

A Family of Families



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 2:18-25; 27:1–28:5; Matt. 10:35-37; John 17:11, 21, 22; Acts 9:17; 21:8, 9; Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 4:14, 15; Gal. 4:5; 1 John 4:8, 16.*

Memory Text: “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone” (*Ephesians 2:19, 20, NKJV*).

The Week at a Glance: Through our family, both in our households and in His church, God longs for us to experience His self-giving love.

Maurice and Sara, newly baptized Adventists who lived in a crime-ridden area, told the pastor they wanted to move to a safer place, one closer to the church, so their two daughters could attend church school. With their permission the pastor shared their hopes with the congregation. Before long a member spotted an empty apartment not far from the church. It was just what the family had been hoping for, but their hope fell at the news of the large security deposit. Telephones rang, and by the next day donations by church members helped Maurice and Sara make the deposit and the first month's rent. Church members cleaned both apartments and moved them across town. Exhausted but exhilarated, Maurice stood before the church the next Sabbath and beamed with gratitude. A man of few words, he said only, “I'm so glad I have a family!”

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

Family Roots

When He brought together the first man and the first woman in marriage in the Garden of Eden, the Creator formed the first family.

Study the origin of the family (*Gen. 2:18-25*). What purpose for the family is evident in this account?

“ ‘It is not good for the man to be alone’ ” (*Gen. 2:18, NIV*). Companionship is one of the first purposes of families. Scripture uses *family* and *household* to describe social units made up of relatives and sometimes domestic helpers, all dwelling together in companionship. Together, families fend off loneliness and provide for the needs of each person (*compare Lev. 25:49; Ruth 2:20; Ps. 68:5, 6*).

A special companionship. With the marriage of the first couple, God supplied a very special kind of companionship. He intended husbands and wives to experience a unique union He called “one flesh” (*Gen. 2:24*). To the married couple He entrusted another of His purposes for families—the bearing and rearing of children (*Gen. 1:28*).

What deeper meaning of the family emerges from reflection on the nature and Personhood of God and the creation of humankind in His image? *Gen. 1:26-28. Compare John 17:11, 21, 22; 1 John 4:8, 16.*

What we can see in Christ’s words is the unity and the loving relationship within the Godhead Itself. Think of the meaning and purpose this gives to life in our individual households, which, in their own way, can reflect the self-giving love seen within the Trinity! No wonder family becomes a major metaphor in the New Testament for the church, the household of faith (*Gal. 6:10*).

Companionship, we see, is one of the fundamental components of family life. How much time do you spend being a companion to other family members? What things should you give up that would allow you to spend more time with your family?

Jesus' Affirmation of Families

What do the following texts tell us about Jesus' attitude toward family relationships?

Matt. 19:4-6

Mark 7:9-13

John 5:17, 18

John 19:26, 27

The divine plan for family living got a boost from the ministry of Jesus. He left no uncertainty about God's plan for marriage, especially when the Pharisees quizzed Him about divorce. The fifth commandment about honoring parents was in His mind as He rebuked the Pharisees who encouraged adult children to give as an offering the money that should have been spent upon their aging parents. Probably Jesus' greatest acknowledgment of the parent-child relationship came when He talked about God as His Father. On the cross He expressed love and care for His mother, Mary. During that terrible time He made sure the woman who had cradled Him, cherished Him, and, at times through the years, wondered at Him, got the best care He could give in the home of His trusted disciple.

Some statements of Jesus about families may need some clarification (*Matt. 10:35-37, Mark 3:32-35, Luke 9:59-62, 14:26*). **Why do you think Jesus said these things? How can they be reconciled with His approval elsewhere of family life?**

He who set people in families from the beginning did not change His mind about them during His earthly ministry. Just as He planned at Creation, the Son of God upheld them as sources of nurture, support, and strength. However important, families must be seen in the light of the higher loyalty to God.

Since God calls us to commitment to Him in both our church and family experience, how can energy, time, and resources be fairly distributed between these two? What dangers exist for those who, so busy in their work for God, neglect their family commitments?

A Variety of Families

Consider the various kinds of households in Bible times: Genesis 27:1–28:5; Ruth 1:22; 2:23; Jeremiah 16:2; Hosea 1:2, 3, 6, 8; 3:1-3. What others can you think of?

