HUMAN RIGHTS

The United Nations formed in 1945 to deescalate future wars and protect every human’s basic rights. Their “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” passed in 1948 and posted on their website, says, “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance” (Article 18). This milestone document has been translated into 514 languages and has inspired many countries and regions around the world to implement their own protections of liberty.

However, today, wars and military conflicts are putting more and more people at risk. The regulations protecting human rights, which include religious liberty, are suffering unexpected setbacks, and the world is suffering in sin and sorrow in more and more graphic ways.

Perhaps people living in the twenty-first century can recognize beyond any preceding generation that no human agency will deliver the freedom this world so desperately needs. Humanism will never succeed. This world needs a deliverance from above—which is what Adventism is all about! The word “advent” means “coming,” which is why Adventists chose that word to describe our faith in Christ’s soon return. Jesus’ name means “God saves”; even His name promises freedom. This week’s lesson will focus on the final liberation that God has promised to all His children.
Write out Revelation 21 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out verses 1–8. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the passage.
THE GLORIOUS EMANCIPATION

Our last few lessons have focused on the final battle between good and evil in this world as described in Revelation 13 and 14. When the crisis comes, everyone must choose between faithfulness to God at any cost and loyalty to human traditions. Those who faithfully obey God’s laws and maintain faith in Christ will become Satan’s targets (Rev. 12:17). God’s last-day people—those who refuse to renounce their allegiance to God—will be despised, slandered, abused, and punished with fines, penalties, and even death. Family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, and all organizations will use every resource at their disposal to convince or manipulate God’s faithful people into complying with man’s traditions (Mark 13:12, 13). Believers will be arrested, dragged before courts, and punished by civil authorities (v. 9). There will be no safe place outside of God’s care as nations unite in their hatred against God’s people (Matt. 24:9). Fanatical preachers, full of charisma and backed by supernatural signs and miracles, will intensify the crowds’ frenzy (vv. 11, 24). Believers will be stripped of every good thing this world has to offer. Deliverance will not come from any worldly source; our only hope will be in God Himself. As difficult as it can be, we can trust Him to follow through on His promises, and in His compassion and understanding. The final chapters of Revelation declare that God is coming to liberate His weary people. Chapters 15–20 depict the judgment and destruction of God’s enemies while chapters 21 and 22 focus on the glorious freedom God’s people will enjoy after they’ve been released from the bondage of this world.

One of the big reasons God judges the wicked in chapters 15–18 is to deliver His people. The seven last plagues (Rev. 16) will be His punishment for all who try to force His children to receive the mark of the beast (15:1, 2); they demonstrate that those who try to take freedom from God’s people will lose their own freedom (16:1, 2). As the plagues in Egypt (Exod. 7–12) were given to emancipate God’s people from slavery, so the plagues in Revelation will result in freeing God’s end-time people from oppression and persecution. God’s judgment against Babylon in chapters 17 and 18 serves to avenge the martyrs she has killed (Rev. 17:6; 18:20, 24) and end the spell that Babylon has cast over all the earth (18:23). God will prepare the lake of fire for those who work false miracles to deceive the world (19:20). His people will no longer suffer the reproach, fraudulent accusations, and anger of false religious teachers. His judgments will deliver them.

After the detailed description of God’s judgments against His people’s oppressors, Revelation 21 announces the relief, safety, and peace that God’s people finally find in His presence. Imagine it for a moment: no more tears, no more sorrow, no more death (v. 4)! This is a freedom worth living for, and one worth dying for.
FREEDOM TO LOVE

Is the freedom that God gives His people in heaven an absolute freedom? Is it a freedom without boundaries? Is it a freedom to do anything? Of course, we know the answer is no. Healthy families do not allow their members to do anything they please; they have structure and assign different responsibilities to different members to protect the safety and happiness of everyone involved. Relationships in heaven operate in a similar way; they’re governed by covenantal love, which includes responsibilities and boundaries.

God likens His people to a bride to illustrate the mutual respect and love intrinsic to our relationship with Him (Rev. 19:9; 21:2). Two people in love want nothing more than to live with the person they love forever. Marriage vows solidify the covenantal love that protects the future of that sacred union. God, too, wants us to live in His presence forever and is therefore preparing to share His home with us (John 14:2, 3). Marriage does not give a spouse the freedom to do whatever they want. They are not free to cheat on each other or spend all their partner’s money on themselves. Spouses are not free to be gone all the time. Healthy marriages include mutual responsibilities and obligations. When spouses decide they have the freedom to do whatever they want, they doom the marriage. Despite all these boundaries, many feel that marriage opened the door to the best freedom they’ve ever discovered: the freedom to live with and have children with the person who they share a deep love with. When couples are in love, marriage means freedom, but when they aren’t, it means bondage. The same is true of heaven. For people who love God, heaven means freedom; for those who don’t, heaven would be bondage.

God’s law is written on every heart that chooses Him, and that reveals one of the most amazing things about Him: He does not force us to choose Him or worship Him. He writes His law on our hearts after we’ve made our choice. An angel could decide to rebel against Him at any time, yet no person or heavenly being will ever again choose to sin (Nah. 1:9; Rev. 21:27; 22:11). The redeemed have experienced firsthand the devastation caused by the lie that breaking God’s law brings freedom, and the angels have witnessed the results of redefining freedom as we see fit. This harrowing experience, played out on earth and witnessed by all creation, has irreversibly repudiated every one of Satan’s accusations that God is not just or that a better freedom exists. It has revealed, once and for all, that Satan's initial lie, which revolved around the claim that God’s government is too restrictive, is just that: a lie. One could say the whole great controversy centers around the question of freedom. Does loving God and choosing to follow the Ten Commandments protect our freedom or destroy it? Each of us must answer that question for ourselves today. Our conclusion will determine both the destiny we want and the destiny we’ll be given.
What relationship do the following verses have with Revelation 21?

