

Stewards After Eden



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 22:14–18; 1 Cor. 4:1, 2; Col. 2:2, 3; Eph. 6:13–17; 2 Cor. 5:10.*

Memory Text: **On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts”** (*1 Thessalonians 2:4, NIV*).

Adam and Eve's first job involved stewardship. The garden and all creation were given to them to care for, to enjoy, and to have dominion over (*Gen. 2:15*), even though they owned none of it. Instead, they were stewards of what the Lord had entrusted to them.

This week, we will look more closely at the definition of a steward but after the Fall, after our first parents were driven from Eden. That is, we also are stewards, but we are stewards in an environment quite different from the one Adam and Eve first enjoyed.

What is stewardship? Certain Bible characters reveal what a steward is by how they lived. Other scriptures define it more clearly. When we become God's stewards, our focus on the world and its materialistic values changes to a focus on the Creator and His mission. As with Adam and Eve, God entrusts to us responsibilities of divine origin. Since the Fall in Eden, however, the task of stewardship has changed; along with the responsibilities of caring for the material world, we are also entrusted to be good stewards of spiritual truths.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 3.

Stewards in the Old Testament

The word *steward* itself is translated only a few times in the Old Testament. In most cases, it comes from the phrase regarding the one who is “upon the house,” the idea of being in charge of the running of a house; that is, a “steward” (*Gen. 43:19; 44:1, 4; 1 Kings 16:9*). Stewards had responsibilities to manage household affairs and their master’s possessions, doing whatever was asked of them. The definition of a steward in the Old Testament can be found by identifying the characteristics of a steward. Stewards cannot be separated from their stewardship, for it reveals their identity.

Some characteristics of a steward are made clear in the Old Testament. First, the position of a steward was one of great responsibility (*Gen. 39:4*). Stewards were chosen because of their abilities, and they received respect and trust from their owners for getting the job done. Second, stewards knew that what had been entrusted to them belonged to their owner (*Gen. 24:34–38*). This is the supreme difference between a steward and an owner. Stewards understand their position. Third, when stewards took for their own use what had been entrusted to them, the relationship of trust between them and the owner was broken, and the stewards were dismissed (*Gen. 3:23, Hos. 6:7*).

Read Isaiah 22:14–18. During Hezekiah’s reign, Shebna was appointed steward, as well as treasurer—both very important positions of authority. What happened to him as a result of his abuse of his position?

“A steward identifies himself with his master. He accepts the responsibilities of a steward, and he must act in his master’s stead, doing as his master would do were he presiding. His master’s interests become his. The position of a steward is one of dignity because his master trusts him. If in any wise he acts selfishly and turns the advantages gained by trading with his lord’s goods to his own advantage, he has perverted the trust reposed in him.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 246.

How can we better learn the important concept that we are indeed stewards of what we possess in this life? How should this realization impact all that we do?

Stewards in the New Testament

The two basic words for “steward” in the New Testament are *epitropos*, occurring three times, and *oikonomos*, occurring ten times. Both of these words describe positions that incorporate managerial responsibilities entrusted to the steward by the owner.

In both the New and Old Testaments, stewards are defined by what they do. The New Testament specifically describes the steward in terms of accountability (*Luke 12:48*) and expectations (*1 Cor. 4:2*). The Old Testament, though, is more focused on declaring God’s ownership than on directly defining us as His stewards. Thus, while the concept of a steward is very similar for both Testaments, the New Testament expands the concept beyond only household management.

In the parable of the dishonest steward (*Luke 16:1–15*), Jesus expands the definition of steward. His lesson is about more than a steward escaping financial disaster. It is also applicable to those escaping spiritual disaster through a wise manifestation of faith. A wise steward will prepare for the future of Jesus’ return beyond the here and now (*Matt. 25:21*).

Read 1 Corinthians 4:1, 2; Titus 1:7; and 1 Peter 4:10. What do they tell us about stewards and stewardship?

“Shall I open my heart to the Holy Spirit, that every faculty and energy may be aroused, which God has given me in trust? I am Christ’s property, and am employed in His service. I am a steward of His grace.”—Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 301.

In Luke 12:35–48, Jesus also uses the term “steward” metaphorically. He tells of the wise steward being ready for the Son of man’s return and describes the unfaithful steward as one who has given up caring because the master has delayed His return. The unfaithful steward has turned into a tyrant and has become abusive to those around him. He is no longer a pattern of good works or a manager of grace.

When we accept Christ, we are stewards, called to manage God’s resources. But more important, we are to manage the spiritual realities of the Christian life in preparation for heaven.

