

A New Order



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 15:14–16; Lev. 10:1–11; Numbers 1–4; Jer. 23:23, 24; John 14:15–18, 23.*

Memory Text: “Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come” (1 Corinthians 10:11).

A Christian struck up a conversation with another man, a professional biologist. Looking for a way to witness, the Christian asked, “Don’t you see the hand of a Creator when you study the things that you do?”

Without missing a beat, the biologist answered, “Wherever you look, either outwardly or inwardly, you see order.”

However much our world has been damaged by sin, we still can see the working of our Creator in the design and order of the natural world. Even one fanatical Darwinist was forced to admit that nature is something that gives “the illusion of design.”

Illusion? Please. Design and order are real, and they represent the hand of our Maker.

But God’s order doesn’t end merely with nature. It is seen also in His dealing with His covenant people, the Israelites, even as they wandered in the wilderness. This week we’ll look, firsthand, at how God organized His people for their sacred calling, and we’ll draw some lessons for ourselves today.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 3.*

Organizing the Army

Having miraculously escaped from Egypt, the multitudes of Israel flowed into the wilderness of Sinai. Encamped around the mountain, they heard the voice of God proclaiming His will (*Exodus 20*). Despite such an incredible manifestation of God’s power, some fell away and worshiped the golden calf (*Exodus 32*). After that debacle, the repentant nation spent time building a portable sanctuary (*Exod. 25:8*). The work was completed on the first day of the first month in the second year (*Exod. 40:17*).

It was in the following month that the Lord proceeded to organize the nation more thoroughly (*Num. 1:1*) than it previously had been. And it’s at this point, with the new organization, with this new order, that the book of Numbers picks up the sacred story of God’s working with His covenant people.

What kind of census did the Lord ask Moses and Aaron to draw up, and why? *Num. 1:2, 3*.

The Israelites were not a warlike nation. Their occupation had been that of shepherds, cattle herding (*Gen. 47:3*). Furthermore, at this point they were recently freed slaves, without weapons or training for war. It may seem strange for the Lord now to organize them into troops. But it must be remembered that their task involved the displacement of several nations of the most wicked and corrupt people in the Near East, including the Amorites and Canaanites. Israel would serve as God’s executioners of these nations who had filled the cup of their transgressions (*Gen. 15:14–16*). Israel was now a theocracy, directed by God Himself, and they were a people, a might army, on the move.

Read Genesis 15:14–16 (see also *Deut. 9:5*). **What’s implied here? How can these texts help us understand Israel’s wars with the Amorites?**

At the time of Abraham, God would not allow the Amorites to be destroyed. Here God revealed His long-suffering. “The Amorites were at enmity against His law; they believed not in Him as the true and living God; but among them were a few good persons, and for the sake of these few, He forbore long.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, p. 1093.

Many folk are troubled by the Israelite destruction of these people, and understandably so. Why, in cases such as this, in which there is much we don’t understand, do we simply need to go by faith, trusting in the goodness of God, who has revealed Himself to us in Jesus? *John 14:9*.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Numbers 2:1–34*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Describe how God brought order to the people of Israel so that they could represent Him.

Feel: Sense the similarities between Israel and God’s church and identify with the lessons God is trying to teach us.

Do: Apply the lessons of order to our lives, family, and church.

► **Lesson Outline:**

I. Know: To Each His Place

A In organizing the tribes of Israel and the Levites around the sanctuary, God was prescribing not only a well-planned camp and an ordered march but His place in the center of camp. Why was the sanctuary in the center of the camp, rather than at its head?

B Where did the Levites camp, and what were their special roles? What tragedy illustrated the grave responsibilities that accompanied the leadership role of the Levites?

C The ancestral families and clans in each tribe were organized under their respective banners, and the able-bodied men were counted and organized into a troop. Why were family lines valued in this plan of organization?

II. Feel: Identifying With the People of Israel

What present-day examples can you give that illustrate the need for order, reverence, and strong families in our church?

