

LESSON 1

*December 31—January 6

(page 6 of Standard Edition)

Part of God's Family



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gal. 3:26, 29; Ps. 50:10–12; 1 Chron. 29:13, 14; Phil. 4:19; 1 John 5:3; Matt. 6:19–21.*

Memory Text: “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!” (*1 John 3:1, NKJV*).

As Christians, an amazing feature about our relationship with God is that He trusts us to manage His affairs on the earth. At the very outset of human history, God explicitly delegated to Adam and Eve the personal care of a flawless creation. (*See Gen. 2:7–9, 15.*) From the naming of the animals to keeping the Garden, and to filling the earth with children, God let it be known that we are to work on His behalf here.

He also blesses us with resources, but we are the ones whom He has entrusted to manage them, such as to collect money, to write the checks, to do the electronic transfers, to make the budgets, or to bring our tithes and offerings to the church on Sabbath mornings. God encourages us to spend the resources that He has given to us for our own needs, for the needs of others, and for the advancement of His work. Incredible as it may seem, we are the ones whom God has entrusted with raising His children, building His buildings, and educating the succeeding generations.

In this week's study, we will explore the privileges and responsibilities of being a part of the family of God.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 7.

We Are Part of God’s Family

“For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named” (Eph. 3:14, 15, NKJV). What imagery is evoked in this verse, and what hope is found there?

Early in Jesus’ ministry, He states, “ ‘In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name’ ” (*Matt. 6:9, NKJV*). Later He repeats the same prayer privately with His disciples (*Luke 11:2*). Jesus told us to call His Father, “Our Father in heaven.” When Jesus encountered Mary after His resurrection, she wanted to embrace Him. “Jesus said to her, ‘Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, “I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God” ’ ” (*John 20:17, NKJV*).

Because we have the same Father as Jesus, He is our Brother, and we are all brothers and sisters in the Lord. Jesus became a member of the earthly family so that we could become members of the heavenly family. “The family of heaven and the family of earth are one.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 832.

Read Exodus 3:10; Exodus 5:1; and Galatians 3:26, 29. What do these verses say about how God relates to us? Why should this be so encouraging?

In contrast to a view of creation in which we are deemed the mere products of cold, uncaring natural laws, Scripture teaches not only that God exists, but also that He loves us and relates to us in such a loving manner that the imagery of family is often used in Scripture to depict that relationship. Whether Jesus calls Israel My people or us sons of God or refers to God as our Father, the point is still the same: God loves us the way family members are supposed to love each other. What good news amid a world that, in and of itself, can be very hostile!

Imagine a world in which we treated everyone as family. How can we learn to relate better to all human beings as our brothers and sisters?

God Is the Owner of Everything

Read Psalm 50:10–12; Psalm 24:1; 1 Chronicles 29:13, 14; and Haggai 2:8. What’s the message here, and what should this truth mean to us and how we relate to whatever we possess?

The book of 1 Chronicles, starting with chapter 17, records King David’s desire to build a house for God. He shared this desire with the prophet Nathan, who responded, “ ‘Do all that is in your heart, for God is with you’ ” (1 Chron. 17:2, NKJV). But that night the word of God came to Nathan and instructed him to tell the king that, because he was a man of war, he couldn’t build God’s house. His son would do the work instead. David asked if he could, at least, draw the plans and prepare the building materials. When David was granted this request, he spent the rest of his life amassing a tremendous amount of hewn stone, cedar, iron, gold, silver, and brass “without measure.” When all of the building materials had been prepared and assembled at the building site, David called all the leaders of Israel together for a ceremony of praise and thanksgiving.

In 1 Chronicles 29:13, 14, in King David’s public prayer, who did he say was the real source of all the building materials that he and the people had spent time and money preparing? Of course, in essence, he said, “We really can’t take any credit for all these special materials because we are just giving You back Your own stuff.”

The point is important for all of us, whether rich or poor (but especially the rich). Because God made everything in the beginning (see Gen. 1:1; John 1:3; Ps. 33:6, 9), He is truly the rightful Owner of all that exists, including whatever we possess—no matter how hard and diligently and honestly we have worked for it. If not for God and His grace, we would have nothing, we would be nothing; in fact, we wouldn’t even exist. Thus, we must always live with the realization that, ultimately, God owns all that is, and by praising and thanking Him for His goodness to us, we can keep this important truth before us.

“But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly as this?” (1 Chron. 29:14, NKJV). What beautiful principles are expressed in these words, and how do they reflect what our attitude toward God should be and our attitude toward what we possess?

