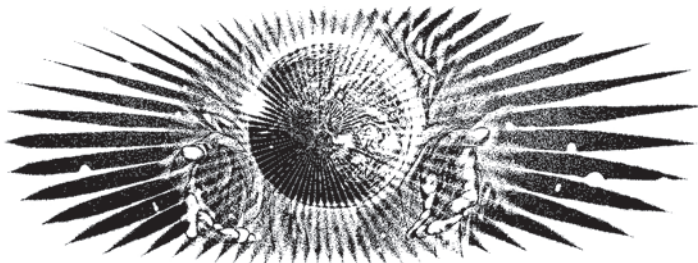


Atonement *and the* Divine Initiative



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 Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Ephesians 1:9, 10*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: God chose to save the human race.

Feel: Separation causes pain to both God and us.

Do: Ponder daily the mystery of Christ's incarnation and what it means to you about the love and character of God.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. From Perfection to Eternal Death (*Eccles. 7:29*)

God created perfect creatures, and they chose to create chaos. In response, God chose to clean up the mess humans made. Discuss the scenarios God could have chosen instead of offering Redemption. After examining these other potential outcomes, how do we understand God's character better? Suppose He had decided to leave us to our fate, without the option of salvation?

II. A Rescue in Motion (*Rom. 5:6–8*)

We don't deserve to be fixed. God could have allowed us to be mired in the muck of sin and the eternal ruin it brings. Instead He implemented a rescue operation. Under what conditions would you die for someone else? Whom would you die for—your children, spouse, or parent? Would you die for a power-hungry dictator, a terrorist, a drug dealer, or a prostitute? What does your answer tell you about the character of God?

► **Summary:** We don't have to fully understand God's choice to rescue us. He just wants us to accept and believe He has provided a way out. We simply have to choose to accept it.

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?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Though He made angels and people with the power of choice, God not only knew they *could* reject Him but that some *would* reject Him. He also knew that the only answer to the evil that would erupt in the universe was a demonstration of His true nature: His unbending righteousness on the one hand and His self-sacrificing love on the other. “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.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 42.

Ask class members to describe why being free moral agents is important to them. What would be the alternative? Why should God plan to save people? Haven’t they made their choice?

Alternative: Hold up a potted flowering plant. Ask if the plant has any choice in the type of flower it produces. Ask if any in the class have a choice about how tall they are or whether they have a hot temper. Some things we don’t have a choice in. We may be born with a hot temper, but unlike a flower, we do have a choice of whether we display our temper. However, we must be educated as to our alternatives. How does God purpose to do this?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. Mysterious Love (*Review Romans 3:19, 20; 5:6–8.*)

In creating Lucifer and Adam and Eve perfect in a perfect environment, God made all the provisions possible for their happiness and success. The law is a perfect picture of how things are in a perfect world. But when sinners choose to step outside of the perfection of God’s environment, neither they nor the law can fix what has been broken. God provided more than a perfect environment; He provided Himself, a perfect offering of self-forgetful love, long before our creation and our sin.

Consider This: Examine Romans 5:6–8 in conjunction with

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

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Philippians 2:6. Human love tends to be limited. How did Jesus go beyond most limits we can understand?

II. Mysterious Grace (Review Romans 5:20, 21.)

“That He who had passed from star to star, from world to world, superintending all, by His providence supplying the needs of every order of being in His vast creation—that He should consent to leave His glory and take upon Himself human nature, was a mystery which the sinless intelligences of other worlds desired to understand.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 69.

Grace is an offering of something we don’t deserve. God had already provided everything possible; now He was offering more. Already the Provider of every need, He provided Himself as a personal demonstration of the immutability of His law, the end result of sin, and the depths of His mercy in taking sin’s sentence on Himself.

Consider This: What else could God do for us? (See Rom. 8:32.)

III. Eternal Plan (Review Ephesians 1:4, 10; Titus 1:2.)

Before we were ever created and before we sinned, God chose us to be holy and blameless and to live eternally. This was possible only because Christ was chosen to be slain for our sins, before our sins had ever been committed (*1 Pet. 1:20, Rev. 13:8*), and to provide for us what we could not provide for ourselves—a sinless life, worthy of eternal life.

Consider This: In this context, explain Galatians 2:20 in your own words.

IV. By Way of the Cross (Review Galatians 1:4, 2:20.)

We are lifted up to a life we don’t deserve, only because Christ “made him-

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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*).

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

self nothing” (*Phil. 2:7, NIV*), made Himself a servant in human flesh and took on Himself the curse of death that we deserved, even death on a cross.

Consider This: Philippians 2:8 goes on to describe Christ as “obedient to death” (*NIV*). Explain this concept in relation to Luke 22:42 and Galatians 1:4.

V. Jesus Must Do It (*Review Luke 22:37, John 9:4.*)


Consider This: Why did Jesus see what He did as so necessary for His mission? Why did He say so often that He wasn’t doing His work but His Father’s?

The communion between the Father and Son is so close that Jesus, in loving us and dying for us, was expressing the Father’s love for us, in close obedience to His Father’s will. Yet, our relationship with Jesus is so intimate that Jesus says He knows us the way the Father knows Him. “What a statement is this!—the only begotten Son, He who is in the bosom of the Father, He whom God has declared to be ‘the man that is my fellow’ (*Zech. 13:7*),—the communion between Him and the eternal God is taken to represent the communion between Christ and His children on the earth!”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 483.

► STEP 3—Practice

Role-play:

Set up a pretend situation in which several of your class members (male and female) apply to receive a spouse programmed to meet the applicant’s specifications. Another class member can sit at a computer, typing in each applicant’s requirements as he or she describes them. In discussion, ask class members to imagine receiving a spouse cut and programmed to their specifications. How would they feel, being loved by someone they made to love them? Relate this issue to God, risking rejection in making free moral agents. Why would He do this? (An alternative would be to role-play programming children to obey.)

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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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Thought Questions:**

- 1 Because God knew that some of His created beings would, at some point, turn their backs on Him, He created a contingency plan. Why does this contingency plan work for people on earth but not for Satan or his angel followers?
- 2 Throughout His life, Jesus acknowledged that He was there not to do His own will and work but His Father's work. How is this consistent with statements that He laid down His own life and took it up again? (*See John 10:14, 15, 17, 18.*)

Life Applications:

- 1 In Luke, Jesus often spoke of what was “necessary” for Him to do. What do you see as necessary for you to do, as your mission in life? Write a mission statement that defines what it is that is most critical for you to do.
- 2 Does your life help to reveal the mysteries of God's love and grace? How might you be a part of this process?

► STEP 4—Apply

Consider This: Discuss the suggestions below as possible activities for the week ahead. You may choose to close with number 4.

- 1 Examine John 17, Jesus' prayer of consecration for Himself and His disciples. In light of your understanding of your personal mission in Christ's service, write a prayer of consecration for yourself in response to Christ's prayer.
- 2 Write a short drama about Adam and Eve's first time to offer a sacrifice outside the gateway into Eden.
- 3 Memorize number 76, “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go,” in the *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* (1985).
- 4 Arrange a responsive reading from Ephesians 1, emphasizing God's plan from before the world was made, to bring everything in the universe together under Christ. Use this reading as a closing for your class.

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:

1 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?

2 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.