

Christ's Church *and the* Law



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 2:16–3:7, Genesis 6, Genesis 12, Deut. 7:6–12, Gal. 3:6–16, Rev. 12:17, 14:6–12.*

Memory Text: “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 consists of 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 participants. One team member alone can race at any given time—the one who is holding the baton. The baton is skillfully passed from one team member to the next until the race is finished. In a sense, the baton is the only symbol of continuity 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 phases of salvation history: from Noah to Abraham to Sinai to the New Testament church to the Reformation church and now to those who proclaim the three angels' messages.

The symbol of continuity for God's church is His law, which, after the Fall, must always be coupled with God's saving grace. Together, both are the essence of the gospel.

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

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 21.

From Adam to Noah

In one sense, we can speak of a “church of Christ” only since the New Testament era, when believers first testified to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. However, we can see “Christ’s church” in a broader context. The Greek term for “church” is *ekklesia*. Borrowed from the secular world, it refers to those who have been “called out.” In every generation God has “called out” a people to reflect His will by lives of faithfulness, trust, love, and obedience.

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

In order to be able to love, Adam and Eve had to be created as morally free agents. They had to have the ability and the freedom to do wrong, even if they had no valid reason to do so. The test at the tree was a moral test: In what way would they use their God-given moral freedom?

We know the answer.

At the center of morality is law, God’s law, which defines good and evil for us (note that the tree is called the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil”). What’s the purpose of a law that forbids lying, stealing, and killing if these beings were incapable of doing any of those things to begin with? The law itself would be meaningless in a universe of automatons—beings able to do only good. That’s not, however, how God chose to create us. He couldn’t—not if He wanted beings who could truly love.

Though after the Fall Adam and Eve were to “pass the baton” to the next generation, humanity’s moral spiral downward was quick and dirty. Of their first two sons, only Abel chose to join God’s church, while Cain became possessed by the spirit of covetousness, lying, murder, and parental disrespect. Things went from bad to worse until evil overshadowed the good, and 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 moral choices, using the freedom given to us from Eden? What were those choices, and how much were they in harmony with God’s moral law?

From Noah to Abraham *(Gen. 6:5–9)*

The world into which Noah was born was worse than any society that has ever existed, which means that it must have been pretty bad. With people living for almost a thousand years, it is not difficult to see how evil could become ingrained in society to the point that God became 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 humanity? Why does this not mean that God had been unaware of what was going to happen? See *Deut. 31:15–17*.

2. Ellen G. White wrote that the designations “sons of God” and “daughters of men” refer to faithful men marrying unfaithful women. What lessons, then, can we learn from Genesis 6 about the church’s interaction with the world?

3. What were some of the things that these people did that displeased God, and how do these things relate to His law?

4. Look at the description of Noah in Genesis 6. What does the text say about him that helps us to understand the kind of man that he was, especially in such a corrupt 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?

From Abraham to Moses

After the Flood, it was the responsibility of Noah and his sons to share God's will with their descendants. Noah's family knew that global destruction had come to the world as a result of humanity's refusal to obey God's law, and having experienced God's grace, they could do something to help develop a more faithful generation. Unfortunately, not too long after the Flood, the inhabitants of the earth again rebelled (*Gen. 11:1–9*). "Many of them denied the existence of God and attributed the Flood to the operation of natural causes. Others believed in a Supreme Being, and that it was He who had destroyed the antediluvian world; and their hearts, like that of Cain, rose up in rebellion against Him."—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 119.

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

God called Abraham, a descendant of Shem, and made a covenant of blessing with him (*Gen. 12:1–3*). The Bible gives no criteria for God's call of Abraham. He does not appear to have had the righteous profile of Noah. In fact, soon after the call he proved himself to be cowardly and deceptive (*vss. 11–13*), violating God's law. Nevertheless, Abraham was a man of true faith, and by God's grace this faith was credited to him as righteousness. Although he was not perfect, he was willing to listen to the voice of God, even if it meant trusting God for things that seem all but impossible from a human standpoint.

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 approve of adultery and lying. The second Abimelech even rebuked Isaac for exposing Abimelech's people to temptation (*Gen. 26:10*). Although God had chosen Abraham for a specific task, there were people in many different nations who feared Him. In fact, after Abraham and his military alliance had defeated Chedorlaomer and his coalition, Abraham was blessed by King Melchizedek, who was a "priest of the Most High God" (*Gen. 14:18, TEV*). This is more evidence that knowledge of God existed in the world at that time, even before the work and ministry of Moses.

