

Preparing a People



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Numbers 5; 6; Ezek. 33:15; Luke 19:8, 9; Acts 17:28; 1 Cor. 6:19, 20.*

Memory Text: “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth” (3 John 2).

Unless you have been a refugee, you're probably not going to relate completely to the situation of the children of Israel. Of course, unlike many refugees today, the children of Israel wanted to leave Egypt, as opposed to being driven out. Yet still, it must have been disconcerting to have left the only land they knew and to be wandering in a hostile desert.

It's in this context that we better can understand some of the rules and regulations given to these people, rules that would help them survive in the wilderness. At the same time, though some things were ended after they finally entered the Promised Land (such as the manna), many regulations remained because in them were principles that, if followed, greatly would have blessed their lives in a world filled with sin and idolatry.

This week we'll look at some of the provisions that the Lord instituted for His ancient people, which include such things as how to deal with some sickness and disease, how to deal with marital infidelity (or the fear of it), and how to deal with the personal clashes that inevitably arise when people live together.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 10.*

Disease Control

Imagine the scene of ancient Israel in the wilderness desert before Mount Sinai. Thousands upon thousands of nomads with their cattle, miles away from any kind of civilization. What kind of medical facilities did they have at their disposal? None. And considering how medicine often was practiced back then, they might have been better off anyway. Nevertheless, in such an environment, how easily an epidemic of one sort or another could spread.

What three classes of people did the Lord command Moses to “put out of the encampment”? *Num. 5:1–4.*

Apparently, anyone with a serious skin disease might be designated a leper. True leprosy (now called Hansen’s disease) also was included in this class. Any infectious skin disease would be regarded as a danger to the community. So, also a bloody flux or discharge or the handling of a decaying corpse in the desert heat might spread disease of epidemic proportions through the camp. Both men and women were expelled until, if possible, they improved in health. The Lord didn’t hate these physically impaired persons, but for the sake of the health of the nation, He separated them to an area outside the camp, a kind of quarantine. Even in modern times we have special wards in hospitals for persons with infectious diseases.

For what theological reason were these impaired persons removed for a time from the nation’s encampment? *Num. 5:3, last phrase.* What spiritual message can we take away from this for ourselves?

Look at this whole thing from a spiritual perspective, from the idea of defilement, of sin, and of what sin does to us. What believer hasn’t experienced the reality of how sin separates a person from the sense of God’s presence? Who hasn’t experienced the sense of spiritual isolation that comes from being defiled before God?

What things are we watching, reading, eating, doing, or even thinking that make us feel as if we are exiled spiritually out of the camp? More important, what’s the only solution to this problem? *1 John 1:8, 9.*

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** 3 John 2

► **The Student Will:**

Know: List a variety of ways in which God prescribed a holy way of living for His people.

Feel: Appreciate the importance of attention to detail in complying with God's way of life.

Do: Surrender all aspects of our life to God and to His intent to save us.

► **Lesson Outline:**

I. Know: How to Live in a Holy Camp

A The methods whereby God instructed Israel to deal with infectious disease, behavioral problems, marital problems, and those who felt a religious calling were detailed. Why were these prescriptions necessary?

B What were the benefits of having a prescribed procedure to deal with marital infidelity and jealousy?

C Numbers records specific activities of the religiously consecrated, regulating both what they did while set apart and how they ended their vows. Why might God have wanted to be careful to delineate these activities?

II. Feel: Desiring to Live a Holy Life

The Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6:22–27 moves our attention from a list of behaviors to a description of a relationship. What longings does this blessing awaken in your heart?

III. Do: Seeking to Live in Harmony With God's Ways

A How do we now handle disease and interpersonal conflicts that parallel God's suggestions in Numbers?

B What do you believe is God's plan for dealing with marital problems now?

C What kinds of things do we do to consecrate our lives to God and His service? What cautions should we take in separating the holy from the common?