Read Luke 12:45. Why must we as Seventh-day Adventists, who often struggle with a sense of “delay,” be especially careful about falling into this deception?

Stewards of the Mysteries of God

Read Colossians 2:2, 3 and 1 Timothy 3:16. What do these verses identify as a “mystery”? What does the fact that it is a “mystery” say to us about the limits of what we can know about it?

Zophar the Naamathite says to Job, “ ‘Can you fathom the mysteries of God?’ ” (*Job 11:7, NIV*). The word *mystery* means “puzzling, obscure, unknown, unexplained, or incomprehensible.” The mysteries of God have been recorded in Scripture, even though understanding them fully is still beyond our comprehension. That’s why they are *mysteries*. It is as if each of us is a nearsighted person looking into the heavens, hoping to see the smallest detail. We can’t see that far unless God reveals it to us.

What does Deuteronomy 29:29 say about what is revealed to us?

We are stewards of things that we do not understand fully. We know only as much as revelation and Scripture reveal. Our greatest stewardship is to live “as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (*1 Cor. 4:1, NKJV*).

God wants us, as His stewards, to preserve, teach, protect, and care for divine truth that He has revealed. How we do this is the ultimate stewardship, and it means we are “holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience” (*1 Tim. 3:9, NKJV*).

The greatest of all mysteries is that we all can experience Christ, the “hope of glory.” The plan of salvation is supernatural and impossible for us to understand fully. That the Creator of all that was made (*John 1:1–3*) would come down to this earth and be “manifested in the flesh” (Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 6, p. 112) only to offer Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of humanity entails mysteries that probably never will be comprehended fully by any of the creation. Even angels study to understand the mystery of why Jesus came to earth (*1 Pet. 1:12*). Nevertheless, what they do know causes us all to praise the Lord for His glory and goodness (*see Rev. 5:13*).

You have been called to be a steward of the gospel. What responsibilities does that automatically mean you have?

Stewards of Spiritual Truth

When we think of stewardship, we think of tangibles—and rightly so. But as we have now seen, stewardship goes beyond that. Like tangible possessions, intangible gifts come from God, as well. These intangibles are spiritual possessions that God gives to us (*1 Pet. 4:10*) so that we can, in Christ, develop Christian characters and become the people we can be in Him. Thus, we must manage intangible gifts even more carefully than tangible ones, because they are infinitely more valuable.

Read Ephesians 6:13–17. What have we been given by God that we are to be stewards of? Why is the proper management of these things so crucial to us?

“The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (*Rom. 6:23, NKJV*). The world, and all that it offers, cannot offer us the redemption that we have in Christ. Redemption, a gift God gives to us, is our most valuable possession. Keeping the reality of this redemption always before us helps us maintain perspective in our stewardship of other possessions given to us from God, as well.

“Only in the light that shines from Calvary can nature’s teaching be read aright. Through the story of Bethlehem and the cross let it be shown how good is to conquer evil, and how every blessing that comes to us is a gift of redemption.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 101.

Redemption is ours only because Jesus paid the ultimate price. Paul clearly states, “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace” (*Eph. 1:7, NKJV*). The words “we have” mean that we have “redemption.” It is ours, but only because God has given it to us. How crucial, then, that we keep on “the whole armor of God” (*Eph. 6:11, NKJV*), in order that the evil one doesn’t come and take it away. For the only way he can do this is if we allow him to, which will happen only if we don’t obey what is revealed to us in “the word of God” (*Eph. 6:17*). Our greatest protection is by obeying, in faith, the light we have been given.

Read again Ephesians 6:13–17. How do we put on the armor of God, and in what ways are we stewards of all that we have been given in that armor?

Our Responsibility as Stewards

Wise stewards are defined by their willingness to accept and execute the moral principle of personal responsibility. Acceptance of personal responsibility is the choice we make and the actions we take. It recognizes the relationship between cause and effect. Willingness to accept personal responsibility is a key trait that cannot be ignored when we define what a steward is, for stewards must be single-minded in having the best interest of the Owner at heart. Hence, such willingness is a choice that defines the desired relationship a steward has with God.

“God desires to bring men into direct relation with Himself. In all His dealings with human beings He recognizes the principle of personal responsibility. He seeks to encourage a sense of personal dependence and to impress the need of personal guidance. His gifts are committed to men as individuals. Every man has been made a steward of sacred trusts; each is to discharge his trust according to the direction of the Giver; and by each an account of his stewardship must be rendered to God.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, p. 176.