Isaac and Rebekah lived with their adult son, Jacob, and his married twin brother, Esau. The grieving widows Naomi and Ruth, bound together as mother and daughter-in-law, found refuge together. Jeremiah was single. Hosea parented his three children alone before he was reconciled to Gomer. Still other Bible families include the siblings Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, who had a home in Bethany where Jesus visited (*John 11:1-3, 20*); Aquila and Priscilla, married but apparently never had children (*Acts 18:2, 18; 1 Cor. 16:19*); and the family of grandmother Lois, her daughter Eunice, and grandson Timothy, in Lystra. Timothy's Greek father may have separated from the family as an unbeliever (*Acts 16:1, 2 Tim. 1:5; compare 1 Cor. 7:15*).

Acceptance of different family types. That God loved and cared about such diverse families is a source of abundant encouragement in our world today. It should also lead to appreciation of widely varied family types within His church.

What core values for family living are continually present in Scripture? *Gen. 2:24, 25; Exod. 20:14; Lev. 18:22; Prov. 5:18-20; Matt. 19:6; Rom. 1:26, 27; 1 Cor. 7:3-5; Heb. 13:4.*

God's gracious dealings throughout salvation history bear witness to His mercy toward humankind in a world distorted by sin, where the divine blueprint for families is rarely replicated. There are, however, certain core values that frequently appear throughout Scripture, intended to preserve and, where necessary, restore and elevate God's gift of sexuality to the human family. These values hold that sexual intimacy is a mutual expression of love reserved for the monogamous marriage of a man and a woman only (the Bible knows nothing of same-sex *marriages*). Many types of families in which a commitment to these values exists can be accommodated; yet relationships in which sexuality is otherwise expressed, or exploited, ultimately undermine God's design for marriage and degrade humanity.

Is there anyone in your church who is living in a household different from your own? How can you show this person, or such people, appreciation and support?

One Is a Whole Number

When present households in the family of God are counted, those of single adults represent a large and growing segment. Whenever and wherever society or the church hold up marriage as the norm, often it is difficult for these individuals to feel normal and whole. Often they do not feel as though they truly belong.

Consider the circumstances of these single adults. In what ways did they contribute to the cause of God? **Elijah** (*1 Kings 17:1–2 Kings 2:11*); **Anna** (*Luke 2:36–38*); **John the Baptist** (*Matt. 11:7–11*); **Philip’s daughters** (*Acts 21:8, 9*). **What other Bible characters remained single?**

The option to live singly. For many people, singleness is a season of life, either preceding or following marriage. For others, singleness is a positive lifetime choice. They recognize that although many people get married, God also gives His sons and daughters the option to live singly. For still others, singleness is not really a choice but an agonizing and reluctant consent to circumstances in which suitable partners are unavailable or marriage would be inappropriate.

Paul supported marriage in his teaching and writing, but he personally held that because of the work to be done for Christ in a short time, singleness was preferable. This was especially true if individuals had the gift for singleness; that is, if they felt led of God to make such a choice. The fellowship of the church must include both single and married people. In the choices they make and challenges they face, single people need to be understood and affirmed as persons rather than minimized, as often happens (even if unintentionally).

Personal value and completeness are ultimately related not to one’s single or married situation but to one’s response in faith to Christ. In Him who draws everyone to Himself, all are complete (*Col. 2:10*).

Who are the single people in your church? How can you relate to them in a positive manner, one that affirms them in their present circumstances?

Household of Households

Discover the family imagery in the following texts describing life in the church: John 20:17; Acts 9:17; Romans 16:1; 1 Corinthians 4:14, 15; Galatians 4:5; 1 Timothy 5:2.

Just as the human family was to reflect the Creator's relational nature, so the church is to be an even more exquisite replica of the harmonious, giving, loving relationship known within the Godhead. Family terms—*birth, adoption, mother, father, sister, brother*—provide a new vocabulary, a whole new way of talking about the human relationship with God and of human beings with one another.

A template for the church. The Holy Spirit uses common family relationships to describe a community in which new births are embraced, diversity is accommodated, strengths are affirmed, and people are encouraged to grow. If the word *family* calls up warm feelings for us, we likely will embrace this view of the church. Sadly for some, family means painful memories. For these, other images of the church may have more appeal. Yet, God is a relational Being. He formed humanity with relational capacities, and it is comforting to know that although family may fail us, in His church He provides for rest, healing, and experiences of surpassing family love (*compare Ps. 27:10*).