Resources Available for God’s Family

God’s greatest gift to His children is Jesus Christ, who brings us the peace of forgiveness, grace for daily living and spiritual growth, and the hope of eternal life.

“ ‘For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life’ ” (*John 3:16, NKJV*). “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name” (*John 1:12*).

Salvation, then, is the foundational gift because, without this gift, what else could we get from God that in the long run would really matter? Whatever we might have here, one day we will be dead and gone and so will everyone who ever remembered us, and whatever good we did will be forgotten, as well. First and foremost, then, we must always keep the gift of the gospel; that is, Christ and Him crucified (*1 Cor. 2:2*), at the center of all our thoughts.

And yet, along with salvation, God gives us so much more. To those who were concerned about their food and clothing, Jesus offered comfort by saying, “ ‘Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you’ ” (*Matt. 6:33, NKJV*).

Read Psalm 23:1, Psalm 37:25, and Philippians 4:19. What do these verses say about God’s provision for our daily needs?

Also, when Jesus talked to His disciples about going away, He promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to comfort them. “If ye love me, keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you” (*John 14:15–17*). “He will guide you into all truth” (*John 16:13*).

Then the Spirit Himself gives amazing spiritual gifts to God’s children. (*See 1 Cor. 12:4–11.*)

In short, the God in whom “we live, and move, and have our being” (*Acts 17:28*), the God who “ ‘gives to all life, breath, and all things’ ” (*Acts 17:25, NKJV*), has given us existence, the promise of salvation, material blessings, and spiritual gifts in order to be a blessing to others. Again, whatever material possessions that we have, whatever gifts or talents we have been blessed with, we are indebted in every way to the Giver in how we use those gifts.

Responsibilities of God’s Family Members

We all enjoy the spiritual and temporal blessings and gifts that God gives us. How comforting to know, too, that we are “part of the family.”

Read Deuteronomy 6:5 and Matthew 22:37. What does this mean, and how do we do it?

How would you love God with “ ‘all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” ’ ” (*Matt. 22:37, NKJV*)? Interestingly enough, the Bible gives us the answer, and it’s not what most people expect.

Read Deuteronomy 10:12, 13 and 1 John 5:3. Biblically speaking, what is our proper response in our love relationship with our Father in heaven?

Keeping the law? Obeying the commandments? For many Christians, unfortunately, the idea of obeying the law (especially the fourth commandment) is legalism, and they claim that we are called, simply, to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. However, God is clear: we reveal our love to God and to our neighbors by, yes, obeying His commandments.

“For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments” (*1 John 5:3, NKJV*). We are used to looking at this verse as, well, we love God and, therefore, we keep His commandments. That’s fine. But perhaps we also can read it as “this is the love of God”; that is, we know and experience the love of God by keeping His commandments.

In Matthew 7:21–27, Jesus said that those who hear and do God’s words are likened to a wise builder who built his house upon the solid rock. Those who hear but don’t obey are likened to a foolish builder who built his house on the sand—with disastrous results. Both heard the word; one obeyed, one didn’t. The results made the difference between life and death.

Think about the link between loving God and obeying His law. Why would love for God be expressed that way? What is it about keeping the commandments that, indeed, does reveal that love? (Hint: Think about what disobeying His law causes.)

Treasure in Heaven

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:19–21, NKJV).

What crucial truths is Jesus speaking here?

Who hasn't read story after story of those who had amassed great wealth, only somehow to lose it? Our world is a very unstable place: wars, crime, violence, natural disasters, anything can come in a moment and take away all that we have worked for and, perhaps, even what we have honestly and faithfully earned. Then, too, in a moment, death comes, and so these things become useless to us anyway.

Of course, Scripture never tells us it's wrong to be rich or to have amassed wealth; instead, in these verses Jesus warns us to keep it all in perspective.

What, though, does it mean to lay up treasure in heaven? It means making God and His cause first and foremost in your life, instead of making money first and foremost. Among other things, it means using what we have for the work of God, for the advancement of His kingdom, for working in behalf of others, and for being a blessing to others.

For instance, when God called Abram, He planned to use Abram and his family to bless all the families of the earth. God said to Abram, who “was called the friend of God” (James 2:23, NKJV), “I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:2, 3, NKJV).

“So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham” (Gal. 3:9). We have the same challenge presented to us as was presented to him.

“Money has great value, because it can do great good. In the hands of God's children it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, and clothing for the naked. It is a defense for the oppressed, and a means of help to the sick. But money is of no more value than sand, only as it is put to use in providing for the necessities of life, in blessing others, and advancing the cause of Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 351.

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21). Where does your heart tell you your treasure is?

