

# The Law *as* Teacher




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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week’s Study:** *Deut. 6:5, 31:9–27, Rom. 3:19–23, Rev. 12:17, 14:12, Mark 6:25–27, Heb. 5:8.*

**Memory Text:** “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (*Deuteronomy 6:5, NKJV*).

In warning the Galatians against legalism, Paul wrote: “For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law” (*Gal. 3:21, NKJV*). Of course, if any law could have “given life,” it would have been God’s law. And yet, Paul’s point is that, for us as sinners, even God’s law can’t give life. Why? “But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (*Gal. 3:22, NKJV*).

However, if the law can’t give life to sinners, what’s the purpose of it, other than to show us our need of grace? Is the law, then, only negative in function, only there to show us our sins?

No; the law also is there to point us to the way of life, which is found only in Jesus. This also is what true education should be about, pointing us to a life of grace, of faith, and of obedience to Christ. That’s why this week we will study the role of God’s law in the whole question of Christian education. As we do, let’s see what the law, though it cannot save us, still can teach us about faith, about grace, and about our God’s love for fallen humanity.

\* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 17.

## To Love and to Fear God

The book of Deuteronomy contains Moses' last words to Israel before a new generation will finally enter the Promised Land. But before they do, he has some very clear words and instructions for them.

### **Read** Deuteronomy 31:9–13. What does it mean to fear the Lord?

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God was intentional about the ways that He imparted His law to Israel. He made every provision so that His laws would not be forgotten. In this way, God is a long-suffering Educator. He teaches and repeats and sends prophets and uses His servants to impart His message. And He did it again and again. Indeed, isn't so much of the writings of the Old Testament nothing but God seeking to teach His people to follow the way of life?

Notice in these verses how Moses stresses the importance of future generations' learning the law. Moses describes it as a two-step process. First the children will *hear* the law, and then they will “learn to *fear* the LORD your God” (*Deut. 31:13*).

First, they hear, and then, they learn to fear God. That is, learning the law presupposes that fear will not be a natural outcome of knowing the law. The process of fearing God must be learned. Moses implies that knowledge and fear are a process, not an immediate cause-and-effect relationship.

Also, what does “fear God” mean when the people also are told that “you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (*Deut. 6:5, NKJV*)? Perhaps we can compare it to the way a child loves and fears a good father, a father who reveals his love and care by showing that he says what he means and he means what he says. With such a father, if you do wrong, you will indeed suffer the consequences of that wrongdoing. Yes, we can, and must, love and fear God at the same time. They are not contradictory ideas. The more we learn about God, the more we come to love Him because of His goodness; and yet, at the same time, the more we come to know about God, the more we can fear Him, too, because we can see just how holy and righteous He is and how sinful and unrighteous we are in contrast, and how it is only by grace—undeserved merit—that we are not destroyed.

**How do you understand what it means to love and to fear God at the same time?**

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## A Witness Against You

When Moses knows he is soon to die, he is profoundly aware of the situation that he will leave behind. He knows that after his death the Israelites will enter into the Promised Land of Canaan. He also knows that they will become rebellious upon reaching their long-sought destination.

**Read** Deuteronomy 31:14–27. What preparations does Moses make before his death? What were Moses’ chief concerns, and how does he address those concerns?

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Moses’ tone here may appear like that of a teacher preparing for a substitute. He knows that his pupils have misbehaved in his presence in the classroom; he is not so deluded as to think that they will not rebel in his absence. He instructs the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant to place the book of the Law next to the ark in order for it to be a “witness.” Moses is not simply passing on a lesson plan for his substitute. He is passing on a witness. Moses speaks of the book of the Law as though it is a living being with power to reprove the hearts of men.

**Think** about the law as a “witness against” them. How do we understand this idea in the New Testament, as well? *See Rom. 3:19–23.* That is, how does the law point us to our need of grace?

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In Deuteronomy 31, God instructs Moses to write down a song that the Lord has taught Moses. Moses is then to teach the song to the Israelites so that, as stated in verse 19, it “may be a witness for me against the children of Israel.” Again we see God’s directives personified. A song, when sung, is more easily shared and spread. And when a song is a witness, it has the ability to cause people to look at themselves and see what it says about them.

