

Adult
Sabbath School
Bible Study Guide
July | Aug | Sept 2023

EPHESIANS



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Ephesians: How to Follow Jesus in Trying Times



In the Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul tells us about the Ephesians themselves. Years after the exciting events of the early days of Christian mission in Ephesus, the Ephesians struggled with the significance of their Christian faith.

Paul, once the troubler of the economy of this fourth-largest city in the Roman Empire, is now sidelined and imprisoned. Writing from prison, he worries that the believers in Ephesus may “lose heart,” forgetting any active sense of what it means to be disciples of Jesus in the sophisticated, urban, and thoroughly pagan culture of Ephesus. Though his hearers are already Christians, Paul’s tone is one of recruitment. He seeks to reenlist them in the Christian faith, to reignite the fire of their devotion to Christ, and to resurrect the excitement of being part of God’s great enterprise in the world, the church.

Because the Christian faith is all about Christ, Paul radiates admiration and worship of Him. If wobbly Christian disciples are to regain their footing, it will be because they recapture their first love for Jesus and establish fresh trust in His grace and power. So, Paul highlights Christ’s exaltation in heaven above all the powers and deities that seek to attract the devotion of believers in Ephesus. Jesus is the goal of the divine plan for the ages, a plan in which believers, as the church, play an important role in God’s plans to unify all things in Christ.

As Paul seeks to draw believers in Ephesus into fresh devotion to their Lord, he does not dumb down the demands of Christian discipleship. He spells out in some

detail what Christian behavior and community look like. Christians are called to Spirit-inspired, Christ-honoring, God-directed worship, which Paul illustrates again and again. A devotion to Christ impacts how one acts and speaks. To love Christ means to respect and value fellow believers. It means resisting the patterns of mean-spirited and sexually decadent behavior so rampant in their culture. It means, in our relationships within church and household, borrowing from the example of self-sacrifice offered by Christ. It means offering fellow citizens of Ephesus clear examples of a new pattern of human existence.

Paul spends a good deal of his letter expressing his excitement for this new pattern of what it means to be human through membership in God's church. He is especially invigorated by the thought that God has joined estranged segments of humanity—Jews and Gentiles—as one in the church. In living out unity where hostility would be expected, they have an opportunity to exhibit the characteristics of God's new society and the coming kingdom.

In pursuing the importance of being part of God's church, Paul develops four metaphors for the church. Believers make up the *body* of Christ, demonstrating their devotion to Christ and their unity with each other. They are a *living temple*, built through the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary, in which God is worshiped. They are the *bride* of Christ, who look toward a grand marriage ceremony when the Bridegroom comes to claim them as His own. In a final metaphor that expresses Paul's efforts to reenlist them in Christian faith, they are the *army* of Christ, which wages peace in His name, combating the forces of darkness in God's strength as they look toward Christ's return.

Ephesians, then, speaks especially to times like our own, in which the allure of the world and the passing of time threaten to dull Christian discipleship. It lifts up Christ and accents the significance of following Him as engaged, active members of His church as we live out the hope of His return. This quarter we have the privilege of listening prayerfully to Ephesians and experiencing anew the excitement of following Jesus in challenging times.

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How to Use This Teachers Edition

“The true teacher is not content with dull thoughts, an indolent mind, or a loose memory. He constantly seeks higher attainments and better methods. His life is one of continual growth. In the work of such a teacher there is a freshness, a quickening power, that awakens and inspires his [class].”

—Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, p. 103.

To be a Sabbath School teacher is both a privilege and a responsibility. A privilege because it offers the teacher the unique opportunity to lead and guide in the study and discussion of the week’s lesson so as to enable the class to have both a personal appreciation for God’s Word and a collective experience of spiritual fellowship with class members. When the class concludes, members should leave with a sense of having tasted the goodness of God’s Word and having been strengthened by its enduring power. The responsibility of teaching demands that the teacher is fully aware of the Scripture to be studied, the flow of the lesson through the week, the interlinking of the lessons to the theme of the quarter, and the lesson’s application to life and witness.

This guide is to help teachers to fulfill their responsibility adequately. It has three segments:

- 1. Overview** introduces the lesson topic, key texts, links with the previous lesson, and the lesson’s theme. This segment deals with such questions as Why is this lesson important? What does the Bible say about this subject? What are some major themes covered in the lesson? How does this subject affect my personal life?
- 2. Commentary** is the chief segment in the Teachers Edition. It may have two or more sections, each one dealing with the theme introduced in the Overview segment. The Commentary may include several in-depth discussions that enlarge the themes outlined in the Overview. The Commentary provides an in-depth study of the themes and offers scriptural, exegetic, illustrative discussion material that leads to a better understanding of the themes. The Commentary also may have scriptural word study or exegesis appropriate to the lesson. On a participatory mode, the Commentary segment may have discussion leads, illustrations appropriate to the study, and thought questions.
- 3. Life Application** is the final segment of the Teachers Edition for each lesson. This section leads the class to discuss what was presented in the Commentary segment as it impacts Christian life. The application may involve discussion, further probing of what the lesson under study is all about, or perhaps personal testimony on how one may feel the impact of the lesson on one’s life.

Final thought: What is mentioned above is only suggestive of the many possibilities available for presenting the lesson and is not intended to be exhaustive or prescriptive in its scope. Teaching should not become monotonous, repetitious, or speculative. Good Sabbath School teaching should be Bible-based, Christ-centered, faith-strengthening, and fellowship-building.

Paul *and the* Ephesians



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 18:18–21; Acts 19:13–20:1; Acts 20:17–38; Eph. 1:1, 2; Eph. 6:21–24; Eph. 3:13; Eph. 1:9, 10.*

Memory Text: “Making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (*Ephesians 1:9, 10, ESV*).

When we write something, we have a purpose for doing so, sometimes a weighty one. Abraham Lincoln, for instance, wrote his famous Gettysburg address in 1863 after the terrible devastation in the American Civil War battle there, which left about seven thousand soldiers dead. In that address, invoking the founding fathers, Lincoln expressed his belief that the Civil War was the ultimate test as to whether the nation created in 1776 would endure or would “perish from the earth.”

Paul has a profound purpose that motivates his letter. Partly because of his imprisonment (*Eph. 3:13, Eph. 6:20*), and partly because of ongoing persecution and temptations, the Ephesians are tempted to lose heart. Paul reminds them of what happened when they were converted, accepting Christ as their Savior and becoming part of the church. They have become Christ's body (*Eph. 1:19–23, Eph. 4:1–16*), the building materials in a temple (*Eph. 2:19–22*), the bride of Christ (*Eph. 5:21–33*), and a well-equipped army (*Eph. 6:10–20*). They play a strategic role in fulfilling God's grand plan, to unite everything in Christ (*Eph. 1:9, 10*). Paul writes to awaken the believers in Ephesus to their full identity and privileges as followers of Christ.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 1.

Paul, Evangelist to Ephesus

What does Paul do on his first visit to Ephesus, at the end of his second missionary journey? (*Acts 18:18–21*).

Ephesus was one of the largest cities of the Roman Empire, with a population of about two hundred fifty thousand. It was the capital of one of the empire's richest provinces, the province of Asia, which covered much of what we know today as Asia Minor. In Paul's day, the province was enjoying a time of growth and prosperity. A port city, Ephesus was also at the crossroads of important land routes. While the people worshiped many deities in the city, Artemis, regarded as the protector goddess of the city, was supreme. Her worship was the focus of civic ceremonies, athletic games, and annual celebrations. (Artemis was called Diana by the Romans; see *Acts 19:24, 35, KJV; NKJV*.)

Paul later returns to Ephesus on his third missionary journey (*Acts 19:1–12*) and remains there “for three years” (*Acts 20:31*). The apostle makes a significant time commitment to Ephesus, with the intention of firmly founding Christianity there.

What strange event leads to widespread reverence for “the Lord Jesus” in Ephesus? *Acts 19:13–20*.

Luke shares the strange story of seven itinerant, Jewish exorcists in the city. Mingling the names of both Jesus and Paul in their incantations proves to be a misguided venture for these exorcists. When the news flashes through the streets of the city, “everyone was awestruck; and the name of the Lord Jesus was praised” (*Acts 19:17, NRSV*). The event also had a profound impact on some of those who had already become believers, who publicly burned their expensive handbooks of magic arts worth “fifty thousand silver coins” (*Acts 19:19, NRSV*). With the wider residents of the city, believers learn that the worship of Jesus must not be diluted with the worship of anything or anyone else.

What did the burning of their own books signify, even at such an expense to themselves? What does that say about a total commitment to the Lord?

A Riot in the Amphitheater

Read Acts 19:21–20:1. What lessons can we draw from this story?

Paul's witness in the large, sophisticated city of Ephesus was so effective that it impacted an important economic engine for the city, tourism focused on the Temple of Artemis. And what a temple it was! This magnificent structure was composed partly of 127 pillars, each 60 feet high, of Parian marble, a pure-white, flawless marble highly prized for sculptures. Thirty-six of these pillars were sculpted and overlaid with gold, earning the temple its reputation as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Concerned that Paul's anti-idolatry rhetoric was draining financial support from the temple (*Acts 19:27*), Demetrius the silversmith whipped his fellow craftsmen into a frenzy. A rapidly expanding and highly energized crowd swept from the marketplace into the large amphitheater, which seated some twenty-five thousand people. There the commotion continued, featuring two continuous hours of shouting " 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!' " (*Acts 19:34, ESV*). After the crowd is dispersed by the town clerk, Paul meets with the believers and leaves the city.

At the end of his third missionary journey, Paul meets with elders of the Ephesian church. How would you summarize Paul's concerns? See *Acts 20:17–38*.

A tentative chronology of Paul's relationship to Ephesus:

- * AD 52: Paul's initial, brief visit to Ephesus (*Acts 18:18–21*).
- * AD 53–56: Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus (*Acts 19:1–20:1*). He composes 1 Corinthians near the end of his stay there (*1 Cor. 16:5–9*).
- * AD 57: While at Miletus, Paul meets with the elders from Ephesus (*Acts 20:17–38*).
- * AD 62: Paul composes his letter to the Ephesians, probably from confinement in Rome.

"Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears," said Paul (*Acts 20:31, NKJV*). What do you think Paul would warn our church about today, and why?

Hearing the Letter to the Ephesians

Paul wrote Ephesians to be read aloud in the house churches of believers in greater Ephesus. In the intervening years since Paul's departure, the Christian movement in Ephesus had grown, and the number of house churches had multiplied. For those early believers, it would have been an important event to have Tychicus, the personal representative of the founding apostle Paul, stand among them and share a letter from him. As suggested by the epistle itself, the assembled group likely included members of the host household—father, mother, children, and slaves (*Eph. 5:21–6:9*). At the time, a household included others, as well—clients (free persons who depended on the householder for support) and even customers. So, these may be present too, as well as members of other households.

In conjunction with the outline of the letter below, read through the entire epistle, preferably out loud (it will take about fifteen minutes to do so). What themes echo through the letter as a whole?

-
- I. Opening Greeting (*Eph. 1:1, 2*)
 - II. Introductory Blessing (*Eph. 1:3–14*)
 - III. Praying for Believers to Receive Christ-Focused Wisdom (*Eph. 1:15–23*)
 - IV. Once Spiritually Dead; Now Exalted With Christ (*Eph. 2:1–10*)
 - V. Christ's Creation of the Church Out of Jews and Gentiles (*Eph. 2:11–22*)
 - VI. Paul as Preacher of Christ to the Gentiles (*Eph. 3:1–13*)
 - VII. Praying for Believers to Experience the Love of Christ (*Eph. 3:14–21*)
 - VIII. Hold On to the Spirit-Inspired Unity of the Church (*Eph. 4:1–16*)
 - IX. Live the New, Unity-Nurturing Life (*Eph. 4:17–32*)
 - X. Walk in Love, Light, and Wisdom (*Eph. 5:1–20*)
 - XI. Practice Christ-Shaped Life in the Christian Household (*Eph. 5:21–6:9*)
 - XII. Stand Together: The Church as the Army of God (*Eph. 6:10–20*)
 - XIII. Closing Greeting (*Eph. 6:21–24*)

What key theme seems to come through in this letter? What does it say to you? What specific point or points touch home?

Ephesians in Its Time

How does Paul begin and end his letter to the believers in Ephesus? What do we learn about his deepest desires for them? See *Eph. 1:1, 2; Eph. 6:21–24*.

At the outset of the letter, Paul identifies himself as the author (*Eph. 1:1*). Near the middle of the letter, Paul again identifies himself by name, labeling himself “the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles” (*Eph. 3:1, NKJV*), which introduces a personal reflection on his work as an apostle (*Eph. 3:1–13*). Near the end of the letter, he again refers to his imprisonment (*Eph. 6:20*) and concludes with personal words (*Eph. 6:21, 22*). While some scholars deny that the letter was written by Paul, it is important to note that the epistle clearly lays claim to Paul as its author. Most Christians accept, and rightly so, Paul as the author.

How does Paul worry about the effect his imprisonment will have on believers in Ephesus? See *Eph. 3:13*.

Ephesians seems to share the same general timing and circumstances with other letters Paul writes from prison, Colossians (see esp. *Col. 4:7, 8*) and Philemon. Also considerable time seems to have passed since Paul’s ministry in Ephesus (*Eph. 1:15; Eph. 3:1, 2*). Paul probably composed Ephesians in a prison in Rome about AD 62.

In Ephesians, Paul offers few specifics about the situation of his audience in Ephesus. The scope of his attention is wide. He deals with a grand span of time, beginning with God’s decisions made “before the foundation of the world” (*Eph. 1:4*), and reflects broadly on grand themes of God’s salvation offered in Christ. In doing so, the letter exhibits an exalted, literary style, with long sentences, repetitive expressions, and developed metaphors. Paul can use such a style elsewhere (e.g., *Rom. 8:31–39*), but it is concentrated in Ephesians, which features a great deal of praise, prayer, and worship language (*Eph. 1:3–14, Eph. 1:15–23, Eph. 3:14–21*) and offers carefully crafted, highly rhetorical passages (e.g., *Eph. 4:1–16, Eph. 5:21–33, Eph. 6:10–20*).

Ephesians: A Christ-Saturated Letter

How does Paul announce the theme of his letter? *Eph. 1:9, 10.*

How can the message of Ephesians be summarized? From prison, Paul sets forth a vision of God's Christ-centered plan for the fullness of time and the church's role in it. God has acted in Christ to initiate His plan "to unite all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (*Eph. 1:10, ESV*), and He did so by creating the church as an entity composed of one new humanity of both Jews and Gentiles (*Eph. 2:14*). Believers are called to act in concert with this divine plan, signaling to the evil powers that God's ultimate purpose is underway (*Eph. 3:10*).

As Ephesians 1:9, 10 proclaims, the unity God has in mind is centered in Christ. So, it is no surprise to discover that Ephesians is a Christ-drenched letter that everywhere praises the actions of God in Christ and celebrates the access of believers to the spiritual resources offered them in Christ. Paul employs the phrase "in Christ" and similar phrases more than thirty times, and everywhere lifts up Jesus. As you read the letter, watch for these phrases and stay alert to the many ways Paul focuses on Jesus.

Paul seeks to reignite the spiritual commitment of believers in Ephesus by reminding them that they are part of the church, which is at the heart of God's plan to unify all things in Christ. When he uses the word "church" (Greek, *ekklēsia*) in the letter, he means the "universal" church or the church at large (rather than a local congregation).

A principal strategy he uses is to talk about the church, and he does so using vivid metaphors, four of which he develops in some detail:

1. The church as a body (*Eph. 1:22, 23; Eph. 2:16; Eph. 3:6; Eph. 4:1–16, 25; Eph. 5:23, 29, 30*).
2. The church as a building/temple (*Eph. 2:19–22*).
3. The church as a bride (*Eph. 5:22–27*).
4. The church as an army (*Eph. 6:10–20*).

Each one of these images, in its own way, reveals what God's purpose and intention for His church is.

In the church of which you are a part, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, God is drawing together a transnational, multilingual, multiracial, cross-cultural community (*Rev. 14:6, 7*) that points the way to the fulfillment of His plan to unite all things in Jesus (*Eph. 1:9, 10*). How can we work in concert with God's grand plan?

Further Thought: The story of the exorcists misusing the names of Jesus and Paul (*Acts 19:13–20*; see Sunday’s study) helps explain why Paul uses so much language about power in Ephesians. Some new believers, under fresh conviction of the sovereignty of Jesus, throw their expensive magic manuals into the flames. Thanks to the discovery of some two hundred fifty papyri dealing with magic, as well as other finds, we have ample illustrations of rituals, spells, formulas, curses, et cetera, similar to those likely featured in these manuals of magic. The volumes had advised believers how to conduct such rituals to persuade gods, goddesses, and spirit powers to do whatever they would ask.

Luke tells us that these volumes were worth 50,000 silver coins, or 50,000 days of wages. (In today’s setting, if you allow for \$80/day of wages for a skilled laborer, this amounts to \$4 million!) This detail demonstrates the importance and centrality of these volumes to their everyday lives. “It took the sovereign intervention of God for them to be sufficiently convicted that they should completely repent of their ongoing utilization of amulets, charms, invocations, and traditional means of gaining spiritual power.”—Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), p. 34.

We come to understand that Ephesians was written to believers who needed instruction about “how to cope with the continuing influence and attacks of the sinister cosmic ‘powers.’ ”—Clinton E. Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992), p. 165. Paul’s response is the Epistle to the Ephesians, in which he points to Christ as the One who has been exalted above every power (*Eph. 1:20–23*) and emphasizes the superiority of the strength that God provides to believers (*Eph. 2:15–19, Eph. 3:14–21, Eph. 6:10–20*).

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What powers or authorities are active in our world and your life today? How do these powers manifest themselves, tempting believers to honor and respect them rather than to give undiluted loyalty to the exalted Christ?
- ❷ In the context of God’s “fullness of time” plan to unite all things in Christ, Paul expresses hope for the future. Review his uses of the word “hope” in Ephesians 1:18, Ephesians 2:12, and Ephesians 4:4. Why does he believe there is hope for the future?
- ❸ In the following passages in Ephesians, how does Paul point to the great, future hope of Christ’s return? *Eph. 1:13, 14; Eph. 1:21; Eph. 2:7; Eph. 4:30; Eph. 5:5*. What does this hope mean for us right now?

Bible Survives Blaze

By TOR TJERANSEN

Valentina Melentjeva watched helplessly as her home burned to the ground in Kongsberg, Norway. While she was sad to lose her life's possessions, the thought of losing her Bible devastated her the most.

Valentina grew up in Klaipeda, the third-largest city of the then-Soviet republic of Lithuania. Although her mother was a Christian, her family never owned a Bible, never talked about Jesus, and never prayed.

When Valentina was 45, she noticed that a neighbor named Ira seemed happy even though she endured struggles. Valentina asked Ira about the secret to her happiness, and Ira invited her to her home.

When Valentina arrived, Ira placed an open Bible in her hands. For the first time in her life, Valentina held a Bible. It was opened to Exodus 20.

"Please read," Ira said.

Valentina began reading the Ten Commandments. When she reached the fourth commandment, she was shocked to read, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God" (*Exodus 20:8-10, NKJV*).

Four times she read the Sabbath commandment. The seventh day, not Sunday, was the day of rest. For her entire life, she had worked on Saturdays. But now she wanted to live according to the fourth commandment.

The next Saturday, Valentina went with Ira to worship with other Seventh-day Adventists in Klaipeda. On her second Sabbath in church, Valentina received a new Bible in the Russian language. The book became her most-treasured possession, and she was baptized a year later, in 2004. Later, Valentina moved to Norway to learn more about God at an Adventist Bible school. By the time she completed the course, the Bible's cover had become well-worn. She commissioned a beautiful leather cover for the Bible.

After the 2021 fire, the police and fire brigade cordoned off Valentina's apartment. When their investigation ended, Valentina's visiting son walked through the rubble. Valentina was overjoyed when her son returned with the Bible. The Bible, which had been standing on a shelf with other spiritual books, was the only book to remain intact. It suffered only minor fire damage.

"It is amazing what the love of God can do to preserve the most important thing," Valentina said.



Thank you for your Thirteenth Sabbath Offering three years ago that helped open a center of influence in Sortland, Norway, where more people can learn about Valentina's favorite book, the Bible.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Ephesians 1:9, 10*

Study Focus: *Acts 18:18–21; Acts 19:13–20:1; Acts 20:17–38; Eph. 1:1, 2; Eph. 6:21–24; Eph. 3:13; Eph. 1:9, 10.*

Introduction: The first lesson for this quarter sketches the background to the study of the entire Epistle to the Ephesians and focuses on several major themes. First, we learn about Paul’s purpose in writing his Epistle to the Ephesians: to help the Ephesians remember their identity and role in God’s kingdom and His plans. Second, we get to know the Ephesians better. We virtually visit Ephesus, walk on its streets, listening to the people of the city talk and hearing their interest in magic and the other-world. We watch hundreds of ships anchored in their port, and we visit the impressive temple of Artemis, while seeing people of all classes and ages rushing to join the riot in the amphitheater. Third, we study the literary structure of the epistle and thus form a panoramic view of the apostle’s flow of thoughts and his main subjects. Fourth, we discover that Paul’s all-pervasive theme in this epistle is threefold: Jesus Christ, His love for His church, and His work through the church for the salvation of humanity.

In our study this week, let’s remember the general title of these lessons as described in the Introduction: “Ephesians: How to Follow Jesus in Trying Times.” Indeed, Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians is the best, the most systematic theology of the church. Yet, this quality does not mean Ephesians is a cold, theoretical, detached, abstract theological construct. Rather, the epistle describes the church in a real, living, and loving relationship with its Creator and Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, with the resultant Christian living in a real world and accomplishing the church’s great mission.

Lesson Themes: This week’s lesson highlights three major themes:

1. Getting to know the author of the Epistle to the Ephesians.
2. Getting to know the Ephesian people, the recipients of the epistle.
3. Getting to know the main topic of Paul’s message to the church in Ephesus.

Part II: Commentary

The Book of Acts on Ephesus and the Ephesians

We can much more easily understand Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians if we look at it in the context of the book of Acts. Several narrative aspects of the Acts of the Apostles are especially relevant for the birth of the Ephesian church:

1. Accompanied by Aquila and Priscilla (*Acts 18:18*), Paul seems to have been the first to briefly preach the gospel of Jesus Christ in Ephesus, where he first contacted the Jews (*Acts 18:19*). Unlike the Jews in Corinth, who rejected and persecuted Paul (*Acts 18:6, 12, 13*), the Jews in Ephesus initially appeared more open to the gospel (*Acts 18:20*). It was only later that some of the Jews in Ephesus became obstinate and rejected Paul's message (*Acts 19:8, 9*). However, these Jews did not appeal to the authorities to throw Paul out of the city.
2. After Paul's first departure from Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila continued the gospel work there, being joined later by Apollos of Alexandria (*Acts 18:24–26*). Their work resulted in a fledgling community of Christians (*Acts 19:1*).
3. Apollos, Priscilla, and Aquila seemed to be well versed in Christian teaching. However, the Ephesians received instruction for a limited time before Apollos left for Corinth. Possibly for this reason, the Ephesian disciples had a limited understanding of the gospel and what Christianity was about. The disciples there did not even know about the Holy Spirit (*Acts 19:2, 3*). For this reason, when Paul returned to Ephesus, he decided to spend more time there and provide the needed solid theological foundation to the church both in the city and in the entire region of Asia Minor (*Acts 19:10*).
4. It is important to note that one of Paul's most evident ways to test the veracity and quality of Christianity was to ask the church members whether they had received the Holy Spirit (*Acts 19:2*) and whether they correctly understood who Jesus was, who God was, and how people are saved through baptism in Jesus Christ (*Acts 19:2–5*). For this reason, when Paul was writing to the Ephesians many years later, he returned to, and insisted upon, these crucial topics (*see, for instance, Ephesians 4*). These topics were determinant to the Christian identity and life, both at the level of the individual and of groups (family and church). There is no Christian church without Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Father.
5. When the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples in Ephesus, they became the church of Jesus Christ, led by the Holy Spirit in their mission. The Holy Spirit immediately equipped them for ministry and mission by bestowing upon them the gift of tongues and other spiritual gifts. For this reason, when Paul wrote the Epistle to the Ephesians, he

insisted on the cruciality of the spiritual gifts for the life and mission of the church.

Book Burning

Contemporary intellectuals, such as Rebecca Knuth, former chairwoman of the Library and Information Science program at the University of Hawaii, in her *Burning Books and Leveling Libraries: Extremist Violence and Cultural Destruction* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), concludes that book burning constitutes the destruction of human cultural heritage. In his *Burning the Books: A History of the Deliberate Destruction of Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2020), Richard Ovenden, director of the Bodleian Libraries at the University of Oxford, argues that humanity must reject book burning and preserve human knowledge and culture. The burning of mostly Jewish books by the Nazis in 1933 or the destruction of Western capitalist-leaning books by Mao Zedong's Red Guards in 1966 are used as classical examples of book burning with the political purpose of controlling the population's access to information and imposing a new culture, ideology, historical interpretation, and worldview. The story of insurgents who burned thousands of ancient African manuscripts in Timbuktu in 2013 is used as an example of indiscriminate extremist religious book burning. During that time, a few Christian pastors from various denominations were condemned as bigots or intolerant when they conducted book-burning services, calling for witchcraft books to be burned.

How can we understand the book burning described in Acts 19:19? Several points should be noted:

1. This book burning was a voluntary act of those who had converted to Christianity from paganism and magic. They did not destroy the libraries and the properties of other people, but they burned their own books of witchcraft, books they themselves had used in practicing their pagan religions. By this voluntary act, they publicly proclaimed that, once they received the call of Jesus Christ to join His kingdom, they were cutting themselves off from their sinful past. They did not want to have anything further to do with Satan and his demonic activities.

Two hundred fifty years later, Emperor Diocletian ordered all Christians to bring their sacred books to be burned if they wanted to avoid being burned themselves. Some Christians complied and handed their Scriptures over to the Roman authorities to be burned; these Christians were called *traditores*, or “those who handed over” their books. Other Christians, however, preferred to be burned themselves rather than betray or renounce the Word of God. Thus, while the book

burning in Acts 19 was a voluntary and joyous proclamation of liberation from the snares of sin and Satan, Diocletian's book burning was a violent and oppressive political and ideological persecution of Christianity, with the purpose of annihilating the people of God and imposing the pagan religion.

2. God calls His people to categorically refuse and reject any trace of idolatry and witchcraft in their homes and properties (*see Gen. 35:2–4*).
3. Although, Israel would enter other countries and destroy the idols and burn the witchcraft paraphernalia that was not their main goal. Their mission was to proclaim that idolatry is destructive and leads to death (*Ps. 135:15–18; Isa. 44:9–20; Isa. 45:20; Jer. 2:11–13; Jer. 16:19, 20; Jon. 2:8; Gal. 5:19–21; Rev. 9:20, 21*) and to live out their lives free from idolatry and witchcraft as an example of a nation free from the power of Satan and death.
4. This does not mean that God takes away the joy of art and of writing. On the contrary, God enjoys human creativity and culture expressed in books. But those books and art must express the experience of a human life liberated from sin and Satan. Otherwise, we are back under Satan's controlling power.

Part III: Life Application

1. ***Salvation, Mission, and Education.*** The book of Acts associates the origin of the church in Ephesus with education, which is described as “reasoning” and “persuading.” At first, Paul reasoned with, spoke to, and persuaded the Jews in their synagogues, which were not only places of worship but also public educational spaces (*Acts 18:19, Acts 19:8*). Later, Paul moved into a local school, the school of Tyrannus, and continued “reasoning with” or “teaching” both the Jews and the Greeks the way of salvation (*Acts 19:9, 10*). Engage your students in thinking about how they, as a class, could contribute to transforming their church into a gospel school for the community. How can they make their local church a public arena where they may reason with the community about the gospel?

2. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians displays a wonderful balance between reason, emotions, feelings, theological contemplations, and practical life. Challenge your students to identify two ways that they can contribute to transforming their church into a ministry that would address these aspects of human life in your community.

Notes

God's Grand, Christ-Centered Plan



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 1:3–14; Eph. 2:6; Eph. 3:10; Col. 1:13, 14; Deut. 9:29.*

Memory Text: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (*Ephesians 1:3, ESV*).

Twenty-five years after becoming the first person to walk on the moon, Neil Armstrong wrote a thank-you note to the creative team who designed the spacesuit, the Extravehicular Mobility Unit (EMU), in which he took those historic steps. Calling it “the most photographed spacecraft in history” and teasing that it was successful at hiding “its ugly occupant” from view, Armstrong thanked “the EMU Gang” at the Johnson Space Center for the “tough, reliable, and almost cuddly” suit that preserved his life, sending them “a quarter century’s worth of thanks and congratulations.”

Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians with a majestic thank-you note, praising God for the blessings He has poured out, blessings as essential to the lives of believers as a spacesuit is for someone who walks on the moon. Paul argues that God has been at work on these essential blessings since “before the foundation of the world” (*Eph. 1:4*) and praises God for working through the ages on behalf of believers.

Paul’s opening here makes Ephesians especially valuable in modeling how to worship God and to praise God for the many blessings He has provided.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 8.

Chosen and Accepted in Christ

A thank-you note usually includes a description of the gift or gifts received. Paul includes a long gift list in Ephesians 1:3–14 as he thanks God for the blessings of the gospel.

Paul praises God for the fact that He has “blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing” (*Eph. 1:3, ESV*). That the blessings are spiritual (Greek, *pneumatikos*) suggests that they come through the Spirit (*pneuma*), pointing to the closing of Paul’s blessing, which celebrates the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers (*Eph. 1:13, 14*).

Ephesians 1:3–6 contains inspiring language about how God views us in Christ. Before the creation of the world, God chose us in Christ and determined that we should stand “holy and blameless” in His presence (*Eph. 1:4, ESV; compare Eph. 5:27*) as treasured sons and daughters by virtue of both Creation and Redemption in Christ (*Eph. 1:5*). Since before the sun began to shine, it has been His strategy that we would be “accepted in the Beloved” (*Eph. 1:6, NKJV*). In short, it’s God’s intention for us to be saved. We lose salvation only by our own sinful choices.

What does the phrase “in the heavenly places” mean in Ephesians (the only place it is used in the New Testament)? Study the uses of the phrase. (See *Eph. 1:3, 20; Eph. 2:6; Eph. 3:10; Eph. 6:12; compare the use of “in the heavens,” Eph. 3:15, Eph. 4:10, Eph. 6:9*.)

In Ephesians the phrases “in the heavenly places” and “in the heavens” or “in heaven” point to heaven as the dwelling place of God (*Eph. 1:3, Eph. 6:9*), to the location of spiritual powers (*Eph. 1:10, 20, 21; Eph. 3:10, 15; Eph. 6:12*), and to the location of Christ’s exaltation at the right hand of the Father (*Eph. 1:20*). Believers have access to these “heavenly places” in the present as the sphere where spiritual blessings are offered through Christ (*Eph. 1:3, Eph. 2:6*). Though “the heavenly places” have become a place of blessing for believers, they are still the location of conflict from evil powers that contest the lordship of Christ (*Eph. 3:10, Eph. 6:12*).

Dwell on Ephesians 1:4, which says that we have been chosen in Him, Christ, “before the foundation of the world.” What does that mean? How does it reveal to us God’s love for us and His desire for us to be saved?

Costly Redemption; Lavish Forgiveness

Sin had been a dark, dominating force in the lives of the members of Paul's audience. Paul can describe them in their prior existence as the walking dead—"dead in trespasses and sins" (*Eph. 2:1, NKJV*) yet "walking" or living as Satan commanded them (*Eph. 2:1–3*). Enslaved to sin and Satan, they had no ability to free themselves. They needed rescue. God has done so through His gracious actions in Christ, and Paul celebrates two new blessings of God's grace in the lives of believers: redemption and forgiveness.

Read Ephesians 1:7, 8. "Redemption" is an idea that is used frequently in the New Testament. Compare the uses of the idea in Colossians 1:13, 14; Titus 2:13, 14; and Hebrews 9:15. What themes do these passages share in common with Ephesians 1:7, 8?

The Greek word translated "redemption" in Ephesians 1:7 is *apolutrōsis*, originally used for buying a slave's freedom or paying to free a captive. One can hear echoed the voice of the slave trader auctioning his merchandise and the cold grinding of a slave's manacles. When the New Testament discusses redemption, it highlights the costliness of setting the slaves free.

Our freedom comes at an extreme cost: "In him [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood" (*Eph. 1:7, ESV*). The idea of redemption also celebrates God's gracious generosity in paying the high price of our liberty. God gives us our freedom and dignity. We are no longer enslaved!

"To be redeemed is to be treated as a person, not an object. It is to become a citizen of heaven, rather than a slave of the earth."—Alister E. McGrath, *What Was God Doing on the Cross?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), p. 78.

Note carefully that the idea that God pays the price of redemption to Satan is a medieval, not a biblical, one. God neither owes nor pays Satan anything.

The benefits of Calvary also include "the forgiveness of our trespasses" (*Eph. 1:7, ESV*). On the cross, Christ takes upon Himself the price of our sin, both past and future, "canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands" (*Col. 2:14, ESV*). In doing this work of redemption and forgiveness through Christ, God is acting as our generous Father, with the "riches of his grace" being "lavished upon us" (*Eph. 1:7, 8, ESV*).

What does it mean to you that through Christ's atoning sacrifice you are forgiven and redeemed? What if you feel that you are unworthy of it? (Hint: you are unworthy; that's the whole point of the Cross.)

God's Grand, Christ-Centered Plan

What is God's "plan for the fullness of time," and how extensive is its reach? *Eph. 1:9, 10.*

Paul uses three labels for God's plan. It is (1) "the mystery of his will," (2) "his purpose," and (3) "a plan for the fullness of time" (*ESV*). What is God's ultimate, final plan? To unite everything, everywhere, in Jesus.

The term that Paul uses to describe the plan is a picturesque one (Greek, *anakephalaiōsasthai*), to "head up" or to "sum up" all things in Christ. In ancient accounting practice, you would "add up" a column of figures and place the total at the top. Jesus heads God's final, eschatological plan. This Christ-centered plan was crafted "before the foundation of the world" (*Eph. 1:4*) and is so broad that it encompasses all time ("the fullness of the times," *NKJV*) and space ("all things . . . things in heaven and things on earth," *ESV*). Paul announces unity in Christ as the grand, divine goal for the universe.

In discussing God's "plan for the fullness of time" (*Eph. 1:10, ESV*), Paul shares the theme that he will weave through the letter. God begins His plan to unify all things, rooted in the death, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Jesus (*Eph. 1:15–2:10*), by founding the church and unifying disparate elements of humankind, Jews and Gentiles, in it (*Eph. 2:11–3:13*).

In this way, the church signals to the evil powers that God's plan is underway and their divisive rule will end (*Eph. 3:10*). As the Bible says elsewhere: "For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time" (*Rev. 12:12, NKJV*).

The last half of Paul's letter opens with a passionate call to unity (*Eph. 4:1–16*) and continues with a lengthy exhortation to avoid behavior that damages unity and, instead, to build solidarity with fellow believers (*Eph. 4:17–6:9*). Paul concludes with the rousing image of the church as a unified army, participating with vigor in waging peace in Christ's name (*Eph. 6:10–20*).

How can you acknowledge and celebrate that the redemption you have experienced in Christ Jesus is part of something sweeping and grand, an integral part of God's studied and ultimate plan to unite all things in Christ?

Living in Praise of His Glory

“In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory” (Eph. 1:11, 12, NKJV).

The believers in Ephesus seem to have lost a clear sense of who they are as Christians, to have “lost heart” (see Eph. 3:13). In line with what he has affirmed earlier (Eph. 1:3–5), Paul wishes again to shore up their identity as Christians. Believers are not victims of haphazard, arbitrary decisions by various deities or astral powers. They are the children of God (Eph. 1:5) and have access to many blessings through Christ based on the deep counsels and eternal decisions of God. It is God’s purpose, counsel, and will (Eph. 1:11) that is being worked out in their lives in line with the still wider plan of God to unite all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10). They may have unshakable confidence in their standing before God and in the effectiveness of the blessings He provides. Their lives should shout the message of Ephesians 1:3–14: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Compare the uses of the idea of “inheritance” in Ephesians 1:11, 14, 18. Why do you think this idea is important to Paul?

Have you ever received an inheritance as the result of someone’s death? Perhaps a relative left you a valuable treasure or a considerable sum of money. In Paul’s view by virtue of the death of Jesus, Christians have received an inheritance from God (Eph. 1:14) and become an “inheritance” to God (Eph. 1:18).

In the Old Testament, God’s people are sometimes thought of as being His “heritage,” or inheritance (Deut. 9:29, Deut. 32:9, Zech. 2:12). This sense of being or becoming God’s inheritance is clear in Ephesians 1:18 and is the likely meaning of the term in Ephesians 1:11, as well (which would then be translated, “In him we have become an inheritance”). As a central element in their Christian identity, Paul wishes believers to know their value to God. They not only possess an inheritance from God (Eph. 1:14, Eph. 3:6; compare Eph. 5:5), but they are God’s inheritance.

What is the difference between working to get something and inheriting it instead? How does this idea help us understand what we have been given in Jesus?

The Holy Spirit: Seal and Down Payment

In Ephesians 1:13, 14, Paul tells in brief the conversion story of his readers. What are the steps in that story?

In exploring the importance of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers, Paul uses two images, or metaphors, for the Spirit. He first pictures the Holy Spirit as a “seal,” identifying a sealing presence of the Spirit that occurs from the time of conversion. In ancient times, seals were used for a wide variety of functions: to authenticate copies of laws and agreements, to validate the excellence or quantity of a container’s contents (*e.g.*, Ezek. 28:12), or to witness transactions (*e.g.*, Jer. 32:10–14, 44), contracts, letters (*e.g.*, 1 Kings 21:8), wills, and adoptions. Imprinted on an object, a seal announced both ownership and protection. The presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives marks believers as belonging to God and conveys God’s promise to protect them (*compare Eph. 4:30*). They have been “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (*Eph. 1:13, ESV*).

“Paul plainly states that at the moment one gives his/her life to Jesus and believes in Him the Holy Spirit seals (Greek verb: *sphragizō*) that believer in Christ for the day of redemption. Wonderful liberating and reassuring truth! The Spirit of God marks Christ’s followers with the seal of salvation right when they first believe.”—Jiří Moskala, “Misinterpreted End-Time Issues: Five Myths in Adventism,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2017), p. 95.

The second image Paul uses for the Holy Spirit is that of “guarantee.” The Holy Spirit is the guarantee of our inheritance, which looks toward the moment when the inheritance is to be given in full (*compare 2 Cor. 1:22, 2 Cor. 5:5*).

The word translated “guarantee” (*arrabōn*) was a Hebrew loan word that was used widely in the common or Koine Greek of New Testament times to indicate a “first installment,” “deposit,” or “down payment” that requires the payer to make additional payments.

Note that believers do not pay this down payment but receive it from God. The treasured presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers, says Paul, is a first installment of the full inheritance of salvation and redemption that will come with the return of Christ. Our job is to receive with a grateful and submissive heart what we have been offered in Jesus.

Further Thought: Does Ephesians 1:3–14 teach that God predetermines the futures of human beings, predestining some to everlasting life and others to everlasting death? Many people, unfortunately, believe this. Consider, however, these ideas:

1. In the passage, the role of Christ is determinative, since the divine choice to adopt us occurs “through Jesus Christ” (*Eph. 1:5, ESV*) or “in him” (*Eph. 1:4, 11*). This suggests that God’s election and predetermination are exercised toward all who choose faith in Christ rather than selecting who will be saved or lost on a case-by-case basis even before people are born. God’s decision is the studied, pre-determined, divine response to those who exercise faith in Christ.
2. Ephesians 1:3–14 also contains vivid relational language about God’s work of salvation. God is “Father,” and we are His “adopted” children (*Eph. 1:3–5*), who receive His blessings in bountiful measure (*Eph. 1:8*). We must understand the language about God’s choice and predetermination in the light of this rich, relational language. God is not a distant, unfeeling judge who makes decrees from afar but the caring Father of all His children (*see Eph. 3:15*).
3. That God honors human choice is reflected in Ephesians 1:3–14 (especially Ephesians 1:13, where “hearing” and “believing” are judged to be important), elsewhere in the letter (*Eph. 2:8, Eph. 3:17, Eph. 4:1–6:20*, all of which emphasize or presume the exercise of choice and the response of faith), and in other passages in the New Testament (*e.g., 1 Tim. 2:4, Acts 17:22–31*). Or, as Ellen G. White expressed it: “In the matchless gift of His Son, God has encircled the whole world with an atmosphere of grace as real as the air which circulates around the globe. All who choose to breathe this life-giving atmosphere will live and grow up to the stature of men and women in Christ Jesus.”—*Steps to Christ*, p. 68.

Discussion Questions:

- ① What arguments would you add to those given above supporting the idea that God does not pick and choose before we have been created who will be saved and who will be lost?
- ② Whose choice ultimately decides whether or not a person has salvation in Jesus?
- ③ “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace” (*Eph. 1:7, NKJV*). How does this verse reveal the reality of salvation by faith alone and not by the works of the law?

Remarkable Path to Lebanon

By KATHIE LICHTENWALTER

Volunteer teacher Ruan Oliveira struggled to listen to the speaker at a “I Will Go!” mission-training event at Middle East University in Beirut, Lebanon. “Where have I seen that guy before?” he wondered.

Ruan had arrived from Brazil to serve as a volunteer teacher at the Adventist Learning Center, which teaches Syrian refugee children in grades 1–8. He was listening to university teacher Brian Manley describe the work of “tentmakers,” Seventh-day Adventists who follow apostle Paul’s example of using their profession to work in non-Christian countries.

Ruan pulled out his cellphone and began to scroll through years of photos.

Mission was in Ruan’s blood. Born in Brazil, he had grown up in a family that talked and lived mission. As a high school student, he accompanied his parents to Argentina for an “I Will Go!” mission conference in 2017. His heart was deeply touched as he heard about the needs of the Middle East.

During his first year of university studies, he accepted an invitation to teach English in a non-Christian country in Asia. Soon after he arrived, however, the language school closed. He stayed to study the local language, but he was forbidden from mentioning God to anyone. Returning to Brazil for his second year of university, Ruan felt a strong desire to go abroad again. He filled out several applications for openings in the Middle East, the region that had captured his imagination at the 2017 conference in Argentina.

“God, it’s up to You,” he prayed as he sent off the applications on VividFaith.com, the Adventist Church’s official website for volunteers. “I will accept the first response that I get.”

Seven minutes later, a message popped up on his phone. It was from the Adventist Learning Center in Beirut. Ruan arrived at the school six weeks later. After Asia, he had an appreciation for the religious freedom in Lebanon. “I can even tell them I am a Christian!” he said.

After a year in Lebanon, Ruan intends to finish his studies and become a full-time missionary. His conviction that God has called him was reaffirmed when he remembered where he had seen Brian Manley previously.

After Manley finished speaking at the conference, Ruan approached him, phone in hand.

“I know where I’ve seen you before!” he said, scrolling back five years to show a photo of him and his parents with Manley at the conference in Argentina in 2017. It was Manley’s presentation about tentmakers at the conference that had stirred Ruan’s heart to serve God in the Middle East.



Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Ephesians 1:3*

Study Focus: *Eph. 1:3–14; Eph. 2:6; Eph. 3:10; Col. 1:13, 14; 1 Pet. 1:18, 19; Deut. 9:29.*

Introduction: The lesson this week focuses on how Paul teaches the Ephesians—and us—to count our blessings. Not the blessings we think are important but the real blessings humanity needs so desperately. God, Paul emphasizes, gives these blessings to us in Christ. In Christ, we have been chosen and accepted by God. We are His, and He is ours. God treasures and regards us as His inheritance, and we treasure and regard Him as our inheritance. In Christ, we have been forgiven and redeemed. In Christ, we receive God’s supreme plan of salvation. In Christ, humanity has its only chance at unity and harmony. In Christ, we live full of joy and praise. Because of Christ, we receive God’s seal and a foretaste of eternal salvation. Because of Christ, we may receive the presence and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. God’s gifts are spiritual primarily in the sense that the Holy Spirit gives them to us. The Holy Spirit brings these gifts to us from the very realms of heaven. All these riches are God’s gifts to us all because we do not—and cannot—work to merit them. It is God who gives these gifts to us freely, out of His heart full of love for us. All who accept these gifts God predestines to be sealed and to taste beforehand the eternal blessings of His kingdom.

