

The Nations: Part 1



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 10:1–12, Gen. 12:1–9, 1 Sam. 8:4–18, Matt. 20:25–28, Rev. 18:1–4.*

Memory Text: “ ‘Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed’ ” (*Daniel 7:14, NKJV*).

The book of Revelation shows us God's solutions for our fallen world. In the final chapters, access to the tree of life is restored, the curse is lifted, and we are readmitted into the presence of God. Revelation, in some ways, is the book of Genesis in reverse, which is why Genesis remains an important key to understanding how the world's problems developed in the first place.

One of the key issues in both Daniel and Revelation is worldly government, a succession of human attempts to control a planet that rightfully belongs to God, who will—once this horrible episode of sin and rebellion is forever ended—ultimately rule in righteousness.

It is a very long process that leads to this moment, covering thousands of years of human experiments in self-government. They have never worked; even those expressing the highest ideals have always fallen short, often terribly short, of those ideals. So much of the sad history of humanity through the millennia is nothing but accounts of the tragedy that these failed systems have brought upon us. And it only will get worse until God's “everlasting kingdom” (*Dan. 7:27*) finally is established.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 26.

Nimrod and Nineveh

Eden was created as the ideal home for the human race. Once sin entered, God had no choice but to separate humanity from the Garden and the tree of life, at least for now.

Outside of the Garden, humans were required to work hard to provide for their own continued existence. Life became harder; we had to live with pain and by the sweat of our brow (*Gen. 3:16–19*). Our first parents trusted that the rightful King would provide a path back into the Garden, and they brought sacrifices to the gates of Eden in faithful anticipation of the redemption that God, right from the start, offered the fallen world.

“The Garden of Eden remained upon the earth long after man had become an outcast from its pleasant paths. . . . Hither came Adam and his sons to worship God. Here they renewed their vows of obedience to that law the transgression of which had banished them from Eden. When the tide of iniquity overspread the world, and the wickedness of men determined their destruction by a flood of waters, the hand that had planted Eden withdrew it from the earth. But in the final restitution, when there shall be ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ (*Revelation 21:1*), it is to be restored more gloriously adorned than at the beginning.”
—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 62.

Others, however, worked on man-made “solutions” to our newfound problems, and we see the birth of city-states, an attempt to create an easier life, and perhaps to try to recapture what was lost in Eden.

Read Genesis 10:1–12. This is where the Bible introduces a number of key political players found throughout the rest of the Bible, including Nineveh and Babylon. Given what we know about the roles of those cities later on, what can we deduce from these texts?

Some have read about Nimrod and concluded that he is a noble hero, much like the conquering heroes of pagan mythology. But when the Bible describes him as “a mighty one on the earth,” and a “mighty hunter before the LORD,” it is not a compliment. Nimrod is great in his own estimation, and he stands “before” the Lord in the sense that he defies God. What we see in these texts is the spreading of the rebellion against God, a rebellion that will exist until, ultimately, all rebellion will be forever eradicated.

Why is the sin of rebellion against God more subtle than we might realize? How can we protect ourselves against this very human trait?

Abraham's Call

In the tenth chapter of Genesis, we see the birth of various nations. The word usually translated “nations” is *goyim*, which also can refer to Gentiles. Genesis 10 tells us that the human race divided up into lands, languages, families, and “nations” (*Gen. 10:5; see also Rev. 14:6*).

Almost immediately after the introduction of this concept, God calls Abraham out of one of those nations to be different from them and from what they represent.

Read Genesis 12:1–9. Why did God call Abram (later Abraham) out from his country of origin?

God intended to use Abraham to establish a nation that would stand in contrast to human kingdoms. They were not to have a king other than God Himself. The people were to show what would happen if the human race returned to their Creator. Israel was established to be a blessing to “ ‘all the families of the earth’ ” (*Gen. 12:3, NKJV*). God had poured out upon the Israelites light and privileges that had not been seen in the world since, perhaps, before the Flood.

Read Deuteronomy 4:5–9. What was the Lord telling the children of Abraham, the nation that had become a fulfillment of the promise God had made to Abraham?

This was not a single individual bearing witness in a single community; this was an entire *nation* that, by working together and in cooperation with God, could exhibit the glory of His character. Notice, too, in the words spoken to them that it wasn't just “statutes and judgments” that God had given them that made them so special, but their adherence to them that would cause the other nations to say, “ ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’ ” (*Deut. 4:6, NKJV*). However wonderful the truths given to the people, their failure to live up to them, to obey them, would bring curses instead of blessing and death instead of life.

How does the same principle, that of not just knowing these truths but obeying them, apply to us as Adventists today?

Given What You Asked For

As originally established, Israel was not to have a human monarch, the way that other nations did. In time, however, the people's faith faltered, and they found themselves pining for the things that "the nations," the Gentiles, had.

