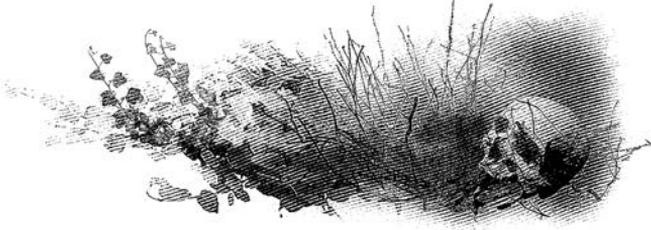


# A Matter of Life and Death



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Matt. 5:21–30; Prov. 6:21; 7:3; Prov. 6:23; 7:2; 6:24; 6:30, 31; Prov. 7:26, 27.*

**Memory Text:** “For the commandment is a lamp, and the law a light; reproofs of instruction are the way of life” (*Proverbs 6:23, NKJV*).

**T**wo brothers were left home alone but given a strict warning by their mother not to eat the cake that she had just baked. To make sure that the boys would obey, she added the threat of punishment.

When she left, it took the boys only a few minutes to decide to eat the cake anyway. “This is not a matter of life and death,” they reasoned. “Our mother would never kill us; so, let’s eat!”

For the teacher in Proverbs, though, the issue he speaks about is indeed a matter of life and death. His language is strong and sometimes graphic. Of course, Jesus used very strong language Himself when talking about matters of eternal life and death (*see Matt. 5:21–30*). And no wonder. In the end, our ultimate destiny, our eternal destiny (and what could be more important than that?), rests upon the choices that we make here, now. So, we should take the urgency of the strong language at face value.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 17.

## The Law in Our Lives

**Read** Proverbs 6:21 and 7:3. How are we to understand the bodily images used in these texts regarding how we should relate to God's law?

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As we saw in an earlier lesson, in Proverbs the *heart* represents the seat of emotions and thoughts. By telling us to bind the law upon our hearts (*Prov. 6:21*), the teacher means that we should always be in close connection with the law. There is no moment we may lose contact with the law, because the law is what defines sin (*Rom. 7:7*). The teacher also insists that this law should even be written on the tablets of the heart (*Prov. 7:3*), just as the Decalogue was written by God on the stone tablets (*Exod. 24:12*).

To speak about the law written on the heart means that the law is not just an external set of rules imposed on us. The law should penetrate our motivations, our secret intentions, and so be part of our intimate self. It's another expression of having the Pauline promise of "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (*Col. 1:27*), be a reality in our lives.

To tie the law around the *neck* also means that we should keep it close to ourselves. Ancient people used to tie their precious belongings around their necks. The neck is the place through which air travels to the lungs, allowing breath and life, an association of thoughts that is attested in the Hebrew word *nephesh* ("soul"), which refers to "life" and is derived from a word meaning "throat" and "breathing."

To bind the law on one's *fingers* means to bring the law into the domain of actions. The teacher focuses on the fingers to suggest the most delicate and intimate actions. The law should affect not only the grand choices we make but the smaller ones, as well (*see Luke 16:10*).

Although the biblical intention of these images was purely symbolic, it is noteworthy that these symbols have been taken literally in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions. It is seen through the use of the Jewish *tefillin* around the head and the fingers, the Christian crosses around the neck, and the Muslim (and Christian) rosaries around the fingers.

**Symbols can be helpful, but why must we be careful not to mistake the symbol for the reality it represents?**

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## Light and Life

**Read** Proverbs 6:23. How is the law related to “light”?

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In the Bible, the word of God or His law has been compared to light: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (*Ps. 119:105, NKJV*). In the Hebrew mind, there is a connection between the idea of “law” and of “light.” Just as the lamp illuminates the path where we walk, the law will help us stay on track; that is, when we face moral choices, it will help us to know what the right choice is, even if at times reason or personal expedience would tempt us to disregard the law.

**What** examples can you find in the Bible of those who chose to follow God’s law despite powerful reasons not to? What can we learn from their obedience? In what cases, if any, did their choice to be faithful seem to be the wrong one, at least from a human perspective?

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**Along** with Proverbs 6:23, read Proverbs 7:2. Why is the law related to “life”?