Lesson Themes: This week’s lesson highlights three major themes:

1. In Christ, God lavished on us many gifts: election, adoption, redemption, forgiveness, joy of salvation, unity and harmony of humanity, and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit as God’s down payment for what is yet to come when Christ will return.
2. Our response to God’s gracious gifts is a life of praise and adoration in, and for, Christ.
3. In the Holy Spirit, we experience a foretaste of our future eternal life.

Part II: Commentary

Christ Jesus Our Lord

It is important to note the way that Paul writes about our Savior. Rarely does Paul refer to Him as simply Jesus (*Eph. 4:21*). Rather, for Paul, our Savior is “Lord Jesus” (*Eph. 1:15*), “the Lord Jesus Christ” (*Eph 1:2, 3, 17; Eph. 5:20; Eph. 6:23, 24*), “Christ Jesus our Lord” (*Eph. 3:11*), “Jesus Christ” (*Eph. 1:5*),

“Christ Jesus” (*Eph. 1:1; Eph. 2:6, 7, 10, 13, 20; Eph. 3:1, 6, 21*), simply “Christ” (*Eph. 1:10, 12; Eph. 2:5, 12, 13; Eph. 3:4, 8, 17, 19; Eph. 4:7, 13, 15, 20, 32; Eph. 5:1, 5, 21, 23, 24, 25, 29, 32; Eph. 6:5, 6*), or simply “the Lord” (*Eph. 2:21; Eph. 4:1, 5; Eph. 5:8, 10, 17, 19, 22; Eph. 6:7, 8, 10, 21*)!

Obviously, one reason for these references to our Savior is reverence, which must be part of the Christian’s—indeed, of the Christian theologian’s—language and attitude. But there is more to these references than simple respect for the Master. By referring to Jesus as “the Lord,” Paul exalts Him as the risen Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior, in whom we have our own resurrection from our sins and through whom we are going to have our final resurrection from the grave. The resurrection of Jesus Christ and our own resurrection are crucial for Paul’s theology and life because they lie at the very heart of God’s redemptive plan (*e.g., Eph. 2:1–6*). The theme of resurrection transforms Paul’s entire perspective on life and salvation. It should be essential for ours, as well.

Doxological Theology

Paul wrote Ephesians 1:3–14 in a style we could call doxological theology. Theologians note that Christian theology must begin with doxology (praise) and end in doxology—indeed, must *be* doxology. Being among the first doxological theologians, Paul’s theology is not a cold, purely rational, schematic, and neutral development of a concept. Nor is Paul writing in this doxological way simply because of the customary epistolary style of the time. Rather, when he immortalizes in writing the beautiful Christian theology about who God is, about what God did for us, about God’s love for us, about the incarnation of Christ Jesus, about His death, about His resurrection, about the joy and peace and hope and profound transformation of humanity in Christ, Paul vividly contemplates and describes the most magnificent and foundational wonders of this life and the life to come. For this reason, while writing these things down for his brothers and sisters in Ephesus, Paul cannot abstain from erupting in worship and adoration of the great God he describes.

For Paul, God is not a mere concept; rather, God is our Father, our Creator, our Savior. This same God is full of love, might, justice, and grace. He always is ready to protect us and to save us. He always is ready to give us gifts and blessings so that we may enjoy our lives to the fullest in His kingdom, now and in the future. How could Paul write about such a God and about His great salvation without bursting into joyful praises?

Blessings From the Heavenly Places

Paul insists that our God is fundamentally a God of blessings. But the blessings that God gives us are not simply material or earthly blessings—blessings with no reference to spiritual or eternal realities. Rather, God’s blessings are blessings from the heavenly realms, from *His* realm. By pointing out this idea, Paul expands the theater of salvation. Salvation is not a minuscule solution to a small

temporary human problem, although it includes that aspect, too. Salvation does not happen simply in a corner of the world (although, in one sense, it does, because Jesus died in a corner of the universe and in a corner of the Roman Empire). For Paul, salvation is a process that takes place on a universal scale. Paul takes us to the dizzying heights of the *epouranios*, or heavenly realms.

The Greek word *epouranios* has several meanings. On the one hand, it means spiritual or godly, as opposed to earthly or sinful (see *John 3:12*, *Heb. 3:1*). On the other hand, the word refers to spatial dimensions (*1 Cor. 15:40, 41*). Paul also combines both the spatial and the spiritual dimensions of the word *epouranios* together (*1 Cor. 15:48, 49*). For instance, the *epouranios* in Ephesians 1:3 seems to refer to a spiritual reality: that is, God blesses us with the blessings that are found in Christ. However, in the same chapter, Paul describes heaven as a spatial realm other than the earth (*Eph. 1:10*). In Ephesians 1:20, Paul relates the *epouranios* to Christ's ascension to the throne of God. Paul's heavenly places, thus, are not some ethereal neoplatonic spheres, describing the immaterial divine world to which our incorporeal, disembodied spirit allegedly travels after death.

Considering the larger biblical context, the notion of "heavenly places" is a very rich biblical concept. On the one hand, "the heavens" refers to the entire universe that God created (*Gen. 1:1*, *Ps. 8:3*, *Ps. 19:1*, *2 Chron. 6:18*), with all of its magnificent beauty. On the other hand, the Bible depicts another meaning of the "heavens," closer to Paul's meaning in Ephesians, in which the apostle relates the heavenly places with Creation and salvation. When God created the universe, He did not remain outside the universe (the Bible does not espouse deism). Rather, God chose to enter the universe as its Creator, Provider, and King (*Ps. 11:4*) and to establish a special, personal relationship with the beings He created in His image (*Gen. 1:26–28*). This relationship is accomplished in various ways. One, in His omnipresence, God was, and is, present throughout the universe (*Ps. 139:7, 8*). This idea means that we can pray to God everywhere, in any situation, and He hears us in real time.

However, the Bible describes another way that God meets and relates to the population of the universe. Many biblical authors emphasize that God chose a realm or place in the heavens where He established His throne of love and justice (*Ps. 103:19, 20*). In that place, God displays His permanent visible presence and governance of the universe. It is in, and from, that heavenly place that God blesses the universe through His acts of loving providence. It was at His throne that He met with all His intelligent beings (*Job 1:6*); it is there that all the intelligent beings of the universe respond in worship and adoration to God's presence, providence, and loving and just government.

The Bible associates the throne of God with the heavenly temple of God (*Ps. 11:4*; *Ps. 103:19, 20*; compare with *Exod. 25:8, 9*), God's "heaven" or "dwelling place" (*2 Chron. 6:21, 23, 25, 30, 33, 35, 39*). In his dedicatory prayer, Solomon associated the temple with God's heavenly dwelling place (see also *2 Chron 6:2, 18, 40, 41*). It was against that throne in the heavenly

sanctuary that Lucifer fought, accusing God of being unloving and having an unjust character and government. It was to that throne that Jesus ascended after He fully revealed and proved God's character of love and of justice.

In his epistle to the Hebrews, Paul also associates the heavens with God's throne and the heavenly sanctuary: "We have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord set up, not man" (*Heb. 8:1–3, NASB; see also Heb. 1:8; Heb. 4:16; Heb. 9:23–25; Heb. 12:2, 22–24*). Thus, as in his epistle to the Hebrews, and also as Daniel (*Daniel 7*), Solomon (*2 Chronicles 6*), and later John (*Revelation 4 and 5*), Paul directs the attention of his readers to God's heavenly place, to His throne and heavenly sanctuary, from which God blesses His people with all the blessings He intended in His original plans of Creation and of salvation in Christ.

Illustration: The Ground Fault Circuit Interrupter

In the past, numerous people died from accidental domestic electrocution. Modern houses are equipped with an ingenious protective device called a ground fault circuit interrupter (GFCI). The GFCIs sense any difference in the current in the system and interrupt the electrical current in a matter of milliseconds. In this way, if a child plugs a metallic object into an outlet, the circuit interrupter will activate and stop the current and save the child from death. God planned to create our world and crown it with intelligent and free humans who could choose to reject God and sin. The consequences of sinning (like the consequence of touching a live electrical wire) result in the death of the sinner. God told Adam and Eve they would die in the moment or day that they sinned (*Gen. 2:17*). Yet, they did not die. On the contrary, they realized what had happened and ran away from God (*Gen. 3:6, 7*). It could be argued that the first pair died in a spiritual way or that they were condemned to death in the long run.

While these answers have merit, the gospel, especially as explained by Paul in Ephesians, gives a more complete answer to the question of why Adam and Eve did not die immediately for their sin. According to Paul, before the foundation of the world (*Eph. 1:4*), God built into the Creation plan a safety feature, a spiritual GFCI. When Adam and Eve fell into sin, they were supposed to die, because they touched the "bare wire" of sin. However, Adam and Eve did not die immediately, because the plan of salvation, created by God before the foundation of the world, was immediately activated. That plan was Christ, and whoever believes in Christ, whoever chooses to be found "in Christ," is saved from the power and consequences of sin, guilt, alienation, and death.

Part III: Life Application

1. Brainstorm with your students about ways that they can, as a class,

organize thanksgiving worship services in their personal lives, in their family life, in their communities, or in the local church. Each of these services could have different themes: thanksgiving for the plan of salvation and how it has transformed their personal lives, thanksgiving for the love of Christ as it is manifested in their personal lives and in the community, or thanksgiving for forgiveness as manifested in their personal lives and in the life of the community.

2. Ask your students to consider this question: How exalted are their communications? That is, how does the content of their everyday oral, written, or graphic communication reveal that their lives have been touched, and transformed, by the grace of God and by the worldview of the exalted Lord and His theology? How much do your class members feel they are affected by eternal realities in the heavenly places? How is the content and manner of their conversation like Paul's? Ask your students to consider the ways in which they talk to family, friends, work colleagues, and people in public spaces. Challenge them to revise the way they write emails or messages on various social media platforms. Also, challenge them to revise the content of their personal conversations with family, friends, and colleagues to reflect Christ and to become more Christ-centered.
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3. In Ephesians 1:5, Paul writes that God “predestined us to adoption as sons and daughters through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will” (*NASB*). Many Christians take this text to mean that the apostle teaches the concept of predestination in the sense that God selects us to be saved and that we cannot do anything to resist His will or change His decision in this matter. How would your students explain this text to the following groups of people: (1) their Christian friends who believe in the concept of predestination and (2) their non-Christian friends or neighbors?
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The Power of the Exalted Jesus



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 1:15–23, Eph. 3:14–21, 1 Thess. 5:16–18, Deut. 9:29, 1 Cor. 15:20–22, Ps. 110:1.*

Memory Text: Through the Holy Spirit, believers may know “what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places” (*Ephesians 1:19, 20, NKJV*).

Human beings, it seems, are always reaching for more power. Auto manufacturer Devel Motors, for example, showed off the prototype of its Devel Sixteen, a vehicle with a 16-cylinder, 12.3-liter engine producing more than 5,000 horsepower. Or, if that is not enough, consider the Peterbilt semitruck that sports three Pratt & Whitney J34–48 jet engines. Boasting 36,000 horsepower, the truck does a quarter mile in 6.5 seconds and regularly hits 376 m.p.h. before deploying its two parachutes.

In contrast, Paul prays that believers in Ephesus, under temptation to admire the various powers and deities of their culture, will experience through the Holy Spirit the immensity of the power God makes available to them in Christ. This divine might is not measured in horsepower, or magic, but is seen in four cosmos-shifting, salvation-history events: (1) the resurrection of Jesus; (2) His exaltation at the throne of God; (3) all things being placed in subservience to Christ; and (4) Christ being given to the church as its Head (*Eph. 1:19–23*).

In considering these four events, believers may begin to grasp—and experience—the vast scope of the power God exercises on their behalf.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 15.

Praying and Thanksgiving

Motivated by news that believers in Ephesus are thriving in faith toward Jesus and in love toward each other (perhaps news shared by Tychicus, *Eph. 6:21, 22*), Paul reports to them how he prays for them.

Compare Paul’s two prayer reports in Ephesians—Ephesians 1:15–23 and Ephesians 3:14–21. What themes do the two reports share?

Sometimes our default tone in prayer can be doleful, mourning over this challenge or that problem. Paul’s prayer reports in Ephesians suggest that thanksgiving is the native language of prayer. We gather up the blessings of God and thank Him for them. We seek to perceive God at work in difficult circumstances and praise Him for His transforming presence in our lives. Celebrating the grace and power of the exalted Jesus (*Eph. 1:20–23*), we thank Him for blessing those in our circle of influence. Here is Paul’s transforming secret for prayer: *prayer is the key of praise and thanksgiving*.

Paul also said that he does “not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers” (*Eph. 1:16, NKJV; see also Phil. 1:3, 4; 1 Thess. 1:2; and 1 Thess. 5:16–18*).

What does it really mean to “pray without ceasing” (*1 Thess. 5:17*)? It cannot mean that we are always kneeling before God in prayer. It does mean that, blessed by God’s Spirit, we move through life with hearts open to the presence and power of God, seeking cues for thanksgiving to Him. It means a readiness to process the issues of life in the presence of God, to seek divine counsel as we experience the twists and turns that life brings. It means living not in estrangement from God but in engagement with Him, ever open to divine leading.

We too often view prayer as a nicety, an add-on to discipleship that is to be exercised when convenient. Paul illustrates a different view. Paul takes seriously the task of praying for the believers in Ephesus, doing so both by giving thanks for them (*Eph. 1:16; compare Eph. 1:3–14*) and by interceding for them (*Eph. 1:17–23; compare Eph. 3:14–21*). For him, prayer is a central, or even *the* central, task of Christian faith. These verses provide a moving call to prayer, an invitation for each of us to consider our own “prayer ministry” in the light of Paul’s dedication to it.

Why is it important always to thank God in prayer for what you have to be thankful for?

Experiencing Insight From the Holy Spirit

“I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him” (Eph. 1:16, 17, ESV).

In reporting his prayers, Paul records one central request that he places before the throne of God. He has already noted that the Holy Spirit has come into believers’ lives at the time of their conversion (Eph. 1:13, 14). Now Paul prays for a fresh blessing of the Spirit to give needed spiritual insight focused on a deepened understanding of Jesus (“in the knowledge of him,” Eph. 1:17).

Paul prays that the Holy Spirit will bring special insight to believers on what three topics? See Eph. 1:17–19.

When Paul prays for insight for them about “the hope to which he has called you” (Eph. 1:18, ESV), he prays that they will be alert to the past actions God has already taken for their salvation (Eph. 1:3–9, 11–13) and to the glorious future He has planned for them (Eph. 1:10, 14).

When he prays for insight into “the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints” (Eph. 1:18, NKJV), he is recalling the Old Testament idea of believers as God’s inheritance (Deut. 9:29, Deut. 32:9, Zech. 2:12; compare Eph. 1:11). He wishes them to know that they not only possess an inheritance from God, but that they are God’s inheritance, and Paul wants them to understand their value to God.

When Paul prays for spiritual insight about “the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe” (Eph. 1:19, NKJV), he imagines the Holy Spirit bringing fresh understanding of the immensity of God’s power and actualizing it in their experience.

In all these prayers, Paul wants these people to experience for themselves what they have been given in Jesus.

How can you better experience “the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe”? What does this mean in daily life?

Participating in Resurrection Power

In the remaining verses of Paul's prayer report, Ephesians 1:20–23, Paul expands on the third topic of insight he hopes that the Holy Spirit will bring to believers: the enormity of God's power, which He exercises on their behalf. Paul begins by pointing to two salvation-history events as the premiere illustrations of God's power: (1) the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and (2) the exaltation of Jesus to the throne of the cosmos (*Eph. 1:20*).

How is God's power expressed through the resurrection of Jesus? *Eph. 1:20; 1 Cor. 15:20–22; Phil. 3:8–11; Heb. 13:20, 21; 1 Pet. 1:3.*

The resurrection of Jesus is a nonnegotiable belief of the Christian faith (*1 Cor. 15:14, 17*). It is because Christ is risen that faithful believers await the grand, future resurrection to eternal life at the time of Christ's return (*1 Cor. 15:20–23*). It is because Christ is risen that we can look to Him today for all the blessings of the gospel, including the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

The imagery, that God “seated Him [Christ] at His right hand” (*Eph. 1:20, NKJV*), is drawn from Psalm 110:1, the most frequently cited passage in the New Testament (all of the passages just cited seem to draw on it). The exaltation of Christ has a high profile in Ephesians. Believers are “seated with . . . him [Christ Jesus] in the heavenly places” (*Eph. 2:6, ESV*). In addition, Paul refers to the ascent of Christ as a prelude to Christ's filling all things and giving gifts to His church (*see Eph. 4:8–11*).

In Ephesians 4:8–11, Paul warns us away from adopting a merely static image of Christ on the Father's throne, presenting rather “the dynamic NT picture of the exalted Christ going forth by His Spirit in all the world, conquering and to conquer.”—F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 133. So, Paul portrays the exaltation/coronation of Christ, not simply as an illustration of the divine power offered to believers but as the source of that power.

What are the ways that you need Christ's power in your life, and how can we better avail ourselves of that power? What practices might hinder our access to His power?

Christ Above All Powers

Paul has celebrated the exaltation of Jesus, who now sits with the Father on the throne of the cosmos. Having defined the position of Christ in relationship to the Father (“seated . . . at his right hand in the heavenly places” [*Eph. 1:20, ESV*]), Paul turns to the relationship of Jesus to “the powers.” As coregent with the Father, Jesus is “far above” them all (*Eph. 1:21*).

Compare Paul’s mentioning of evil, spiritual powers in Ephesians 1:21, Ephesians 2:2, and Ephesians 6:12. Why do you think Paul is so interested in these powers?

Acts 19:11–20, with its story of the seven sons of Sceva, illustrates that Ephesus at the time of Paul was a center for the magic arts. “The overriding characteristic of the practice of magic throughout the Hellenistic world was the cognizance of a spirit world exercising influence over virtually every aspect of life. The goal of the magician was to discern the helpful spirits from the harmful ones and learn the distinct operations and the relative strengths and authority of the spirits. Through this knowledge, means could be constructed (with spoken or written formulas, amulets, etc.) for the manipulation of the spirits in the interest of the individual person. With the proper formula, a spirit-induced sickness could be cured, [or] a chariot race could be won.”—Clinton E. Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians*, p. 18.

The interest in naming deities and powers in spells was a feature of religious life in Ephesus (see *Acts 19:13*), and among some even today. Paul wishes to make clear the relationship between Christ and “the powers”: The exalted Jesus is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion” (*Eph. 1:21, ESV*).

Just to be sure that his audience understands that there is no power outside of the sovereignty of Jesus, he adds an allusion to the practice of gathering up the names of deities in spells: “and above every name that is named” (*Eph. 1:21, ESV*). Turning from the dimension of space to that of time, Paul stresses the unlimited chronology of Jesus’ exalted rule. His rule over all powers applies “not only in this age but also in the one to come” (*Eph. 1:21, ESV*).

What are some present-day manifestations of these same evil forces, and how can we make sure that we don’t get caught up in any of them?

Jesus, All Things, and His Church

Early Christians saw in Psalm 110:1 a prophecy of the exaltation of Jesus: “The LORD says to my LORD: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool’ ” (*ESV*). They read Psalm 8 in the same way, with its affirmation that God has “put all things under his feet,” (*Ps. 8:6, ESV*), the feet of “the son of man” (*Ps. 8:4, ESV*). While they believed that the powers of darkness in the heavenly places were over their heads and threatened to subjugate them, they laid hold of the truth that those powers were under Christ’s feet.

Note carefully that having “put all things under his [Jesus’] feet,” the Father “gave him as head over all things to the church” (*Eph. 1:22, ESV*; compare “gave Him to be head over all things to the church,” *NKJV*). While “all things” is a universal, inclusive term, Paul still has in mind “the powers” mentioned in Ephesians 1:21. All things—the cosmic, supernatural, spiritual powers included—are under the feet of Christ, subservient to Him.

What benefits does the exaltation of Christ to the throne of the cosmos, and His rule over all things in heaven and on earth, provide for His church? *Eph. 1:22, 23*.

God has made Christ victorious over all evil powers. The church, closely identified with Christ and supplied by Him with all it needs, is itself guaranteed victory over those foes. The power of God, on display in the resurrection and His exaltation over every cosmic power, has been activated for the church. God has given the victorious Christ to the church, which is so united with Him as to be called His body.

How can we believers know the exalted Christ and experience God’s power in our lives? Paul does not directly address any mechanisms or strategies by which this occurs. However, the fact that the passage is part of a “prayer report” is suggestive. Paul believes that God will answer his prayer. He affirms the efficacy of celebrating God’s power, revealed in Christ, in God’s own presence and asking for it to be active in the lives of believers.

What has been your own experience with the power of prayer? That is, not just answered prayers but prayer in general, and how does prayer draw us closer to God and the power offered us in Jesus?

Further Thought: Study these two descriptions of Christ's exaltation from the writings of Ellen G. White:

"When Christ passed within the heavenly gates, He was enthroned amidst the adoration of the angels. As soon as this ceremony was completed, the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples in rich currents, and Christ was indeed glorified, even with the glory which He had with the Father from all eternity. The Pentecostal outpouring was Heaven's communication that the Redeemer's inauguration was accomplished. According to His promise He had sent the Holy Spirit from heaven to His followers as a token that He had, as priest and king, received all authority in heaven and on earth, and was the Anointed One over His people."—*The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 38, 39.

"The Father's arms encircle His Son, and the word is given, 'Let all the angels of God worship Him.' Hebrews 1:6.

"With joy unutterable, rulers and principalities and powers acknowledge the supremacy of the Prince of life. The angel host prostrate themselves before Him, while the glad shout fills all the courts of heaven, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing.' Revelation 5:12.

"Songs of triumph mingle with the music from angel harps, till heaven seems to overflow with joy and praise. Love has conquered. The lost is found. Heaven rings with voices in lofty strains proclaiming, 'Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb forever and ever.' Rev. 5:13."—*The Desire of Ages*, pp. 834, 835.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Ponder the "now" and "not yet" of the exaltation of Jesus. In what sense is Jesus already the Lord of "all things," with the demonic powers subservient to Him—that is, the "now"? And in what sense does His full reign over all things look toward the future—the "not yet"? (See 1 Cor. 15:24–28.)
- ② To what extent are you living in the light of Christ's rule over all things? Or to what extent are you living under the authority of these other powers, the fallen powers, whose authority is ebbing away anyway? How do you know which is which, and how can you get away from the forces of evil that, though certainly defeated, are still prevalent in our world?

Three Books, One Answer

By JOHN BRADSHAW

As a child, I had a lot of questions for which I couldn't find answers. Why did I have to confess my sins to a priest? Why should I pray to saints when Jesus could surely hear my prayer? Would God burn people in hell forever?

I enjoyed going to church, and I was happy to believe in Jesus. But attending church didn't clear up the questions. I attended many churches. Every church claimed to believe the Bible, but none could answer my questions.

When I was 16, an older brother gave me a book. He had joined another church that did strange things—church on Saturdays?—but the change was obviously good for him. He was happy, which led me to think the book might just be worth reading. I promised to read the book, which he said was about history and prophecy, but I didn't get beyond the introduction.

Several years later he asked me if I had read it, and when I told him I had not, he gave me another copy. I assured him I would read this one. This time I started on page one. I read most of it. Most of page one, that is. I put the book down intending to read it later, but I never got back to it.

More years passed. I left New Zealand, my home country, and was living in England. On a trip to Ireland, desperate to find a meaningful relationship with God, I went to church. But as I left it, I told God I was never going to church again “until You show me the truth!”

When I returned to London, a package was waiting for me. I had asked my brother if he had any idea where I might be able to find the book that he twice had given me. I had looked in several bookstores but hadn't been able to locate it. And here in the mail was the third copy of the book that would change my life, *The Great Controversy*. This time I started reading in the middle of the book, and when I got to the end I went back to the beginning and read what I had missed. I encountered the power of God's Word in a book that not only explained the deep prophecies of the Bible but also connected me with Jesus. A call to the operator connected me with a church in London, and thus began in earnest my walk with Jesus.

I still read *The Great Controversy*, having found that I continue to find new blessings and insights into the plan of salvation. Outside of the Bible, no book has had a greater impact on my life.

Join the global church in 2023 and 2024 in the mass promotion and distribution of *The Great Controversy*. Visit greatcontroversyproject.com for more information or ask your pastor.



John Bradshaw is speaker and director of It Is Written, an Adventist television ministry.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Ephesians 1:19, 20*

Study Focus: *Eph. 1:15–23, Eph. 3:14–21, Ps. 110:1, 1 Thess. 5:16–18, Deut. 9:29, 1 Cor. 15:20–22.*

Introduction: After summarizing and praising God for His plan of salvation in Christ, Paul, in Ephesians 1:15–23, assures his brothers and sisters in Ephesus that he is praying for them to continue to experience salvation through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Paul requests God the Father to give the Ephesians (1) the experience of knowing God through His revelation, (2) the hope that emanates from God’s calling and promises, and (3) the faith through which they might experience the infinite power of the Lord Jesus Christ (*Eph. 1:17–19*).

Christ’s power is manifested in two ways. First, we experience Christ’s power through His resurrection. We are spiritually raised to the new life in Christ here and now and have the promise of the future final resurrection for eternal life. Second, we experience Christ’s power through His ascension in that He is seated on the throne of the universe as God, our God, who blesses us from His heavenly places, that is, His heavenly sanctuary. Christ Jesus created the universe and all its physical and spiritual powers; therefore, they are all subordinate to Him. The rebellious spiritual powers that temporarily claimed dominion over the earth are also subordinate to Him.

In addition, knowing that Jesus ascended to the hall of God’s throne makes us already heirs and members of the heavenly places in Him. In Christ, all the things in the universe are ours! One day, we also physically will ascend to those heavenly places and join the universe in praising God around His throne (*Rev. 4:1–4, 8–11; Rev. 5:6, 9–14; Rev. 15:2–4*).

Lesson Themes: This week’s lesson highlights three major themes:

1. Prayers of praise and thanksgiving are essential for the life of the Christian.
2. For the Christian, experiencing the transformative power of Christ and of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life is indispensable.
3. As true Christians, by knowing and experiencing the power of Christ, we can freely live our lives in Him without fearing the rebellious powers of this world.

Part II: Commentary

“For This Reason”

Throughout his Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul uses several conclusive expressions, such as:

- *dia touto* (*Eph. 1:15, Eph. 5:17, Eph. 6:13*, meaning “through,” “because of,” “on account of”),
- *dio* (*Eph. 2:11, Eph. 3:13, Eph. 4:25, Eph. 5:14*, meaning “wherefore,” “on which account,” “therefore”),
- *oun* (*Eph. 4:1; Eph. 5:1, 7; Eph. 6:14*, meaning “therefore,” “then”), and
- *toutou charin* (*Eph. 3:1, 14*, meaning “in favor of,” “for the pleasure of,” “for the sake of,” “by reason of,” “on account of”).

In English translations, such as the NASB, these phrases are translated as “therefore” (*Eph. 2:11; Eph. 3:13; Eph. 4:1, 25; Eph. 5:1, 7, 17; Eph. 6:13, 14*) or “for this reason” (*Eph. 1:15; Eph. 3:1, 14; Eph. 5:14*). Thus, Paul first states and describes a theological reality or truth as a foundational section. Then, he develops a “therefore” section to apply these ideas to the life of the church. However, sometimes Paul uses a “therefore” or application section as the foundation section for another “application” or “therefore” section. In this way, Paul progressively expands, develops, and enriches the horizon of his thought on the gospel, the church, and Christian life.

In Ephesians 1:11–14, Paul summarizes the essence of the gospel, the platform upon which he places his “for this reason” theology (*Eph. 1:15, NASB*) and shows how the gospel relates to the church (*Eph. 1:15–23*), which is comprised of “saints” (*Eph. 1:15, 18*). The Christians or the saints are those who have faith in Jesus (*Eph. 1:15*), have “the spirit of wisdom and revelation” in knowing God (*Eph. 1:17*), and have been enlightened to know Christ’s calling, the inheritance He wants to give us and the superpower of His resurrection (*Eph. 1:18, 19*). These saints are the church, or Christ’s body (*Eph. 1:22, 23*). This example of Paul’s “for this reason” theology is the essence of the church.

The church is built on the gospel that Paul just described in Ephesians 1:1–15. The rest of the Epistle to the Ephesians is about the church. But this is a church that is built upon the correct understanding of the gospel, “Paul’s gospel,” as he would put it elsewhere (*Rom. 2:16, Rom. 16:25, 2 Tim. 2:8*). As has been noted, in Ephesus everything was defined by relating it to something else. In the cosmopolitan context of Ephesus, it was very easy to have one’s identity shaped by the Ephesian culture, by rubbing religious or philosophical elbows with other religions and philosophies. But Paul is adamant here: the foundation of the church, the identity of the church, is shaped by the gospel, by God’s gospel or plan that was established by Him before the foundation of the world and revealed now in Jesus Christ. The church, its identity, message, and mission, is not an evolutionary cultural idea. The church is the result of God’s plan, of God’s work in the world to save sinners and humanity.

Church, Revelation, and Philosophy

Paul prays for his church (*Eph. 1:16, 18*), thanking God for His work in it. Specifically, Paul thanks God for His work of enlightenment in the church, through His gifts of wisdom and revelation (*Eph. 1:17, 18*). This prayer uncovers two major aspects of the nature of the church.

First, the church is built upon God's revelation, not human philosophy. Although Paul was well versed in philosophy (*Acts 17:28*), he refused to lay any philosophical stone at the foundation of the church. For him, the church was to be built, not on human wisdom and rhetoric but on the "testimony of God." His revelation in Jesus Christ crucified, and in the "demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (*1 Cor 2:1–5, NASB*). This notion, however, does not mean there is no wisdom related to the building of the church.

On the contrary, the church is built upon wisdom, but it is "a wisdom . . . not of this age nor of the rulers of this age . . . but . . . God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood" (*1 Cor. 2:6–8, NASB*). That is why Paul warns the Colossians to guard against being taken "captive through philosophy and empty deception in accordance with human tradition . . . rather than in accordance with Christ" (*Col. 2:8; see also John 1:12, 13; 1 Cor. 1:20–27; 1 Cor. 3:19; 1 Tim. 6:20, 21*).

This attitude to philosophy does not imply that God, Paul, or Christianity reject logic or reason. On the contrary, reason is one of the most elevated human abilities or attributes God endowed us with when He created humans in His image. What Paul communicates here is that the church, or Christian religion, is not founded on the presuppositions and the conclusions of philosophy. Western classical philosophy and, recently, modern science are based largely on the presupposition that there is no intentional, loving, special, specific, propositional divine revelation. Rather, what Western philosophy and modern science posit is a human rational, mystical, or psychological effort to reach toward God or to a certain divine realm. This thinking is a reversal of the Christian faith.

Paul adamantly insisted that the church is not, and cannot be, the product of human philosophy or science, or their presuppositions and conclusions. The church is the result of God's direct intervention in our world and revelation in Christ Jesus and of God's specific revelation through the Scriptures. Through Christ and through Scripture, God called humanity back to Himself and to His kingdom. When humans respond to this call, they become God's church established in, and on, the direct work of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit in us. For this reason, a successful philosophy will construct its worldview and presuppositions in reference to divine revelation.

Second, the church is not a two-tiered society, comprised of a philosophical, enlightened, intellectual elite on one side and simple and ignorant people on the other. Rather, in the church, *all* church members

are enlightened and are recipients of God's revelation and wisdom. This idea is the Christian foundation for the concepts of grace and unity. The saved, or saints, did not receive salvation and revelation because of special insights, abilities, or efforts, but because of God's grace, for it is God who reveals Himself to all humans and calls them to salvation. All church members inherit the same blessings! All of them receive the same revelation, the same salvation, and the same mission. That is why the church is one and not divided into two, three, or four classes or tiers.

Fear of, and Victory Over, the Powers

Our world is in a constant search for power. If we think of power as energy, we see that the sources of energy are causing constant tensions, and even wars, in our world.

But the world is looking for more than sources of energy. The world is looking especially for spiritual sources of powers, powers that will give lifelong success, dominance or peace, control, and fulfillment. As we approach the end of sinful human history, many people look for power in demonic sources, consciously or unconsciously. These demonic sources are enslaving and destructive powers. Millions of people do, in fact, realize that these demonic powers are enslaving, but they cannot liberate themselves from these powers. Many do not even know of any alternative power. They are simply afraid of these demonic powers.

Many other people are afraid of inanimate powers, such as earthquakes, tsunamis, or black holes. Some are afraid of the powers of the position of the celestial bodies. Some people are afraid of the power of the personal appetite or of inner anger. More recently, artificial intelligence has become a source of fear for many.

But Paul insists that Christ's power is infinitely superior to all these powers. Christ created the entire universe with all its powers and sources of energy, so all these forces are under His control. He created us, and He can restore us and help us control ourselves and whatever inner problems we are afraid of. Christ created all the angelic beings, a part of whom rebelled against God and turned demonic, attempting to control the world; but God defeated their rebellion during His first coming and will ultimately destroy their power and them forever at the end of the great controversy. Even now, these demonic entities are defeated and cannot obtain any victory over us when we are in Christ Jesus.

For this reason, the Seventh-day Adventist Church felt the need to express this gospel truth in the form of fundamental belief 11, titled "Growing in Christ":

"By His death on the cross Jesus triumphed over the forces of evil. He who subjugated the demonic spirits during His earthly ministry has broken their power and made certain their ultimate doom. Jesus' victory gives us victory over the evil forces that still seek to control us, as we walk with Him in peace, joy,

and assurance of His love. Now the Holy Spirit dwells within us and empowers us. Continually committed to Jesus as our Saviour and Lord, we are set free from the burden of our past deeds. No longer do we live in the darkness, fear of evil powers, ignorance, and meaninglessness of our former way of life. In this new freedom in Jesus, we are called to grow into the likeness of His character, communing with Him daily in prayer, feeding on His Word, meditating on it and on His providence, singing His praises, gathering together for worship, and participating in the mission of the Church. We are also called to follow Christ's example by compassionately ministering to the physical, mental, social, emotional, and spiritual needs of humanity. As we give ourselves in loving service to those around us and in witnessing to His salvation, His constant presence with us through the Spirit transforms every moment and every task into a spiritual experience." (Available from <https://www.adventist.org/growing-in-christ>.)

Part III: Life Application

1. **Some Seventh-day Adventist Church buildings are closed for much of the week. In contrast, the divine worship services on the Sabbath days are sometimes agglomerated with program items that allow only for a limited time for individual or corporate prayer. Encourage your students, together with their local church, to develop a plan to transform the church, both as a congregation and as a building, into a house or space for continuous prayer for all the community and visitors throughout the week.**

2. **Invite your students to think of ways that their families and church may become centers where people in the community could experience the power of Christ. How could you help the people in your community overcome the various fears that hold them in bondage to the powers of the universe, technology, self, or other humans, as well as to demonic powers?**

3. **Ask class members to imagine that they each have been invited to preach on fundamental belief 11. What three ideas would constitute the main points of their sermon?**

How God Rescues Us



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 2:1–10, Eph. 5:14, Rom. 5:17, Eph. 5:6, 2 Tim. 1:7.*

Memory Text: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ” (*Ephesians 2:4, 5, ESV*).

On October 14, 1987, eighteen-month-old Jessica McClure was playing in her aunt's backyard when she fell twenty-two feet into an abandoned well. Her plight attracted media from around the world to Midland, Texas. A global audience watched “Baby Jessica” sleeping, crying, singing, and calling out for her mother. They watched as emergency workers piped fresh air down the well.

Finally, fifty-eight hours after Jessica's fall, the worldwide audience watched as Jessica was released from the eight-inch well casing that had trapped her for more than two days. Photographer Scott Shaw's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph captured the moment: a rescue cable bisects the worried faces of Jessica's rescuers looking down at the bandaged bundle at the heart of the drama, Baby Jessica.

There's nothing quite as gripping as a good rescue story, and Paul, in *Ephesians 2:1–10*, gives us an up-close-and-personal view of the grandest, most sweeping rescue mission of all time—God's efforts to redeem humanity. The drama of the story is heightened by knowing that we are not mere spectators of someone else's rescue but witnesses of our own.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 22.

Once Dead and Deceived by Satan

Read Ephesians 2:1–10. What is the main idea that Paul is giving us here about what Jesus has done for us?

Paul has already described the salvation given to Christians (*Eph. 1:3–14, 15–23*) and told, in brief, the story of the believers in Ephesus (*Eph. 1:13*). In Ephesians 2:1–10, Paul will now tell their conversion story in more detail, with a more personal focus. He contrasts their past, sinful existence (*Eph. 2:1–3*) with the blessings of God’s salvation, which he portrays as a participation in the resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Christ (*Eph. 2:4–7*), and he celebrates the basis of that salvation in the grace and creative work of God (*Eph. 2:8–10*).

These three sections of the passage are summarized neatly in the phrases of Ephesians 2:5: (1) “we were dead in our trespasses”; (2) God “made us alive together with Christ”; (3) “by grace you have been saved” (*ESV*).

In Ephesians 2:1, 2, Paul underlines the sad reality of the pre-conversion existence of his audience by noting that they were spiritually dead, practicing trespasses and sins as their regular pattern of life (*Eph. 2:1*), and were dominated by Satan (*Eph. 2:2*). Since Paul writes to living people, he refers to them as once “dead” in a metaphorical sense (*compare Eph. 5:14*). However, their plight was very real and dire since they were once separated from God, the Source of life (*compare Col. 2:13, Rom. 5:17, Rom. 6:23*).

Reflecting on the past lives of his hearers, Paul identifies two external forces that dominated them. The first of these is “the course of this world” (*Eph. 2:2, NKJV*)—the customs and behavior in the wider society of Ephesus that misshaped human life into rebellion against God.

Satan is described in two ways as the second external force that dominated their prior existence. He is “the prince of the power of the air” (*Eph. 2:2, NKJV*) since “the air” (or “the heavenly places”) is identified as the location of supernatural powers, including evil ones (*compare Eph. 1:3, Eph. 3:10, Eph. 6:12*). Also, he is active on earth since he is “the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience” (*Eph. 2:2, NKJV*).

What do these verses teach about the reality of the great controversy? At the same time, how can we draw comfort and hope in the knowledge that Jesus has been victorious and that we can share in His victory now?

Once Deluded by Our Own Desires

“All of us also lived among them [the disobedient] at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath” (Eph. 2:3, NIV).

Apart from the intervention of God, human existence is dominated not only by the external forces mentioned in Ephesians 2:2 but also by internal ones: “the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind” (Eph. 2:3, *ESV*; compare James 1:14, 15; 1 Pet. 1:14).

What does Paul mean by stating that his hearers were once “by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph. 2:3, *ESV*)? Compare Ephesians 2:3 and Ephesians 5:6.

The present reality of a lost life is distressing enough, but its last-day implications are more frightening still. Human beings, being “by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph. 2:3, *ESV*) stand under the threat of God’s judgment at the end of time.

The phrase “by nature children of wrath” points to another daunting reality, as well. While still bearers of the image of God, we have come to understand that there is something deeply awry in us. Living the Christian life, then, is not just a matter of conquering a bad habit or two or overcoming whatever “trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1) are currently threatening. We do not just contend with *sins* but with *sin*. We are bent toward rebellion against God and toward self-destruction. Humans, by default, are caught in a pattern of self-destructive, sinful behavior, following the dictates of Satan (Eph. 2:2) and our own innate, sinful desires (Eph. 2:3). Believers once were “by nature the children of wrath.”

It is important to note that Paul employs a past tense—we “were by nature the children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3). This does not mean that an inherent bent toward evil is no longer a reality for believers. Paul spends a considerable portion of his letter (Ephesians 4:17–5:21) warning that sinful acts, rooted in a sinful nature, remain a threat for Christians. It does mean, though, that this “old self” need no longer dominate the believer, who through the power of Christ can “put off your old self” and “put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:22–24, *ESV*).

Who hasn’t experienced just how corrupted our own nature is, even after we have given ourselves to Jesus? What should this teach us about how important it is that we cling to Him every moment of our lives?

Now Resurrected, Ascended, and Exalted With Christ

“But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us” (*Eph. 2:4, NKJV*). Here, with two powerful words, “But God,” Paul pivots from his doleful portrait of the past lives of his audience (*Eph. 2:1–3*) to the new, hope-filled realities that mark their lives as believers (*Eph. 2:4–10*).

In what sense do believers participate in Christ’s resurrection, ascension, and exaltation? When does this participation occur? *Eph. 2:6, 7.*

We have noted that Ephesians is a Christ-drenched letter highlighting the solidarity of believers with Christ. In Ephesians 2:5 and 6, Paul extends this theme by deploying three compound verbs to unleash the stunning truth that, through God’s initiatives, believers themselves participate in important salvation history events that center on the Messiah, Jesus.

Believers are (1) co-resurrected with Christ; (2) co-raised up with Christ (which Paul probably uses to indicate the participation of believers in Christ’s ascension to heaven); and (3) co-seated with Christ “in the heavenly places,” meaning that believers participate in Christ’s “seating” on the throne of the cosmos. They are co-exalted with Jesus.

To appreciate the power of Paul’s argument, we must look back to Ephesians 1:19–23 and recall that in His death, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation, Christ gains the victory over all evil and spiritual powers, the very ones who once dominated the lives of believers. In the resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Jesus, these powers—though still active and threatening to human existence—have been thoroughly superseded. The cosmos has shifted. Reality has changed. Believers are not mere spectators to these events but are personally and intimately involved in them. That we are co-resurrected, co-ascended, and co-exalted with Jesus opens up a whole new array of possibilities for us. We have the right to turn from a demon-dominated existence to a life of spiritual abundance and power in Christ (*2 Tim. 1:7*).

“For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (*2 Tim. 1:7, NKJV*). How do the verses we looked at today help us understand what Paul writes here?

Now Blessed Forever by Grace

Compare God’s planning for salvation in Ephesians 1:3, 4 with the eternal results of that plan described in Ephesians 2:7. What are essential elements and goals of God’s “plan of salvation”?

Graduation ceremonies are wonderful celebrations, whether for kindergarten or a PhD. A graduation marks an important accomplishment, the move to a different stage of life or career. It is important for us as believers to understand a profound truth of the gospel: we never graduate from grace. There is never a celebration that we have attained our PhD in grace or graduated from our need of it.

Paul affirms this truth in Ephesians 2:7, accenting it with an expansive chronology. God has acted in the past in Christ to redeem us, so identifying us with His Son, Jesus Christ, that we are in the present coparticipants in His resurrection, ascension, and exaltation (*Eph. 2:4–6*). God’s plan, though, does not end with a grace-filled past and a mercy-bathed present. God’s plan, rooted in divine councils in time immemorial (*Eph. 1:4*), stretches forever into the future. It includes all “the coming ages” (*Eph. 2:7, ESV*). His plan for the eternal future is founded on the same principle as His actions in the past and present—the principle of grace. “In the coming ages,” God looks forward to demonstrating “the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (*Eph. 2:7, ESV*).

Paul thinks of God’s grace as a treasure or fortune of unfathomable value (*compare Eph. 1:7, Eph. 3:8*) from which believers may draw to meet any need. This grand generosity of God toward us becomes an eloquent, ageless, and cosmic exhibit of His grace.

“By coming to dwell with us, Jesus was to reveal God both to men and to angels. . . . But not alone for His earthborn children was this revelation given. Our little world is the lesson book of the universe. God’s wonderful purpose of grace, the mystery of redeeming love, is the theme into which ‘angels desire to look,’ and it will be their study throughout endless ages. Both the redeemed and the unfallen beings will find in the cross of Christ their science and their song. It will be seen that the glory shining in the face of Jesus is the glory of self-sacrificing love.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 19, 20.

