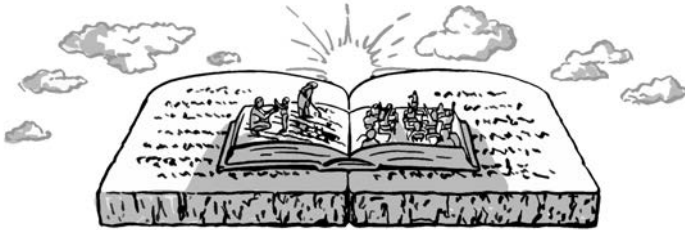


Blueprint *for a Better* World



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 3:7, Matt. 22:37–40, Exod. 22:21–23, Deut. 14:22–29, 26:1–11, Lev. 25:8–23.*

Memory Text: “‘You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD’” (*Leviticus 19:18, NKJV*).

In His mercy, God has always had people with whom He has maintained a special relationship. In the stories of Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—among others—we see God yearning to rebuild the broken relationship with human beings. But this was not just for the benefit of these few individuals and their families. When they were connected with God and blessed by Him, it was part of a larger plan to repair that relationship and share the blessing with others. As God said to Abraham, “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing . . . and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (*Gen. 12:2, 3, NIV*). As he was blessed, he could be a blessing to others.

This blessing was to come through the nation of Israel and, ultimately, the Messiah, who would come from that nation. With the creation of the people of Israel, God was now working with an entire nation. So, He set about giving them laws, regulations, festivals, and practices that would be a way to live so that those who were blessed by God would be able to bless others, as well.

No doubt this principle still exists today.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 13.

The God Who Hears

“ ‘I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering’ ” (*Exod. 3:7, NIV*).

Four hundred years is a long time to wait, especially when waiting in conditions of increasingly harsh slavery. God had promised that He would return to His people and bring them out of Egypt, but for generation after generation they were left to build the wealth and prestige of their idolatrous oppressors, and all the while God seemed silent.

Then God manifested Himself in a unique way. He appeared in a burning bush out in the remote desert to an unlikely leader, a fugitive prince and humble shepherd named Moses. He gave the reluctant Moses a job to do, and the first part of that job was to go back to the Israelites in Egypt with the message that God had heard and seen their oppression—and, yes, He did care. In fact, He was about to do something to change their situation dramatically.

Read Exodus 3:16, 17. Why was it important for God to begin outlining His plan for these people with this specific message? What catches your attention about this statement from God?

But God does not stop there. Not only does He have a plan for a better land, He does not intend for the people to escape from Egypt destitute. For hundreds of years, they had contributed to the wealth of the Egyptian Empire. God foresaw the initial resistance from Pharaoh, but He assured Moses that the Israelites would be compensated for their years of hard labor: “ ‘And I will make the Egyptians favorably disposed toward this people, so that when you leave you will not go empty-handed’ ” (*Exod. 3:21, NIV*).

After their years of oppression, God took the opportunity to establish a new kind of society with these former slaves. He wanted them to live in a different way and to establish a society that would continue to be sustainable and viable. His plan was that this new kind of society would be a model for the surrounding nations and, like Abraham, that the blessings they received from God also would bless the whole world.

How important is it to you that God is a God who sees the suffering of people in the world and hears their cries for help? What does this tell you about God? Consider *Exod. 4:31*.

The Ten Commandments

Read Matthew 22:37–40, then Exodus 20:1–17. How does Jesus’ summary of the commandments help your understanding as you read each of the Ten Commandments?

The Ten Commandments read like a constitution. After a brief preamble that sets out the basis on which these statements are made—in this case, the fact of God’s deliverance of His people—the document lists the core principles on which the nation is founded. In this case, there were specific commands about how human beings could best live out their love for God and love for each other. It is little wonder that many nations with a Christian heritage have drawn the basis of their laws from these guiding principles.

While many of these statements are brief, we should not underestimate the breadth of their impact and the comprehensiveness of the Ten Commandments as the law of life. For example, the sixth commandment—“‘You shall not murder’ ” (*Exod. 20:13, NIV*)—summarizes and includes “all acts of injustice that tend to shorten life” as well as “a selfish neglect of caring for the needy or suffering.”—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 308. Similarly, the prohibition against stealing (*see Exod. 20:15*) condemns “slave dealing, and forbids wars of conquest.” It “requires the payment of just debts or wages,” as well as prohibiting “every attempt to advantage oneself by the ignorance, weakness, or misfortune of another.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 309.

We can easily tell ourselves that we are not bad people. For example, if we are not directly involved in murder or obvious stealing, it might seem we are doing OK. But when Jesus talked about the commandments, He made it clear that the commandments are not fulfilled simply by not doing a few specific acts. Rather, our thoughts, motivations, and even failure to do things we know we should can break the law of God (*see Matt. 5:21–30*).

