

## **Family Seasons** **Families of Faith**

Lesson #11 for June 15, 2019

Scriptures: Acts 10:1-28,34-35; 1 Corinthians 2:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22; John 1:12-13; 3:7; 1 John 5:1; Hebrews 12:1-2.

1. This lesson talks about the effects of human culture on our choices and our understanding even of God's plan for us. What if we literally followed the Bible today, as some try?
2. Hebrews 12:1-2 tell us clearly that the only safe plan for our lives is to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus from beginning to end.
3. It should not be necessary to mention that our culture affects us in every stage of our lives. That culture is handed down to us from our parents, maybe our grandparents; it impacts how we live in our homes, how we relate to each other, even how we worship at church.
4. One of the very important ways in which cultural ideas from the past have affected all of us was the "change" in Sabbath to Sunday. And even though there is no biblical evidence for that change, it still impacts the majority of Christians in our world today.
5. Culture is not always negative. But, often, it is. No doubt, that is because of the Devil's work. So, how do we become faithful and blameless while living in a culture that is absolutely committed to the Devil's ways? (Philippians 2:15)
6. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is probably unique among Christian churches in that it continues to believe and act as if a worldwide church can come together and formulate common beliefs and doctrines and remain a unified whole despite cultural differences.
7. Sometimes, in the past, Adventist missionaries and also missionaries of other churches have traveled to very warm areas in Africa, for example, and thought that they needed to wear a suit and a tie in order to stand up and preach on Sabbath! Some African tribes have accepted that attire as if it were an essential part of the Christian message!
8. We have repeatedly discussed in the past the slow and erratic progress which finally resulted in the acceptance of Gentiles into the early Christian church. Jesus repeatedly reached out to Gentiles: (1) The two demoniacs of Gadara—with amazing results (Matthew 8:28-33); (2) The woman at the well in Samaria (John 4:1-41); (3) The woman in Phoenicia whose daughter was possessed with the demon (Matthew 15:21-28); etc. It was near a pagan temple in the area of Caesarea Philippi that Jesus asked His disciples that important questions recorded in Matthew 16:15 (*GNB\**): "Who do you say I am?"
9. One very important step in the acceptance of Gentiles into the Christian church is spelled out in Acts 10:1-35; 11:1-18. Cornelius was a man of faith even though he was a Roman centurion—an enemy of the Jews! God needed to reach out to him and his family and draw them into the Christian church. At that time, Peter was staying at the house of a tanner in Joppa. He received that strange vision of the sheet coming down from heaven with all kinds of animals in it. And then, he heard the knock on the door and, eventually, after traveling to Caesarea Maritima with at least six (Acts 11:12; 10:23) other Christians from Joppa realized when the Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentile believers that God had accepted them as well!
10. God never shows partiality to any particular group. Now, it is true that He favored the Jews by giving them the Scriptures. But, that did not place them at any kind of advantage when it actually comes to salvation. The death of Christ on the cross answered the questions in the great controversy, and those answers were just as valid for Gentiles as for Jews.
11. In fact, Jesus's death was for more than the sins of every human being. It was to demonstrate

the truth about God, His character, and His government, as well as to demonstrate the truth about Satan and his character.

**Romans 3:1-4:** Have the Jews then any advantage over the Gentiles? Or is there any value in being circumcised? <sup>2</sup>Much, indeed, in every way! In the first place, God trusted his message to the Jews. <sup>3</sup>But what if some of them were not faithful? Does this mean that God will not be faithful? <sup>4</sup>Certainly not! **God must be true, even though every human being is a liar.** As the scripture says,

“You must be shown to be right when you speak;

you must win your case when you are being tried.”—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation\** (2nd ed., Romans 3:1-4). New York: American Bible Society. [Bold type is added.]

It was in order that the heavenly universe might see the conditions of the covenant of redemption that Christ bore the penalty in behalf of the human race. **The throne of Justice must be eternally and forever made secure, even tho the race be wiped out, and another creation populate the earth.** By the sacrifice Christ was about to make, all doubts would be forever settled, and the human race would be saved if they would return to their allegiance. Christ alone could restore honor to God’s government. **The cross of Calvary would be looked upon by the unfallen worlds, by the heavenly universe, by Satanic agencies, by the fallen race, and every mouth would be stopped.** In making His infinite sacrifice Christ would exalt and honor the law. He would make known the exalted character of God’s government, which could not in any way be changed to meet man in his sinful condition.—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*,\* July 12, 1899, par. 2. [Bold type is added.]