Now Saved by God

Read back through Ephesians 2:1–10, focusing on Paul’s conclusion in verses 8–10. What points does he highlight as he concludes the passage?

In Ephesians 2:1–3, Paul documents that the salvation of the believers in Ephesus does not occur because of their good behavior or winsome qualities. When the story begins, they are spiritually dead. There’s not a spark of life or worth in them (*Eph. 2:1*). They have been utterly conquered by sin (*Eph. 2:1*). They exhibit no personal initiative but are led around by Satan himself and by their own base passions and mental delusions (*Eph. 2:2, 3*).

Unknown to them, they are in a far worse position than simply being without spiritual life or virtue. In company with all humankind, they are the enemies of the true God and are moving toward a day of destiny and divine judgment. They are “children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (*Eph. 2:3, ESV*).

Instead of being rooted in their own qualities, their salvation is rooted in God’s inexplicable love—a love that cannot be explained based on any worth in the object of that love. In mercy and love, God acts on their behalf in Christ Jesus (*Eph. 2:4*), resurrecting them from spiritual death. Because of God’s intervention, they experience an amazing itinerary that follows the trajectory of Jesus Himself. From the extreme depth of utter spiritual death and grinding slavery, they are resurrected and conveyed to the “heavenly places” and seated with Christ on the cosmic throne (*Eph. 2:5, 6*). This lightning-like, divine intervention, though, is no momentary phenomenon. It has real staying power, eternal durability, because God intends to exhibit His grace toward them in Christ Jesus throughout all eternity (*Eph. 2:7*).

In his conclusion to Ephesians 2:1–10 (*Eph. 2:8–10*), Paul goes back over this ground, wishing to ensure that his point sticks: the salvation of believers is a divine work, not a human one. It does not originate in us but in God’s gift. No human being can boast of having sparked it (*Eph. 2:8, 9*). Standing in the grace of God, we believers are exhibits of His grace, and only of His grace. We are His masterpieces, created by God “in Christ Jesus” (*Eph. 2:10*).

Why is it so important for us to understand that our salvation is from God and is not rooted in our own worth or efforts?

Further Thought: Underlying the Epistle to the Ephesians is a story that is often rehearsed in part or alluded to in it. The major events in the narrative are the following:

1. God's choice of the people "before the foundation of the world" (*Eph. 1:4, 5, 11*).
2. Their past, lost existence (*Eph. 2:1–3, 11, 12; Eph. 4:17–19, 22; Eph. 5:8*).
3. The intervention of God in Christ to save them (*Eph. 1:7, 8; Eph. 2:4–6, 13–19; Eph. 4:1, 20, 21; Eph. 5:2, 8, 23, 25, 26*).
4. Their acceptance of the gospel (*Eph. 1:12, 13 and implied elsewhere*). Having once "no hope" (*Eph. 2:12*), they now possess the "one hope" toward which believers move (*Eph. 4:4; compare Eph. 1:18*).
5. The present lives of the addressees as disciples. Though living at a time fraught with hazards and the opposition of the evil powers, they may draw on the resources offered by their exalted Lord (*Eph. 1:15–23, Eph. 2:6, Eph. 3:14–21, Eph. 4:7–16, Eph. 6:10–20*).
6. In the future culmination of history, the Spirit's role as "guarantee" (*Eph. 1:13, 14, ESV*), or "seal" (*Eph. 4:30*), reaches fruition. In this crowning moment, the addressees will be rewarded for their faithfulness by taking possession of the "inheritance" already granted to them in Christ (*Eph. 2:7; Eph. 6:8, 9*); and, through their faith in Christ, they will be granted a place in the Christ-centered age to come (*Eph. 1:21; Eph. 2:7, 19–22; Eph. 4:13, 15; Eph. 5:27*).

Discussion Questions:

- ① The underlying story of Ephesians (see above) is not just the story of believers in the first century. It is our own story. Which of the major steps or stages of that story gives you the most hope in this moment?
- ② Why do you think it is that Paul so frequently recalls the sinful past of his audience, inviting them to reflect on their pre-conversion lives?
- ③ Compare Paul's summary of the gospel in Ephesians 2:8–10 to his earlier summary in Romans 1:16, 17. What similar themes emerge? In what ways are the two different?
- ④ While the good works of believers play no role in their redemption, in that they can never give people saving merit before God, what important part do they play in God's plans for believers? *Eph. 2:10*.

Terrified in Russia: Part 1

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Unusual events began occurring at home after 16-year-old Almira signed up for courses on the supernatural in the Russian republic of Bashkortostan.

The year was 1992. The Soviet Union had collapsed the previous year, and public interest was high in once-banned religion. Two Russians from Moscow showed up at Almira's school in the city of Sibay and offered extracurricular courses on extrasensory perception.

Almira's parents forbade Almira from attending the courses.

The Russian teachers, however, promised to reveal amazing secrets, including how to heal illnesses. Mother had suffered headaches for some time, and Almira wanted to help her. So, she secretly attended the courses. She was taught that she was surrounded by invisible good and evil forces and, if she mastered them, could perform wonders.

Alone at home, she attempted to put into practice what she was learning. She carried out a one-sided conversation with unseen forces in her home, saying that she wanted to control them.

That night, when she turned off the light to go to bed, she sensed a presence in the room.

After a while, the presence manifested itself during the day when she was at home alone. Sometimes she noticed a shadow running past a window.

She was not afraid. She thought that she was strong and was on her way to controlling an invisible force.

As time passed, she realized to her chagrin that the force was stronger than her.

She could not control it.

Frightened, she stopped turning off the lights when she went to bed at night. She was afraid to sleep. When she finally slept, she had terrifying nightmares.

In desperation, Almira asked Mother to sleep with her. But Mother refused after a few days. She said she was having nightmares.



Over the next six months, Almira's life turned upside down. Her grades suffered, and she seemed to be in constant conflict with teachers, friends, and her parents. She grew terrified. She didn't know where to turn.

Read more about Almira next week. Thank you for your mission offerings that help spread the gospel in Russia and around the world.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Ephesians 2:4, 5*

Study Focus: *Eph. 2:1–10, Eph. 5:14, Rom. 5:17, Eph. 5:6, 1 Tim. 1:7.*

Introduction: While Paul, in Ephesians 1, highlights God’s overarching plan of salvation in Christ at the universal level, in chapter 2 the apostle explains in more detail the way God operates in our salvation at the individual level. After humans left the Garden of Eden, they entered a condition that Paul calls “dead in trespasses and sins” (*Eph. 2:1*). In this condition, humans are dead in their sins in the sense of being controlled by both internal forces (sinful tendencies) and external forces (the devil and the world). Humans in this condition cannot hope for a life with God; rather, they are “children of wrath” (*Eph. 2:3*). The only hope for us is to become resurrected, to ascend, and to be exalted with Christ (*Eph. 2:6, 7*).

But we cannot resurrect, ascend, and exalt ourselves. For this reason, Paul emphasizes that we are saved “by grace” (*Eph. 2:5, 8*). It is totally God’s work, initiative, love, mercy, and power (*Eph. 2:4*). For Paul, this work is the foundation of the gospel. Yet, Paul immediately rushes to add that we are saved “through faith” (*Eph. 2:8*). While our salvation is, in totality, God’s work, God does not save us against our wills. Those who are saved will not ascend to heaven or be exalted to the heavenly places by a divine act of predestination. Rather, God’s salvation becomes operational in us when we exercise faith—that is, when we accept and receive God’s salvation, allowing God’s power to resurrect us, to exalt our lives, and to empower us to live in Christ Jesus.

Lesson Themes: This week’s lesson emphasizes three major themes of Ephesians 2:1–10 that describe the dynamic process of personal salvation:

1. What does it mean to be dead in sin? What is the nature of sinful living?
2. What does it mean to be raised with Christ to new life in Him?
3. What does it mean to be saved by grace through faith?

Part II: Commentary

Ellen G. White on the Concepts of Dead in Sin and Salvation by Grace

In chapter 2 of her book *Steps to Christ*, Ellen G. White explains the fallen human condition. She notes that after Adam’s “sin, he could no longer find joy in holiness, and he sought to hide from the presence of God. Such is still the condition of the unrenewed heart. It is not in harmony

with God and finds no joy in communion with Him. The sinner could not be happy in God's presence; he would shrink from the companionship of holy beings. Could he be permitted to enter heaven, it would have no joy for him. The spirit of unselfish love that reigns there—every heart responding to the heart of Infinite Love—would touch no answering chord in his soul. His thoughts, his interests, his motives, would be alien to those that actuate the sinless dwellers there. He would be a discordant note in the melody of heaven. Heaven would be to him a place of torture; he would long to be hidden from Him who is its light and the center of its joy. It is no arbitrary decree on the part of God that excludes the wicked from heaven: they are shut out by their own unfitness for its companionship. The glory of God would be to them a consuming fire. They would welcome destruction, that they might be hidden from the face of Him who died to redeem them.”—*Steps to Christ*, pp. 17, 18.

She then insists, “It is impossible for us, of ourselves, to escape from the pit of sin in which we are sunken. Our hearts are evil, and we cannot change them. . . . Education, culture, the exercise of the will, human effort, all have their proper sphere, but here they are powerless. They may produce an outward correctness of behavior, but they cannot change the heart; they cannot purify the springs of life. There must be a power working from within, a new life from above, before men can be changed from sin to holiness. That power is Christ. His grace alone can quicken the lifeless faculties of the soul, and attract it to God, to holiness.”—Page 18.

Ellen G. White further explains that “it is not enough to perceive the loving-kindness of God, to see the benevolence, the fatherly tenderness, of His character. It is not enough to discern the wisdom and justice of His law, to see that it is founded upon the eternal principle of love. Paul the apostle saw all this when he exclaimed, ‘I consent unto the law that it is good.’ ‘The law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.’ But he added, in the bitterness of his soul-anguish and despair, ‘I am carnal, sold under sin.’ Romans 7:16, 12, 14. He longed for the purity, the righteousness, to which in himself he was powerless to attain, and cried out, ‘O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from this body of death?’ Romans 7:24, margin. Such is the cry that has gone up from burdened hearts in all lands and in all ages. To all, there is but one answer, ‘Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.’ John 1:29.”—Page 19.

Dead in Sins and Resurrected by and in Christ

Paul's expression “dead in trespasses and sins” (*Eph. 2:1*) highlights three major aspects of the fallen human condition.

First, “dead in trespasses and sins” points to a literal death. Sin is essentially antithetical to God and life. To be in sin is to negate God and life. Paul emphasizes that “the wages of sin is death” (*Rom. 6:23*). Being in sin and remaining in sin leads to death (*see also 1 John 5:16*)—literal death—a complete

annihilation of the totality of the human being. Being in sin is being condemned to death; it is tantamount to being “dead.” This death does not refer only to the body; the human being who participates, and chooses to remain, in sin will be dead in his or her entirety, in all aspects, without any surviving elements.

Second, “dead in trespasses and sins” is a spiritual and moral condition. To be “dead in trespasses and sins” is to be dead to God. For humans, to be “dead in trespasses and sins” does not mean they cannot perceive God’s love, justice, or call, or that they cannot recognize their own decadent state. To state otherwise would lead to the concept of predestination. But humans can, and do, perceive God’s revelation and call; for this reason, they are “without excuse” (*Rom. 1:19–21*; see *Rom. 2:1, 9–16, NASB*). The problem arises when they perceive God’s call of grace but decide that all is well with them and that they will be better off if they go their own way, claiming they can change themselves and fix the world by themselves (*Isa. 5:21, Rom. 1:21–23*; see also *Gen. 11:1–5*). This warped thinking, however, sinks them deeper in the mire of sin (*Rom. 1:24–32*).

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul illustrates this lost condition with the trope of walking in “the course of this world” (*Eph. 2:2*), fulfilling the cravings, the lusts, the desires, and the thoughts of the flesh (*Eph. 2:3*). By doing so, the unrenewed reach the point wherein they “call evil good, and good evil” and substitute “darkness for light, and light for darkness” (*Isa. 5:20*). This state constitutes not only moral confusion but moral rebellion against God.

Third and consequently, “dead in trespasses and sins” points to our being utterly unable to overcome the gravitational pull of the black hole of sin. This inability is so because sin has become a pervasive controlling force in our beings, becoming “another law waging war” in and against us (*Rom. 7:23, ESV*). Our very nature was affected, diseased in an irremediable way, to the point of becoming a “body of death” (*Rom. 7:24, ESV*).

It is for this very reason that Paul notes that only a “resurrection” can save us from our being “dead in sins” (*Eph. 2:5, 6*). But Paul does not talk about a resurrection akin to the resurrection of the avian phoenix of ancient myth, a bird that had an intrinsic regenerative power. Our death in sin and because of sin is definitive and irreversible. We do not have in us any intrinsic power to revive. Only God, who created us, can re-create or resurrect us.

For Paul, resurrection is not a “simple” regeneration of our biological tissues so that we might live for several decades more in the same sinful condition. Rather, Paul’s notion of resurrection is a total escape from the damaging power of the world and from the domination of sin. Paul’s belief in resurrection constitutes another kind, or quality, of life—eternal life (*Rom. 6:23*). This unique power of renewal was manifested in Christ’s resurrection from the dead (*Eph. 1:20*) and then given to us in the sense that God invited us to share and partake, through the Spirit, in Christ’s resurrection (*Eph. 2:5, 6*).

In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul explains that because sin is such a pervasive force in us, it is inevitable that we die. But because of God's grace, we do not need to die in sin, but to sin. Christ died in our place for our sin. Now, in Christ we die, but we die with Christ to sin (*Rom. 6:2–4*). Paul, then, concludes that, because “we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for the one who has died is freed from sin” (*Rom. 6:5–7, NASB*).

By Grace Through Faith

When Paul says that we are saved “by grace . . . through faith” (*Eph. 2:8*), he does not say we are saved only by grace or only by faith. The two always work together in salvation. However, they do have an essential sequential order of operation. In the gospel, it is not faith that generates grace. Faith is not an inner energy of ours that gives us life and power, that elevates us to God, that changes God's disposition toward us, or that generates salvation. Rather, for Paul faith occurs or is born and becomes operational in us when God offers us His grace (*Rom. 10:17*). Grace generates faith. Faith is our reception of God's grace manifested to us.

This understanding has at least two major implications. First, faith is not, and cannot be, meritorious. In fact, even faith is a gift from God, because God offers us all the possibility of receiving His grace. Both grace and faith are the gifts of God (*Eph. 2:8*). For this reason, Paul emphasizes that our works do not have any role in producing our salvation (*Eph. 2:9*). Rather, we, as saved people, are God's “workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works” (*Eph. 2:10, NASB*). These good works, therefore, are not ours; they are not generated by the genius or power of our faith; rather, they were “prepared [by God] beforehand so that we would walk in them” (*Eph. 2:10, NASB*).

Second, Paul joins justification with sanctification in an inextricable relation. While justification means we are clothed in Christ's righteousness, sanctification means we are clothed in Christ's robe of good works and are walking in it.

Third, grace and faith are the foundation of the unity of the church, which is one of the central themes of Paul's theology of the church. The church is united in the same experience of receiving the divine revelation of grace and in the same experience of accepting and embracing it in faith, “one faith” (*Eph. 4:5*). In this experience, all church members are equal. Again, the church is not a multitiered society in which some members are better Christians because they received more grace. The church is not divided into camps of more spiritual or less spiritual members, according to the degree of their faith. Rather, the entire church is founded on, and united in, the same grace and the same acceptance of that grace in faith. In Ephesians 4:7, Paul seems to talk about various degrees or types of grace. Here, though, he does not speak of salvific grace but about the diversity of the spiritual gifts for the edification of God's church and for the

accomplishment of its mission. Also, when, in 1 Corinthians 12:9, Paul says that the Spirit gives faith to some, he refers to the same topic of the spiritual gifts and not to the salvific faith given to all humans.

Part III: Life Application

1. While for some people the Christian God is a punitive and vengeful divinity, many contemporary people simply cannot associate a loving and gracious God with wrath, judgment, and condemnation. In Ephesians 2:3, Paul describes sinful people as “children of wrath,” which means that, if they remain in that condition, they will receive the wrath, or the condemnation, of God directed against sin (*Rom. 1:18*). Invite class members to think of ways to explain the wrath of God to the following groups of people: (1) their children, (2) their non-Adventist neighbors, and (3) their secular, atheist colleagues.

2. Ask class members to remember their experience of being made alive with, and in, Christ. How would they describe this experience to friends and to members of their community? How can they keep that experience fresh in their Christian life?

3. Many Seventh-day Adventists grew up in what we would call an insulated or “pure” Christian environment in which they were not exposed to many of the temptations of a more secular or worldly life. However, these Adventists are still dead in their sins all the same and have not experienced the new birth. What are ways that your class members could help these fellow Adventists to experience the fullness of being “made . . . alive together with Christ” (*Eph. 2:5, ESV*)? That is, how can your students encourage these Adventists to be reborn without first having to go through the entire misery of a sinful life?

Horizontal Atonement: The Cross *and the Church*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 2:11–22, Rom. 3:31, Rom. 7:12, Isa. 52:7, Isa. 57:19, John 14:27, 1 Cor. 3:9–17.*

Memory Text: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one” (*Ephesians 2:13, 14, ESV*).

You are a Gentile, a Greek, who has learned to treasure the God of the Jews. In fact, you have left your worship of many gods and have embraced the one true God. As you make your way through the beautiful courtyards and fluted columns of the Jerusalem temple, the sounds of worship call forth your praise. Just then, though, you find yourself confronted by a stone barricade four feet high. Engraved every few feet in Latin and Greek is this message: “No foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure around the temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.” In that moment you feel shut out, alienated, and separated.

In Ephesians 2:11–22, Paul sees the cross of Christ as making a dramatic difference, destroying such barriers and walls. Vertically, the Cross dissolves alienation, reconciling humans with God. Horizontally, it reconciles people with each other. The Cross removes enmity and brings peace between Jews and Gentiles, making of them “one new humanity” (*Eph. 2:15, NIV*). Together they become a new temple, “a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (*Eph. 2:22, ESV*).

What does this truth mean for us today?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 29.

Brought Near in Christ

Compare Ephesians 2:1–3, Paul’s earlier description of the Gentile past of the addressees, with Ephesians 2:11, 12. What does he accent in his fresh description of their past?

Gentiles who were now believers in Christ and members of His “body,” the church, were once totally separated from Israel and the salvation God offered. Paul judges it important for them to “remember” (*Eph. 2:11*) this past. They were then “without Christ,” the Anointed One, the Messiah of Israel. They were “aliens from the commonwealth [the state or people] of Israel.” And they were “strangers from the covenants of promise,” oblivious to the promises of salvation God had offered down through salvation history. The alienation from Israel and the salvation offered through it meant that they once had “no hope” and were “without God in the world” (*Eph. 2:12, NKJV*).

Also, in their past existence, Gentiles were caught up in a grand feud between themselves and the Jews. Paul gives a sense of this entrenched hatred by referring to one symptom of it, name-calling. Jews referred to Gentiles with derision as “the uncircumcision,” and Gentiles referred to Jews with equal disdain as “the circumcision” (*Eph. 2:11*).

Ephesians 2:13, however, points to something radically different now. Paul wrote: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (*NKJV*).

When Paul describes Gentile believers as once “far off,” he borrows from Isaiah 57:19: “ ‘Peace, peace, to the far and to the near,’ says the LORD, ‘and I will heal him’ ” (*ESV; compare Eph. 2:17, 18*). In Christ and through His cross, Gentile believers had been brought near to all from which they were separated—God, hope, and their Jewish brothers and sisters. Here is the powerfully good news implied by Paul’s description: that the cross of Christ can heal the wide rift between Jews and Gentiles means that all of our feuds and divisions can be resolved there. This good news invites us to consider the divisions that exist in our own lives and in the church and to ponder the power of the Cross to supersede them.

From what condition has Jesus redeemed you? Why might it be important for you to recall, with some regularity, where you were when He found you and where you might now be had He not found you?

Reconciliation: God's Gift From the Cross

“For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility . . . that he might . . . reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross” (*Eph. 2:14–16, ESV*).

How does Paul describe the Cross and the impact of Christ's work there in each of these passages in Ephesians? How would you summarize what Paul says about the Cross and how it transforms our relationships? (See *Eph. 1:7, 8; Eph. 4:32; Eph. 2:13, 14; Eph. 2:16; Eph. 5:2, 25.*)

In the context of our passage for this week, Ephesians 2:11–22, the Cross yields three great assets for believers: (1) Gentiles, who were “far” from God and His people, are “brought near” (*Eph. 2:13, ESV*) to both, being now sons and daughters of God and brothers and sisters of Jewish believers (*Eph. 2:19*); (2) the “hostility” (Greek, *echthran*, “enmity,” related to *echthros*, “enemy”) between Jewish and Gentile believers is itself “put to death” (*Eph. 2:16, NASB*). The cross of Christ removes what seemed to be the permanent state of hostility and war in which Jews and Gentiles were sworn enemies (*Eph. 2:17*); (3) in the place of hostility comes reconciliation. It was Christ's purpose to “reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross” (*Eph. 2:16, NKJV; compare Col. 1:19–22*).

What does reconciliation look like? How does it feel to be reconciled? Imagine severe estrangement between a mother and daughter, one that has settled in over a period of years. Imagine this rancor being dissolved in a wave of grace and forgiveness and the ensuing reunion between the two. That is reconciliation. Reconciliation is experienced in the moment when one church member lays aside whatever issue divides from another and acknowledges the other church member as a beloved brother or sister who accepts what has been offered. Reconciliation is not a mechanical or legal term but an interpersonal one that celebrates the mending of broken relationships. Paul dares to imagine Christ's powerful work on the cross as impacting the relationships, between not just individuals but also people groups. He imagines it invading our lives and destroying our divisions, dissolving our quarrels, and renewing our fellowship with and understanding of each other.

In what ways might you need to apply the principles here to be reconciled to someone else? How do you go about doing it?

Breaking Down the Dividing Wall

What action does Paul say Christ took toward “the law of commandments expressed in ordinances” (*ESV*)? Why did He take this action? (See *Eph. 2:14, 15*.)

Paul probably alludes here to the balustrade or fence that surrounded the court of Israel in Herod’s Temple, with its death threat. Paul imagines this wall coming down and Gentiles being granted full access to worship God (*Eph. 2:18*). Any such wall, says Paul, is removed by the Cross. For there we learn that these two peoples, Jews and Gentiles, are really one.

Some believe that Ephesians 2:14, 15 teaches that the Ten Commandments, inclusive of the Sabbath commandment, are “abolished” or “set aside” by the Cross. However, in Ephesians, Paul demonstrates profound respect for the Ten Commandments as a resource for shaping Christian discipleship. He quotes the fifth commandment (*Eph. 6:2, 3*) and alludes to others (e.g., *the seventh, Eph. 5:3–14, 21–33; the eighth, Eph. 4:28; the ninth, Eph. 4:25; the tenth, Eph. 5:5*). This aligns with Paul’s earlier assertions about the law (*Rom. 3:31, Rom. 7:12*). He addresses the misuse of the law, but he honors the law itself and assumes its continuity. Hence, to use these verses to abolish the Ten Commandments, especially in light of all the other verses in the Bible about the perpetuity of the law, is clearly a misinterpretation of Paul’s intent here.

Instead, any use of the law to drive a wedge between Jews and Gentiles and especially to exclude Gentiles from full partnership among the people of God and access to worship, would be anathema to Paul and a misuse of the divine intention for the law. The “law” in Ephesians 2:14, 15 is either the ceremonial aspects of the law that divided Jew from Gentile, represented in Paul’s complex phrase “the law of commandments expressed in ordinances” (*ESV*), or it is the whole Old Testament system of law as it had come to be interpreted, augmented, and misused as a wedge to distance Jews from Gentiles.

What tensions among Seventh-day Adventists or among members of the wider Christian community need to be confronted and overcome? Why should our common love of Christ be enough to overcome these tensions?

Jesus, Preacher of Peace

How does Paul summarize the ministry of Christ in Ephesians 2:17, 18?

The concept of peace is important in Ephesians, with the letter beginning and ending with blessings of peace “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (*Eph. 1:2, NKJV; compare Eph. 6:23*). Earlier in Ephesians 2:11–22, Paul argued that Christ personifies peace, “For He Himself is our peace,” and that His Cross creates it (*Eph. 2:14–16, NKJV*). Christ not only destroys something—the hostility between Jew and Gentile (*Eph. 2:14, 15*)—He creates a new humanity, marked by relationships of reconciliation and peace (*Eph. 2:15–17*). Such peace is not just the absence of conflict but resonates with the Hebrew concept of shalom, the experience of wholeness and well-being, both in our relationship with God (*Rom. 5:1*) and with others.

How does Paul imagine believers participating in sharing Jesus’ message of peace? *Eph. 4:3; Eph. 6:14, 15; compare Rom. 10:14, 15 with Eph. 2:17–19, Isa. 52:7, Isa. 57:19.*

The Gospels contain examples of Jesus as a preacher of peace. In His farewell messages to the disciples, He promises them—and us—“ ‘Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you’ ” (*John 14:27, NKJV*). And He concludes, “ ‘I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world’ ” (*John 16:33, ESV*). After His resurrection, when He appears to the disciples, He repeatedly says to them, “ ‘Peace be with you’ ” (*John 20:19, 21, 26, ESV*).

In Ephesians 2:17, 18, Paul is keen to point out that Christ’s preaching of peace extended beyond the time of His earthly ministry. He has “preached peace” in the present to both “far” (Gentile believers before they were converted; *ESV*) and “near” (Jewish believers, *ESV; compare Eph. 2:11–13*). Having accepted this proclamation, all believers experience a profound blessing.

How can we learn to be preachers of peace as opposed to conduits of conflict? To what situations, right now, can you help bring healing?

The Church, a Holy Temple

What culminating set of images does Paul use in Ephesians 2:11–22 to signal unity between Jews and Gentiles in the church?

Reviewing Ephesians 2, we recall that verses 1–10 teach that we live in solidarity with Jesus, while verses 11–22 teach that we live in solidarity with others as part of His church. Jesus’ death has both vertical benefits in establishing our relationship with God (*Eph. 2:1–10*) and horizontal ones in cementing our relationships with others (*Eph. 2:11–22*). Through the Cross, Jesus demolishes all that divides Gentile believers from Jewish ones, including the misuse of the Law in order to widen the gulf (*Eph. 2:11–18*). Jesus also builds something—an amazing, new temple composed of believers. Gentiles, once excluded from worship in the sacred places of the temple, now join Jewish believers in becoming a new temple. We all become part of God’s church, “a holy temple in the Lord” (*Eph. 2:19–22, ESV*) and are privileged to live in solidarity with Jesus and our brothers and sisters in Christ.

How does Paul’s use of the metaphor of the church as a temple in Ephesians 2:19–22 compare with the uses in the following passages? *1 Cor. 3:9–17, 2 Cor. 6:14–7:1, 1 Pet. 2:4–8.*

Paul employs the metaphor of the church as temple as a culminating image for the full inclusion of Gentiles in the church. Once banned from worship in the “Court of Israel” in the temple, they now not only gain access (*Eph. 2:18*) but themselves become building materials for a new temple designed as “a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (*Eph. 2:22, NKJV*).

New Testament authors employ the temple metaphor to visualize the sanctity of the church, God’s role in founding and growing the church, and the solidarity of believers within the church. The metaphor is used in conjunction with biological language (see *Eph. 2:21*, where the temple “grows”), and the process of building is often accentuated (see *Eph. 2:22*, “you also are being built together,” *ESV*). Rather than a static image, the church is able to acknowledge its identity as “the temple of the living God” (*2 Cor. 6:16, NKJV*).

Further Thought: Study carefully the following preamble to the discussion questions listed below:

What is the specific context in which Paul writes Ephesians 2:11–22 as he describes the sweeping effects of the Cross on human relationships? He is addressing the relationships between Jewish and Gentile believers who together are members of the church. He expresses an obvious concern that they understand and live their shared, reconciled status as fellow members of God’s household (*Eph. 2:19*). However, in the context of the letter as a whole, Paul demonstrates a broad, far-reaching purpose. His theme is God’s grand, ultimate plan to unite all things in Christ (*Eph. 1:9, 10*), and his scope includes “every family in heaven and on earth” (*Eph. 3:15, ESV*).

More important, the unity of members within the church—the specific topic he addresses in Ephesians 2:11–22—itself has a wider purpose that Paul discloses in Ephesians 3:10: “so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God [in creating the church out of both Jews and Gentiles] might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (*ESV*). Through actualizing the unity Christ won on the cross, believers are to signal that God’s ultimate plan to unite all things in Christ is underway. Their reconciled relationships signal God’s plan for a universe unified in Christ. So, it is appropriate to look to Ephesians 2:11–22, set in the context of Ephesians as a whole, for biblical principles concerning a topic of importance today, relationships among people groups or races.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What biblical principles concerning ethnic relations are provided in Ephesians 2:11–22? How does the passage offer a distinctive, Christ-centered approach to the theme of how members of one ethnic group should relate to members of another?
- ❷ Given God’s plan for the future of humankind (*Eph. 1:9, 10; Eph. 2:11–22*), how important is it for the church to deal with its own internal issues and conflicts between races?
- ❸ What simmering issues between ethnic groups, which all too often may be hidden and ignored, exist in your community? How might your church play a positive role in actualizing the unifying work Christ already has accomplished on the cross? How might you participate in that work?

Safe in Jesus: Part 2

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

One afternoon, 16-year-old Almira decided to take a nap after returning home from school, exhausted from months of fitful nights. She lay down on a couch, her face to the open door of the room. She was at home alone.

Suddenly, she sensed the presence in the room. Looking toward the door, she saw the presence for the first time. He looked like a gray cloud, completely obscuring the doorway. Almira didn't know why, but she understood that something terrible would happen if she even blinked. She stared at the doorway for what seemed an eternity. Finally, she had to blink. In that split second, the gray cloud darted to her. Almira felt like she was entombed in a giant stone, helpless and unable to move. She struggled to breathe. She pleaded with good forces for help. There was no response.

At that moment, she remembered a prayer that she had memorized. It was a non-Christian prayer associated with her ancestors' traditional religion. She recited it. For a moment, she was free and could breathe. But then the presence captured her again. She repeated the prayer again and again. She was released and recaptured, released and recaptured.

Growing weary of the struggle, she frantically wondered what she could do to save herself. Abruptly, she remembered that one of the Russian teachers at the supernatural courses had mentioned Jesus Christ was more powerful than all good and evil forces. The thought flashed into her mind to call upon Jesus. She opened her mouth to speak. She only managed to utter the first syllable of Jesus' name, and the gray cloud fled. She felt as though Jesus had entered the room and thrown the evil captor off her.

Almira had no doubt that she needed Jesus. But how? She was not a Christian. So, she went to her ancestors' traditional place of worship for two months. She began to sleep better; so, she decided that Jesus must also visit that place of worship.

Then her older sister, Faniya, came home with two friends whom Almira had never seen before. She learned that day that Faniya had started going to a Seventh-day Adventist Church located on the same street as their apartment building. The two friends were members of the Adventist Church.

Almira related her story to the Adventist girls.

"That is Satan," one girl said.

The other girl said Almira had entered Satan's territory by taking the classes on the supernatural.

"But Jesus is on your side," she said. "Only He can free you from Satan's power."



Read more about Almira next week. Thank you for your mission offerings that help spread the gospel in Russia and around the world.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Ephesians 2:13, 14*

Study Focus: *Eph. 2:11–22, Rom. 3:31, Rom. 7:12, Isa. 52:7, Isa. 57:19, John 14:27, 1 Cor. 3:9–17.*

Introduction: In Ephesians 2:1–10, Paul paints an incredibly beautiful and uplifting picture of how God operates in the salvation of an individual person. Being saved means being called by the Messiah, being resurrected with the Messiah, ascending with the Messiah, and being exalted with the Messiah. But this description was usually applied to the Jews who were eagerly waiting for their Messiah-Savior. In the Jewish interpretation, when the Messiah would come He was expected to save and exalt the Jews and destroy and humiliate the Gentiles. However, Paul takes the exalting language used for describing the salvation of the Jews and applies it . . . to the Gentiles, too!

At the same time, we do need to carefully note that Paul does not proclaim that now the Gentiles are saved because they are Gentiles or that the Jews are saved because they are Jews. The Jews, who were “nigh” to God (*Eph. 2:13*), could live the same type of life “without God in the world” (*Eph. 2:12*) as the Gentiles (*Eph. 2:1–10, Rom. 2:17–26*). The Gentiles, for their part, must not forget what manner of life they lived before encountering and accepting Christ. Thus, both groups were equally saved by the grace of God, manifested in Christ Jesus on the cross. It is only when both the Jews and the Gentiles are in Christ that they are saved. On the other hand, Paul does emphasize that salvation comes from the Jews (*Eph. 2:12; see also Rom. 9:4, 5; John 4:22*). After all, “God had chosen the Hebrew people to be His representatives on earth, . . . entrusted to them the divine oracles, and . . . the Messiah was . . . a Jew (*Rom. 9:4, 5*).”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 940.

Lesson Themes: This week’s study covers three major themes:

1. Christ Jesus saves both the Jews and Gentiles equally, although God first called the Jews to the mission of proclaiming His salvation to the world.
2. The salvation offered to all by the Lord Jesus is universal because He died on the cross thus making provision of salvation for everyone who believes in Him (*John 3:16*), and thus the partitioning wall between the Jews and the Gentiles became irrelevant.
3. Jesus Christ not only destroyed the wall between the Jews and the Gentiles, but He also builds a new reality, a new temple of God, the church, wherein both the Jews and the Gentiles equally and together constitute the church.

Part II: Commentary

Tearing Down That Wall

Some Christians mistakenly understand that, in Ephesians 2:16, Paul envisions peace between the Jews and the Gentiles by abolishing the Mosaic law. Consequently, these Christians see the Old Testament and the law as irrelevant to Christianity. However, this view is not only a misunderstanding of Paul's theology but also a conclusion contrary to what Paul wrote.

Two major observations are crucial to underline here. First, the immediate context of Ephesians 2:16 does indeed point to the idea that the Gentiles who wanted to join God's people were met with a wall that prevented them from doing so. This wall of separation was a tragedy because God had called Israel to His grace and given them the mission to proclaim His grace to the world. However, the Israelites confused their call to experience holiness, conferred by grace, with isolationism and elitism. Thus, they failed to deliver on God's mission for them.

Some tend to identify the problem of the enmity described here as generated solely by the Jews to keep the Gentiles from accessing God. The major implication of this view is that the problem would be solved by Jesus' simply abolishing the Jewish law and establishing a new religion. No doubt there was a lot of enmity displayed by the Jews against the Gentiles. However, the Old Testament also witnesses to the enmity of the peoples of the ancient world manifested against Israel and Judah.

Paul, however, does not engage here in a project of a traditional international reconciliation of two people groups, based on the identification of common ground, on compromises on both sides, and on the political decision of mutual toleration. Yes, Paul does say that both the Jews and the Gentiles are at fault, but he does not say that the main problem of these two people groups consists simply in their mutual animosity or in the lack of finding a way of cohabitation in the world. In the very context of Ephesians 2:14, Paul tells the Gentile Christians in Ephesus that they had been "dead in . . . sins," not because of the Jews but because of succumbing to their own sinful nature and to Satan and because they were arrogant and thought they knew better how to save themselves (*Eph. 2:1–3; see also Rom. 1:21–32*).

The problem of the Jews, on the other hand, did not consist of the pressure and the attacks suffered at the hands of the Gentiles; God had promised them His protection if they fully trusted Him. Nor did the problem lie in the fact that the promises, the covenants, and the laws and the ordinances of God were given to the Jews and not to the Gentiles. Also, the Jews did not become the enemies of the Gentiles because God instructed them to become so. The problem of the animosity between Jew and Gentile consisted of something else.

Paul insists that the main problem of their mutual animosity was that both groups equally sinned and rebelled against God (*Rom. 3:9–19*). While the Gentile path to salvation was always by works (or so they thought), the Jews received the revelation of God’s salvation by grace. However, by the time of Jesus, the difference between the Jews and the Gentiles was no longer grace (Jews) versus works (Gentiles); rather, now they were quarreling over whose works would attain salvation. While the Gentiles thought their heroic initiative, acts, and lifestyle placed them on the way to the salvation of humanity, the Jews thought that it was they who were on the path to salvation—their salvation—because, by their strict adherence to precept, they fulfilled the law that God had given them (*Rom. 9:31, 32; Rom. 10:3*).

The animosity, then, was superficial and artificial. Underneath the verbiage, both the Jews and the Gentiles were one and the same: sinful rebels against the grace of God (*Rom. 1:21; Rom. 2:4, 5*), each group claiming they would be saved by their works. The Jews and the Gentiles were fighting over a religion of works. In essence, the Jewish religion had become Gentile in nature; it was for this reason that Jesus, after a long scolding of the Jews for falling into legalism and misinterpretation of Scripture (*Matthew 23*), had to announce to the leaders that “Your house is left to you desolate” (*Matt. 23:38*).

God had called Israel to be the custodian and proclaimer of the religion of grace to the world. This call of, and to, grace was the very identity and mission of Israel. It was for this reason that Paul fought fiercely for maintaining grace at the very foundation of the Christian religion. His epistles to the Galatians (Gentiles) and to the Hebrews (Jews) are a passionate call to Christianity to avoid following Israel in its gravest error.

Second, and consequently, Paul’s solution for this crucial problem was not social or political negotiations, wherein the Old Testament law was to be partially or totally compromised in order to make room for the Gentiles to be reconciled to the Jews. Rather, Paul called both groups to abandon their entrenched positions in their reliance on works and accept God’s grace in Jesus Christ. When each of these groups would accept God’s grace to be reconciled to God, they would find themselves in the same unified sphere of God’s kingdom. They would find themselves to be part of the same people of God, citizens of the same country and members of the same family (*Eph. 2:19*), the church.

Thus, the horizontal reconciliation of the Jews and Gentiles lies in, first, their experiencing vertical atonement. This atonement is achieved through Christ, who was incarnated to “reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross” (*Eph. 2:16, NASB*). Thus, the church—that space where peace is made between the Jew and the Gentile—is

not built upon the abolition of God's law, because that is the law of God's love and grace (*John 14:15, Rom. 13:8–10*).

If God were to reconcile humanity to Himself by abrogating His own law, the blood of Jesus and the cross would not have been necessary. The entire plan of salvation would not have been necessary. Rather, God reconciled both the Jews and the Gentiles to Him by calling them all back to Him and saving them all through the same Christ and the same Spirit (*Eph. 2:16, 18*).

Part III: Life Application

1. After thousands of years of history, the relationship between the Jews and Gentiles has become irrelevant for many Christian churches. Most likely, your class's local or regional church is mostly comprised of Gentiles, and they are not even thinking about the Jews. However, just like the Jews, we, as Christians, may have erected our own walls of separation between us, the people of God, and other people groups—walls that keep people away from the gospel. Ask your students to examine whether such walls exist in their own lives and in the life of their church. How might the church allow for such walls to be torn down by, and in, Christ?

2. Some people may interpret the tearing down of the wall between the Jews and Gentiles to mean that now there should be no difference between the church and the world and that the church could now live by the standards of the world. Why is this attitude unbiblical? Ask class members to consider how such an attitude is a detriment to sharing the gospel with all people. Why is the call to uphold God's

holiness, and to keep sin and a sinful lifestyle out of the church, a legitimate calling? Discuss.

3. Some Christians may note that the partitioning wall between the Jews and the Gentiles was erected by God Himself in the first place, especially when He directed the Israelites to separate themselves from the Gentiles. After all, Jesus Himself presented God as having installed “a fence around” Israel (*Matt. 21:33, NASB*). In addition, God strictly prohibited the Israelites to marry people from other nations (*see, e.g., Deut. 7:1–6*). Even Paul warns against marrying nonbelievers (*2 Cor. 6:14*). The majority of contemporary society seems to project a more inclusivist, nondiscriminatory outlook on religious intermarriage. Considering these observations, how would class members explain Paul’s affirmation that Jesus tore down the wall between the Jews and the Gentiles when the Bible seems clear that it was God who built the wall around Israel?

UNITED BY MISSION



Anna



Luka



Melisa

In Latvia, a 14-year-old girl brings friends to church. In Montenegro, a 12-year-old boy cooks in his family's vegetarian restaurant. In Poland, a 10-year-old girl roots for Jesus in the great controversy against good and evil. What do these children have in common? They are united in the Seventh-day Adventist Church's mission to win souls in the Trans-European Division, the recipient of your Thirteen Sabbath Offering this quarter.

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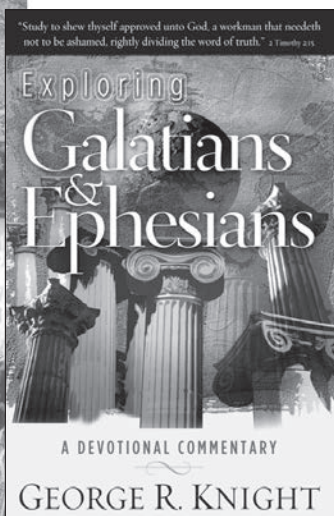
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GEORGE R. KNIGHT

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The Mystery of the Gospel



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ephesians 3; Job 11:5–9; Ezek. 43:13–16; Amos 7:7, 8; Rev. 11:1, 2.*

Memory Text: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (*Ephesians 3:20, 21, NIV*).

In Ephesians 3, Paul opens with a theme that he had already touched on earlier: “that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel” (*Eph. 3:6, NKJV*). And though that might not be much of a surprise to the church today, composed mostly of Gentiles, it was something that seemed radically new to many of his readers at that time.

Paul then continues his inspired words, as the apostle reflects on his passion to preach the gospel of Jesus to the Gentiles.

We learn, too, of his current hardships in extending that ministry, hardships that include time in a Roman prison.

And we also hear his commitment to the mystery at the heart of the gospel, the mystery that, in the church, Gentiles are on equal footing with their Jewish brothers and sisters. We experience his excitement for the church and its cosmic mission. We listen in as he prays, praising God for expressing His grace through the church.

In short, we are inspired to join Paul in his passion for the gospel.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 5.

Paul: Imprisoned Apostle to the Gentiles

Read Ephesians 3. As you do so, identify one or two main themes. What major points does Paul make?

Ephesians 3 displays an interesting structure. Paul begins the chapter with these words: “For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles” (*Eph. 3:1, NKJV*). Then, he breaks off for what turns out to be a lengthy digression focused on his work as apostle to the Gentiles (*Eph. 3:2–13*). After the aside, he signals a return to his original train of thought by repeating the phrase “For this reason” (*Eph. 3:14, NKJV*), with verses 14–21 providing his interrupted prayer report.

In Ephesians 3:1, Paul identifies himself as “the prisoner of Christ Jesus” (*NKJV*), his way of arguing that though he may reside in Roman captivity and appear to be under the authority of the Roman Empire, there is a deeper, divine purpose being worked out in his life. He is not the prisoner of Rome but “the prisoner of Christ Jesus”! (*compare Eph. 4:1*).

Paul’s mention of his “suffering” (*Eph. 3:13, ESV*), and his later mention of his chains (*Eph. 6:20, ESV*), suggest that he is not under relatively comfortable house arrest (*compare Acts 28:16*) but is in prison. Being in prison in the first century and in a Roman dungeon was especially challenging. The Roman Empire did not run well-organized prisons with sanitary facilities and regular meal service. In fact, the empire had little need for prisons since incarceration was not used as a means of punishment. People were placed in prison only while they awaited trial or execution. Prisoners were expected to provide for themselves and were dependent on relatives and friends to supply food and other needs.

Paul’s worries perhaps center on the emotional impact of his imprisonment on believers, since being a prisoner was an extreme social disgrace in the context of an honor-shame culture. He might fear that some will ask, “How can Paul be the apostle and messenger of the exalted Christ and be a despised prisoner?” So, he reframes his imprisonment, helping believers to see it as part of God’s plan. He is suffering for them (“suffering for you,” *ESV*), and what appears to be a source of shame will in fact turn out to be for their “glory” (*Eph. 3:13*).

How can we learn to trust God and His ways amid what can be very trying circumstances?

