

God *the* Lawgiver



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Heb. 12:21; Rom. 7:8–13; Job 24:14, 15; Exod. 16:4–30; Heb. 8:10; 10:16; Rom. 13:8–10.*

Memory Text: “For the LORD is our Judge, the LORD is our Lawgiver, the LORD is our King; He will save us” (*Isaiah 33:22, NKJV*).

Key Thought: God's law is an inseparable part of the Old and New Testaments. It is also an expression of His love.

As Seventh-day Adventists, we often hear the idea that the law is a transcript of God's character. (If so, then because God doesn't change, the law—which reveals His character—shouldn't change either.) What, though, does that mean?

Suppose you lived in a land with a king whose word was law. (“The state, that's me” one French king famously said.) Now, suppose the king issued laws that were repressive, nasty, hateful, unfair, discriminatory, and so forth. Would not those laws be a good representation of the kind of person the king was; would they not reveal his character?

Think through some of history's worst despots. How did the laws they passed reveal the kind of people they were?

In this sense, the law reveals the character of the lawgiver. What, then, does God's law reveal about God? When we understand God's law as a hedge, a protection, something created for us, for our own good, then we come to understand more about what God is like.

This week we'll take a look at the law and, by default, the Lawgiver.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 11.*

The Law at Sinai

Read Exodus 19:18, 19; 20:18; Deuteronomy 5:22; and Hebrews 12:21, descriptions of the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. Why would it be something so terrifying?

“The people of Israel were overwhelmed with terror. The awful power of God’s utterances seemed more than their trembling hearts could bear. For as God’s great rule of right was presented before them, they realized as never before the offensive character of sin, and their own guilt in the sight of a holy God. They shrank away from the mountain in fear and awe.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 309, 310.

There’s something so powerful in the Ellen White quote above. As the law is presented to them, the people realize “as never before” just how bad sin is and their own guilt in the eyes of God.

So, right from the beginning of Israel’s covenantal relationship with God, we can see a revelation of the gospel in the law. The law was never meant to be a means of salvation, even at Sinai; rather, it was to show the people their need of salvation. It was right after the giving of the law that they were given instructions to build the sanctuary, which revealed to them the plan of salvation. The law was to point people to the Cross, to their need of atonement and Redemption. No wonder, then, that they trembled before the law, because the law showed them just how sinful and fallen they were.

Read Romans 7:8–13. How do these verses reveal this crucial truth? What is Paul saying that the law does? (See also Ps. 119:6.)

In a sense, Paul is saying here what Ellen White said happened at Sinai. The problem is not with God’s law; the problem is with sinners who have violated the law, as we all have done. Paul is showing how the law is inseparably tied to the gospel, that it is the law that shows us just how sinful and fallen we are.

Read Exodus 20:1–17. Do you find yourself trembling before the law? Do you find yourself convicted by it? What are your emotions as you read the law and compare yourself with it?

The Law Before Sinai

As soon as we talk about the law, the Ten Commandments, and Sinai, we hear the refrain that the Ten Commandments were first given to the Jews at Sinai; hence, the commandments are a Jewish or an Old Testament institution and not applicable to our day and time.

Of course, numerous problems exist with that theology, the biggest being that if this were true, then how could there have been sin before Sinai, “for sin is the transgression of the law” (1 John 3:4)? The truth is that the book of Genesis yields an amazing witness to the existence of God’s law long before Sinai.

Genesis 1 and 2 describe God’s perfect Creation. Genesis 3 records the fall of Adam and Eve. In the next chapter, Genesis 4, we have the first murder. How did Cain know he was guilty for murdering his brother if there were no law to define murder as sin?

Long before Sinai, God specifically denounced murder in the covenant He established with Noah after the Flood (*Gen. 9:6*).

In the oldest book in the Bible, the book of Job, we find God commending Job’s righteousness two times. What does He declare of Job’s character? (*Job 1:8, 2:3*). Obviously, a standard of right and wrong is operating. Job lived long before the Exodus, and he wasn’t even of the covenant line.

