

# Jesus, Provider *and* Sustainer



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Heb. 1:3; Col. 1:16, 17; Job 42; Matt. 5:45; 6:25–34; 10:28.*

**Memory Text:** “And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus” (*Philippians 4:19, NIV*).

God sustains the creation in such regular ways that the universe is sometimes compared to a machine that God has left to run on its own.

Rather than a machine, however, a better metaphor is that the creation is like a musical instrument that God uses to produce the desired “melody.” That is, He is constantly involved in sustaining what He has created.

Nothing in the universe exists independently of the Lord. He created everything that was created. “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (*John 1:3, NIV*). Not only that, He is the One who sustains it all. Even more astonishing, the One who created and sustains it all was the One who was crucified for us.

“The apostle Paul, writing by the Holy Spirit, declares of Christ that ‘all things have been created through Him, and unto Him; and He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.’ Colossians 1:16, 17, R.V., margin. The hand that sustains the worlds in space, the hand that holds in their orderly arrangement and tireless activity all things throughout the universe of God, is the hand that was nailed to the cross for us.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 132.

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 23.*

## The Sustainer

**Read** Hebrews 1:3 and Colossians 1:16, 17. What is the role of Jesus in the ongoing existence of the universe?

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The implication here is that Jesus continues to sustain the existence of the universe by His power. The universe is not independent; its existence depends on the continuous exercise of divine will. This is a refutation of deism, the philosophy that teaches that God created the world to govern itself and then left it to evolve without any further action on His part. The Bible rules out such theories.

Also, God is not within the creation, constantly creating it, as in the false theories of pantheism (God and the universe are the same thing) or panentheism (God inhabits the universe as though it were His own body). God is not dependent on the universe in any way. He is separate from the universe. He existed and continues to exist independently of it. The universe depends on God; God does not depend on the universe.

**Read** 1 Corinthians 8:6 and Acts 17:28. How does Paul describe our relationship to Jesus?

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We are dependent on God's sustaining power, moment by moment, day by day. It is because of His love that we continue to exist and are able to act and also form relationships. This is true in a special way for those who have committed themselves to God and who are, as Paul would describe it, "in Christ" (*2 Cor. 5:17, Eph. 2:10; note the references to creation in these texts*). It is also true that even those who reject salvation are, nevertheless, dependent on God's sustaining power for their existence. Daniel made this point very poignantly to King Belshazzar when he said, "The God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified" (*Dan. 5:23*).

**With all this in mind, how do we understand the reality of free will and free choice? Why are these elements of our existence so important to all that we believe?**

## The Generous Provider

Genesis 1:29, 30 shows that when God first created living creatures, He provided food for them. Herbs, fruits, and seeds were the food chosen for both humans and animals. Nothing is said of predation or competition for resources. The generous Provider made plenty of food for everyone to partake in without any need for violence.

What a contrast to the common models for existence proposed by evolutionary theory, which teaches that human life, indeed all life, exists only through a violent process of predation and survival of the fittest. The early chapters of Genesis know nothing about that. On the contrary, they reveal a world that was, literally, a paradise from the beginning. That’s why, when the Lord had finished creating it, the Bible records these words: “And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day” (*Gen. 1:31*).

**Read** Genesis 2:8, 9. What does this passage indicate about God’s special interest in providing for Adam and Eve?

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We already noted that God had provided food for all His creatures, including humans. Now we see God going a step further. Not only does He provide food in abundance throughout the earth, but He has prepared a special Garden for Adam and Eve, with trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food (*see Gen. 2:9*). The Garden, with its beauty and its variety of food, was a provision of God’s extravagant love and grace. It was a gift of grace because Adam and Eve had done nothing to earn it, but it was freely offered and abundantly furnished.

As stated in an earlier lesson, we are far removed from the original Creation. Ours is a greatly damaged world. Nothing on the earth, it seems, has been spared either. Yet, even amid the damage, powerful evidence of God’s love exists.

**“Nature is a power, but the God of nature is unlimited in power. His works interpret his character. Those who judge him from his handiworks, and not from the suppositions of great men, will see his presence in everything.”—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, March 13, 1884. Look at nature; in what ways do we see “his presence in everything”?**

## Natural Evil

Of course, one of the great questions that all believers in a loving God have had to deal with is the question of evil; not just human evil but what is called “natural evil.” This natural evil occurs when bad things happen in nature (floods, hurricanes, drought, earthquakes, etc.) that cause enormous pain and suffering, not just for humans but for animals, as well.