When we become stewards, we will not shift our responsibility to another individual or to an organization. Our personal responsibility is to God and will be reflected in all of our interactions with those around us (*Gen. 39:9; see also Dan. 3:16*). We will embrace the task at hand to the best of our abilities. Success in God’s eyes will depend more on our faith and on our purity than on intelligence and talent.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:10. How do we understand these words in the context of what it means to be a wise steward?

For centuries, theologians and philosophers have debated the difficult question of free will. But the Scripture is clear: we as human beings do have free will and free choice. The idea of being judged by our deeds makes no sense otherwise. Hence, we do have a personal responsibility, by the grace of God, to choose to make the right decisions in all that we do, which includes being faithful stewards of all our Master’s goods.

Further Thought: The word translated as “steward” in a few Old Testament texts comes not from a single word but from a phrase: *asher al bayt*, the “one who is on or over a house.” For example, Genesis 43:19 can be translated: “When they drew near to *the steward of Joseph’s house*, they talked with him at the door of the house” (*NKJV, emphasis added*). If one considers that the family that resides in the house is part of the house itself, then what is more valuable to a person than his or her own home? Hence, a steward is someone being entrusted with something very valuable that, nevertheless, does not belong to him or her. In many ways, that makes the responsibility even greater than it would be if the steward were in charge of his or her own possessions.

This same idea is continued in the New Testament, as well. “The NT takes OT ideas and joins them with first-century ideas, concepts, and words, thus enriching and enlarging the biblical teaching on stewardship. The most common Greek words used in relationship with stewardship are derived from *oikos* and *oikia*, ‘house.’ The *oikonomos* is one who keeps the house: the steward or manager. *Oikonomia* is the abstract noun, ‘management of the house,’ the meaning of which is often much broader.”—*Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), p. 653.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Instead of taking responsibility for eating the forbidden fruit, what did Adam say to God when asked about what he had done? *Gen. 3:12*. How interesting that one of the earliest human responses brought about by sin is to seek to shift the blame from oneself to another. What does his response say about his willingness to accept personal responsibility for his actions? What should it tell us about our own willingness, as well? How can we learn to avoid the common trait of blaming others for our mistakes?
- 2 In class, dwell more on the idea of being stewards of things that are not tangible but spiritual. What does that mean? How do we “manage” these things?
- 3 Think about the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6–12. What important truths are expressed there that we have been given the responsibility to be stewards of?
- 4 Why is it so important for us to learn to trust in and believe in spiritual things that we don’t understand fully? In what worldly ways do we do that all the time anyway?

Finding Ellen White in the Mideast

by CHANMIN CHUNG

Ahmet felt a strange impression to look for a Seventh-day Adventist church in a major Middle Eastern city where Adventists are not allowed to witness in public or distribute literature door-to-door.

Ahmet, who was visiting his ill father, had never met an Adventist, visited an Adventist church, or heard of Adventist beliefs.

“The impression came again and again,” said Ahmet, a former Muslim who had converted to Christianity four years earlier.

Following the impression, he set off in search of the church. Little did he know that only 30 Adventists are known to live in the city of 10 million people. (Adventist Mission is not identifying the city or Ahmet by his real name to safeguard the Adventist work in the region.)

Finally, Ahmet found the Adventist church, stepped into the entrance area, and knocked on the inner door. He was met with silence.

“Nobody was there except Ellen White books,” Ahmet said.

Local church members had placed a bookrack with free literature inside the church entrance, an area that is not considered a public space legally and therefore is available for witnessing. Ahmet felt convicted to pick up *The Victory of Love*, a book containing several chapters of *The Great Controversy* by Adventist Church cofounder Ellen White.

Returning to his father’s home, Ahmet wondered whether the Spirit of the Lord had led him to the church. When he finished reading the book three days later, he concluded that White’s words were in harmony with the Bible. He found church contact information on the last page of the book and asked for more information. Soon he received a copy of White’s book *Patriarchs and Prophets*. After that he read *The Great Controversy*, *The Acts of the Apostles*, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, and his favorite, *The Desire of Ages*. After reading those books, Ahmet decided to become an Adventist, and today wants everyone to know about Ellen White.

“I will tell everyone: Ellen White is a prophet of God,” he said.

Even more, Ahmet said he wants to share the clearer picture of God’s love that he has learned in these books. He is reaching out to people from his country who have never heard the gospel.



Ahmet’s story has encouraged local church leaders to maintain their efforts to share White’s writings. “We need to do all we can to share the treasure we have,” said Rick McEdward, president of the Middle East and North Africa Union.

CHANMIN CHUNG is communication coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Union.

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *1 Thessalonians 2:4*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Identify the scriptural concept of stewardship in both its Old and New Testament contexts.

Feel: Sense a personal call to stewardship within the contours of his or her life situation.