► **Summary:** In order to bless us, God seeks to bring us into harmony with His life design.

Social Control

It is difficult for us today to grasp the enormous problems entailed in the migration of thousands of people together with herds and flocks of cattle and sheep. Now they are packed into the wilderness before Mount Sinai. The physically impaired had been removed for the sake of the nation's health. But another serious problem needed to be addressed. Although they were being instructed to "love" one another (*Lev. 19:18*), as anyone who lives in a community knows, that's not always so easy. Even in the best of times, conflicts arise.

When an Israelite sinned against a person in the camp, whom did he or she really sin against? *Num. 5:6*; see also *Ps. 51:3, 4*. **How** do we understand this concept?

To wrong our neighbor is to sin against God Himself. In one sense this shouldn't be that hard to understand. We all belong to God; we are all His property, both by creation and by redemption (*1 Cor. 6:19, 20*; *Acts 17:28*). If someone were to come onto your property and damage it, the sin wouldn't be just against the property itself as much as against you, the one who owns it. It works the same way when we sin against someone else; we are sinning against the One who created that person and who, at the cross, bought that person back with His own blood. No wonder, then, that the Bible expresses this idea that by sinning against others we are sinning against God Himself.

What was the guilty person to do? *Num. 5:6-8*; see also *Ezek. 33:15* and *Luke 19:8, 9*.

Though the principle of righting wrongs with other people still applies today, how do we right the wrong we have done to God, against whom we've sinned, as well? The fact is, we can't. It's way too late for us to make ourselves right with God. That's, of course, why Jesus came: to set us right with God, not through anything we could do but only through what Jesus has done for us (*Col. 1:20*).

Keeping in mind what Jesus has done to make things right between you and God, what do you need to do to make things right with someone whom you might be in conflict with?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The Creator, who fine-tuned the natural laws that allow life, has not abandoned us to our own devising but has given laws that, when followed, maximize the experience of life.

In an article entitled “God and Nature: A Biblical Approach to Origins,” L. James Gibson, director of the Geoscience Research Institute, examines the possibility that life and the universe are a product of chance. He writes, “Two lines of evidence strongly point to the insufficiency of chance in causing the origin of nature. First, the universe has a set of specific properties without which life would be impossible. The relative strengths of the fundamental forces, such as gravity and the forces of the atomic nucleus, along with the values of the physical constants, such as the speed of light, are finely tuned in a way that makes life possible. Slight changes in these factors could make it impossible for atoms and molecules to exist. . . . The probability is vanishingly small that all these factors would be so finely tuned by chance.” He adds: “The probability that amino acids would arrange themselves by chance into sequences appropriate for life is so remote as to be unthinkable.” So, how does he explain the mystery of life? He concludes, “Design seems a compelling explanation for the origins of the universe and life. . . . The evidence for design implies that God acted with purpose to create both.”—*Ministry*, November 2007, pp. 16, 17.

Consider This: Discuss the possibility of whether the God who created the universe under such precise conditions would permit human law to occur by chance. What does He have to say about how to make the best of the life He has given? What design does the God of order have for marriage, worship, social relationships, and even diet?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. Disease Control (*Review Num. 5:1–4; 3 John 2; 1 John 1:8, 9 with the class.*)

During Israel’s wilderness journey, God’s desire to see His people prosper spiritually and physically took the form of laws and restrictions designed to protect them from the spread of disease. Earlier in their journey God

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Marital Fidelity

The Creator established the marriage bond in Eden by creating humankind in two sexes and celebrating the first union (*Gen. 1:26–28, 2:21–24*). Two precepts of the Decalogue, the seventh and the tenth, protected the institution of marriage. In the theocracy, infidelity was punishable by the death of both parties (*Lev. 20:10*).

Read Numbers 5:11–31. How are we to understand this today?

The Lord, obviously, wanted to stress how seriously He took the whole question of marital infidelity, which is by far the greatest threat to family stability.

