

God Loves Freely



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 33:15–22; Hosea 14:1–4; Rev. 4:11; John 17:24; Matt. 22:1–14; John 10:17, 18.*

Memory Text: “‘I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely, for My anger has turned away from him’” (*Hosea 14:4, NKJV*).

Though Peter had denied Jesus three times, just as Jesus had predicted (*Matt. 26:34*), these denials were not the end of the story. After the Resurrection, Jesus asked Peter, “‘Do you love Me more than these?’” And Peter replied, “‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’” And Jesus said, “‘Tend My lambs.’” Then, Jesus again asked Peter, “‘Do you love Me?’” And Peter replied, “‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’” And Jesus said, “‘Shepherd My sheep.’” Then, yet again, a third time Jesus asked Peter, “‘Do you love Me?’” And “Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, ‘Do you love Me?’” And Peter replied, “‘Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.’” And Jesus said, “‘Tend My sheep’” (*John 21:15–17, NASB 1995*). Just as Peter had denied Jesus three times, Jesus—by way of the crucial question, “‘Do you love Me?’”—restored Peter three times.

However different our circumstances may be from Peter's, in many ways the principle is the same. That is, the question that Jesus had asked Peter is really the ultimate question that God poses to each of us in our time and place: *Do you love Me?*

Everything depends on our answer to that question.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 4.*

Beyond Reasonable Expectations

God not only asks us, “Do you love Me,” but God Himself loves each person, and does so freely. Indeed, He *freely* loves you and me and every other person more than we could possibly imagine. And we know this love by the way He has acted in the history of His people.

Read Exodus 33:15–22 and consider the context of these verses and the narrative in which they appear. What does this passage, especially verse 19, reveal about God’s will and love?

All seemed lost. Not long after God’s amazing deliverance of His people from slavery in Egypt, the people of Israel had rebelled against God and worshiped a golden calf. When Moses came down from the mountain, he saw what they had done, and he threw down the tablets containing the Ten Commandments and shattered them. Though the people had forfeited any right to the covenant privileges and blessings that God had freely bestowed on them, God freely chose to continue with them in covenant relationship anyway—despite their unworthiness for the covenant blessings.

The words of Exodus 33:19, “ ‘I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion’ ” (*NKJV*), are often misunderstood to mean that God arbitrarily chooses to be compassionate and gracious to some, but not others. However, in context, God is not stating here that He will arbitrarily be gracious and compassionate to some and not to others. That is not how God works, contrary to some popular theology in which God predestines some to be lost and to face eternal condemnation.

What, then, is God proclaiming here? Essentially, God is proclaiming that, as the Creator of all, He has the right and authority to grant grace and compassion freely to even the most undeserving of people. And He is doing so in this situation, even after the golden calf rebellion, by granting mercy to His people, Israel, even if they didn’t deserve it.

This is one of many instances in which God manifests His love and does so beyond any reasonable expectations. Good news for us all, is it not?

In what ways has God continued to reveal and manifest His love to you—even beyond any reasonable expectations?

Unrequited Love

God's striking instance of His love for fallen humanity is found in the story of Hosea. God commanded the prophet Hosea, " 'Go, take yourself a wife of harlotry and children of harlotry, for the land has committed great harlotry by departing from the LORD' " (*Hos. 1:2, NKJV*). Hosea and his unfaithful wife were to be a living object lesson of God's love for His people, even despite Israel's unfaithfulness and spiritual harlotry. That is, it is a story of God's freely bestowed love on those who do not deserve it.

Indeed, despite God's faithfulness and love, the people rebelled against Him, again and again, too. Accordingly, Scripture repeatedly describes God as the unrequited lover of an unfaithful spouse. He had loved His people perfectly and faithfully, but they had scorned Him and served and worshiped other gods, deeply grieving Him and breaking the relationship, seemingly beyond repair.

Read Hosea 14:1–4. What do these verses reveal about God's steadfast love for His people?

In the aftermath of repeated rebellion by His people, God declares: " 'I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely' " (*NKJV*). The term "freely" in the phrase " 'I will love them freely' " translated a Hebrew word (*nedabah*), which connotes that which is offered voluntarily. It is the same term used of the freewill offerings in the sanctuary system.

Throughout Hosea, and throughout the narratives of Scripture, God shows amazing commitment and compassion to His people. Even though they repeatedly went after other lovers, breaking the covenant relationship, seemingly beyond repair, God of His own free will continued to bestow His love on them. The people did not deserve God's love; they had rejected and forfeited any rightful claim to it. Yet, God continued to bestow love on them without any compulsion, moral or otherwise. Here and elsewhere, Scripture consistently displays God's love as free and voluntary.