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Since the Fall, our hope for eternal life cannot be found in the law but only through faith in Christ. However, obedience to the law and the principles it represents continues to play a central part in the life of faith (*see Matt. 19:17, Rev. 14:12*). We obey because, as the Lord said to Israel thousands of years ago, “I am the LORD your God” (*Lev. 18:4*). The law of God is related to “life,” simply because of who God is—the Source of our life. This principle represents true spirituality: we trust God and His promises for our present life, just as we trust His promises for eternal life.

**Jesus said: “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life”** (*John 8:12, NKJV*). How have you experienced the reality of this wonderful promise in your walk with the Lord?

## Fighting Temptation

As we have just seen, the author of Proverbs 6:23, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, directly links light and life to God's law. In the next verse, he gives a solid example of how the law, as light and life, can offer us powerful spiritual protection.

**What** are we being warned about in Proverbs 6:24? Besides the obvious, what more subtle warning is given here?

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When a religious person is tempted, the greatest temptation is to find a religious reason to justify the iniquity. Using God to rationalize bad behavior is not only a terrible form of blasphemy—it's powerfully deceptive. After all, if someone thinks that "God is with me," then what can you say in reply? This can happen even in cases of adultery. "God has shown me that this [man or woman] is the one I should be with." If that's what they believe, who or what can trump what "God" has shown them?

Notice, too, it's not just her physical beauty that lures him. She uses language, flattering words, to draw the victim into her trap. How often have men and women been led into compromising situations by subtle and seductive words, sometimes even couched in religious language? The author of the book of Proverbs seeks to warn us against this deception.

The law is the perfect antidote against the "flattering tongue of a seductress." Only the imperative of the law and the duty of obedience will help us resist her alluring words, which can sound so true and beautiful. Indeed, the seductress will find you not only handsome but also wise and bright. She may even evoke her spiritual needs; and ironically, dangerously, "the love of God" might become the justification for sin.

**Just think how easily we can be led, even under the guise of faith, to justify wrong actions of any kind, not just adultery. Why, then, is an absolute commitment to the law of God our only real protection against even our own minds and the tricks that they can play on us?**

## “You Shall Not Steal”

Right after his warning about adultery (*Prov. 6:24–29*), the author starts talking about another sin: stealing (*vss. 30, 31*). The relationship between the two commandments (stealing and adultery) shows how disobedience to one commandment can affect our obedience to the others. The attitude of compromise, to pick and choose in regard to God’s law, could be even more dangerous than complete disobedience to the law. “The strongest bulwark of vice in our world is not the iniquitous life of the abandoned sinner or the degraded outcast; it is that life which otherwise appears virtuous, honorable, and noble, but in which one sin is fostered, one vice indulged. . . . He who, endowed with high conceptions of life and truth and honor, does yet willfully transgress one precept of God’s holy law, has perverted his noble gifts into a lure to sin.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 150.

**Read** Proverbs 6:30, 31. What are these verses saying about what even a desperate person does?

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Poverty and needs do not justify stealing. The thief is guilty even if “he is starving” (*vs. 30, NKJV*). Although the starving thief is not to be despised, he must still restore seven times what he has stolen; this shows that even the desperateness of his situation does not justify sin. On the other hand, the Bible insists that it is our duty to meet the needs of the poor so that they don’t feel compelled to steal in order to survive (*Deut. 15:7, 8*).

How interesting that after going from adultery to stealing, the text now returns to adultery (*Prov. 6:32–35*). The two sins are indeed somewhat similar. In both cases, someone is illicitly taking something that belongs to someone else. A crucial difference, however, between stealing and adultery lies in the fact that the former sin concerns only the loss of an object, while the latter deals with something much greater. In some cases, one can make restitution for stealing an object; in the cases of adultery, especially when children are involved, the damage can be much more severe than when stealing is involved.

“‘Thou shalt not commit adultery.’ This commandment forbids not only acts of impurity, but sensual thoughts and desires, or any practice that tends to excite them. . . . Christ, who taught the far-reaching obligation of the law of God, declared the evil thought or look to be as truly sin as is the unlawful deed.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 308.