From Moses to Jesus

Though ancient law codes found in Egypt and Mesopotamia also provide evidence for a widespread knowledge of the principles and precepts found in God's law, none of them is complete. In fact, many of these codes also contain laws that promote idolatry and other practices that God later condemned. So, God chose a people to be the stewards of His true law. These people were the Hebrew nation, the descendants of Abraham and heirs to the covenant promise made to him many centuries earlier—a promise whose ultimate fulfillment was found only in Jesus.

Read Deuteronomy 7:6–12. How does this passage reveal the close relationship between law and grace?

When God chose Israel to be the depository for His law, He knew that they were an imperfect people. Nonetheless, He entrusted them with the task of sharing His will with other imperfect people. The very designation “‘kingdom of priests and a holy nation’” (*Exod. 19:6, NKJV*) shows that Israel was to be God's mediating priesthood for the entire world. Israel was the one chosen to bring the truth of God's will to the confused nations. And, despite Israel's mistakes, failures, and, at times, outright rebellion, it was still among these people that the Messiah came, lived, ministered, and died, fulfilling the covenant promise made to Abraham many centuries earlier.

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

Though many in ancient Israel understood the single noun form of “seed” to mean Israel as a single corporate entity, Paul here presents Jesus Himself, as the true and complete fulfillment of the covenant promise. So, the gospel itself, with its clear emphasis on both law and grace, most fully manifests and reveals the covenant.

Think about all the long ages 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

Since Eden, God’s church has always been filled with fallible people. The very institution that was supposed to be a witness to God’s righteousness was itself in need of that same righteousness. As “the baton” passed from generation to generation, no runner was worthy enough to cross the finish line. None who received the law was able to reach its level of righteousness. Humanity, it appeared, was trapped in a wheel of futility in its quest for God’s approval.

However, 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, and through constant devotion to His Father managed to maintain His obedience all the way to the Cross. With His resurrection, Jesus crossed the finish line, for He broke the chain of death. Now, through the power of the Spirit, the resurrected Christ shares His righteousness with every believer. This message, always the center of the covenant promise, was most clearly understood after Jesus completed His earthly ministry, and the New Testament church began.

Unfortunately, the Christian church—even with all this light—proved itself at times less faithful to the covenant than was ancient Israel, and deep apostasy soon took over almost everywhere. The Reformation, beginning in the sixteenth century, started to reverse this trend, but even it faltered, and many false doctrines and teachings have remained in the Christian world, including (as we have seen) wrong views about the role and purpose of the law in the life of New Covenant Christianity. God would call out a remnant people to restore many lost truths.

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

As we have seen, keeping “the commandments of God” is God’s appointed way of manifesting true love. In what ways, though, might we be outwardly keeping these commandments but not really manifesting love as we should? Why can’t we really be keeping the commandments if we don’t show love?

Further Study: “The three angels of Revelation 14 represent the people who accept the light of God’s messages and go forth as His agents to sound the warning throughout the length and breadth of the earth. Christ declares to His followers: ‘Ye are the light of the world.’ Matthew 5:14. To every soul that accepts Jesus the cross of Calvary speaks: ‘Behold the worth of the soul: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.”’ Mark 16:15. Nothing is to be permitted to hinder this work. It is the all-important work for this time; it is to be far-reaching as eternity. The love that Jesus manifested for the souls of men in the sacrifice which He made for their redemption, will actuate all His followers.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, pp. 455, 456.

“The theme of greatest importance is the third angel’s message, embracing the messages of the first and second angels. All should understand the truths contained in these messages and demonstrate them in daily life, for this is essential to salvation. We shall have to study earnestly, prayerfully, in order to understand these grand truths; and our power to learn and comprehend will be taxed to the utmost.”—Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 196.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Revelation 12:17 describes the “remnant” as those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus. With the presence of hundreds of other Sabbath keeping Christian churches around the globe, what is the specific purpose of Seventh-day Adventism? What are we proclaiming and teaching that these other churches aren’t, even those who might be keeping the seventh-day Sabbath?
- 2 Read Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6, and James 2:23, all in context. How do these verses help us to understand salvation by faith?
- 3 Notice that in the first angel’s message, which begins with the “everlasting gospel,” there is also a proclamation that the “hour of his judgment has come.” 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?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Revelation 14:12*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize that throughout history God has had a people who were called to reach out to the world on His behalf.

Feel: Appreciate the privilege of being part of God's family.