The Long-Hidden Mystery of the Gospel

What is the mystery that has been entrusted to Paul? *Eph. 3:1–6*.

As you study Ephesians 3:1–6, note the following:

First, Paul writes this part of the letter specifically to Gentile believers in the house churches of Ephesus (*Eph. 3:1*).

Second, Paul claims to be the recipient of something he labels “the stewardship of God’s grace,” given to him “for you,” for Gentile believers (*Eph. 3:2, ESV*). This stewardship, or this ministry of grace, is Paul’s way of describing the commission given to him to preach the gospel (“God’s grace”) to the Gentiles (*compare Eph. 3:7, 8, ESV*).

Third, Paul claims that a mystery has been revealed to him, a topic he has already written about in the letter (*see especially Eph. 1:9, 10; Eph. 2:11–22*), the “mystery of Christ” (*Eph. 3:3, 4*). Paul does not wish to be understood as the inventor of the gospel, but he does lay claim to a God-given ministry to proclaim it.

Fourth, Paul is not alone in having received advanced revelation about this *mystery*, as the Spirit has also revealed it to Christ’s “holy apostles and prophets” in a way that surpasses the revelation of God’s plan to earlier generations (*Eph. 3:5*). The term *prophets* here probably refers to those possessing and exercising the gift of prophecy among early Christian house churches rather than the prophets of the Old Testament. The *mystery*, which was once hidden, has now become what we might call an “open secret.”

Finally, he declares: “This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (*Eph. 3:6, ESV*).

Paul is passionate about the gospel and especially about the way it is expressed in the church, which is composed of both Jews and Gentiles. These two groups have become the building blocks of God’s new community, His new brand of humanity, the church (*see Eph. 2:14–16*). We could say they are now transformed from being enemies to being “co-heirs,” “co-bodied” (included in a single body, the body of Christ), and “co-partakers” of the gospel promise (*see Eph. 3:6*).

What, if any, attitudes, maybe even below the surface, might you hold that contradict the inclusiveness taught by the gospel? How do you rid yourself of these?

The Church: Revealer of God's Wisdom

What does Paul say about God and the actions of God in Ephesians 3:7–13?

Paul again lays claim to being a “minister” through “the gift of God’s grace” (*Eph. 3:7, ESV; compare Eph. 3:1, 2*). This gift, like the gospel itself, is not granted because of the worth of the recipient, but through God’s grace. Paul underlines this point by describing himself as “the very least of all the saints” (*Eph. 3:8, ESV*).

There is an interesting progression in Paul’s self-understanding that is discernible as we move through Paul’s letters in the order they were written. Early on, he lays claim to his status as a divinely appointed apostle (*Gal. 1:1*). Later, though, he introduces himself as “the least of the apostles” and “not worthy to be called an apostle” (*1 Cor. 15:9, NKJV*). Here in Ephesians he sees himself as “the very least of all the saints” (*Eph. 3:8, ESV*). Finally, he describes himself as the “chief” (*NKJV*) or “worst” of sinners (*1 Tim. 1:15, NIV*).

Perhaps this line of thinking here by Paul can help explain this famous quote by Ellen G. White: “The closer you come to Jesus, the more faulty you will appear in your own eyes; for your vision will be clearer, and your imperfections will be seen in broad and distinct contrast to His perfect nature.”—*Steps to Christ*, p. 64.

Paul then continues. In Ephesians 3:10, he writes: “to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places” (*NKJV*). Who are the “rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (*ESV*) mentioned here? How does the church announce God’s “manifold” or multifaceted wisdom to them? Though Ephesians 3:10 does not describe the nature of the powers, it seems best to take them as the evil ones described in more detail in Ephesians 6:11, 12. If so, the composition of the church, unifying Jews and Gentiles as once very divided parts of humankind, becomes a ringing announcement to these demonic “rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” of God’s plan for the future, “to unite all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth” (*Eph. 1:10, ESV*). They are put on notice that God’s plan is underway and their doom assured. The very nature of a unified church signals their ultimate defeat.

If your own congregation took seriously Paul’s “job description” of the church in Ephesians 3:10, how might it change the way you and your fellow church members relate to each other?

Christ, Dwelling in Your Heart

Compare Paul's earlier prayer request, Ephesians 1:16–19, with his plea for believers in Ephesians 3:14–19. In what ways are the two requests similar?

Behind the English translations of Ephesians 3:14, 15 is an important play on words. When Paul says that he bows before “the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named” (*ESV*), he is exploring the phonetic connection between the Greek word for *Father*, *patēr*, and the Greek term for *family*, *patria*. In Ephesians, Paul celebrates the comprehensive nature of God’s plan of salvation, which involves all things (*Eph. 1:9, 10*) for all time (*Eph. 1:21*). And here he lays claim to “every family in heaven and on earth” as belonging to “the Father.” Every family (*patria*) takes its name from the Father (*patēr*). This is very good news!

Ponder this thought: Your family, despite its imperfections and failings, belongs to God. Your family is not in the cruel grip of fate but in God’s caring hands. God loves imperfect families. They bear the divine name. They carry the mark of His ownership.

In Ephesians 3:16–19, Paul asks God to grant believers an abundant spiritual experience marked by inner strength through the Spirit’s presence (*Eph. 3:16*), intimacy with Christ, who is also portrayed as dwelling within (*Eph. 3:17*), and a settled, secure spiritual identity (“rooted and grounded in love,” *Eph. 3:17, ESV*).

As Paul seeks to offer praise to God for the expansive reach of blessings offered to believers, he includes not three dimensions but four—“breadth and length and height and depth” (*Eph. 3:18, ESV*). He does not clearly identify to what these dimensions apply, though they obviously describe the vast size of something important. This leaves an interesting puzzle for Bible students. Do these dimensions describe God’s wisdom (*compare Job 11:5–9*, which uses four dimensions), God’s power (*compare Eph. 3:16, 17*), or, perhaps, the spiritual temple of Ephesians 2:19–22 (*compare Ezek. 43:13–16*, which uses four dimensions; *Amos 7:7, 8; Rev. 11:1, 2*)? It may be best to see these four dimensions as describing the immensity of “the love of Christ” (*Eph. 3:19*), viewing the phrase “to comprehend . . . the breadth and length and height and depth” (*Eph. 3:18, ESV*) as parallel to the next phrase, “to know the love of Christ” (*Eph. 3:19, ESV; compare Rom. 8:35–39*). However we see his words, they are good news.

Glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus

Paul concludes his prayer report with a doxology, a brief, poetic statement of praise to God. For what does he praise God? *Eph. 3:20, 21.*

Paul has been recording his prayers for believers (*Eph. 3:14–19*). Now he prays directly and powerfully. Paul’s doxology raises two questions: 1. Does the passage inappropriately elevate the church, placing it on a par with Christ, in the phrase “to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus” (*Eph. 3:21, ESV*)? While Paul is highly interested in the church in Ephesians, it is clear that Christ is the Savior of the church since it is Christ who dwells in the hearts of believers (*Eph. 3:17*). In the doxology, Paul praises God for the salvation offered to the church through Christ Jesus.

2. Does the phrase “throughout all generations, forever and ever” (*Eph. 3:21, ESV*) portray an unending, earthbound future for the church, with the return of Christ put on hold? Ephesians exhibits a robust expectation for the future. For example, Ephesians 4:30 looks toward “the day of redemption” (*ESV*). Also, believers will experience Christ’s limitless, sovereign power in “the age to come” (*Eph. 1:21, NRSV*). Paul’s doxology should be read as a celebration of Christ’s unending power exercised on behalf of believers.

Looking back over Paul’s second prayer report (*Eph. 3:14–21; compare Eph. 1:15–23*), we see Paul finding strength in the cosmic scope of the Father’s care (*Eph. 3:14, 15*), the ready availability of the Holy Spirit (*Eph. 3:16*), the partnership of Christ Himself (*Eph. 3:17*), and the immeasurability of the limitless love of Christ (*Eph. 3:18, 19*). This is so true that he imagines believers being filled “with all the fullness of God” (*Eph. 3:19, ESV*) and celebrates these spiritual realities in praise, again marveling at the abundance of God’s power on offer to the saints (*Eph. 3:20, 21*).

Whenever we feel the press of problems, temptations, or doubts, we may turn to this buoyant account of Paul’s prayers. The imprisoned apostle raises our vision to the grand horizon of God’s purposes and grace, reminding us that, whatever our current circumstances, we are participants in God’s ultimate plan (*Eph. 1:9, 10*), and His power is at work in us.

What blessings from God are especially valuable to you? Practice composing a prayer of praise in order to praise God for them.

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “Modern Revivals,” in *The Great Controversy*, pp. 461–478.

“How can we harmonize our dwarfed spiritual condition with the presentation of our text [*Eph. 3:14–19*] that describes the fullness of knowledge it is our privilege to possess? How can Heaven look upon us, who have had every spiritual and temporal advantage that we might grow in grace, when we have not improved our opportunities? The apostle did not write these words to tantalize us, to deceive us, or to raise our expectations only to have them disappointed in our experience. He wrote these words to show us what we may and must be, if we would be heirs of the kingdom of God. How can we be laborers together with God, if we have a dwarfed experience? We have a knowledge of the Christian’s privilege, and should seek for that deep, spiritual understanding in the things of God that the Lord has desired us to have.

“Do we really believe the Bible? Do we really believe that we may attain to the knowledge of God that is presented before us in this text? Do we believe every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God? Do we believe the words that have been spoken by prophets and apostles, by Jesus Christ, who is the author of all light and blessing, and in whom dwelleth all richness and fullness? Do we really believe in God, and in his Son?”—Ellen G. White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, October 1, 1889.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Compare Paul’s doxology in Ephesians 3:20, 21 to other doxologies in the New Testament—*Rom. 11:33–36; Rom. 16:25–27; Phil. 4:20; 2 Pet. 3:18; Jude 24, 25*. What themes or ideas move through these passages? How might we adopt the attitude of praise and worship they illustrate?
- ❷ Compare Paul’s four uses of the Greek word *plēroma* (“fullness”) in Ephesians (*Eph. 1:10, 23; Eph. 3:19; Eph. 4:13*). Why do you think this idea is important to Paul?
- ❸ Of all the actions of God that Paul praises in Ephesians 3, which is most inspiring to you? Why?
- ❹ Paul concludes the first half of Ephesians just as he began it (*Eph. 1:3–21*), employing the language of prayer and praise. He exults in God’s power, present in the lives of believers through Christ and the Spirit (*Eph. 3:16–21*). How can we, as Ellen G. White wrote above, better experience this power in our lives?

Fighting With Scripture: Part 3

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

That night, Almira woke up after having another nightmare, and she resolved to go to the Seventh-day Adventist Church the next Sabbath. But in the morning, she thought, *I'm not a Christian. I can't go there.* The following night, she had another nightmare, and she struggled again over what to do. On Sabbath, she went to the Adventist Church.

After several weeks, Almira's parents found out that she was attending the church every Sabbath, and they forbade her from going. Other relatives heard and implored her not to go. Neighbors saw her walking to the church on Sabbaths and purposely came out of their apartment buildings to scold her. Going to church became a deeply unpleasant battle every Sabbath. But Almira enjoyed worshiping at the church, and she kept on going. She was learning about Jesus and finding peace in Him.

But at home the evil presence persisted. The spirit kept coming at night. Almira began to pray out loud, "In the name of the blood of Jesus Christ, protect me from Satan so I can sleep." She prayed the prayer every night for three months. The prayers dispelled the spirit, but she remained scared.

She told the Adventist pastor about her fears, and he suggested that she also read the Bible out loud. Whenever she sensed the spirit, she opened her Bible to Isaiah 43. She especially liked the promise, "But now, thus says the LORD, who created you, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel: 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine.' . . . Since you were precious in My sight, you have been honored, and I have loved you; therefore I will give men for you, and people for your life" (*Isaiah 43:1-4, NKJV*).

She also found comfort in Isaiah 49:24, 25, which says, "Shall the prey be taken from the mighty, or the captives of the righteous be delivered? But thus says the LORD: 'Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken away, and the prey of the terrible be delivered; for I will contend with him who contends with you, and I will save your children' " (*NKJV*).

One night, she confessed all her sins out loud to Jesus. After that, she slept better than she had in a long time.

Finally, Almira stopped being afraid. When she read the Bible and prayed, the spirit always left. She realized that even though the spirit was stronger than her, Jesus was stronger than them both.



Read more about Almira next week. Thank you for your mission offerings that help spread the gospel in Russia and around the world.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Ephesians 3:20, 21*

Study Focus: *Ephesians 3; Job 11:5–9; Ezek. 43:13–16; Amos 7:7, 8; Rev. 11:1, 2.*

Introduction: After he shared in Ephesians 3:1 his glorious vision of the cross of Christ and what it accomplished for the Jews and the Gentiles alike, Paul wants to assure his brothers and sisters in Ephesus that he prays that they may always ponder, understand, and be guided and transformed by that vision of the Cross and by the glory, the power, and love of God that the Cross reveals. However, just as Paul begins telling the Ephesians that he was praying for them, he, “the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles” (*Eph. 3:1, NASB*), decided to dwell a bit more on his ministry for the Gentiles. His ministry consisted in understanding the glorious “mystery” of God to include them, the Gentiles, in His plan of salvation and in His church. This mystery, the apostle insists, was not an afterthought in God’s plan. Rather, it was God’s “eternal purpose” (*Eph. 3:11*) and now, in the age of Christ, God proceeded to fully reveal this purpose to the world, fulfilling it through Christ, and now through him, Christ’s apostle.

Lesson Themes: This week’s lesson highlights three major themes:

1. Paul’s prayer and ideal for the church was to view the church as the new humanity, including the Gentiles.
2. The inclusion of the Gentiles was God’s great mystery and surprise to humanity. Paul was the humble steward of this mystery.
3. Because of the inclusion of the Gentiles, and thus of all humanity in the plan of salvation, the church became the display of God’s wisdom, love, power, and glory, both on earth and throughout the universe.

Part II: Commentary

The Mystery of God and the Foundation of the Apostles and the Prophets

The discussion on the Jews and the Gentiles, united in Christ’s body, raises the issue of the relationship between the church and Israel. Christians have developed different models of the Israel-church relation. One traditional position is that Israel was God’s covenant nation, but that after Israel as a nation rejected Jesus as the Messiah, Israel as a nation was rejected and was replaced by the church. Therefore, after Christ, Israel does not

fulfill any role in God's economy of salvation. Other theologians took a "literalistic interpretation" of Scripture and developed the dispensational theory: that Israel and the church represent two different peoples of God. These peoples have different calls, different covenants, different paths to salvation, and different purposes in the economy of salvation.

Even a cursory reading of Paul and of the New Testament reveals that both these theories are problematic and that the dispensationalist approach to the Israel-church relation is especially contrary to what the apostle envisioned. Several major points of Paul's view on the Israel-church relation could be made here. First, Paul viewed an essential continuity between Israel and the church. This relationship is to be understood in the context of the overarching biblical interpretative principle of promise-fulfillment: Christ and the New Testament people of God are the fulfillment of God's promises in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, God saved Israel and called it to proclaim God's covenants and promises of grace in the world. Through Israel, God's call to receive His promises of grace and to join His covenants were to reach all the families and nations of the earth. Israel's was not a mission of imperial development in which Israel was to conquer and annex all the nations of the earth. Rather, the nations were expected to join God's covenant and promises, as opposed to joining a national or an imperial entity. The Old Testament, therefore, was looking forward to a supranational structure of God's people, in which people of all nations would be part of the same covenant with God (*Gen. 12:1–3, 1 Kings 8:41–43, Isa. 56:3–7, Isa. 60:3*). This supranational structure was fulfilled in the New Testament people of God composed of both Jews and Gentiles.

Second, and consequently, Israel and the church are not two peoples of God that coexist in parallel, each of them with their covenants, paths to salvation, and missions. Rather, Christ explained that His mission was to "bring" His "other sheep that are not in this fold" so that "they will become one flock, with one shepherd" (*John 10:16, NASB*). Nor is the church simply the replacement of Israel as a nation, in the sense that Israel was the nation of God until Christ, and now, after Christ rejected Israel as a nation, the church is the new people of God. Rather, for Paul, the church is not a different people of God but the fulfillment of the amazing promise of God in the Old Testament: He calls all humanity to His grace. That is why, in Romans 9, Paul views the church as comprised of both Jews and Gentiles (*Rom. 9:23–26*).

True, only a remnant of Israel joined the community gathered around Jesus (*Rom. 9:27–29*), but it is precisely this remnant that shows that God did not reject Israel's taking part in the church (*Rom. 11:1*). It is this remnant that ensures the continuity and unity between Israel and the church. For this reason, in Romans 11:16–18, Paul compares the church

with the olive tree: some branches are the children of Israel, and other branches are the Gentiles, but all the branches ultimately are fed by the same root; that is, God's covenant with Abraham. God always had one plan of salvation, one Seed who was Christ, one promise, one covenant, and one people.

This same idea of the one plan of God, the continuity between Israel and the church, and therefore the essentiality of the unity of the church resurfaces again in Ephesians 2 and 3. Paul explains to the Ephesians that the church is comprised both of "circumcised" and "uncircumcised" (*Eph. 2:11*). The apostle does not say that the Jews and the church are two separate peoples or that the church replaced the Jews as God's people. Far from excluding the Jews from the church, Paul follows Jesus' theology and affirms that salvation comes from the Jews (*John 4:22*). For this reason, Paul emphasizes that, while the Gentiles were "far away," the Jews were "near" (*Eph. 2:17, NASB*). Elsewhere, Paul described this "nearness" in terms of having received God's promises or covenants, God's prophecies, the Messiah, and God's mission to share them all with the world (*Rom. 9:4, 5*). Thus, it is the Gentiles who were brought near to God and built on the same foundation of the Hebrew prophets, as opposed to building on the foundation of their old myths or philosophies.

Third, even when speaking of the foundation of the church, Paul uses the same idea of the continuity of Israel and the church, this time in terms of revelation. The church is built on divine revelation. But God does not have two discontinuous revelations, the Old and the New Testaments. He did not reveal something in the Old Testament only to abandon His plan and reveal a totally new project. His plan is one, and His revelation is one and continuous. That is why Paul emphasizes that the church is built on both the apostles and the prophets (*Eph. 2:20*; see also John's description of the New Jerusalem wherein the apostles' names are inscribed on the foundation of the city, and the names of the patriarchs are inscribed on the gates; yet the apostles and the patriarchs are integrated in the same New Jerusalem, God's dwelling place, *Rev. 21:10-14*). The reason for listing the apostles first is perhaps that the apostles are "greater" than the prophets in the same sense that John the Baptist was greater than all the prophets. This "greatness" is to be understood in the same sense of promise-fulfillment: while the prophets prophesied the coming of the Messiah, the apostles announced His real historical advent in the world. The Messiah whom the apostles proclaimed as having come into the world was the same Messiah seen by the prophets in their visions. The apostles and the prophets were united in their testimony, which is the foundation of the church.

However, while Paul recognizes that the apostles and the prophets received God's call to play this foundational role in the church, they recognized and proclaimed that the Cornerstone of the church was Jesus of Nazareth, as the Christ prophesied by the Old Testament Scriptures (*Eph. 2:20*), the content and essence of their testimony. As an apostle, Paul followed Jesus' interpretative principle of "all the scriptures" (*Luke 24:27*) pointing to Him, His advent, and His ministry (*see Luke 24:25–27*). It is because Jesus is the Cornerstone that the building is built perfectly "in Him" (*Eph. 2:20–22*) as a "holy temple" (*Eph. 2:21*) for God to dwell in (*Eph. 2:22*).

Fourth, Paul's view of the Israel-church relation also reveals his understanding of the identity and character of God. The God of Israel is not their national God; He is the God of the whole earth. While His earthly residence may be in Jerusalem, His jurisdiction is not limited to Judea and the surrounding areas. Rather, the God of the Christians has His throne in the heavenly places or sanctuary and has authority over any power on earth and in heaven (*Matt. 6:10, Matt. 28:18, Eph. 1:21*) because He is the Creator and the Redeemer of the entire world. That is why God calls the whole world to return to Him, receive His grace, and live in His kingdom.

Part III: Life Application

1. **People love mysteries and secrets. Ask your students to consider these questions: Have you ever lived your Christian life as if you were the guardian of a great, glorious mystery, a mystery that changed your life forever and, as you understand it, will change the world forever in the most positive way? If so, explain. Have you ever shared the gospel as if it were a great, beautiful mystery? Discuss.**

2. In Ephesians 3:10, Paul affirms that the church is the means through which God reveals His wisdom “to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (*ESV*). Ask your students the following questions: In your understanding, is the church a revelation of God’s plan of salvation to the entire universe? How so? How is the unity in the church in Christ, unity between the Gentiles and the Jews, unity in families and in society an essential part of the saving revelation of the grace and power of God? Discuss the answers with your class.

3. In Colossians 1:27, a parallel text to Ephesians 3, Paul emphasizes that the mystery God revealed to the “saints” in the church is “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (*NASB*). Invite your students to share how they might explain this expression to a non-Christian. What does the apostle mean by “Christ in you”? How does this expression relate to “the hope of glory”? On the other hand, how does this “mystery” affect your daily life? Lead your class in a discussion of the answers to these questions.

The Unified Body of Christ



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 4:1–16; Phil. 2:3; Ps. 68:18; Acts 2; 1 Cor. 12:4–11, 27–30; Isa. 5:4.*

Memory Text: “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (*Ephesians 4:11, 12, ESV*).

One of Aesop's fables is called “The Belly and the Feet.” It goes like this: “The belly and the feet were arguing about their importance, and when the feet kept saying that they were so much stronger that they even carried the stomach around, the stomach replied, ‘But, my good friends, if I didn't take in food, you wouldn't be able to carry anything.’ ”—Lloyd W. Daly, *Aesop Without Morals* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1961), p. 148.

Paul, however, used the human body to make a spiritual point. For Paul, the human body—and the church as the body of Christ—is composed of various parts with differing abilities, all of which must work together for the body to be healthy. In *Ephesians 4:1–16*, Paul redeploys the body metaphor that he used so effectively earlier (*Rom. 12:3–8, 1 Cor. 12:12–31*). Christ is now the Head of the body, supplying the body with “gifted” people who help unify the body, with each part—each church member—contributing its abilities to the whole.

Paul's picture of a healthy, unified body helps us understand God's goal for us: to be parts of a fruitful church united in Christ.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 12.

The Unity of the Spirit

Read Ephesians 4:1–16. How does Paul encourage believers to nurture the unity of the church?

Paul begins the second half of Ephesians (chapters 4–6) with a stirring call to unity, but in two major parts. First, in Ephesians 4:1–6 he asks believers to nurture “the unity of the Spirit” by exhibiting unity-building virtues (*Eph. 4:1–3*), a call he supports with a poetic list of seven “ones” (*Eph. 4:4–6*). Second, in Ephesians 4:7–16, Paul identifies the victorious, exalted Jesus as the Source of grace in people who lead in sharing the gospel (*Eph. 4:7–10*) and describes how they, together with all church members, contribute to the health, growth, and unity of the body of Christ (*Eph. 4:11–16*).

As the chapter begins, Paul invites Christians to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (*Eph. 4:1, ESV*). He used the verb *walk* in the figurative sense of *to behave*, or *to live* (see *Eph. 2:2, 10; Eph. 4:17; Eph. 5:2, 8, 15*). When Paul refers to their calling, he refers to the call to Christian faith (*Eph. 1:18; Eph. 2:4–6, 13*). Paul urges believers to practice a unifying behavior that reflects God’s ultimate plan (*Eph. 4:9, 10*). He begins that emphasis here with his call to practice virtues that lead to unity (*Eph. 4:1–3*), such as humility, gentleness, and patience.

Let’s look at each term.

Paul elsewhere explains the term *humility*, in Ephesians 4:2 (*ESV*; “lowliness” in *NKJV*), by adding the idea to “count others more significant than yourselves” (*Phil. 2:3, ESV*). Humility, then, may be understood not as a negative virtue of self-deprecation (see *Col. 2:18, 23*) but as a positive one of appreciating and serving others.

Gentleness (*Eph. 4:2, ESV, NKJV*) may be explained as “the quality of not being overly impressed by a sense of one’s self-importance” and also means “courtesy, considerateness, meekness.”—Frederick Danker, ed., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 861.

Finally, *patience* (*ESV*; compare “longsuffering,” *NKJV*) is being able to bear up under provocation or trials. These qualities, then, all gather around the theme of turning away from self-importance and, instead, focusing on the value of others.

Humility, gentleness, patience. Think about how these attributes would help unify us as a people. How do we learn to cultivate these virtues?

Together as One in the One

What seven “ones” does Paul cite in support of his theme of the unity of the church? What point is he seeking to make with this list? *Eph. 4:4–6.*

Paul’s list of seven “ones” has a poetic feel to it and may echo a hymn of affirmation used in Ephesus. The list begins by mentioning two “ones” together: “There is one body” (referring to the church as the body of Christ, *Eph. 4:12, 16; Eph. 1:23; Eph. 5:23, 29, 30*) and “one Spirit” (*Eph. 4:4*). The third one is the “one hope of your calling” (*Eph. 4:4; compare Eph. 4:1*).

The list then offers three more elements, “one Lord” (a reference to Christ), “one faith” (meaning the content of what Christians believe, *Eph. 4:13; Col. 1:23; Col. 2:7; Gal. 1:23; 1 Tim. 4:1, 6*), and “one baptism” (*compare Eph. 5:26*) before concluding with an extended description of God as “one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all, and in all” (*Eph. 4:6, ESV*).

What is Paul communicating through this poetic description of God the Father? By virtue of His being “Father of all,” God is the Creator. The rest of the sentence describes how, once the world is created, God relates to “all things,” to everything that He made. Paul is not dabbling in the heresies of pantheism (which identifies nature with God), or panentheism (which argues that the world is included in God’s being, though it does not exhaust that being). He is rather proclaiming the transcendence (“who is over all”), active rule (“who is . . . through all”), and immanence (“who is . . . in all”) of God.

Note carefully two ideas about the unity of the church (*Eph. 4:1–6*). First, unity is a spiritual fact, rooted in these seven “ones,” a reality to be celebrated (*Eph. 4:4–6*). Second, this unity requires our zeal to nurture and grow it (*Eph. 4:3*). There will often be cause to weep at our failings in actualizing this unity. However, whatever our failings, we should rejoice in the work of God-in-Christ in unifying the church, rejoicing in the theological reality of the “unity of the Spirit” (*Eph. 4:3*). Doing so will empower us to return to the hard work of advancing this unity but with fresh conviction that in doing so we are accomplishing God’s own work.

Read again Ephesians 4:4–6. How does it make you feel? How should it make you feel, knowing what it says about our unity in and with God through Christ?

The Exalted Christ, Giver of Gifts

“However, he has given each one of us a special gift through the generosity of Christ. That is why the Scriptures say,

**‘When he ascended to the heights,
he led a crowd of captives
and gave gifts to his people.’**

“Notice that it says ‘he ascended.’ This clearly means that Christ also descended to our lowly world. And the same one who descended is the one who ascended higher than all the heavens, so that he might fill the entire universe with himself” (Eph. 4:7–10, NLT). What is happening here, and what is Paul’s point in these verses?

Paul here quoted Psalm 68:18, which reads: “When you ascended to the heights, you led a crowd of captives. You received gifts from the people, even from those who rebelled against you” (NLT). Psalm 68:18 portrays the Lord, Yahweh, as a conquering general who, having conquered His enemies, ascends the hill on which His capital city is built, with the captives of battle in His train (see Ps. 68:1, 2). He then receives tribute (“received gifts”) from His conquered foes (noting that Paul adjusts this imagery to the exalted Christ “giving gifts,” based on the wider context of the psalm; see Ps. 68:35).

If we follow the order of Psalm 68:18, the ascent—Christ’s ascension to heaven (Eph. 1:21–23)—occurs first, followed by the *descent* in which the risen, exalted Jesus gives gifts and fills all things. This is Paul’s way of depicting the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2). This view is confirmed by Ephesians 4:11, 12, which identify the *gifts* provided by the exalted Jesus as gifts of the Spirit.

“Christ ascended on high, leading captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. When, after Christ’s ascension, the Spirit came down as promised, like a rushing, mighty wind, filling the whole place where the disciples were assembled, what was the effect? Thousands were converted in a day.”—Ellen G. White, *Ye Shall Receive Power*, p. 158.

However deep these few verses in Ephesians may be, how can we learn to draw comfort from what they show Christ has done for us and will do, especially when He will fill “all things everywhere with himself” (Eph. 1:23, NLT)?

Gifts of the Exalted Jesus

Drawing on Psalm 68:18, Paul has just described the risen, exalted, conquering Jesus as giving gifts to His people from on high. What “gifts” does the exalted Jesus give, and for what purpose? *Eph. 4:11–13*.

Paul identifies four groups of “gifted” people as part of the treasure trove of the exalted Jesus that He gives to His church: (1) apostles; (2) prophets; (3) evangelists; (4) shepherds (*ESV*) and teachers (the structure of the Greek phrase suggests these are a single group). Christ gives these gifts to accomplish important work: “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (*Eph. 4:12, ESV*) and “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (*Eph. 4:13, ESV*).

This last point was of special importance to early Adventists, who were reflecting on the spiritual gifts of Ellen G. White. Does the Bible validate the functioning of the gift of prophecy in the church only during the time of the apostles? Or does the gift continue until the return of Christ? The early Adventists found their answer in Ephesians 4:13 and shared it through a story about the captain of a ship who was bound to follow the instructions provided for a voyage. As the ship neared port, the captain found that the instructions informed him that a pilot would come on board to help guide the vessel. To remain true to the original instructions, he must allow the pilot to board and obey the further guidance offered. “Who now heed that original book of directions? Those who reject the pilot, or those who receive him, as that book instructs them? Judge ye.”—Uriah Smith, “Do We Discard the Bible by Endorsing the Visions?” *Review and Herald*, January 13, 1863, p. 52.

We should be careful when we identify “shepherds” (or “pastors”), “teachers,” and “evangelists,” since we think of these positions within our own context and time. As far as we are able to determine, in Paul’s day these would all have been lay leaders who were serving the house churches of Ephesus (*compare 1 Pet. 2:9, Acts 2:46, Acts 12:12*).

Read Isaiah 5:4: “What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it?” (NKJV). Think about this verse in the context of what God has given us in the ministry of Ellen G. White. How does it apply?

Growing Up Into Christ

What danger threatens the Christlike maturity of the church? *Eph. 4:14.*

Paul perceives an environment not unlike our own in which various ideas, such as “every wind of doctrine” and “deceitful schemes” (*ESV*), are thrust upon believers. He uses three sets of images to describe the dangers of wayward theology: (1) the immaturity of childhood, “so that we may no longer be children” (*ESV*); (2) danger on the high seas, “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine” (*ESV*); and (3) being swindled by clever people who, like gamblers, practice sleight of hand. Paul uses figuratively the Greek word *kubeia* (“dice playing”) to mean “cunning” (*ESV*) or “trickery” (*NKJV*).

Paul believes divisiveness to be an important mark of error: That which nourishes and grows the body and helps it hold together is good while that which depletes and divides it is evil. By turning from the divisive teaching and to that of tested and trusted teachers (*Eph. 4:11*), they will advance toward true Christian maturity and play effective roles in the body of Christ (*Eph. 4:12, 13; compare Eph. 4:15, 16*).

In what ways does a healthy church function like a healthy body? *Eph. 4:15, 16.*

In Ephesians 4:1–16, Paul advocates for the unity of the church and recruits the addressees to foster it actively. While unity is a theological certainty (*Eph. 4:4–6*), it does require our hard work (*Eph. 4:3*). One way we foster unity is by being active “parts” of the body of Christ (*Eph. 4:7–16*). Each of us is a part of the body and should contribute to its health and growth (*Eph. 4:7, 16*). We all should also benefit from the work of apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers (*Eph. 4:11*). These, like ligaments, tendons, and “every joint” (*Eph. 4:16, ESV*), have a unifying function, helping us grow up together into Christ, who is the head of the body (*Eph. 4:13, 15*).

What are some of the “winds of doctrine” blowing through our church today, and how can we stand firm against them? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Further Thought: Two notes help to expand our study of Ephesians 4:7–10:

1. *Translating Ephesians 4:9.* Some translations indicate that the descent occurs before the ascent (e.g., *NKJV*, “He also first descended”; *KJV*, *RSV*, *ESV*, *NASB*). Other translations follow the Greek text more closely, leaving the issue of the timing of the ascent and descent open (e.g., *NIV*, “What does ‘he ascended’ mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions?” *ASV*, *HCSB*, *LEB*, *NLT*), which allows for the view, expressed in Tuesday’s study, that the narrative order of Psalm 68:18 should be followed, with Christ’s exaltation to heaven (the “ascent”) occurring first, followed by His “descent” in the Spirit.

2. *Leading captivity captive.* In quoting Psalm 68:18 from the Greek Old Testament, called the Septuagint (an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament), Paul uses a phrase in Ephesians 4:8 that reads literally, “he took captive captivity” (reflected in some translations, e.g., *KJV*, *NKJV*, *NRSV*), but which is widely affirmed to mean, “he took as prisoners a group of captives” (reflected in the *ESV*, *NASB*, *NIV*, etc.). Seventh-day Adventists have often understood the phrase to refer to Christ’s act of taking back with Him to heaven, at His ascension, those raised in a special resurrection at the time of His own resurrection (*Matt. 27:51–53*). These constitute a “wave sheaf,” firstfruits of the redeemed, that He presents to the Father on His return to the courts of heaven (see *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1022; *The Desire of Ages*, p. 834; compare *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 785, 786). Alternatively, in line with Colossians 2:15, the passage could be taken as a picture of Christ’s conquest over His foes—Satan and his evil angels—who are portrayed as defeated captives.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Compare the list of “spiritual gifts” in Ephesians 4:11 with the lists in 1 Corinthians 12:4–11, 27–30; Romans 12:4–8; and 1 Peter 4:10, 11. What differences and similarities do you observe?
- ❷ In class, talk about some of the “winds of doctrine” blowing in the church today. Notice how Paul says that we should not be blown about by these winds. What are specific ways that we can help protect ourselves, and others in the church, from the damage that these winds can inflict upon us?
- ❸ Paul stresses through Ephesians the theme of “unity.” But do we seek unity at all costs? In other words, at what point can the desire for unity become counterproductive? Discuss.

A Genuine Sacrifice? Part 4

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

About a year passed. Almira prayed and read the Bible every night to keep the evil spirit at bay. She attended church every Sabbath, enduring painful criticism and even threats from parents, relatives, and neighbors. But the rest of her life remained unchanged. She went to school on weekdays and often partied with friends at clubs on nights and weekends.

At 18, Almira reached a crossroads in her Christian faith. She came across a question that she could not answer. She couldn't understand why the Bible called Jesus' death a sacrifice. To her, Jesus' death didn't seem like a sacrifice. While He was cruelly persecuted and crucified, He surely knew that He would be resurrected, so how was His death a sacrifice? In contrast, Almira faced persecution every Sabbath, and she felt as though she had sacrificed her relationship with her parents, relatives, and friends for Jesus. She had no idea how her story would end. She seemed to have made a greater sacrifice.

Stumped, she prayed for an answer. "Jesus," she said, "I have read that I need to openly tell You about my worries and You will answer. Here's what I propose: I will read about Your life in the Gospels and *The Desire of Ages* every day. Please reveal to me what Your death on the cross means and why Your sacrifice was so great."

Almira didn't really want to read the Bible or Ellen White's *The Desire of Ages*, but she forced herself to read both every day. At first, she fought boredom as she read. She didn't have a close relationship with Jesus. Even though she worshiped on Sabbath, she lived her own life during the week.

Almira kept reading and finally found an answer. She read in *The Desire of Ages*, "Satan with his fierce temptations wrung the heart of Jesus. The Saviour could not see through the portals of the tomb. Hope did not present to Him His coming forth from the grave a conqueror, or tell Him of the Father's acceptance of the sacrifice. He feared that sin was so offensive to God that Their separation was to be eternal" (p. 753).

This was the answer to her prayer. Jesus also had been afraid that He would die forever, but He had been ready to take the risk for her. It struck her that He had not known the end, just as she did not know how her story would end. But He had risked His eternal life to save her.

Amazed by such infinite love, she poured out her heart in prayer. "Jesus, even if no one else on earth follows You, I will follow You," she said.

She decided to give her life to Jesus in baptism.



Read more about Almira next week. Thank you for your mission offerings that help spread the gospel in Russia and around the world.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Ephesians 4:11, 12*

Study Focus: *Eph. 4:1–16; Phil. 2:3; Ps. 68:18; Acts 2; 1 Cor. 12:4–11, 27–30; Isa. 5:4.*

Introduction: So far, Paul has explained the power of God’s salvation and how it operates in the history of the world, uniting Jews and Gentiles into a new humanity in Christ. In Ephesians 4:1–17, Paul continues the theme of unity. By so doing, Paul emphasizes that unity is an indispensable attribute or mark of the church. Unity is the result of God’s salvation, but it is also God’s tool for fulfilling His mission for the church and through the church. For this reason, Paul moves beyond the theme of the unity of the Jews and Gentiles in the church to focus on the church’s internal unity in life and mission. Now that in Christ there is no Jew nor Gentile, now that in Christ we are all brothers and sisters without respect to ethnicity, Paul discusses the unity of all Christians as members of the same body and involved in the same mission of Christ.

The unity of the church is achieved in several ways:

- (1) by sharing in Christ’s attitudes of humility, gentleness, and patience;
- (2) by contemplating the ultimate model for the life of the church: the Godhead in the Three Persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and Their work in Creation and Redemption;
- (3) by Christ’s unifying tools of salvation that constitute the church—one hope, one faith, and one baptism; and
- (4) by the spiritual gifts through which God blesses the church to grow and unite in one body in Christ and accomplish its mission in the world.

Lesson Themes: This study focuses on three major themes from Ephesians 4:1–16:

1. The unity of the church is essential to the identity, life, and mission of the church.
2. Church unity is achieved when the church looks at the triune life of the Godhead and embraces God’s values and attitudes: the Three Persons of the Godhead though different, live and act in perfect unity.
3. The spiritual gifts are essential for the unity, life, and mission of the church.

Part II: Commentary

The Church as the Body of Christ

When Paul mentions in Ephesians 1:22 that the church is the body of Christ,

he does not mean that the church itself is divine or supernatural. In the economy of the plan of salvation, it was God who was incarnated, and not humans who were divinized. The church is the body of Christ in the sense that it is the new, saved humanity represented and accomplished by, and in, Christ's incarnation. It is the new humanity created, saved, and ruled by Christ, its Creator, Savior, and Lord. Thus, the church is not an emanation from the divine; rather, the church is God's people—the people who were created by God and now have been restored by Him back into His kingdom. It is in this sense that the church is the “fullness of Him who fills all in all” (*Eph. 1:23, NKJV*).

The Triune Source and Model of the Church's Existence and Unity

The unity of the church is essential to Paul's doctrine of the church. However, Paul does not model this unity after the administrative, political, economic, and military unity of the Roman Empire or some other human institution. Rather, Paul roots the unity of the church in the very nature of the Christian God, the triune God. In fact, the Epistle to the Ephesians is filled with references to the various Persons of the Godhead that reveal Paul's grand vision of all Three Persons of the Godhead at work in the plan of salvation, in creating and building the church.

Just as in Ephesians 1:1–14 Paul describes the members of the Godhead at work for our salvation, in Ephesians 1:15–23, Paul describes the Father and the Son at work in creating, blessing, and empowering the church. For this reason, Paul ends this section by calling the church the “body” of Christ and the “fullness” of the Father (*Eph. 1:23; see also Eph. 4:6*). In Ephesians 2:19–22, all the members of the Godhead are involved in the making of the church: the church is the “household” or the “holy temple” of the Father built upon Christ Jesus and “in whom” the church members are “built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit” (*NASB*). In Ephesians 3, Paul views the church as the result of the grace of the Father (*Eph. 3:2*) being revealed “in the Spirit” (*Eph. 3:5, NASB*) as “the mystery of Christ” (*Eph. 3:4*) or “unfathomable riches of Christ” (*Eph. 3:8, NASB*) to the “apostles and prophets” (*Eph. 3:5*). Also, the Father (*Eph. 3:14*) empowers the church “through His Spirit . . . so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (*Eph. 3:16, 17, NASB*) and so that the church would “comprehend” the love of Christ (*Eph. 3:18*) and “be filled to all the fullness of God” (*Eph. 3:19, NASB*). In addition, the church is created and united by God because her God is the Father of “every family in heaven and on earth” (*Eph. 3:14, 15, NASB*). All the beings in the universe take His surname because He created us all, and in Him we are a family. In God's universal family, we are kin, not only with all the other members of the church throughout humanity but also with the entire population of the universe (*see also Heb. 12:22, 23*). Thus, while Paul focuses on salvation and on the church on earth, he is careful to keep his cosmic perspective that he introduced when writing about the heavenly places in Ephesians 1.

In Ephesians 4, Paul brings to a climax his grand development of the

doctrine of the church as created and united by, and in, the Godhead. Paul declares that the unity of the church is, in fact, the “unity of the Spirit” (*Eph. 4:3*). In a rather poetic fashion, the apostle tells his readers that this unity is essentially related to all the Persons of the Godhead. We are “one body” because there is “one Spirit” who called us “in one hope” (*Eph. 4:4*). In the same way, in our “one Lord” we have “one faith, one baptism” (*Eph. 4:5*). Ultimately, the church is united because we have “one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all” (*Eph. 4:6, NASB*). Thus, the church exists because God created us and called us. In addition, the church exists as a united body because the God who created and called her is One: Three Persons, yet one God. The church cannot exist without God; the church cannot exist if it is not “one”; and the church cannot be one if it is not rooted in the biblical teaching of One God in Three Persons.

The Spiritual Gifts, Existence, Unity, and Mission of the Church

After laying the theological foundation for the existence and the unity of the church in the triune God, Paul, in Ephesians 4, explains in a more practical way how the church is the body of Christ and how the Holy Spirit operates in its unity. To do so, Paul returns to a set of themes in Ephesians 1: Christ’s ascension to the throne of God (*Eph. 1:20*), His exaltation (*Eph. 1:21, 22*) to the status of “head” of the church, “His body” (*Eph. 1:22, 23, NKJV*), and the blessing of His church “with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (*Eph. 1:3, NASB*). These blessings were blessings of grace for salvation in Christ: “redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins” (*Eph. 1:7, NKJV*), revelation of the gospel of Christ (*Eph. 1:7–13*), and faith (*Eph. 1:13, 15*).

In Ephesians 4, the apostle follows a similar pattern to explain that Christ ascended (*Eph. 4:8*) and was exalted (*Eph. 4:10*). Being the “head” of the church (*Eph. 4:15*)—that is, His body (*Eph. 4:16*)—Christ “gave gifts” to His people (*Eph. 4:8*). These gifts are called Christ’s gifts and are also associated with “grace”: “to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (*Eph. 4:7, NKJV*). However, these gifts are not blessings for saving sinners, as in Ephesians 1, but rather blessings or gifts of empowerment for the constitution, unity, and mission of the church. Paul identifies these gifts as “apostles . . . prophets . . . evangelists . . . pastors and teachers” (*Eph. 4:11*). Elsewhere, Paul calls them gifts of grace (*charismata*; *Rom. 12:6–8, 1 Cor. 12:4*) or gifts of the Spirit (*pneumatikois*; *1 Cor. 12:1*), given and distributed by the Holy Spirit (*1 Cor. 12:4, 7–11*) to the members of the body of Christ (*1 Cor. 12:12, 13*).

Thus, although Paul uses a very similar pattern of themes in Ephesians 1 and 4, he addresses different aspects of the church. While in Ephesians 1 the apostle talks about the salvation of humans, in Ephesians 4 he discusses the existence, unity, and mission of the church. That is why, in Ephesians 4, the risen and ascended Lord Jesus (*Eph. 4:8–10*) gives each member of the

church “grace . . . according to the measure of the gift of Christ” (*Eph. 4:7*). The “giving” or the “grace” is an assignment here (*Eph. 4:11*), and not the grace of salvation or forgiveness. It is the gift of “equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ” (*Eph. 4:12, NASB*).