Do: Create a personal outline that will serve as a guide for his or her personal participation as a steward.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Stewardship Defined

- Ⓐ What was the role of a steward in the Old Testament as compared with the New Testament?
- Ⓑ With what were the stewards of biblical times entrusted?
- Ⓒ What is our responsibility as stewards?

II. Feel: The Universal Call

- Ⓐ How can we faithfully fulfill our sense of calling in the modern world in which we live?
- Ⓑ How can we experience the fervor of the biblical stewards for mission?

III. Do: Patterns of Stewardship

- Ⓐ Which elements of the biblical pattern of stewardship must we incorporate into the framework of contemporary stewardship?
- Ⓑ What are the key areas of life that must be included in the outlines of our personal stewardship plans?
- Ⓒ How should we explain our stewardship decisions to family and friends, especially when they disagree with us?

▶ **Summary:** The basic components of biblical stewardship are embedded in the lives of faithful believers whose stories are recorded in Scripture. The torch of stewardship has been passed from generation to generation. It is now our turn to live as faithful stewards, passing the torch to the generation that follows us.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *1 Thessalonians 2:4*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Faithful stewards are single-minded in having the best interests of their Overseer, God, at heart.

Just for Teachers: This week's study focuses on the biblical meaning of stewardship by surveying examples from both the Old and New Testaments. The principles of Scripture form the foundation for stewardship. Modern stewards seek to exemplify those values in contemporary contexts and pass their enthusiasm for their Master to future generations.

Opening Discussion: The word *steward* is not common in contemporary vocabulary. The social context that gave rise to stewards is uncommon in the modern world, dominated by socialistic, communistic, and democratic-entrepreneurial economies. Read from the following list of words and ask class members which of these modern concepts do they think most closely approximates the ancient role of steward. Have them explain, or give a reason, for their answer.

List of Words That Potentially Define the Ancient Role of a Steward

owner	entrepreneur
president	employee
slave	chief executive officer
manager	servant
plant operator	supervisor
foreman	chief of operations
guardian	vice president
wage earner	farmhand
staff member	professional
accountant	chief financial officer

Add other leadership terms that fit better into your economic context and delete from the above list those that do not fit. Write down the best ideas that arise from the class discussion. Compare them with the biblical data surveyed during the lesson study. If possible, write your ideas in a place where all class members can see it.

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: This week's study concentrates on developing a biblical understanding of the word *steward*. Obviously, this definition

is foundational for acquiring an accurate perception of the derivative word *stewardship*. In defining stewardship, our study draws from both the Old and New Testaments, detailing the steward’s activities and responsibilities.

Bible Commentary

I. A Steward’s Life (Review Genesis 2:15; 24:34–38; 39:4; 43:19; Isaiah 22:14–18; Luke 12:35–48; 1 Corinthians 4:1, 2; Titus 1:7; and 1 Peter 4:10 with the class.)

Professor N. Avigad identified a tomb on the slopes of the Mount of Olives as being the tomb mentioned in Isaiah’s narrative about Shebna (*Isa. 22:14–18*). The tomb’s inscription, which was taken to the British Museum, is translated as, “This is [the sepulcher of Sheban]yahu, who is over the house.” (For the complete discussion, see *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 191.)

The descriptive phrase “who is over the house” typifies the Old Testament portrayal of the steward. Various translations employ different words to describe Shebna, each implying something different about his responsibilities. Several later translations utilize “steward” (*ESV, TLV, RSV, NRSV, NASB, HCSB, NKJV, NIV*), while other newer works are more creative—“official” (*CEB*), “caretaker” (*VOICE*), “palace administrator” (*NLT*), “manager” (*NCV*), “servant” (*NCV*), and even “prime minister” (*CEV*). Older translations use “treasurer” instead (*KJV, ASV, AMPC, MEV*). Many employ the phrases “in charge” (*GW, NASB*) or “taking care of” (*NLV*).

It appears that stewards were considered household members living with their owners. They were indeed servants, but not in the menial sense as, say, a slave. They managed property, probably had lesser servants working under their leadership, managed household schedules, may have held some financial responsibility, and were even considered government “officials.”

In the New Testament era, there are two Greek words that are translated as steward. The more common is *oikonomos*, which appears ten times, and *epitropos*, which occurs three. *Oikonomos* is a blend of two Greek words—*oikos*, the common word for house, and *nemō*, meaning “to manage” or “set in order.” So, a steward was the person responsible for putting the house in order. The second word, *epitropos*, was used of stewards in the *oikonomos* sense but could also refer to government officials or to the guardians of children. In Galatians 4:2, *epitropos* and *oikonomos* appear in the same verse. The unique contribution of the New Testament seems to be that it applies the term metaphorically to spiritual matters, as well as using it in the literal sense. This metaphorical usage is explored more deeply in the next section.