III. Do: Doing What God Commands

A What can we do to situate Christ more prominently and reverently in the center of our organization and personal lives?

B What importance do our families have in the organization and progress of our church today?

► **Summary:** In order to move ahead as God’s people, we need to recognize and apply God’s principles of order and reverence in our lives, families, and church organization.

The Presence of the Lord

To what task was the tribe of the Levites appointed? *Num. 1:50–54.*

Moses pitched the portable tabernacle in the middle of Israel's encampment. The Levites pitched their tents around it, on all four sides. Their presence acted as a kind of barrier, protecting the place where God manifested His presence.

Why was it set up this way? The Bible doesn't come right out and say, yet some important lessons can be learned from this arrangement.

Yahweh, the living God, was in their midst. He, the Creator, was among His people—so what could overcome them if they remained faithful? And yet, at the same time, they pitched their tents at a distance from the tabernacle (*Num. 2:2*), and that was because He was holy, and so they, as sinners, as fallen beings, could come only so close. Thus, on one hand, they had the reality of God's closeness and compassionate care; at the same time, they constantly were reminded of His greatness and holiness and that only through mediation could they, as sinners, approach a holy God.

What do other Bible writers say about God's distance (transcendence) and nearness (immanence) to humanity? *Ps. 139:1–10; Isa. 57:15; Jer. 23:23, 24; John 14:15–18, 23.*

“At all times and in all places, in all sorrows and in all afflictions, when the outlook seems dark and the future perplexing, and we feel helpless and alone, the Comforter will be sent in answer to the prayer of faith. Circumstances may separate us from every earthly friend; but no circumstance, no distance, can separate us from the heavenly Comforter. Wherever we are, wherever we may go, He is always at our right hand to support, sustain, uphold, and cheer.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 669, 670.

In what ways have you experienced the reality of God's presence, His compassionate care, and closeness? On the other hand, what things are you doing that keep you from an even deeper intimacy with God?

Learning Cycle

► STEP 1—Motivate

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The Lord has designed that His people should live together in an orderly manner that glorifies Him.

Order is a core characteristic of God's being. Sin, the antithesis of God's loving character, inevitably leads to chaos. Therefore, it should not surprise us that God places a high value on order among His followers. History reveals that order brought success to nations even when they did not always honor the true God. It was organization and order that gave the Roman legions the strategic advantage in their battles to conquer the world. The pursuit of order was a key motivating factor in the rise of national governments. The natural world itself demonstrates the importance of order and design.

Opening Activity: Bring a popular table game to class, such as Scrabble, Uno, or Monopoly (a game that allows for multiple players is better than a two-person game for this illustration). Invite a representative group to join you in the game, telling them that playing will lead to an important point in the lesson. Set up the game by the rules, but when you, the teacher, take the first turn, you do something that clearly violates the rules, such as playing all your letters even though they do not spell a word (Scrabble) or going backwards, on the first move, to the desirable Boardwalk or Park Place properties and demanding purchase (Monopoly). Now ask the class to discuss how they felt about your actions. Ask them if any game is fun without rules and order. Apply the principle to life.

► STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. Organizing the Army (*Review Exodus 20; 25:8; 32; 40:17; Num. 1:1–3; and Genesis 15 with the class.*)

Charisma or organization? Despite the supernatural charismatic manifestations displayed in the cloud by day and fire by night, in the thundering encountered at Mount Sinai, and in the daily manna, the Lord found it necessary to organize the Hebrew people in considerable detail.

It appears that a well-ordered people did not automatically happen as a result of encountering God. It required considerable effort. In the New

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Under the Standards

“So the Israelites did everything the Lord commanded Moses; that is the way they encamped under their standards, and that is the way they set out, each with his clan and family” (*Num. 2:34, NIV*).

Read Numbers 2. Talk about organized religion! What is one thing that becomes apparent about how the Israelites were supposed to live?

