. Finally, this wonderful aspect of God’s nature was revealed to the universe in an unparalleled way in the person and work of Christ. It is only and exclusively in Him that we find and enjoy the benefits of “the riches of His grace” (*Eph. 1:7, NASB*).

Read 2 Corinthians 8:9. What is Paul talking about here? More important, how have you experienced for yourself the kind of grace revealed in this text? How has your life changed as a result of what Christ has done for you?

An Eternal Plan

After the Fall, God was not obliged to save us. But He did so anyway. Moreover, this decision—which was extremely expensive for Him—was not an afterthought.

Read Ephesians 1:4; Colossians 1:26, 27; 2 Timothy 1:8, 9; and Titus 1:2. What do these texts tell us about when the plan to save us was instituted?

The New Testament reveals several things about the mystery of God.

First, it was formulated before the “foundation of the world” (*Eph. 1:4, NASB*). This implies that long before humans fell into sin, the Godhead had created a plan to deal with that calamity.

Second, this divine mystery was “kept hidden for ages and generations” (*Col. 1:26, NIV*). Not only was the plan configured in advance, but it was also determined that it would be put into effect at a particular moment. Therefore, it remained hidden within the Godhead for ages.

Third, the mystery is specifically identified with Christ (*Col. 1:27*). This refers to the mystery of the person of Christ, His ministry, death, resurrection, and mediation on behalf of a sinful human race. It is fundamentally the good news of salvation through Christ, the Christian gospel (*Eph. 6:19*).

Fourth, this mystery is more precisely defined as God’s purpose in Christ “to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ” (*Eph. 1:10, NIV*). The plan was to restore, in and through the person of Christ, the cosmic harmony that was ruined through sin. The effectiveness of this process is already visible in the unity of Gentiles and Jews in the church (*Eph. 3:6*). Fifth, the mystery secretly formulated within the Godhead before the creation of the world has now become known through the coming of Christ into human history.

Even before the foundation of the world, God’s plan was to save the world, each one of us included. What hope can you draw, for yourself, from the amazing truth that God’s plan was to save you even before you existed?

The Way of the Cross

God could have dealt with human rebellion in several different ways. He could have immediately destroyed Adam and Eve, even the whole planet. Or He also could have decided to abandon them to their fate; that is, He could have just left them to face the inevitable results of sin, which would be eternal ruin.

But there was one thing He could not have done; He could not have ignored their rebellion, pretending as if nothing had happened and allowing their relationship to continue as before.

In the end, what did God do? He didn't destroy them, He didn't abandon them, and He didn't ignore them. Instead, He put into effect His eternal purpose of salvation through Christ.

Read Mark 10:45, Galatians 1:4, 2:20, Ephesians 5:2, and Titus 2:14. What key theme is repeated in these texts? What do they tell us about the plan of salvation?

Once God committed Himself to save us, He didn't have several options on how to do it. In fact, there was just one. Sin could be solved only through the incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, and mediation of Christ. If we were to be spared eternal ruin, Jesus had to "give" Himself for us. The incarnation and the death of Christ were unavoidable if we were to be saved. In other words, there is only one road to heaven, and it passes through the heart of Christ on the cross.

When Jesus was in Gethsemane, experiencing the anguish of death (*Matt. 26:36–46*) and bearing the sins of the world, He approached the Father, asking Him, essentially, whether or not there was another option available to accomplish the salvation of humankind. The answer came wrapped in divine silence. There was no other way out for the human problem except through the sacrifice of Christ.

In the mystery of divine council, before the creation of the world, the Son of God offered Himself to die as our Substitute and Surety. He, as we saw in the above verses, "gave" Himself for us. There was no other way.

Again, He was not under compulsion to save us; He did it willingly, out of love. But once He decided to accomplish that salvation, His death was inescapable, even though a voluntary act. " 'I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord' " (*John 10:17, 18, NIV*).

God's Plan Revealed in Jesus

According to these texts, what did Jesus “need” to do in order to accomplish His mission of salvation? *Luke 4:43; 9:22; 17:25; 19:5; 22:37; 24:7, 26, 44.*

In most of those passages we find a verb that could be translated “it is necessary” (Greek, *dei*). The verb expresses a very important aspect in the life of Jesus. The whole life of Jesus was oriented by what He needed to do in order to accomplish His mission: “ ‘We must [it is necessary for us to] do the work of him who sent me’ ” (*John 9:4, NIV*). At the beginning of His public ministry Jesus said to the disciples, “ ‘I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose’ ” (*Luke 4:43, NASB*). The ministry of Jesus clearly was determined by willingness to accomplish God’s plan for the salvation of the human race. Every aspect of His life was part of this plan. For instance, He saw Zacchaeus and said to him, “ ‘I must [it is necessary for Me to] stay at your house today’ ” (*Luke 19:5, NIV*).