12. Many of our Christian friends believe that the gospel is all about how God saves “me”—and you, too, of course! But, the gospel is really about telling the truth about God, His character, His government, and seeing what a contrast it is to the character and government of Satan. But, being egocentric people, that is a difficult message for us to understand. If God could be seen as He is and the Devil as he is, wouldn’t everyone choose God?
13. Another big step forward was made when Christians from Cyprus and Cyrene (Libya) went to Antioch in Syria and began to spread the gospel freely to Gentiles as well as to Jews. (See Acts 11:19-21.)
14. Soon, there were many Gentiles joining the Christian church in Antioch, and the conservative leaders in Jerusalem had to check it out. The result was the calling of that first “general conference” session as spelled out in Acts 15. Fortunately, God’s will was done, and the hand of fellowship was extended to Gentiles.
15. Read Acts 15:19-20,28-29; 1 Corinthians 2:2; and 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22.
16. Most cultures value the ties that are represented by our family units. Christians should be thankful for that. Unfortunately, a lot of strange beliefs have crept into the Christian church because of cultural ideas in the past.
17. Read John 16:13. How much of your faith is shaped by your culture? How much is biblical truth? How can you learn to discern between the two? The United States was founded by groups of people who believed that they were escaping persecution from false Christianity which had linked hands with the local governments of Europe to oppress and kill those who disagreed with them. How far have we come from that original position? Is our government today more in line with true Christianity than our founding fathers were?

18. Read Genesis 12:1-5. Abraham has always been described as the father of the faithful. He grew up in Ur of the Chaldees which is now southeastern Turkey—not southeastern Iraq as some have thought in the past. When he reached the age of 75, God called him because He recognized that his family was becoming pagan. The Bible and Ellen White suggest that if Abraham had remained there, either he or his descendants would soon have lost their relationship with the true God. If he had not moved from Ur, we may never have heard of Abraham. So, Abram/Abraham and Sarai/Sarah left Ur with many slaves, permanently leaving their families. After spending some time in Haran, they uprooted again and traveled to Canaan. There were thousands of people in that extended household.
19. Abraham had moved from his pagan environment to a different pagan environment where sexual immorality was practiced as part of their religion. Many strange customs have developed down through the ages and then have been considered essential to become a part of a recognized family. In one ancient culture, a man was expected to eat the corpses of his dead parents! In another culture, a man who wanted to marry had to bring her father a dowry of shrunken heads from a rival tribe! So, what cultural influences are impacting our lives today and the beliefs we share in our worship communities?
20. Read Genesis 16:1-3 and Genesis 35:1-4. When Abraham and Sarah thought it was impossible for God to fulfill His promise in giving them a child, they followed custom and added Hagar to their family! And we have been living with the consequences ever since.
21. Many years later when Jacob received a message from God to move back to Bethel, God asked him to collect the idols that were being kept by his family members and to bury them so that when they returned to Bethel they could worship God correctly.
22. Recorded in Ezra 10 and Nehemiah 13 are the stories of the few Jewish exiles—probably less than 1% or 2% of the Jewish exiles—who returned to Palestine from Babylonia and Medo-Persia. Fairly quickly, even the leading men of Israel were marrying foreign wives.
23. The second time this happened is spelled out in Nehemiah 13:23-24. We need to notice how pervasive this practice had become. The children of some of those Israelite fathers could not even speak the Aramaic language of their fathers! If this process had continued for very long, Judaism would have faded away, and we would never have heard of it!
24. Earlier, Solomon initiated that whole process by marrying multiple foreign wives and building pagan temples on the Mount of Olives in which those wives could worship those foreign gods.
25. So, once again, we need to ask ourselves the question: How can we exist within our culture and retain what is good while we reject or shun what is bad?
26. What things in your particular culture are helpful to family life and are in harmony with the Bible? What things are not? How can you best adapt your faith to your culture without compromising essential truths?
27. In the United States today, many in the government believe that every religion including atheism should be treated as of equal value. Think of the impact that evolution has had on our educational system. It is very interesting to notice that the media acts as if evolution is correct; but, when a crisis occurs, we are encouraged to pray! To whom should we pray?
28. Surely, we all would admit that change is inevitable. It has been the story of mankind from the days of Adam and Eve until our present day. Some changes are predictable such as aging, marriage, and death; others are completely unpredictable such as natural disasters, war, illnesses, family moves, or even career failures.
29. Read Esther 2:7-9. How might things have been different if Esther's parents had not died? How would things have been different if Mordecai had never been employed by the king? And what if Esther had not been chosen to be one of the ladies in that beauty contest?

