

Christ's Church and the Law



SABBATH—JUNE 14

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Genesis 2:16–Genesis 3:7; Genesis 6; Genesis 12; Deuteronomy 7:6–12; Galatians 3:6–16; Revelation 12:17; Revelation 14:6–12.

MEMORY VERSE: “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 HAS 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 runners. Only the team member who is holding the baton¹ can race at any given time. The baton is skillfully passed from one team member to the next until the race is finished. In a way, the baton is the only symbol of unity (oneness) 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 time periods of salvation history: from Noah to Abraham to Moses to the New Testament church to the Reformation² church, and now to those who preach the three angels' messages.

The symbol of unity for God's church is His law. After the fall of Adam and Eve, God's law must always be coupled with God's saving grace.³ Together, they are the real meaning of the gospel.

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

DEFINITIONS

1. baton—a “stick” that is passed from one runner to another in a race.
2. Reformation—the period of history in which a protest was started in Europe in the Middle Ages against the teachings of the Catholic Church.
3. grace—God's gift of mercy and forgiveness that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

FROM ADAM TO NOAH (Genesis 2:16–Genesis 3:7)



The Greek word for “church,” *ekklesia*, means those who have been “called out.”



The tree was a test: How would Adam and Eve use their freedom?

DEFINITIONS

4. secular—not spiritual, of or relating to the physical world and not the spiritual world.

5. generation—a group of people born and living during the same time.

In a way, we can speak of a “church of Christ” since the New Testament period. This is when believers first preached the life, death, and resurrection (return to life) of Jesus. But we also can think of “Christ’s church” more broadly. The Greek word for “church” is *ekklesia*. Borrowed from the secular⁴ world, the word means those who have been “called out.” In every generation⁵ God has “called out” a people to live out His will by their examples of faithfulness, trust, love, and obedience.

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

To be able to love, Adam and Eve had to be free to make choices. They had to have the ability and the freedom to do wrong, even if they had no good reason for doing so. The experience at the tree was their test: In what way would they use their God-given freedom?

We know the answer.

At the center is law—God’s law. The law describes good and evil for us. (Note that the tree is called the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”) What is the purpose of a law that does not permit lying, stealing, and killing if these humans were not capable of doing any of those things to begin with? The law itself would be meaningless in a universe of people who could do only good. But that is not how God chose to create us. He could not do that if He wanted humans who could truly love.

After the Fall, Adam and Eve were to “pass the baton” to the next generation. But humans’ downward path was quick and dirty. Of their first two sons, only Abel chose to join God’s church. Cain was filled with the spirit of jealousy, lying, murder, and parental disrespect. Things went from bad to worse until evil overpowered the good. By the time of the Flood, only Noah and his family could truly claim to be members of Christ’s church.

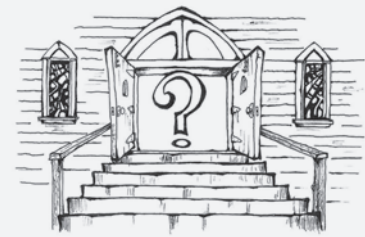
How many times in the past 24 hours have you made choices between good and bad while using the freedom given to us from Eden? What were those choices? How closely were they united (one) with God’s moral (righteous; holy) law?

**FROM NOAH TO ABRAHAM
(Genesis 6:5–9)**

The world into which Noah was born was worse than any society that has ever lived throughout history. This means that it must have been pretty bad. People were living for almost a thousand years. So, it is not difficult to imagine how society could become bad enough that God was 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 humans? Explain how this does not mean that God did not know what was going to happen? (Read Deuteronomy 31:15–17.)**
- 2. Ellen G. White explains that the phrases “sons of God” and “daughters of men” mean faithful men marrying unfaithful women. So, what lessons can we learn from Genesis 6 about the role of the church in the world?**
- 3. What were some of the things that these people did that displeased God? How are these things connected with His law?**
- 4. Look at the description of Noah in Genesis 6. What does the verse say about Noah that helps us to understand the kind of man that he was in such an evil 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?**



What is the role of God’s church in the world?

FROM ABRAHAM TO MOSES (Genesis 15:1–6)



Noah's family knew that the destruction of the world came because people refused to obey God's law.

After the Flood, it was the responsibility of Noah and his sons to share God's will with their future children. Noah's family knew that the destruction of the world came because of people's refusal to obey God's law. Having experienced God's grace, they could do something to help develop a more faithful generation. Unfortunately, not too long after the Flood, the people of the earth again rebelled (turned against God) (Genesis 11:1–9). "Many of them refused to believe in God. They claimed the Flood came because of natural causes. Others believed in God. But they blamed God for destroying the world by the Flood. Their hearts, like that of Cain, rose up in rebellion against Him."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs [Early Leaders and Forefathers] and Prophets [Special Messengers]*, page 119.

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

God called Abraham, who came from the line of Shem. God then made a covenant (agreement; promise) of blessing with him (Genesis 12:1–3). The Bible gives no clear reason for God's call of Abraham. If anything, the Bible gives us reasons why God could have chosen not to call Abraham. For example, soon after the call, Abraham proved himself to be cowardly and sly (Genesis 12:11–13). He broke God's law. But Abraham was a man of true faith. By God's grace, this faith was given to him as righteousness. Abraham was not perfect. But he was willing to listen to the voice of God. It meant trusting God for things that seem impossible to humans.