Do: Participate in proclaiming the three angels' messages to the world.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Our Reason for Being

A Why didn't God create us as unable to do anything wrong but only able to do good?

B Why did even Noah who is designated as "just" need to find "grace" (*Gen. 6:8, 9*)?

C How does the mention of Melchizedek demonstrate that a knowledge of God's commandments existed before the ministry of Moses?

D Why did God choose Israel to be the depository for His law?

II. Feel: Privileged to Serve

A What has always been the center of the covenant promise?

B How are we, as a remnant people, supposed to relate to others not of our faith?

C A long time passed before Abraham had the son that he had been promised. Why does God insist on our developing patience?

III. Do: Called for a Time Like This

A How can my faith in Jesus be credited to me as righteousness?

B Why did God give us the freedom to do wrong if we are not supposed to do it?

C Why am I a Seventh-day Adventist?

► **Summary:** In every generation, God has "called out" a people to reflect His will by living lives of faithfulness, trust, love, and obedience.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Revelation 14:12*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: God's people throughout the ages were always called to live and preach His saving grace, which makes living according to His law possible.

Just for Teachers: In some areas of the world, the Seventh-day Adventist Church seems to be in an identity crisis. Seventh-day Adventists almost seem to be ashamed of our distinctive truths. Some see the application of the term *remnant* to the Seventh-day Adventist Church as an exclusivist idea. In this lesson, we want to emphasize that the term *remnant*, while being biblically based, carries with it not a sense of superiority but a validation for mission. We are privileged to be part of the thread of God's salvation story that began in Eden and will conclude with Jesus' second coming.

Begin researching your family tree, and you may discover ancestors from countries that once were part of imperial Russia, such as Belarus, Moldova, and Poland. Or you may learn you have Portuguese or African ancestors. Everyone has heard of Sitting Bull and Sacajawea; but could you be related to them?

Strangely enough, as our families are breaking up and many children are growing up without getting to know a parent, more people than ever want to know their ancestry. Tracing family history is enjoying a boom at the moment. The reach of the Internet makes things quicker and less complicated as registries and immigration records, even ship logs, are being digitized. Most of us would like to think that we are related to nobility or a national hero, but, for most of us, our family tree would include some people who got into trouble with the law—perhaps a few murderers, alcoholics, and wife beaters.

Since Eden, there has been a family line that God has maintained through both the Old and New Testaments. They were a family on a mission. They were called out to invite the world to join God's family and to show what a godly inheritance could look like.

Opening Activity: Do you have any interesting ancestors? Did anyone leave you a legacy that you are particularly proud of? What is the greatest legacy that our Adventist spiritual ancestors have left us?

Discuss: How is the family metaphor used in both the Old and the New

Testaments to depict God's church?

►STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. The Remnant in History *(Review 1 Kings 19:14–18 with your class.)*

Throughout history, God has had His people on planet Earth. When Adam and Eve decided to trust the serpent rather than their Creator, they actually signed their death warrant. Their access to the tree of life was blocked; slowly, but surely, they felt muscle pains and fatigue, and they discovered wrinkles and gray hairs. Yet, God had a plan, and the plan had a name. When God established a covenant with individuals or people, it was not necessarily for singling out the best, the fastest, the fittest, or the strongest. He called them so that they could call others. However, external and internal strife kept on threatening God's people. Whether through invasion by foreign powers or the slow and often imperceptible slide toward syncretism or crass idolatry, God's people were reminded throughout history that they were part of a larger conflict between good and evil, between God and Satan. There were many times in history where it seemed as if God's side would be completely wiped out. Just remember the wickedness that led to the Flood or Elijah's conversation with God on Mount Horeb when the prophet felt that he was the only one left who worshiped the Lord (*1 Kings 19:14*). God quickly cleared up that misconception, but even those 7,000 that had not bent their knees before Baal represented a small group within Israel. They truly were a remnant (*vs. 18*).

Consider This: Many dissertations and monographs have been written to explain the biblical concept of the remnant. Ask your class to provide a one-sentence definition of the concept.

II. Characteristics of God's Remnant *(Review Revelation 12 and 19:10 with your class.)*

In the following, we will review a number of important ideas included in a chapter by Ángel M. Rodríguez, "God's End-Time Remnant and the Christian Church," in *Toward a Theology of the Remnant: An Adventist Ecclesiological Perspective*, Ángel M. Rodríguez, ed. (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 2009), pp. 201–226.

1. God wants to communicate His saving grace through His remnant. Since Jesus came to seek and save the lost, the concept of the remnant and the Person of Christ are intricately connected. We need to keep in mind the intricate link between God's remnant (also the end-time remnant) and Jesus Christ.