In this procedure, which obviously included a supernatural element—the focus was on the drink. The water was holy; so was the ground from which the priest took a pinch of dust. Holy water and dust didn’t embitter the water; it simply underscored its holiness. The written judgments/curses that were washed off into the water symbolized its potential bitterness. “Everything depended on whether the woman was holy (guiltless) or unholy (guilty). If the holy met the unholy, judgment was inevitable. If the holy met the guiltless, harmony prevailed.”—Raymond Brown, *The Message of Numbers* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 2002), p. 46.

This procedure (strange to us) was not an instance of magic. Rather, it was a concrete visual aid that ex-slaves could grasp. It was not the water but the Lord who read the wife’s heart and who punished or cleared her.

How was this procedure also a protection for the woman, who could be the victim of a husband’s unwarranted jealousy?

However strange this whole thing seems to us today, the point it brings out is how important the marriage vow is in the eyes of God. God alone knows just how much pain, suffering, and damage have been caused by marital infidelity by one partner or another. What a tragedy that in so many societies marriage vows seem to hold about as much sanctity as a handshake.

What things can you do, what choices can you make, to enable you to have a pure heart?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED


had made a conditional promise that linked trust and obedience to health. “If you listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord who heals you” (*Exod. 15:26, NIV*). For the ancient Hebrew, disease had a distinct spiritual context, not merely a biological one. The Exodus statement infers that the Egyptians suffered from disease because they lacked trust in the true God. The Hebrews could avoid this suffering if they only would obey the rules God had given them.

We must not forget that scientific knowledge regarding disease was not readily available to these ancient slaves. History reveals that in some cases so-called medical practices of ancient peoples were laced with superstition and falsehood. While the modern person often is reminded about the advantages of frequent hand-washing and low-fat diets through schools, the media, and in the workplace, such knowledge was unknown by primitive peoples. Many generations would pass before germs and cholesterol were discovered and linked to disease. While modern minds, steeped in germ theory and more abundant medical knowledge, can see the logic undergirding God’s health-related instructions, the ancients simply had to accept it by faith in God’s Word.

Consider This: The modern mind tends to think that because of our advanced knowledge we no longer need to heed some of the ancient biblical restrictions that do not make sense to us. Discuss how valid the possibility is that there still might be “one or two” things that we do not know yet. What things must we still accept simply because God’s Word says so and not because we can always see the rationale behind it?

II. Social Control (*Review Lev. 19:18; Num. 5:6–8; Ps. 51:3, 4; Ezek. 33:15; Matt. 25:31–46; Luke 19:8, 9; Acts 17:28; 1 Cor. 6:19, 20; Col. 1:20 with the class.*)

If social order is difficult to achieve in relatively stable conditions, think how much harder this would have been in a mobile population of perhaps two million people! God’s law became the fence that protected them from self-destruction. It made ample provision for fairness, taking into account the needs of male and female, citizen and immigrant, poor and wealthy, and young and old. It considered property rights, human rights, and many other rights based on one central principle: humanity is created in God’s image, and we are God’s property. If Bobby breaks Johnny’s dump truck, we might be upset, not because the truck is

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Consecrated Commoners

God purposed to organize Israel in the broadest sense to be for Him “a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation” (*Exod. 19:6*). They would thus witness to the nations far and near about the truths concerning the living God and the Creator of all things. However, at Sinai the Lord especially appointed priests and Levites to serve Him in connection with the sanctuary-tabernacle worship.

What vow could a commoner (woman or man) take to devote a specific period of time to the Lord? *Num. 6:1–21*. What spiritual lessons can we take from this for ourselves today, in the context of deepening our own spirituality and our commitment to the Lord?