**Even as we seek to obey God’s law with all our God-given strength, in what ways does His law function as a “witness against” us? What does this witness teach us about the need of the gospel in our lives?**

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## That You May Prosper

Throughout the Bible, we hear of other outcomes of knowing—and obeying—God’s law.

**Read** Joshua 1:7, 8. What was the Lord saying to Joshua, and how do the principles found there apply to us today?

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The Lord tells Joshua as he enters into Canaan: “Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go” (*Josh. 1:7, NKJV*).

This notion of success as a by-product of obedience may seem contrary to the way success is measured in our world today. Many today believe that the marks of success are innovation, creativity, and self-reliance. To succeed in a particular industry often requires extraordinary talent and risk-taking.

However, in God’s eyes success requires a different set of resources.

**Read** Revelation 12:17, 14:12, Romans 1:5, 16:26, James 2:10–12. What are these verses saying to us, today, about obedience to God’s law? That is, even if we are not saved by obeying God’s law, why is it so important that we still keep it?

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Old Testament, New Testament, Old Covenant, New Covenant—it doesn’t matter: as Bible-believing Christians we are called to obedience to God’s law. Violation of the law, also known as sin, can lead only to pain, suffering, and eternal death. Who hasn’t learned for themselves, or seen for themselves, the results of sin, the results of violation of God’s law? Just as ancient Israel would prosper by obeying God’s law (even though they needed grace, as well), it’s no different for us today either. Hence, as part of Christian education we need to keep God’s law as a central component of what it means to live by faith and trusting in God’s grace.

**What has been your own experience with the consequences of sin? What have you learned that you could share with others so that, perhaps, they might not make the same mistakes?**

## The Toils and Struggles of Law Keepers

There are great benefits to following God’s law, as evidenced in the people whom God prospered. Joshua closely followed God’s precepts, and he led the people of Israel well. Time and again, the Lord told Israel that if they obeyed the law, they would prosper.

**Read 2 Chronicles 31:20, 21. What were the key reasons in this passage as to why Hezekiah prospered?**

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Whatever education venue we are in, we must stress the importance of obedience. Yet, our students aren’t stupid. They will notice, sooner or later, the harsh fact that some people are faithful, loving, and obedient. And yet—what? Disaster strikes them, as well. How do we explain this?

The fact is, we can’t. We live in a world of sin, of evil, a world in which the great controversy rages, and none of us are immune to it.

**What do these texts teach us about this difficult question?** *Mark 6:25–27; Job 1, 2; 2 Cor. 11:23–29.*

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Without question, good and faithful people, law-abiding people, have not always prospered, at least as the world understands prosperity. And here, too, might be a partial answer to this difficult question, a question that as we seek to teach the importance of the law is no doubt going to be raised. What exactly do we mean by “prosperity”? What did the psalmist say? “I would rather be a door-keeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness” (*Ps. 84:10, NKJV*). There’s no question that, by the world’s standards, even those faithful to God and obedient to His law don’t always “prosper,” at least for now. We do our students a disservice to say otherwise.

**Read Hebrews 11:13–16. How do these verses help us understand why those who are faithful still suffer in this life?**

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## Jesus, Our Example

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, lived the only human life in perfect obedience to the Father, in perfect obedience to the law of God. He did this so that He could be not just our Substitute, which He was, but also our Example, which He was too.

**Read the following passages:** *Luke 2:51, 52; Phil. 2:8; Heb. 5:8; John 8:28, 29.* **How do they remind us of Christ's obedience throughout His life?**

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Perhaps John said it the best when he wrote this: "He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked" (*1 John 2:6, NKJV*). When we fix our eyes on the life of Christ and His ministry on earth, it is easy to see how He pleased the Father by His obedience. Christ did fulfill prophecy, and He upheld God's laws throughout His lifetime.

Just as God told Moses to write down His law so that it might be a witness to Israel, Christ was the living embodiment of the witness to His apostles, disciples, to sinners, and saints. Now, rather than just having a set of rules to follow, we have the example of Jesus, a flesh-and-blood human being, to follow, as well.

As teachers, what better role model can we present to students than the model of Jesus and how He obeyed the Father?