Yes, the church is constituted by individual people who were saved, but their being saved is only the beginning of the life God envisions for His church. God creates a new humanity, His people, and this new community is built by the Spirit through “grace” (*charisma; Eph. 4:7*). Through the *charismata*, or gifts, the Spirit works in the church “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God” (*Eph. 4:13, NIV*). Or, in other words, until we all mature “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (*Eph. 4:13, NKJV*), who is the Head of the church (*Eph. 4:15*).

There are at least several major conclusions and implications that we may draw from Paul’s theology of the church in Ephesians 4:

First, the church is not a human organization, built and sustained by humans and for human purposes. Rather, the church is created, sustained, and guided in its mission by God Himself.

Second, reflecting the image of its triune God, the church is, and must be, united. In His high-priestly prayer, Jesus pleaded with the Father that the church “may all be one; just as You . . . are in Me and I in You . . . so that the world may believe that You sent Me” (*John 17:21, NASB*).

Third, this unity is not the product of human will or genius, but the work of the Father, Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit working in and through the church.

Fourth, the triune God works out the unity and growth of the church through the spiritual gifts. Thus, the spiritual gifts are not an optional program of the church to be used when deemed necessary by church members. Rather, the spiritual gifts are the way that God constitutes, sustains, and guides the church. It is important to note that when talking about the essence and the unity of the church, Paul does not propose a hierarchical and sacramental governance structure of the church. Rather, while promoting a good organization of the church, the apostle viewed the source of the existence, unity, and mission of the church as being rooted in the triune God, who is the Head of the church and of the spiritual gifts He bestowed to manifest His presence and work in the church.

Fifth, so important for biblical theology are the topics of the Godhead and the spiritual gifts that Seventh-day Adventists consider them in numerous statements of belief. The Godhead is discussed in five fundamental beliefs: 2 (which discusses the biblical teaching of the triune God), 3 (“God the Father”), 4 (“God the Son”), 5 (“God the Holy Spirit”), and 10 (“The Experience of Salvation,” which discusses the implication of all Three Persons of the Godhead in the salvation of humanity). The doctrine of the church is richly articulated in seven fundamental beliefs: 12 (“The Church”), 13 (“The Remnant and Its Mission”), 14 (“Unity in the Body of Christ”), 15 (“Baptism”), 16 (“The Lord’s Supper”), 17 (“Spiritual Gifts and Ministries”), and 18 (“The Gift of Prophecy”).

Part III: Life Application

1. One of the tragic developments in the history of any church is its division and fragmentation. Based on the class's study of Ephesians 4:1–16, guide your students in developing a three-point strategy to keep your local or regional church united and growing.

2. What, in your students' understanding, is the relation between one's conversion, membership in the church as the body of Christ, and spiritual gifts?

3. Lead your class in a discussion of the following question: When was the last time you have thought of yourself, your family, your group of friends, or your church in terms of spiritual gifts? Now ask your students how they think their Sabbath School group or church could help better promote the idea that spiritual gifts are the work of the Holy Spirit in the church. Ask class members to identify three ways in which the church election process or the church leadership could promote spiritual gifts to pursue the church's growth, unity, and mission.

4. Perhaps it would be difficult to invent a tool for measuring humility, gentleness, and patience. However, if such a measuring device were to exist, what level of these values and attitudes do your students think such a device would reveal in their own lives, in the lives of their friends, or in the life of their church? Ask class members to think of three ways to promote the true biblical values of humility and patience in their own lives and in the life of your church that would help lead to greater unity.

Christ-Shaped Lives *and* Spirit-Inspired Speech



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 4:17–32; Col. 3:1–17; Zech. 3:3–5; Zech. 8:16; Isa. 63:10; Rom. 8:16, 26, 27.*

Memory Text: “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (*Ephesians 4:22–24, NIV*).

Jose Antonio lived on the streets of Palma, Spain, as a homeless man for years. With gray, straggly hair and beard, Jose looked older than his 57 years. One day, Salva Garcia, the owner of a hair salon, approached Jose and proposed a complete makeover.

With Jose in the salon chair, a hardworking team cut, dyed, and styled the tangled bundles of hair and beard. Next, Jose then got new stylish clothes. Then came the reveal! As Jose sat in front of a mirror, tears came. “Is this me? I’m so different; no one is going to recognize me!” Later he would add, “It wasn’t just a change of looks. It changed my life.”

In Ephesians 4:17–32, Paul argues that believers have experienced a complete transformation. They have taken off their old selves and have embraced their new identity. Somewhat like Jose’s change, though, this is no mere external transformation. It includes being “renewed in the spirit of your minds” (*Eph. 4:23, ESV*), bringing into the life “true righteousness and holiness” (*Eph. 4:24, ESV*). This is the ultimate makeover.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 19.

The Downward Spiral of Sin

Compare Ephesians 4:17–32 with Colossians 3:1–17. How does Paul advocate for believers to live in a way that encourages the unity of the church?

In the prior section, Ephesians 4:1–16, Paul’s theme was the unity of the church. When we compare Ephesians 4:1 and Ephesians 4:17, we note how similar these two exhortations are about how to *walk* or to live. This resemblance suggests that Paul addresses the same theme—unity and the lifestyle that supports it—but from a new and initially more negative vantage point.

In Ephesians 4:17–24, Paul contrasts Gentile lifestyle, which he regards as undermining unity (*Eph. 4:17–19*), with truly Christian patterns of life that nourish it (*Eph. 4:20–24*). As we read Paul’s sharp critique of the depraved, Gentile lifestyle, we should recall his conviction that Gentiles are redeemed by God through Christ and offered full partnership in the people of God (*Eph. 2:11–22, Eph. 3:1–13*). In Ephesians 4:17–19, then, he is offering a limited and negative description of “Gentiles in the flesh” (*Eph. 2:11*).

Paul is not just concerned about specific sins or behaviors exhibited by Gentiles. He is concerned about a pattern of behavior that they exhibit, a downward trajectory of living in the grip of sin. At the heart of Ephesians 4:17–19 is a portrait of a calloused spirituality: “in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God” (*Eph. 4:17, 18, NKJV*). This calloused spirituality is the source of the darkened understanding highlighted at the beginning of the passage (“because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous,” *Eph. 4:18, 19, ESV*) and the depraved sexual practice underlined at its end (“and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity,” *Eph. 4:19, ESV*). Alienated from God, they don’t know how to live, and separated from His saving grace, they continue in a downward spiral of sin and depravity.

What has been your own experience with the power of sin to continue to drag a person downward into even more sin?

A Dramatic Change of Clothing

In retelling the story of the conversion of his audience, what essential main point is Paul getting across to them? *Eph. 4:20–24*.

Having described their former, Gentile existence (*Eph. 4:17–19*), Paul does not say, “That is not the way you learned about Christ.” Instead, he exclaims, “That is not the way you learned Christ!” (*Eph. 4:20, ESV*). Noting that the addressees “heard Him” [Christ] (*NKJV*), and were taught “in him” (*Eph. 4:21, ESV*) or “by Him” (*NKJV*), Paul further advocates the adoption of a Christ-shaped life with the phrase “as the truth is in Jesus” (*Eph. 4:21*). For Paul, coming to faith centers on a personal connection with Christ, one so vivid and real that it may be described as “learning Christ.” We acknowledge that the risen and exalted Jesus is alive and present with us. We are shaped by His teachings and example and exercise loyalty to Him as our living Lord. We open our lives to His active guidance and direction through Spirit and Word.

Paul tells us that the adoption of a Christ-shaped life requires three processes, which he expresses through clothing imagery: (1) to “put off” or turn away from the old way of life (*Eph. 4:22*); (2) to experience inner renewal (*Eph. 4:23*); and (3) to “put on” the new, Godlike pattern of life (*Eph. 4:24*). Paul’s metaphor reflects the use of clothing in the Old Testament as a symbol for both sinfulness (*e.g., Ps. 73:6; Zech. 3:3, 4; Mal. 2:16*) and salvation (*e.g., Isa. 61:10; Ezek. 16:8; Zech. 3:4, 5*).

In ancient times, men wore a knee-length tunic as an undergarment and a cloak or mantle to offer protection from the sun. Similarly, women wore a tunic and a robe. The cultures reflected in the Bible were subsistence ones. Garments were precious and expensive and were kept for a long time. It would have been unusual to own more than one set of clothing. The quality and style of those garments signaled identity and status markers about the wearer. To change one’s clothes, exchanging one set of clothes for another, was an unusual and important event (rather than the trifling occurrence it is in many cultures today). Paul imagines the change in life to be as noticeable as exchanging one set of clothing for another would have been in this first-century context.

What is the difference, the *crucial* difference, between learning about Christ and learning to know Christ?

Unity-Building, Grace-Filled Speech

Which of Paul's words of counsel with regard to the use of speech among believers is the most important to you just now? Why? *Eph. 4:25–29.*

Paul repeatedly uses an interesting structure in Ephesians 4:25–32, which is illustrated by Ephesians 4:25 (*NKJV*): a negative command (“putting away lying”); a positive command next (“‘let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor’ ”); and then a rationale (“for we are members of one another,” which seems to mean “because we are members of one body and so related to one another as parts of that one body”). Paul’s exhortation to “speak truth” is not an invitation to confront other church members with a tactless recitation of facts. Paul alludes to Zechariah 8:16, which exhorts speaking the truth as a way of fostering peace.

Since in Ephesians 4:31 Paul banishes anger and angry speech, his words in Ephesians 4:26 provide no permission to exercise anger within the congregation. Rather, Paul concedes the possibility of anger, while limiting its expression with the sense, “Should you become angry, do not allow it to bear fruit in full blown sin.”

Paul appears to interrupt his theme of speech with a negative command about thieves: “Let the thief no longer steal” (*Eph. 4:28, ESV*). Positively, the thief is to “labor, doing honest work with his own hands” (*Eph. 4:28, ESV*; see also *1 Cor. 4:12, 1 Thess. 4:11*) based on the rationale, “so that he may have something to share with anyone in need” (*Eph. 4:28, ESV*). Perhaps Paul includes this word about thieves here because of the connection between theft and deceptive speech as illustrated by the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1–11. Paul’s faith in Christ’s transforming power is so strong that he envisions thieves becoming benefactors!

Paul then commands, “Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth” (*Eph. 4:29, NKJV*), which describes a destructive word making its seemingly unstoppable way toward the lips to do its damaging work. Positively, Paul imagines any negative expression not being just stopped, but replaced by a statement that exhibits three criteria: It (1) “is good for building up,” (2) “fits the occasion,” and (3) gives “grace to those who hear” (*Eph. 4:29, ESV*). If only all our words could be like that!

The Holy Spirit in the Believer's Life

In discussing sins of speech within the Christian community, what exhortation does Paul share about the presence of the Holy Spirit with believers? *Eph. 4:30*.

Paul simultaneously offers a daunting warning and a heartwarming promise. Our sins against one another in the church are not minor misdeeds with little consequence: what grieves the Holy Spirit is our misuse of God's gift of speech to tear down others (*Eph. 4:25–27, 29, 31, 32*). That Paul echoes Isaiah 63:10 underlines the serious warning: “But they [Israel] rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit; therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought against them” (*ESV*).

In a reassuring promise, Paul affirms that the Holy Spirit seals believers from the day they accepted Christ (*Eph. 1:13, 14*) until “the day of redemption” (*Eph. 4:30*). The Spirit's relationship with the believer is not fragile but durable. When believers disregard the indwelling presence of the Spirit by weaponizing God's gift of speech, the Spirit is not said to leave but to grieve. The Spirit intends to remain present with believers, marking them as owned and protected by God, until Christ's return.

Paul underlines the full divinity of the Spirit as “the Holy Spirit of God” and highlights the *personhood* of the Spirit by portraying the Holy Spirit as *grieving*. (See also *Rom. 8:16, 26, 27; 1 Cor. 2:10, 13; 1 Cor. 12:11; Gal. 5:17, 18*.)

We must tread with care in discussing the mystery of the Godhead. The Spirit is both One with and distinct from the Father and the Son. “The Spirit has His own will and chooses accordingly. He can be grieved and blasphemed against. Such expressions are not fit for a mere power or influence but are characteristics of a person. Is the Spirit then a person just like you and me? No, we use limited human terminology to describe the divine, and the Spirit is what human beings can never be.”—Paul Petersen, *God in 3 Persons—In the New Testament* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2015), p. 20.

It is “the Holy Spirit of God” who lives in such intimate contact with us that our actions are said to affect Him. We share life with a member of the Godhead committed to us in a durable relationship that seals us until the end of time. What should be our faith response to this amazing truth?

Kindness (Not Bitterness)

By referring to “the day of redemption” (*Eph. 4:30*), Paul has just invited his readers to consider their uses of speech in the context of Christ’s second coming. Ephesians 4:31, 32, then, may be understood as addressing the use of speech as we approach that grand event.

In the light of Christ’s return, what attitudes and behaviors, related to speech, should be discarded? What attitudes and behaviors should be embraced? *Eph. 4:31, 32.*

In the final exhortation of Ephesians 4:17–32, Paul again provides a negative command, this one identifying six vices that are to “be put away from you” (*Eph. 4:31*); a positive command to be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving (*Eph. 4:32*), and a rationale. Believers are to forgive one another “even as God in Christ forgave you” (*Eph. 4:32, NKJV*). The list of six vices begins and ends with general, all-encompassing terms, “all bitterness” and “all malice.” In between come four additional terms: “wrath,” “anger,” “clamor,” and “slander” (*Eph. 4:31, ESV*).

The last of these translates the Greek word *blasphemia*, which English has borrowed as a technical term for demeaning speech against God. However, the Greek term identifies speech that defames either God or other humans as “slander” or “evil speaking.” In the list, attitudes (bitterness, wrath, anger) seem to boil over into angry speech (clamor, slander). In essence, Paul demilitarizes Christian speech. The attitudes that drive angry speech and the rhetorical strategies that employ it are to be removed from the Christian’s arsenal. Christian community will flourish and unity of the church be fostered (*compare Eph. 4:1–16*) only where these things are laid aside.

Evil speech, though, is not so much to be suppressed as replaced. Our conversations and actions among the family of Christ—and beyond it, as well—are not to grow out of anger but are to be motivated by kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness based on the highest standard of all, the forgiveness that God has extended to us in Christ (*Eph. 4:32*). Paul presents “vertical forgiveness” (offered by God to us) as the model for “horizontal forgiveness” (that which we offer to each other; *compare Col. 3:13; Matt. 6:12, 14, 15*).

Think about the power of your words. How can you use them to be uplifting, encouraging, and faith-building?

Further Thought: “Let your conversation be of such a nature that you will have no need of repentance. ‘Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.’ . . . If you have love in your heart, you will seek to establish and build up your brother in the most holy faith. If a word is dropped that is detrimental to the character of your friend or brother, do not encourage this evil-speaking. It is the work of the enemy. Kindly remind the speaker that the word of God forbids that kind of conversation.”—Ellen G. White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 5, 1888.

How would your congregation change if you and each member were to take and live a pledge consisting of such statements as the following?

1. I wish for my influence within the Seventh-day Adventist Church family and beyond to be positive, uplifting, faith-building, and morale-boosting (*Eph. 4:29*).
2. Recalling Christ’s calls for unity and love, I will expend more energy affirming those doing and saying things I believe to be good than in pointing out the failings of those I believe to be wrong (*John 13:34, 35; John 17:20–23; Eph. 4:1–6; 1 Thess. 5:9–11*).
3. When I do disagree with someone, I will make my respect for my fellow believer clear. I will assume his or her integrity and commitment to Christ. I will offer my differing opinion gently, not stridently (*Eph. 4:31, 32*).
4. I will live joyfully, looking for every opportunity to build up and affirm my fellow church members, as I await the return of Christ (*Eph. 4:29, 30; Gal. 6:2; Heb. 10:24, 25*).

Discussion Questions:

❶ Review the 11 times in Ephesians that Paul describes the three members of the Godhead as working closely together for the salvation of humankind. How does this repeated emphasis inform our understanding of the Godhead? *Eph. 1:3–14, Eph. 1:15–23, Eph. 2:11–18, Eph. 2:19–22, Eph. 3:1–13, Eph. 3:14–19, Eph. 4:4–6, Eph. 4:17–24, Eph. 4:25–32, Eph. 5:15–20, Eph. 6:10–20 (where “the Lord,” Eph. 6:10, refers to Christ).*

❷ How does Paul’s counsel about Christian speech (*Eph. 4:25–32*) apply in the age of “computer-mediated communication,” which is too often used for cyberbullying and anonymous, online character assassination?

Real Divine Healing: Part 5

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Almira told her parents about her decision to become a Seventh-day Adventist. She also told them about taking the forbidden classes on the supernatural, the appearance of the evil spirit, and the persistent nightmares.

Mother wept. “If the church helps you, go,” she said.

After her baptism, Almira was never bothered by the spirit again.

Today, Almira H. Yalysheva, 46, is a linguistics teacher at Zaoksky Adventist University in Russia. Her husband, Kemil K. Yalyshev, whom she met and married while studying at Zaoksky in the late 1990s, is a pastor and the vice president for student affairs at the university. Before working at the university, the couple served for a decade as missionaries to non-Christian people in Russia’s North Caucasus region, part of the 10/40 window. More recently, the couple earned higher education degrees from the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIAS) in the Philippines.

Almira also is a mother, and she has a rule at home forbidding all children’s cartoons and books that mention magic. After her own experience with evil spirits, she believes that there is no such thing as good or bad magic. All magic opens the door to Satan and his evil forces, she said. Sometimes a parent will ask her, “What will my children talk about with their friends if they don’t watch cartoons?” She tells them that there are more interesting things to watch and discuss, including documentaries about animals and nature, if they choose to have screens in their homes.

Almira’s sister, Faniya, is an Adventist, and their father worshiped with them on Sabbath before passing away. Their mother, now 75, regularly reads the Bible and Ellen White’s writings. She no longer has the headaches that Almira had hoped to cure through the courses on the supernatural. After being baptized, Almira began to bring health magazines home from church. Mother read them, and slowly her lifestyle changed. Once a drinker of only black tea, she replaced the beverage with fresh water and became physically active. The headaches went away. Almira’s desire was fulfilled, but not in the way that she had expected. Mother was healed.

Almira prays to be a healing presence in many lives, saying, “The daring step that I took to give my life to Jesus changed my life. A spoiled, selfish girl has been given the privilege of becoming the hands and feet of Jesus. My biggest desire is to serve Him.”



This mission story illustrates Mission Objective No. 2 of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s “I Will Go” strategic plan: “To strengthen and diversify Adventist outreach . . . across the 10/40 Window.”—IWillGo2020.org

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Ephesians 4:22–24*

Study Focus: *Eph. 4:17–32; Col. 3:1–17; Zech. 3:3, 4; Zech. 8:16; Isa. 63:10; Rom. 8:16, 26, 27.*

Introduction: Having explained to the Ephesians how a mature Christian community exists and lives in the Holy Spirit and in Christ, Paul exemplifies this existence in practical terms. He uses the universal trope of human clothes—wearing clothes and changing them—to illustrate the change of personal identity that occurs when Christ transforms the life through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Joining Christianity is like leaving one set of clothes that constituted your old identity and putting on a new set of clothes that gives the impression to other people that you are a new person. But becoming a Christian is not the same as taking the old clothes off temporarily, just for the night, only to wear them again in the morning. Rather, when Paul referred to taking the clothes off, he meant removing them and throwing them away for good.

Thus, we leave, abandon, or throw away as a “loss” (*Phil. 3:7, 8*) the “futile” things of the Gentile world, which include the sinful worldview and lifestyle of the kingdom of this world. In their place, we receive a new identity, a new citizenship, and a new ID, which is the passport to God’s kingdom. However, the new ID is more than simply a paper certificate. Rather, the new ID signifies a genuine transformation of a person’s worldview, lifestyle, character, and relations with the other members of the church and members of humanity. This new life, however, is not a regenerative project based on some human philosophy or ideology (*John 1:12, 13*). Rather, this identity is qualitatively a new life. This life is made possible only when one encounters and accepts the divine Christ Jesus and only when one allows the Holy Spirit to work in him or her.

Lesson Themes: The study for this week highlights three major themes:

1. The Christian new life qualitatively contrasts with the old, worldly life.
2. A change of life and of identity is possible only in Christ and in the Holy Spirit.
3. The presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives leads to a transformation of our worldview, identity, lifestyle, conversation, attitudes, and relationships.

Part II: Commentary

Worldviews, Lifestyles, Cross-Cultural Mission, Critical Contextualization, and Conversion

Contemporary society values inclusivity, acceptance, preservation, and

promotion of local cultures, lifestyles, and worldviews. The “old style” missionaries are being criticized for disregarding the local-national, or tribal-cultural, heritages and for modeling local or regional churches in the mission fields on “Western” interpretations of Christianity and their lifestyles. While a critical contextualization certainly has its place in missions, two very relevant questions are raised: What elements of the local culture could be celebrated and preserved, and what elements of the local culture are part of the “old self” and must be abandoned as sinful and of “this world”?

Several points could be highlighted here in answer to these questions. First, in Ephesians 4:17–32, Paul contrasts the world of sin, futility, ignorance, darkness, impurity, anger, slander, and deceit (*Eph. 4:17–22, 25, 31*) with the world of God’s grace, righteousness, knowledge, light, purity, honesty, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and truth (*Eph. 4:25–29, 32*). Ultimately, the evaluating principle of a culture or lifestyle is not an ideology or philosophy, such as rationalism, empiricism, modernism, pragmatism, utilitarianism, or postmodernism. Rather, the biblical principle of evaluating any culture or way of life is “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (*Eph. 4:30, NASB*). This principle, when put into action, demonstrates God’s love for us and our love for Him, and reveals God’s righteousness.

Second and consequently, Paul does not discuss anthropology or the preservation of the world’s cultural heritage. He does not engage in classifying world cultures and evaluating some cultures in the light of others. Rather, he calls for all cultures, Jewish or Gentile, to be evaluated in light of the gospel of Christ Jesus and in light of the culture and the lifestyle of His kingdom. In his epistles, Paul finds a lot to rebuke in the Jewish culture and calls them to repent. Similarly, Paul tells the Gentiles that God welcomes them into His kingdom, His covenant, and His church. But Paul does not shy away from characterizing much of the Gentile worldview (polytheistic, mythological, philosophical) and way of life as futile and sinful (*Eph. 4:18, 19*). Thus, if the gospel highlights sin in the lives of church members and in their cultures, they must confess it as sin and abandon it. Otherwise, salvation is no longer salvation from sin, but a cultural justification for tolerance of a sinful lifestyle.

True, we come to God as we are, in the filthy rags of sin, but we do not come to Him to remain in those rags; rather, we come to God to remove those rags, to be washed, and walk into the “newness of life” (*Rom. 6:4*). Without this understanding, Christianity will lose its power and message of salvation. Christianity is not a religion of affirming humanity in its sinful ways. Rather, the biblical message challenges all nations, tribes, tongues, and cultures to evaluate themselves in the light of Scripture and accept God’s washing and working of the Holy Spirit to regenerate us. In Paul’s gospel, we cannot afford to protect a sinful aspect of our lives by excusing it on the grounds that it is part of our cultural heritage or worldview. In fact, all that is sinful is eventually self-destructive; sin destroys cultures and nations rather than upholding or edifying them.

Third, God celebrates diversity and cultural expressions in harmony with the gospel of His kingdom. For this reason, the gospel does not call for the complete uniformization of all cultures. When a culture builds on the values and lifestyle of Christ, it will only prosper and be enriched.

In a 1992 article in *Ministry* magazine, Børge Schantz (1931–2014), a celebrated Seventh-day Adventist missiologist, proposed three guiding principles of contextualization for the Seventh-day Adventist approach to cross-cultural mission:

First, the cross-cultural missionary must correctly understand the biblical stories and teachings in their original context.

Second, the cross-cultural missionary must accurately distinguish between universal biblical teachings and their principles and his or her own cultural values and experience. Though these customs must be, or may be, contextualized, biblical principles, such as the Sabbath, cannot be compromised.

Third, the cross-cultural missionary must develop a genuine and profound interest in, and understanding of, the culture of the people whom he or she serves.

When all these elements are taken into consideration, the ultimate contextualization principle is that, while demonstrating sensitivity to various elements of the local culture, the missionaries must allow the biblical absolutes to determine the new teachings and practices of the converts.

Schantz shared a “note of warning” to the leaders of Seventh-day Adventist mission and evangelism: “Christian churches are tempted to lose hold of pure doctrine and objective ethics when they accept uncritically that God’s Word is always and at all places culturally and historically related. The contextualization process definitely raises some problems. Adapting biblical teachings to the cultures of the world will bring the communicator into contact with elements that are false, evil, and even demonic. The sad result of going too far is a damaging syncretism, forcing opposing religious elements to coexist.” For this reason, Schantz concluded: “In all cultures, including our own, there are customs condemned by the gospel, and what is rejected by the Scriptures must be rejected by the missionaries and national leaders.” However, this principle does not need to make us more insensitive to the innocent culture of the local peoples. Rather, Schantz prayed that “the Lord of mission must grant us wisdom to differentiate between universals that must be proclaimed worldwide and the optional variables of Western culture.”—“One Message—Many Cultures: How Do We Cope?” *Ministry*, June 1992, p. 11.

The New Humans

Throughout history, the espousers of philosophies, ideologies, and powers claim, or have claimed, the ability to radically change humanity. One example of such an ideology is Marxism, especially as promoted in the Soviet Union. Driven by the optimism of the 1970s, the Soviets promoted the idea that they,

the Soviets, were in the process of advancing human evolution by bringing about the next upgrade in the human species: the Soviet people. The Soviet people would leave behind the old religious and ideological capitalistic baggage, and evolve, collectively, into the new, Marxist human. As history shows, this Soviet project ended in utter failure. Instead of creating a new and better type of human, the Soviet people, the story ended with the widely circulated pejorative phrase *homo sovieticus*.

Speaking of evolution, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, such theistic evolutionists as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin promoted the idea of the emergence of the new human, the spiritual human. While Teilhard de Chardin believed that humans are still engaged in the process of evolution from animal form, he envisioned an Omega moment in the future when humans would leave behind their old heritage of predatory behavior and evolve into new humans characterized by global consciousness and universal love.

These are only two examples of ideologies or philosophies that strove to drastically change sinful humans into “new humans.” Although these philosophies seem radical, in fact, all or most philosophies and sciences operate on the assumption that they have the power to transform humanity and human society. This assumption reveals at least two important observations. On the one hand, all these movements highlight the deep-seated human desire for the new human, with all the profound renewal that ideal embodies. On the other hand, all these philosophies have ended in failure, even if some showed what seemed like initial success. The latest demonstration of this phenomenon is the rise of postmodernism, with its critique of modernism, which was completely trusted by the world as being capable of delivering the truth about our origin, development, and destiny of humanity and of the entire universe. While postmodernism is attempting to create the new man, it is already becoming increasingly clear to people that philosophy does not have the answer for the new humanity. The failure of humanity to re-create or reinvent itself under the aegis of philosophy or science stems from its lack of the proper model for new humanity and from a lack of the power to mold humanity after that model. Biblical Christianity offers both: Jesus is the Model of the new humanity, and He is also the Source of power to transform us, to renew us according to His glorious image (*John 1:12, 13*).

Part III: Life Application

1. Invite class members to analyze their own lives to see how the experience of the “newness of life” touches on all aspects of life. Take, for instance, speech. How many times do each of us say “I” in a conversation with other people? How many times do we center the conversation on ourselves instead of on our listeners? How many times do we monopolize conversations? Challenge class members to identify other spheres of

their lives that need the gracious and powerful transformation of the Holy Spirit.

2. Some people are skeptical about the possibility of human change. While Paul was aware of the enslaving power of sin that prevents us from being transformed, he is the staunchest believer in the power of the gospel to transform us in the most profound way. The apostle was fully confident in this change because he knew what the Holy Spirit could do. Ask class members to identify three practical steps that they can share with someone who wants to be transformed, who wants to leave the old self behind and walk in the newness of life in Christ—but despairs of being able to change or of sustaining that change.

3. Controlling or managing negative emotions, attitudes, or behavior became a major concern in the modern world. People appeal to special exercises, counseling programs, or even to clinical treatment to receive help in dealing with their emotions and behavior. While counseling and clinical treatment have their place and role in some cases, what does the study of Ephesians and of the Bible, in general, reveal about the change of behavior, emotions, attitudes, and lifestyle in the life of the Christian? Ask class members to identify three life-changing principles that they found in their study of Ephesians that could help themselves, other members in the church, or people in the general community.

Living Wisely



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 5:1–20, 1 Cor. 5:1–11, Rev. 16:1–16, Col. 4:5, Prov. 20:1, Prov. 23:29–35, Acts 16:25.*

Memory Text: “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” (*Ephesians 5:15–17, ESV*).

Not long ago a crystal jug was placed on auction in the United Kingdom. The auctioneers described it as a “nineteenth-century French, claret jug,” estimating its worth at US\$200. Two perceptive bidders recognized the jug as an extremely rare, Islamic ewer. Its true, appraised worth? £5 million (about US\$6.5 million). What allowed that bidder to walk away with such a bargain? The bidder knew something that the auctioneer did not: the true value of the jug.

In Ephesians 5:1–20, Paul contrasts what pagans and believers valued. Pagans valued a racy story (*Eph. 5:4*), a drunken party (*Eph. 5:18*), and debauched sex (*Eph. 5:3, 5*) as the great treasures of life. Believers, though, know an ultimate day of appraisal is coming, when the true value of all things will become apparent (*Eph. 5:5, 6*). Instead of placing their bid on partying and drunkenness, they treasure, among other things, “all that is good and right and true” (*Eph. 5:9, ESV*) in Christ. Paul, thus, urges them to snap up the bargains found in Christ as they live (as we all do) on the threshold of eternity (*Eph. 5:15–17*).

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

“Instead Let There Be Thanksgiving”

In what sense does Paul intend believers to be “imitators of God”? See *Ephesians 5:1, 2, NKJV*.

Paul urges the believers in Ephesus to walk in love, a call important to this section (see *Eph. 5:8, 15*). This “walking in love” (see *Eph. 5:2*) is to be modeled after Christ’s own love for us (compare *Eph. 4:32*), expressed in His atoning sacrifice. Paul affirms four things about that sacrifice: (1) It is motivated by both the love of God the Father (*Eph. 5:1*) and of Christ Himself (*Eph. 5:2*); (2) it is substitutionary, with Christ dying in our place. Christ is no passive victim but gave Himself up for us; (3) under the imagery of the Old Testament sanctuary service, Christ’s death is also a sacrifice, which is made to God; and (4) the sacrifice is accepted by God since it is “a fragrant offering” (*Eph. 5:2, ESV*; compare *Exod. 29:18, Lev. 2:9, Phil. 4:18*).

Ephesians 5:3–5 then introduces a section expressing concern for sexual ethics. The young converts in Ephesus are in danger of reversing their Christian calling and being drawn back into sexual behavior that would negate their Christian witness (compare *1 Cor. 5:1–11, 1 Cor. 6:12–20, 2 Cor. 12:21*).

On the one hand, the Greco-Roman world of the first century exhibited the moral corruption and debauchery described elsewhere in the New Testament (see *1 Cor. 6:9, Gal. 5:19, Eph. 4:17–19, Col. 3:5*). For example, banquets of the wealthy regularly featured the behaviors Paul decries in Ephesians 5:3–14: drunkenness, ribald speech, risqué entertainment, and immoral acts. In addition, urban centers provided anonymity and permissiveness that fostered immoral sexual practices. On the other hand, many in that society lived virtuous lives and served as advocates for strict morality. When the New Testament provides vice-or-virtue lists and household codes (e.g., *Eph. 5:21–6:9, Col. 3:18–4:1*), its authors mirror themes in the wider Greco-Roman world. This world, at once debauched and virtuous, helps explain Paul’s exhortations to avoid the immoral behavior practiced by the Gentiles while wishing for believers to be circumspect in their behavior and so to earn good standing among outsiders.

In what ways are Paul’s words about sexual behavior applicable to your culture, wherever you live?

Walking as Children of Light

Paul writes, “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience” (*Eph. 5:6, NKJV*).

Paul has identified those who practice various sins without shame or repentance, the “sexually immoral, or impure, or who is covetous” (*Eph. 5:5, ESV*). He has offered a blunt assessment: Those who are in Christ and destined to be participants in His future kingdom should not act like those who are not (*Eph. 5:5*). He now worries over the effect of “empty words”; that is, believers might be deceived by explicit language into thinking that sexual sin is not taboo, or might even be drawn into such sins themselves (*Eph. 5:6*). To be so deceived, warns Paul, risks God’s end-time judgment, “the wrath of God” that “comes upon the sons of disobedience” (*Eph. 5:6, ESV*).

The phrase “the wrath of God” is a challenging one. That it is the wrath or anger of God suggests a contrast to the usual, moody human variety (compare *Eph. 4:31*). It is the just response of a long-suffering and righteous God against stubborn commitment to evil, not a crazed, volcanic reaction to some minor infraction. Moreover, mentions of divine wrath most often occur in the context of inspired, biblical warnings about the coming judgments of God (e.g., *Rev. 6:12–17, Rev. 16:1–16, Rev. 19:11–16*). God warns of His own coming judgments—an act of grace, since human beings are “by nature children of wrath” (*Eph. 2:3, ESV*), subject to those judgments.

Why does Paul exhort believers not to become “partners” or “partakers” with sinners? (*Eph. 5:7–10*).

Paul exhorts, “Walk as children of light” (*Eph. 5:8*) and continues with a further command: “and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord” (*Eph. 5:10, ESV*). The pagan seeks pleasure through “sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness” (*Eph. 5:3, ESV*). The believer’s goal is dramatically different, not to please oneself but to please God (compare *Rom. 12:1, 2 Cor. 5:9, Heb. 13:21*, which use the same Greek word, *euairetos*, “pleasing” or “acceptable”). The believer seeks to reflect the self-sacrifice of Christ (“walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us,” *Eph. 5:2, ESV*).

What are some of the “empty words” that in our day and age we need to be wary of?

“Awake, O Sleeper!”

Read Ephesians 5:11–14. What powerful warning is Paul giving here, and how does this apply to our present situation?

To understand Ephesians 5:11–14, it is helpful to observe that Paul repeatedly offers two exhortations, alternating between them: (1) live a God-honoring lifestyle as “children of light” (*Eph. 5:8; see also Eph. 5:1, 2, 4, 9–10, 11, 13, 14*); and (2) don’t live a sexually immoral, God-opposing lifestyle, exhibiting the “unfruitful works of darkness” (*Eph. 5:11; see also Eph. 5:3–8, 12*).

We may mine the parallel exhortations in Ephesians 5:8–10 in order to understand Ephesians 5:11. Believers are to live before unbelievers as “light in the Lord” and “children of light” (*Eph. 5:8*). The whole point of doing so is to be seen, to make clear that “the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true” (*Eph. 5:9, ESV*). Paul, then, is advocating a strategy of showing forth God’s goodness. Believers are to expose the unfruitful works of darkness by exhibiting the righteous alternative for all to see.

Meanwhile, we may take the challenging, poetic language of verses 13 and 14 as Paul’s daring assertion that believers, by exhibiting “the fruit of the Spirit” (*Eph. 5:9*), may win worldlings to faith in Christ. The Spirit is like light and reveals hidden things: “But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light” (*Eph. 5:13, 14, ESV*). When decadent living is exposed by the light, worldlings may see their behavior for what it is (“it becomes visible”), futureless and wrath-bound (*Eph. 5:5, 6*), and experience a darkness-to-light transformation (“for anything that becomes visible is light,” *ESV*), the very change that Paul’s Ephesian readers have experienced as believers themselves (*Eph. 5:8*).

What are we to make of the poem or hymn in Ephesians 5:14, which uses language associated with the resurrection of the dead at the end of time (*compare Eph. 2:1, 5*) to issue a clarion call to awaken from spiritual slumber and experience the transforming presence of Christ? Since Isaiah 60:1–3, which Paul seems to reflect, is directed to God’s people Israel, we may view the hymn/poem of Ephesians 5:14 as a powerful appeal to Christian believers to awaken to their role as missionaries, refractors of the light of Christ in a darkened world (*compare Phil. 2:14–16, Matt. 5:16*).

How do you live the kind of lifestyle that can expose works of darkness for what they are?

Snapping Up the Bargains

Paul concludes Ephesians 5:1–20 with two clusters of exhortations, Ephesians 5:15–17 and Ephesians 5:18–20, completing a section with sustained interest in sexual purity. The first cluster begins with the exhortation, “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise” (*Eph. 5:15, ESV*), restated as “do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” (*Eph. 5:17, ESV*). In between is a call to make “the best use of the time” (*Eph. 5:16, ESV*).

Consider Paul’s exhortations to live in a way that reflects prayerful, discerning wisdom (*Eph. 5:15–17*). What is the difference between walking not as fools but “wise”? Also, what does “redeeming the time” mean?

In Ephesians, Paul has repeatedly used the common Old Testament metaphor of “walking” for how one lives (*Eph. 2:2, 10; Eph. 4:1, 17; Eph. 5:2, 8*). Here he uses the metaphor to encourage intentional discipleship. Just as you should “watch your step” when walking on a rough or darkened path, believers should “look carefully then how you walk” (*Eph. 5:15, ESV*). Because Ephesians 5:15 finds a parallel in Ephesians 5:17, we may look there for a definition of what it means to live as wise people. We do not look within for wisdom. To be wise is to reach beyond ourselves, to “understand what the will of the Lord is” (*Eph. 5:17, ESV*).

Paul also encourages intentional discipleship with a vivid image. In the phrase “making the best use of the time” (*Eph. 5:16, ESV*; compare “redeeming the time,” *NKJV*), Paul uses the verb *exagorazō* (compare *Col. 4:5*). Drawn from the marketplace, it is an intensive form of the verb “to buy” and means “to snap up the bargains” on offer as we await Christ’s return. “Time” here is the Greek word *kairos*, which describes a moment of opportunity. The “time” until the end is a promising period to be used to the full. It is also a challenging time because “the days are evil” (*Eph. 5:16, ESV*; compare *Eph. 6:13, Gal. 1:4*) and because “the course of this world” is dominated by “the prince of the power of the air” (*Eph. 2:2, ESV*).

As believers look toward the return of Christ, they live in a difficult time, one that Paul portrays as a hazardous but rewarding marketplace. They are to be as attentive in their use of the time that remains as are bargain hunters during a brief sale that offers steep discounts. Though we can’t buy salvation, the imagery is still apt: take promptly what is offered us in Christ.

Spirit-Filled Worship

In Ephesians 5:18–20, Paul imagines Christians gathered to worship. What does he depict them as doing in that worship?

In his final argument in Ephesians 5:1–20, Paul urges believers to turn away from the mind-numbing use of wine and instead experience together the presence and power of the Spirit. Paul bans drunkenness (probably with a quotation from Proverbs 23:31 in the Greek version of the Old Testament), suggesting he has in mind the injunctions against the use of alcohol as seen in the wisdom literature (*Prov. 20:1, Prov. 23:29–35*). The evil things that come in the wake of drunkenness include crude, sexually explicit speech, mindlessness, immorality, and idolatry (*Eph. 5:3–14*). These are to be exchanged for thoughtful, Spirit-inspired worship of God. Paul's exhortation to be filled with the Spirit is a key one that is modified by a series of verbs in Ephesians 5:19–21 ("speaking"; "singing and making melody"; "giving thanks"; "submitting yourselves").

Paul here applies the exhortation to "be filled with the Spirit" (*Eph. 5:18*) corporately, imagining believers gathering in Spirit-inspired worship of God that nourishes unity (*Ephesians 4*) and that stands in contrast with egocentric, pagan behavior and worship (*Eph. 5:1–18*). In this sketch of early Christian worship, musical praise dominates. It has been argued that the church was born in song; and this passage, together with Colossians 3:16, provides the best evidence for the claim (compare *Acts 16:25, James 5:13*).

There is a "horizontal" element to worship since, in singing, church members are in a sense "speaking to one another" (*Eph. 5:19, NKJV*). However, the specific object of the musical praise is the Lord, which, as indicated in Ephesians 5:20, identifies "the Lord Jesus Christ" (compare *Col. 3:16*). The thanksgiving of Ephesians 5:20, described in parallel to the musical praise of Ephesians 5:19, is to be offered "unto God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." In the phrase "spiritual songs," the adjective "spiritual" (Greek, *pneumatikos*) highlights the role of the Holy Spirit in worship since the term describes songs that are inspired by or filled with the Holy Spirit. Paul's sketch of early Christian worship, then, portrays all three members of the Godhead as active participants.

How can you use music to enhance your own worship experience?

Further Thought: Looking back at Ephesians 5:1–20 as a whole, we watch Paul take a strong stance against sin and evil, especially in the form of sexual immorality and crude speech. He is unwilling to accept the presence of corrupt behavior among the people of God. Instead, he calls the believers in Ephesus to a high standard of conduct and to embrace their identity as the “beloved children” of God and as “saints,” or holy ones (*Eph. 5:1–10, ESV*). He dares to believe that when the Christians in community do so, they shine a light into the darkness, drawing their neighbors away from self-defeating lifestyles and into God’s grace and truth (*Eph. 5:11–14*).

Paul imagines the church, buoyed by a renewed commitment to “walk as children of light” while they await Christ’s return (*Eph. 5:8; see also Eph. 5:15, 16*) and blessed by the presence of Christ (*Eph. 5:14*), gathering to worship. As they are motivated by their status “as beloved children” of God and by Christ’s death for them (*Eph. 5:1, 2, ESV*) and are filled with the Spirit (*Eph. 5:18*), their shared worship is characterized by energy and joy as together they sing thanksgiving praise to their Lord, Jesus Christ, and to God the Father. With a firm grip on heavenly realities, they celebrate their hope for the future, rooted in the story of what God has done, is doing, and will accomplish through Jesus Christ their Lord (*Eph. 5:18–20*).

Understood in this way, the passage becomes far more than a set of disconnected commands about Christian living. It becomes a prophetic call concerning Christian identity, commitment, community, and worship in the last days, a pathos-filled invitation to “snap up the bargains” on offer in the days until Christ’s return (*Eph. 5:16*).

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Confronted today with a viral culture that preaches its values 24/7/365 through a withering array of media, how can believers adopt Paul’s high standards?
- ❷ What strategies might believers today employ to “discern what is pleasing to the Lord” (*Eph. 5:10, ESV*) and to “understand what the will of the Lord is” (*Eph. 5:17, ESV*)?
- ❸ Someone might argue that Paul’s ban against speaking of sexual immorality among believers (*Eph. 5:3, 4*) means that we should not deal with issues of sexual misbehavior and abuse. Why is that an inappropriate conclusion?
- ❹ In what ways does our contemporary society reflect similar pagan practices to those that Paul dealt with in his time?

Diapers on Grocery List

By AMY MCHENRY

One Friday morning, I was doing the weekly shopping at our local grocery store in Beirut, Lebanon. My husband, Peter, was buying apples and granola bars for the Pathfinders' weekend hike, and I was getting the family food. We serve as missionaries teaching biology at Middle East University.

As I went upstairs to get some disinfectant and dish soap, I glanced down the diaper aisle and saw someone looking at diapers. I thought to myself how hard it must be for people who need diapers in Lebanon. The financial situation is extremely difficult, with the Lebanese currency having lost more than 90 percent of its value in two years and the cost of goods skyrocketing. More than 80 percent of the country lives below the poverty line.

Suddenly a command popped into my head, "Buy a package of diapers."

I was surprised at this sudden thought. "Lord, is that You?" I asked. "Why would I buy diapers? The youngest of my three children is 10 years old!"

"Buy a package of diapers."

I started to walk toward the escalator.

"Lord, I don't even know anyone with a baby who needs diapers."

The command became more insistent, "Buy a package of diapers."

I walked back to the diaper aisle and prayed, "OK, Lord, I'll buy some diapers, and You'll just have to show me later who they are for. What size should I get?" I grabbed a package of size 3 diapers and continued shopping.