A Nazirite was a “consecrated one” who purposed to dedicate himself or herself to the Lord for a varying length of time. A parent could dedicate a child to be a lifetime Nazirite. For example, Samson’s mother dedicated her son according to the instruction of an angel, with the intent that he would begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines (*Judg. 13:2–5, 16:17*). Likewise, the angel Gabriel instructed Zacharias to rear John (the Baptist) as a Nazirite for his service as the forerunner of the Messiah (*Luke 1:15*). Hannah also vowed Samuel to be a lifelong Nazirite (*1 Sam. 1:10, 11*).

Interesting, too, is the injunction about drink. The vineyard, and its products of juice, wine, and grapes, represented to the ancient mind a cultivated land of farms and homesteads. When the Nazirites wouldn’t drink from the vineyard, they were expressing in a concrete way their belief that they were heading to a better land. The vineyard symbolized the settled life; the Nazirite, however, by the way he lived, showed in a concrete way a desire for “a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city” (*Heb. 11:16*).

How do we, as Seventh-day Adventists, live in anticipation of a better country, regardless of whatever country we are living in now? What are concrete ways that we can protect ourselves from getting so caught up with our vineyards here that we lose sight of our final destination?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

so important but because Johnny’s feelings are. Ultimately, when we destroy our fellow human beings, it is God who gets hurt, for He is the One to whom all humans belong. David expressed this when he confessed his sin against Bathsheba in Psalm 51. Jesus, Himself, paints the judgment scene in terms of a direct relationship with the Father. While at first glance, it is other human beings that we hurt by our sins, it is ultimately Jesus that we hurt. It is Jesus that we did not feed, Jesus that we did not clothe, Jesus that we did not visit. So, in giving the Israelites laws that protected their relationships with one another, God effectively also was protecting their relationship with Himself.

Beyond the letter of the law, the minimal standard of conduct expected in the Israelite community was the injunction to “love one another as you love yourself.” This involves forgiveness. Jesus teaches that if we will not forgive, God will not forgive us. While Christians will make every attempt to make wrongs right, some wrongs are irreversible. Forgiveness, however, covers all sins. We have all sinned, and we all need forgiveness. Whose do you need? Who needs yours?

Consider This: How is harmony with God and our fellow human beings cultivated through obedience to God’s will? How is it cultivated through the act of forgiving?

III. Marital Fidelity (*Review Gen. 1:26–28, 2:21–24, Num. 5:11–31, Matt. 19:1–12 with the class.*)

While this ancient “lie detector test” seems rather bizarre to the modern mind, we should not lose sight of the purpose of the procedure: to preserve family stability. There is nothing outdated about that concept. How much human pain, suffering, and psychological illness can be traced to an unstable home caused by marital betrayal? Are we surprised that Jesus Himself took up the cause of marital fidelity? We shouldn’t be.

Consider This: How does marital unfaithfulness affect future generations, especially the children of unfaithful parents? Consider financial consequences, moral example, and psychological self-image and stability.

► STEP 3—Apply

Thought Questions:

- 1 The Nazirites did not use products from vineyards because those

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The Aaronic Prayer

“The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace” (*Num. 6:24–26*).

After reading carefully the above blessing, answer the following questions:

• **How is the nature of the Godhead hinted at here?** *Matt. 28:19*.

• **How does this prayer reveal Israel’s total dependence upon God?** *John 15:5*.

• **What significance is there to the fact that the priests themselves were the ones to pray this prayer on behalf of the people?** *Heb. 7:25*.

There are several points of interest here. Each of the lines begins with God’s personal, covenant name (Yahweh, Lord). The congregation addressed is in the singular number. That is, each person was talked to as an individual. Each person could know what the blessing meant personally, individually. That is, no matter how much of a community Israel was, each individual could have a personal relationship with the Lord.

Israel had no Scriptures at this time. The Lord’s blessings would be seen in their deliverance from slavery, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the provisions made for their food and water. His keeping power would have been seen by His presence in the sanctuary, whose ritual—burnt offering, incense, and menorah—always burned day and night.

