

A New Order



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 15:14–16; Lev. 10:1–11; Numbers 1–4; Jer. 23:23, 24; John 14:15–18, 23.*

Memory Text: “Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come” (1 Corinthians 10:11).

A Christian struck up a conversation with another man, a professional biologist. Looking for a way to witness, the Christian asked, “Don’t you see the hand of a Creator when you study the things that you do?”

Without missing a beat, the biologist answered, “Wherever you look, either outwardly or inwardly, you see order.”

However much our world has been damaged by sin, we still can see the working of our Creator in the design and order of the natural world. Even one fanatical Darwinist was forced to admit that nature is something that gives “the illusion of design.”

Illusion? Please. Design and order are real, and they represent the hand of our Maker.

But God’s order doesn’t end merely with nature. It is seen also in His dealing with His covenant people, the Israelites, even as they wandered in the wilderness. This week we’ll look, firsthand, at how God organized His people for their sacred calling, and we’ll draw some lessons for ourselves today.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 3.*

Organizing the Army

Having miraculously escaped from Egypt, the multitudes of Israel flowed into the wilderness of Sinai. Encamped around the mountain, they heard the voice of God proclaiming His will (*Exodus 20*). Despite such an incredible manifestation of God's power, some fell away and worshiped the golden calf (*Exodus 32*). After that debacle, the repentant nation spent time building a portable sanctuary (*Exod. 25:8*). The work was completed on the first day of the first month in the second year (*Exod. 40:17*).

It was in the following month that the Lord proceeded to organize the nation more thoroughly (*Num. 1:1*) than it previously had been. And it's at this point, with the new organization, with this new order, that the book of Numbers picks up the sacred story of God's working with His covenant people.

What kind of census did the Lord ask Moses and Aaron to draw up, and why? *Num. 1:2, 3*.

The Israelites were not a warlike nation. Their occupation had been that of shepherds, cattle herding (*Gen. 47:3*). Furthermore, at this point they were recently freed slaves, without weapons or training for war. It may seem strange for the Lord now to organize them into troops. But it must be remembered that their task involved the displacement of several nations of the most wicked and corrupt people in the Near East, including the Amorites and Canaanites. Israel would serve as God's executioners of these nations who had filled the cup of their transgressions (*Gen. 15:14–16*). Israel was now a theocracy, directed by God Himself, and they were a people, a mighty army, on the move.

Read Genesis 15:14–16 (see also *Deut. 9:5*). **What's implied here? How can these texts help us understand Israel's wars with the Amorites?**

At the time of Abraham, God would not allow the Amorites to be destroyed. Here God revealed His long-suffering. "The Amorites were at enmity against His law; they believed not in Him as the true and living God; but among them were a few good persons, and for the sake of these few, He forbore long."—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, p. 1093.

Many folk are troubled by the Israelite destruction of these people, and understandably so. Why, in cases such as this, in which there is much we don't understand, do we simply need to go by faith, trusting in the goodness of God, who has revealed Himself to us in Jesus? *John 14:9*.

The Presence of the Lord

To what task was the tribe of the Levites appointed? *Num. 1:50–54.*

Moses pitched the portable tabernacle in the middle of Israel's encampment. The Levites pitched their tents around it, on all four sides. Their presence acted as a kind of barrier, protecting the place where God manifested His presence.

Why was it set up this way? The Bible doesn't come right out and say, yet some important lessons can be learned from this arrangement.

Yahweh, the living God, was in their midst. He, the Creator, was among His people—so what could overcome them if they remained faithful? And yet, at the same time, they pitched their tents at a distance from the tabernacle (*Num. 2:2*), and that was because He was holy, and so they, as sinners, as fallen beings, could come only so close. Thus, on one hand, they had the reality of God's closeness and compassionate care; at the same time, they constantly were reminded of His greatness and holiness and that only through mediation could they, as sinners, approach a holy God.

What do other Bible writers say about God's distance (transcendence) and nearness (immanence) to humanity? *Ps. 139:1–10; Isa. 57:15; Jer. 23:23, 24; John 14:15–18, 23.*

“At all times and in all places, in all sorrows and in all afflictions, when the outlook seems dark and the future perplexing, and we feel helpless and alone, the Comforter will be sent in answer to the prayer of faith. Circumstances may separate us from every earthly friend; but no circumstance, no distance, can separate us from the heavenly Comforter. Wherever we are, wherever we may go, He is always at our right hand to support, sustain, uphold, and cheer.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 669, 670.