Read Job 24:14, 15. How do these verses help us to understand what the standard of right and wrong included?

When Abraham lied about Sarah to Abimelech, God rebuked Abraham for his falsehood. And even though Abimelech was king of Gerar and not of Israelite stock, God held him to the same standard of marital purity found in the Decalogue and demanded that Sarah be returned to Abraham (*see Gen. 20:9*).

What pointed testimony about Abraham does God give to Isaac about his father? *Gen. 26:4, 5*.

What’s fascinating about Genesis 26:5 is that the Hebrew uses four different words, *mshmr*, *mzvt*, *huqt*, and *torot* (from *Torah*, “the law”) to describe what Abraham obeyed. Certainly among all these were the Ten Commandments.

When Jacob, at God’s bidding, was returning to Bethel to build an altar to the Lord, he felt the need for revival in his household. What did he request his household to do? (*See Gen. 35:2, 3*.)

Clearly, the idea that there was no law until Sinai makes no sense in light of so much of what the Bible teaches about life before Sinai.

The Sabbath Before Sinai

God doesn't reveal how He communicated the eternal principles of His law to humanity before Mount Sinai, but the evidence is clear and substantial that the giving of the law on Sinai was not the world's initial exposure to its precepts.

Many people, forced to concede that point, argue, instead, that it was only the Sabbath commandment, not the others, that was first given at Sinai, and, therefore, it is exclusively Jewish and doesn't pertain to Christians today. How valid is that claim?

Read Genesis 2:1–3. What does this passage teach us about the Sabbath before Sinai?

Next, in Exodus 5:1–5, the Bible reveals Moses and Aaron struggling with Pharaoh in regard to the question of letting Israel go. Verse five is particularly enlightening.

Read Exodus 5:5. What indication is there of the Sabbath in this text?

Pharaoh's response, "You make them rest from their labor" (*NKJV*), seems clear enough. The original language reads even more pointedly. Although there are several words for *rest*, the verb Pharaoh uses is built on the word for "Sabbath." The striking language of Pharaoh to Moses and Aaron reads like this, "You make them sabbath from their labor!" a hint, if nothing else, to the reality of the Sabbath rest before Sinai.

Proof of the Sabbath before Sinai, though, appears in Exodus 16, when God miraculously provides manna for Israel in the wilderness. This 40-year miracle began before the Israelites reached Mount Sinai.

Read Exodus 16:4–30, focusing especially on verses 23–30. How do these verses prove the existence of the seventh-day Sabbath before the Mount Sinai experience?

Notice the words of the Lord to Moses in verse 28, "How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws?" (*NKJV*), a clear indication that God's laws and commandments existed before the revelation at Sinai, and that among those commandments and laws was the seventh-day Sabbath. Thus, although something monumental happened with the giving of the law at Mount Sinai, the Ten Commandments themselves obviously weren't new.

How is your Sabbath experience? Do you love the Sabbath, dread it, or are you ambivalent about it? What can you do to have a deeper and richer experience with the Lord through the gift of His Sabbath day?

The Law and the Prophets

Little controversy exists over the existence of the law in the period after Sinai. The Old Testament writings are filled with references to the law. And though, so often, those references deal with Israel's transgression of the law and the subsequent punishments, other texts reveal the great love and reverence many in Israel had for the law, which included not just the Ten Commandments but all of the rules and precepts that the Lord had given to His people.

In what ways do the following texts extoll the law? What attitudes do they reveal?

Isa. 48:17, 18 _____

Ps. 119:69–72 _____

Ps. 119:97–103 _____

Jer. 31:33 _____

Contrary to popular beliefs, although Israel (ideally) loved the law, those who understood the law's function never saw it as a means of salvation. The Hebrew religion had always been a religion of grace, even though the people went from one extreme to the other: from trampling the law openly and blatantly, as in the first-temple period, to extreme legalism, as seen so clearly in the time of Jesus.