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 accept adultery (unfaithfulness in marriage) and lying. The second Abimelech even scolded Isaac for opening Abimelech's people to temptation (Genesis 26:10). God had chosen Abraham for a special work. But there were people in many different nations who feared God. Abraham and his friends had defeated Chedorlaomer and his army. Then Abraham was blessed by King Melchizedek, who was a "priest of the Most High God" (Genesis 14:18, TEV). This is more proof that the people of the world knew God at that time. This happened even before Moses began his work.

FROM MOSES TO JESUS (Deuteronomy 7:6–12)

Laws found in Egypt and Mesopotamia from thousands of years ago also give proof that the world knew of the principles (rules) found in God's law. But none of the laws from Egypt and Mesopotamia are complete. In fact, many of those laws encouraged idol worship and other practices that did not please God. So, God chose a people to be the keepers of His true law. These people were the Hebrew nation, the future children of Abraham and receivers of the covenant promise made to him hundreds of years earlier. This promise held fulfillment that was found only in Jesus.

Read Deuteronomy 7:6–12. How do these verses show the close relationship between law and grace?

When God chose Israel to be the keepers of His law, He knew that they were not perfect people. But God entrusted them with the responsibility of sharing His will with other imperfect (not perfect) people. The very words “ ‘kingdom of priests and a holy nation” ’ ” show that the people of Israel were to be God's priests for the entire world (Exodus 19:6, NKJV). Israel was the one chosen to bring the truth of God's will to the confused nations. Israel made mistakes, failed, and sometimes rebelled. However, it was among the people of Israel that the Messiah (Chosen One) came, lived, ministered (worked), and died. He kept the covenant promise made to Abraham many hundreds of years earlier.

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

Many people in Israel from the time of Moses and onward understood the single noun form of the word *seed* to mean Israel as a single nation. But Paul here shows Jesus Himself as completely fulfilling (satisfying) the covenant promise. So, the gospel, including law and grace, most fully points to the covenant.

Think about all the time periods 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 (SMALL, FAITHFUL GROUP) (Revelation 12:17)

Since Eden, God's church has always been filled with people who have not been perfect. The very nation that was supposed to be a witness to God's righteousness was itself not perfect. As the "baton" passed from generation to generation, no runner was worthy enough to cross the finish line. None who received the law could reach its high level of righteousness. People were uselessly trapped in their search for God's acceptance.

But, 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. Through His faithfulness to the Father, Jesus managed to keep His obedience all the way to the cross. With His resurrection (return to life), Jesus crossed the finish line. This is because He broke the chain of death. Now, through the power of the Spirit, the risen Christ shares His righteousness with every believer. This message is always the center of the covenant promise. But it has been most clearly understood after Jesus finished His earthly ministry (work), and the New Testament church began.

Sadly, the Christian church, even with all of this light, sometimes proved itself less faithful to the covenant than Israel was. Deep backsliding soon took over almost everywhere. The Reformation⁶ began in the sixteenth century (1500s) and started to bring people back to God. But even it weakened, and many false doctrines (church beliefs) and teachings have remained in the Christian world. This includes (as we have described) wrong views about the role and purpose of the law in the life of new covenant Christianity. God would call out a remnant (small group) people to restore (bring back) many lost truths.

DEFINITIONS

6. Reformation—a movement started by Martin Luther and others, trying to return to the true principles of the Bible.

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

Keeping "the commandments of God" is how God wants us to show true love. But in what ways might we be outwardly keeping these commandments but not really loving others as we should? Why are we not really keeping the commandments if we do not show love?

ADDITIONAL STUDY: “The three angels of Revelation 14 are the people who accept the light of God’s messages. And they go forth as His servants to give the warning all over the earth. Christ announces to His followers: ‘Ye are the light of the world.’ Matthew 5:14. To every person that accepts Jesus the cross of Calvary speaks: ‘Behold [see] the worth of the soul: “Go into all the world. Preach the good news to everyone.” ’ Mark 16:15, NlrV. Nothing is to be permitted to slow down this work. It is the all-important work for this time. It is to be far-reaching as eternity. Jesus showed His love to the souls of men through the sacrifice which He made for their salvation. This love will inspire [cause] all His followers to work hard for Him.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, volume 5, pages 455, 456.

“The most important theme is the third angel’s message, which also includes the messages of the first and second angels. All people should understand the truths in these messages and practice them in daily life. This is very important for salvation. We need to study seriously and prayerfully, in order to understand these great truths. This will require all our power to learn and understand.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, page 196.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① Revelation 12:17 describes the remnant as those who keep the commandments of God and have the faith of Jesus. There are hundreds of other Sabbath keeping Christian churches around the world, so what is the special purpose of Seventh-day Adventism? What are we preaching and teaching that these other churches are not?
- ② Read Romans 4:3; Galatians 3:6; and James 2:23. How do these verses help us to understand salvation by faith?
- ③ In the first angel’s message, which begins with the “everlasting gospel,” there is also an announcement that the “hour of his [God’s] judgment is come” (Revelation 14:6, 7). 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?