

Grace



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 25:8; Isaiah 53; Rom. 5:18, 19; 2 Cor. 3:16–18; Eph. 2:4–10; Titus 2:11–14.*

Memory Text: “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (*Romans 5:8*).

During a British conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world debated what, if any, belief was unique to the Christian faith. They began eliminating possibilities. Incarnation? Other religions had different versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Again, other religions had accounts of returns from death. The debate went on for some time until Christian writer C. S. Lewis wandered into the room. “‘What’s the rumpus about?’ he asked and heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity’s unique contribution among world religions. Lewis responded, ‘Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.’”—Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), p. 45.

Last week we were confronted with the dreadful phenomenon of sin, the “secret power of lawlessness” (*2 Thess. 2:7, NIV*). In the final section we saw that through divine intervention a solution has been provided. What that intervention was, and what it accomplished for us, will be the focus of this week’s study.

The Week at a Glance: What are some of the images God uses to teach us the plan of salvation? What is atonement? How central is the concept of substitution to our understanding of the Cross?

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 16.

God Provides Salvation

The story of how Abraham's loyalty was tested is well known. God asked him to sacrifice his son Isaac. Unaware of what God had told his father to do, and thinking that they were simply going to offer a sacrifice somewhere, Isaac asked why they had not taken an animal with them. Abraham then replied with the prophetic words that found their echo throughout the pages of the Old, as well as the New Testament: " 'God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering' " (*Gen. 22:8, NIV*).

What was the prophetic significance of Abraham's words to his son?

Where else in the Old Testament do we find texts that point to the redemption that was to come through Christ? What are those texts, and what do they say? See, for example, *Gen. 3:15, Exod. 25:8, Isaiah 53*.

Jesus Christ is the center of the Old Testament. Indeed, the whole purpose of the earthly sanctuary service was to point to the coming of the Messiah (*see Hebrews 8, 9*). Everything prior to His entrance into the world was a mere prelude to the Cross. God waited until the right moment. Then, when "the time had fully come" (*Gal. 4:4, NIV*), Christ came to live among us.

"Through every age, through every hour, the love of God had been exercised toward the fallen race. Notwithstanding the perversity of men, the signals of mercy had been continually exhibited. And when the fullness of the time had come, the Deity was glorified by pouring upon the world a flood of healing grace that was never to be obstructed or withdrawn till the plan of salvation should be fulfilled."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 37.

Think how many long centuries had passed between the promises of the coming Messiah and His coming. What should that tell us—beings who usually live only eighty short years or so at best—about patience, about trusting in God though things seem to take so long?

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Romans 5:8*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: That Christ's sacrifice ensures us eternal life if we accept Him.

Feel: Secure of your future with Him as your personal Savior.

Do: Respond to God's grace by following Him.

▶ **Lesson Outline:**

I. Understanding Grace (*Isaiah 53*)

A Jesus is the central point of the entire Old Testament. What does this say about the importance of grace and salvation in God's message to us?

B "He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (*vs. 12, NIV*). It is through His suffering on our behalf, that we can claim eternal life. Does this seem just to you? Why, or why not?

II. Accepting Grace (*Eph. 2:8*)

A The greatest thing about grace is that it is free. This is a hard concept for many to comprehend. God recognized this difficulty and used many different illustrations to help us better understand grace. How do you best relate to grace?

B How does the idea of grace make you feel? Do you feel guilty accepting such an undeserved gift? Do you feel a security in the promise of eternal life? Are you thankful for God's love? Explain. What might your answers tell you about your relationship with God?

III. Changed by Grace (*1 Cor. 15:10*)

As grace changed Paul, it can change you. We are required to believe and accept His gift. How has grace changed you?

▶ **Summary:** Christ died so that we can have eternal life. We are lost without Him.