How are we to understand these things? After all, if God is in control of the creation, why would such things happen?

One of the earliest books of the Bible is the book of Job, where these questions (and others) became painfully real for Job (see week four).

**Read Job 42. What does this chapter answer for us? What questions remain unanswered?**

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Anyone who has ever read the book of Job came away with, perhaps, more questions than answers. The book does reveal important truths about the great controversy (*see also Rev. 12:12*), which help to form a background crucial for us to even begin to understand the existence of evil. The great controversy scenario, however, doesn't explain every instance of evil. In fact, to explain evil would in a sense be to justify it, and we can never do that. The great controversy can reveal the grand issues behind evil; the motif tells us little, if anything, about each instance of evil.

Job did not understand, and neither do we when we face such catastrophic losses. Although God spoke to Job, He did not provide the answer to Job's questions, nor did He explain the cause of what had happened. He simply reminded Job that there were things beyond his knowledge and that he would have to trust God, which Job did. Our experience is often similar; we may not receive an answer to our questions. But the story of Job does give us important insight into the nature of evil, and it shows us that God is not unaware of the struggles that we face.

**Go back to Sabbath's introduction and read the Ellen G. White quote. How does that help us to come to grips better with the question of evil, knowing that God Himself suffered greatly from it, as well?**

## Governing a Damaged Creation

**Read** Matthew 5:45 and Psalm 65:9, 10. How does God act in creation in order to maintain the creatures that He created? What does this tell us about God’s interest in the created world?

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We are familiar with sunshine and rain, and scientists have provided explanations for the processes involved in each. Yet, there is more to the story than science can tell. Behind the scenes, God is actively providing for the necessities of His creatures. We may not understand His ways, but we know He is in control. Just as a skilled musician may play an instrument to produce music so beautiful that one’s attention is focused on the music rather than on the musician, so God orders the creation so that we often see the order and are impressed with the majesty of the creation. At the same time we may not recognize that God is behind the scenes, ordering events according to His will and intending that all things will eventually work together for the good of those who love Him (*Rom. 8:28*).

**What** similar phenomenon is noted in the following texts? *Gen. 8:1, Exod. 10:13, Num. 11:31.*

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Wind is a common event, and we generally understand what causes it. But in these texts, the winds occur in special circumstances. We might call them “providential winds.” They occur at specific times and places and accomplish specific purposes. Though they may appear “natural,” there is an unseen Cause working out the purposes of His own will, using features of the world that He created to accomplish His own purposes.

In 2 Kings 20:9–11, we see one of the most unusual miracles of the entire Bible. The relationship of sun and earth and day length seems like one of the most stable and predictable features of human experience. Imagine the reaction of today’s scientific community if a similar event should occur in our day. Yet, we must ask, “Is any thing too hard for the Lord?” (*Gen. 18:14*). What this miracle and others should tell us is that there is much about the creation, and God’s actions in His creation, that is way beyond our understanding. That’s why it’s so crucial that we come to a personal knowledge of God and know for ourselves the reality of His love. That way, we learn to trust Him despite all that we don’t understand.

## Provider for a Damaged Creation

**“Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?”** (*Matt. 6:26*).

Even after Adam and Eve had sinned and could no longer enter the Garden, God provided for their immediate physical needs (*Gen. 3:21*). Sin brought a new need, the need for clothing. Adam and Eve tried to provide clothing for themselves, but fig leaves were quite unsatisfactory. Something better was needed, which God provided in the form of skins. (We will consider more of the meaning of the skins in another lesson.) The point is that God provided for their needs, even though they had fallen into sin. This is another example of God’s grace providing for us despite our unworthiness.

**Read Matthew 6:25–34. What crucial message is Jesus giving us with these words? How are we to understand them in the face of the trials and tragedies that are such a part of so many lives?**

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These are very comforting words, and we need to cling to them with all our hearts, souls, and minds, especially in times of great suffering, loss, and need. Jesus died for us, not for the lilies or the birds. We can be sure of His love for us, regardless of the circumstances. And yet, as we all know, circumstances can at times be quite appalling. We see famine, drought, floods, epidemics, and death all around, and Christians are not immune to these tragedies either.

God does not promise His people a life of luxury without pain, but He does promise to provide for our needs and to strengthen us so that we may cope with our challenges. We just can’t forget the reality of the great controversy and that we are in a fallen world.