"That so-called faith in Christ which professes to release men from the obligation of obedience to God, is not faith, but presumption. 'By grace are ye saved through faith.' But 'faith, if it hath not works, is dead.' Ephesians 2:8; James 2:17. Jesus said of Himself before He came to earth, 'I delight to do Thy will, O My God: yea, Thy law is within My heart.' Psalm 40:8. And just before He ascended again to heaven He declared, 'I have kept My Father's commandments, and abide in His love.' John 15:10. The Scripture says, 'Hereby we do know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. . . . He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself also so to walk even as He walked.' 1 John 2:3-6."—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 61.

**What can you do to better follow Christ's example in all areas of your life and thus be a better teacher to others, as well? Though it's kind of an old, trite idea, why does what we do—our actions—speak so much louder than what we say?**

**Further Thought:** “Love, the basis of creation and of redemption, is the basis of true education. This is made plain in the law that God has given as the guide of life. The first and great commandment is, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind.’ Luke 10:27. To love Him, the infinite, the omniscient One, with the whole strength, and mind, and heart, means the highest development of every power. It means that in the whole being—the body, the mind, as well as the soul—the image of God is to be restored.

“Like the first is the second commandment—‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’ Matthew 22:39. The law of love calls for the devotion of body, mind, and soul to the service of God and our fellow men. And this service, while making us a blessing to others, brings the greatest blessing to ourselves. Unselfishness underlies all true development. Through unselfish service we receive the highest culture of every faculty. More and more fully do we become partakers of the divine nature. We are fitted for heaven, for we receive heaven into our hearts.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 16.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Like Israel of old, we are to love God and to fear God at the same time (*Matt. 22:37, Rev. 14:7*). In class, talk more about how we can do both. Also, answer the question: *Why are these two commandments not in conflict with each other?*
- 2 What is the difference between setting a standard and making a rule? In your experience, is Adventism more concerned with setting high standards within its community of believers or in making rules that unite its community? What does Scripture say about setting high standards for oneself? One’s family? One’s church?
- 3 How do we strike the right balance in showing the importance of obedience to the law of God and, at the same time, showing why this obedience is not the source of our salvation?
- 4 Read through Psalm 119 and note how many times notions of obedience, freedom, laws, rules, and commands are stated. What does the author of Psalm 119 want to convey about these themes?

## Instructed by God in Brazil

By SELOMITA HAMZAOUI

An aunt gave me a booklet filled with Bible verses on a Saturday afternoon. “Just open the booklet, and God will talk to you through a verse,” she said.

I hadn’t thought about God in more than twenty years. Although I was raised in a Christian home in Brazil, I had stopped attending church when I was 16. Now I was wrapping up a month-long trip in Brazil as part of a research project for my university studies in France. I would leave for Paris the next day.

I opened the booklet, and my eyes fell on Proverbs 22:19: “So that your trust may be in the LORD; I have instructed you today, even you” (NKJV). The words moved me because I was a student and curious to know what God would teach.

That evening, I joined friends for a goodbye meal. But I couldn’t get the Bible verse out of my mind, and I excused myself to go to church.

Entering the church, I saw to my shock that every young woman was dressed like me in jeans, high heels, earrings, and makeup. The music also had changed, and the pastor didn’t make an altar call. I was waiting for the appeal. I wanted to give my heart to Jesus. I left disappointed.

The next day, I flew to France and prayed, “Lord, even though they didn’t make an altar call, I will find a church in France and attend services regularly.”

In France, I found a church near my home and started to attend every Sunday. The people were kind, but I sensed that they were cold spiritually.

I started studying the Bible at home, and I watched sermons online. I discovered a prominent Seventh-day Adventist preacher on YouTube who spoke powerfully about Revelation. I watched 25 of his sermons.

One night, I woke up around 3:00 A.M. and decided to pray until daybreak. The same thing happened the next night and the next. As I prayed those three nights, I sensed that Jesus’ return was near. I confessed my sins and praised God for His goodness. On the third day, peace filled my heart. I knew God lives.

Although I had watched so many YouTube sermons, I didn’t realize that the preacher was an Adventist. Wondering about his denomination, I found his personal testimony online. Immediately, I looked for the address of an Adventist church in Paris. On my first Sabbath, I was astonished to see people

studying the Bible in Sabbath School. The women were dressed modestly, and the sermon was about Revelation. God knew what was important for me. I wept during the worship service. I didn’t think this kind of church existed.