30. Think of the impact that Mordecai and Esther ultimately had on the fate of the Jews. Not only did Esther save them from genocide but also when Mordecai became prime minister, it must have had some important implications for their future.
31. Think of all you know about the stories of Daniel and his three friends. What if Daniel had not been brave enough to insist on food which had not been offered to idols—which happened to be a healthier diet? What if his three friends had not been willing to stand up for the truth on the plain of Dura? Were there other Jews who were bowing down?
32. Because Daniel and his friends remained faithful to their beliefs, we have all of the information recorded in the book of Daniel and all of the later references, some even by Jesus Himself, to Daniel. It was through Daniel that God has given to us all of the time prophecies all the way down to 1844 and the later development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. And remember that Daniel and his friends were only teenagers who had been torn from their homes when those momentous events started.
33. It has been carefully studied by sociologists and proven time and again that when there is a major change in one's cultural setting, the upset makes him/her more vulnerable to take on new ideas and new attitudes. Many people have chosen at such times to join a new church; others have stopped attending church completely.
34. What are we as Seventh-day Adventists doing to reach out to people we might meet who have just gone through such trauma? Are we welcoming them into our "faith community"?
35. Read Judges 2:7-13. When Joshua and his fellow leaders died, the children of Israel rapidly began adopting pagan customs and ideas. How do you explain that?

Studies of how values and beliefs in organizations such as churches are transmitted to subsequent generations show that the founders have very high levels of commitment to the beliefs. They were the ones who first championed them. Within a generation or two, many lose sight of the principles behind the values. They may go along with the organization—but often from habit. In subsequent generations, habits tend to crystallize into traditions. The founders' passion is no longer present.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide\** for Wednesday, June 12.

36. Read John 1:12-13; 3:7; and 1 John 5:1. Some scholars, considering all that we have just talked about, have said that God has no grandchildren, only children. What does that mean? It means that each of us must develop a personal relationship with God and with Jesus Christ if our faith is going to remain active. Without that personal attachment, the faith will flicker and die.
37. So, how should we pass along our faith to our children? In previous lessons we have noted that parents can pass along their faith not only through organized instruction but also by casual example. While parents should do everything they can to maintain an environment in which Christianity is attractive, they cannot make choices for their children.
38. *The Message* is a paraphrase of the Bible by Eugene Peterson. He translated the word *euaggelion* or *gospel* using the word *message*. That is the message that needs to go to all parts of the world in our day. So, what is involved in that message? Read Matthew 28:5-7; John 3:16; Romans 1:16-17; 1 Corinthians 2:2; and **2 Corinthians 5:18-21**.
39. In the Matthew 28 passage, it is interesting to notice that according to the cultural norms of that day, the all-male disciples did not believe what the woman said when they spoke the message of the resurrection! "You women have gone hysterical on us!" Both John and Paul had total confidence and faith in the Christian message. They realized that that message was intended for every single person living on planet Earth. It involves not only the forgiveness

of our sins but also plans to transform each of us to become like Jesus Christ Himself.

40. Think of Paul and later John and others going into pagan, polytheistic cities and speaking to groups of people who came to listen, explaining to them that Christ had arisen from the grave in His own power! (*DA* 785) And not only that, but also Christians were raising people from their graves! What did it take to convince one of those pagans that he was telling the truth? How might a message like that impact people in our day?
41. Think of what we know about the stories of those early Christians. They opened their homes to other Christians; they conducted home churches. They welcomed whole new families into the message. Were there any differences that led to conflicts? Of course! But, they recognized that the truths they were sharing were more important than any differences that might separate them. They claimed the prayer of Jesus recorded in John 17:20-23.
42. Is there any reason why that kind of excitement and sharing cannot happen today? Paul was so excited about the gospel that he could not keep quiet about it. It was like a fire in his bones. Do we feel that way? How can we be better sharers and examples of the gospel?
43. The entire world needs to hear our message. And we need to set aside all our prejudices as we reach out to others.