**Read Matthew 10:28. How could this verse, read in conjunction with the verses for today, help us to deal better with the harsh realities that we often face?**

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**Further Study:** “Yet men of science think that they can comprehend the wisdom of God, that which He has done or can do. The idea largely prevails that He is restricted by His own laws. Men either deny or ignore His existence, or think to explain everything, even the operation of His Spirit upon the human heart; and they no longer reverence His name or fear His power. They do not believe in the supernatural, not understanding God’s laws or His infinite power to work His will through them. As commonly used, the term ‘laws of nature’ comprises what men have been able to discover with regard to the laws that govern the physical world; but how limited is their knowledge, and how vast the field in which the Creator can work in harmony with His own laws and yet wholly beyond the comprehension of finite beings!”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 114.

(See also Ellen G. White, “Laws of Nature,” pp. 259–261 in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8.)

### Discussion Questions:

- ① Read carefully the Ellen G. White statement above. What is she saying? In what ways do we see many scientists today doing exactly what she says?
- ② Modern science today is much better than it used to be at explaining, through natural means, why certain things happen or why they don’t. The problem isn’t with “natural means” or “natural laws” but with the idea that these means and laws are all that exist—that there is nothing, and certainly no supernatural forces, ultimately behind them. What’s wrong with this assumption? Why does it make no logical sense (ask yourself, From where did these laws originate?), and why is that idea so contrary to the most basic teaching of the Bible?
- ③ How does the image of creation as a musical instrument provide a more accurate picture of God’s relationship to the creation than does the image of creation as a machine?
- ④ What other examples can you find in Scripture where God caused special events in what we would consider to be merely “forces of nature”? See, for example, 1 Kings 19:11, 12.

## The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Hebrews 1:2, 3; Colossians 1:16, 17*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Understand why God’s sustenance of the world is important to one’s spiritual life.

**Feel:** Appreciate the importance of God’s sustaining power for spiritual life.

**Do:** Seek to depend more fully on God’s sustaining power in his or her life.

► **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: God’s Sustenance of the World**

**A** What kind of God continues to sustain what He created?

**B** How does God’s ongoing sustenance of His creation reveal His purpose and will?

**II. Feel: Appreciating God’s Sustaining Power**

**A** What difference will the fact that God sustains His creation make in your relationship with Him?

**B** Contrast God’s divine design with the evolutionary model where there is no design but only random forces at work. How does the difference provided by the contrast deepen your appreciation for the many blessings and promises of God that are so often taken for granted?

**C** Conversely, how does the difference between evolution and Creation help to deepen your compassion and patience for those whose worldview is shaped by a belief in the evolutionary model?

**III. Do: Depending on God’s Sustaining Power**

**A** How can you appropriately put God’s Word to the test and experience His creative power?

**B** In what ways can you allow God’s creative and sustaining power to renew all areas of your life?

► **Summary:** The biblical view of God’s ongoing sustenance of His creation highlights that God has a purpose and design that He seeks to maintain. This seems incompatible with an evolutionary model in which there is no design but only random, undirected processes at work. God’s sustaining power is the same as His creative power, and we find this creative sustaining power at work in both justification and sanctification.



## Learning Cycle

### ► **STEP 1**—Motivate

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** The Bible teaches that God continually sustains the world and universe He created. The sustaining work of God is not compatible with all views of God but requires particular perspectives of who God is.

**Just for Teachers:** Emphasize with your class that God’s sustaining power in nature is the same power that sustains us in spiritual life.

A sustaining God is an active God, One who is interested in His creation. Stories abound of people exercising great faith and accomplishing great things with God. The missionary George Mueller was famous for trusting God to fulfill the needs of his missionary work. The Bible contains similar stories—from the deliverance of Israel, to David’s numerous escapes from his enemies, to Paul’s missionary journeys—in which a cadre of people have taken the risk to radically depend on God’s sustaining, creative power to accomplish God-glorifying feats. Sadly, we tend to be so fearful of presumption or emotionalism that we fear contact with the supernatural.

Nowhere is this fear more tragically enacted than in the story of King Ahaz during the siege of the Syrian army against Judah. Isaiah was sent to Ahaz with a promise: “ ‘Take heed, and be quiet; do not fear or be faint-hearted for these two stubs of smoking firebrands.’ . . . Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘It shall not stand, nor shall it come to pass’ ” (*Isa. 7:4–7, NKJV*). Ahaz appeared to doubt the promise, and so, “the LORD spoke again to Ahaz, saying, ‘Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; ask it either in the depth or in the height above.’ But Ahaz said, ‘I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD’ ” (*vss. 10–12, NKJV*). God wants us to trust His promises because He is still at work, sustaining the cosmos and all that is in it.