God promised in Brazil to teach me, and I have been learning in France ever since.



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*Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offerings that help spread the gospel around the world.*

## *Part I: Overview*

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The law has a public relations problem. This is unfortunate because the law and the God who gave it have much to teach us. Christians are confused about how the law functions in life because of the Pauline emphasis on our not being “justified” by law but by faith (*Gal. 2:16*). But to dispense with the law just because it doesn’t function in one realm would be like getting rid of your toaster because it doesn’t vacuum the floor well. It seems that people have grown content with simply knowing what the law doesn’t do rather than what it does do.

But those who are in a properly oriented covenant relationship with God have no reason to suffer anxiety or aversion toward the law. Being able to say with David, “O how love I thy law!” (*Ps. 119:97*) provides a good test of whether one is in a healthy relationship with God and the law. If people protest with, “What about love or grace or Jesus?” they are in for a surprise. The most important law of all, the *crème de la crème* of all the laws, is the law to love. “ ‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.’ ” This is the greatest of all the laws; at least, that’s what Jesus thought (*Deut. 6:5, ESV; Matt. 22:36, 37*). If people have a problem with law, do they take issue with *this* law too? So, it is safe to say that there is enough endorsement from King David and King Jesus to give the law a chance as an instructor for life and a revelation of the God who gave it.

## *Part II: Commentary*

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### Scripture

When planning an evening with friends, no one is likely to recommend, “Let’s get together so we can read and study some laws.” It is understandable why most people have an aversion to the subject of law in the Bible. For the most part, there is a depressing cycle of (1) laws given or repeated, (2) laws violated, and (3) God’s anger as a result of the violation and the horrible consequences that follow.

This cycle happens again and again, to the point where we as readers ask ourselves in frustration, “What is Israel’s problem? They are the most stubborn, rebellious group of people on the face of the earth.” We act shocked at Israel’s failures for 30 seconds, and then something happens. Slowly we look away from the nation of Israel and instead gaze into the proverbial mirror and see the reflection of our personal

histories. If we are honest, we see some striking similarities between ourselves and Israel, and like King David unwittingly condemning himself upon hearing Nathan's parable, we, too, hear the law announce to us, "Thou art the man" (*2 Sam. 12:7*).

So, what is there to learn from this rather fatalistic cycle of law, sin, and condemnation—a cycle so many Christians resolve by simply ignoring the subject of biblical law and/or prematurely jumping to the themes of forgiveness, grace, and salvation? The answer is found in God's sharing with Moses and Israel the prediction of Israel's rebellion. " 'This people will rise and whore after the foreign gods . . . and they will forsake me and break my covenant' " (*Deut. 31:16, ESV*). Then the children of Israel learn a 43-verse song (*Deuteronomy 32*) that they are never to forget (*Deut. 31:21*), a song that explicates exactly that prediction. This is all done on the verge of their being granted the Promised Land and the innumerable blessings that accompany it.

What we learn here is something fundamental about God Himself. What kind of Being is this who willingly enters into a covenant relationship with a people He knows beforehand will be unfaithful to Him? So many of the relationships that we humans enter into are risk-based and probabilistic. We marry with the expectation that our spouse will be faithful to us till death. If we were unsure, we probably wouldn't commit; if we were certain of their future infidelity, then we definitely wouldn't commit. Friendships are formed on the presumption that the parties won't become backstabbing enemies. And yet, the God of the Hebrews, our God, embraces us with open arms, knowing that He will be stabbed in the back by our sin and rebellion against Him. This is amazing grace.

Yet, this grace comes into sharpest focus when seen through that "depressing" cycle of a covenant people called into a relationship with God, governed by His commandments and laws, followed by egregious disobedience. This perspective reveals God's heart of love and grace even *before* the promises of salvation and forgiveness are made explicit. The mere fact that He enters into committed relationships with people such as us is a miracle in itself. His later promises of salvation, forgiveness, and restoration are the simple outgrowth of a divine heart that counts the cost of our rebellion and sin and concludes the price small enough for a chance to be in our company for eternity.