## The Threat of Death

Most people don't think of death when they sin; they have other things on their minds, usually the immediate gratification and pleasure that they derive from their sin. It doesn't help, either, that popular culture often extols adultery and other iniquities. In contrast, the book of Proverbs places sin in the right perspective, a view echoed many years later by Paul: "The wages of sin is death" (*Rom. 6:23*).

**Read Proverbs 7:22, 23. What makes the adulterer vulnerable to the threat of death?**

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The one who goes "after her" is described as someone who has lost his personality and will. He is no longer thinking. The word *immediately* suggests that he does not give himself time for much reflection. He is compared to an ox who "goes to the slaughter;" to a fool who goes to "the correction of the stocks," and to a bird who "hastens to the snare." None of them realize that their life is threatened.

**Read Proverbs 7:26, 27. What makes the immoral woman lethal?**

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It's possible that the woman here depicts more than a "mere" adulterer. In fact, she represents values opposite to wisdom. Solomon uses this metaphor to warn his pupil against any form of evil. The risk is huge, for this woman does not just wound; she kills, and her power is such that she has slain even the strongest of men. In other words, others before you, stronger than you, have not been able to survive in her hands. The universal language of this passage clearly suggests that the biblical author is speaking about humankind in general. (The Hebrew word *sheol* in the text has nothing to do with "hell," as commonly thought; it designates the place where the dead now are: the grave.)

In the end, the point is that sin, whether adultery or something else, leads to annihilation, the opposite of the eternal life that God wants us all to have through Jesus Christ.

No wonder, as we said in Sabbath's introduction, the language is strong—we are dealing, literally, with matters of life and death.

**Think of some "strong" people who have fallen in a big way. Why should this make you tremble for yourself? What is your only protection?**

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**Further Study:** “Satan offers to men the kingdoms of the world if they will yield to him the supremacy. Many do this and sacrifice heaven. It is better to die than to sin; better to want than to defraud; better to hunger than to lie.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 495.

“Choose poverty, reproach, separation from friends, or any suffering rather than to defile the soul with sin. Death before dishonor or the transgression of God’s law should be the motto of every Christian. As a people professing to be reformers, treasuring the most solemn, purifying truths of God’s word, we must elevate the standard far higher than it is at the present time.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 147.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 How can we be serious about the gravity of sin without falling into the trap of fanaticism? At the same time, how can we be obedient to the law of God without falling into legalism?
- 2 Read Exodus 20:1–17. How are all the Ten Commandments related to each other? Why, if we openly violate one commandment, are we likely to transgress other commandments, as well? (See James 2:11.) What examples can you find in which transgression of one commandment has led to the transgression of others?
- 3 Dwell more on the idea of how people might use religion in order to justify wrong actions. It’s not that hard to do, especially if you tend to hold up “love” as the ultimate standard of right and wrong. After all, think about all the bad things done under the pretext of “love.” How, then, does the law continue to act as a way of protecting people, either from themselves or others, who might otherwise be led into sin?
- 4 Look again at the question at the end of Sunday’s study, which deals with mistaking symbols for reality. How might we do that? For example, how might idolatry be one way of doing this? What traditions, which are symbols of spiritual truths, could be mistaken for those truths themselves?

## The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Proverbs 6:23*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Understand that following the guidance from God’s law is essential for our ultimate survival.

**Feel:** Cherish the warmth and security of God’s parental love as He teaches what is best for him or her.

**Do:** Accept God’s instruction and seek to learn more of His will, as recorded in writings that He has inspired.

► **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: Following God’s Law Is a Matter of Life and Death.**

- A** What is God’s law?
- B** How do God’s instructions shed light on the safe way of life?
- C** How is God’s law based on cause and effect?
- D** How does God’s law reveal the dangers of departing from God’s principles?

**II. Feel: God’s Love Is Expressed Through His Law.**

- A** What does God’s law have to do with His character of love and care for us?
- B** If we feel God’s mercy and grace, why do we need His law?
- C** In what way do we feel God’s love when He disciplines us for departing from His instructions?

**III. Do: Accepting and Learning God’s Instructions Affects Your Life.**

- A** What instructions from God that you understand up to this point have you accepted and followed? What difference has this commitment made in your life?
- B** Why should you want to learn more of God’s instructions?
- C** What are specific ways in which you actually (not theoretically) may go about learning more of God’s will for your life?