**Opening Activity:** Most of us hate being dependent on others. Why do we find this so distasteful, and how can this attitude affect our ability to trust in God?

### ► **STEP 2**—Explore

**Just for Teachers:** The fact that God is an active Sustainer is only compatible with certain views of God. Sustaining power is the same as creative power. Thus, the New Testament ascribes both creative and sustaining power to Christ.

## Bible Commentary

### I. Our Sustainer God (Read Hebrews 1:2, 3 and Colossians 1:16, 17 with the class.)

Several important points from past lessons are reinforced by the concept of God's continued activity of sustaining the world. First, an active sustaining by God would seem contrary to the undirected processes of natural selection and evolution, which are devoid of design and purpose. Christians who try to unite Creation with evolution thus seek to blend contradictory views of how God acts in, and relates to, the world.

Second, some theologians who are currently trying to blend evolution into Christian theology favor a pantheistic view of God. Pantheism claims that all of the material universe is in God, as part of His being. The cosmos is akin to being God's body. This view creates an interesting problem that would seem to be shared by pantheism (all is God), as well. In both views, there is a significant lack of distinction between creature and Creator, for all share in God's divine being. If the random processes of evolution are part of the divine being, then either God is unstable, changing, and possibly capricious—causing earthquakes, tornadoes, and calamities—or God becomes lessened in power, assuming the role of co-victim with the Creation. These evolutionary theologians tend to favor the latter, arguing that God hides Himself in nature so that the world can be truly free to participate in its own creation. Instead of sustaining the world according to a preplanned design, God humbly submits Himself to the same suffering and pain that we face, as a co-victim of natural evil. We are supposed to take comfort, not that God might intervene but that our pain and suffering are eternally recorded in God's being and thus will never be forgotten. Some go so far as to assert that God is evolving with the universe that is part of Him.

The doctrine of divine provenance stands in stark contrast to these views. To be a provider, one cannot be a co-victim with the needy. A sinking ship would not be of any real help to the passengers from the *Titanic*. The victims of the *Titanic* needed a sound vessel other than the *Titanic* to save them. The helper must be equipped sufficiently to be of practical help to the needy and thus cannot be a co-victim with them. Thus, a God who sustains and provides must be distinct from and "other" to that which He sustains. He must also have plans and purposes that He wishes to support with His sustenance and be superior in power and resources. Such a God entered our suffering through the Incarnation, not as a helpless co-victim but in an act of self-sacrifice that provides a solution to a cosmic rebellion for all willing to surrender their revolt. Thus, God does not suffer for the sake of suffering but to achieve specific purposes. God suffers in order to achieve the necessary conditions to

save and deliver, not merely to empathize.

Finally, the doctrine of divine sustenance presents the idea of our utter dependence on someone bigger and better than ourselves. Having trusting dependence on God is a vital element of righteousness by faith. This is because we depend on God through faith, not only to forgive our sins but also for the power to walk in the paths of righteousness. Righteousness by faith depends on God's creative Word, the promise, in spite of what one perceives and feels; it enables the believer to make choices based on dependent faith that God will fulfill His promise and sustain him or her in a successful walk of moral growth and development. Just as the world depends on its Creator not only for origins but also for ongoing sustenance, so the believer lives in a state of dependence on God not only for justification but also for implementation of a Christian lifestyle.

**Consider This:** The New Testament writers assign both Creation and sustenance to Christ (for example, *Acts 17:28*; *Col. 1:16, 17*; *Heb. 1:3*). What does this tell us about whom they understood Christ to be?

### ► **STEP 3**—Apply

**Just for Teachers:** **Knowing that God is continually sustaining the world should remind us of our utter dependence on God and His promises.**

#### Thought Questions:

**1** When do you find it easy to depend on God's promises, and why? When do you find it hard to depend on God's promises, and why do you feel that is so?

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**2** What might help you to be more willing to depend on God's Word and promises?

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3 What role might biblical stories of God’s sustaining others play in helping you to develop your trust in God?

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4 What role might the testimonies of people you know and trust play in helping you to become more willing to exercise faith in God’s promises?

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► **STEP 4**—Create

**Just for Teachers:** Revelation 12:11 says, “ ‘They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony’ ” (NKJV). Remind your students that testifying about God’s sustaining activity in their own lives can encourage others to trust God’s sustaining power and promises.

**Activity for Discussion:** What personal experiences have you had that might encourage others to trust God’s Word and promises?

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