

1. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ

Biblical material: *Romans 3:9-26, Luke 1:26-38, John 1:1-18, Acts 9:1-19.*

Quotes:

- Never be afraid to try something new. Remember, amateurs built the Ark. Professionals built the Titanic. *Anon.*
- The least of things with a meaning is worth more in life than the greatest of things without it. *Carl Jung*
- No matter how much I prove and prod,/ I cannot quite believe in God;/ But oh, I hope to God that He/ Unswervingly believes in me. *E.Y. Harburg, attributed*

Introductory questions

What do you think of when you hear the word “Lord”? How is this concept of God relevant to today’s world? What are the positive/negative aspects? While we certainly recognize God’s sovereignty, is this what is at issue in the Great Controversy? How did Jesus come to reveal the kind of Lord he is? How should we relate to such a Lord?

Discussion ideas

This quarter’s lessons focus on the Lordship of Jesus, viewed from different aspects. The first question to pose is how the concept of “Jesus as Lord” works in our contemporary society. For we have few lords today. Perhaps the nearest parallels are president and prime ministers, or CEOs. The whole notion of an all-powerful, even dictatorial lord, is not now a usual part of our experience. In the Middle Ages, the peasants could readily relate to the concept of the Lord of the Manor. Knights would pledge allegiance and homage to their Lord, and so on. But today?

So while we would want to respectfully appreciate the concept, how do we translate such an idea into today’s world? Or are we suggesting that we need to revert to some idea of God as a tyrannical Lord who orders: “Ask no questions! Obey and tremble!”?

Sunday’s lesson is entitled “Our need of a savior,” and then speaks of the wrath of God and the wages of sin. If we understand our primary problem with God as being mainly legal, then what we need is not so much salvation as a declaration of being not guilty. This emphasis turns God’s incredible gift of healing, transforming salvation into a judicial declaration. While our sense of guilt may well drive us to seek such a “pardon,” the true wonder of God’s salvation is that he re-makes us in his image once more. It is not a question of his stating we are good when we are quite evidently not, but of a complete transformation from sin-sick rebels into trustworthy friends of God.

“Unfortunately, not everyone is willing to accept God’s perfect plan. Some view the message of the Cross and blood atonement as a remnant from humanity’s barbaric past. Others would rather trust in their own wisdom rather than the wisdom of God.” Wednesday’s lesson. How would you respond to such assertions?

Interestingly the first Bible text (Rom. 3:9-26) does not mention the word “Lord.” So one might be forgiven for wondering why it is included...

The key question is Acts 9:5: “Who are you, Lord?” The answer to this question determines all that follows...

Ellen White Comments

As they question, “Who is this?” the disciples, filled with the spirit of inspiration, answer this question. In eloquent strains they repeat the prophecies concerning Christ: Adam will tell you, It is the seed of the woman that shall bruise the serpent’s head. Ask Abraham, he will tell you, It is “Melchizedek King of Salem,” King of Peace. Gen. 14:18. Jacob will tell you, He is Shiloh of the tribe of Judah. Isaiah will tell you, “Immanuel,” “Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.” Isa. 7:14; 9:6. Jeremiah will tell you, The Branch of David, “the Lord our Righteousness.” Jer. 23:6. Daniel will tell you, He is the Messiah. Hosea will tell you, He is “the Lord God of hosts; the Lord is His memorial.” Hosea 12:5. John the Baptist will tell you, He is “the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.” John 1:29. The great Jehovah has proclaimed from His throne, “This is My beloved Son.” Matt. 3:17. We, His disciples, declare, This is Jesus, the Messiah, the Prince of life, the Redeemer of the world. And the prince of the powers of darkness acknowledges Him, saying, “I know Thee who Thou art, the Holy One of God.” Mark 1:24. {DA 578-9}

Extra material

“‘Not by might, not by power, but by my spirit,’ says the Lord of Hosts.” And don’t misread the quote. God is **not** saying: “Not by *your* power, but by *my* power.” Rather, it is *by his spirit*. God is not into the enforcement of belief by power. The all-powerful Creator of the Universe has chosen not to use that power. He does not want acceptance based on fear; worship based on threat of punitive power. If that was what God wanted, he could have achieved his aim in the very beginning—all dissent would have been met by instant disintegration. No. God does not use power to get his own way. But few get the message.

So he comes in person. As a human being without power. Without the ability to threaten, force, convince by display of power. And what happens?

Very little. Who bothers to notice this **powerless** individual? A few shepherds; the odd prophetess and priest; and some astronomers from the east. As he grows up, who comes to see him? And even when he starts his public ministry, what do people want from him?