► **Summary:** God lovingly teaches us His principles of living for our own good.

## Learning Cycle

### ►STEP 1—Motivate

**Spotlight on Scripture:** *Proverbs 7:1–4*

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** God teaches His instructions to us as a loving parent teaches a child. His purpose is not to burden us but to help us make wise choices. If we cherish His guidance as a precious gift and allow it to shape our inner attitudes, we will enjoy life rather than falling into temptations that deceive those who lack understanding.

**Just for Teachers:** Proverbs 7 presents divine teaching through King Solomon as words of wisdom addressed to his son (*vs. 1; compare 1:1*). Verses 1–4 of chapter 7 reiterate 6:20–23, and both of these passages introduce warnings against falling into the temptation to commit adultery (*6:24–35, 7:5–27*).

The Ten Commandments prohibit adultery (*Exod. 20:14*). Related laws condemn to death, under the Israelite judicial system, those who commit this crime (*Lev. 20:10, Deut. 22:22*). Proverbs deals with the same sin and its deadly consequences but approaches it from a different angle by appealing to the listeners' desire for their own well-being and by describing the kind of attractive temptation that could lead to adultery.

**Opening Discussion:** God is our perfect Manufacturer, and He provides us with the Bible as the Manufacturer's Manual. When you buy a car and the manufacturer's manual says to put motor oil in its engine, you follow the instructions without complaining, because you know that the one who made the vehicle knows best. So, why would anyone even think of disregarding God's instructions?

#### Questions for Discussion:

- ❶ How many principles of the Ten Commandments can you find in Proverbs 6, 7?
- ❷ Why does God teach the principles, illustrated in the Ten Commandments, from different angles in various parts of the Bible? Can we learn anything from this method regarding how we can pass His instructions on to others, including our children?

## ►STEP 2—Explore

**Just for Teachers:** Three of the most important words for law and related concepts appear together in Proverbs 6:23: “For the commandment [*mitzvah*] is a lamp, and the law [*torah*] a light; reproofs of instruction [*musar*] are the way of life” (*NKJV*).

A *mitzvah* is a “command” or “commandment.” *Torah* is “direction,” “instruction,” or “teaching” from someone who is wise (13:14), such as a mother (1:8) or father (4:2). The word *torah* is apparently derived from the same Hebrew root as the verb *yrh*, which means “teach” (4:4, 11) or “point” (6:13). *Musar* is “discipline” or “training” (3:11) or “warning” or “instruction” (1:8).

By using several terms with related but distinct meanings, the biblical text expands the understanding of a concept. The law is commanded by a superior person, such as a parent or God (*mitzvah*), but it is not arbitrary; it is instruction that points out a wise course of action (*torah*) and trains a person through warning and discipline (*musar*). Through parallel expressions, Proverbs 6:23 characterizes the law as “a lamp,” “a light,” and “the way of life.” A “lamp” provides “light”; so, these words are closely related and show that the law functions to dispel darkness so that one can see what is going on. By adding that the law is “the way of life,” Proverbs indicates that the light of the law illuminates the safe course of life that results in living rather than dying.

## Bible Commentary

Proverbs 7:1–3 urges the hearer to internalize wise commands “within you,” using the metaphor of writing them “on the tablet of your heart” (*NKJV*). True and unflinching obedience flows from inner attitudes shaped by the commands; it is not something artificially imposed from the outside. Our sinful will and lack of understanding prevent us from internalizing God’s law by ourselves. But God promises to put His law in our minds and write it on our hearts (*Jer. 31:33; compare Ezek. 36:26*).

Putting a clean heart within us is a miracle of God’s creative power (*Ps. 51:10*). To receive it, we must acknowledge our weakness and accept the forgiveness and moral cleansing that God offers through Jesus Christ (*Psalms 51, Jer. 31:34, 1 John 1:7–9*). God transforms us, making us new people through His Holy Spirit (*John 3:3–8, Titus 3:4–7*).