When my husband and I met at the car, I told him, "Don't be surprised if you see a package of diapers in the trunk. The Lord told me to purchase them. They're a gift, but I don't know who they're for yet." We drove home.

The next day at church, I saw a friend whose wife works with refugee families in Beirut. We chatted for a while, and I asked him, "Do you think your wife might know someone who needs diapers? The Lord told me to get some yesterday, and I don't know who they are for." He promised to ask her.

That evening I received a text from him. "When I told my wife your story about the diapers, she started to cry," he wrote. "Tomorrow she will be visiting two families who need diapers. Can we pick them up tonight?"



A short while later, as we hugged and chatted at the door, I handed her the diapers that God had put on my grocery list. I learned that she works with more than twenty families who need diapers and can't afford them. Now I know to put diapers on my grocery list more often.

Thank you for your mission offerings that help spread the gospel in the Middle East and around the world.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Ephesians 5:15–17*

Study Focus: *Eph. 5:1–20, 1 Cor. 5:1–12, Rev. 16:1–16, Col. 4:5, Prov. 20:1, Prov. 23:29–35, Acts 16:25.*

Introduction: Worldview and identity determine values and wisdom. A Gentile worldview will develop a certain set of values and a certain type of wisdom. God's kingdom, God's worldview, and God's values generate an entirely different type of wisdom. For this reason, Paul does not call Christians to embrace the wisdom of one of the moderate philosophical schools, or even emulate the Greco-Roman pride, in striving for virtue. Rather, in his view, Christian wisdom is rooted in God's sacrificial love, in Christ's light, and in pure morality. The wise Christian will run away from the wisdom of the world, which is expressed in all-consuming sexual debauchery, egocentric boasting, and drinking wine. Instead, the wise Christian will wake up from the "sleep" of the world, will be enlightened by Christ's gospel, will be empowered by the presence of the Holy Spirit, will grab the moment of salvation, and will worship God!

The difference between the wisdom of this world and the wisdom of God consists in understanding who is the object of one's worship: self or God. Who is one centered on: self or God? Who is one filled with: self or God?

Lesson Themes: This week's study emphasizes three major themes:

1. Christian wisdom is rooted in God's revelation or Christ's light.
2. Christian wisdom is not a collection of witty statements about life. Rather, it is a lifestyle, a walk of life transformed by the Holy Spirit according to the pattern left to us in Christ.
3. Christian wisdom is about salvation and worship.

Part II: Commentary

The Wisdom That Comes From Above

It is almost impossible to think of Paul writing on practical aspects of Christian life and not including wisdom in his discussion. The ancient world was steeped in talks about wisdom. Just several centuries prior to Paul, the Greeks gave birth to what they called "philosophy," that is, love for wisdom. Philosophy rebelled against the ancient Greek mythological wisdom, in which Zeus, Metis (Zeus' first wife), Athena (their daughter), and Apollo were associated with wisdom in different ways. All these deities were consulted by humans, becoming patrons of various cities or groups of

people. For instance, it was believed that people seeking wisdom in various matters of life could access the mind or knowledge of the Greek god Apollo through Pythia, the priestess of the temple of Apollo, also known as the oracle of Delphi. But apart from seeking wisdom from Pythia, the visitor to the temple of Apollo would be greeted and educated by various maxims that constituted the Delphic wisdom, of which three were the most popular: “know thyself,” “nothing in excess,” and “certainty leads to ruin.” Other maxims taught the Greek way of life, from respecting the gods to conducting an ethical life to sacrificing one’s life for one’s country.

While the philosophers, or “lovers of wisdom,” rejected the mythological aspects of their ancient religion, they placed themselves in the line of succession to the oracle in Delphi. On one hand, the philosophers claimed that Pythia had pronounced Socrates as the wisest man of Greece. On the other hand, the philosophers made use of the Delphic wisdom, especially of the first maxim, “know thyself.”

For this reason, Greek philosophy determined and shaped the subsequent aim of Western thought to seek wisdom by appealing to human reason. The same human reason was used as a foundation for ethics or for the Greek way of life. Other philosophies, especially in the East, built on the same foundation of humanity. Buddhism, for instance, is a proposal of a way of life centered on human experience and psychology. Despite the rich diversity of philosophical schools, both in the West and in the East, they all share a common foundation: the principle of “know thyself.” This principle shows that these philosophies represent a human-centric effort to understand the ultimate reality of life and, thus, they infer a way of life, decision-making, and behavior based on human introspection and reason. By doing so, human wisdom, both in the West and in the East, rejected or departed from divine revelation.

On the other hand, the foundational characteristic of the biblical wisdom is that it is rooted in the divine revelation. Both Paul and James mention characteristics of wisdom that other philosophers also promote: tranquility, balance, moderation, justice, etc. However, James characterized Christian wisdom as coming “from above” (*James 3:17*), and not “earthly, natural, demonic” (*James 3:15, NASB*). Paul develops the same contrast between Christian wisdom and worldly wisdom by appealing to the concepts of light versus darkness. For this reason, he warns the Ephesians against being deceived “with empty words” (*Eph. 5:6, NASB*) or the “useless deeds of darkness” (*Eph. 5:11, NASB*), for to be deceived by these things is to be unwise.

But why does Paul characterize the wisdom of the world in such a somber way? Weren’t the philosophers of the world also given good advice, teaching a way of life based on justice and mutual respect? Yes, many of them did. However, no matter how noble a way of life human philosophy would devise, it would always be deficient, partial, and

based on the wrong motivation, rejecting the possibility of the revelation of God. The problem of worldly philosophies lies not in what they affirm but in what they reject or deny. A philosopher may get one aspect of life partially correct, but the rejection of the possibility of God's revelation and the power of His intervention in the world renders his or her philosophy useless for salvation and for life in God's kingdom. That is why, for instance, sexual impurity was not considered problematic in the ethics of most philosophies. And even if some philosophers promoted sexual abstinence, the reasons for doing so were wrong.

Ellen G. White notes: "Many acts which pass for good works, even deeds of benevolence, will, when closely investigated, be found to be prompted by wrong motives. Many receive applause for virtues which they do not possess. The Searcher of hearts inspects motives, and often the deeds which are highly applauded by men are recorded by Him as springing from selfish motives and base hypocrisy. Every act of our lives, whether excellent and praiseworthy or deserving of censure, is judged by the Searcher of hearts according to the motives which prompted it."—*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, p. 512.

On the other hand, their words are "empty" because these philosophies do not have the power of grace, redemption, forgiveness, or the Spirit to transform us and help us walk on God's way. In a letter, Ellen G. White describes the importance of motivation and revelation in relation to truth and philosophy: "Faith in a lie will not have a sanctifying influence upon the life or character. No error is truth, or can be made truth by repetition, or by faith in it. Sincerity will never save a soul from the consequences of believing an error. Without sincerity there is no true religion, but sincerity in a false religion will never save a man. I may be perfectly sincere in following a wrong road, but that will not make it the right road, or bring me to the place I wished to reach. The Lord does not want us to have a blind credulity, and call that the faith that sanctifies. The truth is the principle that sanctifies, and therefore it becomes us to know what is truth. We must compare spiritual things with spiritual. We must prove all things, but hold fast only that which is good, that which bears the divine credentials, which lays before us the true motives and principles which should prompt us to action."—*Selected Messages*, book 2, p. 56.

For this reason, the Christian walk that Paul espoused is based on the revelation of God in Christ Jesus. Only the biblical God who created us can reveal to us who He is, who we are, and how we can live to be happy. Only God can give us the grace and power to live that life in His kingdom.

Light of Light

In Ephesians 5, Paul does not say that the Ephesians were "in darkness" but that they were "darkness" (*Eph.* 5:8). But now, "in the Lord," they are

“light” (*Eph. 5:8*). For this reason, he calls the Ephesians to “walk as children of light” (*Eph. 5:8*) and explains that walking in light means to bear the “fruit of the light,” “all goodness, righteousness, and truth” (*Eph. 5:9, NASB*), to live in such a way as to “please the Lord” (*see Eph. 5:10, NASB*), and to live in the light of Christ, illuminated by Christ (*Eph. 5:13, 14*). So, we are light “in the Lord” (*Eph. 5:8*) because we are illuminated by Christ (*Eph. 5:14*).

Adventist Theology of Lifestyle

As Adventists, we have included lifestyle in our list of doctrinal statements. Following Paul, lifestyle is not a marginal aspect of Christianity for us but rather the central part of Christianity, which is to say, living out the Christian life. Adventists especially articulate the biblical teaching on Christianity as a way of life in two fundamental beliefs: 19 (“The Law of God”) and 22 (“Christian Behavior”). In addition, the fact that, in Christ, we regard our transformed lifestyle as essential to Christian experience is also reflected in our church discipline and also in our repeated calls for revival and reformation.

Part III: Life Application

- 1. Ask your students to recall how they viewed wisdom before becoming Christians. What was wisdom for them then? Invite your students to write down their own definition of wisdom now that they have become true Christians. Ask them to share their understanding of wisdom with the class.**

- 2. Ask your students to consider these questions: What does “being enlightened” and “walking in the light” mean in your local context?**

How do these concepts compare to the biblical view of “being enlightened” and “walking in the light”? What do these concepts mean for you personally?

- 3. Sometimes Christians are accused of suppressing wisdom and preventing the development of human knowledge. Some people perceive Christians as being arrogant and dismissive of the world’s wisdom. How can we, as Adventist Christians, appreciate the world’s search for wisdom; learn from the world’s wisdom heritage; be humble about our own wisdom, as received from God and not our own; yet preach that God is the real, and only, source of wisdom? Discuss the answers in class.**

Husbands *and* Wives: Together *at the Cross*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 5:21–33; Phil. 2:3, 4; Ezek. 16:1–14; 2 Cor. 11:1–4; Gen. 2:15–25.*

Memory Text: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish” (*Ephesians 5:25–27, NKJV*).

In Ephesians 5:21–33, Paul builds on the idea of the submission of believers to each other (*Eph. 5:21*); he then offers counsel to Christian wives (*Eph. 5:22–24*) and husbands (*Eph. 5:25–32*); and he concludes with a distillation of the instruction to both (*Eph. 5:33*).

In this counsel, Bible students today may hear the risen Christ addressing our relationships. We are positioned to do so when we understand Ephesians 5:21–6:9 as Paul's way of actualizing the great theme of the letter, unity, but now for the Christian household. While he offers a strong critique of the flawed social structures of the old humanity (*see Eph. 4:22*), he also celebrates the creation of a new humanity (*see Eph. 2:15*) embedded within the wider humanity with its flawed social structures. From within these structures, believers demonstrate that a new power, the Holy Spirit (*Eph. 2:22; Eph. 3:16; Eph. 5:18–21; Eph. 6:17, 18*) and a new ethic patterned on Christ (*Eph. 4:13, 15, 20–24, 32; Eph. 5:2, 10, 17, 21–33*) have been unleashed, which point toward the ultimate fulfillment of God's plan for His people and the world.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 2.

Counsel to Christian Wives

Paul begins with a hinge passage (*Ephesians 5:21*) connecting *Ephesians 5:1–20* and *Ephesians 5:22–33*, in which he advocates for church members to submit to each other (*compare Mark 10:42–45; Rom. 12:10; Phil. 2:3, 4*). Believers are to do so “out of reverence for Christ” (*Eph. 5:21, ESV*), the first of several times Paul will identify the relationship with Christ as the most important and defining one for believers.

What does Paul mean by exhorting church members to submit to each other? How are we to understand this idea? *Eph. 5:21*.

Paul also invites Christian wives to submit to “your own husbands, as to the Lord” (*Eph. 5:22, ESV*), clarifying that he is discussing the submission of wives to their respective husbands (*see also 1 Pet. 3:1, 5*). When Paul says wives are to do so “as to the Lord,” does he mean a wife is to submit to her husband as though he were Christ; or, instead, does He mean that Christ is the truest and highest focus of her submission?

In view of *Ephesians 6:7*, where slaves are asked to serve “as to the Lord, and not to men” (*NKJV*), and *Colossians 3:18*, where wives are asked to submit to their husbands “as is fitting in the Lord” (*NKJV*), the latter view is to be preferred. Wives are themselves believers who must ultimately honor Christ over their husbands.

In both *Colossians* and *Ephesians*, Christ—and only Christ—is identified as the Head of the church, which is His body (*Eph. 1:22, Eph. 5:23, Col. 1:18*): “Christ is the head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body” (*Eph. 5:23, NKJV*). By analogy, the husband is “the head of the wife” (*Eph. 5:23*), with the church’s faithfulness to Christ serving as a model for the wife’s loyalty to her husband. The passage presumes a loving, caring marriage, and not a dysfunctional one. This verse should not be interpreted to allow any form of domestic abuse.

In light of what we have just read, why is this following counsel so important to remember? If the husband “is a coarse, rough, boisterous, egotistical, harsh, and overbearing man, let him never utter the word that the husband is the head of the wife, and that she must submit to him in everything; for he is not the Lord, he is not the husband in the true significance of the term.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 117.

The Church as the Bride of Christ: Part 1

Compare Ephesians 5:25–27, 29 with the foundling story of Ezekiel 16:1–14. What elements of that story does Paul reflect in his own sketch?

As Paul, in Ephesians 5:25–27, 29, shapes his wedding-marriage metaphor for the church and its relationship with Christ, he draws creatively on the customs and roles of an ancient wedding. In relationship to the church as bride, Christ is the divine Bridegroom who:

(1) *Loves the church as bride* (Eph. 5:25). We must never forget that this is heart work for Jesus. He loves us!

(2) *Gives Himself as the bride price*. In the context of ancient wedding arrangements, the bridegroom would “purchase” the bride with the “bride price,” which was usually a large sum of money and valuables, so large that ancient village economies depended upon the custom. Christ pays the ultimate price for the church as His bride since He “gave Himself for her” (Eph. 5:25, *NKJV*). In the incarnation and at the cross, He gives Himself as the bride price.

(3) *Bathes His bride*. The preparation of the bride was an important part of the ancient wedding festivities. As is also true today, it was the bridesmaids and female relatives of the bride who prepared her for the ceremony. Paul, though, imagines the divine Bridegroom preparing His bride for the wedding! It is He who sanctifies and cleanses her “by the washing of water” (Eph. 5:26, *ESV*), a probable reference to baptism.

(4) *Speaks the word of promise*. This cleansing is performed “with the word” (Eph. 5:26, *ESV*), pointing to the word of promise that the divine Bridegroom speaks to His bride, perhaps in the context of the betrothal ceremony (*compare* Eph. 1:3–14, Eph. 2:1–10, noting God’s promises to believers at the time of their conversion). Betrothal was the ancient version of modern engagement, but was a much more serious set of negotiations, which included a written agreement about the bride price (from the husband) and the dowry (assets the bride would bring to the marriage from her family).

(5) *Prepares and adorns the bride*. When the bride is finally presented to her Groom, she is fabulously beautiful, appearing in flawless splendor (Eph. 5:27). Christ not only bathes the bride; He prepares and adorns her, as well.

How do these verses help us understand the way Christ feels about us? Why should we find this so comforting?

The Church as the Bride of Christ: Part 2

How does Paul use elements of the ancient wedding in appealing to Christians in Corinth? When does the presentation occur? (2 Cor. 11:1–4).

Using one final element of the ancient wedding, in Ephesians 5:25–27 Paul portrays Christ as the One who: (6) *presents the bride (to Himself!)*. In ancient times the bride would be given away by the best man, best men, or her father. Never by her groom! Here, though, Paul imagines Jesus presenting the church as bride to Himself.

Paul uses marriage customs and roles to highlight Christ’s relationship to the church in an unfolding, chronological pattern: (1) *Betrothal*. Christ offered Himself up for the church (as “bride price”) and so became betrothed to her (Eph. 5:25). (2) *Preparation for the wedding ceremony*. The attentions of the Bridegroom continue in His present efforts to sanctify and cleanse the bride (Eph. 5:26). (3) *The wedding ceremony itself*. Christ’s present attentions are in view of the “presentation” of the bride at the wedding (Eph. 5:27). This last element looks to the grand wedding celebration at His return, when Christ, the Bridegroom, will come to claim the church as bride and present her to Himself (Eph. 5:27; compare 2 Cor. 11:1, 2; Col. 1:21–23, 28).

Ancient weddings often began with a nighttime parade (see Matt. 25:1–13). The groom and his entourage would gather at the groom’s home—the couple’s new home—and with grand ceremony begin a procession. Lit by torches and accompanied by joyful, lilting music and great rejoicing, the crowd jostles toward the home of the father of the bride. Gathering up the bride there or meeting the bride’s own procession on the way, the parade would convey the couple to their new home, where the guests would settle into a weeklong feast, culminating in the wedding ceremony, when the bride would be presented to the groom.

When Paul portrays Christ presenting the church to Himself, he alludes to this grand parade and to the moment of presentation. In doing so, he provides a moving portrait of Christ’s return as a future wedding ceremony, when the long betrothal between Christ and His church is complete and the wedding celebrated.

What message should we take for ourselves from all this positive, happy, and hopeful imagery?

Love Your Wife as You Do Yourself

What new argument does Paul use to encourage husbands to practice tender love toward their wives? *Eph. 5:28–30*.

Paul's rules for the Christian household (*Eph. 5:21–6:9*) disclose a challenging social context. In Ephesians 5:28–30, Paul addresses husbands who, following the all-too-frequent pattern of the time, may choose to “hate their own flesh” (*see Eph. 5:28, 29*), abusing and beating their wives. In the Greco-Roman world of Paul's day, the legal power of the “father of the family” (Latin, *pater familias*) was very broad. He could punish harshly or even kill his wife, children, and slaves and be within his legal rights (though exercising such power in extreme ways was increasingly constrained by public opinion).

In Ephesians 5:25–27, Paul has detailed the ultimate example of love, Christ's love for the church, offering a drastically different model for husbands than the usual one. Now, before laying out a new argument, he points again to that great Example, asking Christian husbands to respond “in the same way” (*Eph. 5:28, ESV*) as Jesus, who “gave himself up” for His bride, the church, and attends to her every need (*Eph. 5:25–27, ESV*). Paul challenges Christian husbands to turn from the expected practices of their time and seek to match Christ's tender love.

In Ephesians 5:28–30, Paul adds a new rationale to support the love of Christian husbands for their wives: self-love. Paul offers a truism: “No one ever hated his own flesh” (at least no one thinking clearly). Husbands don't harm themselves or beat up on their own bodies. Instead, they “nourish and cherish” them (*Eph. 5:29, NKJV*). In a bid to eliminate harshness and violence against Christian wives, Paul invites the Christian husband to identify with his wife. You are so much one with your wife, Paul argues, that to harm her is nothing short of inflicting self-harm, and most people in their right minds don't do that.

Returning to the example of Jesus, Paul argues that Christ is Himself practicing tender self-care in cherishing believers who are “his body” (*Eph. 5:29, 30, ESV*). Model your behavior toward your wife, says Paul, on the way you treat yourself and, ultimately, on the way Christ treats you.

Paul cites the example of Jesus to both wives and husbands. What can you learn from Jesus about loving those in your own family circle?

The “One Flesh” Model of Marriage

Study the Creation narrative of Genesis 2:15–25. What happens in the story before the statement concerning a husband and wife being “one flesh” (*Gen. 2:24*)?

A key to applying Paul’s counsel to wives and husbands is to see his citation of Genesis 2:24 (*in Ephesians 5:31*) as the culmination of it. As he meditates on the Creation story of Genesis, Paul considers the needs of Christian congregations and the health of family relationships within them. He hears in Genesis 2:24 a message that echoes down through time. By divine design, marriage is intended to be a “one flesh” relationship, with sexual unity mirrored in emotional and spiritual unity, and emotional and spiritual unity bringing meaning to the sexual relationship.

Note that in choosing Genesis 2:24, Paul selects a statement about marriage made before the Fall and applies it to the relationships between Christian husbands and wives. In our distinctly post-Fall world, rampant exploitation of the sexual relationship between a man and a woman reveals how deeply entrenched in modern cultures is the idea that the sexual union represents subjugation of the woman. Paul argues that the sexual relationship, as reflected in Genesis, is not one of subjugation but of union. It does not symbolize or actualize the dominance of the male but the union of husband and wife, so much so that they are “one flesh.” We may look to both Ephesians 5:21–33 and Genesis 2:24, then, for an important, countercultural, and corrective theology of marriage and sexuality.

In this same context, Paul in the next verse talks about a “profound mystery” (*see Eph. 5:32, ESV*). This includes both sides of the double metaphor Paul has been discussing: Christian marriage understood in the light of Christ’s relationship with His church (*Eph. 5:32*) and Christ’s relationship with His church understood in the light of Christian marriage (*Eph. 5:32*).

Christian marriage is elevated by comparing it to the relationship between Christ and the church. In addition, by thinking of the church’s relationship to Christ through the lens of a caring, Christian marriage, believers gain new clarity about their shared relationship to Christ.

In what ways does Ephesians 5:33 serve as a concise summary of Paul’s counsel in Ephesians 5:21–32? If married, how can you seek to more fully implement these principles in your marriage?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “Responsibilities of Married Life,” *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, pp. 45–50, and “Mutual Obligations,” *The Adventist Home*, pp. 114–120.

Ellen G. White consistently urges marriage partners to turn away from efforts to control the other: “Do not try to compel each other to yield to your wishes. You cannot do this and retain each other’s love. Be kind, patient, and forbearing, considerate, and courteous.”—*The Adventist Home*, p. 118.

She comments directly on the interpretation and application of Colossians 3:18 (and Eph. 5:22–24): “The question is often asked, ‘Shall a wife have no will of her own?’ The Bible plainly states that the husband is the head of the family. ‘Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands.’ If this injunction ended here, we might say that the position of the wife is not an enviable one. . . . Many husbands stop at the words, ‘Wives, submit yourselves,’ but we will read the conclusion of the same injunction, which is, ‘As it is fit in the Lord’ [Col. 3:18]. God requires that the wife shall keep the fear and glory of God ever before her. Entire submission is to be made only to the Lord Jesus Christ, who has purchased her as His own child by the infinite price of His life. . . . There is One who stands higher than the husband to the wife; it is her Redeemer, and her submission to her husband is to be rendered as God has directed—‘as it is fit in the Lord.’ ”—*The Adventist Home*, pp. 115, 116.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Imagine someone arguing that Ephesians 5:21–33 is an out-moded passage that no longer addresses Christian relationships since it enforces a model of marriage focused on the authority and domination of the husband. How would you respond? What elements from the passage itself would inform your response?
- ❷ What might Paul’s counsel in Ephesians 5:21–33 have to offer to those who find themselves in challenging and difficult marriage relationships?
- ❸ Some Christians argue that the Creation story in Genesis 1 and 2 is a mere metaphor and that it doesn’t come close to depicting what really happened, which was billions of years of evolution. What does Paul’s use of the story teach us about how literally he took it?
- ❹ Dwell more on the theme of “one flesh.” How does this help us better understand the sanctity of marriage and why married couples must do everything possible to protect that sanctity?

Visiting Inmates in Spain

By GABRIEL DIAZ

Working with inmates is my passion. I have participated in prison ministry everywhere that I have served as a pastor, first in my homeland of Colombia and now in Spain.

Over the past two decades, I have visited four prisons in Spain, including a maximum-security prison for women in the Spanish capital, Madrid. It took three years of talks with prison officials to gain access to this prison of 400 women. Prison authorities finally allowed me to enter the prison for the first time in 2019 and begin leading a worship service from 5:30 P.M. to 7:00 P.M. every Thursday. Only one woman showed up for the first worship service. But she was very eager and willing to listen to me.

“I’m very happy to meet you,” I told the woman. “It fills me with joy to come here. But we need to pray to meet with even more people.”

We prayed to God to bring more people to our Thursday meetings. When I arrived at the fourth meeting, 10 women were waiting for me! Today, 60 women attend the meetings every week. They range in age from 22 to about 70. Our worship program is divided into three parts: songs and prayer; a time for women to share their personal testimonies, called, “Name Your Miracle”; and Bible study.

When I speak to them, I always remind them that God is their Father in heaven. “God sees you as His daughters,” I say.

In all my years of serving as a pastor, I have never witnessed worship and praise like in the prison. The worship and praise are intense. The women are so sincere and honest in their prayers. Sometimes I long for our Thursday meetings even more than Sabbath meetings at church.

Our time together is short; so, each woman can write her personal testimony on a piece of paper, bring it to the meeting, and hand it to me at the end. The letters contain words of praise about how God is changing lives. I have a high stack of letters now.

A group of church members also visit with the women and give them Bible studies on weekends. They can only visit with the women behind glass. They are not allowed inside as I am. But together we are seeing fruit. Several women have given their lives to Jesus, and we also have established contact with their relatives.



This mission story illustrates Mission Objective No. 2 of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s “I Will Go” strategic plan: “To strengthen and diversify Adventist outreach . . . among unreached and under-reached people groups.” For more information, go to the website: IWillGo2020.org.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Ephesians 5:25–27*

Study Focus: *Eph. 5:21–33; Phil. 2:3, 4; Ezek. 16:1–14; 2 Cor. 11:1–4; Gen. 2:15–25.*

Introduction: Unity runs like a golden thread through Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. Unity applies not only to the relation between the Jews and the Gentiles in the church (*Ephesians 2*). Throughout the epistle, Paul discusses how unity is brought about by the triune God; by salvation; by baptism; by faith; by spiritual gifts; by the presence of the Holy Spirit in us; by the transformation of our walk of life, according to the pattern of Christ; and by Christian wisdom. Ultimately, for Paul, unity in all its aspects is possible only in Christ.

Paul brings to its rightful place his entire discussion of the unity of the church as the new humanity: the family. If ever there was an example or a model of unity, it is the family. Family can be truly united only in Christ, as the Gentiles and the Jews are united in Christ and as all the church members are united in one body, the body of Christ. In the family, the wives will submit to the husband in Christ and the husband will love the wife “in the Lord.” The divine aspect within the marital relation means we must see the family as God sees it. This divine aspect also means that the family must fulfill the function and purpose that the Lord gave it at Creation: “one flesh,” an indivisible unity. The two are one, not only because of mutual benefits but because God created them so, because God commanded them to be so. The unity of the family points beyond itself, just as the unity of the church points to the unity of the triune God and His relationship to humanity.

Lesson Themes: This study focuses on three major themes:

1. Paul’s unity theme continues with the Christian family, as revealed in the relationship of the husband and wife.
2. The only way the true Christian family keeps its unity is by being “in the Lord,” meaning that the members submit to each other as designed by God at Creation and as confirmed by Jesus’ sacrificial love for humanity in His plan of salvation.
3. A family truly “in the Lord” would not experience abusive relations, such as adultery or violence, because both the husband and the wife would learn how to respect and love each other in the Lord.

Part II: Commentary

Paul’s Theology of the Family

Ephesians 5:21–33 is a profound Christological and ecclesiological discussion.

As elsewhere in his epistles, Paul mixes a solid theological discussion (doctrine of Christ and doctrine of the church) in his practical considerations. In Paul's view, biblical theology does not exist for the sole purpose of devising a coherent and beautiful intellectual system; the apostle's practical message is always built on the solid foundation of biblical theology.

For this reason, the apostle does not approach the discussion of the family as if it were a marginal topic that could be addressed with a few solutions taken from general human wisdom, psychology, or sociology. Rather, he places his discussion of the family in the context of foundational Christian doctrines: God, Creation, Christ, salvation, and the church. In fact, here Paul does not use the family to illustrate these doctrines but, rather, uses these doctrines to illustrate the Christian family!

As in the case of the church, Paul does not accept that the approach to the Christian family be determined by the realities of our fallen human nature and society. Rather, he follows Jesus' "to the beginning" interpretive principle ("but from the beginning it was not so," *Matt. 19:8, NKJV*), which helps the Christian church and its theology to orient itself toward the restoration of God's ideals for us, as opposed to legitimizing the realities of the sinful world. Paul's treatment of the family in the context of these foundational Christian doctrines shows that the Christian family cannot be subjected to compromise.

Submit and Love

Paul's "submit . . . love" language, referring to male-female relationships, has caused numerous debates, attracting even some condemnations of Christianity as misogynistic. However, these reactions are based on a misunderstanding of Paul's message.

Several points may help us gain a better understanding of this passage:

(1) The attitudes of both the husband and the wife come from the context of submitting to one another (*Eph. 5:21*), as a result of being filled by the Holy Spirit (*Eph. 5:18*).

(2) The wife submits to her husband, not as to a boss but as to Christ, her Savior and Protector. The meaning of submission is to hold her husband in high regard, respecting, acknowledging, and appreciating him as her protector and helper. The Bible does not provide any foundation to the notion of regarding the wife as inferior to her husband and, therefore, in subjection to him as to a superior. Rather, Paul here teaches the right attitude of humility and respect that the wife should have for her husband. The fact that Christianity proclaims the equal dignity of men and women in Christ must not lead women to adopt an attitude of arrogance and superiority toward their husbands. Rather, the wife's attitude must be an attitude of loving and supportive faithfulness.

(3) Husbands, in their turn, must remember that women perceive love in terms of care and protection. The husband's love for his wife is like the Lord's sacrificial love for the church. Paul teaches men to have the right attitude of humility, appreciation, and love for their wives.

(4) True, Paul did compare the wife's submission with the church's

submission, and the husband's love with Christ's love. But Paul does not make this comparison loosely, mixing up theological concepts, thereby providing ground for hierarchical relationships between men and women or for a sacramental view on marriage. On the contrary, the apostle immediately qualifies his comparison and explains very carefully what he meant exactly and what the points of comparison are. That comparison refers to the attitudes and forms of submitting to each other and of expressing love.

John Chrysostom (A.D. 347–407), the famous preacher and patriarch of the church in Constantinople, used his best homiletical skills to describe the husband's love for his wife:

Wouldest thou have thy wife obedient unto thee, as the Church is to Christ? Take then thyself the same provident care for her, as Christ takes for the Church. Yea, even if it shall be needful for thee to give thy life for her, yea, and to be cut into pieces ten thousand times, yea, and to endure and undergo any suffering whatever,—refuse it not. Though thou shouldest undergo all this, yet wilt thou not, no, not even then, have done anything like Christ. For thou indeed art doing it for one to whom thou art already knit; but He for one who turned her back on Him and hated Him. In the same way then as He laid at His feet her who turned her back on Him, who hated, and spurned, and disdained Him, not by menaces, nor by violence, nor by terror, nor by anything else of the kind, but by his unwearied affection; so also do thou behave thyself toward thy wife. Yea, though thou see her looking down upon thee, and disdain, and scorning thee, yet by thy great thoughtfulness for her, by affection, by kindness, thou wilt be able to lay her at thy feet. For there is nothing more powerful to sway than these bonds, and especially for husband and wife. A servant, indeed, one will be able, perhaps, to bind down by fear; nay not even him, for he will soon start away and be gone. But the partner of one's life, the mother of one's children, the foundation of one's every joy, one ought never to chain down by fear and menaces, but with love and good temper. For what sort of union is that, where the wife trembles at her husband? And what sort of pleasure will the husband himself enjoy, if he dwells with his wife as with a slave, and not as with a free-woman? Yea, though thou shouldest suffer anything on her account, do not upbraid her; for neither did Christ do this.—*Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians*, in Philip Schaff, ed., *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Printing Company, 1983), vol. 13, p. 144.

Adventist Doctrine of Marriage and Family

The theology of the family is so important that some Christian churches have included the family in the list of their doctrines (see, for instance, the

Westminster Confession of Faith, article XXIV). Unfortunately, some churches, such as the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglican churches, went to the extreme of viewing marriage and the family as a sacrament.

The view of Seventh-day Adventists on the family, especially focusing on the relationship between the spouses, is expressed in fundamental belief 23: "Marriage was divinely established in Eden and affirmed by Jesus to be a lifelong union between a man and a woman in loving companionship. For the Christian, a marriage commitment is to God as well as to the spouse and should be entered into only between a man and a woman who share a common faith. Mutual love, honor, respect, and responsibility are the fabric of this relationship, which is to reflect the love, sanctity, closeness, and permanence of the relationship between Christ and His church. . . . Although some family relationships may fall short of the ideal, a man and a woman who fully commit themselves to each other in Christ through marriage may achieve loving unity through the guidance of the Spirit and the nurture of the church. God blesses the family and intends that its members shall assist each other toward complete maturity. Increasing family closeness is one of the earmarks of the final gospel message."—Seventh-day Adventist Church, "What Adventists Believe About Marriage and the Family," available from <https://www.adventist.org/marriage-and-the-family/>.

The Adventist Church also provides additional reflection on the family through official statements. Its 1996 statement on "Marriage" (see below) is clearly associated with Ephesians 5, although the church's statement does not use biblical references. However, several points from this statement highlight the theological importance of marriage and family.

First, the statement relates marriage to the nature of the biblical triune Holy God: "Arising from the diversity of the two human genders, the oneness of marriage images in a singular way the unity within diversity of the Godhead."

Second, family symbolizes the relationship of God and humanity: "Throughout Scripture, the heterosexual union in marriage is elevated as a symbol of the bond between Deity and humanity. It is a human witness to God's self-giving love and covenant with His people. The harmonious affiliation of a man and a woman in marriage provides a microcosm of social unity that is time-honored as a core ingredient of stable societies."

Third, the statement emphasizes that human families are in a state of sin and in need of restoration in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit: "Because marriage has been corrupted by sin, the purity and beauty of marriage as it was designed by God needs to be restored. Through an appreciation of the redemptive work of Christ and the work of His Spirit in human hearts, the original purpose of marriage may be recovered and the delightful and wholesome experience of marriage realized by a man and a woman who join their lives in the marriage covenant."—General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Administrative Committee, "Marriage," April 23, 1996, available

from <https://www.adventist.org/official-statements/marriage/>.

The Adventist Church has issued additional statements condemning family abuse and violence (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Administrative Committee, “Statement on Abuse and Family Violence,” released by the Office of the President, Robert S. Folkenberg, at the General Conference Session in Utrecht, the Netherlands, June 29–July 8, 1995), as well as affirmation and support of women in various difficult contexts (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Administrative Committee, “Statement on Women’s Issues,” released by the Office of the President, Robert S. Folkenberg, at the General Conference Session in Utrecht, the Netherlands, June 29–July 8, 1995).

Part III: Life Application

1. **Brainstorm with your students about ways that their families or church could become a center of family reconciliation, where the husbands and the wives in the larger community could find reconciliation.**

2. **Invite your class members to imagine they have been invited to prepare three presentations as part of a project for promoting the Christian relationships between husbands and wives in the community. What three topics would they choose, and subsequently, what elements would they include in each topic?**

3. **Ask class members to identify and explain three major differences between the way the Bible and their local culture views the husband-wife relationship in the family. In what three ways could they correct relations in their own families in order to approach the biblical model of husband-wife relationships in the family?**

Practicing Supreme Loyalty to Christ



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 6:1–9; Mark 10:13–16; Col. 3:21; 1 Pet. 2:18–25; 2 Cor. 5:10; Col. 3:24, 25.*

Memory Text: “And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him” (*Ephesians 6:9, NIV*).

In 2018, an artifact at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, DC, attracted much attention. It was an abridged Bible designed to teach essentials of faith while deleting any passage inciting rebellion by slaves. Published in 1808, the text does not just remove a passage here or there. Ninety percent of the Old Testament is missing, and 50 percent of the New. Of the 1,189 chapters in the Bible, only 232 remain.

Passages seeming to reinforce the evils of slavery, especially in the absence of so much of the Bible's narrative of “good news,” are left fully intact, including such oft-misused texts as “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ” (*Eph. 6:5*).

Today, in our time and culture, our important challenge is to read Ephesians 6:1–9 in the context of the full story of salvation, as is revealed in the complete Bible. What can we learn as we watch Paul apply the values of the gospel to the flawed social structures of his day?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 9.

Advice to Children

What advice does Paul give to children, and how does he support that counsel from the Old Testament? *Eph. 6:1–3. (See also Matt. 18:1–5, 10; Mark 10:13–16.)*

To appreciate fully Paul’s counsel to children, we must imagine it being read out in the house churches of the thriving metropolis of Ephesus. The word “children” (Greek, *ta tekna*) could refer to a wide range of ages, since children remained under the father’s authority until the father was 60 (in the Greek tradition) or until his death (in the Roman one). These children, though, are young enough to be under parental training (*Eph. 6:4*) but old enough themselves to be disciples in their own right.

We hear Paul appealing to children, who were worshiping in Christian congregations, to obey and honor their parents “in the Lord,” that is, in Christ (*compare Eph. 5:22; Eph. 6:4, 5, 7–9*). We are invited here to respect children as themselves being disciples of Christ and to include them as active participants in worship. This makes the passage a foundational one for parenting and for ministry to children.

Paul’s command to obey is not absolute. When the commands of parents “contradict the requirements of Christ, then, painful though it may be, they [children] must obey God and trust the consequences with Him.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 293.

Paul completes his exhortation to children by quoting the fifth commandment, bearing witness to the high value he places on the Ten Commandments as a source of guidance for Christian believers (an obvious feature of *Eph. 4:1–6:9; especially Eph. 4:25, 28; Eph. 5:3–14*). He begins the quotation (“‘Honor your father and mother,’” *Eph. 6:2, NKJV*), breaks into it with an editorial comment (“which is the first commandment with promise,” *Eph. 6:2, NKJV*), and then completes the citation (“‘that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth,’” *Eph. 6:3, NKJV*). The fifth commandment bears witness that honoring parents is part of God’s design for human beings to thrive. Respect for parents, imperfect though they may be, will help foster health and well-being.

How do these verses reinforce how important family relationships are?

Advice to Parents

Compare Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3:21. What motivation does Colossians 3:21 provide for avoiding irritating one’s children?

Sirach, a Jewish document available in Paul’s day, advises fathers about the treatment of their sons: “He who loves his son will whip him often. . . . Pamper a child, and he will terrorize you; play with him, and he will grieve you. . . . Discipline your son and make his yoke heavy, so that you may not be offended by his shamelessness” (*Sirach 30:1, 9, 13, NRSV*).

Paul’s counsel bears a very different tone. He first addresses a negative command to fathers: “Do not provoke your children to anger,” followed by a positive one, “Bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (*Eph. 6:4, ESV*). In Paul’s day, fathers had complete legal power over their children, who were regarded as his property. Fathers had the right to inflict violent punishment, even death, on their children. Indeed, in some respects a father’s power over his children exceeded a master’s authority over his slaves. Paul is not endorsing such power but is boldly clarifying and reshaping family relationships. In the context of a supreme loyalty to Christ, Paul invites Christian fathers to rethink their use of power since children who are provoked to anger will not be well positioned to accept “the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (*Eph. 6:4, ESV*).

“Fathers and mothers, in the home you are to represent God’s disposition. You are to require obedience, not with a storm of words, but in a kind, loving manner. . . .

“Be pleasant in the home. Restrain every word that would arouse unholy temper. ‘Fathers, provoke not your children to wrath,’ is a divine injunction. . . .

“No license is given in God’s Word for parental severity or oppression or for filial disobedience. The law of God, in the home life and in the government of nations, flows from a heart of infinite love.”—Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance*, p. 259.

Though the context of the lesson here deals with parents and children, what principles can be taken from these texts that should impact how we should deal with all other people?

Slavery in Paul's Day

Read through the counsel to slaves and slave masters in the following passages: Eph. 6:5–9; Col. 3:22–4:1; 1 Cor. 7:20–24; 1 Tim. 6:1, 2; 1 Pet. 2:18–25. **How would you summarize this advice?**

It is startling to hear Paul address Christian slave masters and to imagine Christian slaves and their Christian slave master seated together in the house churches of Ephesus. Slavery in the Greco-Roman world could differ from the later version in the New World in significant ways. It was not focused on a single ethnic group. Urban, household slaves were sometimes offered opportunities for education and could work as architects, physicians, and philosophers. Freedom sometimes occurred for these household slaves after a limited period of service, though most slaves never gained their freedom. In an attempt to acknowledge such differences, a number of recent Bible versions translate the Greek term *doulos* (“slave”) in Ephesians 6:5–8 as “bondservant.”

Regardless, slavery at any time, in any culture, in any circumstances, is an inexcusable evil, and God will judge, and condemn, slaveholders according to His infinite justice—and for that we can be thankful.

The cry of ex-slave Publilius Syrus is haunting: “It is beautiful to die instead of being degraded as a slave.” Given the full range of these realities, the translation of *doulos* as “slave” is to be preferred (*NIV*, *NRSV*), especially since these slaves are living under the threat of their masters (Eph. 6:9).

Slavery was an ever-present evil in Paul's world. He addresses it, not as a social reformer but as a pastor who advises believers how to deal with current realities and to cast a new vision centered on the transformation of the individual believer, which later could have wider implications for society at large: “His vision was not for *manumission of slaves in the Roman Empire*. Rather his view was about something other than *legal manumission*, that is, a new creation sibling-based fellowship on the basis of adoption as children of God. . . . For Paul the social revolution was to occur in the church, in the body of Christ, at the local level, and in the Christian house church and household.” —Scot McKnight, *The Letter to Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2017), pp. 10, 11.

One of the great stains on Christian history is how some used these biblical passages about slavery to justify this evil. What frightening message should we take away about how carefully we need to handle the Word of God?

Slaves of Christ

What does Paul require of Christian slaves in his detailed instructions to them? *Eph. 6:5–8*.

Paul asks Christian slaves to obey their masters, offering heartfelt, excellent service. What is notable is his repeated reference to a grand substitution that he asks them to make. They are not to place their slave master in the place of Christ, offering to him the allegiance that belongs only to Christ. Rather, in the commitments and allegiance that motivate their heartfelt, excellent service, they are to substitute Christ, the Lord, for the slave master. In encouraging this essential substitution, Paul is offering a transformed, Christian understanding of the master-slave relationship.

Notice the several ways Paul presses this substitution upon them:

- * Their slave masters are diminished by Paul as their “*earthly masters*,” pointing toward the real and heavenly Master (*Eph. 6:5, ESV; emphasis added*).
- * They are to serve “with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, *as you would Christ*” (*Eph. 6:5, ESV; emphasis added*).
- * Paul notes this substitution most clearly in arguing that Christian slaves are to offer genuine service as slaves, not of their masters, but as “*slaves of Christ*” (*Eph. 6:6, NIV*).
- * In performing their service, they are to do “the will of God from the heart,” offering heartfelt service directed to God (*Eph. 6:6, NIV*).
- * Paul invites positively motivated service, offered “as to the Lord and not to man” (*Eph. 6:7, ESV*).

For their heartfelt service, Christian slaves may expect full reward from Christ when He returns. They have done their work for Him and may expect reward from Him, an especially attractive idea for those trapped in this horrific institution. A slave might feel unappreciated or worse by an earthly master (*compare 1 Pet. 2:19, 20*). The believing slave, though, has a Master who is attentive, noticing “whatever good thing each one does” (*Eph. 6:8, NASB*), and offering sure reward.

However much we might wish that Scripture had openly condemned this horrible practice, it doesn’t. Nevertheless, what principles can we draw from Paul’s words in this context about how we relate to people we work with in our own context?

Masters Who Are Slaves

In Paul's final words to slaves, "whether he is a slave or free" (*Eph. 6:8, NKJV*), the word "free" refers to slave masters, allowing Paul to transition to his counsel to them while imagining slaves and slave masters standing on an equal footing before Christ in the judgment (*compare 2 Cor. 5:10; Col. 3:24, 25*).

Assuming that you are a Christian slave master who is listening to Ephesians being read out in your house church, how might you react to this counsel, offered in the presence of your slaves? *Eph. 6:9*.

Paul addresses masters, slave masters, in a pointed exhortation, which turns on the sharp contrast between "the lords" (Greek, *hoi kurioi*, translated as "masters"), who had a habit of "threatening" their slaves, and "the Lord" (*ho kurios*), Christ, with whom there is "no partiality" (*ESV*).

Paul asks masters to "do the same to them" (*ESV*), the slaves, which would have been shocking to a first-century slave owner. Masters should respond to their slaves with deeds of goodwill governed by their allegiance to Christ, corresponding to what Paul has just asked of slaves (*Eph. 6:5–8*). He tells them to stop threatening their slaves, a common practice of a time in which masters administered a wide variety of punishments, including beating (*1 Pet. 2:20*), sexual abuse, being sold (and parted from loved ones), extreme labor, starvation, shackles, branding, and even death. For this, they will be judged—by God.

