

God's Nature: The Basis of Atonement



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ps. 139:1–4; Isa. 46:10; John 1:4; Rom. 5:8; 8:37–39; 1 John 5:11, 12.*

Memory Text: “ ‘I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please’ ” (*Isaiah 46:10, NIV*).

Key Thought: God's work of salvation is a self-willed outflow of His very nature; it does not require sinners to persuade Him to love them.

There are many mysteries about God, things about Him, His nature, His holiness, and His power, that we just cannot understand. Yet, there is one aspect about Him that we can begin to understand; namely, His love, a love manifested to us through His Son's redemptive work, a work that touches us at the individual and personal level, a work that is the outgrowth of God's own nature and being.

This week we begin our study of the doctrine of salvation, and we do so with the recognition that the driving force in our salvation is the greatness and love of our God. Nothing outside God forced Him to do what He did for us through His Son. Instead, it is because of His very nature itself that He has poured out His love and grace toward this fallen world.

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

Eternal God

What do the words “in the beginning God created . . .” (*Gen. 1:1*) imply about the nature of God? Before you answer, read also *Genesis 21:33* and *Psalm 90:2*.

The concept of eternity is difficult for us to understand. We are finite creatures (at least in this life). We know that we will die. In fact, everything that we relate to is transitory: It's here today but will one day be gone. Everything in this world had a beginning and will have an end. In contrast, the idea of God never having a beginning and never having an end isn't easy to understand, not with minds so used to thinking in finite terms.

Read *Psalm 102:25–27*. To whom is this passage applied in the New Testament? (*See Heb. 1:10–12.*) What's the message there, along with *Psalm 90:2*, about the length of God's existence?

Because God is eternal, because He existed before all created things, He has to be self-existent. Creatures, in contrast, are not. We all need air, water, and food to preserve our existence (*Gen. 1:29*), while God needs nothing to exist. Throughout eternity, before He made anything, there was nothing else apart from God. He therefore existed by Himself, dependent upon nothing. *He is life in Himself*. And only He who is life in Himself, the Eternal Self-existing One, can restore life to repentant sinners. Created life, both now and for eternity, all comes from God, the great Life-Giver (*see John 1:4; 1 John 5:11, 12*). We are dependent upon Him for everything.

Think about how dependent you are on God for your life here and now. How much more so for eternal life? How should your realization of this dependence help foster in you a sense of humility? Why is arrogance such a repulsive trait in the eyes of God?

A Loving God

The mystery of God lies beyond our full understanding. He is not an object that we can find by ourselves (*Job 11:7*). The Bible does not give us a systematic and philosophical description of His being. It presents a God who reveals Himself through His actions, through the way He relates to us. We come to know who He is by what He tells us about Himself; otherwise we would know little about Him.

The Scriptures tell us that God is by nature love; that is to say, the essence of His being is self-giving, and this is expressed in concern for the well-being of others.

What do the following texts tell us about the character and nature of God? *Ps. 118:1–4; Rom. 5:8; 8:37–39; 1 John 4:8, 9, 16.*

The statement “God is love” takes us into the core of the divine and tells us (1) “God is love” means that an exploration into God’s essence would reveal that it is, by nature, love. This understanding of the nature of God is of extreme importance in the doctrine of atonement. (2) “God is love” means that He is a relational Being; He enjoys by nature fellowship with His creatures. It is precisely in that personal interaction that He reveals His love. If we want to know whether God loves us or not, we do not examine our feelings and emotions but look at the way He has treated us in spite of our sinfulness. (3) “God is love” means that there is nothing outside God that can move Him to love us. Because God is by nature love, it is unnecessary, even impossible, for us to make ourselves lovable in order to be accepted by Him. And nothing, of course, reveals His love toward us more than the plan of salvation. Indeed, the moment we fell into sin, Christ became our Mediator, Redeemer, and Savior—the ultimate expression of God’s love toward the fallen race.

“Since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (*1 John 4:11, NIV*). What are practical ways in which you can express love toward others? What things in your own life hinder you from showing that love?

God as Creator

“Know ye that the Lord he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture” (*Ps. 100:3*).