Why, though, such a love of the law? Again, if one understands the word *law* to encompass not just the Ten Commandments but the whole body of Old Testament teachings, especially the first five books of Moses, then you understand that what was loved was the message of salvation, of grace, of redemption. They loved the "truth" as it was revealed to them and as they best grasped it. It wasn't a love of rules, per se, but a love of a set of guidelines and principles that, if kept, would have opened the way for many blessings and promises, because all that God had given them was for their own good and well-being.

Is it any different today?

Think about what God has given us as a people. How can we live out the wonderful light with which we have been blessed?

The Law in the New Covenant

From the start, the principles of the Ten Commandments were given to humanity out of the Lord's love for people. The law has always been intended to be a blessing. You obey the law, and you are greatly protected from the ravages of sin; you disobey, and you face the inevitable consequences of transgression. Who needs theology to know, personally, just how painful sin and its consequences are? How often can you read the results of sin on the faces of those who have been ravaged by it?

Although sections of the New Testament—Paul's writing specifically—deal with those who have misunderstood the purpose of the law, the commandments of God have been presented in the New Testament in a positive, uplifting way.

Read Hebrews 8:10 and 10:16 in their contexts. How is God's law presented in these texts? As something still relevant, or as something negated by grace?

So often, we see people seeking to place the law in opposition to God's love or God's grace, the idea being that if you truly love, then God's law is negated. One could argue that love transcends the law, in the sense that one who truly loves God and others reveals the ultimate principles of the law. But this is no excuse for negating the law. On the contrary, love fulfills the law; love is the law expressed in its purest form.

It's like the parts of a car. The parts don't exist as ends in themselves; they are there so that the car will go from place to place. That's their purpose, so that the car can move. Yet, without each part, the car wouldn't function. The law is like that: it's not an end in itself but the means to an end, and that end is a deep expression of love, love for God and love for others.

Look up these texts. How do they help us to understand the link between love and law? *Rom. 13:8–10; Gal. 5:14; James 2:8; 1 John 5:2, 3.*

Dwell more on the links between God's law and love. Law-keeping without love leads to what? Love without law-keeping leads to what? Write out your thoughts and bring them to class on Sabbath.

Further Study: “The ten holy precepts spoken by Christ upon Sinai’s mount were the revelation of the character of God, and made known to the world the fact that He had jurisdiction over the whole human heritage. That law of ten precepts of the greatest love that can be presented to man is the voice of God from heaven speaking to the soul in promise. ‘This do, and you will not come under the dominion and control of Satan.’ There is not a negative in that law, although it may appear thus. It is DO, and Live. . . . The Lord has given His holy commandments to be a wall of protection around His created beings.”
—Ellen G. White, *Sons and Daughters of God*, p. 53.

“In the work of redemption there is no compulsion. No external force is employed. Under the influence of the Spirit of God, man is left free to choose whom he will serve. In the change that takes place when the soul surrenders to Christ, there is the highest sense of freedom. . . . True, we have no power to free ourselves from Satan’s control; but when we desire to be set free from sin, and in our great need cry out for a power out of and above ourselves, the powers of the soul are imbued with the divine energy of the Holy Spirit, and they obey the dictates of the will in fulfilling the will of God.

“The only condition upon which the freedom of man is possible is that of becoming one with Christ. ‘The truth shall make you free;’ and Christ is the truth. . . . Subjection to God is restoration to one’s self,—to the true glory and dignity of man. The divine law, to which we are brought into subjection, is ‘the law of liberty.’ James 2:12.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 466.

Discussion Questions:

❶ Discuss your answer to Thursday’s questions about law and love. What is law-keeping without love like? How is it often manifested? At the same time, what is love without law-keeping like? What kind of love is it, if love at all? Why do they need to be linked?

❷ In what ways does the law reveal the character of the Lawgiver? How does God’s law reveal to us what God is like?