Consider This: How does the fact that stewards were entrusted with considerable responsibilities but were still considered servants elevate our concept of Christian servanthood or Christian service?

II. Adminstrating Spiritual Truth (*Review 1 Corinthians 4:1, 2; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 4:10; Colossians 2:2, 3; and 1 Timothy 3:16 with the class.*)

While the New Testament uses the word *steward* in the literal sense, like the Old Testament, it expands its use and applies it in the sense of administering spiritual truths or, as Paul says, the mysteries of God. Our Corinthian passage applies the word to ministers of the gospel. Paul’s letter to Titus applies it to church leadership, specifically to elders and overseers. Peter applies it to all believers. Contemplate the risk that God is taking: we hold the eternal treasures of His spiritual riches in finite jars of clay—which is to say, our perishable flesh.

Consider the responsibility that such a spiritual endowment entails. While Paul’s words of exhortation to be faithful stewards of God’s gospel are important, it is his life that speaks volumes. Despite unimaginable hardships, he purposed to administer the gospel faithfully in ever-widening circles. He recounts his own experience:

“I have worked harder, been put in prison more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm. Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of my concerns for all the churches. Who is weak without my feeling that weakness? Who is led astray, and I do not burn with anger?” (*2 Cor. 11:23–29, NLT*).

Paul embraced his responsibility for administering the gospel and left no stone unturned to ensure that the mission was accomplished.

Consider This: Considering Paul’s legacy of spiritual stewardship and the legacy of many others throughout history, what legacy will I leave behind when I die?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: God has placed us in an incomparable position

of trust. The destinies of lost souls hang in the balance. Every choice we make either furthers God's mission or slows it down. Who is sufficient for these things! Christ might have entrusted His treasure to angels. He might have called upon the sinless beings of other worlds. He might have destroyed the human race and started all over again. Instead, He sacrificed His life, and He is depending on us to be faithful stewards of His grace in a fallen world.

Thought/Application Questions:

- ❶ How can modern Christians experience the fervor that Paul and Christ's disciples had for administering spiritual truth to our world?
- ❷ What are the identifying characteristics of faithful stewards in contemporary society?
- ❸ What practical steps must we take to guarantee that Christ's interests are paramount and ours are only secondary?
- ❹ What promises of the Holy Spirit should encourage us regarding our Christian stewardship?
- ❺ Paul says that we are not our own because we are bought at a price. How might meditating upon that fact motivate our Christian stewardship?
- ❻ How can we extend our influence as faithful stewards so that others will emulate our example?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: We are certainly stewards of God's gifts, but, more important, we are stewards of His grace. The two are complementary. The physical and spiritual resources with which God has entrusted us can be effectively used in God's mission by those who wish to be faithful stewards of the gospel.

Activities:

- ❶ Prepare an outline about today's topic that you could share with a youth group. Include stories about your personal faith journey, being honest about times you may have put your interest above those of your Overseer. Include stories about how God has blessed you in material and spiritual ways when you placed God's interests first.
- ❷ Analyze the needs in your community and select one area where you could make a difference, given the unique gifts and talents with which God has entrusted you.

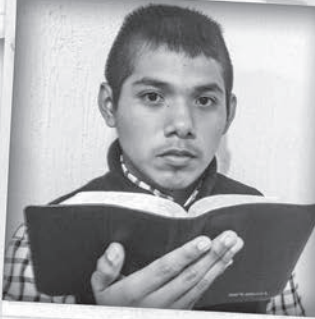
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Ezequiel Perez Gongora



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They are united by a desire to see the construction of a seven-story medical center in Mexico—one of the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering projects for this quarter.

Read about Ezequiel Perez Gongora, Laura del Carmen Flores Dias, and Uriel Arodi Albino Ramos in this quarter's Youth and Adult Mission quarterly (bit.ly/adultmission) and

Children's Mission quarterly (bit.ly/childrensmission).

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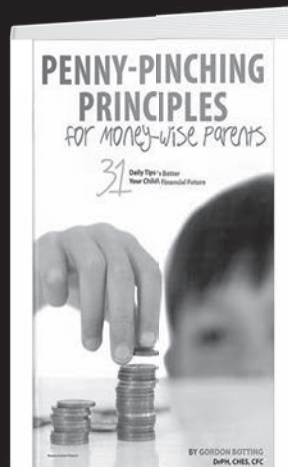
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