Scripture is unequivocal: God is the Creator. Without this fundamental truth, the Bible message becomes meaningless. On the other hand, God as Creator means that He is to be distinguished from creation, that He is not part of the created order. God as the Creator means that there was nothing before Him or before His acts of creation (*Rom. 4:17, Heb. 11:3*). God as Creator means that everything belongs to Him and depends on His power and benevolence for subsistence (*Pss. 24:1, 2; 104:10–14*). God as Creator means that creation reveals the glory and power of its Creator (*Ps. 19:1–3, Rom. 1:20*).

What did the Creator promise to a world damaged by sin? *Isa. 65:17, Rev. 21:1*.

The Bible explicitly states that God created and sustains everything through the power of His Son (*John 1:1–3; Heb. 1:2, 3*). The atonement is God’s solution to the problem of sin within this creation. Instead of leaving us to reap the ultimate rewards of sin and rebellion, which would be eternal ruin, He instituted the plan of salvation.

How does Paul describe those who are in Christ? *2 Cor. 5:17*.

The power God displayed during the creation of the universe is the same power He employs in re-creating fallen human beings into His own image. He brought everything into existence through the power of His word (*Ps. 33:6*), and now it is also through the power of His incarnate word in Christ that He re-creates us (*John 1:1, 12, 13; 2 Cor. 4:16*).

Is there something that you personally have created and sustained, something that you put a lot of work and care into? In what ways does your act of creating it give you ownership over it? How do you feel about what you have made? How, in a small way, might this comparison help us understand what we mean to God, our Creator?

Holy God

Read Isaiah 40:25 and Isaiah 57:15. What do these texts tell us about the nature of God?

The holiness of God is not simply an attribute of God but, like love, reveals what He is in Himself. At least two fundamental ideas are associated with His holiness.

First, it describes God as unique. The term *holy* usually designates what has been placed at the exclusive and unique service of the Lord. But when *holy* is applied to God, it emphasizes the fact that He is unique and incomparable. There is no one in the universe like our sublime and majestic God (*see Isa. 46:5, 9*), and only He is worthy of our worship.

Second, God being holy does not mean that He is distant and inaccessible to us and unable to have fellowship with us. His holiness and His love are inseparable. His holiness reveals itself in His willingness to dwell with the contrite and lowly in spirit. By approaching them and dwelling among them, the Holy One allows His creatures to participate in His holiness.

What promise is found in the following verse? *2 Cor. 5:21*.

God's holiness does not tolerate sin but actively reacts against it (*Isa. 5:24, Hos. 9:15, Rom. 1:18*). "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong" (*Hab. 1:13, NIV*). God's natural hatred for sin made necessary the role of a Mediator. God designed a way by which sinners could be sanctified and enjoy fellowship with Him again. This was possible through Christ, in whom atonement and holiness were mysteriously united. The Holy One was born as a baby on this planet of sin and impurity (*Luke 1:35*) to sanctify us through the power of His atoning death: "We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ" (*Heb. 10:10, NIV*).

Someone says, "Why do I need a Savior? I'm not that bad, certainly not as bad as many others." How should our understanding of God's holiness help us answer this person correctly?

Omniscient God

What do these texts tell us about God’s knowledge? *Ps. 139:1–4, 15, 16; Isa. 46:10; Matt. 10:30.*

God is omniscient; that is, “he knows everything” (*1 John 3:20, NIV*). Nothing is hidden from Him. “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes” of the Lord (*Heb. 4:13, NIV*). All the spheres of His creation are inundated by His presence, and therefore He knows every dimension of it (*Ps. 139:7–10*). His knowledge of us is perfect and complete. God alone possesses pure objectivity, because He alone knows everything from every possible perspective.

It is not only that the Lord fully knows what is; He also perfectly knows what will be in the future (*Isa. 46:10; Matt. 26:34, 74, 75*). The future is no more hidden from Him than is either the past or the present.

What does 1 Peter 1:19, 20 tell us about God’s foreknowledge regarding the rise of sin?