Here is clear evidence that Old Testament religion was all of grace (*Gal. 3:7–14; Heb. 4:1, 2*). The third line assures the believer of God’s smile and peace (*see Matt. 11:28–30*).

How have you experienced the blessings listed above in your own life? What things might you be doing that are making it difficult to see these things realized in your walk with God? What changes, no matter how painful, must you make?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

represented a “settled” life, and they were pursuing something “better.” Are Christians “pilgrims” or “settlers” while on earth?

2 Consider the American pioneers who traveled from Missouri to California searching for the land of gold. How did they live while on the trail? How might that have changed when they reached their goal?

3 Reflecting on what pioneers and pilgrims gave up in order to reach their ultimate goal, ask, “What things might my family and I do to lighten our earthly load so that we may reach our heavenly goal? What things could we do now to invest in our heavenly home? What is God doing in my life now to prepare me for a better residence?”

Food for Thought: Life is a lot like the board game Monopoly. Players spend hours acquiring and losing wealth, but in the end winners and losers alike put everything back in the box and have nothing more or less than they had at the start. In the game of life, players spend a lifetime acquiring this and that, but in the end, everyone is put in a box, and no one has more or less than they had at the start. All we leave behind is the legacy of how we lived our lives.

► **STEP 4—Create**

Group Activity:

Prop List: small flowerpot, potting soil, fertilizer, seed, a cultivating tool, a pitcher containing water, and a lamp.

Discuss which natural laws will be involved in developing a plant from the seed. What role does each “prop” play in providing for growth? What “social” laws are important for the plant to live among other plants? What growth principles help the plant to prosper (for instance, adequate light, frost protection, adequate moisture and nutrition)?

Now view the props metaphorically. What spiritual laws may be represented by the various items? How does God use them to prepare the spiritual seed for growth? How might “law” protect the sprouted seed? What laws are necessary to produce a mature plant? What about “spiritual weeds”? What special precautions might be taken when transplanting to another “social soil” or environment? How can we apply our observations to our real life of disappointments, temptations, successes, opportunities, challenges, and choices during the coming weeks and months?

Further Study: “Consecrate yourself to God in the morning; make this your very first work. Let your prayer be, ‘Take me, O Lord, as wholly Thine. I lay all my plans at Thy feet. Use me today in Thy service. Abide with me, and let all my work be wrought in Thee.’ This is a daily matter. Each morning consecrate yourself to God for that day. Surrender all your plans to Him, to be carried out or given up as His providence shall indicate. Thus day by day you may be giving your life into the hands of God, and thus your life will be molded more and more after the life of Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 70.

“Circumstances may separate friends; the restless waters of the wide sea may roll between us and them. But no circumstances, no distance, can separate us from the Saviour. Wherever we may be, He is at our right hand, to support, maintain, uphold, and cheer. Greater than the love of a mother for her child is Christ’s love for His redeemed. It is our privilege to rest in His love, to say, ‘I will trust Him; for He gave His life for me.’”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 72.

Discussion Questions:

1 Though we all know the dangers of getting too caught up in the things of this world, and losing sight of our real home, is it possible to be so wrapped up in our desire for heaven that we shirk our responsibilities here? If so, how? How can we strike the right balance in this important topic? What examples can you think of in which people have gone too far in their anticipation of heaven at the expense of their responsibilities here?

2 What are some of the stresses and strains that your particular society places on marriage? How can your church, in that society, deal with these challenges in a way that protects the God-given sanctity of marriage?

3 In class, talk about situations in which you were wrong, or wronged someone else, and how you were able to resolve the problems. What lessons did you learn from these experiences? How do you deal with situations in which it appears that the wrongs are all but unforgivable?

Summary: The Lord would have His people happy and at peace. Physical and spiritual wholeness are obtained by loving obedience to His laws of life, kind relationships with spouse and neighbors, and daily consecration of the will to the Father. This doesn’t mean that life is always easy in this sin-cursed earth, but it can be improved greatly if we seek to walk in His paths.