Pictures of the Miracle of Grace

How do you explain to a three-year-old child what electricity is? How do you explain to those deep in the African jungles, who have never traveled more than 25 miles from where they live, what traffic lights are for and how an elevator works? How can a physicist ever hope to explain Einstein's relativity theory to a person whose education remained limited to elementary school? God faced a communication gap that went far beyond these examples of human communication barriers. The divine love demonstrated in the life and death of Jesus Christ cannot be captured fully in human words. Yet, God wanted us to have an adequate idea of what is involved in His plan of salvation. God inspired the authors of the Scriptures to use a number of different word-pictures, each of which gives us further insight into the mystery of His grace. None of these images should be used in isolation from the other perspectives. Taken together, however, they will leave us with a sense of wonder and immense gratitude.

What is one of the most prominent word-pictures God used to help us catch some profound glimpses of the mystery of grace? *Isa. 53:7, John 1:29.*

What other symbolism is used to illustrate a further dimension of the truth of the atonement? *Matt. 20:28, Acts 20:28, 1 Cor. 6:20.*

We must be careful not to use one particular symbol to the exclusion of other word-pictures. When we combine everything that is said about the atonement, we arrive at as full a picture as we finite human beings can absorb. Nevertheless, the image of a ransom, of a high price paid for us, is a powerful one. "Christ redeemed us from sin, that is, He bought us back from sin. . . . What the metaphor intends is that (a) the means of our salvation is costly and that (b) we have passed from one state to another—from the state of slavery to the state of nearness to God. A redemption means the passing over of ownership at a cost."—Edward W. H. Vick, *Let Me Assure You* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1968), p. 33.

Dwell on the implications of this idea that the Creator of the universe, the One who made all that is (*John 1:1–3*), voluntarily went to the cross as the only means of saving us from eternal ruin. Why should the reality of this truth heavily influence how we live? Think how foolish it is to let anything earthly turn us away from the Cross.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Only God’s grace has the capability to transform our sin-scarred lives.

Just for Teachers: If possible, bring a few before-and-after digital images to share with your class to illustrate the transforming power of digital imagery.

Digital photography’s ability to transform how we see reality verges on the mind-bending. A digital photographer can take an imperfect subject and make him or her appear perfectly beautiful. Skin can be airbrushed to look flawless. Chipped teeth can be made to seem whole again or gapped teeth brought close together. Moles or other blemishes can be erased as easily as pencil from paper; wrinkles can be removed forever. Shadows, too, can be deleted from a picture, and a crooked nose can be made straight. As a matter of fact, most of the flawless portraits we see have been digitally enhanced. (That is one reason we never will look as fabulous as the people in advertisements, no matter how hard we try.)

God’s grace in our lives works a lot like digital photography. Yet, as powerful as digital photography is, it changes only the likeness of something, not the thing itself. But God changes us into His likeness by revealing His character in us. Acceptance of Jesus as our Savior covers our blemishes and defects and presents us perfect before God. The transformation goes deeper, too. God’s grace has the ability to remove our spiritual blemishes in order to restore us to the original image of His perfect likeness.

Consider This: God’s eye is like a camera lens that captures us for who we are. Yet, despite what He sees, He wants to transform us into who we were meant to be. How does grace, like a digital camera, restore us to His likeness? What does it mean to be in His likeness?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. Trading Places (*Review Romans 6:23 and Hebrews 9:22 with your class.*)

C O N T I N U E D 

What Happened at Calvary?

There is a lot of discussion among theologians about the doctrine of atonement. Two main concepts are promoted. Some opt for an objective view of the atonement while others defend a subjective view. What does this mean? The first school of thought emphasizes that something actually occurred at a historical point in time on a hill just outside of Jerusalem, a concrete, historical event that provided the basis for our salvation. Other theologians underline the fact that our response to the demonstration of Jesus' love and self-sacrifice on the cross is the crucial point: We are changed when we contemplate a love so great! Both perspectives are true and, understood together, complement each other.

