

God's Nature: The Basis of Atonement



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ps. 139:1–4; Isa. 46:10; John 1:4; Rom. 5:8; 8:37–39; 1 John 5:11, 12.*

Memory Text: “I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please” (*Isaiah 46:10, NIV*).

Key Thought: God's work of salvation is a self-willed outflow of His very nature; it does not require sinners to persuade Him to love them.

There are many mysteries about God, things about Him, His nature, His holiness, and His power, that we just cannot understand. Yet, there is one aspect about Him that we can begin to understand; namely, His love, a love manifested to us through His Son's redemptive work, a work that touches us at the individual and personal level, a work that is the outgrowth of God's own nature and being.

This week we begin our study of the doctrine of salvation, and we do so with the recognition that the driving force in our salvation is the greatness and love of our God. Nothing outside God forced Him to do what He did for us through His Son. Instead, it is because of His very nature itself that He has poured out His love and grace toward this fallen world.

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

Eternal God

What do the words “in the beginning God created . . .” (*Gen. 1:1*) imply about the nature of God? Before you answer, read also *Genesis 21:33* and *Psalms 90:2*.

The concept of eternity is difficult for us to understand. We are finite creatures (at least in this life). We know that we will die. In fact, everything that we relate to is transitory: It’s here today but will one day be gone. Everything in this world had a beginning and will have an end. In contrast, the idea of God never having a beginning and never having an end isn’t easy to understand, not with minds so used to thinking in finite terms.

Read *Psalms 102:25–27*. To whom is this passage applied in the New Testament? (*See Heb. 1:10–12*.) What’s the message there, along with *Psalms 90:2*, about the length of God’s existence?

Because God is eternal, because He existed before all created things, He has to be self-existent. Creatures, in contrast, are not. We all need air, water, and food to preserve our existence (*Gen. 1:29*), while God needs nothing to exist. Throughout eternity, before He made anything, there was nothing else apart from God. He therefore existed by Himself, dependent upon nothing. *He is life in Himself*. And only He who is life in Himself, the Eternal Self-existing One, can restore life to repentant sinners. Created life, both now and for eternity, all comes from God, the great Life-Giver (*see John 1:4; 1 John 5:11, 12*). We are dependent upon Him for everything.

Think about how dependent you are on God for your life here and now. How much more so for eternal life? How should your realization of this dependence help foster in you a sense of humility? Why is arrogance such a repulsive trait in the eyes of God?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Isaiah 46:10*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: That God loves His created beings.

Feel: Confident that He loves unconditionally.

Do: Seek the intimacy of this relationship.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. The Importance of Understanding God’s Character and Nature

A God’s character is love. He has love for all His creatures, even when they sin. As Christians, how are we called to love—even the most despicable?

B Because God loved us, He was proactive and made a plan for salvation before it was needed. When God knew all of our dirty little secrets, why didn’t He just write off planet Earth and start over? What does this tell you about His love for other created beings in the universe?

II. A Creating God (*Ps. 19:1–3; Rom. 1:20, 21*)

A God doesn’t need a public relations firm to promote His image. We can learn much about Him through the nature around us (*Ps. 19:1–3*). How does Satan use the idea of evolution to cast doubt about the character and nature of God (*Rom. 1:20, 21*)?

B Paul describes Christians as newly created beings (*2 Cor. 5:17*). Imagine God breathing the first breath of life into Adam. What is the equivalent in our lives? How can we experience it? How often do we need God’s breath?

► **Summary:** God wants to re-create new creatures in this sin-damaged world. Let’s allow Him to do that in us daily.

A Loving God

The mystery of God lies beyond our full understanding. He is not an object that we can find by ourselves (*Job 11:7*). The Bible does not give us a systematic and philosophical description of His being. It presents a God who reveals Himself through His actions, through the way He relates to us. We come to know who He is by what He tells us about Himself; otherwise we would know little about Him.

The Scriptures tell us that God is by nature love; that is to say, the essence of His being is self-giving, and this is expressed in concern for the well-being of others.