Read 1 Samuel 8:4–18. Why do you suppose the elders found the idea of a king appealing? In what ways do we fall prey to similar temptations?

It is important to notice that the request for a king was a rejection of God's reign over His people. As established, the nation was to answer directly to the Creator, and their relationship to Him was put on display through the sanctuary and its services, among other things. By requesting a king, they would bring the same kinds of suffering on themselves that the Gentile kingdoms experienced: military conscription in the king's wars, confiscation, taxation, and other ills. They would discover that human potentates tend to rule in their own favor instead of benevolently, as God does.

Also, the new arrangement would be permanent: Israel would be given what they asked for, but when they realized that it was a downgrade, they would be stuck with it. " 'And you will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, and the LORD will not hear you in that day' " (*1 Sam. 8:18, NKJV*).

God knows the weakness of His people, and He predicted early on that Israel would request a human king. They did, and so much of sacred history is the story of the consequences of that choice.

Read Deuteronomy 17:14–20. Notice that God does not say, "I will give them a king," but rather, His people decide that they want one. God put safeguards in place to protect His people from some of the evils of human government—though, as the history of the nation and its kings showed, the safeguards often were ignored.

One simply has to look at the history of Israel after they decided to have a king in order to see just how badly things went for them under these kings. Though some kings were better than others, even the "good" ones had done wrong (think of David and Bathsheba). In many cases, the nation lived under the rule of one king after another who did "evil in the sight of the LORD" (*see 1 Kings 11:6, 1 Kings 15:26, 1 Kings 16:30, 2 King 3:2, etc.*).

Back then, or even today, all human governments share one thing in common: sinners governing other sinners. *What possibly could go wrong?*

The Rulers of the Gentiles

God's dealings with Israel provide rich insights into His dealings with the New Testament church. In fact, in many ways, the nation of Israel served to foreshadow the errors of the church. Far from being able to claim any kind of superiority to ancient Israel, Christians have been, and still are, very much susceptible to the same temptations.

Read Matthew 20:25–28. What error did Jesus warn His disciples to avoid in establishing the work of the Christian church?

Israel asked for a human king, a request that led to the moral downfall of the nation. The kings became progressively more wicked until God allowed the Babylonians to take His people captive as a matter of course correction.

Something similar happened in the history of the Christian church. Even though they were not to structure themselves like a Gentile nation, when Constantine came to power and professed to be a Christian, believers were relieved—persecution was now ended! That in itself was a blessing, but then it occurred to the church that they might be able to leverage the power of the emperor to their own advantage.

Several major disputes broke out among Christians in the fourth century, and when the church found itself incapable of resolving them, appeals were made to the emperor to intervene. From this point forward, the bishop of Rome rose in prominence, where he had once been one senior bishop among equals. The church asked the state to intervene in the religious matters, and once the state had a foot in the door, things went from bad to worse.

Like Israel of old, many of the darkest chapters in Christian history are the direct result of the church compromising with the world. Where Israel turned to idol worship and her kings were corrupted by their appetite for power—to the point of offering children to idols—the church gradually adopted many of the means and methods of a pagan empire to the point that many faithful believers were martyred because they were perceived as threats to the church-state institution.

In your own culture, your own society, what are the ways in which these same temptations can jeopardize the integrity of our faith?

A Light to the Gentiles

The primary purpose for which God established the nation of Israel was not to condemn the rest of the world but to save it. Certainly, most of us feel condemned when we are confronted by righteous behavior in someone else; so the existence of Israel also served to highlight the sin and selfishness of the nations around it. Believers living in harmony with God highlight His righteous character, which naturally leads to conviction. Ideally, the lives of people who “keep the commandments of God” (*Rev. 14:12*) should showcase His character.

However, had the Israelites acted as they should have and done what they had been told to do, the nations would have come to them in peace, seeking to know more about them and their God. Tragically, as the Babylonian captivity showed, these nations came to wage war instead.

The ultimate showcase of God’s character, of course, was Jesus—the only human who has perfectly demonstrated it. But His perfect example, which certainly brought conviction to hearts, was intended as an invitation (*see John 3:16–21*).

The ultimate purpose for establishing the nation of Israel was the same as God’s purpose in establishing the church: He longs to use His people to draw sinners toward Christ. The call of the three angels’ messages, delivered through His church, goes out, not to a select few but to “every nation, tribe, tongue, and people” (*Rev. 14:6, NKJV*). Revelation 18:1 predicts that the whole earth will be lighted up with the glory of God prior to Christ’s return.

What do the following passages teach us about God’s intended role for His people in this world? How can we apply these principles to ourselves?