How does the Bible explain the relationship between what Christ did for us and what we as sinful beings, in fact, deserve? *Isa. 53:4, 5; Rom. 5:18, 19.*

The idea that Jesus Christ died in our place, so that we will not suffer eternal death but become partakers of the life that He offers, is usually referred to as the concept of substitution. To many this is an abhorrent idea. They do not like the legalistic language often used or the concept of divine wrath against sin. But whatever we may like or dislike, the grandiose truth is that God has dealt with the sin problem in the way He decided was suitable. Being just, He could not ignore sin; being love, He could not abandon the sinner. We should have paid the penalty of eternal death ourselves because we are the guilty ones. But Jesus was willing to take our place! That's what happened at the cross. This actual event, that of His substitution in our stead, became the basis for our redemption.

Then, as a result of what Christ has done for us, as a response to His substitution in our place, we are drawn to Him, we respond to Him, we change our attitude toward Him and other humans beings, as well. This is the complementary, subjective side to the plan of salvation (*John 12:32, Rom. 5:1*).

Think about all the bad things you have done and (perhaps) might still do. Then realize that Jesus, at the cross, suffered the punishment that you deserve for those actions. How do you feel, knowing that He suffered in your stead? What should your response be, knowing what Jesus went through on your behalf?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Romans 6:23 declares that the wages of sin is death, and Hebrews 9:22 tells us that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins. Consequently, when our first parents sinned, someone's blood needed to be shed as a payment for the sin debt. The only one qualified for that position was Jesus. He willingly volunteered to pay the debt.

“As soon as there was sin, there was a Saviour. Christ knew that He would have to suffer, yet He became man's substitute. As soon as Adam sinned, the Son of God presented Himself as surety for the human race.”
—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, p. 1084.

Consider This: Why is blood the only way for sin to be cleansed or remitted? What does the shedding of blood symbolize? Why was Jesus the only One qualified to pay the sin debt?

II. What's Your Worth? (Review 1 Peter 1:18, 19 with your class.)

According to a recent article published in *Fortune* magazine in October 2007, Indian tycoon Mukesh Ambani overtook Mexican telecommunications mogul Carlos Slim and American billionaires Bill Gates and Warren Buffett for the number one slot as richest man in the world. Some say Ambani's status as the world's richest man is only on paper. With the rise and fall of the stock market, analysts warn that Ambani's star is short-lived.

But as wealthy as Ambani, Slim, Gates, and Buffet are combined, the poorest person on earth is worth far more in God's eyes. Plus, our worth is revealed not by something as fluctuating as the world economy but by something infinitely more stable: the blood of His Son, the guarantee of His grace.

Peter reminds us that we are bought, not with corruptible things that would perish or even silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Jesus. Jesus' blood brings us far more than material riches. It brings us, under the direction of the Spirit, a renewed life that is filled with peace and happiness in spite of our present, temporary circumstances.

Consider This: We have an expiration date—thanks to sin. We break down. We make mistakes. We steal. We kill. We lie. Yet, despite these flaws, God estimates us as worthy recipients of eternal riches. Why? How does the blood of Jesus pay our sin debt and spiritually enrich our lives?

A Change of Heart

The unparalleled manifestation of divine compassion and grace on Calvary has changed millions of hearts. From the very moment He hung dying on the cross, people were changed by beholding the love of Christ. One of the criminals crucified with Him noticed that Jesus was someone special, with a future beyond this ignominious death (*Luke 23:39–43*). And even the Roman centurion noticed that Jesus was no criminal (*vs. 47*).

How should our lives be changed by beholding Jesus and what He has done for us? *2 Cor. 3:16–18; Heb. 12:2, 3.*

“Let the repenting sinner fix his eyes upon ‘the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world’ (John 1:29); and *by beholding, he becomes changed*. His fear is turned to joy, his doubts to hope. Gratitude springs up. The stony heart is broken. A tide of love sweeps into the soul. Christ is in him a well of water springing up unto everlasting life. When . . . we behold Him in Gethsemane, sweating great drops of blood, and on the cross dying in agony—when we see this, self will no longer clamor to be recognized. Looking unto Jesus, we shall be ashamed of our coldness, our lethargy, our self-seeking. We shall be willing to be anything or nothing, so that we may do heart service for the Master.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 439, 440; italics supplied.