Show us a miracle, then we’ll believe. Give us a sign, so we can know what you say is true. Make a wonder appear in the sky, so we will be convinced. *Give us some proof of power, Jesus.*

Jesus’ reply? A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a sign. And I will not give you any. No power pyrotechnics to amaze you. For Jesus came with no reason to be accepted than that what he said was the truth, and what he did was proof enough of the real power of God.

The disciples ask for fire out of heaven on those that don’t respond. Jesus refuses this kind of use of power. The Devil tempts Jesus to use his power to help himself. Jesus refuses to use his power in this way—for it totally contradicts his very nature, the nature of God himself. Herod asks for a show-stopping miracle from Jesus. “So I can believe.” Jesus says nothing, does nothing.

Even on the Cross, they are still trying to get some power display from Jesus. After all, to come down from the Cross would be some feat any escapologist would have been proud of. Come on Jesus, show us some divine power. Force us to believe. Do something that will convince us—give us a powerful God to be proud of.

And all Jesus does is ask forgiveness for those who do not know what they are doing. For our God is **not** a God of power. Not in that way.

Not that God has no power. He surely has total power. But he **chooses** not to exercise his power to force and compel; for that only creates the sullen submission of a rebel. And once the power is removed, then the hostility flares up once more. Is that the way God wants to run his Universe?

No. God extends his power to achieve the greatest goal: total freedom for all his created beings. The freedom to choose, the freedom to love, the freedom to worship a God who will never force or compel.

2. Lord of Our Priorities

Biblical material: Exodus 19:5, Romans 3:24, Eph 1:7, Genesis 2:24, Job 1:1-5.

Quotes:

- Authority exercised with humility, and obedience accepted with delight are the very lines along which our spirits live. *C. S. Lewis*
- We do not have a money problem in America. We have a values and priorities problem. *Marian Wright Edelman*
- A priority is done first; it is the most urgent, the most critical basis for success. A priority is a necessity that cannot be ignored. It may bring hardship, but a priority is the driving force that controls thinking and action. Nearly impossible goals can be reached if they are given top priority. Unfortunately, many people just respond to the immediate demands around them and do not analyze what is controlling their behavior. *Gary Smith*

Introductory questions

How is God's blessing tied to obedience? Is this "love me or else"? Or is obedience to be seen as mindless adherence to a set of arbitrary requirements? The lesson stresses justification and "blood redemption." In what way should such ideas be priorities for us? How is the experience of Job an exercise in priorities? What is God's priority?

Discussion ideas

"Obedience is the ultimate evidence that we have accepted Jesus as Savior and Lord." (Wednesday's lesson). Or is it agreement, identification, assent? The whole issue of what is to be our priority in how we answer such questions influences our whole relationship with God. And what is the nature of true obedience—is it purely in doing what we are told without even understanding why, or does God wish us to think, reason, and agree that what he says is right?

In the context of the Great Controversy, what is the fundamental issue? Is it that the Devil and all who follow him are not obeying God? That God demands unquestioning obedience? If that is the real issue, then God could have enforced such obedience long ago. However God has gone to great lengths to demonstrate that is *not* the way he runs his universe.

God's priority is to win the battle for the minds of his created beings—to convince them through demonstration that his way of running the universe is the only way, and that he is right and loving and true. Only by convincing his children that the charges of the Devil are untrue can God conclude the conflict over God's character and government.

In fact one of the Devil's main accusations is that God demands obedience. So the issue runs far deeper—what kind of obedience, and why?

Some answers given by Christian believers tend to agree with the Devil's charges! Even those who wish to speak well of God can sometimes be confused about what God really wants, and how he achieves his objectives. Terms like "justification" may suggest that God's priority is to declare us not guilty, rather than to restore us to spiritual health.

In Romans 3:24 it speaks of being "justified freely." How would you explain this idea—and how free is free? "Under his lordship we find freedom, not bondage." (Friday's lesson.)

Ephesians 1:7 says "we have redemption through his blood." Imagine you are trying to explain this concept to someone who has never heard Christian ideas before—what would you say?