In what ways have you experienced the reality of God's presence, His compassionate care, and closeness? On the other hand, what things are you doing that keep you from an even deeper intimacy with God?

Under the Standards

“So the Israelites did everything the Lord commanded Moses; that is the way they encamped under their standards, and that is the way they set out, each with his clan and family” (*Num. 2:34, NIV*).

Read Numbers 2. Talk about organized religion! What is one thing that becomes apparent about how the Israelites were supposed to live?

The government of Israel was characterized by a very precise organizational structure, seen, for example, in how the Lord had arranged for the camp itself to be ordered and where the people were to pitch their tents. The Hebrew camp was separated into three great divisions, each having its appointed position in the encampment, all based on family and tribal ties.

The position of each tribe in the camp also was specified. Each was to march and to encamp beside its own standard. Nothing was left to chance. The Lord carefully and precisely had organized the nation. And though they were one people, their distinctive family connections were not broken.

Read Numbers 2:34. What does this tell us about how, despite the clear organizational pattern, the Lord left room for the distinctness and uniqueness of the various tribes? What lessons can we draw from that for ourselves?

Why is it so important for the church today to be organized, as well? What happens when folks are left to do their own thing? Why is that so often a recipe for chaos and deception? How has belonging to an organized body helped you in your spiritual walk?

Call to Ministry

In memory of their deliverance from Egyptian slavery, the death of the Egyptian firstborn, and the deliverance of their own under the sign of the blood, God requested Israel's firstborn to be dedicated to Him (*Exod. 13:2, 12–15*).

Giving God our firstborn? That's very intense. What powerful lesson should we take from this about how much we owe the Lord for our redemption and deliverance? Why, in this context, are pride and self-sufficiency so sinful?

At Mount Sinai, the Lord did an exchange for the firstborn of all Israelites. Instead of them, He would take the Levites in their place (*Num. 3:12, 13*). This act, then, required the numbering of the Levites, who until that point had not been numbered with the rest of Israel. Moses is told to number the Levite males from a month upward (*vss. 14, 15*). To make the exchange, Moses then counted the male firstborn Israelite children of a month old and older. Their total came to 22,273—that is, 273 more firstborn Israelites than there were Levites (*vss. 39, 43*).

What were the extra Israelites to do for their redemption? To whom was it given? *Num. 3:46–51*.

The Lord also dedicated the Levites to Aaron and his priestly sons and descendants; they were to assist in the worship of God and the care of the tabernacle. In a sense, they were called to the ministry of the church in the wilderness.

Once the Hebrews reached the Promised Land, the Levites continued to be attached to the sanctuary in a variety of tasks (*1 Chron. 23:27–32*). Scattered through the tribal areas, some became teaching Levites (*2 Chron. 17:7–9*); others became judges (*2 Chron. 19:8–11*), instructing the people in the ways of God.

In what ways can you see the Cross, the substitutionary death of Jesus (*John 3:16*), prefigured in these substitutionary rituals? What does it mean that Jesus substituted Himself for you? How should knowledge of this reality change your life?

Protecting the Sacred

In establishing the system of worship at Sinai, God selected one family of the Levites to function as priests. This work is laid out in Numbers 4. Moses consecrated Aaron as high priest and his four sons—Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar—as assistant priests. The rest of the tribe of Levi would help the others but would not function as priests. It is obvious that every working Levite had his place and service, harmoniously working together to preserve and protect the sacredness of Israel’s worship system.

No question, the Levites had been given a solemn responsibility. The same with the sons of Aaron, who would function as priests before the Lord in the tabernacle. Think about what they were called to do. The Lord Himself, the Creator, revealed His presence among them in the sanctuary (*Num. 14:10, 11*), a powerful reminder to them that their safety and security existed only in Him, the One who had redeemed them from Egypt. These priests were the mediators between a Holy God and a fallen people. In their roles, too, of course, they were symbols of Jesus, our true High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary (*Hebrews 8*).

Read Leviticus 10:1–11. What happened, and what lessons are there for us today?

It is hard to imagine that these young men, given such a sacred responsibility and who already had been given so much (*see Exod. 24:9–11*), would violate so openly an express command of God. However hard and harsh their punishment might seem to us, it only underscores the reality of just how sacred the responsibility given them was. No doubt others got the message about how seriously the Lord expected His commandments regarding the sanctuary to be carried out.