❸ What does Ellen White mean when she talks above about the law being a “law of liberty”? How can the keeping of the law be equated with “liberty”?

❹ What examples can we find in the world, and all around us, of what happens when people violate God’s law? How powerful a testimony are these examples of the value and continued validity of that law?

Summary: God’s law is an expression of His love, and when we love as God loves us, we will truly reveal the law in all its beauty and power.

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Isaiah 33:22*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Describe the unchanging character of God, as outlined in His law.

Feel: Empathize with the feelings of Moses and the people of Israel as God proclaims His law from Mount Sinai.

Do: Accept the instruction of the law because it teaches us our need for a Savior, and rejoice in the law because it protects and liberates us to be our truest selves in Christ.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Picture of God's Character

A How are the seemingly negative statements of some of the Ten Commandments really positive examples of who God is and the ways in which He created us so that we may function at our fullest potential?

B What can we learn about God's character from the natural laws that govern the universe?

C How is it evident that God's law was known and in operation before Mount Sinai?

II. Feel: The Importance of Being Afraid

A Why was it important for God to share His law at Mount Sinai in such an awe- and fear-inspiring display of power?

B How does a healthy fear of the law send us to the Savior?

III. Do: Rejoicing in the Law

A What aspects of the law awaken a sense of joy, praise, and love for the Lawgiver in your heart, and how can you share this joy?

▶ **Summary:** Because the law describes how God lives and how He designed us to live, it follows that when we let Him write these laws in our hearts that we are free to live joyously, as our true selves.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The law of God, as summarized in the Ten Commandments and the specific teachings of Jesus, provides direction and purpose for our lives, as well as profound insight into the nature of God.

Just for Teachers: Obtain a copy of the official rules of one or more sports popular in your local area or among class members. These might be accessed online; for football (soccer), for example, rules can be found at www.fifa.com/worldfootball/lawsofthegame.html or perhaps obtained from a local sporting club or association. Familiarize yourself with these rules and, if you have the opportunity, perhaps research the history of where and when these rules were developed and how they have changed over time. Make the rules available for class members to peruse, whether by making copies or projecting the rules on a screen from a computer. As described below, keep the discussion of sporting rules lighthearted. Try to ensure that class members are not too distracted by the sporting metaphor and that they don't move too precipitously from thinking about the rules of the sport to the law of God and its purpose for living the life God wants for us.

Opening Activity: If possible, distribute or display copies of the rules to a sport. Ask class members to reflect on the complexity or simplicity of the outlined rules. Perhaps ask class members to suggest changes to the rules and what, if applicable, these rules reflect about the time and place in which the rules were developed. Then ask them to imagine how the game might change if all or most of the rules were removed. Would the game be possible without rules? In what ways are these rules similar to the law of God? How are they different? How are rules beneficial to the game? How are God's laws beneficial to our lives?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: This section provides an opportunity to consider the law of God in its role in the developing relationship between God and humanity.

Bible Commentary

I. Introductions to God's Law *(Review Genesis 4:3–16; 9:5, 6; 26:4, 5; 35:2, 3; Exodus 16:23–30; Job 24:14, 15 with the class.)*

Many people who have set out to write an introduction to Christianity have sought to connect with human beings' innate sense of right and wrong, of fairness and injustice. For example, in the twentieth-century classic *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis describes a kind of natural law that governs human actions in almost all societies and seems innate in us all to some degree. Observing the simplest human interactions, he argues, "We are forced to believe in a real Right and Wrong."—(London: Fount Paperbacks, 1977), p. 18. And it seems it has always been this way. We are told little of how the first followers of God were told about God's law and the reality of right and wrong. But from the first sin came a sense of guilt that must have been one of the ways in which God communicated to those first human beings about their brokenness and their need for a new relationship with Him.

Consider This: Do you think human beings have an innate sense of right and wrong?