Ellen White Comments

The man who attempts to keep the commandments of God from a sense of obligation merely—because he is required to do so—will never enter into the joy of obedience. He does not obey. When the requirements of God are accounted a burden because they cut across human inclination, we may know that the life is not a Christian life. True obedience is the outworking of a principle within. It springs from the love of righteousness, the love of the law of God. The essence of all righteousness is loyalty to our Redeemer. This will lead us to do right because it is right—because right doing is pleasing to God. {COL 97-8}

It makes every difference how we do service for God. The boy who drudges through his lessons because he must learn will never become a real student. The man who claims to keep the commandments of God because he thinks he must do it will never enter into the enjoyment of obedience. The essence and flavor of all obedience is the outworking of a principle within—the love of righteousness, the love of the law of God. The essence of all righteousness is loyalty to our Redeemer, doing right because it is right. When the Word of God is a burden because it cuts directly across human inclinations, then the religious life is not a Christian life, but a tug and a strain, an enforced obedience. All the purity and godliness of religion are set aside. But adoption into the family of God makes us children, not slaves. {TMK 118}

All true obedience comes from the heart. It was heart work with Christ. And if we consent, He will so identify Himself with our thoughts and aims, so blend our hearts and minds into conformity to His will, that when obeying Him we shall be but carrying out our own impulses. The will, refined and sanctified, will find its highest delight in doing His service. When we know God as it is our privilege to know Him, our life will be a life of continual obedience. Through an appreciation of the character of Christ, through communion with God, sin will become hateful to us. {DA 668.3}

No one can keep the commandments of God who does not cherish love in his heart; for without love there is no true obedience. Supreme love to God is required, and when this is an abiding principle in the soul, our love to those around us will be seen in our deeds and words. {ST, February 24, 1898}

Do right because you love to. {AY 47}

Extra Material

Red light. You stop. Life continues. A simple kind of ad campaign I saw in Brazil, a safety promotion by their Highways Department. Nothing complicated here. You're driving down the street and come up to a stop light. If it's red you stop. You don't drive through it or try to beat it. You stop, and life continues—for you, and for the others on the street.

Strange then that they have to advertise this fact. If you need an ad campaign to promote the obvious, it suggests a problem.

I spoke to one of the taxi drivers outside the hotel.

"Yes, it's necessary," he said. "Too many people think a red light means go faster!"

Racing down the highway of life, ignoring the stop lights? Some try it... Truth is, you don't live long. Stop lights are not some arbitrary device to stop you getting to where you're going, but a way of making sure drivers going in different directions are controlled, so they don't kill each other at the intersection. Stop lights protect people at crosswalks, halting traffic so they can cross the street in safety. You jump a crosswalk light at red and you may kill or injure someone. Simple as that.

If we run spiritual stop lights, God doesn't hand out an arbitrary ticket, but we pay an inherent price. In the same way as an addict dies from refusing to acknowledge the stop lights that the doctors and counselors and judges pointed out on the way, we too make ourselves sick and kill ourselves spiritually.

We follow and respect God's stop lights because we agree with Him that right is right and wrong is wrong. We identify with God's way of running the Universe, and wouldn't want it any different. When Jesus tells us to obey his commands, and then indicates we will obey if we love him, then that's no compulsion or even God-pleasing. It's us simply saying, "I obey precisely because I understand, and identify with right for right's sake."

God's stoplights are there for a purpose. Not because God is mean-spirited and wants to stop us having fun. Not because He's a control-freak. Not because He delights in demanding obedience and imposing penalties.

Rather because He wants the very best for us, and will protect us, even from ourselves. Because He loves us.

3. Lord of Our Thoughts

Biblical material: 1 Corinthians 2:16; Colossians 3:1, 2; Ephesians 6:10-18; 2 Corinthians 10:3-5; Romans 12:1, 2.

Quotes:

- Reality leaves a lot to the imagination. *John Lennon*
- Getting things done is not always what is most important. There is value in allowing others to learn, even if the task is not accomplished as quickly, efficiently or effectively. *R. D. Clyde*

Introductory questions

Does God really ask us to give him our minds? What could this mean? Why does God allow our free thoughts—what is he really looking for? How do “we have the mind of Christ”? What about setting our hearts and minds on things above? How does this relate to the issues in the Great Controversy, and what about theological concepts that stress more objective concepts?

Discussion ideas

Ephesians 6 explains that the spiritual battle is against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. What does this mean, and how what does this tell us about the true nature of the Great Controversy? 2 Corinthians 10 explains the weapons we are to use, and how we “demolish arguments”! This sounds like the real issues are in the mind—so how important it is to make sure we think right thoughts. How do we do this is the real question!

We are transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2). If *that* is the real process that God wants to achieve, then what about other concepts regarding God’s perceived requirements that have been traditionally taught?

In Tuesday’s lesson we’re told to dwell on Christ’s substitutionary death and his intercessory ministry, and then think what this reveals about the character of God. What are the possible conclusions that you could come to?