Isaiah 25:8, 9
John 14:1–3
Revelation 7:13–17
Revelation 15
Revelation 19:1–9

What other verses come to mind in connection with the primary passage?

Review your memorized verse from Revelation 21.
FREEDOM WITH CHRIST

The sense of relief the redeemed feel when God delivers them from oppression is hardly a drop compared to the ocean of relief Jesus will feel when He finally brings His people home. The conflict will finally be over; the last stage will be complete. Reminiscent of the words He spoke on the cross, Jesus will exclaim, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts” (Rev. 21:6). Jesus’ first desire is to give us the water of life. Jesus is still outward focused even though He’s in heaven. He rejoices that He has freed the world from every barrier that would prevent people from enjoying the everlasting water of life.

Jesus promises that “he who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son” (Rev. 21:7). The plan of salvation elevates the redeemed to the full status of sons and daughters of our heavenly King, giving us all the privileges of heavenly royalty. No one has better freedoms than the children of kings. Princes are exempt from the taxes commoners pay (Matt. 17:25, 26). Princesses have the royal treasury to cover expenses and they can access the throne. They have every physical thing they could ever want. If earthly royals enjoy these extraordinary privileges, imagine the freedoms given to the King of kings’ children (1 John 3:1, 2).

Jesus gave up His liberties. He left His throne and all its royal benefits to become a servant of other servants—the lowest of the low. He was arrested and abused, stripped naked and nailed to a cross like a common criminal. He became poor so we might be rich (2 Cor. 8:9). Think about that for a moment. There was nothing He did not sacrifice in His fight to free us from sin; He surrendered His freedom and His life for just the chance that we would accept His gift.

It’s important to understand that Jesus didn’t give His people freedom because we somehow earned or deserve it; it was a gift, totally free of charge, given out of His Divine grace. How do we respond to such an incredible display of love? It’s an important question, and Revelation 14:12 provides the answer: “keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.” It takes an inordinate amount of courage to do so when the current of the whole world runs in the opposite direction. God is looking for people who have the deep love, unshakable trust, and nerve to follow Him in the here and now when friends and family are running in the other direction. Nurturing a close relationship with Christ is the only way to develop the confidence in Him that empowers us to do things we never thought possible. May the Holy Spirit help us overcome cowardice and unbelief and fill us with the love and trust needed to be among those who keep God’s commandments and have the faith of Jesus. When Christ comes in the clouds of heaven (14:14), only then will we taste true freedom.
**PARADISE**

“The angels will be there, also the resurrected saints with the martyrs, and the best of all, and what will cause us the most joy, our lovely Saviour, who suffered and died that we might enjoy that happiness and freedom, will be there. His glorious face will shine brighter than the sun, and light up the beautiful city and reflect glory all around.” (Ellen White, *Heaven* [2003], 84.)

“Could those whose lives have been spent in rebellion against God be suddenly transported to heaven and witness the high, the holy state of perfection that ever exists there,—every soul filled with love, every countenance beaming with joy, enrapturing music in melodic strains rising in honor of God and the Lamb, and ceaseless streams of light flowing upon the redeemed from the face of Him who sitteth upon the throne,—could those whose hearts are filled with hatred of God, of truth and holiness, mingle with the heavenly throng and join their songs of praise? Could they endure the glory of God and the Lamb? No, no; years of probation were granted them, that they might form characters for heaven; but they have never trained the mind to love purity; they have never learned the language of heaven, and now it is too late. A life of rebellion against God has unfitted them for heaven. Its purity, holiness, and peace would be torture to them; the glory of God would be a consuming fire. They would long to flee from that holy place. They would welcome destruction, that they might be hidden from the face of Him who died to redeem them. The destiny of the wicked is fixed by their own choice. Their exclusion from heaven is voluntary with themselves, and just and merciful on the part of God.” (Ellen White, *The Great Controversy* [1911], 542, 543.)

“It is now evident to all that the wages of sin is not noble independence and eternal life, but slavery, ruin, and death. The wicked see what they have forfeited by their life of rebellion. The far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory was despised when offered them; but how desirable it now appears. ‘All this,’ cries the lost soul, ‘I might have had; but I chose to put these things far from me. Oh, strange infatuation! I have exchanged peace, happiness, and honor for wretchedness, infamy, and despair.’ All see that their exclusion from heaven is just. By their lives they have declared: ‘We will not have this Man [Jesus] to reign over us.’ ” (Ibid., 668.)

“The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation. From Him who created all, flow life and light and gladness, throughout the realms of illimitable space. From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love.” (Ibid., 678.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How do the seven last plagues liberate God’s people?
What kinds of things will we be free from in the new earth?
What does the marriage relationship teach us about freedom?
What things does God’s law protect us from?
Why is it so necessary for our freedom to be guarded by boundaries?
How can freedom of choice be dangerous? Why does God give it to us anyway?
How has Satan redefined freedom?
Why will nobody ever again choose to sin in the new earth?
What freedoms did Jesus give up to purchase our freedom?
How can we develop deep love and unshakable trust in God today?