So, imagine a society in which each of the Ten Commandments was taken seriously and lived out fully. It would be an active, vibrant society in which everyone enthusiastically acted on their love for God by loving and caring for one another.

Why do we tend to read the Ten Commandments “narrowly,” often ignoring the broader applications of these important principles to our lives? Why is the narrower reading easier to follow in practice?

Slaves, Widows, Fatherless, Foreigners

Read Exodus 23:9. What is God’s message to Israel here?

As newly freed slaves, the Israelites knew what it was to be oppressed, exploited, and marginalized. And while they celebrated their freedom, God was concerned that they not forget where they had come from, what it was like to be excluded, and what He had done to rescue them. He instituted the Passover as a memorial event and an opportunity to retell the story: “With a mighty hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (*Exod. 13:14, NIV*).

Read Exodus 22:21–23. How important was the memory of their own slavery in the instructions about how the people should treat the least fortunate in their new society?

Barely had the echoes died away after the giving of the Ten Commandments when Moses is called to spend more time with God, who gives him detailed instructions as to how these grand commands should be lived out in Israelite society. Even before the instructions for building the tabernacle, God gives three chapters of laws about such things as the appropriate treatment of slaves, laws that would have stood out in stark contrast to the treatment many of the Israelites had experienced. There were laws dealing with violent crimes, laws related to property, laws for everyday living, and principles for establishing courts to implement these laws and to administer justice (*see Exodus 21 to 23*).

Prominent among these laws was concern for fellow citizens in this new society, as well as concern for the outsiders and those most vulnerable. These people were not to be exploited; they were even given rights to access food in ways that would respect their dignity, such as gleaning leftover crops from the harvested fields. Such treatment for “outsiders” and foreigners was not common in the ancient world. Even today some seem to forget the important moral principles found here regarding the treatment of others.

What memory in your experience makes you more compassionate and concerned about the suffering or injustice of others?

Second Tithing

Many Christians recognize and follow the Bible's instructions regarding paying—or returning—tithes. Usually referenced from Malachi 3:10, it is a simple formula, with believers giving 10 percent of their income—or “increase”—to support the work of the church in spreading the gospel. Entrusted with these tithes, churches usually have strict guidelines about how to use these funds, primarily applying them to support direct ministry and evangelism.

Read Deuteronomy 14:22–29. In these instructions, what is the primary purpose of tithing?

The temptation is to think we have fulfilled our giving when we give that 10 percent. But the instructions given to the Israelites suggest that the 10-percent figure was a starting point. Studies suggest that an ancient Israelite living and giving according to the guidelines in the Levitical laws would on average give almost one fourth of the year's income to the work of God, to support the priests and sanctuary, and to help the poor.

Some scholars describe this giving—particularly to support the foreigners, orphans, and widows—as a second tithe. It is obvious that the people were to enjoy the results of their work and to celebrate their harvests. God promised to bless them, particularly in their new land, but they were not to take that blessing for granted or to forget those who were not so blessed.

In regular years, this portion of the harvest was to be brought to the sanctuary and shared from there. But every third year, there was to be a special focus on sharing their blessings in their own community. In these harvest celebrations, there was a special focus on those who might easily have been overlooked or forgotten: “You shall give it to the Levite, the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied” (*Deut. 26:12, NIV*).

According to God's instructions, at least some portion of the Israelites' giving was to be focused on providing financial and practical assistance to those who most needed it. Again, this was based on the people's memory and appreciation of how God had been merciful and just to them.

Read Deuteronomy 26:1–11. What is the Lord saying to them? How should we apply this to our own attitude toward giving to those in need?

The Year of Jubilee

Meeting the Israelites as a people who had no home of their own and who were waiting for their arrival in the Promised Land, God knew the importance that the land would take on as they established their new society in Canaan. Under the leadership of Joshua, God oversaw an orderly distribution of the land by tribe and family groups.

But He also knew that over time the wealth, opportunity, and resources that were connected with landholding would tend to become concentrated in the hands of the few. Family difficulties, ill health, poor choices, and other misfortune might cause some landholders to sell their lands for short-term gain or simply to survive, but this would mean the family might be dispossessed for successive generations.

God's solution was to decree that land could never be sold absolutely. Instead, land would be sold only until the next "year of jubilee," at which time the land would revert to its allotted family, and any land sold could be redeemed by the seller or another member of the seller's family at any time. Again, God reminds the people of their relationship to Him and how that affects their relationships with others: "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers" (*Lev. 25:23, NIV*).