What do the following texts tell us about the character and nature of God? *Ps. 118:1–4; Rom. 5:8; 8:37–39; 1 John 4:8, 9, 16.*

The statement “God is love” takes us into the core of the divine and tells us (1) “God is love” means that an exploration into God’s essence would reveal that it is, by nature, love. This understanding of the nature of God is of extreme importance in the doctrine of atonement. (2) “God is love” means that He is a relational Being; He enjoys by nature fellowship with His creatures. It is precisely in that personal interaction that He reveals His love. If we want to know whether God loves us or not, we do not examine our feelings and emotions but look at the way He has treated us in spite of our sinfulness. (3) “God is love” means that there is nothing outside God that can move Him to love us. Because God is by nature love, it is unnecessary, even impossible, for us to make ourselves lovable in order to be accepted by Him. And nothing, of course, reveals His love toward us more than the plan of salvation. Indeed, the moment we fell into sin, Christ became our Mediator, Redeemer, and Savior—the ultimate expression of God’s love toward the fallen race.

“Since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (*1 John 4:11, NIV*). **What are practical ways in which you can express love toward others? What things in your own life hinder you from showing that love?**

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

As our minds stretch to wrap around the concepts of God and particularly His nature as they are presented in the Scriptures, we are at once humbled and inspired. Calvin Coolidge described how he would stand in the evening at an open window to contemplate the largeness of space and the vast numbers of stars, in order to remember his place in the universe. When we put our arms on the window casements of heaven and consider the many facets of our eternal, holy, and loving God, the windows of our soul are opened, and the light from God's throne brightens, uplifts, and ennobles our own nature. Ask class members what activities help them contemplate God's attributes.

Alternative: Review the qualities of God's nature examined in the lesson: eternal, holy, creative, loving, all-knowing. Ask your class to extend the list by brainstorming other qualities of God's nature.

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. God Is Eternal (*Review Genesis 1:1 with your class.*)

We share, or hope to share, a number of God's characteristics. But God's eternal nature is one that always will be uniquely His. "The opening words of Scripture . . . draw a striking contrast between all that is human, temporal, and finite, and that which is divine, eternal, and infinite."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, p. 207.

Consider This: In the light of Colossians 1:15–19, discuss what impact God's eternal nature has on His provision for our salvation.

II. God Is Love (*Review Romans 8:31–39 in The Message, if possible.*)

Love is one of those aspects of God's nature that we greatly need to be a part of our nature, and it is awakened by contemplating God's love for us. "Children of the heavenly King! Precious promise! Theme for the most pro-

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God as Creator

“Know ye that the Lord he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture” (*Ps. 100:3*).

Scripture is unequivocal: God is the Creator. Without this fundamental truth, the Bible message becomes meaningless. On the other hand, God as Creator means that He is to be distinguished from creation, that He is not part of the created order. God as the Creator means that there was nothing before Him or before His acts of creation (*Rom. 4:17, Heb. 11:3*). God as Creator means that everything belongs to Him and depends on His power and benevolence for subsistence (*Pss. 24:1, 2; 104:10–14*). God as Creator means that creation reveals the glory and power of its Creator (*Ps. 19:1–3, Rom. 1:20*).

What did the Creator promise to a world damaged by sin? *Isa. 65:17, Rev. 21:1*.

The Bible explicitly states that God created and sustains everything through the power of His Son (*John 1:1–3; Heb. 1:2, 3*). The atonement is God’s solution to the problem of sin within this creation. Instead of leaving us to reap the ultimate rewards of sin and rebellion, which would be eternal ruin, He instituted the plan of salvation.

How does Paul describe those who are in Christ? *2 Cor. 5:17*.

The power God displayed during the creation of the universe is the same power He employs in re-creating fallen human beings into His own image. He brought everything into existence through the power of His word (*Ps. 33:6*), and now it is also through the power of His incarnate word in Christ that He re-creates us (*John 1:1, 12, 13; 2 Cor. 4:16*).

Is there something that you personally have created and sustained, something that you put a lot of work and care into? In what ways does your act of creating it give you ownership over it? How do you feel about what you have made? How, in a small way, might this comparison help us understand what we mean to God, our Creator?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

found meditation! The matchless love of God for a world that did not love Him! The thought has a subduing power upon the soul and brings the mind into captivity to the will of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 15.

Consider This: What Bible stories help you meditate on the love of God?

III. God Is Creator (Review John 1:1–14.)

Consider This: What examples from Scripture can you use to demonstrate God’s intentions to re-create us in His image and restore our relationship to Him? Examine 2 Corinthians 4:11 and John 17:24, 25.

“As Gen. 1 sets forth the nature of creation and the fact that man was originally formed in the image of God, so the prologue to the Gospel of John sets forth the nature of the Creator (vs. 1-4) and the means by which God purposed to make possible the re-creation of His image in man (vs. 5-14).”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol 5, p. 896.