Many people think of God as a distant and harsh ruler and judge. How does the imagery of God's being scorned and grieved as the unrequited lover of an unfaithful spouse help you see God differently? How does it change the way you view your own relationship with God?

Love Freely Given

God not only continued to bestow His love freely on Israel, despite repeated rebellions, but God also continues to bestow love freely upon us, even while we are sinners. We do not deserve God's love, and we could never earn it. Conversely, God does not need us. The God of the Bible does not need anything (*Acts 17:25*). God's love for you and for me and for all persons is entirely of His own volition.

Compare Revelation 4:11 and Psalm 33:6. What do these verses tell us about God's freedom relative to Creation?

God freely created this world. And, because of this, God is worthy of all glory, honor, and power. God did not need to create any world. Before the foundation of the world, God already enjoyed the love relationship that existed within the Godhead.

Read John 17:24. What does it tell us about God's love before the world existed?

God did not need creatures as an object of His love. But, in accordance with His character of love, God chose to create the world and enter into a love relationship with creatures.

Not only did God freely create this world as a bestowal of His generous love, but God also continues freely to love humans, even after humans fell into sin in Eden, and even after we personally sin.

After the Fall in Eden, Adam and Eve had no right to continue to live and receive God's love. But God, who upholds "all things by the word of His power" (*Heb. 1:3, NKJV*), in His great love, mercy, and grace sustained their lives and has made a way to reconcile humanity back to Himself in love. And that reconciliation includes us, as well.

What does the fact that God continues to bestow love on this world, despite its fallenness and evil, tell us about His love and character? How should this truth cause us to love Him in return?

Many Are Called, but Few Are Chosen

God not only loves people of His own free will, but He also invites them to love Him in return. That God grants them the ability to freely choose whether they will accept or reject His love is apparent in (among other places) Christ's parable of the wedding banquet.

Read Matthew 22:1–14. What is the meaning of this parable?

In Christ's parable of the wedding banquet, a king arranges a marriage for his son and sends out his servants to "call those who were invited to the wedding," but "they were not willing to come" (*Matt. 22:2, 3, NKJV*). More than once the king sent out his servants to call them, but they ignored his call and, even worse, seized his servants and killed them (*Matt. 22:4–6*).

Later, after dealing with those who had murdered some of his servants, the king told his servants, "The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Therefore go into the highways, and as many as you find, invite to the wedding" (*Matt. 22:8, 9, NKJV*). After another episode of a man without a wedding garment being cast out, signifying the need to receive a wedding garment from the king to attend the wedding banquet, Jesus closes the parable with the cryptic but highly meaningful phrase, "Many are called, but few are chosen" (*Matt. 22:14, NKJV*).

What does this mean? Those who are finally "chosen," the "elect," are those who have accepted the Lord's invitation to the wedding. The term translated "call" and "invite" throughout the parable is the Greek term *kaleo* (to call, invite), and what determines who is finally "elect" (*eklektos*) is whether one has freely accepted the invitation.

In fact, God calls (that is, invites) *everyone* to the wedding feast. However, any one of us can refuse God's love. Freedom is essential to love. God will never force His love on anyone. Sad to say, we can reject having a love relationship with God.

The "elect" are those who accept the invitation. For those who love God, God has prepared things more wonderful than anything that we could possibly imagine. Once again, it all comes down to the question of love and the freedom inherent in love.

What about your life reveals that you have accepted the wedding invitation and have come appropriately clothed?

Crucified for Us

God invites everyone into a love relationship with Him, but only those who freely accept the invitation enjoy the eternal results. As seen in the parable of the wedding banquet, many whom the king called “‘were not willing to come’ ” (*Matt. 22:3, NKJV*).

Accordingly, shortly before His crucifixion, Christ lamented: “ ‘O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!’ ” (*Matt. 23:37, NKJV*). Christ wanted to gather them, but they were not willing. The same common Greek verb that means “to will” (*thelo*) is used both of Christ’s wanting to save them and of their not being willing to be saved (and the same term is in Matthew 22:3 above, as well).

Yet, Christ went to the cross for these people and for us. Amazing love! While human sin merits death, God Himself (in Christ) paid the price and has made a way to repair the ruptured relationship between heaven and earth. Meanwhile, He continues to bestow His love on us, though He is under no obligation beyond His own free commitment to do so.

Read John 10:17, 18. Compare with Galatians 2:20. What’s the message to us here in these texts?