Paul supports his commands with two motivations that call slave masters to look beyond the social structures of the Greco-Roman world: (1) they and their presumed slaves are co-slaves of a single Master ("knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven," *ESV; compare Col. 4:1*); and (2) the heavenly Master judges all without partiality. Since their own Master treats those regarded as slaves on an equal footing with others, so should they (*compare Philem. 15, 16*).

Much of Paul's language in Ephesians would be especially heartening for Christian slaves: adoption as sons (*Eph. 1:5*); redemption (*Eph. 1:7*); inheritance (*Eph. 1:11, 14; Eph. 3:6*); being enthroned with Jesus (*Eph. 2:6*); becoming "fellow citizens," "members of the household of God" (*Eph. 2:19, ESV; compare Eph. 3:14, 15*), and integral parts of the body of Christ (*see Eph. 3:6, Eph. 4:1–16*). Ephesians 6:5–9 activates all the teaching in the letter as operative in the relationships between slaves and slave masters, including the counsel about speech (*Eph. 4:25–32*) and sexual ethics (*Eph. 5:1–14*).

Further Thought: Paul's respect for children as fellow believers (*Eph. 6:1–3*) heightens our concern for the ways in which children are treated in our world today. His word to fathers (*Eph. 6:4*) invites us to consider parental responsibilities. Applying Paul's counsel to slaves (*Eph. 6:5–8*), and, especially, his counsel to slave masters (*Eph. 6:9*), is more challenging, since the social setting is distant for many of us and because we know that slavery, *in any form*, is one of the greatest of moral evils. Still, since these words are inspired ones that are part of Scripture, we should ponder how to apply them today. With the believers in Ephesus in the first century, we have the privilege and responsibility of applying the values of the gospel to our relationships. The discussion questions below are designed to foster that important work.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What does it mean for Adventists that love for children is identified as evidence of “a people prepared for the Lord”? *Luke 1:17* (quoting *Mal. 4:6*).
- ❷ Paul's obvious respect for children suggests a searching question: What is our responsibility to extend the care of Christ to children who have experienced violence, sexual abuse, and shame in their early lives? In view of research on the profound impact of adverse childhood experiences (or ACEs; see <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/>), what is our responsibility toward them?
- ❸ As an extension of Paul's respect for children and Jesus' care for them, what responsibilities does the church have to nurture and protect the children in its care? What systems and procedures need to be in place to do so?
- ❹ Paul's counsel to slaves and slave masters, Ephesians 6:5–9, is often applied to the relationships between employees and employers. In what ways might this be appropriate? What dangers present themselves in doing so?
- ❺ Slavery remains a painful reality in our world, with more than 40 million people enslaved (according to “The Global Slavery Index,” <http://www.globalslaveryindex.org/>). As free people whose spiritual forebears were firmly committed to the abolition of slavery, what are our responsibilities to these enslaved sons and daughters of God as we sing of Christ, “Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother, and in his name all oppression shall cease” (lyrics to “O Holy Night,” public domain)?

A Book and a Ride

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Alexei Arushanian, a 33-year-old Ukrainian living in Poland, was running late. He had just finished his work, installing windows, and had to stop at the gas station as he raced to meet his wife for an evening shopping trip.

At the gas pump, Alexei noticed a young man trying to start his scooter. He kept trying to start the scooter but to no avail. A large, insulated bag on the back of his scooter showed that he was making a food delivery. Alexei didn't speak good Polish, but he didn't want to pass up an opportunity to help. He thought about the young man as he filled up the tank and paid for the gas. Back in the car, he opened the window and called out, "What's wrong?"

The young man was Polish. He said, "The scooter doesn't want to start."

Alexei belonged to a group of church members who distribute Ellen White's *The Great Controversy*. It is a difficult task with few receptive people, and he saw an opportunity. He handed the young man a book.

"I have a gift for you," he said. "It's a Christian book that contains the history of Christianity from the first Christians who defended the truth after Christ returned to heaven to the events that will occur at the end of the world. I think that you will find it interesting."

The young man accepted the book and thanked him. Alexei returned to his car. And sat. And thought. *I can't leave. I haven't done my duty as a Christian*, he thought. *I gave him a book, but I didn't fill his need*. Opening the car door, he said, "I can take you to your delivery place."

"Really?" the young man asked with surprise.

"Really," Alexei said. "I understand how you feel. I'll take you."

The young man grabbed the bag of food, and Alexei drove him about 2 miles (3 km) to the address. "Will you wait for me?" the young man asked. "Of course. I brought you."

On the way back to the gas station, the young man marveled at Alexei's kindness. "In Poland, very few Christians stop and offer help, but you are a Ukrainian Christian and offered help," he said. He introduced himself as Kamil. Alexei spoke about the love of God, and Kamil listened intently. As they arrived at the gas station, a coworker from Kamil's workplace pulled up to fix the scooter.

Alexei left. Kamil had help, and he could leave.

Alexei was late to his appointment to meet his wife—but it was worth it. He had been delayed by a divine appointment.



This quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will go to the Trans-European Division, which includes Poland. Thank you for planning a generous offering.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Ephesians 6:9*

Study Focus: *Eph. 6:1–9; Mark 10:13–16; Col. 3:21; 1 Pet. 2:18–25; 2 Cor. 5:10; Col. 3:24, 25.*

Introduction: After discussing the topic of family unity, Paul delves into one of the most controversial and difficult categories of unity: unity between generations and between social groups or classes. For these situations, Paul has the same gospel solution: unity “in the Lord.” Paul advises children to respect their parents in the Lord. This phrase already places the children in the realm of a Christian family and society, in which they themselves are treated as members of the family of the Lord. The apostle’s advice for the parents is exactly in the same spirit: treat your children as if they belong to the Lord. This principle, however, does not mean that children cannot be educated, corrected, and disciplined. But the parents must approach the discipline of their children in the same way that God would.

Contrary to what some critics of the Bible say, Paul did not espouse the evil institution of slavery but chose to approach it in a pastoral, strategic way. Following Jesus, who rejected a militarized revolutionary solution to the problem of persecution or oppression (Peter was admonished by Jesus to place his sword into his sheath), Paul advocated for solving, in Christ, this social problem and others. The slaves must see themselves as slaves of Christ, just as Paul saw himself, and must work diligently for the Lord Jesus. On the other hand, slaves should see their masters as humans (earthly masters) in need of salvation, just like any other sinful human being. The slave masters must see their slaves as fellow citizens in God’s kingdom and themselves as slaves to the heavenly Master. The social tension of master-slave is “resolved” in the fact that, in the church, both the masters and the slaves are equally called and adopted by Christ, exalted with Christ in the heavenly places. They worship the same God and Savior and are called to have their lives completely transformed by the presence of the Holy Spirit in them, according to the image of God in Christ.

Lesson Themes: This study highlights two major themes:

1. Unity between generations: the children and the parents can be truly united when they treat each other in the Lord.
2. Unity between social classes: slave owners and slaves are united only in the Lord when they see each other for what they are in the Lord: fellow citizens of the new kingdom and the new life in Christ.

Part II: Commentary

Unity for Children and Parents, Slaves and Masters

In Ephesians 6:1–9, Paul continues his theme of the unity that God brings to humanity and the church through Christ Jesus. Paul does so by touching upon two sensitive family and social issues: the relationship between generations and the relationships between the slaves and masters. The apostle tells the children they must obey their parents “in the Lord” because “this is right” (*Eph. 6:1*). It is right because it is God’s commandment, a commandment with a promise (*Eph. 6:2*) of blessings and prosperity (*Eph. 6:3*). On the other hand, Paul calls Christian parents not to “provoke” children to wrath (*Eph. 6:4*) by commandeering them at whim. Rather, the parents’ goal is to “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (*Eph. 6:4, NASB*), not according to their own wisdom. Children are to be educated toward their own mature relationship with the Lord. While children are to be involved in the work of the household, such work must be a means of education and not a means of exploitation or production that does not benefit the children. Parent-children relationships are fundamental for society. Sad to say, different societies, at various times, have witnessed within the familial relationships either the abuse of parents or the abuse of children, or both. Paul is certain that this intergenerational tension caused by sin can be solved in the church only when it is in Christ.

Paul calls the Christian slaves to “obey” their “earthly masters with respect and fear and sincerity of heart, just as [they] obey Christ” (*Eph. 6:5, NIV*). By this, Paul does not mean he is placing divine approval on something so obviously wrong and evil as slavery. Nor is Paul drawing a parallel between “earthly masters” and Christ. Rather, Paul emphasizes the genuineness of the conversion of the slaves and of the masters.

We must be true Christians in whatever circumstance we find ourselves. In this sinful world, we are often caught up in various difficult situations. Some of us are incapacitated or limited by a disease, some by a natural or social disaster, and some are even facing the closure of life. Of course, in such circumstances, the Scriptures teach us to do everything in our power to improve or change our circumstances. But this strategy is not always possible to carry out. In such circumstances, the most important thing for the Christian to do is to hold fast to his or her genuine faith and relationship with Christ.

Likewise, Paul tells the Ephesian slaves: if you are a slave, like Joseph in Egypt, and if you cannot change this terrible situation (*1 Cor. 7:21–23*), remember the mystery of the gospel, the blessings of Christ in the heavenly places, the honor He gave us by exalting us with Himself to the throne of God. Remember, too, the fact that we are all stones in God’s temple and members of His body, that we have experienced the deep transformation of our hearts and lifestyles, the profound transformation of our attitudes and perspectives, and the power of the Holy Spirit that works in us to produce these amazing changes.

So, like Joseph in Egypt, work for the master, prosper his or her house in the same way you would work for Jesus (*Eph. 6:6*). Such conduct is not adulation or flattery. Nor is this behavior self-deception or tantamount to developing a slave mentality. Rather, this deportment represents the essence of the Christian attitude in his or her relationships. In whatever circumstance or social structure, the most important thing for the Christian is his or her conversion, which will result in a sincere, diligent, perfect attitude toward work and life (*Eph. 6:6–8*).

On the other hand, Paul tells Christian masters to “do the same” (*Eph. 6:9*) for their slaves: be a master like Jesus. The earthly slave masters or people of wealth and power know that Jesus is their Master. So contrary to the opinion that Paul is affirming slavery, he destroys the foundation of slavery by establishing the Christian principle that all—both slaves and earthly masters—have the same Master in heaven, Jesus Christ. All earthly social and economic relationships are to be related to Jesus Christ. Slaves live and work first in relation to Jesus as their Master. Masters treat their workers as Jesus, their Master, treats them. Paul emphasizes that “there is no favoritism with him” (*Eph. 6:9, NIV*). Following his own Master, Jesus (*Matt. 26:51–53*), Paul believed that by preaching the gospel of unity and love in Christ, the evil institution of slavery would collapse by itself.

Seventh-day Adventist Theology on Children

Seventh-day Adventists value both marriage and children. This value is reflected in fundamental belief 23: “God blesses the family and intends that its members shall assist each other toward complete maturity. Increasing family closeness is one of the earmarks of the final gospel message. Parents are to bring up their children to love and obey the Lord. By their example and their words they are to teach them that Christ is a loving, tender, and caring guide who wants them to become members of His body, the family of God which embraces both single and married persons.”—Seventh-day Adventist Church, “What Adventists Believe About Marriage and the Family,” available from <https://www.adventist.org/marriage-and-the-family/>.

Valuing children is included in other official statements of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Referencing Ephesians 6:4, among other texts, the statement titled “Nurture and Protection of Children” describes children “as precious gifts from God entrusted to the care of parents, family, community of faith and society-at-large” and calls for children to be protected from any form of abuse, violence, and exploitation. The statement notes that “many children experience harsh punishment in the name of a biblical approach to discipline. Correction characterized by severe, punitive, dictatorial control often leads to resentment and rebellion. Such harsh discipline is also associated with heightened risk for physical and psychological harm to children as well as increased likelihood the youth will resort to coercion and violence in resolving their differences with others. By contrast, examples

from Scripture as well as a large body of research confirm the effectiveness of more gentle forms of discipline that allow children to learn through reasoning and experiencing the consequences of their choices. Such milder measures have been demonstrated to increase the likelihood children will make life-affirming choices and espouse parental values as they mature.” This statement invites the churches to become a “safe place” for children, providing “emotional and spiritual healing” for affected children.—Executive Committee of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, “Nurture and Protection of Children,” June 23, 2010, available from <https://www.adventist.org/official-statements/nurture-and-protection-of-children>. Similar statements, including practical recommendations, were issued in 1997 (“Child Sexual Abuse,” voted by the Spring Meeting of the General Conference Executive Committee, April 1, 1997, in Loma Linda, California) and 2000 (“Well-being and Value of Children,” voted by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Administrative Committee, for release at the time of the General Conference Session in Toronto, Canada, June 29–July 8, 2000). It is notable that the Adventist Church has several departments that minister to the needs of the family: Family Ministries, Children’s Ministries, Women’s Ministries, and Youth Ministries.

Seventh-day Adventist Theology on Slavery

As Seventh-day Adventists, we have incorporated into our key doctrines biblical perspectives on social issues, such as racism, slavery, and other socio-economic disparities, relating these issues to the doctrine of the church, as Paul did in his Epistle to the Ephesians. Seventh-day Adventist fundamental belief 14, “Unity in the Body of Christ,” proclaims that “in Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning, and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor, male and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation” (available from <https://www.adventist.org/beliefs/>). Even if the church had not voted on a statement specifically addressing slavery, related statements on poverty and human relations have been adopted, such as “Homelessness and Poverty” (General Conference president, Neal C. Wilson, July 5, 1990, released at the General Conference Session in Indianapolis, Indiana, available from <https://www.adventist.org/official-statements/homelessness-and-poverty>); “Global Poverty” (Executive Committee of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, June 23, 2010, released at the General Conference Session in Atlanta, Georgia, June 24–July 3, 2010, available from <https://www.adventist.org/official-statements/global-poverty>); “One Humanity: A Human Relations Statement Addressing Racism, Casteism, Tribalism, and Ethnocentrism” (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Administrative Committee in Silver Spring, Maryland, September 15, 2020, available from <https://www.adventist.org/official-statements/one-humanity-a-human-relations-statement-addressing-racism-casteism-tribalism-and-ethnocentrism>).

Part III: Life Application

1. Perhaps you have been mistreated or maltreated by your parents in the past. Even so, what are three principles in Ephesians 5 and 6 that could serve as guiding principles for raising your own children? How can these same principles help you to heal from the scars of your past familial relationships?

2. Perhaps, on the other hand, the Word of God, in Ephesians 6, and the Holy Spirit convince you that you have been on the path of mistreating your spouse and your children. Based on a renewed study of Ephesians 5 and 6, make a three-step plan to gain freedom from this situation. Suppose you do not have this problem, but you know someone who is struggling in such a situation. How can you help him or her?

3. If, in the light of this study, you realize you have lived a life of disobedience and contempt in relation to your parents, what are three ways you could remedy this situation?

4. There seems to be a close connection between abusive relationships in the family and church and the departure of young people from the church. What can you as a family and/or as a church do about this phenomenon? How can we find a balance between correcting the behavior of the young people and letting them know of our constant, unshakeable love for them?

5. The prophet Malachi in Malachi 4:5, 6 prophesied about the return of Elijah to the people of God with a message of intergenerational reconciliation. Our own salvation is, in fact, the reconciliation that God works out between us—His sinful children—and Himself, as our Father (*2 Cor. 5:18–21*). Throughout his Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul talks about this same reconciliation, in Christ, between us and God. This vertical reconciliation will be reflected in our family, social, and work relations. What are three ways your church could become a center for the promotion of intergenerational and social reconciliation in the larger community?

The Call *to* Stand



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Eph. 6:10–20; Deut. 20:2–4; Rom. 13:11–14; 1 Thess. 5:6–8; 1 Cor. 15:23, 24.

Memory Text: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil” (Ephesians 6:10, 11, ESV).

Bleary-eyed, the servant stumbles out of his lodgings and sees an alarming sight—a large, well-equipped and hostile army with “troops, horses, and chariots everywhere.” Speaking to the prophet Elisha, he stammers out the news, along with his harried question, “‘Oh, sir, what will we do now?’”

Elisha responds, “‘Don’t be afraid! . . . For there are more on our side than on theirs!’” a response that fails to register in the face of his servant. Elisha, pulling him close, prays for him: “‘O Lord, open his eyes and let him see!’” The prophet’s prayer is answered immediately. The servant steps to the ramparts again, but this time the veil between the seen and the unseen lifts. He now sees not one army, but two. “The Lord opened the young man’s eyes, and when he looked up, he saw that the hillside around Elisha was filled with horses and chariots of fire” (2 Kings 6:15–17, NLT).

In composing Ephesians 6:10–20, Paul prays for an enhanced vision for believers so that they will be able to see the full reality of the great controversy and to draw hope from what it reveals to them.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 16.

Battle Speech

Study Paul’s ringing conclusion to his letter, Ephesians 6:10–20. What does Paul’s battle cry mean to us today, as combatants in the great controversy?

Paul concludes Ephesians with a call to battle, urging believers to take their stand in the church’s war against evil (*Eph. 6:10–20*). He begins with an overarching exhortation to “be strong in the Lord” (*Eph. 6:10*), which he repeats as a call to “put on the whole armor of God” (*Eph. 6:11*). He supports this call by specifying a purpose (to be able to stand against the devil’s schemes, *Eph. 6:11*), and by offering a rationale: the battle is against powerful, spiritual forces of evil (*Eph. 6:12*). In a detailed way, Paul then reissues the call to arms. Believers are to “take up the whole armor of God” in order to stand firm in battle (*Eph. 6:13, ESV*), donning belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, helmet, and sword (*Eph. 6:14–17*). Paul invites believers, now fully armed and ready to enter the fray, to do what soldiers on the ancient battlefield might do—and that is, pray (*Eph. 6:18–20*).

By echoing battle exhortations or eve-of-battle speeches in the Old Testament, Paul speaks of the church’s mission in terms of military conflict and weapons. Paul signals this in his first, overarching command: “Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might” (*Eph. 6:10, NKJV*).

Battle exhortations in the Old Testament (*see, for instance, Deut. 20:2–4; Judges 7:15–18; 2 Chron. 20:13–20; 2 Chron. 32:6–8; Neh. 4:14, 19, 20*) underline the idea that Israel’s success in battle does not depend on the superiority of its own weapons or an army that outnumbers its foes. Rather, victory results from depending on the presence and power of God. The key to the Israelites’ success was not confidence in themselves but firm trust in God’s power and His provision for their success. Paul makes bold use of these themes to exhort believers to be: (1) active in pursuing the church’s mission; (2) attentive to the unseen dimensions that impact their lives and witness; (3) cognizant of the divine provision for their success; and (4) always alert to the importance of unity and collaboration among believers.

What should Paul’s warning that we fight not against flesh and blood but against supernatural enemies teach us about where our only hope of victory is?

Finding Strength in Christ

Paul ends his letter with a powerful call to battle that draws together themes and ideas important to the letter as a whole. He begins by announcing the overarching theme of the conclusion, offered in the tone of a commander's battle cry: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might" (*Eph. 6:10, ESV*). The rest of the passage (*Ephesians 6:11–20*) illustrates and unpacks this large theme.

Read again Ephesians 6:10–20. How do you see the reality of the great controversy, which involves literal supernatural powers, as central to Paul's point? Why is keeping this crucial truth before us so important in our own daily walk with God?

Paul identifies Christ as the Source of believers' strength with his phrase "in the Lord and in the power of His might" (*Eph. 6:10, NKJV*) since "Lord" refers to Christ, as is consistently the case in Ephesians (*Eph. 2:21; Eph. 4:1, 17; Eph. 5:8; Eph. 6:1, 21*). "The Church's strength lies in the almightiness of her risen Lord, the Captain of her warfare."—G. G. Findlay, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (New York: Ray Long & Richard R. Smith, 1931), p. 398.

Paul uses repetition in Ephesians 6:10, employing the synonyms *power* and *might* to underline his point: the power to be exhibited by the church is not inherent in believers but is derived. It comes from the Lord, from Christ. Paul summarizes here an important theme of the letter, God's power shared with believers (*Eph. 1:19–22; Eph. 2:4–6; Eph. 3:16, 17*). Strength for every current and future conflict is to be found in believers' solidarity with the resurrected and exalted Christ.

While the initial command announces Christ as active in providing strength to believers (*Eph. 6:10*), all three members of the Godhead are engaged in strengthening them for spiritual combat against evil. God (the Father) makes His own weapons available as the "armor of God" (*Eph. 6:11, 13; compare Isa. 59:17*). Earlier, Paul has identified the Spirit as active in strengthening believers. Paul prayed that God may grant you "to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being" (*Eph. 3:16, ESV*). Here, it is the Spirit who issues the sword, "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (*Eph. 6:17*). Also, believers are to pray "at all times in the Spirit" (*Eph. 6:18, ESV*). Paul wishes his hearers to understand that the triune God is fully engaged in equipping them to battle against these evil powers.

The Great Controversy in Paul's Letters

Read Romans 13:11–14, 1 Thessalonians 5:6–8, and 2 Corinthians 10:3–6. How do these verses compare with Ephesians 6:10–20? Why do you think Paul uses this kind of imagery?

In his letters, Paul frequently employs military language and imagery, inviting believers to mimic exemplary, soldierly behavior. While Ephesians 6:10–20 represents his longest and most concentrated use, military language exhibits one of his major ways of understanding the gospel story. Having conquered the “rulers and authorities” at the cross (*Col. 2:15, ESV*), the exalted Christ now works out the results of that victory from His position as exalted Lord over the powers (*Phil. 2:9–11*). Recruiting His followers as combatants in the cosmic war, Christ leads the armies of light toward a grand day of victory (*1 Cor. 15:54–58, 2 Thess. 2:8, Rom. 16:20*). Gathering up Paul’s uses of military symbolism, we see that he understands the conflict between good and evil to be “a long-running cosmic war: battles ebb and flow between two armies which face each other down through the ages until one wins the final confrontation.”—Peter W. Macky, *St. Paul’s Cosmic War Myth: A Military Version of the Gospel* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1998), p. 1.

Paul’s frequent theme of cosmic war is also part of the fabric of Ephesians. In his call to arms (*Eph. 6:10–20*), Paul draws together elements of the cosmic conflict, that he has already used: God’s empowering of believers with immense “power” (*Eph. 1:18–20; Eph. 3:16, 20*); Christ’s victory and exaltation over the powers (*Eph. 1:20–23*); believers as a resurrected army of the once-dead but now empowered by their identity with the exalted Christ and able to fight against their former, dark master (*Eph. 2:1–10*); the church’s role in revealing to the powers their coming doom (*Eph. 3:10*); the use of Psalm 68:18 to portray Christ as the conquering, divine Warrior (*Eph. 4:7–11*); and the call for believers to “put on” gospel clothing (see *Eph. 4:20–24*). When called to put on God’s “full armor,” we are well prepared to understand the central role of cosmic conflict, but, also, we are to remain firm in the assurance that we have of participating in Christ’s ultimate victory.

What are some of the ways that you personally have experienced the reality not only of this cosmic conflict but of the victory we can claim for ourselves in Jesus? Why is understanding His victory for us so foundational to our hope and experience?

Standing on the Ancient Battlefield

Read through Ephesians 6:10–20, noting each time Paul uses some form of the verb *stand*. Why is this idea so important to him?

We must understand Paul's military metaphor in the context of the ancient battlefield. What did it mean to "stand" (*Eph. 6:11, 13, 14*)? Does the verb suggest a defensive-only posture? Battle speeches included in the writings of Thucydides, one of the great classical authors of battle literature, highlight three successive actions that must occur if a side is to be victorious: (1) soldiers must "close with the enemy," which means they must march to meet their foes; then, (2) they must attack and "stand fast," or "stand our ground," fighting hand-to-hand with their foes; and finally, (3) they must "beat back the enemy" (see *Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War* [New York: E. P. Dutton, 1910], 4.10.1–5).

The key moment of an ancient battle occurred with the second of these three actions, when the two opposing phalanxes came crashing together in "a terrible cacophony of smashed bronze, wood, and flesh," which ancient author Xenophon refers to as that " 'awful crash.' "—Victor Davis Hanson, *The Western Way of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 152, 153. Standing firm, holding one's ground at this strategic moment, was the great challenge of ancient battle. In the close combat that would ensue, each side would seek momentum for "the push."

Paul's call to arms reflects combat in which soldiers were "bunched together, giving and receiving hundreds of blows at close range."—Victor Davis Hanson, *The Western Way of War*, p. 152. This is confirmed by Paul's depiction of the church's battle against its foes as a wrestling match (*Eph. 6:12*; see Thursday's study) and in his use of an intensive form of the verb "to stand" in verse 13: "that you may be able to *withstand* in the evil day" (*NKJV, ESV; emphasis added*).

This is no relaxed stance! To "stand," then, is to be vigorously engaged in battle, employing every weapon in close-order combat, a point obvious from the military imagery in Paul's earlier exhortation to be found "standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel" (*Phil. 1:27, ESV*).

Read Hebrews 12:4. How does this verse help encapsulate what it means to stand in the Lord? What is the corporate nature of this standing, as well?

Wrestling Against Evil Powers

What do you judge to be Paul's purpose in listing a variety of titles for the evil spiritual powers depicted in Ephesians 1:21, Ephesians 3:10, and Ephesians 6:10–20?

Paul describes “our struggle” (*Eph. 6:12, NRSV*), using a Greek word for the competition between wrestlers (*palé*). Since wrestling was regarded as excellent preparation for battle, this is an appropriate description of the weapon-against-weapon and hand-to-hand combat that takes place when armies clash. Paul is emphasizing the reality of believers' close struggle against the evil powers.

Here are the titles he gives them:

Ephesians 1:21	Ephesians 3:10	Ephesians 6:12
every ruler (or every rule)	the rulers	the rulers
(every) authority	the authorities	the authorities
(every) power		the cosmic powers over this present darkness
(every) dominion		the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places
every name named		

In his broad descriptions (“every name named” *Eph. 1:21, LEB*; “the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places,” *Eph. 6:12, ESV*), Paul does affirm that all evil and supernatural powers are subjugated to Christ (*Eph. 1:21*). However, in any battle, it is never a good strategy to underestimate the forces on the opposing side. Paul warns that we do not just confront human enemies, but “spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (*Eph. 6:12, NKJV*), led by a wily general, the devil (*Eph. 6:11*). However, while we must be on the alert against our powerful foes, we need not be daunted by them. God is present with us in the battle (*Eph. 6:10*) and has supplied us with the finest of weaponry, His own armor, the “armor of God” (*Eph. 6:11; compare Isa. 59:15–17*). He has placed at our disposal His truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation, and the Holy Spirit (*Eph. 6:13–17*). With God going before us and our being equipped from head to toe in the armor He has supplied, we cannot fail (*Rom. 16:20; 1 Cor. 15:23, 24; 2 Thess. 2:8*).

What should the reality of these supernatural evil powers—against whom we, ourselves, are utterly helpless—teach us regarding why we must grasp hold of the Lord Jesus, who is not only greater than these powers but has already defeated them?

Further Thought: “Our work is an aggressive one, and as faithful soldiers of Jesus, we must bear the blood-stained banner into the very strongholds of the enemy. ‘We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.’ If we will consent to lay down our arms, to lower the blood-stained banner, to become the captives and servants of Satan, we may be released from the conflict and the suffering. But this peace will be gained only at the loss of Christ and heaven. We cannot accept peace on such conditions. Let it be war, war, to the end of earth’s history, rather than peace through apostasy and sin.”—Ellen G. White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 8, 1888.

How does Ephesians 6:10–20 relate to the book of Revelation? The passage exhibits the same basic view of last-day events, or eschatology, as the battle motif in the book of Revelation (see *Revelation 12*, *Rev. 16:12–16*, *Rev. 19:17–21*, *Rev. 20:7–10*). In both, the people of God are under attack by the enemy who is “in heavenly places” and “is active and powerful in the present *aeon*” (or age). In both, the people of God are encouraged by “the picture of the future *aeon*.” Further, “both scenarios explicitly point to the final battle when the enemy will be conquered completely after which the new *aeon* will be established forever,” a new age in which “the final glorious state of the people of God” and “the eternal doom of the enemy” will be evident (see Yordan Kalev Zhekov, *Eschatology of Ephesians* [Osijek, Croatia: Evangelical Theological Seminary, 2005], pp. 217, 233–235).

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ When have you most clearly confronted the powers of darkness? What have you found to be the most helpful strategies at those times?
- ❷ Informed by Ephesians 6:10–20, how would you minister to someone who seems especially oppressed by “the spiritual forces of evil” (*Eph. 6:12, ESV*)?
- ❸ How do we best discern and reject “the schemes of the devil” (*Eph. 6:11, ESV*)? For example, how often do you feel ready to give up your faith because you feel that you are too sinful, too corrupt, to be saved? Who is putting that thought in your head—Christ or the forces of darkness? Especially at times like that, why must you claim many of the wonderful promises we have been given in Jesus?

Finding the Right Words

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Alexei Arushanian, a 33-year-old Ukrainian national living in Poland, noticed a Bible and many other religious books in the apartment of the woman whose windows he was installing.

Alexei belonged to a group of church members who distributed Ellen White's *The Great Controversy*. It was a difficult task with few receptive people, and he prayed for an opportunity to share a book in this home.

Then the woman, who was about 40 and lived alone, offered him a cup of tea. Alexei sat and sipped the tea as the woman went about her activities. She sang as she worked. Alexei prayed about what to do. Finally, he spoke.

"I see that you love to read books," he said.

"Yes, I really love to read," she said. "You might have noticed that I don't have a TV. I read all the time."

The woman resumed working and singing.

Alexei had an idea. "Are you a Christian?" he asked.

"Yes, I sing in a choir at church," she said.

"I also go to church, at Foksal 8," Alexei said, giving the address of the only Seventh-day Adventist Church in Poland's capital, Warsaw. "I'm a Protestant. I'm a Seventh-day Adventist."

Seeing that the woman was listening intently, Alexei grew bolder.

"I'd like to give you a gift, a book about the history of Christianity," he said. "It's really interesting."

The woman agreed to look at the book.

As Alexei took his tools out to the car, he worried that she wouldn't open the door when he returned with the book. But she welcomed him back in. She was visibly impressed with the handsomely bound volume, and she immediately began to leaf through it. From the expression on her face, Alexei could see that she didn't agree with everything that she saw.

"It's up to you to accept or reject what's in the book," he said.

The woman accepted the book, saying, "Thank you very much."

The pair spoke a little longer, and Alexei was filled with joy when he left.

He was so happy that he had found a way to give her the book.

"I could have stayed silent," he says. "But she had the right to decide whether to accept the book or not. My duty only was to offer it to her."



This quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will go to the Trans-European Division, which includes Poland. Thank you for planning a generous offering.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Ephesians 6:10, 11*

Study Focus: *Eph. 6:10–20; Deut. 20:2; Rom. 13:11–14; 1 Thess. 5:6–8; 1 Cor. 15:23, 24.*

Introduction: So far, Paul has integrated together several foundational facts about the gospel: the fact that the Lord has restored to unity Jews and Gentiles, husbands and wives, children and parents, slaves and masters; the fact that our lives have been transformed, that we are resurrected, ascended, and exalted with Christ; the fact God gave us blessings and gifts; and the fact that we have been constituted into the church of God, united in the Lord. Do all these facts mean that the history of salvation is over and that there is nothing else for us to do? By no means.

In the last chapter of his letter, Paul reminds the Ephesians, and all of us, that Christians are not simply saved people who are amassed in the fold of Jesus. On the contrary, Paul insists that once Christians join the kingdom of the Lord, they take part in its defense and promotion. They are soldiers of the kingdom of God. But they are not soldiers in the sense that soldiers of the Roman Empire are. Nor are they militarized rebel militias. Their enemy is spiritual, and so are their armor and weapons. It is a cosmic battle, started in the “heavenly places” by “the devil” and other “world forces of this darkness . . . the spiritual forces of wickedness” (*Eph. 6:11, 12, NASB*) against the throne of God.

The source of the power and strength of Christians does not reside in their own muscles, armor, weapons, battle skills, and strategies. Rather, their only source of power is, as always, in the Lord. They fight as their Lord fought, by crushing evil and worldly powers with the power of love and justice that comes from the cross. But the cross is not theirs; it is the Lord’s. It was the Lord who obtained the victory over the powers of evil at the cross; it was the Lord who resurrected and ascended to the heavenly places. It is by virtue of this victory that the Lord Jesus gives His church His resurrection, His life and blessings (*Ephesians 1*), His gifts (*Ephesians 4*), and now His armor (*Ephesians 6*). The Christians fight, clad in Christ’s armor, for a battle that He already has won.

Lesson Themes: This week’s study focuses on two major themes:

1. By joining the church, the Christian automatically engages in a spiritual battle of cosmic proportions.
2. But the Christian does not need to worry, for his or her strength and armor come from the Lord. All a Christian must do is to stand his or her ground in the Lord.

Part II: Commentary

Taking the Victorious Side

When Paul says “finally” (*Eph. 6:10*), he does not mean that he is lowering the intensity, and the elevated description, of his vision for Christian life. Rather, he is ending his epistle with a call to fight. Yes, Paul’s gospel is a message of peace, but it is a message of peace precisely because of an ongoing war, involving the entire universe, from God on the throne in the heavenly places to the last person in the world. Paul’s gospel is a message of peace because God has obtained the victory in this war.

However, the war continues for each one of us as we take a side. True Christians are those who take their side with God. This alliance will bring the battle to their doorstep. But Christians do not need to be afraid. On the contrary, knowing that they have taken the right, and the winning, side of the war, they need to understand that they are not left alone and that they have been empowered and supplied with all the war equipment they need to be victorious. The only thing needed is for them to take a stand. So important is this stand that, in Ephesians 6, the apostle repeats three times his call for the Christians to stand for God (*Eph. 6:11, 13, 14*).

Here I Stand

By 1521, Martin Luther (1483–1546) had become the leading voice of the Reformation. Studying the Scriptures in their original languages, the Augustinian monk, who became a professor of biblical theology at the University of Wittenberg, arrived at two major conclusions, both enforced by Paul’s theology. First, that the justification of the sinner is based on God’s grace and accepted by the sinner by faith; this idea translated into the Protestant Reformation principles of *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. Second, that the Scriptures constitute the self-sufficient revelation of God and that the Bible, not the church council or pope, is the only, and final, rule of faith and authority in the church. This idea was encapsulated into the *sola scriptura* principle of the Reformation.

While these ideas were increasingly shaping up in Luther’s mind, Johann Tetzel’s sale of indulgences near Wittenberg inspired Luther to rise against flagrant corruption in the church by publishing his famous Ninety-Five Theses on October 31, 1517. However, instead of witnessing a wave of deep reformation in the church, Luther was confronted with a tsunami of attacks aimed at breaking and silencing him. By the time of the 1518 Diet of Augsburg, Luther already regarded Scripture as the sole basis for faith, morality, and theology. However, caught between his growing popularity in Germany and high pressure from the Papacy, Luther agreed in 1519 not to publish his views if his opponents would refrain from attacking him.

But when, in 1520, he came under repeated attack, Luther decided to let his calls for a profound reformation of the church go fully public. Luther published a series of pamphlets as a result. In these pamphlets, the Reformer used the Scriptures to debunk (1) the papal claim to absolute authority over the church and world through its hierarchy and (2) the church's claim to control God's grace through its sacraments and priesthood. Instead, Luther proposed that the church needed to return to the principle of the priesthood of all believers, who have direct access to God and His grace through their faith.

The church of Rome responded via Pope Leo X's 1520 bull, *Exsurge Domine*, in which the pope identified some 41 alleged theological errors in Luther's writings. Luther was excommunicated in the same year, and his books were ordered to be burned. Luther responded in kind: when the papal bull reached his place in December of 1520, he burned it publicly. The tense situation turned into an open war. Charles V, the new emperor, attempted to bring order in his domain by summoning Luther to the Diet in the spring of 1521, in the Imperial Free City of Worms (close to the city of Frankfurt), where Luther would be required to answer for his views and his actions. The Reformer was to travel, and attend the Diet, under the protection of Frederick of Saxony, the founder of the University of Wittenberg and a defender of Luther. Luther was well motivated to fight for God, as illustrated in his exclamation before traveling to Worms: "I will enter Worms under the banner of Christ against the gates of hell."—Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1950), p. 179.

Luther arrived in Worms on April 16, 1521, and was ordered to appear before the Diet at four o'clock in the afternoon of the following day. On April 17, Luther was brought before the Diet. The presider proceeded directly to questioning Luther as to whether the books arranged on a desk were his and whether he was ready to recant the views written in them. Realizing the cruciality of the moment and its impact on the future of the gospel, Luther hesitated and requested additional time for consideration. His request was granted, and he returned to the Diet on April 18, at six o'clock in the afternoon.

His appearance and voice differed from the day before: he was well composed, and his voice sounded strong, confident. After acknowledging that the books piled up before him were authored by him, the Reformer explained that he could not recant the ideas in those books because they were falling into three categories, each of which held truths that he could not recant: (1) proclaiming general Christian teachings, (2) denouncing the corruption of the Papacy that was oppressing the German nation, and (3) exposing the corruption of certain individuals. For this reason, Luther requested to be shown his errors by Scripture and not by ecclesiastical mandates.

The presider rebuked Luther for claiming Scripture as the final authority, pointing out that the church would be exposed to shame if it were found in error after so many centuries. For this reason, the presider then challenged Luther to give a direct answer to the question of whether he was renouncing his works and his teachings. Luther's ringing voice proclaimed the famous answer: "Since then Your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. *Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise.* God help me. Amen."—Bainton, *Here I Stand*, p. 185; italics added (see comment below).

Historians have noted that the words "Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise" are not present in the official written records of the Diet but are included in the earliest printed version of the speech (Bainton, p. 185). Ellen G. White describes Luther as having pronounced these words (see *The Great Controversy*, p. 160). Many historians believe Luther did say these words but posit that the clerk was so overwhelmed by the discourse that he missed recording these specific words. Regardless of how he worded his defense, the fact remains that Luther's stand before the Diet of Worms was a courageous act: he stood up for truth, for the gospel, for God, and for the salvation of humanity.

When one sincere, Spirit-filled, devoted Christian stands up for Christ, the whole world changes. Also, Luther did not make his defense loudly or unnaturally. He took his stand in faith. He did not speak based on his own power or schemes; he went to Worms as one already condemned to death. But Luther spoke as Christ's soldier, covered in the armor of God. The battle he went to fight was not his battle. It was God's battle. All he needed to say was "Here I stand;" and God changed the course of the great controversy forever.

Part III: Life Application

1. Ask your students to ponder the following set of questions personally while you read them aloud in class: While Paul calls us to "stand" strong in the Lord, sometimes we stumble and fall. Remember how many times you have fallen on the spiritual battlefield. Though you may have fallen many times, compose a short list of the major falls. Analyze the reasons for those falls. What piece or pieces of your Christian armor did you not deploy or use correctly? Which piece or pieces of armor did you not use on time that might

have contributed to those spiritual failures? What could you do to remedy the situation and stand up again—stand your spiritual ground—and push forward in the battle, alongside your family and alongside your brothers and sisters in your community of faith? Ask for a volunteer or two to share the answer to the last question with the class. Remember God’s encouragement for His soldiers: “The righteous falls seven times and rises again” (*Prov. 24:16, ESV*).

2. Paul urges the Ephesians to be strong “in the Lord” (*Eph. 6:10*). In fact, the apostle’s use of the expressions “in Him” or “in Christ” is so frequent that it is obvious that it is an integral part of the main theme of the epistle and the gospel (*see, for instance, Eph. 1:1, 3, 4, 7, 9–11, 13, 20; Eph. 2:6–8, 13, 15, 21, 22; Eph. 3:6, 11, 21; Eph. 4:21, 32*). In light of these verses, ask your class members to consider these questions: What, in their opinion, did Paul want most to communicate to his readers in his use of the expression “in Him”? Why does Paul insist on this expression? Direct your class to consider John 15:4–8 when devising their answer.

Waging Peace



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Eph. 6:10–20, 1 Pet. 4:1, 1 Pet. 5:8, Isa. 59:17, Isa. 52:8–10, 1 Thess. 5:16–18.

Memory Text: “In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:16, 17, ESV).

In John Bunyan's devotional classic, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, written while he was in jail, Christian is escorted into a palace armory and shown “all manner of furniture [weaponry], which their Lord had provided for pilgrims, as sword, shield, helmet, breastplate, all-prayer, and shoes that would not wear out. And there was here enough of this to harness [fit] out as many men for the service of the Lord, as there be stars in the heaven for multitude.” Before Christian departs, he is again escorted into the armory where “they harnessed [fitted] him from head to foot with what was of proof [impenetrable], lest, perhaps, he should meet with assaults in the way.”

Bunyan's writing in 1678 recalls a document written some 1,600 years earlier by the apostle Paul, the Epistle to the Ephesians, also composed in prison. In it the great missionary apostle imagines a great army, the church, visiting God's armory and suiting up in the divine *panoplia*, the Greek term for full, head-to-toe armor. God's armory holds enough of the finest weaponry for every soldier in His army to be “clad with northern steel from top to toe,” as they set forth to wage peace in His name.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 23.

The Church: A Unified Army

Read Ephesians 6:10–20. What is Paul saying about the kind of warfare the church is engaged in? Is Paul primarily depicting just an individual believer's spiritual battle against evil, or the church's corporate war against evil?

Victory in Greek and Roman warfare was dependent on the cooperation of the soldiers in a military unit and especially in their support for each other in the heat of battle. Individualism in battle was regarded as a characteristic of barbarian warriors, dooming them to defeat.

There are important reasons to support the idea that Paul, in line with this usual military understanding, is primarily addressing the church's shared battle against evil in Ephesians 6:10–20: (1) The passage is the climax of a letter that is all about the church. It would be strange for Paul to conclude his letter with a picture of a lone Christian warrior doing battle against the foes of darkness; (2) At the end of the passage, Paul highlights Christian camaraderie in his call to prayer "for all the saints" (*Eph. 6:18–20, ESV*); (3) Most significant of all, earlier in the letter when Paul discusses the powers of evil, he places them over against the church, not the individual believer: "So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (*Eph. 3:10, ESV*).

Thus, Ephesians 6:10–20 does not portray a solitary, lone warrior confronting evil. Instead, Paul as a general addresses the church as an army. He calls us to take up our full armor and, as a unified army, vigorously and unitedly press the battle. Paul chooses to conclude his thoroughgoing emphasis on the church, which has included sustained descriptions of the church as the body of Christ (*Eph. 1:22, 23; Eph. 4:1–16*), the building/temple of God (*Eph. 2:19–22*), and the bride of Christ (*Eph. 5:21–33*), with a final metaphor, the church as the army of the living God. Since we are approaching "the evil day" (*Eph. 6:13*), the final stages of the long-running battle against evil, it is no time to be fuzzy about our commitment to God or our loyalty to one another as fellow soldiers of Christ.

In what ways can we, as a corporate body, work together in the great controversy, in order to help each other in our struggles against evil, in whatever form it comes?

Belt and Breastplate

How does Paul imagine believers beginning their preparation for the battle against evil? *Eph. 6:14; see also 1 Pet. 4:1, 1 Pet. 5:8, Rom. 8:37–39.*

Paul’s warning of an intense battle (*Eph. 6:13*) prepares readers for his final call to stand (his fourth, *compare Eph. 6:11, 13*) and is a detailed call to arms (*Eph. 6:14–17*). Paul describes the action of “girding up one’s waist” (*compare Isa. 11:5*). Ancient, loose-fitting garments needed to be tied up around the waist before work or battle (*compare Luke 12:35, 37; Luke 17:8*). Paul imagines the believer suiting up in armor as would a Roman legionnaire, beginning with the leather military belt with its decorative belt plates and buckle. From the belt hung a number of leather straps covered with metal discs, together forming an “apron” worn as a badge of rank for visual effect. It served the essential function of tying up the garments and holding other items in place.