■ *How do verses 12–14 of John 1 describe the re-creative power of God? What part do we play in this restoration process?*

IV. God Is Holy (Review Isaiah 57:15.)

The sanctuary service was designed to demonstrate the holy nature of God and His provisions to restore us to Himself. “The sanctuary was not designed to honor man, but the God of heaven. He had given specific directions how everything was to be done. The people were to be taught that He was a being of greatness and majesty, and that He was to be worshiped with reverence and awe.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 268.

Consider This: In the light of Hebrews 9:11–15, 28, discuss what aspects of the sanctuary service illustrated the holiness of God’s character and what aspects of the sanctuary service illustrated how God designs to make His people holy.

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Holy God

Read Isaiah 40:25 and Isaiah 57:15. What do these texts tell us about the nature of God?

The holiness of God is not simply an attribute of God but, like love, reveals what He is in Himself. At least two fundamental ideas are associated with His holiness.

First, it describes God as unique. The term *holy* usually designates what has been placed at the exclusive and unique service of the Lord. But when *holy* is applied to God, it emphasizes the fact that He is unique and incomparable. There is no one in the universe like our sublime and majestic God (*see Isa. 46:5, 9*), and only He is worthy of our worship.

Second, God being holy does not mean that He is distant and inaccessible to us and unable to have fellowship with us. His holiness and His love are inseparable. His holiness reveals itself in His willingness to dwell with the contrite and lowly in spirit. By approaching them and dwelling among them, the Holy One allows His creatures to participate in His holiness.

What promise is found in the following verse? *2 Cor. 5:21*.

God's holiness does not tolerate sin but actively reacts against it (*Isa. 5:24, Hos. 9:15, Rom. 1:18*). "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong" (*Hab. 1:13, NIV*). God's natural hatred for sin made necessary the role of a Mediator. God designed a way by which sinners could be sanctified and enjoy fellowship with Him again. This was possible through Christ, in whom atonement and holiness were mysteriously united. The Holy One was born as a baby on this planet of sin and impurity (*Luke 1:35*) to sanctify us through the power of His atoning death: "We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ" (*Heb. 10:10, NIV*).

Someone says, "Why do I need a Savior? I'm not that bad, certainly not as bad as many others." How should our understanding of God's holiness help us answer this person correctly?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**V. God Is All-Knowing** (Review *Psalm 139:1–4, 15, 16.*)

Consider This: How do you know God is omniscient? What evidence can you find of this in Scripture?

Since God knows the end from the beginning, He knew that sin would enter the world, the havoc it would create, and what to do about it (*1 Pet. 1:19, 20*). He knew that Israel would fail as a nation and predicted the rise and fall of the world powers before He would finally set up His kingdom (*Daniel 2*).

► **STEP 3—Practice****Object Lesson:**

“As the bow in the cloud is formed by the union of the sunlight and the shower, so the rainbow encircling the throne represents the combined power of mercy and justice. It is not justice alone that is to be maintained; for this would eclipse the glory of the rainbow of promise above the throne; man could see only the penalty of the law. Were there no justice, no penalty, there would be no stability to the government of God. It is the mingling of judgment and mercy that makes salvation full and complete.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, pp. 1071, 1072.

Consider This: Illustrate this concept with a glass of water or prism in a window or other means of making a rainbow. What aspects of God’s nature inspire awe and respect? What aspects of God’s nature inspire a desire for love and intimacy? How do these aspects of God’s nature interrelate?

Life Applications:

1 The Psalms and Isaiah are wonderful sources of readings on God’s nature. Divide into small groups and give each group one of the following chapters to examine for characteristics of God’s nature: *Psalm 18, 139, Isaiah 43, 55*.

2 List some of the things that God knows that we don’t. (For examples, see

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Omniscient God

What do these texts tell us about God’s knowledge? *Ps. 139:1–4, 15, 16; Isa. 46:10; Matt. 10:30.*

God is omniscient; that is, “he knows everything” (*1 John 3:20, NIV*). Nothing is hidden from Him. “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes” of the Lord (*Heb. 4:13, NIV*). All the spheres of His creation are inundated by His presence, and therefore He knows every dimension of it (*Ps. 139:7–10*). His knowledge of us is perfect and complete. God alone possesses pure objectivity, because He alone knows everything from every possible perspective.