Further Thought: “The heart of God yearns over His earthly children with a love stronger than death. In giving up His Son, He has poured out to us all heaven in one gift. The Saviour’s life and death and intercession, the ministry of angels, the pleading of the Spirit, the Father working above and through all, the unceasing interest of heavenly beings,—all are enlisted in behalf of man’s redemption.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 21.

“If you have renounced self and given yourself to Christ you are a member of the family of God, and everything in the Father’s house is for you. All the treasures of God are opened to you, both the world that now is and that which is to come. The ministry of angels, the gift of His Spirit, the labors of His servants—all are for you. The world, with everything in it, is yours so far as it can do you good.”—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 110.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 With all of these awesome gifts that God gives His children, we are compelled to ask, as did the psalmist, “What shall I render to the LORD for all His benefits toward me?” (*Ps. 116:12, NKJV*). Make a list of the blessings and gifts of God to you in your spiritual and temporal life, and be ready to share it with your class. What does this teach you about how thankful to God you really should be?
- 2 Though we think about God, and rightly so, as our Creator, Scripture again and again teaches that He is our Sustainer, as well. (*See Heb. 1:3; Job 38:33–37; Ps. 135:6, 7; Col. 1:17; Acts 17:28; 2 Pet. 3:7.*) From the galaxies in the cosmos to the beating of our hearts, to the forces that hold together the atomic structures that make up all known matter, it is only God’s sustaining power that keeps them in existence. How should this biblical truth help us understand just what our obligations are to God, in terms of how we use whatever He has given us? How does this reality help us keep our life and the purpose of our life in proper perspective?
- 3 The lesson talked about why, of all God has given us, Jesus and the plan of salvation are the greatest gifts. Why is that true? What would we have if we didn’t have that and the great hope it offers us? An atheist writer depicted humans as nothing but “hunks of spoiling flesh on disintegrating bones.” Why, without the gift of the gospel, would he have a point?

Mission Field in Lake Malawi

By A. D. V. MOYO

A stranger stopped the Seventh-day Adventist university student as he walked down the road after a Pathfinder meeting on the island of Chizumulu in Lake Malawi. His green Pathfinder uniform caught her attention.

“Where are you coming from?” the stranger asked with great interest.

The student, Levison Kawonga, told her that he had been participating in a Pathfinder event at an Adventist church. His words seemed to touch her heart, and the words started rolling off her lips. “I used to be an Adventist,” she said. “I married an Adventist man, but we divorced.”

She spoke about going to bars and living licentiously after the divorce. Then she moved to Chizumulu and married a local high school teacher.

The next Sabbath, the woman showed up at the Adventist church. She enjoyed the worship service, and she asked Levison for Bible studies.

Levison was delighted. This was why he had come to the island in the first place: to share God’s love. He belonged to a club of Adventist students at Mzuzu University, a major public university of 8,500 students located about 60 miles (100 kilometers) away. The club aimed to strengthen the faith of Adventist students and reach out to classmates through twice-weekly prayer meetings. The club grew into the Mzuzu Seventh-day Adventist Church, and its students fanned out to engage in missionary work in places in the region, including Chizumulu.

Levison visited the woman and her husband in their home and, after the Bible study, left behind several books, including Ellen White’s *The Great Controversy*. When Levison arrived for the second Bible study, he found the husband deeply engrossed in *The Great Controversy*. “What’s the difference between Saturday and Sunday?” the husband asked Levison. At the end of the Bible study, he promised to go with his wife to church the next Sabbath.

Weeks and months passed, and the man and his wife (pictured) gave their hearts to Jesus and were baptized. Today, they are mission-minded members of the Chizumulo Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Levison is convinced that God can use young people to reach anyone and everyone. “It is time to go and reach different classes of people with the good news of Jesus Christ,” he said. “The Mzuni Seventh-day Adventist Church, which started as a club of students, never dreamed that the Chizumulu effort would bear such fruit. Glory to God!”



Part of this quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will support Adventist education in the East-Central Africa Division. Thank you for your Thirteenth Sabbath Offering in the second quarter of 2021 that is helping to expand Adventist education in Malawi.

Part I: Overview

“The importance of the family in ancient Israel was partly due . . . to the fact that in those days it was a society of worship.”—T. K. Cheyne and J. Sutherland Black, *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1903), p. 1498. The family was designed to serve God. The Father’s original plan was to create a large family on earth that would be part of the heavenly family (*Eph. 3:10–15*). His character, expressed in the hearts and minds of His unfallen children, would be revealed in each successive generation (*Gen. 1:26–28*). Blessings and gifts would be used for the glory of God and to bless the world. Such blessings and gifts were to be representative of their true Source (*Ps. 24:1, 2*).