Some of these ideas illustrate the problem we face when we see sin as something objective and “out there,” rather than an internal problem that affects us to the core of our being. If sin is only something to be removed, like some dirt to be washed away, then the way this is achieved will be by some external process. But sin is not an object. It is the way we think, the way we relate, the way we *are*. So in order to take care of sin, God has to renew our minds, and heal the damage sin has done to our nature and character. No wonder then that he is most interested in our minds, the way we think. For the way we think determines our actions, who we really are. So instead of talking so much about objective and external concepts, maybe we need to speak more about subjective and internal ones!

How can God be “Lord of our thoughts”? God wants us to be individuals and free moral agents. He is not into mind-control. Rather our relationship to God is developed through a process by which we reason and think things through, so that we conclude that God’s way is the way we want, and choose to “think God’s thoughts after him”? God refuses to take away our personal responsibility, even if we try to “give our minds” to him. That is not what he wants. If he wanted to control our thoughts, he could have programmed us that way from the beginning. No: God wants our freely-given love and admiration, based on our reasoned choice, eagerly wanting God’s will as our own will. We agree with him on the basis of truth and right.

Ellen White Comments

Gird up the loins of your mind, says the apostle; then control your thoughts, not allowing them to have full scope. The thoughts may be guarded and controlled by your own determined efforts. Think right thoughts, and you will perform right actions. {AH 54}

Not only our words and actions, but our thoughts, make up the picture of what we are. {CG 563}

God bids us fill the mind with great thoughts, pure thoughts. He desires us to meditate upon His love and mercy, to study His wonderful work in the great plan of redemption. Then clearer and still clearer will be our perception of truth, higher, holier, our desire for purity of heart and clearness of thought. The soul dwelling in the pure atmosphere of holy thought will be transformed by communion with God through the study of Scriptures. {COL 60}

The leaven hidden in the flour works invisibly to bring the whole mass under its leavening process; so the leaven of truth works secretly, silently, steadily, to transform the soul. The natural inclinations are softened and subdued. New thoughts, new feelings, new motives, are implanted. A new standard of character is set up--the life of Christ. The mind is changed; the faculties are roused to action in new lines. Man is not endowed with new faculties, but the faculties he has are sanctified. The conscience is awakened. We are endowed with traits of character that enable us to do service for God. {COL 98-9}

Extra material

So often we talk about conversion, about God's means of salvation, as just fixing us up. He does a cleaning job on us. As if we're saying that basically we're OK, we've just got a little bit of sin-dirt on us. So God comes in and washes us, so that we become clean and bright. That's what God does. Making us new. Not just cleaning a bit of sin- dirt off the outside, but transforming us from the inside. As Romans 12:2 says: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within..." (Phillips version.)

We just can't clean ourselves up; nor is it a question of getting the right "divine detergent"! "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." (Philippians 2:13). God works in you, both to will and to do. All who accept God into their lives are being changed. God's process of changing us is first and foremost internal. What soap ad would promise cleansing from the inside out?!

But that's exactly what God does. As we let him, he gets to work, and sets about restoring his divine image in us once more. "But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we have done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." (Titus 3:4,5 NIV.)

Note that the washing is "rebirth" washing; and that the Holy Spirit makes us new. God's plan calls not for scrubbing or polishing something a little tarnished (yet basically OK), but for what only God can do: the creation of trusting friends out of rebellious enemies.

As this happens, as we accept God and his salvation, we are transformed. God's friends reflect his character to all those around him. That's the change, that's the miracle, that's the gospel.

For all the beings of God's eternal kingdom, to be safe, must be "thought-true." Remember it was as Lucifer began to think in his mind, as he directed his thoughts in a wayward direction, that sin was born—the refocusing of the mind onto self, in complete opposition to the way in which God thinks.

4. Lord of Our Desires

Biblical material: Genesis 1, 2; Romans 1:3; 6:1-7; 8:3; 2 Corinthians 5:17; 1 Timothy 3:16; Philippians 2:8; Colossians 2:12, 13; 1 Peter 1:13-16; 1 John 2:1.

Quotes:

- Sometimes it is more important to discover what one cannot do, than what one can do. *Lin Yu-t'ang*
- The life you have led doesn't need to be the only life you have. *Anna Quindlien*
- He was too good-looking to be wrong. *Overheard conversation, teenage girls, Bracknell, England.*

Introductory questions

How are we “no longer slaves to sin”? How would you explain Romans 8:3, 4? What is God doing for us, and how do we reveal God in the way we live? We are a new creation—the old has gone, the new has come! How does this work, and what should such a concept lead us to focus on? How do we “prepare our minds for action”?