2. Throughout history, God maintained a faithful remnant. Revelation 12–14 describes the beginning, continuation, and end of the conflict between Christ and Satan. It is important to note that, in spite of persecution and even coexisting with ungodly powers that derive their strength from the dragon, God’s remnant remains a faithful witness and is called to proclaim in a clear and unmistakable manner God’s final message to the world. We often speak about the three angels’ messages (*Rev. 14:6–12*), which represent not only a specific message in a specific time in history to a specific people but also repeat, in different terms, the main pillars of the plan of salvation, focusing upon Creation and worship, a fallen church, and present judgment leading to a new creation. This is truly the gospel for our time.

3. While God’s remnant has always been present as a witness in the great cosmic theater, we often wonder today how it relates to other churches (or even religions). We notice denominational fragmentation amid a call for ecumenical cooperation. God’s *oikumene* (that is, the “universal community of faith”) is not based on creeds and organizations. It is marked by faithfulness to His Word (including His law) and the proclamation of the soon return of Christ—the Lamb that was slain but is now depicted as Lion and Judge and Conqueror.

4. Scripture has always emphasized the concept of the church as a body with Christ as its Head. Since the remnant is not primarily identified by membership but by belief and practice, we are called to faithfulness to the Head. This faithfulness is expressed in life and one’s relation to the Word—both the Written and the Living Word. It is here that we note the juncture between the biblical concept of the remnant and God’s law.

5. Revelation 12:17 describes the characteristics of the remnant (or the faithful who remain) at the end of time as obedience to God’s commandments and commitment to the testimony of Jesus. Revelation 1:2, 12:17, and 20:4 all refer to the “testimony of Jesus” and link it to the Word of God—including the commandments of God in Revelation 12:17. Revelation 19:10 adds an important qualifier, “ ‘For the testimony of Jesus is the *spirit of prophecy*’ ” (*italics added*), a phrase that occurs only once in Scripture and refers specifically to prophetic ministry (*compare Rev. 19:10 and 22:8, 9*). God’s law and the commitment to God’s prophetic gift (throughout history as demonstrated in the Word and particularly in the last moments of history) both point to a humble acceptance of the will of God marking the end-time remnant (*compare Gerhard Pfandl, “Identifying Marks of the End-Time Remnant in the Book of Revelation,” in Toward a Theology of the Remnant: An Adventist Ecclesiological Perspective, pp. 139–158*).

6. Importantly, a careful reading of Revelation as a whole reminds us that these characteristics are not limited to one particular group. Yes, God keeps His remnant throughout history, but He also calls out of confusion and lukewarmness and sin those who have committed their lives to Christ and are willing to follow His Word to the end. In John 10:16, Jesus describes this group as follows: “ ‘I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them

also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd' ” (*NASB*). In Revelation 18:4, this group is described as living in Babylon but called to come out of her.

7. Finally, the eschatological remnant is not only faithful to God’s commandments and His spirit-filled prophets, it also follows the Lamb wherever He goes (*Rev. 14:4*). It is this love and commitment to Christ, and the recognition that He is our only means of salvation, that enables this group to share the everlasting gospel with every nation, tribe, tongue, and people. After all, God calls those who are willing to call others.

Consider This: As you think about the important biblical concept of the remnant, discuss in your Sabbath School class the best way of interacting with other Christians and non-Christians in this particular time in history. How can we be agents of hope that represent the Master faithfully?

►STEP 3—Apply

Thought Questions:

- ❶ What does it mean that Adam and Eve were created as morally free agents?
- ❷ How did obedience to God’s commands and faith in God’s promises play out in the life of Noah?
- ❸ How could Abraham’s faith be credited to him as righteousness (*Rom. 4:9*)?
- ❹ How is the proclamation of the gospel, as well as the validity of the law, enclosed in the first angel’s message of Revelation 14?

Application Questions:

- ❶ How can we avoid feelings of superiority or exclusivism when using the term *remnant*?
- ❷ Why did God need to test Adam and Eve, seeing that they were perfect? Does He still need to test us?
- ❸ What are we as Seventh-day Adventists known for in our communities? Is this what we were really called into existence for?

►STEP 4—Create

Activity: Being part of a family always requires responsibilities, as well as privileges. Brainstorm on the privileges and responsibilities of being a Seventh-day Adventist. Why would it be important to keep this in mind as we interact with others who are not Seventh-day Adventists?