It is true that we are commanded to “cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and show My people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins.” Isaiah 58:1. This message must be given; but while it must be given, we should be careful not to thrust and crowd and condemn those who have not the light that we have. **We should not go out of our way to make hard thrusts at the Catholics. Among the Catholics there are many who are most conscientious Christians and who walk in all the light that shines upon them, and God will work in their behalf.** Those who have had great privileges and opportunities, and who have failed to improve their physical, mental, and moral powers, but who have lived to please themselves and have refused to bear their responsibility, are in greater danger and in greater condemnation before God than those who are in error upon doctrinal points, yet who seek to live to do good to others. Do not censure others; do not condemn them. If we allow selfish considerations, false reasoning, and false excuses to bring us into a perverse state of mind and heart, so that we shall not know the ways and will of [244] God, we shall be far more guilty than the open sinner. We need to be very cautious in order that we may not condemn those who, before God, are less guilty than ourselves.—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*,\* vol. 9, 243.3-244.0; compare *GW*\* 328.4-329.1. [Bold type is added.]

44. How well are we doing at reaching out to people of other faiths? How well are we doing at sharing the excitement of Christianity with our children and grandchildren? Do our lives demonstrate what we are trying to say about Jesus?
45. Down through history when Christianity is adopted by a group of people, almost always, the Devil has tried to divide them into two camps: Conservatives and liberals. To conservatives, many cultural norms must be rejected, and Christians should stand apart from the world in almost every way they can. This makes it difficult for such people to share the gospel with others. By contrast, liberals will tend to adopt as many of the cultural norms of their time as they feel is possible until, sometimes, it is difficult to tell the difference between a liberal Christian and a person of the world.
46. Read Romans 2:11; Acts 10:34; and Galatians 2:6. God absolutely does not accept partiality in the spread of the gospel. Every human being is a child of God. Do we recognize that as we

move through our lives and rub shoulders with others?

47. How many of our cultural norms do we carry along with our Christianity? Do we insist that people adopt all our cultural ideas if they want to join our church? Is that necessary?
48. An example of how cultural ideas can impact a local church is the question of what kind of music is acceptable in the Christian church. Are guitars and drums okay? Should we adopt more modern music? Or, should we stick with the old, favorite hymns?
49. How often do we make the mistake that Abraham and Sarah did in trying to run ahead of God, thinking that we know what is best? If we run ahead of God, we will tend to do so adopting what we consider to be our cultural norms. How often are those cultural norms going to be consistent with God's plans for us?
50. Think of the disasters that resulted from the children of Israel demanding to have a king. In that process, basically, they rejected God as their King. (1 Samuel 8:5-7)
51. What is incredible is that God continued to work with them despite their mistakes and the rejection of Him as King. God even helped them to choose a king like they wanted! Later, of course, He chose the kind of king He wanted. Imagine God's generosity in allowing one of the descendants of that second king to be His Son who will be King forever!
52. Often, when we make bad choices, sooner or later, the results come back to haunt us. How many of us have had an experience like that?
53. J. Gresham Machen gave a presentation at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1912. He was asking the question: Is the Christian message anything more than a fairy tale? Look at his words.

“False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion. Under such circumstances, what God desires us to do is to destroy the obstacle at its root.”—“Christianity and Culture,” *The Princeton Theological Review*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1913), p. 7.—[as quoted in *Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*\* 148].

54. Cultural relativism impacts all of us in one way or another. Is our thinking clear about our culture as well as the cultures of others? How can we be sure that we are not departing from biblical principles? The Bible must always be our standard. That, of course, must force us to consider what things in the Bible were culturally determined in their day.
55. What cultural trends affecting our culture today are antagonistic to the gospel? What about evolution? And the denigration of religion in the popular press? Women in the ministry?
56. When choosing His 12 disciples and beginning His Galilean ministry, Jesus gave what we call *the Sermon on the Mount*. Could that be an acceptable standard for our beliefs and teachings? Are we even ready to accept that as a norm for ourselves?

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