How well do her words reflect your own experience with Christ? What could be holding you back from a deeper experience with Him? How much time do you spend contemplating Calvary?

Theologians propose various theories of the atonement. But when everything is said and done, there is no one theory or combination of theories that will do justice to the marvel of God’s grace (*see 1 Cor. 1:20–25*). It is good to talk together about the passages of Scripture that reveal different aspects of Jesus’ sacrifice. But what Jesus did for us should be not only a topic of debate but prayerfully contemplated and experienced. Though there’s much we can’t understand, we have been given enough so that we should marvel at what God has done for us in Christ.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED► **STEP 3—Practice**

Just for Teachers: Solicit from class members what their experience has been with making bread with and without yeast.

Object Lesson:

Characteristically, a ball of dough mixed with yeast rises and is bigger than dough unmixed with yeast. God’s grace works in much the same way. Grace activates the growth of our spiritual lives. All people on earth are recipients of God’s grace. Though His justice demands the death penalty for the human race, His mercy intercedes for us, granting us reprieve. That is grace.

Unfortunately, sin, too, has leavening qualities. A little bit of it, the Bible says, “can leaven” or raise the “whole lump” of dough that is our lives. The only hope we have against the leavening power of sin is God’s grace.

Those of us who have accepted Jesus as our Savior have received God’s mercy and pardon for sins and will continue to do so as long as we ask for forgiveness. That is also grace. So, as yeast makes dough rise, likewise, those who have accepted God’s grace should rise above sin and live a life transformed from the old life they lived before.

Thought Questions:

- 1 In what areas of my life am I displaying God’s grace? How does grace help us to rise above sin in our lives? Give specific examples.
- 2 In what areas does God’s grace need to be more manifested in the church? How can we allow grace to work its transforming power in us as individuals?

Parable:

A man falls over the side of a boat at night. When his head shoots above the water, the boat is gone. The water and the sky are a disorienting black. He can see nothing. He calls out, but no one answers. The man is a good swimmer, but after several hours of treading water, his arms are too tired to keep paddling, and his body is numb with cold. Exhausted, he shuts his eyes, floating on his back. A sudden wave pulls him under. He claws his way back up to the surface, taking a desperate breath, before the water plunges him under again. This time his head does not reappear. But a lifeboat reaches him

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Christ Our Salvation

It's easy for Christians to get sidetracked. For some, the focus of their faith is either on the Bible, or on the church, or on the traditions or doctrines of their church. While all these have their role, they can be very problematic if they turn us away from Jesus, who alone is the Source of our salvation.

As Seventh-day Adventists, we often refer to the “truth” as the focus of our faith. There is nothing wrong with that, as long as we do not reduce our concept of truth to a list of doctrines to which we intellectually ascribe. Our faith should find its center in the truth as we find it in Jesus. We believe in a Person who has revealed our God to us, who has come to redeem us, who presently is our heavenly Mediator, and who will return to take us home. This must be of primary importance to us.

What do such passages as Ephesians 2:4–10 and Titus 2:11–14 teach us about the centrality of Christ in our faith?

Ephesians 2:4–10 is an extraordinarily rich passage. It underlines several times that we are saved by grace. This grace is described as “incomparable riches” (*vs. 6, NIV*), which issue from God’s “great love for us” (*vs. 4, NIV*). This grace is *gratis*, free. It cannot be earned. Our works do not bring us eternal life. If they did, we would have reason to boast about our own goodness. It is God’s grace that will bring visible changes in our daily lives and that will enable us to do “good” works (*vs. 10*). But even these good deeds are, essentially, God’s work in us.