The government of Israel was characterized by a very precise organizational structure, seen, for example, in how the Lord had arranged for the camp itself to be ordered and where the people were to pitch their tents. The Hebrew camp was separated into three great divisions, each having its appointed position in the encampment, all based on family and tribal ties.

The position of each tribe in the camp also was specified. Each was to march and to encamp beside its own standard. Nothing was left to chance. The Lord carefully and precisely had organized the nation. And though they were one people, their distinctive family connections were not broken.

Read Numbers 2:34. What does this tell us about how, despite the clear organizational pattern, the Lord left room for the distinctness and uniqueness of the various tribes? What lessons can we draw from that for ourselves?

Why is it so important for the church today to be organized, as well? What happens when folk are left to do their own thing? Why is that so often a recipe for chaos and deception? How has belonging to an organized body helped you in your spiritual walk?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Testament era the people demanded charismatic signs from Jesus (*see Mark 8:11, 12; Luke 16:27–31; and John 6:28–33*). Jesus, however, disapproved of the clamor for signs and for supernatural manifestations. It is noteworthy that He did not disapprove of the process of organizing the early church.

Consider This: A pastor from a certain denomination once told an Adventist pastor that he did not need to study and prepare for his sermons because he just let the Lord tell him what to say when he got up to speak. The Adventist pastor replied that he believed that an organized, well-prepared message did more to honor God. Is charisma, or the direct working of the Holy Spirit in our world, at odds with order and organization? How can the charisma of the Spirit protect from cold, formal organization? How can a well-ordered church guard against charismatic excesses? How can the believer strike the proper balance between the two?

II. The Presence of the Lord (*Review Num. 1:50–54; 2:2; Ps. 139:1–10; Isa. 57:15; Jer. 23:23, 24; John 14:15–18, 23 with the class.*)


The organization of the Hebrew camp taught two concepts that are keys to understanding the plan of salvation. First, God is holy and distant from sin. While He seems within reach, there is a barrier that keeps us from a direct encounter. Second, God has done everything possible to be with us. While a barrier existed in the Hebrew camp, God had instituted a means by which He could be near His people. The priests played a key role as the conduit through which God reached across the sin barrier to sinful people. Their role of mediation pointed forward to the True Mediator, who is Jesus (*see Heb. 10:18–23, Rom. 8:37–39, 2 Cor. 5:17–21*).

Consider This: In light of the fact that God is holy, how should we consider trivial characterizations of God such as calling Him “the Man upstairs”?

■ *In the New Testament era all believers share in the priestly function of being a conduit through whom God reaches a sinful world. How are we fulfilling this role?*

III. Under the Standards (*Review Num. 2:34 with the class.*)

Consider This: Despite a precise organizational structure, God allowed for the distinct and the unique features of the various tribes. Discuss why organizational unity may or may not require uniformity. If the

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Call to Ministry

In memory of their deliverance from Egyptian slavery, the death of the Egyptian firstborn, and the deliverance of their own under the sign of the blood, God requested Israel's firstborn to be dedicated to Him (*Exod. 13:2, 12–15*).

Giving God our firstborn? That's very intense. What powerful lesson should we take from this about how much we owe the Lord for our redemption and deliverance? Why, in this context, are pride and self-sufficiency so sinful?

At Mount Sinai, the Lord did an exchange for the firstborn of all Israelites. Instead of them, He would take the Levites in their place (*Num. 3:12, 13*). This act, then, required the numbering of the Levites, who until that point had not been numbered with the rest of Israel. Moses is told to number the Levite males from a month upward (*vss. 14, 15*). To make the exchange, Moses then counted the male firstborn Israelite children of a month old and older. Their total came to 22,273—that is, 273 more firstborn Israelites than there were Levites (*vss. 3:39, 43*).

What were the extra Israelites to do for their redemption? To whom was it given? *Num. 3:46–51*.