How does the idea of the church as a household (*Gal. 6:10, Eph. 2:19*) open the doors to include everybody?

“Household of faith” calls to mind the sense of belonging that families build in one another and the attitude of neighborliness that has always characterized well-functioning family relationships. Many people, who have received Christ individually as their personal Savior, come as households or families to church. Others attend alone. In a sense, though, their families are with them, for each has been shaped by their family experience, and each will always be part of a family somewhere. Church, then, is quite literally a household of households, a family of families. The first Christians broke bread “from house to house”; yet, they were one church (*Acts 2:46, 47*). First Corinthians 12 shows the importance of valuing, incorporating, nurturing, and utilizing all the individual parts in the complex organism.

How is your experience of family at church similar to or different from your present home or the one in which you grew up? Identify a Christian quality of your current home that could make a difference in life at your church. What one quality of life at church would you like to bring home?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, “The Eden Home a Pattern,” *The Adventist Home*, pp. 25–28; “Who Are My Brethren?” *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 321–327.

Untidy living rooms. “The churches of the Revelation show us that churches are not Victorian parlors where everything is always picked up and ready for guests. They are messy family rooms. Entering a person’s house unexpectedly, we are sometimes met with a barrage of apologies. St. John does not apologize. Things are out of order, to be sure, but that is what happens to churches that are lived in. They are not show rooms. They are living rooms, and if the persons living in them are sinners, there are going to be clothes scattered about, handprints on the woodwork, and mud on the carpet. For as long as Jesus insists on calling sinners and not the righteous to repentance—and there is no indication as yet that he has changed his policy in that regard—churches are going to be an embarrassment to the fastidious and an affront to the upright.”—Eugene H. Peterson, *Living the Message* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 71.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ As a class, discuss how the church should relate to those who are living in a *family* relationship that goes against the Scriptures. How do we show them Christ’s love and acceptance in a way that doesn’t condone their actions?
- ❷ For singles to gain a sense of wholeness and belonging can be difficult in a culture that holds up marriage as the standard. What can you as a class do to reach out to singles in your own church and show them they are a valued part of the church family?

Summary: “Family” is God’s idea. He formed the human family as an expression of His own relational nature. He has ordained both individual families and the church as a family of families to express His sacrificial love within both these circles of close companionship.

Casting Lots Determines the Truth

by STANLEY SAMUEL

Johnny is a bricklayer in southern India. Most of what he earned went to buy drinks. His wife kept a cow and sold the milk to feed the family. The family suffered financially and emotionally from Johnny's excesses, and even his colleagues at work worried about him.

While seeking treatment for their daughter, who had a serious health problem, the family was introduced to God. They began reading the Bible and listening to Christian radio programs.

Johnny noticed that the speakers contradicted one another. He listened carefully to the messages and looked up the Bible references to validate each point. Still Johnny could not determine which speaker spoke the truth, so they decided to cast lots, as the disciples had done in Acts. They fasted and prayed, then they wrote the names of the radio programs on pieces of paper.

Johnny held the papers in his hand as his mother drew one out. They read the program's name: *The Voice of Prophecy*. From that day on, they listened only to *The Voice of Prophecy*. The family did not know that the program is sponsored by Adventists.

Shortly after this, a group of Adventist pastors and lay workers visited Johnny's village and invited people to attend a Bible study group. When they reached Johnny's home, they introduced themselves as representing The Voice of Prophecy. They invited the family to attend their Bible study group. Johnny was amazed and told them how God had shown them that this radio ministry spoke the truth. Johnny's wife attended the Bible study worship first, asking the members to pray for her health. When she was healed, Johnny began attending the Bible study group, as well. They accepted the Bible truths they learned, and six months later they were baptized.

Jeeva, Johnny's daughter, wanted to keep the Sabbath, but she worked six days a week. She was able to get several Sabbaths off before her supervisor questioned her reasons for wanting every Saturday off. When she explained that she wanted to keep the Sabbath, Jeeva was fired. Although disappointed to lose her job, Jeeva rejoiced that she could worship God on His holy day. The family praised God that Jeeva was willing to stand firm, and they prayed that God would bless them in their financial difficulties.

Johnny's colleagues noticed that Johnny stopped drinking. He responded to their questions by inviting them to the Bible study group. Johnny and his family radiate God's love as they share the good news of salvation with those they meet.

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