II. Receiving the Law *(Review Exodus 19:16–25, 20:18–21 with the class.)*

Imagine you are among the people of Israel, camped at Mt Sinai. You have experienced the plagues in Egypt, the miraculous escape, and the crossing of the Red Sea. You are now eating manna every day. You have seen God acting on behalf of your people. But now God says that you must prepare to meet Him at the mountain. The earth shakes. You see, hear, and feel God's presence. You are afraid and somehow also in awe. How might this change your understanding of God?

Consider This: Why do you think that God appeared to the Israelites in this way at this time?

■ *How do you think that God chooses to present Himself throughout the Bible stories when He does so in such different ways at times? Why is He sometimes a great physical presence, sometimes a still, small voice? Why is He sometimes a humble Baby and sometimes a conquering King?*

III. Jesus Affirms, Fulfills, and Expands the Law *(Review Matthew 5:17–30, 33–48, 7:12 with the class.)*

Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (*Matt. 5:17, NIV*). In His teaching He sought to both affirm and enlarge the understanding that His hearers had of the law of God. The specific examples above, taken from the Sermon on the Mount, demonstrate His approach to God’s law. He was keen to emphasize that life lived at its best, and in the kingdom of God, was lived with a deep understanding of, and commitment to, the law of God.

Consider This: How does your understanding of what Jesus lived and taught help your understanding of the law of God?

■ *How do Jesus’ expanded explanations of some of the commandments affect your understanding of what they mean for you?*

IV. Written by God (*Review Exodus 32:15, 16; John 8:6; Hebrews 8:10; 10:16 with the class.*)

Despite the Bible itself being a work of literature, there are only a few examples of God actually writing. The covenant, traditionally considered to be the Ten Commandments, is one of those rare examples. God created a physical reference point to which His people could refer. It becomes clear that the encounter at Mount Sinai was more about establishing a relationship, a covenant, than simply instituting a legal system. And this same idea is carried over in the promise of later writers that God would write His laws on the hearts of His people. Again, it is more about relationship and covenant than mere legalities.

Consider This: Why does it say that God wrote His laws in stone but that Jesus wrote the people’s sins in the dust (*see John 8:6*)?

■ *What does it mean to you to have God’s law written on your heart?*

► **STEP 3**—Apply

Just for Teachers: When God met His newly freed people at Mount Sinai, He was keen to establish a new, healthy, and lasting relationship with them. His law given at that time was not simply about making rules; it was about formalizing a covenant that would be the basis of that relationship. In doing so, He also showed a representation of His character, demonstrating that He, as Creator and Redeemer, wanted what was best for His people.

Application Questions:

- 1 How would you explain “the law of God” to someone who knows little or nothing about God?
- 2 What are the benefits for nonbelievers who might choose to keep God’s law? Does this question even make sense?
- 3 In what ways is the law of God like the rules of a sport or the laws of a nation? In what ways is it different?
- 4 Why do you think so many of the Old Testament writers spent time singing the praises of the law of God in particular? Should we share their sentiments? If so, how can we do that?
- 5 Why did Jesus spend so much time talking about God’s law?
- 6 How important is God’s law in the New Testament as a whole? Explain your answer.
- 7 How can you make God’s law become a larger part of your everyday life?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: These activities are intended to prompt class members to explore the Ten Commandments and their application to our lives in various ways.

Suggestions for Individual Activities: If supplies are available, provide paper and pens or pencils and ask class members to spend time with their Bibles reflecting on how each of the Ten Commandments gives us a glimpse of the nature of God. Working through Exodus 20:1–17, ask class members to journal, or discuss in class, their insights either verse-by-verse or commandment-by-commandment. Suggest that class members use some, or all, of the following questions to aid their reflection: What aspect of God’s character is reflected in each commandment? What do we learn about life lived as a follower of God from each commandment? How would the world be different if everyone lived by each commandment? How might the church be different? How might we be different? After allowing sufficient time for personal reflection and journaling, encourage class members to share their most significant insights either in pairs or with the rest of the group.