The Lord also dedicated the Levites to Aaron and his priestly sons and descendants; they were to assist in the worship of God and the care of the tabernacle. In a sense, they were called to the ministry of the church in the wilderness.

Once the Hebrews reached the Promised Land, the Levites continued to be attached to the sanctuary in a variety of tasks (*1 Chron. 23:27–32*). Scattered through the tribal areas, some became teaching Levites (*2 Chron. 17:7–9*); others became judges (*2 Chron. 19:8–11*), instructing the people in the ways of God.

In what ways can you see the Cross, the substitutionary death of Jesus (*John 3:16*), prefigured in these substitutionary rituals? What does it mean that Jesus substituted Himself for you? How should knowledge of this reality change your life?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

cookie dough (the essence) is the same, must all dough be cut with the same cookie cutter (the form) in order to taste good?

IV. Call to Ministry and Protecting the Sacred (Review *Exod. 13:2; Lev. 10:1–11; Num. 3:12–15, 46–51; 14:10, 11; 1 Chron. 23:27–32; 2 Chron. 17:7–9; 19:8–11 with the class.*)

Initially the firstborn sons and later the tribe of Levi assumed the role of “middlemen,” standing between God and His people. This role meant the execution of several functions, including teaching, judging, caring for the sanctuary, and performing the sacred rituals. To emphasize the sacred nature of their work, the Levites were set apart in a special “ordination” ceremony. In the New Testament era, we are a nation of priests who should take seriously our sacred calling and perform faithfully the tasks God has given us. Which of the Old Testament functions are still applicable, and how should they be carried out?

Consider This: Discuss how we may be in danger of trivializing our sacred calling in the same way that Aaron’s sons did. Why do you suppose Eli’s sons later repeated their mistake? How can we avoid the same trap?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

How can I fulfill my role as a member of the order of priests? As Christians we are a part of the “new priestly order,” and corporately, under the leadership of Christ, we are to carry out “priestly functions” on behalf of God’s ministry in the world. In our study we learn that these functions include the roles of teacher, judge, caretaker, and spiritual intermediary. Below are descriptions of real-life situations. First discuss which of the four priestly roles listed best apply to a particular situation. Then discuss how the role might be carried out. Use the following definitions to guide your selections.

Teacher—one who instructs others on how to live the Christian faith.

Judge—one who fosters the ideals of peace, fairness, and justice within the Christian community.

Caretaker—one who cares for the material aspects (for example, church properties) of the Christian community.

Spiritual intermediary—one who ministers the spiritual aspects of the faith, such as forgiveness, peace, hope, love, and compassion.

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Protecting the Sacred

In establishing the system of worship at Sinai, God selected one family of the Levites to function as priests. This work is laid out in Numbers 4. Moses consecrated Aaron as high priest and his four sons—Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar—as assistant priests. The rest of the tribe of Levi would help the others but would not function as priests. It is obvious that every working Levite had his place and service, harmoniously working together to preserve and protect the sacredness of Israel’s worship system.

No question, the Levites had been given a solemn responsibility. The same with the sons of Aaron, who would function as priests before the Lord in the tabernacle. Think about what they were called to do. The Lord Himself, the Creator, revealed His presence among them in the sanctuary (*Num. 14:10, 11*), a powerful reminder to them that their safety and security existed only in Him, the One who had redeemed them from Egypt. These priests were the mediators between a Holy God and a fallen people. In their roles, too, of course, they were symbols of Jesus, our true High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary (*Hebrews 8*).

Read Leviticus 10:1–11. What happened, and what lessons are there for us today?

It is hard to imagine that these young men, given such a sacred responsibility and who already had been given so much (*see Exod. 24:9–11*), would violate so openly an express command of God. However hard and harsh their punishment might seem to us, it only underscores the reality of just how sacred the responsibility given them was. No doubt others got the message about how seriously the Lord expected His commandments regarding the sanctuary to be carried out.