**Discuss:** We quickly learn that this Lawgiver is not a megalomaniac simply trying to boss His creation around. His willingness to enter into a covenant with people He knew would violate it teaches us something about His character. What does it teach us?

## Scripture

Monday's lesson brings out how before Moses died God gave him a song that the people of Israel were to memorize (*Deut. 31:21*). This song was to serve an interesting function. God says that after the people enter the land and are filled up by its abundance, they will turn to other gods and break the covenant with their God. As expected, disasters and the covenant curses follow. One can imagine the tragic experience of going from the height of prosperity to being decimated by starvation and war (*Deut. 32:23–25*). “Why is this happening to us?” one can almost hear them cry in desperation. “We offered our sacrifices to the gods, and they *had* been blessing and protecting us” (*Deut. 32:17; Hosea 2:5, 8*). It is at this moment of disorientation, when Israel is reaping the full wrath of God for its disobedience, that it is time to sing this song.

The song is intense (*Deuteronomy 32*). It tells the story of God's goodness contrasted with the wickedness of His people. It calls on them to “remember the days of old” when God provided and cared for them, “carrying them on [His] wings” (*Deut. 32:7, 11, NKJV*). Eventually, in the midst of their superabundance, they forget and forsake God and instead sacrifice to demons (*Deut. 32:17, NKJV*). The heartbreaking verses tell us of the disastrous consequences that follow. But there are hints that God has not utterly forsaken His people: “For the LORD will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants,” and “ ‘I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal,’ ” and “ ‘He will provide atonement for His land *and* His people’ ” (*Deut. 32:36, 39, ESV; Deut. 32:43, NKJV; emphasis supplied*). God has taught His people a song that, though brutally honest, will answer all their questions. It will tell them of their origins as a people, of the God they rejected, of the impotent gods they replaced Him with, of the reason that they are in the mess they are in, and of the hope for the future.

The song would have been sung for generations and served as a warning and deterrent against departing from the God of their fathers. But at the height of prosperity and presumptuous security, it must have sounded quaint and irrelevant to their ears, if sung at all. But now that they are experiencing a chaos of their own making, the song out of their own mouths serves as a “witness” against them (*Deut. 31:19*). God has placed within the collective psyche of the people of Israel what their destiny will be unless they resist the idolatry of the nations around them.

This song is tragic, but from a teaching perspective it also is brilliant. It clearly states the consequences of covenant disloyalty. It explains the *whys* behind the dire predicament of being ravaged by war and the elements. It places the blame on Israel's shoulders, and it vindicates God from culpability in the nearly complete destruction of

His people. Can one think of a better method to avert national disaster than to inculcate a prophetic song in a people's oral tradition, telling of what will become of their homeland if they reject the God who granted it to them?

**Discuss:** Who at one point hasn't wished to look into the future in order to make better decisions in the present? God has granted this wish in large measure if we would but read what He prophetically shares. The irony is that, even with the prophetic song on the lips of Israel, they still walked right into the worst-case scenario (*Dan. 9:13–15*). What does this outcome teach us about the benefits or detriments of knowing the future?

### *Part III: Life Application*

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The first step in really applying the law to one's life is reading and prayerfully reflecting on it. And we are not talking about just the Ten Commandments. They will forever have a hallowed place in both Christian and Judaic circles, and they should. The Law as defined as Torah or the first five books of the Old Testament is what the ancients meant when speaking of Law. Once we realize this, "law" takes on a definition that demands broadening. The Garden of Eden story—that's Law; all the stories of Abraham—that's Law; the parting of the Red Sea—that's Law; et cetera. For this reason, *Law* also is properly translated as "teaching" or "instruction." This understanding immediately makes the title of the lesson somewhat redundant (though necessary)—The Law as Teacher. Yes, we would all hope that we would allow the *Law* that God gave us to actually *teach* us something. It would be strange to think otherwise, and how unfortunate it is that sometimes the *Instruction* (i.e., the Law) is the last place people (even Christians) look for instruction. It would be almost comical if it were not so tragic. Prayerfully reading the context of laws in the Bible, with diligent cross-referencing with the New Testament, should keep one on a balanced path of learning, living, and loving God's law.

### *Notes*

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