“To handle sacred things as we would common matters is an offense to God; for that which God has set apart to do His service in giving light to this world is holy. Those who have any connection with the work of God are not to walk in the vanity of their own wisdom, but in the wisdom of God, or they will be in danger of placing sacred and common things on the same level, and thus separate themselves from God.”—Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 639.

Read carefully Leviticus 10:10. How can we today distinguish between the holy and the common, between the clean and unclean? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Further Study: The theme of God’s holiness runs like a silver thread throughout Scripture. Define it. What relation does it have to the believer? *Exod. 28:36; Lev. 11:44, 45; Isa. 6:1–7; Heb. 12:14; 1 Pet. 1:15, 16.*

“Angels work harmoniously. Perfect order characterizes all their movements. The more closely we imitate the harmony and order of the angelic host, the more successful will be the efforts of these heavenly agents in our behalf. If we see no necessity for harmonious action, and are disorderly, undisciplined, and disorganized in our course of action, angels, who are thoroughly organized and move in perfect order, cannot work for us successfully. They turn away in grief, for they are not authorized to bless confusion, distraction, and disorganization. All who desire the cooperation of the heavenly messengers must work in unison with them. Those who have the unction from on high will in all their efforts encourage order, discipline, and union of action, and then the angels of God can cooperate with them.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 28.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Talk about the idea of organized religion. Why are some people so hostile to it? Why, though, is it necessary? At the same time, what are the potential problems that it brings? How can we learn to work better with the church system, despite the problems that arise?
- ❷ Talk about your answer to Thursday’s question. In class, make a list of what is holy and what is common. How can we know the difference? In what ways does our culture impact our understanding of these things? Or our education? How, for instance, might the idea of melding Darwinian natural selection with our faith be a mixture of the sacred with the profane? What other examples can you think of?
- ❸ Dwell more on the idea of substitution, as revealed in Wednesday’s lesson study. Why is this concept so central to the whole plan of salvation? How did, and still does, Jesus function as our Substitute, and why is that so important?

Summary: God is a God of order. Once the tribes were assembled in the wilderness before Mount Sinai, He began to organize them around the tabernacle. First, Israel’s armies were organized, and the encampment of each tribe was selected, as was their order of march. The Levites encamped as a barrier around the tabernacle and were given specific directions regarding their service in transporting it and erecting it. The Holy God was in their midst as Israel was on the move.

The Eager Student

by CHARLOTTE ISHKANIAN

Lijalem grew up as a farmer's son in Ethiopia. He was very bright, but his parents saw no need to send him to high school. After all, why would a farmer need so much education? But Lijalem had a burning desire to study, and because his parents recognized his special gifts, they allowed him to enter secondary school. He was older than most students in high school, but he was determined to do well.

The secondary school was some distance from home, so Lijalem rented a small house in which to live. Every weekend he returned home to see his parents, to serve in his local church, and to help on the farm. When he returned to school, his mother made sure that he had enough food to last a week.

Lijalem noticed that many students at the secondary school were Seventh-day Adventists. He had seen Adventist churches in his neighborhood and wondered what these people believed. He listened as students shared their beliefs with him. He was curious about the Sabbath, for traditionally his church also worshiped on the Sabbath. But over the years the tradition was set aside in most congregations. Only a few old priests remembered worshipping on Sabbath.

Lijalem's Adventist friends invited him to visit the Adventist church in town, and he accepted the invitation. Soon he was attending regularly. His friends taught him how to keep the Sabbath, and in time he joined the baptismal class.

He began telling his family and friends what he had discovered. Some, including his father, thought he was crazy; but others listened to what he said. However, when he was baptized, his parents sent him away from his home.

His friends saw how he was treated and noticed that he did not retaliate when treated badly. One by one those with whom he had shared his faith followed him to the Adventist Church. Today 18 former members of his former church have joined the Adventist Church. All of these have experienced difficulties similar to Lijalem. But they are not discouraged.

Lijalem says that it was the youth of the secondary school that he attended who prepared the way for him to become an Adventist. After finishing high school, Lijalem became a lay evangelist. Because of his love for sharing the gospel, he has been assigned to serve as a Global Mission pioneer in western Ethiopia. In the first nine months in the field, Lijalem led 15 people to the Lord.

Some 85 percent of the Adventists in western Ethiopia are young people. Adventist youth are reaching out to their friends and bringing them to Christ. Our mission offering helps provide materials and support for these young people as they share their faith. Thank you!

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