What magnificent description of the centrality of Jesus Christ to our faith do we find in Paul’s words as recorded in Acts 17:28? *See also Gal. 2:16–20.*

How should the doctrines we have as Adventists help us better understand what Christ has done for us? Suppose, for instance, that you believed in eternal torment in hell. How would that, or other false teachings, impact your understanding of Christ? Why then are correct doctrines so important in helping us come to know Jesus better?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

before he drowns. The crew pulls his unconscious body from the water. Another boat appears and takes the crew away, but they leave the man alone, half-conscious, in the lifeboat on the open sea with a bottle of water and enough food for three days.

Consider This: Most rescue stories typically do not end this way. After all, how crazy it is to rescue someone from death only to abandon that person to certain starvation? But, had God merely stopped at not eliminating the human race when they sinned, then the outcome for us would have been no different than the all-too-certain fate of the man in the lifeboat: he was temporarily saved from drowning, but he was not given enough food or water to save his life.

Typically, during a successful rescue, the hapless victim is pulled or carried to shore and given immediate medical attention until restored. God did nothing less for us. Instead of leaving us stranded, He bodily sent Jesus to answer our distress call. Jesus came not only to save us from drowning in our sins but to row us all the way to the shores of eternal life.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Just as the Bible uses word pictures, or images, to symbolize truth, the elements of this story represent different aspects of grace. Identify the following: Who is the swimmer? How are we like the swimmer?
- 2 What does the boat represent? What does the swimmer being taken to shore symbolize?
- 3 God's grace saves us from sin by making us blameless before God. How does God's grace continue to work in our lives to help make our characters like His?

► STEP 4—Apply**Try This:**

- 1 Do some research on John Newton, author of the song "Amazing Grace." (See Kenneth Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories*.) Sing the song while meditating on the power of God to change this man's life, as well as yours and the lives of others around you.
- 2 Can you think of anyone who has wronged you? Then ask God to help you show His grace by offering that person forgiveness. Ask God to help you forgive this person in your thoughts and in your actions.

Further Study: The book *Seventh-day Adventists* will almost automatically refer to when asked about the atoning work of Christ is Ellen G. White's *The Desire of Ages*. Chapters 78 and 79 (pp. 741–768) are particularly relevant in the context of this week's study. Note the statement on page 751: "As Jesus, crucified with the thieves, was placed 'in the midst,' so His cross was placed in the midst of a world lying in sin. And the words of pardon spoken to the penitent thief kindled a light that will shine to the earth's remotest bounds."

Discussion Questions:

❶ Some people are offended by the idea that God demanded the life of His Son as a "payment" for the sins of humankind. That, though, is one of the images used by the Bible, so we must take it for what it says. What should the image tell us about the seriousness of sin and how costly our redemption was?

❷ If there is one doctrine many contemporary people object to, it is the atonement. Many do not accept the idea that our problem should be solved by an intervention from the "outside." Should not each person accept responsibility for what he or she has done? How do you explain the need for divine intervention to such people? Also, ask these people about the problem of death. How is that problem going to be solved if not by divine intervention?

❸ Those who are saved by grace must also show grace to those around them. How do we as individuals show that our lives are embedded in grace? How does a church model this divine grace?

❹ Why is the "subjective" side of the Cross so important, as well? That is, how should the realization of Christ's death for us change us? What should it teach us about forgiveness, about humility, about patience, about love for the unlovable? What are some concrete and practical ways we can reveal the reality of what the Cross means to us?

Summary: Theologians have developed many theories about the atonement. Most are deficient or at least one-sided. They may be compared with pictures taken from different sides of the Himalayas. They all show the mountains but do not provide a complete picture. The miracle of grace must not be reduced to a formula to which we give intellectual assent. It is the ground of our faith. Christ died for us so that we can have eternal life. Without Him, we are lost. With Him as our Savior, our future is secure.