In Eden, God set up the first family business in the history of the planet. The company was under the care of His children, but they were required to manage it in accordance with the Father’s will (*Gen. 2:15–17*).

Because of sin, God sent His beloved Son to save each family member (*John 3:16*), and, today, God sends us out, redeemed and rehabilitated by His grace, to labor in His name. God still seeks children to work for Him, children who faithfully return the proceeds of His business that was entrusted to them (*Matt. 21:33–41*). God calls these children from among those who keep His commandments, because they love Him (*1 John 5:3*). With the gifts He has bestowed on them, these workers will be a blessing in the church and in the world until His work, in us and through us, is completed (*Phil. 1:6*) and we return to the Father’s house as a family (*John 14:1–3*).

Part II: Commentary

Understanding Stewardship in God’s Family

- A. There are titles that denote the Father’s sovereignty.
- B. All God’s children are His stewards.
- C. The family’s resources are lent by the Father.
- D. The family’s treasure is laid up in heaven.

Part A: There Are Titles That Denote the Father’s Sovereignty.

1. Creator: The Christian stewardship concept is based on the belief that God is the Creator of all things. It is necessary to admit that He exists,

is the Creator, and rewards those individuals who seek Him (*Gen. 1:1; Heb. 11:1–3, 6*). Only a creationist perspective adequately promotes the concept and activity of Christian stewardship. If the Creator’s presence in life is more than theory, the believer’s body, gifts, riches, and time will be placed at the Creator’s service. All things come from Him, and all human life must return to Him, “for of Him, and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen” (*Rom. 11:36, NKJV*).

2. *Father*: The father figure is key in the Bible’s notion of family. The expression paternal home (*bet ab*) points to the patriarchal system, wherein the father had full authority over the possessions and family, being their keeper and protector. The father also had the power to judge and decide the fate of the family members. The father was the priest, and as a rule, the family and religion were intimately connected (J. E. Maldonado, *Fundamentos bíblico-teológicos da casamento e da família* [Viçosa, Brasil: Editora Ultimato, 1996], pp. 11, 12).

Despite the imperfections of patriarchal human families, some important aspects of this relationship illuminate the relationship between God and His spiritual family (*Deut. 14:1, Prov. 3:12*).

As a Father, God is holy. He is King, having sovereignty over heaven and earth. He is Keeper, Judge, and Savior (*Matt. 6:9–14; read also Isa. 33:22*). As a Father, God is all-wise, all-powerful, and all-loving. Therefore, we can trust His judgments and decisions. His guidance has always been, and will always be, the best guidance. So, we should be faithful in observing the Father’s commandments.

3. *Lord*: The Hebrew words *Adonai* (Lord) and *Jehovah* are translated in the Greek-Jewish version of the Old Testament (LXX) with the Greek word *Kurios*, which means Lord, the Owner of all things. The New Testament authors held the same concept about the Lord. To them, the word “Lord” (*Kurios*), uttered with faith, indicated the acknowledgment of the divinity of the Father and of the Son (*Mark 12:29, 1 Tim. 6:15, Jude 4*).

Paul states that no one declares that Jesus is Lord but by the Holy Spirit (*1 Cor. 12:3*). Only people who have the Holy Spirit can understand the Lordship of Christ. It is a matter of conversion and salvation.

However, admitting that Jesus is Lord is more than a formal statement; it is the expression of acknowledging His ultimate authority as Creator, Father, and Lord. This changes the values, preferences, and priorities of life.

Part B: All God’s Children Are His Stewards.

To be a steward is to manage the Lord’s possessions. The Lord Jesus continues

His work of salvation, operating (1) collectively through the church and (2) individually in each member by the agency of the Holy Spirit.

1. *Collectively*, the church is God's family. The church also is His body. As such, the church's existence is meaningful only when it observes the commandments of the Father and Lord, for the Lordship of the Son and the Father is One. The church is the custodian of Christ's gifts. God calls the church to give of itself and to minister with its gifts as Christ ministered, so that the Lord of the church may be known and worshiped as Savior and Lord throughout the world. The church must exercise stewardship faithfully because God has made her the custodian of material and spiritual blessings. However, the church's stewardship does not replace the responsibility of individual members.

2. *Individually*, each church member, guided by the Holy Spirit, lives with Christ and in Christ. The Spirit is the Author of faithful stewardship in each believer. The decision to return tithes and offerings generously and regularly is a spiritual work that each believer must experience individually. This faithfulness is a form of religious service that neither prayer nor other church activities can replace.