Discussion ideas

It is a cliché that your true character is revealed by what you do when no one else is around. While we may recognize that our desires are a long way from what we would really want—but how to change? Particularly when it comes to how we want to relate to God. Though we want a better, deeper, fuller relationship with our loving Lord, how is this achieved?

Speaking with a church group recently, I was asked the question—how can you keep up a good relationship with God when life is just so busy? A good question that we all face!

My answer at the time can no doubt be improved on, but it is perhaps a start. Like a computer that is able to run many programs at a time, our minds can also multi-task. So even though we may have to focus on work or other issues on the main screen of the computer, we can still have our “God-program” running in the background. From time to time that needs to be full-screen, of course! That’s especially true of the Sabbath, that special time when we can direct all our processing power to God. But at other times we still can retain our consciousness of God with that background program or continuously running “icon.” Our connection with him is unbroken. To my mind that is what “pray without ceasing” really means.

So as we address the true desires of our minds, we must recognize the importance of allowing God to re-wire our circuits so that we can truly want what is really best. It is no surprise that due to the ravages of sin we may not even see what is best, or want what is for our good, or the good of others. God’s promise is to re-create, to re-mold, to restore.

“God created us as physical beings, and He gave us physical desires, which, in and of themselves, can’t be bad precisely because God gave them to us. The problem is not our basic desires but rather how we as fallen beings use them...” (Monday’s lesson.) Is there a danger in focusing too much on our desires, and wanting to change them? Or should the focus be on our relationship with God and a plea for him to remake us into his image once more?

All this tends very much to focus on ourselves. As we do so, we can become blind to the larger issues. As we battle temptations, what does the onlooking universe see? How would we view things from that perspective? The question every being has to face is: “What is really important, and as a result, how to live right?” Not just for ourselves, but for the whole universe!

Ellen White Comments

We are so anxious, all of us, for happiness, but many rarely find it because of their faulty methods of seeking, in the place of striving. We must strive most earnestly and mingle all our desires with faith. Then happiness steals in upon us almost unsought. . . {2MCP 472}

We are to keep a spirit of intercession, and present all our wants to God. We are to tell him about the smallest things of life,—our cares, our business, our desires and needs. You can never weary the Lord by your importuning. It is by beholding Jesus that you become changed into the divine similitude. We may behold him by continuing in prayer, until we are not aware that we are praying; for our souls turn to the Sun of Righteousness as a flower turns to the light. {ST, May 28, 1896}

Seize every opportunity to contribute to the happiness of those around you, sharing with them your affection. Words of kindness, looks of sympathy, expression of appreciation, would to many a struggling, lonely one be as a cup of cold water to a thirsty soul. A word of cheer, an act of kindness, would go far to lighten the burdens that are resting heavily upon weary shoulders. It is in unselfish ministry that true happiness is found. And every word and deed of such service is recorded in the books of heaven as done to Christ. . . . Live in the sunshine of Christ's love. Then your influence will bless the world. {ML 165}

Extra material

Near to where we used to live in Cambridge stood a long row of short, stumpy trees. They were old pollarded willows, grey with years of experience; and they guarded the edge of the field like a line of clenched fists pointed angrily against the sky.

I found them in winter, and they seemed defiant, but dead. No sign of life, just old stumps of trees that had died still shaking their fists at the world. But then came the spring, and they came to life. No longer looking like fists, they sent out shoots and leaves, green and fresh, and showed a strange beauty where once there was only ugly, twisted bark. A transformation. A re-creation.

But not all became green and bright. Some stayed just as they had been, grey and dead. A peculiar sight amongst all the summer beauty—an ugly, twisted fist clenched in death. They had died forever and would slowly rot away.

A parable, perhaps. A story for us to think on. A tale that means something, pointer to the ways of God.

Because all too often we stand there and shake our fists at the world and against God. We're angry with our state, and we shout out our complaints. And we want to go our own way, despite God. Why should we put up with the way we are? Why should we have to live as we do? We have plenty to complain about, and who is responsible? Not us. Oh no, not us. If God is really God, why doesn't he do what *we* want? Why do we have to do just as *he* pleases? And even when we do strictly follow his requirements, we *still don't* have any guarantee that we'll get what we want. We're mad, and we think we're right. So we shake our fists at heaven, and shout out our grievances against the God who we think makes us suffer so.

Just like the living willows, we can be transformed by God's spring. We can choose not to be dead, lifeless stumps that have refused his healing, changing grace. We can want to want what God wants!

In everything, God gives us choice. And his plea for each of us is, "Choose life!"