(a) *Num. 14:17–21* _____

(b) *Isa. 42:6, Isa. 49:6, Isa. 60:3* _____

(c) *Rev. 18:1–4* _____

Read again Revelation 18:1–4, the call for “my people,” that is, God’s people, to come out of Babylon. How is that going to happen? In other words, how can we, as a church that is not in Babylon, be used by God to call out God’s people who are still in Babylon?

Further Thought: Read Isaiah 44:24–45:13.

“Little by little, at first in stealth and silence, and then more openly as it increased in strength and gained control of the minds of men, ‘the mystery of iniquity’ carried forward its deceptive and blasphemous work. Almost imperceptibly the customs of heathenism found their way into the Christian church. The spirit of compromise and conformity was restrained for a time by the fierce persecutions which the church endured under paganism. But as persecution ceased, and Christianity entered the courts and palaces of kings, she laid aside the humble simplicity of Christ and his apostles for the pomp and pride of pagan priests and rulers; and in place of the requirements of God, she substituted human theories and traditions. The nominal conversion of Constantine, in the early part of the fourth century, caused great rejoicing; and the world, cloaked with a form of righteousness, walked into the church. Now the work of corruption rapidly progressed. Paganism, while appearing to be vanquished, became the conqueror. Her spirit controlled the church. Her doctrines, ceremonies, and superstitions were incorporated into the faith and worship of the professed followers of Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 49, 50.

In line with the question at the end of Wednesday’s study, are we not all in danger, especially the longer we are here, of setting “aside the humble simplicity of Christ and his apostles” for the pomp, power, accolades, and temptations of the world? If we think we’re not, we are fooling ourselves.

Discussion Questions:

① When God exiled His people to Babylon, it was a particularly painful moment. Abraham had been called *out* of Chaldea to establish a covenant people as a light for the planet, and now they were taken away in chains. During their captivity, God showed Israel what might have been if they had been faithful. Nebuchadnezzar, the very head of a system utterly opposed to God, comes to Christ (*Daniel 4*). At the end of the Israelites’ captivity, God raises up a Persian king to serve as a type of Christ, releasing His people from Babylon and returning them to the Promised Land. Cyrus was not an Israelite, and yet God chose him to demonstrate the plan of salvation to the world as he returned God’s covenant people to Jerusalem. What lessons can we learn about how God views humanity from the fact that He was now using people *outside* of Israel to accomplish His goals?

② We might not be in Babylon, but how much of Babylon might be in us? How do we recognize this problem, and how can we change?

Unlikely Church Planter

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

When Sunita got married, her new family assumed that she would automatically become a Seventh-day Adventist. In her Asian culture, the wife does whatever the husband says, so her husband, Manoj, and his parents thought that she would adopt his faith as a matter of course. But Sunita didn't.

When her in-laws saw that she still worshiped images of stone and wood, they tried their best to tell her about Jesus. The extended family lived in the same house, and the in-laws invited her to family worship. But she wasn't interested. No one forced her to come, and she avoided the gatherings.

A year and a half passed, and Sunita and Manoj moved from their small town to a big city. Now Manoj tried to turn his wife away from her worship practices.

"We as a family don't believe in image worship," he said. "It's not right. We should not do it."

But Sunita didn't know any other way of life, and Manoj didn't try to force her to stop. As time passed, Sunita gave birth to two sons. Then she fell seriously ill.

"Let's go to the Adventist church," Manoj said. "You've tried so many pills and other things, but nothing helps. Let's go just once."

Sunita didn't see any way out. She had no hope, so she agreed to go. It was her first time entering an Adventist church—or any church.

Sunita felt very good inside the building. Even though the service was in English and she understood little, she felt the warmth of church members as they welcomed her. The next week, Sunita returned and asked the pastor to add her name to a list of prayer requests made during the divine worship service. After the prayer, Sunita began to feel better. Her health slowly improved, and eventually she made a full recovery.

Sunita regularly attended church for the next four years. When an assistant pastor who spoke her language joined the church, she took Bible studies and was baptized. From that moment, she began to pray, "Let me serve You."

A few years passed, and Sunita was invited to plant churches as a Global Mission pioneer. She happily agreed. Today, she leads a church plant in an impoverished district of her city. She started the church by praying with people. As her prayers were answered, other people heard by word of mouth and came to her to ask for prayers. Fifteen people have been baptized.

"I never thought that I would come out of my faith and get to know the true God," Sunita said before taking Adventist Mission on a Sabbath visit to her church plant. "It was His will to bring me out, and He's using me for His glory."

Thank you for your prayers for Global Mission pioneers who, like Sunita, face huge challenges planting churches among unreached people groups around the world. Learn more about Global Mission pioneers on the Adventist Mission website: bit.ly/GMPioneers.