God’s omniscience is of great significance for the doctrine of atonement. Because God knows everything, sin was not something that caught Him by surprise. The God who perfectly knows all His creatures knew in advance about the fall of one of His cherubim, and so He formulated a plan to deal with the problem of sin, even before it arose in humans: “Where sin increased, grace increased all the more” (*Rom. 5:20, NIV*). Therefore, God’s decision to save us was hidden in eternity and revealed in Christ. This is “the mystery hidden for long ages past” (*Rom. 16:25, NIV*), “hidden in God, who created all things” (*Eph. 3:9, NIV*). Before God created anything, He had foreseen the origin of sin and decided to defeat it instead of fearfully running away from it. From the divine perspective, Christ is “the Lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world” (*Rev. 13:8*).

God knows everything about you, things that no one else would even dare suspect. And despite that knowledge, He still loves you. How should that help influence how you treat others, despite their faults?

Further Study: God and Redemption: “Only as we contemplate the great plan of redemption can we have a just appreciation of the character of God. The work of creation was a manifestation of His love; but the gift of God to save the guilty and ruined race, alone reveals the infinite depths of divine tenderness and compassion.” —Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 739.

Forgiveness and Justice: “When we study the divine character in the light of the cross we see mercy, tenderness, and forgiveness blended with equity and justice. We see in the midst of the throne One bearing in hands and feet and side the marks of the suffering endured to reconcile man to God. We see a Father, infinite, dwelling in light unapproachable, yet receiving us to Himself through the merits of His Son. The cloud of vengeance that threatened only misery and despair, in the light reflected from the cross reveals the writing of God: Live, sinner, live! ye penitent, believing souls, live! I have paid a ransom.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 333.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Go back over the main points of this week’s lesson. What other aspects of God’s essential nature can you think of, and what role would they play in the plan of salvation?
- ❷ What can we learn about God’s holiness that would help us better understand what it means for us to be holy?
- ❸ Some people struggle with the question of God’s foreknowledge and our free will. How free are we in our choices if God knew beforehand what choices we would make? Discuss.

Summary: The God who is life in Himself is the only One who can restore life to us. We are loved by Him, not because we earned that love but because He is love in Himself and continues to love us, in spite of our sin. He also wants to re-create us, and He is able because He is the Creator. As a holy God who cannot tolerate sin in His presence, He is able to sanctify us through Christ. His all-encompassing knowledge reveals that sin was not an unexpected phenomenon but something that He foresaw and was prepared to deal with.

Angels Closed Their Eyes

by HOMER TRECARTIN

The pastor didn't notice the young man enter the church and sit down. In fact, no one noticed him. It was as though angels had blinded their eyes.

Parsa* grew up in Central Asia, a faithful worshiper of the Creator God. His grandfather was a famous religious teacher. All his life Parsa had prayed to God and read the holy writings of His people. While reading he learned about the Sabbath and grew to love it, but no one else seemed to understand its importance.

Oh, there was a small group of Adventists who worshiped in a house church in town. But they were Christians, and everyone knew Christians were heathens. Christians ate pork, drank alcohol, prayed to idols, dressed indecently, and lived with one wife after another. Besides, Christians were foreigners. No, he wanted nothing to do with Christians, even if they kept the Sabbath.

But one Saturday as Parsa walked down the street, an unseen power pulled him into the little Seventh-day Adventist Church. Trembling he slipped in and sat down in the back row. He listened as the pastor preached a powerful message on Abraham. *Why would Christians talk about Abraham?* Parsa wondered. He thought Christians followed only the New Testament and didn't know that Abraham was a prophet of God. Parsa was so interested in what he heard that day that he returned the next Sabbath and the next. The messages touched his heart, and he wanted to know more.

For six months he slipped into and out of church without being seen. Then one week the Adventists saw him. It was as if scales had fallen from their eyes. They welcomed him and invited him to join a Bible study class.

After several months of intense Bible study, Parsa was baptized. His family and friends shunned him, but Parsa prays that they will find the truth as he has. He continues doing all he can to share God's love with others, and a number of his people have recently accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Pray for Parsa's people, many of whom are searching for greater truth. And remember, your mission offering helps make work in Central Asia possible. Thank you for having a part in spreading the gospel in difficult areas.

*Not his real name.

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