"Prayer offered ever so often and ever so earnestly will never be accepted by God in the place of our tithe. Prayer will not pay our debts to God."—Ellen G. White, *Messages to Young People*, p. 248.

In the Old Testament, the dignity of the father's position was transferred to the son, to whom the father conferred the honor to perform the religious functions (J. E. Maldonado, *Fundamentos Bíblico-Teológicos da Casamento e da Família* [Brazil: Editora Ultimato, 1996], p. 12). In our relationship with the Lord Jesus, we are honored by Him for our faithful stewardship in all areas of our lives.

God has always had His faithful people on earth, and now He has you and the church—His own family—to proclaim His will to the world.

The great and sublime work that God placed in our hands demands full surrender of what we have and of who we are. Thus, we are called to commit both our material and personal possessions fully to Christ and to His work.

Part C: The Family's Resources Are Lent by the Father.

1. *Spiritual*: In and of ourselves, we do not have the desire or power to be faithful, but grace moves us in harmony with the Lord's will. Jesus gave Himself for us and did not leave us alone when He ascended to heaven. We still enjoy His presence and His power. He remains with us through the Holy Spirit. By having the Holy Spirit, we have Jesus.

Jesus also pours out His gifts to His church through the Spirit. It is a true miracle of God's love that fallen human beings dedicate their lives and

gifts unselfishly for the sake of the gospel. God gave us His spiritual gifts, and we must respond to His generosity by using and increasing these gifts in the Lord's work.

2. *Material:* Material possessions are also gifts from God. In Eden, our first parents received a vast and valuable property, filled with animals, plants, and treasures (*Gen. 2:8–17*). But they could not eat the fruit of the forbidden tree. There was no innate poison in the fruit that caused it to be forbidden; rather, God placed it off-limits to test their fidelity to Him and His law (*Gen. 2:15–17*).

The desire for the portion that God forbade generated the disobedience and sin that led humanity to suffer the penalty of death. Today, we also receive material possessions, some of us more and others less, but the test of Eden is repeated in our lives.

God expects His children to be faithful in material possessions, so that we won't repeat in our own experience the desire for the portion He withholds for Himself (*Mal. 3:8*). Faithfulness and character are being tested for eternal life. Only through the outworking of the Holy Spirit are we able to acknowledge God as our Creator, our Father, and our Lord. This understanding changes our worldview.

Part D: The Family's Treasure Is Laid Up in Heaven.

Laying up treasure in heaven means investing in God's work. Heavenly beings are involved in this work alongside us. Our heavenly investment requires us to place God's kingdom first, above all things (*Matt. 6:33*). Heaven cares about what happens on earth, especially with regard to God's redemptive work. Jesus is personally involved, watching every faithful and generous act (*Mal. 3:8–10, Matt. 25:31–46*). Jesus saw the offering of the poor widow (*Mark 12:41–44*), and He still sees us today.

Part III: Life Application

A. God is the Creator, Father, and Lord, and we are His children and stewards. These titles indicate His authority, as well as His loving care and His gift of salvation. We owe Him all that we are, have, and hope for in eternal terms.

- 1. Discuss with the class the motives we have for obeying God in acts such as returning tithes and offerings, working in the church, and helping our fellow human beings.**

- a. How are your students motivated by fear of heavenly judgments?
- b. How are they motivated by gratitude to Jesus for being their Creator and Savior?
- c. How do they feel motivated by the blessings they receive from God in exchange for their faithfulness to Him?
- d. How are they motivated by joy for God’s love and partaking in His work?

B. Sin has made us naturally self-centered and selfish. Because of the Fall, we lost the original sanctity with which God endowed us. So, we must allow the Lord to restore us. His restorative work in our fallen nature includes endowing us with both “the desire and the power to do what pleases him” (*Phil. 2:13, NLT*).

“Sin not only shuts us away from God, but destroys in the human soul both the desire and the capacity for knowing Him. All this work of evil it is Christ’s mission to undo. The faculties of the soul, paralyzed by sin, the darkened mind, the perverted will, He has power to invigorate and to restore.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 29.

Select volunteers to read Malachi 3:8; James 2:14–26; and 2 Corinthians 5:18, 20. Then ask your class the following discussion questions:

1. How do I cooperate with Jesus for my spiritual growth?

2. Why does God require a faithful return of my tithes and offerings to support His work on earth?

3. What does it mean that faith without works is dead? How is my faith revealed by my works?

4. What is the ministry of reconciliation that Christ gives to His people?