“To handle sacred things as we would common matters is an offense to God; for that which God has set apart to do His service in giving light to this world is holy. Those who have any connection with the work of God are not to walk in the vanity of their own wisdom, but in the wisdom of God, or they will be in danger of placing sacred and common things on the same level, and thus separate themselves from God.”—Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 639.

Read carefully Leviticus 10:10. How can we today distinguish between the holy and the common, between the clean and unclean? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Situation 1: An evangelist has raised a church of 120 new members in an economically deprived section of town where teen pregnancy is a major problem. Nearly all of the members are new Christians with no background in Christian ethics. How should the pregnancy problem be addressed in the church?

Situation 2: A large manufacturing plant is closing and plans to transfer operations to another country where labor is cheaper. Eighty percent of the congregation is affected by the closing.

Situation 3: A major natural disaster has just hit town, damaging the homes of most members and causing major damage to the church and school buildings.

Situation 4: Racial tensions have reached a boiling point, and the church building has recently been bombed because of its advocacy of civil rights.

► STEP 4—Create

God's people in ancient Israel were precisely organized. This gave them a sense of belonging and purpose. During the time of the judges, the sense of belonging and purpose began to deteriorate as the sense of order disintegrated. Initially organized religiously, socially, and militarily, the Hebrew people later came to resemble a disorganized mob that stood at the mercy of better-organized peoples. It is possible that today the Christians who have truth may stand at the mercy of antitheistic groups because they lack organization. Choose—individually, but preferably as a group—some aspect of your church life that you can put in order. Then develop and put your plan into effect. Here are some suggestions:

- 1 How does the physical appearance of your church reflect the ideals of order? If it does not, develop a plan to improve its appearance.
- 2 Does your church know where to find its members? Remember that God had so organized the Hebrews that they easily could be found. Work on developing an accurate church directory.
- 3 The primary purpose of the church is based on worshiping God and reaching the lost. Does your worship service reflect order, as well as the direct influence of the Spirit? Does your church have an organized approach to outreach? Does your church keep records about those who have expressed an interest in the Christian faith?

Further Study: The theme of God’s holiness runs like a silver thread throughout Scripture. Define it. What relation does it have to the believer? *Exod. 28:36; Lev. 11:44, 45; Isa. 6:1–7; Heb. 12:14; 1 Pet. 1:15, 16.*

“Angels work harmoniously. Perfect order characterizes all their movements. The more closely we imitate the harmony and order of the angelic host, the more successful will be the efforts of these heavenly agents in our behalf. If we see no necessity for harmonious action, and are disorderly, undisciplined, and disorganized in our course of action, angels, who are thoroughly organized and move in perfect order, cannot work for us successfully. They turn away in grief, for they are not authorized to bless confusion, distraction, and disorganization. All who desire the cooperation of the heavenly messengers must work in unison with them. Those who have the unction from on high will in all their efforts encourage order, discipline, and union of action, and then the angels of God can cooperate with them.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 28.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Talk about the idea of organized religion. Why are some people so hostile to it? Why, though, is it necessary? At the same time, what are the potential problems that it brings? How can we learn to work better with the church system, despite the problems that arise?
- 2 Talk about your answer to Thursday’s question. In class, make a list of what is holy and what is common. How can we know the difference? In what ways does our culture impact our understanding of these things? Or our education? How, for instance, might the idea of melding Darwinian natural selection with our faith be a mixture of the sacred with the profane? What other examples can you think of?
- 3 Dwell more on the idea of substitution, as revealed in Wednesday’s lesson study. Why is this concept so central to the whole plan of salvation? How did, and still does, Jesus function as our Substitute, and why is that so important?

Summary: God is a God of order. Once the tribes were assembled in the wilderness before Mount Sinai, He began to organize them around the tabernacle. First, Israel’s armies were organized, and the encampment of each tribe was selected, as was their order of march. The Levites encamped as a barrier around the tabernacle and were given specific directions regarding their service in transporting it and erecting it. The Holy God was in their midst as Israel was on the move.