Truth is not the believers’ own; it is a gift of God (*compare salvation in Eph. 2:8*). It is not, though, to remain abstract, a distant asset without any transforming impact on their lives. They are to “put on” God’s truth, to experience and use this divine gift. They do not so much possess God’s truth as God’s truth possesses and protects them.

Paul next urges believers to put on “the breastplate of righteousness” (*compare 1 Thess. 5:8*). Like the belt of truth, it is of divine origin, being part of the armor of Yahweh in His role as the divine warrior (*Isa. 59:17*). The body armor used by soldiers in Paul’s day was made of mail (small, intertwined iron rings), scale armor (small, overlapping scales of bronze or iron), or bands of overlapping iron fastened together. This body armor or breastplate protected the vital organs from the blows and thrusts of the enemy. In an analogous way, believers are to experience the spiritual protection offered by God’s protective gift of righteousness. In Ephesians, Paul associates *righteousness* with holiness, goodness, and truth (*Eph. 4:24, Eph. 5:9*), thinking of it as the quality of treating others justly and well, especially fellow church members.

In what ways have you experienced the idea that goodness, holiness, and truth can be a protection?

Shoes: The Church Wages Peace

A Roman soldier, preparing for battle, would tie on a pair of sturdy, military sandals. A multilayered sole featured rugged hobnails, helping the soldier hold his ground and “stand” (*Eph. 6:11, 13, 14*). Paul explains this military footwear with language from Isaiah 52:7, which celebrates the moment when a messenger brings the news that Yahweh’s battle on behalf of His people is won (*Isa. 52:8–10*) and peace now reigns: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace” (*Isa. 52:7, ESV*).

Review the eight times Paul highlights peace in Ephesians. Why does he use a detailed military metaphor when he is so interested in peace? *Eph. 1:2; Eph. 2:14, 15, 17; Eph. 4:3; Eph. 6:15, 23.*

Paul celebrates peace as the work of Christ, “our peace,” the One who preaches peace “to you who were far off and peace to those who were near” (*Eph. 2:14–17, ESV*), drawing Jew and Gentile together into “one new humanity” (*Eph. 2:15, NIV*). By keeping alive the gospel story of Christ’s rescue and His creative work of peace, by celebrating His victory past and looking toward the victory shout in the future, believers shod their feet and stand ready for battle. Like the messenger in Isaiah 52:7, believers are messengers proclaiming the victory of Christ and His peace.

Paul, however, does not wish us to understand his call to arms as a call to take up military weapons against our enemies. That’s why he describes believers as proclaiming “the gospel of peace” (*Eph. 6:15*). Nor does he wish believers to be combative in their relationships with others, since he has been emphasizing unity, edifying speech, and tenderheartedness (see especially *Eph. 4:25–5:2*). The church is to “wage peace” by employing the gospel arsenal of Christian virtues (humility, patience, forgiveness, etc.) and practices (prayer, worship). Such acts are strategic, pointing toward God’s grand plan to unify all things in Christ (*Eph. 1:9, 10*).

How does the following quote help us understand what Paul’s military imagery should mean in our lives as believers? “God calls upon us to put on the armour. We do not want Saul’s armour, but the whole armour of God. Then we can go forth to the work with hearts full of Christ-like tenderness, compassion, and love.”—Ellen G. White, [Australasian] Union Conference Record, July 28, 1899.

Shield, Helmet, and Sword

When and how should believers as combatants in the great controversy use the shield, the helmet, and the sword? *Eph. 6:16, 17.*

Paul's *shield* is the large, rectangular shield of a Roman legionnaire. Made with wood and covered with leather, its edges curved inward to guard against attacks from the side. When soaked in water, shields were "able to quench . . . fiery darts" (*NKJV*), extinguishing arrows dipped in pitch and set on fire. Paul's description of the "shield of faith" reflects the Old Testament use of the shield as a symbol of God, who protects His people (*Gen. 15:1, Ps. 3:3*). To take up "the shield of faith" (*Eph. 6:16*) is to enter the cosmic battle with confidence in God, who fights on behalf of believers (*Eph. 6:10*), supplies the finest weaponry (*Eph. 6:11, 13*), and who ensures victory.

At the same time, the Roman battle helmet was made of iron or bronze. To the bowl that protected the head were added a plate at the back to guard the neck, ear guards, a brow ridge, and hinged plates to protect the cheeks. Given the essential protection the helmet provided, "the helmet of salvation" (*Eph. 6:17*) symbolizes the present salvation believers experience in solidarity with the resurrected, ascended, and exalted Christ (*Eph. 2:6–10*). To put on "the helmet of salvation" means to reject the fear of spiritual powers so common in the time and, instead, to trust in the supreme power of Christ (*compare Eph. 1:15–23, Eph. 2:1–10*).

The final item of armor is "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (*Eph. 6:17*), referring to the Roman legionnaire's short, two-edged sword. The usual battle tactic was to throw two javelins (not mentioned by Paul) and then draw the sword and charge, employing the short sword in a thrusting motion. The believers' sword is "the sword of the Spirit" in that it is supplied by the Spirit, a weapon identified as "the word of God." Paul steps forward as general and issues a call to arms, speaking promises of hope and victory from the divine Commander in Chief. It is these promises, issued in Ephesians 6:10–20, that constitute "the word of God" as the lead weapon in the battle against evil. The "word of God," then, refers to the broad promises of the gospel that we find in the Bible.

Even if we might not like so many military images, what should this imagery teach us about just how literal the great controversy really is and how seriously we should take it?

Practicing Battlefield Prayer

In concluding his battle exhortation, Paul urges believers as soldiers to participate in crucial, continuing prayer “for all the saints” (*Eph. 6:18, NKJV*) and for himself as imprisoned ambassador (*Eph. 6:19, 20*). This call to prayer can be seen as an extension of the military imagery, since calling out to God (or to the gods) in prayer was a common practice on the ancient battlefield. To cite a biblical example: following the battle exhortation of Jahaziel, Jehoshaphat leads “all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem” in falling down “before the LORD, worshiping the LORD” (*2 Chron. 20:18, ESV*). While prayer is not a seventh piece of armor, it is an integral part of Paul’s battle exhortation and military metaphor.

In the first of two prayer requests, Paul asks the addressees to participate in fervent, urgent, and perseverant prayer “for all the saints” (*Eph. 6:18, NKJV*). If the church is to be successful in its battle against the powers of evil, it will need to practice dependence on God through Spirit-inspired prayer.

Paul’s second prayer request is for himself: “and also for me” (*Eph. 6:19, ESV*). He asks for prayer that God might grant him the right message (“that words may be given to me”), at the right time (“in opening my mouth”), delivered in the right way (“boldly to proclaim”), and addressing a most important theme, “the mystery of the gospel” (*Eph. 6:19, ESV*). This last phrase refers to what we might call the “open secret” of God’s intervention in Christ to redeem Gentiles along with Jews (*see Eph. 3:1–13*), creating “one new humanity” (*Eph. 2:15, NIV; see also Eph. 2:11–22*) as a signal of the overarching plan “to unite all things” in Christ (*Eph. 1:10, ESV*).

Review the following “calls to prayer” in the New Testament. Which one inspires you most? Why? *Luke 18:1–8, Phil. 4:6, Col. 4:2, 1 Thess. 5:16–18.*

Why are believers so often urged to participate in earnest, persevering prayer? Paul’s military metaphor suggests two answers: (1) the threat of spiritual battle against an array of supernatural enemies is dire and real; and (2) God’s promises of spiritual strength and victory are illustrated through Paul’s military imagery (*Eph. 6:10–17*). Earnest, persevering prayer provides opportunity for us to listen carefully to these promises, to celebrate them, and to thank God for the resources of His grace.

Further Thought: “An army in battle would become confused and weakened unless all worked in concert. If the soldiers should act out their own impulsive ideas, without reference to each other’s positions and work, they would be a collection of independent atoms; they could not do the work of an organized body. So the soldiers of Christ must act in harmony. They alone must not be cherished. If they do this, the Lord’s people in the place of being in perfect harmony, of one mind, one purpose, and consecrated to one grand object, will find efforts fruitless, their time and capabilities wasted. Union is strength. A few converted souls acting in harmony, acting for one grand purpose, under one head, will achieve victories at every encounter.”—Ellen G. White, *Spalding and Magan Collection*, p. 121.

What is the significance of Paul’s labeling himself “an ambassador in chains” (*Eph. 6:20, ESV*)? Ambassadors often played challenging roles during wartime; so, Paul’s self-description fits the context of his military metaphor. Ambassadors were to be treated with the respect due the person or country that sent them. So there is stark contrast between Paul’s status as ambassador for the Supreme Ruler of the cosmos and the utter disrespect signaled by his *chains* (literally, “chain”). However, since ambassadors would wear a “chain of office,” Paul’s mention of a “chain” may be “spiced with irony,” in which he sees his chain as “a decoration to be worn with distinction.”—David J. Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors: Their Context and Character* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), p. 152.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ In your corner of a world divided and at war, what does it mean for you and your congregation to “wage peace”? How can we be agents of peace in a world so increasingly characterized by aggression and violence?
- ❷ What particular “fiery darts” are being hurled in your direction? How can you ensure that the “shield of faith” is in place to extinguish them?
- ❸ We sometimes speak of “prayer warriors.” How might we conduct “prayer ministry” based on Ephesians 6:18–20?
- ❹ How should we treat those who are wounded on the battlefield of the great controversy? How should we treat the Christian believer who, in the heat of the battle, flees out of fear or openly capitulates to the other side?

Power of a Few Words

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

When armed conflict erupted in his homeland of Ukraine in 2022, Alexei Arushanian was living safely across the border in Poland, where he had worked for several years installing windows in people's homes. But he had many relatives in Ukraine, and he was worried about them.

He called relative after relative to check on their well-being and to see if he could help. "How are you, Aunt Lyuda?" he asked.

"All is fine, praise God," she replied. "We are in hiding."

She said her daughter, Nastya, and her young son were planning to join refugees spilling across the border to Poland. During normal times, the trip would have taken a day. But now the trip would take two to three days.

"Will they come to Warsaw?" Alexei asked. "Have them call me. They can stay with me as long as they need. I can meet them at the border."

A short time later, another relative called from Ukraine to say that Nastya and her son were already in Poland. They had crossed the border and were staying with a Polish family who had opened their home to them. Many Polish people generously offered temporary housing to refugees.

Alexei called Nastya and promised to come for her and her son.

She and her son were waiting when Alexei drove up to the house. The 60-year-old owner of the house accompanied Nastya and her son to the car. Nastya waved goodbye as she got into the car, and Alexei opened the car trunk to place her and her son's belongings inside. As the trunk lid opened, he saw several copies of Ellen White's *The Great Controversy* inside. Alexei belonged to a church group that distributed the book, a difficult task with few receptive people, and he always kept several books in the trunk. Alexei grabbed a book. "I have a gift for you," he told the 60-year-old man.

"What kind of gift?" the man asked, curiously.

"It's a Christian book that contains the history of Christianity from the first Christians who defended the truth after Christ returned to heaven to the events that will occur at the end of the world," Alexei said. "I think that you will find it interesting."

The man accepted the book. Then he gave Alexei a big hug. "Thank you," he said.



Alexei was overjoyed. He had not expected it to be so easy. "This was the will of God," he says. "All I had to do was say a few words, and he took the book. I pray that he reads it and that his wife and children read it, too. I hope that he accepts it."

This quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will go to the Trans-European Division, which includes Poland. Thank you for planning a generous offering next Sabbath.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Ephesians 6:16, 17*

Study Focus: *Eph. 6:10–20, 1 Pet. 4:1, 1 Pet. 5:8, Isa. 59:17, Isa. 52:8–10, 1 Thess. 5:16–18.*

Introduction: By listing and describing the armor of God as individual items (belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, helmet, sword), Paul does not mean to depict a lonely warrior. On the contrary, in Greek, he uses the verbs in the second person plural to address an entire army: (1) you (plural) be strong (*Eph. 6:10*), (2) you (plural) put on the armor of God (*Eph. 6:11*), (3) so that you (plural) may be able to resist (*Eph. 6:11*), (4) for our (obviously plural here) struggle (*Eph. 6:12*), (5) you (plural) take up the complete armor (*Eph. 6:13*), (6) you (plural) stand firm. In fact, all or most of the other verbs Paul uses in addressing the church here are in the plural form. By his use of the plural, then, Paul paints before our eyes God’s glorious army of brave soldiers fully equipped for their mission.

But what is this army’s mission? God’s soldiers are armored and ready to proclaim to the universe a message from Him, the message that God brings peace to the universe, to the people on earth, peace among the nations, peace in the communities, in the families, between generations and classes. But this peace is not a peace achieved because of compromise or syncretism, in which all the parties in the conflict secure the acceptance of a piece of their own worldview, values, or projects. Rather, God brought peace by revealing His love and justice at the cross and thus winning the battle against His accusers and enemies. When people embrace what the Lord Jesus accomplished at the cross, God joyously blesses them with Christ’s righteousness. It is this righteousness and love that brings peace between humans and God, between people, and to the entire universe. It is this peace that Christians proclaim. The history of the nations, of religions, of culture, of philosophy, of psychology, and of science has shown that there is no other way to achieve peace. Because Christians have experienced this peace themselves in their individual lives, in their families, in their communities, and in the church, they now can proclaim it to the entire humanity, indeed to the entire universe.

Lesson Themes: This week’s study focuses on four related themes:

1. The church is involved in the cosmic conflict with the mission of proclaiming the gospel of peace.
2. We are not fighting alone in this battle: we are fighting “in the Lord” and in His armor.

3. We are not fighting this battle as lone warriors but as God's army, the people of God.
4. We are not fighting an open-ended, uncertain battle but a battle that already has a certain outcome: at the cross, God won the victory over sin, evil, death, and Satan.

Part II: Commentary

War and Peace

Paul starts the fragment of Ephesians 6:10–17 with a triple reference to power (*Eph. 6:10*), using three different words: the verb *endunamoó*, “to empower,” and two nouns, *kratos*, “strength” or “might,” and *ischus*, “strength,” “might,” “force,” or “ability.” The apostle used the same words, all three in noun form, at the beginning of his letter (*Eph. 1:19–21*) when describing God's greatness and power, as revealed in Christ. Now, at the end of his letter (*Ephesians 6*), Paul tells the Ephesians that this power is available to them. The apostle appeals to the theme of power because he is introducing the theme of conflict, war, fighting, and overcoming.

Unfortunately, the Christian life is closely related to struggle and overcoming. True, all religions, philosophies, sciences, literature, and history—indeed, all such narratives as evolutionism, Marxism, Nazism—perceive and describe life as a struggle, as a conflict. In fact, anyone who wants to sell a story needs to plot it on conflict and struggle. In such stories, the protagonist or hero is fighting against something or somebody: for instance, a protagonist fights a superpower, another hero is struggling to overcome a black hole, and a third hero fights an incurable disease.

But the Christian's struggle, Paul explains, is against the “devil's schemes” (*Eph. 6:11, NIV*). The war he describes “is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (*Eph. 6:12, NASB; see also Eph. 1:19–21, Eph. 2:6, Eph. 3:10*). This spiritual battle in the “heavenly realms” has direct and crucial repercussions on our lives. We are directly involved in this war, and we must pick a side. However, in the entire epistle, Paul explains that we are not involved in this war simply because two superpowers are fighting, and we are innocent collateral victims, entangled, or caught up, in this battle against our will.

In fact, it is the other way around. It is God who got entangled in this fight for us. It was we who sided with the forces of darkness to fight against God. Instead of destroying us, God offered to fight for our salvation. He took upon Himself our guilt and sin, died in our place so that He could bring us peace, so that He could restore us to our rightful state in His kingdom.

That is why, when we become Christians, we accept God's offer of peace, we accept His call to experience it, and we want to share it with the people in the world who are still at war with God. We do not join Christ from a position of neutrality but from the lines of the enemies of God. When we join Christ's army, we will be attacked by the devil and by all the other forces of evil that are working in us, as well. For this assault, we need the armor of God and the weapon of proclaiming His gospel of peace. Consider this profound perspective from Ellen G. White:

Many look on this conflict between Christ and Satan as having no special bearing on their own life; and for them it has little interest. But within the domain of every human heart this controversy is repeated. Never does one leave the ranks of evil for the service of God without encountering the assaults of Satan. The enticements which Christ resisted were those that we find it so difficult to withstand. They were urged upon Him in as much greater degree as His character is superior to ours. With the terrible weight of the sins of the world upon Him, Christ withstood the test upon appetite, upon the love of the world, and upon that love of display which leads to presumption. These were the temptations that overcame Adam and Eve, and that so readily overcome us.—*The Desire of Ages*, pp. 116, 117.

The Great Controversy

In his extensive work *Systematic Theology*, Norman Gulley highlights that Christian theology has generally missed the theme of the cosmic conflict or great controversy (see Norman Gulley, *Systematic Theology: The Church and the Last Things* [Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2016], vol. 4, p. 478). While for other Christians the great controversy (the spiritual cosmic conflict between God and the evil forces of Satan) is one of the details more related to theodicy. For Ellen G. White and Seventh-day Adventists, the great controversy is the overarching doctrine that integrates all the other doctrines, not only systematically but historically. For Seventh-day Adventists, the theme of the great controversy is not only a system of doctrines but a story, the story of God. It is the story of His loving act of Creation; of our rebellion against Him; of His sacrificial love for us; of His direct intervention in the history of our world through incarnation; of His death on the cross, resurrection, and ascension; of His desire and work to restore our relationship with Him; of His restoring the unity and love in humanity through the church; of His promises to put an end to the story of sin and evil; and of His promise to usher us into His eternal joy and peace. For this reason, Seventh-day

Adventists have articulated the great controversy theme as fundamental belief 8, voted by the General Conference in 1980:

All humanity is now involved in a great controversy between Christ and Satan regarding the character of God, His law, and His sovereignty over the universe. This conflict originated in heaven when a created being, endowed with freedom of choice, in self-exaltation became Satan, God's adversary, and led into rebellion a portion of the angels. He introduced the spirit of rebellion into this world when he led Adam and Eve into sin. This human sin resulted in the distortion of the image of God in humanity, the disordering of the created world, and its eventual devastation at the time of the global flood, as presented in the historical account of Genesis 1–11. Observed by the whole creation, this world became the arena of the universal conflict, out of which the God of love will ultimately be vindicated. To assist His people in this controversy, Christ sends the Holy Spirit and the loyal angels to guide, protect, and sustain them in the way of salvation.—“The Great Controversy,” available from <https://www.adventist.org/the-great-controversy>.

Herbert E. Douglass ably and richly explains the role that the great controversy theme (GCT) plays in Seventh-day Adventist theology: “For Seventh-day Adventists, the GCT is the core concept that brings coherence to all biblical subjects. It transcends the age-old divisions that have fractured the Christian church for centuries. It brings peace to theological adversaries who suddenly see in a new harmony the truths that each had been vigorously arguing for. Herein lies the uniqueness of Adventism. That uniqueness is not some particular element of its theology, such as its sanctuary doctrine. Rather, the distinctiveness of Adventism rests in its overall understanding of the central message of the Bible that is governed by its seminal, governing principle—the Great Controversy Theme.”—“The Great Controversy Theme: What It Means to Adventists,” *Ministry*, December 2000, p. 5.

Part III: Life Application

Ask your students to read and discuss the following questions in class:

1. **What are some of the ways that language is militarized in everyday life? Think, also, of the ostensibly “combative” language that some of our hymns, poems, and Bible-reading passages employ. As Seventh-day Adventists, we are very clear that we apply such language and expressions spiritually. However, this language**

may be misunderstood by the people around us, who regard Christianity, in general, and Seventh-day Adventism, in particular, as a religion of peace. How could we keep the biblical ethos of battling the spiritual forces of evil in the framework of the great controversy while helping our friends and community understand that our church is a community of God's love, grace, and peace? Discuss your answer not only with the Sabbath School class but also with your church.

2. Imagine that your church is invited to be involved in peace-promoting projects in your community, region, or country. In what ways can your church be involved in such projects? How can your church ensure that its involvement is not political but based on the teachings of Jesus and the apostles in the context of the biblical themes of the great controversy and the gospel?

Ephesians *in the* Heart



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ephesians 1–Ephesians 6.*

Memory Text: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (*Ephesians 2:8–10, NKJV*).

Visitors to London climb on board the London Eye, a Ferris-wheel-like attraction. From 450 feet above the River Thames you can see it all: Big Ben, the Houses of Parliament, and the many historic palaces and cathedrals. For New Testament scholar Nicholas Thomas “Tom” Wright, “the letter to the Ephesians stands in relation to the rest of Paul’s letters rather like the London Eye. It isn’t the longest or fullest of his writings, but it offers a breathtaking view of the entire landscape. From here, as the wheel turns, you get a bird’s-eye view of one theme after another.”—*Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (London: S.P.C.K. [Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge Publishing], 2004), p. 3.

In Ephesians, Paul is not focused on issues of local concern. The letter reads as though Paul were addressing believers everywhere and Christian churches wherever they exist. The letter’s timeless feel allows the “breathtaking view” Paul offers to invade our own world and thought. As we review each chapter, let’s keep this question in mind: What important truths embedded in Ephesians should continue to shape our lives as believers?

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 30.

We Are Blessed in Christ

Someone has described Ephesians as the Alps of the New Testament. Paul, our mountaineering guide, takes us on a rapid ascent in Ephesians 1. We are quickly breathless and amazed at the view from the summit.

Reflect on Ephesians 1. What especially inspires you? What peaks do you see?

Ephesians 1:3–14 functions like a map at a mountain’s summit that identifies the peaks on the horizon, as Paul orients us to our blessed place in the vast landscape of the plan of salvation. The scenery covers the full span of salvation history, from eternity past, through God’s grace-filled actions in Christ, to eternity future. God’s redemption of believers reflects divine initiatives taken “before the foundation of the world” (*Eph. 1:4*), which are now being worked out in our lives (*see Eph. 1:7, 8, 13, 14*). These pre-Creation strategies will be fully accomplished at the end of time (*Eph. 1:9, 10*). Then, “all things,” both “in heaven” and “on earth” will be gathered together or united in Christ, and God’s plan for “the fullness of time” (*ESV*) will be fulfilled (*Eph. 1:10*). Then, we will experience fully God’s mysterious plan (*Eph. 1:9*). In the present, we may be certain that the Christ-centered salvation in which we stand is an important part of God’s wide-reaching plan for the redemption of “all things.”

Being on a mountaintop inspires thanksgiving. In Ephesians 1:15–19, Paul gives thanks to God as he prays that believers may experience the salvation God has planned for them. We find ourselves on another steep climb as he points us upward to the risen, ascended, exalted Christ, who rules over every imaginable power for all time (*Eph. 1:20–23*).

Through the grace of God expressed in Christ Jesus, we may live this day on the mountaintop!

Ephesians 1:4 tells us that Christ “chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love” (*NKJV*). Think about what that means. Chosen in Him before the world existed! What great hope should this offer you in regard to God’s desire for you to be saved?

We Are Redeemed for Community

As you read Ephesians 2, seek to answer the following question: What has God done for us through His Son Jesus Christ?

“But God. . . .” Those two words must be the most hope-filled ones known to humankind. In Ephesians 2:1–10, Paul describes the grim past of his audience. Sharing the plight of all humanity, they were bent toward rebellion against God, their lives dominated by sin and Satan (*Eph. 2:1–3*). “But God, who is rich in mercy . . .” And what did God do for them and for us? (1) He made us alive with Christ—Christ’s resurrection is our own. (2) He raised us up with Christ—Christ’s ascension is our own. (3) In heaven, He seated us with Christ—Christ’s coronation is our own (*Eph. 2:4–7*). We are not just bystanders to the cosmos-shifting events of Christ’s life! God takes these remarkable actions, not because of any merit in us but because of His grace (*Eph. 2:8, 9*), and He intends believers to live in solidarity with Jesus and practice “good works” (*Eph. 2:10*).

If Ephesians 2:1–10 teaches that we live in solidarity with Jesus, Ephesians 2:11–22 teaches that we live in solidarity with others as part of His church. Jesus’ death has both vertical benefits, establishing the believer’s relationship with God (*Eph. 2:1–10*), and horizontal ones, cementing our relationships with others (*Eph. 2:11–22*). Through His cross, Jesus demolishes all that divides Gentile believers from Jewish ones, including the misuse of the Law to widen the gulf (*Eph. 2:11–18*). Jesus also builds something—an amazing, new temple composed of believers. Gentiles, once excluded from worship in sacred places of the temple, now join Jewish believers in becoming one. We, too, become part of God’s church, a “holy temple in the Lord” (*Eph. 2:19–22*).

Through the grace of God, you have the privilege of living this day in solidarity with Jesus and your fellow believers.

Ephesians 2:8–10 has played a role in the conversion of many. Martin Luther found in these verses a grace that won his heart, and he discovered as well some central affirmations of the Reformation: salvation comes by faith alone, through grace alone, by Christ alone, and to the glory of God alone. In 1738, eighteen days after experiencing conversion in London’s Aldersgate Street, John Wesley preached at Oxford University, offering “a cry from the heart” and “the manifesto of a new movement.” His text? Ephesians 2:8. (See A. Skevington Wood, “Strangely Warmed: The Wesleys and the Evangelical Awakening,” *Christian History* [magazine], vol. 5, no. 1 [1984]).

We Are the Church of the Living God

Why is it both important and exciting to be part of God's church?
Ephesians 3.

We are encouraged when we hear church members say positive things about the church. However, the most enthusiastic among us falls short of Paul's exuberant testimony in Ephesians 3 about the church. Paul starts a report of his prayers for believers in Ephesus (*Eph. 3:1; compare Eph. 1:15–23, NKJV*) but breaks off to discuss God's creation of the church (*Eph. 3:2–13*), and then completes his prayer report (*Eph. 3:14–21*). Along the way we come to understand important things about God's "plan" or "mystery":

- In eternity, God conceives of "the mystery" or "the plan" about the church (*Eph. 3:3–5, 9, 11*).
- Through the life and death of Jesus, that long-hidden plan is "accomplished" (*Eph. 3:11, NKJV; compare Eph. 2:11–22*).
- By revelation, Paul learns "the mystery" of the church and the astonishing fact that Gentiles are to be full partners in it (*Eph. 3:3–6*).
- Paul participates in spreading this good news as preacher to the Gentiles of "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (*Eph. 3:8, 9*).
- With many won to Christ, the church, composed as it is of both Jews and Gentiles, displays "the manifold wisdom of God" to "the principalities and powers in the heavenly places" (*Eph. 3:10, NKJV*), announcing their coming doom (*compare Eph. 6:10–20*). The plan to unite all things in Christ (*Eph. 1:10*) is underway, and their time is short.

This understanding of the church motivates Paul to pray for believers. Why not imagine him praying the heartfelt prayer of Ephesians 3:14–21 about you? Why not imagine him praying that you will be "filled with all the fullness of God" (*Eph. 3:19*) and participate fully in the amazing, unfolding mystery of a unified church?

What are the kinds of barriers between believers in our church that, in light of what Paul has written, should not be there? What can you do to help remove them?

The Unity of Faith

In Ephesians 4, Paul asks believers to stop doing some things and to be sure to do others. What are those things?

Ephesians 4 begins and ends with calls to care for each other as church members (*Eph. 4:1–3, 32*). Between these invitations, Paul offers strong support for the idea that we should nourish unity in the church. He begins by listing seven “ones”: There is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord (Jesus Christ), one faith, one baptism, one God and Father (*Eph. 4:4–6*). We are bound together by these spiritual realities. We are, in fact, united.

While unity is a theological certainty, it requires our hard work. So, we should always be “endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit” (*Eph. 4:3, NKJV*). One way each of us may do so is by being an active “part” of the body of Christ (*Eph. 4:7–16*). Every member is a gifted part of the body and should contribute to the health of it (*Eph. 4:7, 16*). And all should benefit by the work of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers (*Eph. 4:11, 12*). These, like ligaments and tendons, have a unifying function, helping us grow up together into Christ who is the Head of the body (*Eph. 4:13, 15*).

At the time, Paul also told them “that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting” (*Eph. 4:14, NKJV*), words that clearly suggest that the early church faced some internal struggles from “the trickery of men.”

As Paul moves toward his final appeal, to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another” (*Eph. 4:32, NKJV*), he asks believers to avoid their former hard-heartedness (*Eph. 4:17–24*) and to avoid anger and harsh speech, substituting instead language that builds up and imparts grace (*Eph. 4:25–31*).

This chapter on unity is easy enough to read when things are peaceful. It is more challenging—and important—to read it when we become embroiled in some conflict. Are you remembering today to experience the unity of the body of Christ, the unity for which He died?

What are ways that we can contribute to the unity of our church, both at the local and worldwide levels? Why is it important that we do what we can?

We Are Recipients and Givers of Grace

As you read Ephesians 5, reflect on how Paul asks us to live out the gospel in our relationships with others. Which of his exhortations is especially meaningful to you?

If you start reading Ephesians 5 at its beginning, you may miss the full power of an important theme. So, start instead with Ephesians 4:32, in which Paul tells the Ephesians to “be kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you” (*NKJV*).

As believers, we are called to model our behavior toward others on God’s forgiveness and grace toward us. We are to imitate God! (*Compare Matt. 5:43–48.*)

Paul contrasts this imitating-the-love-of-God lifestyle with the usual, pagan approach. Instead of treasuring others as brothers or sisters in the family of God, humans all too often use others for their own sexual pleasure and then brag about it (*Eph. 5:3, 4*). He warns that such an approach has no future in the new world God is planning (*Eph. 5:5–7*).

Instead, believers are to turn from the darkness of their past and “walk as children of light” (*Eph. 5:8–10*), mimicking the Father’s love. Again, Paul warns us away from “works of darkness” done “in secret” (*Eph. 5:11, 12*). By contrast, we are to live in the light of Christ (*Eph. 5:13, 14*). Rather than wasting our lives in drunkenness, we will be “redeeming the time” by offering thanks to God for His love (*see Eph. 5:15–21*).

Paul extends his theme of imitating God’s love as he advises Christian husbands and wives. Christ’s self-sacrificing love for the church becomes the model for Christian husbands (*Eph. 5:25–33*), while the loyalty of the church toward Christ becomes the model for Christian wives (*Eph. 5:22–24*). Rather than using the gift of human sexuality in a debauched and selfish way, a Christian husband and wife focus on valuing and treasuring each other, becoming “one flesh” (*Eph. 5:28–33*).

“Be imitators of God as dear children” (*Eph. 5:1, NKJV*). By God’s grace, you are called today to live out that exhortation in your relationships with others.

How does Ephesians 5:2, which tells us to “walk in love,” help us understand what Paul means in Ephesians 5:1 about being “imitators of God”?

Further Thought: We conclude by reflecting on Ephesians 6, where we discover that we, the church, are the peace-waging army of God.

In Ephesians, Paul has portrayed the church as the body of Christ (*Eph. 1:22, 23; Eph. 4:11–16*), as God’s temple (*Eph. 2:19–22*), and as the bride/wife of Christ (*Eph. 5:21–33*). In Ephesians 6:10–20, Paul describes the church as God’s army and offers a vigorous call to arms. It is a passage that offers much benefit and risks misunderstanding.

We could misunderstand Paul’s words as a call to take up military weapons or to be combative in our relationships with others. Paul, though, has been emphasizing unity, edifying speech, and tenderheartedness (*see especially Eph. 4:25–5:2*). He describes God’s good news as “the gospel of peace” (*Eph. 6:15*). Through this vivid military metaphor, the church is not exhorted to wage war in the traditional sense. Rather, we are to wage peace in the spiritual battle against evil. Paul steps onto the battlefield of the great controversy and calls us to enlist in God’s army.

We should do so with a realistic assessment of the enemy in view since it will never do to underestimate the forces arrayed against us. We don’t confront just human enemies but “spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (*Eph. 6:12, NKJV*), led by a wily general, the devil (*Eph. 6:11*). However, we need not be daunted by our enemies. God is present with us in the battle (*Eph. 6:10*) and has supplied us with the finest of weaponry, His own armor, the “armor of God” (*Eph. 6:11; compare Isa. 59:15–17*). He has placed at our disposal truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and the Spirit (*Eph. 6:13–17*). With God going before us and our being equipped from head to toe in the armor He has supplied, we cannot fail. Victory is assured.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Though we are not saved by our works, what does Paul mean when he writes that we were “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (*Eph. 2:10, NKJV*)? What, then, is the purpose of our good works?
- ❷ Paul writes: “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us” (*Eph. 3:20, NKJV*). What power works in us, and how should this power be made manifest in our lives?

Praising God for Epilepsy

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Anna Rozenberga has struggled with epilepsy since she was a child in Riga, Latvia. It wasn't only about seizures. Epilepsy affected her emotions and brain functions. It was hard for her to focus. She longed to be healed.

The summer after she graduated from high school, the 19-year-old teen went to a psychic who claimed she could heal her. When the psychic saw she could not help, she told Anna about another client who found healing through a pastor's prayer. The psychic gave Anna the pastor's phone number.

"He will tell you a lot about his church and God, but don't listen to him," she said. "Just take the healing and leave. The rest of what he says is a lie."

Anna called the pastor. In their phone conversation, she heard for the first time about the Seventh-day Adventist Church. They agreed to meet. At their second meeting, the pastor prayed for Anna. But the epilepsy remained.

Anna liked the pastor and accepted an invitation to attend Bible studies. Later that summer, she attended a small group meeting at the church. Then she went to a Sabbath worship service. "You know what?" she told her mother afterward. "I think the church is good."

So, Anna's mother went with her to church. A few months later, Anna was attending church with both her mother and father. The next summer, Anna and her mother were baptized. A year later, her father was baptized. Then her grandmother and brother were baptized.

Over the years, many people have prayed for Anna. She has been anointed with oil. But the epilepsy has remained. Anna wondered why God had not healed her, but then it struck her. Like to the apostle Paul, who also prayed for relief, God was saying to her, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9, NKJV).

Now 30, Anna sees epilepsy as a blessing. Since it is an illness she must deal with every day, she has learned she needs to trust God even more. Some Sabbath mornings she feels like staying in bed, but then she remembers she is scheduled to participate in church. So, she goes to church and trusts that God will pull her through.

Epilepsy also has helped her witness. The challenge has given her empathy for others. She doesn't always mention her epilepsy when she first meets people, but she has found that being vulnerable about herself helps others open up and listen. "So my epilepsy has helped me spread the Word," Anna says. "I am thankful for the challenges with my health."



This quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will go to two projects in the Trans-European Division, including one in Latvia. Thank you for planning a generous offering this Sabbath.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Ephesians 2:8–10*

Study Focus: *Ephesians 1–6.*

Introduction: While the Epistle to the Ephesians is the master key to the rest of the Pauline epistles, this week’s study is the master key that unlocks the entire study on the Epistle to the Ephesians, as follows:

Sunday’s section of the Standard Edition Bible study guide summarizes Paul’s breathtaking view of God’s eternal and historical plan of Creation and Redemption.

Monday’s section summarizes Ephesians 2, which graphically depicts humanity’s grim state of sin and death, a state that is without promises, without hope, without Christ, and without God in the world. But Paul—and the Bible in general—does not end with this grim depiction. Rather, he details the foundational elements of the gospel, the mystery of God, which brings hope to humanity: in and with Christ, God resurrects us and exalts us to His sanctuary in the heavenly places. Moreover, in and with Christ, we become God’s new temple on earth. This transformation is made by grace, and grace is the foundation of the Christian faith, life, and mission.

Chapter 3, reviewed in the section for Tuesday, highlights God’s mystery of the creation of the church.

Wednesday’s section (reprising Ephesians 4) explains how God’s twin purposes are achieved when God’s children from the entire world are united in true piety, in the use of their spiritual gifts, and in mission. That is why the unity of the church is not optional for the existence of the church.

As the section for Thursday (reviewing Ephesians 5) emphasizes, unity cannot be achieved without abandoning our past exaltation of “I.” Unity is realized only when we embrace our new identity and walk in Christ. This profound transformation in Christ will also affect all aspects of our human life, including our families (husbands, wives, and children), society (people groups and social classes), and our personal individual lives.

Friday’s section (Ephesians 6) calls us to see the church as a dynamic, and united, army, well equipped for its battle mission of proclaiming the Lord’s gospel of peace. It is only this peace of, and in, Christ that will assure us of success and of life. Victory is assured in Christ. Our success depends only on whether we will stand our ground of really believing in Christ’s victory and acting on it.

Lesson Themes: This week’s study is a synthesis of the entire Epistle to the Ephesians, an attempt to highlight and weave together all its major themes.

Part II: Commentary

The Mystery of the Gospel

At the very heart of Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians pulsates his fascination with the gospel as a mystery now uncoded. He starts his epistle by celebrating that God "made known to us the mystery of His will" (*Eph 1:9, NASB*), and this mystery is about "an inheritance" (*Eph. 1:11*). This mystery is not about our desperate and dark state (*Eph. 2:1–4*) or about the alienation, divisions, and enmity that sin brought to us as individuals, as families, and as human society (*Eph. 2:11, 12*). The reason for these divisions and enmities is no mystery to us at all in our sinful condition. Nor is our inability to solve the problem of sin and death a mystery (*Eph. 2:9, John 1:13*). As history proves time and again, we are all painfully aware that no human devising can pull us out of the gravitational field of the black hole of sin. Rather, the mystery Paul talks about is the unfathomable miracle of God's love for us! We thought God did not love us. We thought He forgot about us. We thought He preferred the Jews and that the Gentiles were proscribed. We thought that the case of the Jews was forever lost when they rejected Jesus as the Messiah.

It turns out we were wrong about God in all these aspects. When God opened His mysteries before Paul, Paul was shocked. For this reason, although the entire epistle is describing this mystery from different perspectives, the apostle returns, in the center of the epistle, to calling it "the mystery" (*Eph. 3:3, 9*) and "the mystery of Christ" (*Eph. 3:4*), and, at the end of his letter, "the mystery of the gospel" (*Eph. 6:19, NASB*). This mystery is all the more valuable, Paul explains, when we realize that it was hidden from the people in the past centuries and millennia, and God chose Paul's generation to live in that unique historical time when that mystery of mysteries was fully revealed for all to see (*Eph. 3:9; Rom. 16:25; 1 Cor. 2:7; Col. 1:26, 27; Col. 2:2*). What a privilege, what glory!

We can see Paul's exulting over this great discovery. His entire life is affected, nay, transformed, by the gospel truth. As in Jesus' parable of the found treasure (*Matt. 13:44*), Paul "sold" all he had to obtain and possess this secret treasure (*Phil. 3:4–8*). His face conveyed to others that he knew something that others did not. However, unlike the treasure hunter (*Matt. 13:44*) or the unfaithful servant (*Matt. 25:18*), Paul did not hide his mystery treasure in the ground. On the contrary, when God revealed His mystery to him, Paul embarked on a worldwide journey to tell everyone about this mystery. This mystery is about the fact that God is love. He created us out of love, and He died in our place because He is love. He resurrected us to dwell with Him in the Spirit in His holy habitation because He is love. He fought for us because He is love. And He will return for us because He

is love. That mystery, in Paul's own words, "is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (*Col. 1:27, NASB*).

The End of the Great Controversy

One day, the history of sin will end, but God's mystery will not be exhausted. Describing the end of the great controversy, Ellen G. White's language and ethos fully harmonizes and reverberates with Paul's elevated spirit in his Epistle to the Ephesians:

All the treasures of the universe will be open to the study of God's redeemed. Unfettered by mortality, they wing their tireless flight to worlds afar—worlds that thrilled with sorrow at the spectacle of human woe and rang with songs of gladness at the tidings of a ransomed soul. With unutterable delight the children of earth enter into the joy and the wisdom of unfallen beings. They share the treasures of knowledge and understanding gained through ages upon ages in contemplation of God's handiwork. With undimmed vision they gaze upon the glory of creation—suns and stars and systems, all in their appointed order circling the throne of Deity. Upon all things, from the least to the greatest, the Creator's name is written, and in all are the riches of His power displayed.

And the years of eternity, as they roll, will bring richer and still more glorious revelations of God and of Christ. As knowledge is progressive, so will love, reverence, and happiness increase. The more men learn of God, the greater will be their admiration of His character. As Jesus opens before them the riches of redemption and the amazing achievements in the great controversy with Satan, the hearts of the ransomed thrill with more fervent devotion, and with more rapturous joy they sweep the harps of gold; and ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands of voices unite to swell the mighty chorus of praise.

And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever." Revelation 5:13.

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.—*The Great Controversy*, pp. 677, 678.

Part III: Life Application

1. This is a summarizing study. Encourage your students to make their own summary of Ephesians and share it with the Sabbath School class.

2. What are the three principal themes running through Paul's letter to the Ephesians? How do these themes relate to each other? Ask your students to identify which theme they regard as the main one and which themes they consider as subordinate.

- 3. Invite your students to imagine that they are invited to plant a new church in an unevangelized area. How might Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians help them prepare for such a daring project?**

Ask your students to identify themes in Ephesians that would constitute an evangelistic message for this new area. In what order would your students deliver these themes? Also, ask your students to identify the principles upon which they could help establish a vibrant church, as close as possible to the model the apostle Paul envisioned and shared in his epistle.

The principles your students suggest should be useful in growing a church full of the joy of salvation. What additional principles can your students identify that would help unite new members in Christ and unite them together in the life and mission of the church? What principles would inspire the church to be driven by the power of the Holy Spirit through spiritual gifts?

- 4. Direct class members to identify principles from Ephesians that we studied this quarter that would help church members to attain to a lifestyle in accordance with the gospel, principles that would grow happy families and build healthy relationships between various groups.**

This image shows a full page of blank handwriting practice paper. It features approximately 20 evenly spaced horizontal red lines across the entire page, providing a guide for letter height and placement. The background is plain white, and there are no margins, text, or other markings present.

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“God’s Mission—My Mission,” our study for this quarter, written by the directors of Global Mission Centers, will not only share theological insights into mission but also provide tools and ideas on ways to reach others for Christ. The Thursday portion of each lesson will provide challenges of how to do this. As the quarter progresses, the challenges will increase. The goal in mind will be to take the challenge, pray for the Holy Spirit to guide, and report back in Sabbath School the following week about how things went. This time of sharing will be used to generate further ideas and to pray both personally and collectively. By the end of the quarter, our hope is that we will be able to look back and see how the Holy Spirit took our humble efforts and worked mission miracles for the honor and glory of His name.

Lesson 1—God’s Mission to Us: Part 1

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **The God Who Reaches Out to Us** (*Gen. 3:9–15*)

MONDAY: **The God Who Longs to Be With Us** (*Gen. 26:3*)

TUESDAY: **The God Who Became One With Us** (*Matt. 1:18–23*)

WEDNESDAY: **The God Who Continues to Be With Us** (*Luke 19:10*)

THURSDAY: **The God Who Will Come Back for Us** (*John 14:1–3*)

Memory Text—*Genesis 3:9, NKJV*

Sabbath Gem: Before we understand the mission of God, it is essential to better understand the God of mission.

Lesson 2—God’s Mission to Us: Part 2

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **The Triune God: The Origin of Mission** (*Eph. 1:4*)

MONDAY: **Making Disciples: The Focus of Mission** (*Matt. 28:16–20*)

TUESDAY: **The Eternal Gospel: The Message of Mission** (*Rev. 14:6, 7*)

WEDNESDAY: **God’s People: The Channels of Mission** (*Gen. 12:1–3*)

THURSDAY: **The World: The Arena of Mission** (*Rev. 7:9, 10*)

Memory Text—*Matthew 28:19*

Sabbath Gem: In spite of separation caused by sin (*Isa. 59:2*), through His mission, God continues to restore the broken relationship with humanity. Because of this relationship, we not only come to know God but also share with others our experience with Him and His saving love.

Lessons for People Who Are Legally Blind The *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* is available free in braille, on MP3 disc, and via online download to people who are legally blind and individuals who cannot hold or focus on ink print. Contact Christian Record Services, Inc., PO Box 6097, Lincoln, NE 68506-0097. Phone: 402-488-0981, option 3; e-mail: services@christianrecord.org; website: www.christianrecord.org.