But the real goal of the ministry of Jesus reached beyond the compulsion to preach the good news of the kingdom of God. There was a dark path that He “needed to” tread. He needed to go to Jerusalem. He could have chosen not to go, but He knew that this was indispensable for the divine plan. So, He said to His disciples “that he must [it was necessary for Him to] go to Jerusalem and suffer many things . . . , and that he must [it was necessary for Him to] be killed” (*Matt. 16:21, NIV*). He was going there because it was necessary for Him to be rejected by the evil generation (*Luke 17:25*), to be counted with the transgressors (*Luke 22:37*), and to be lifted up on the cross (*John 3:14, 12:34*). But dying was not enough to fulfill His mission. It was necessary for Him to be resurrected (*Acts 17:3*), to be received in glory, and to remain there until all the prophecies were fulfilled (*Acts 3:21*). He was following the eternal plan put together by the Godhead.

What are the things in your life that you must do, that are necessary, and what are the things that aren’t? How do you make that distinction between them, and why is it so important to be able to?

Further Study: Defining Grace: “We would never have learned the meaning of this word ‘grace’ had we not fallen. God loves the sinless angels who do His service and are obedient to all His commands, but He does not give them grace. These heavenly beings know naught of grace; they have never needed it, for they have never sinned. Grace is an attribute of God shown to undeserving human beings. We did not seek after it, but it was sent in search of us. God rejoices to bestow this grace on everyone who hungers for it, not because we are worthy, but because we are so utterly unworthy.”—Ellen G. White, *My Life Today*, p. 100.

Redemption: Not an Afterthought: “The purpose and plan of grace existed from all eternity. Before the foundation of the world it was according to the determinate counsel of God that man should be created, endowed with power to do the divine will. But the defection of man, with all its consequences, was not hidden from the Omnipotent, and yet it did not deter Him from carrying out His eternal purpose; for the Lord would establish His throne in righteousness. God knows the end from the beginning. . . . Therefore redemption was not an afterthought.”—Ellen G. White, *God’s Amazing Grace*, p. 129.

“Not only was He to die, but he knew precisely the shame, the humiliation, He would have to suffer, the cruel treatment He should receive. There was no compulsion in bringing Him to the ignominious death on the cross; yet He made His soul an offering for sin. The mind of God to save the world was the mind of Christ. His own love was one with that of the Father, and that love constrained Him.”—Ellen G. White, *The Bible Echo*, November 25, 1895.

Discussion Questions:

❶ In the second Ellen White quote above, she makes it clear that God knew beforehand about our fall, and hence all the pain and suffering that would come with it. And yet, He created us anyway? Why would He do that, knowing what would happen? How does the third quote above help answer that question? How does the suffering of Jesus Himself help us better understand why God allows our own suffering?

❷ Write out a page summarizing whatever point impressed you the most from this week’s lesson. Bring it to class and share it with others.

Summary: God not only took the initiative to save us but did it voluntarily out of His loving nature. That decision, which revealed the nature of His gracious character, was made in eternity, before we were created, and it required the sacrificial death of God’s Son. The plan was fully revealed and implemented in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The School Taught Me

by IVETTE RIVERA

My children attended a private school that only went through the tenth grade. I began looking for a good school where they could finish their education. A friend told me about the Adventist school in town, but she warned me that the school was not big or fancy. I visited the school and saw that my friend was right; it wasn't big or fancy. However, I was impressed with the teachers, and the students seemed happy. After talking with the director, I enrolled my son in the school and let my daughter finish her last year at the other school.

My son loved his new school and his teachers. He often talked about what he was learning, but I refused to let him talk about religion. I knew almost nothing about Adventists and thought that they worship someone called Ellen White on Saturdays.

One day while I was waiting at a stoplight, a man gave me a magazine. I took it, and laid it aside. When I found the magazine again and started reading it, I didn't trust what was printed there. So I looked up *Sabado* (Saturday) in the dictionary. It said that *Sabado* is the seventh day, and *Domingo* (Sunday) is the first day. I realized that these Adventists were not as crazy as I had thought. I read the articles and verified every fact in the magazine. I even looked up the change of Sabbath to Sunday. I was amazed that nothing in the magazine could be disputed. Even though I didn't want to admit it, this church was right.

I started keeping the Sabbath as I understood it. But I wondered how this Mrs. White fit into Adventist worship. I asked a teacher at the school, and she loaned me several books by Ellen White. There I found great truth.

Because I didn't allow my son to talk to me about what he was learning about religion, I didn't realize that he already knew much of what I was discovering. When I told my children that I wanted to start attending the Adventist church, my son was excited, for he had wanted to go. I allowed my daughter to attend our former church until she was convinced, as I was, that the Adventists were right. She listened as I explained what I was learning, and soon she decided to join my son and me in the Adventist church. Eventually we all were baptized together.

I believe in the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its school system, for through it God introduced us to His church. I believe in our publishing work, for it was a magazine that led me to the feet of Jesus. Our mission offerings support Adventist schools around the world and lead people such as us to God. Thank you for being a part in this great endeavor.

IVETTE RIVERA lives in Vega Baja, Puerto Rico.