It is not only that the Lord fully knows what is; He also perfectly knows what will be in the future (*Isa. 46:10; Matt. 26:34, 74, 75*). The future is no more hidden from Him than is either the past or the present.

What does **1 Peter 1:19, 20** tell us about God’s foreknowledge regarding the rise of sin?

God’s omniscience is of great significance for the doctrine of atonement. Because God knows everything, sin was not something that caught Him by surprise. The God who perfectly knows all His creatures knew in advance about the fall of one of His cherubim, and so He formulated a plan to deal with the problem of sin, even before it arose in humans: “Where sin increased, grace increased all the more” (*Rom. 5:20, NIV*). Therefore, God’s decision to save us was hidden in eternity and revealed in Christ. This is “the mystery hidden for long ages past” (*Rom. 16:25, NIV*), “hidden in God, who created all things” (*Eph. 3:9, NIV*). Before God created anything, He had foreseen the origin of sin and decided to defeat it instead of fearfully running away from it. From the divine perspective, Christ is “the Lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world” (*Rev. 13:8*).

God knows everything about you, things that no one else would even dare suspect. And despite that knowledge, He still loves you. How should that help influence how you treat others, despite their faults?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Isa. 46:10, Daniel 12, Matt. 10:30, Rom. 16:25, and Heb. 4:13.) How does this review of God’s omniscience affect your relationship to Him?

3 Describe characteristics of the heavenly sanctuary that illustrate the eternal, holy, creative, redemptive, and loving nature of God. How does your understanding of God’s nature help you relate to Hebrews 10:19–24?

► STEP 4—Apply

Consider This: Try these ideas in your Sabbath School class or suggest them as activities for members to try on their own.

1 Divide into small groups and ask each group to write an original psalm based on a particular theme taken from an aspect of God’s nature. For example, Psalm 139 is centered on God’s omniscience.

2 Visualize God’s heavenly throne room as a place where we “approach the throne of grace with confidence” (*Heb. 4:16, NIV*), using such texts as Revelation 4, 22, and Ezekiel 1. What aspects of God’s nature are illustrated by the rainbow, fire, the four living creatures, lightning and thunder, the river of life, etc.?

3 Divide into small groups and assign one aspect of God’s nature to each group. Then ask each group to choose two or three verses of Scripture that describe that particular attribute. In responsive reading style, ask each group to read together the verses they chose. (The members of each group should have access to the same version of the Bible.)

4 Do a prayer walk, focusing on attributes of God as illustrated in the works of nature. What do you see in the natural world that illustrates God’s justice? His love? His holiness? His eternal nature?

5 Find songs in a hymnal that speak of the various aspects of God’s nature. Close your Sabbath School with one of these hymns, such as number 21, “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise,” in *The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* (1985).

6 Close your class with prayer by inviting your members to offer sentence prayers acknowledging and praising God for particular aspects of His nature.

Further Study: God and Redemption: “Only as we contemplate the great plan of redemption can we have a just appreciation of the character of God. The work of creation was a manifestation of His love; but the gift of God to save the guilty and ruined race, alone reveals the infinite depths of divine tenderness and compassion.” —Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 739.

Forgiveness and Justice: “When we study the divine character in the light of the cross we see mercy, tenderness, and forgiveness blended with equity and justice. We see in the midst of the throne One bearing in hands and feet and side the marks of the suffering endured to reconcile man to God. We see a Father, infinite, dwelling in light unapproachable, yet receiving us to Himself through the merits of His Son. The cloud of vengeance that threatened only misery and despair, in the light reflected from the cross reveals the writing of God: Live, sinner, live! ye penitent, believing souls, live! I have paid a ransom.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 333.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Go back over the main points of this week’s lesson. What other aspects of God’s essential nature can you think of, and what role would they play in the plan of salvation?
- 2 What can we learn about God’s holiness that would help us better understand what it means for us to be holy?
- 3 Some people struggle with the question of God’s foreknowledge and our free will. How free are we in our choices if God knew beforehand what choices we would make? Discuss.

Summary: The God who is life in Himself is the only One who can restore life to us. We are loved by Him, not because we earned that love but because He is love in Himself and continues to love us, in spite of our sin. He also wants to re-create us, and He is able because He is the Creator. As a holy God who cannot tolerate sin in His presence, He is able to sanctify us through Christ. His all-encompassing knowledge reveals that sin was not an unexpected phenomenon but something that He foresaw and was prepared to deal with.