### I. Wise Words Give Light for Life (Review Proverbs 4, 6:20–23 with your class.)

Proverbs 4 presents instruction from a wise father, who says, “Keep my commands, and live” (*vs. 4, NKJV*). Then he likens the path of righteous people

to light (*vs. 18*), by contrast with the dark way of the wicked, who “do not know what makes them stumble” (*vs. 19, NKJV*). The righteous allow their lives to be illuminated by wisdom so that they do not fall into danger through ignorance. Therefore, words of wisdom “are life to those who find them, and health to all their flesh” (*vs. 22, NKJV*). Proverbs 6:20–23 pulls together the concepts of wise commands, light, and life more tightly. Here a parent’s commands will lead and keep you (*vs. 22*), “For the commandment is a lamp, and the law a light; reproofs of instruction are the way of life” (*vs. 23, NKJV*).

In Psalm 119:105, God’s Word “is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (*NKJV*). In John 1:1–5, 14, Christ, the divine Creator, has come to earth as the ultimate Word (Communication) from God. “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men” (*vs. 4, NKJV*). By internalizing His words (*compare John 6:53–58, 63*), we gain ultimate wisdom that prepares us for eternal life with Him.

**Consider This:** How does beholding Christ’s life change us (*compare 2 Cor. 3:18*)? In what way does this effect go beyond the influence that any other hero has on someone who admires him or her? What difference does whom we admire make?

## II. Wise Instructions Warn Against Temptation (*Review Proverbs 6:23–25, 7:1–21 with your class.*)

In Proverbs 6 and 7, seduction by a woman (*compare by a man in Exod. 22:16*) illustrates how temptation works. It can be desirable to the ears and mind (*Prov. 6:24, 7:21*), to the eyes (*6:25*), to one’s appetite for food (*7:14, here sacrificial meat eaten at home by the offerer; compare Lev. 7:16*), to fulfill a desire for companionship (*Prov. 7:15*), to satisfy a yearning for touch (*vs. 16*), and can appeal to one’s sense of smell (*vs. 17*) and sexual appetite (*vs. 18*). Of themselves, these are good desires that God has given. But temptations are effective, because they present attractive ways to fulfill them by violating the boundaries that God has established for our protection (*James 1:14, 15; compare Gen. 3:6; 1 John 2:16*). By appealing to several desires and offering assurance that there is no danger (*Prov. 7:19, 20; compare food and sex in Num. 25:1, 2; Rev. 2:14*), Proverbs 7 illustrates how strong temptations can be.

**Discussion Questions:** What kinds of temptations appeal to us? Why are they attractive? Why are they dangerous?

## III. Yielding to Temptation Is Costly (*Review Proverbs 6:26–35, 7:22–27 with your class.*)

Rather than appealing to the moral rightness of resisting temptation because one is accountable to God (*compare Gen. 39:9—Joseph*), Proverbs emphasizes

the earthly cause and effect in the present life. The consequences of sin are inescapable (6:27–29) and deadly (6:32–35, 7:22–27). The cost of its temporary pleasure is too high; it is not worth it.

A TV comedian got lots of laughs by exclaiming, “The devil made me do it!” But this is just an excuse. The devil can’t force you to do anything, because “God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it” (1 Cor. 10:13, NKJV). Sin is a choice that we don’t have to make, because God gives us the opportunity to resist, and He is able to keep us from falling (Jude 24).

**Consider This:** If you really believe that God, your Creator and Savior, is able to keep you from falling into sin, then how do your choices show this belief? In what ways could relying wholly on God help you to be more successful?

### ►STEP 3—Apply

**Just for Teachers:** Many people are discouraged and see no hope for overcoming their weaknesses. Help your class to understand the power, through prayer, of taking struggles to Christ. He understands and provides access to the mighty power of God, who promises to help in every time of need (Heb. 4:14–16).

#### Application Questions:

- ① What practical things can we do to reduce temptations and make ourselves less vulnerable?
- ② How can we help others who are discouraged, frustrated, and suffering because of their failures?

### ►STEP 4—Create

**Just for Teachers:** Proverbs 6 and 7 present negative examples as warnings. Help your class to see the positive message behind these warnings.

#### Activities:

- ① List specific ways in which you can get acquainted with the people of your neighborhood, have opportunities to learn their needs, and share with them God’s offer of a better life by following His wisdom.
- ② Set up a network in your group so that any time one of you is struggling with temptation or discouragement, that person can call on the others for prayer support.