In the ultimate display of God’s love—the Cross—we see that Christ gave Himself for us of His own free will. Christ laid down His life of His “own initiative.” No one took His life from Him; He freely offered it, according to the plan of redemption agreed upon in heaven before the foundation of the world.

“The plan for our redemption was not an afterthought, a plan formulated after the fall of Adam. It was a revelation of ‘the mystery which hath been kept in silence through times eternal.’ Romans 16:25, R. V. It was an unfolding of the principles that from eternal ages have been the foundation of God’s throne. From the beginning, God and Christ knew of the apostasy of Satan, and of the fall of man through the deceptive power of the apostate. God did not ordain that sin should exist, but He foresaw its existence, and made provision to meet the terrible emergency. So great was His love for the world, that He covenanted to give His only-begotten Son, ‘that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’ John 3:16.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 22.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “‘To Meet the Bridegroom,’” pp. 405–421, in *Christ’s Object Lessons*.

“It is the darkness of misapprehension of God that is enshrouding the world. Men are losing their knowledge of His character. It has been misunderstood and misinterpreted. At this time a message from God is to be proclaimed, a message illuminating in its influence and saving in its power. His character is to be made known. Into the darkness of the world is to be shed the light of His glory, the light of His goodness, mercy, and truth.

“This is the work outlined by the prophet Isaiah in the words, ‘O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and His arm shall rule for Him; behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him.’ Isa. 40:9, 10.

“Those who wait for the Bridegroom’s coming are to say to the people, ‘Behold your God.’ The last rays of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is a revelation of His character of love. The children of God are to manifest His glory. In their own life and character they are to reveal what the grace of God has done for them.

“The light of the Sun of Righteousness is to shine forth in good works—in words of truth and deeds of holiness.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 415, 416.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Worse than the thought of there being no God would be the thought that God hated us. How different a world would we exist in if that were the truth?
- 2 Why do you think there is so much misunderstanding of God’s character in our world today? Think about and discuss ways that you might help people to see God’s character of love more clearly.
- 3 What is the message that is to be proclaimed about God’s character today? How would you explain this message to someone who is not already familiar with the reality of God’s love? What evidence can you point to that shows the reality of His love and His wonderful character?
- 4 Talking about God’s love is one thing. Revealing and reflecting that love in our lives is another. What “deeds of holiness” might reveal God’s love to those around us?

Opening the Bamboo Curtain

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Kneeling before a South Korean student, I asked if he had any prayer requests before I washed his feet during a Communion service at the Moscow International Seventh-day Adventist Church in Russia.

“Pray for North Korea,” said the student, who was studying at a Moscow university. “The gospel needs to reach the North for Jesus to return.”

With that prayer request in 2006, I learned about a special burden that Seventh-day Adventists from South Korea carry for their brothers and sisters in the North. Jesus said, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come” (*Matthew 24:14, NKJV*). South Korean Adventists see the North as a final frontier in the church’s mission to proclaim the gospel to the world, and today many are prayerfully seeking ways to open the Bamboo Curtain.

The Adventist Church’s work started in the North in 1904 and then spread to the South. Today, the church has 285,000 members living among 52 million in the South. But no Adventists are known to be in the North, which has a population of 26 million. Still, a trickle of information indicates that God has a people in the North, said Beom Seok Oh, a director at the Northern Asia-Pacific Division who oversees the church’s outreach to North Korea. During a trip to South Korea, he told me of a North Korean woman who drank a soy-sauce brew every Sabbath morning to get sick with a fever so she would be excused from mandatory Saturday work. When she was jailed, she smuggled a Bible into prison and buried it in the ground, furtively digging it up to read. Later, she managed to slip over the border to South Korea, where she could worship God freely. Church leaders are preparing for when the northern border will open. When it does, they intend to send missionaries into the country.

In the meantime, South Korean Adventists are caring for North Korean defectors. A deacon and his wife regularly visited a new defector, helping him clean his apartment, prepare meals, and submit government paperwork. After six months, the defector declared belief in God, said Chang-Seop Lee (pictured), pastor of the deacon and his wife’s church.

Another defector couldn’t sleep as he thought about his wife and children in the North. Pastor Lee prayed with him, and afterward, the defector acknowledged that he believed in God and had read the Bible in the North. The incident reenergized the pastor’s resolve to assist defectors. “I believe that we can expand our reach to the North by starting with the people whom we can meet today,” he said.



Pray for North Korea. Thank you for planning a generous Thirteenth Sabbath Offering on March 29 to further the spread of the gospel in the Northern Asia-Pacific Division.