Read *Leviticus 25:8–23*. How do you imagine society would be different if these principles were applied, especially the words "you shall not oppress one another"?

"The regulations that God established were designed to promote social equality. The provisions of the sabbatical year and the jubilee would, in a great measure, set right that which during the interval had gone wrong in the social and political economy of the nation."—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 534.

Bible historians are unsure as to whether these economic and social rhythms were ever fully followed for any significant period of time (*see 2 Chron. 36:21*). Even so, these rules offer an intriguing glimpse into how the world might work if God's laws were fully followed. Moreover, they underline God's particular concern for the poor and the marginalized, as well as His concern that fairness be manifested in practical ways in our world.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Law Given to Israel,” pp. 303–314; “God’s Care for the Poor,” pp. 530–536, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“There is nothing, after their recognition of the claims of God, that more distinguishes the laws given by Moses than the liberal, tender, and hospitable spirit enjoined toward the poor. Although God had promised greatly to bless His people, it was not His design that poverty should be wholly unknown among them. He declared that the poor should never cease out of the land. There would ever be those among His people who would call into exercise their sympathy, tenderness, and benevolence. Then, as now, persons were subject to misfortune, sickness, and loss of property; yet so long as they followed the instruction given by God, there were no beggars among them, neither any who suffered for food.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 530, 531.

“These regulations were designed to bless the rich no less than the poor. They would restrain avarice and a disposition for self-exaltation, and would cultivate a noble spirit of benevolence; and by fostering good will and confidence between all classes, they would promote social order, the stability of government. We are all woven together in the great web of humanity, and whatever we can do to benefit and uplift others will reflect in blessing upon ourselves.”—Pages 534, 535.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Of the blueprint God gave to Moses and the Israelites for the kind of society they were to establish, what feature, law, or regulation most catches your attention (whether it be specifically mentioned in this week’s study or from your wider reading)?
- 2 Why do you think God seems so focused on the most vulnerable in the laws He gave to His people?
- 3 How should we understand and relate to these laws today? How do we choose which of these are applicable and relevant to us today? What is the most important thing we can learn from these detailed instructions as to how the Israelites were to order their society and lives?

Summary: God heard the cries of the suffering people of Israel in Egypt and intervened to rescue them. He sought to build a special covenant relationship with them and to work with them to establish a new society that would be a blessing to all, even those often forgotten, marginalized, and vulnerable.

Man With Crooked Stick

By WILSON MEASAPOGU

Indian villagers faced constant trouble from an intruding tiger.

The wild animal crept by night into Gudem Madhavaram, a remote village with no electricity on a mountainside in India's Andhra Pradesh state.

The villagers—dependent upon goats, cows, and bulls to produce milk and cultivate crops for their rich landowners—watched in despair as their animals were devoured one by one. They prayed to their gods for protection, but nothing happened.

One day, a tall white man with a crooked stick arrived on horseback. He spoke the local Telugu language, and the villagers stared at his crooked stick. When the stick coughed, animals went to sleep. Permanently.

The villagers learned that the man was an American named Dr. Theodore R. Flaiz. He had opened a small hospital in Nuzvid, 30 miles (50 kilometers) away from the village, and a training school for workers in Narsapuram, 110 miles (180 kilometers) away. When he wanted to rest from his work, he hunted on their mountain. He donated the game to the villagers.

On Saturdays, he sat in the shade of a village tree, removed his coat, and sang songs. When the villagers asked what he was singing, he explained that he was worshipping the Creator God. "We want to see the Creator God," the villagers said.

The white man opened a black Book and read aloud about the Creator God.

As the tiger problem grew, the village elders won a promise from the white man to help. They tied a goat to a tree trunk in the village center. In the branches, they built a platform where the white man could sleep. That night, they tied a rope to his leg and retreated to their huts to keep watch.

In the night's darkness, a large tiger approached. The watching villagers jerked the string, waking up the white man. He caused his crooked stick to cough. The tiger, however, was only wounded and fled. Later, the tiger returned, was shot, and fled again. After several attempts, the tiger was shot dead.

After that, the friendship between Dr. Flaiz and the villagers grew greatly, and a small Seventh-day Adventist congregation was established. One of the first converts—a young man who had helped tie the goat to the tree and kept watch at night—was Sundar Rao, my father. He was baptized in 1955.

Today, Gudem Madhavaram is an Adventist village. It has produced 40 pastors and Bible workers and many educators and health professionals. On Saturdays, the whole village comes to a halt to worship the Creator God.



WILSON MEASAPOGU, left, is executive secretary of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's Southern Asia Division, whose territory includes India. Dr. Theodore R. Flaiz was a medical missionary who headed the Adventist world church's medical work from 1947 until his retirement in 1966. He died in 1977 at the age of 80.