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Editorial Office 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904
Come visit us at our Web site: <http://www.absg.adventist.org>

Principal Contributor
Wilson Paroschi

Editor
Clifford R. Goldstein

Associate Editor
Soraya Homayouni

Publication Manager
Lea Alexander Greve

Editorial Assistant
Sharon Thomas-Crews

Pacific Press® Coordinator
Wendy Marcum

Art Director and Illustrator
Lars Justinen

Design
Justinen Creative Group

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The Victory of the Gospel

Many historians believe that the three most crucial decades in world history occurred when a small group of men, mostly Jews under the power of the Holy Spirit, took the gospel to the world. The book of Acts is an account of those three crucial decades, which spanned from the resurrection of Jesus, in A.D. 31, to the end of Paul's first Roman imprisonment, in A.D. 62 (*Acts 28:30*). The book must have been written shortly thereafter, for it stops the narrative at that point, though evidence exists that Paul was released from that imprisonment and that he resumed his missionary endeavors, preaching and traveling until he was arrested a few years later and then executed in Rome, in A.D. 67.

The book is silent about its author, but church tradition always has identified him as Luke, "the beloved physician" of Colossians 4:14 and traveling companion of Paul (*2 Tim. 4:11, Philemon 24*). Luke also traditionally is believed to be the author of our third Gospel, no doubt "the first book" mentioned in Acts 1:1 (*compare with Luke 1:3*). Luke and Acts are twin volumes on the beginnings of Christianity, respectively its origin (Jesus' life and ministry) and expansion (the apostles' missionary endeavors).

Together they comprise about 27 percent of the New Testament, the largest contribution of a single author. Writing to the Colossians, Paul refers to Luke as a Gentile coworker, someone who was not "of the circumcision" (*Col. 4:7-14*). Luke,

then, is the only non-Jewish author of a New Testament book.

This seems to explain one of his main themes: the universality of salvation. God has no favorites. The church is called to witness to all people, irrespective of their race, social class, or gender (*Acts 1:8; 2:21, 39, 40; 3:25; 10:28, 34, 35*). A failure to do so, whether by prejudice or convenience, is a distortion of the gospel and contrary to the most basic truths of God's Word. We are, before God, all the same: sinners in need of the redemption found in Christ Jesus.

It is not by chance, then, that Luke's main hero is Paul, "the apostle to the Gentiles" (*Rom. 11:13, NIV*), to whom almost two thirds of the book of Acts is dedicated.

Other important themes found in Acts include: the sovereignty of God and His divine purpose (*Acts 17:24, 25; 20:27; 23:11*); the exaltation of Jesus as Lord and Savior (*Acts 2:32, 36; 3:13, 15; 4:10–12; 5:30, 31*); and especially the role of the Spirit in empowering and guiding the church for its mission (*Acts 2:1–4; 4:24–31; 8:14–17, 29, 39; 10:19, 20*). In fact, the achievements of the early church were not the result of human wisdom or ability, though it pleased God to use someone like Paul to impact the world in a way that no other apostle did or perhaps was able to do (*1 Cor. 15:10*).

Acts deals with the formative period of the early church, in which there was considerable administrative and even theological growth. We can see this, for example, in the way the church dealt with questions concerning the time of Jesus' second coming, the status of the Gentiles, and the role of faith for salvation. What the early church was able to accomplish in such a short period of time, however, is a perpetual testimony of what God can do through those who humble their hearts in prayer, live beyond individual differences, and let themselves be used by the Spirit for God's honor and glory.

Acts is the story of those called of God to start the work; what can we who are called of God to finish it learn from their story?

Wilson Paroschi is a professor of New Testament interpretation at Brazil Adventist University (UNASP), in Engenheiro Coelho, São Paulo. He holds a PhD degree in New Testament from Andrews University (2004) and performed post-doctoral studies at the University of Heidelberg, Germany (2011).

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What do these three people have in common? They love Jesus and are sharing Him with others in Mongolia, South Korea, and Taiwan!

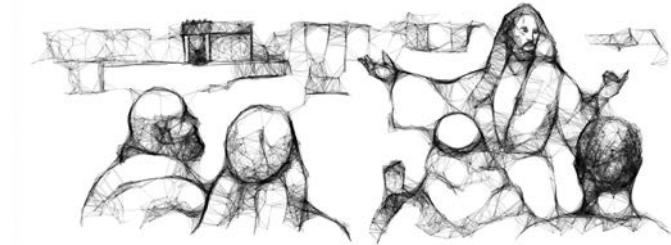
Read about these three people in this quarter's Adult Sabbath School Study Guide, and more about the Thirteen Sabbath Offering projects in the Youth and Adult Mission Quarterly

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You Will Be My Witnesses



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 1:6–8, Luke 24:25, Luke 24:44–48, Deut. 19:15, Acts 1:9–26, Prov. 16:33.*

Memory Text: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (*Acts 1:8, NRSV*).

Jesus' mission on earth was finished. God soon would send the Holy Spirit, who—ratifying their efforts with many signs and wonders—would empower and lead the disciples on a mission that would reach the ends of the earth. Jesus could not stay with them forever in human flesh. Not only did His incarnation impose upon Him a physical limitation in the context of a worldwide mission, but His ascension and exaltation in heaven were necessary in order for the Spirit to come.

Until Jesus' resurrection, however, the disciples did not clearly know these things. When they left everything to follow Him, they believed that He was a political liberator who would one day drive the Romans out of the land, reinstate David's dynasty, and restore Israel to its past glory. It was not easy for them to think otherwise.

This is the primary issue of Jesus' final instructions to the disciples in Acts 1. The promise of the Spirit comes in this context. The chapter also describes Jesus' return to heaven and how the early church prepared itself for Pentecost.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 7.

The Restoration of Israel

There are two kinds of Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament, one that anticipates a kingly Messiah who would rule forever (*Ps. 89:3, 4, 35–37; Isa. 9:6, 7; Ezek. 37:25; Dan. 2:44; 7:13, 14*), and one that predicts that the Messiah would die for the sins of the people (*Isa. 52:13–53:12; Dan. 9:26*). Such prophecies do not contradict each other. They just point to two consecutive phases of the Messiah's ministry: first He would suffer, and then become King (*Luke 17:24, 25; 24:25, 26*).

The problem with first-century Jewish Messianic expectation, however, was that it was one-sided. The hope of a kingly Messiah who would bring political deliverance obscured the notion of a Messiah who would suffer and die.

At first, the disciples shared this hope of a kingly Messiah. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah (*Matt. 16:16, 20*) and were sometimes caught bickering among themselves about who would sit on either side of Him when He was enthroned (*Mark 10:35–37, Luke 9:46*). Despite Jesus' warnings about the fate that awaited Him, they simply could not understand what He meant. So, when He died, they became confused and discouraged. In their own words, "We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel" (*Luke 24:21, NIV*).

Read Acts 1:6. What does this question say about what they still didn't understand? In Acts 1:7, how did Jesus answer them?

If Jesus' death represented a fatal blow to the disciples' hope, the resurrection revived it, raising their political expectations perhaps to an unprecedented level. It seemed natural to conceive of the resurrection as a strong indicator that the Messianic kingdom would finally be established.

In His reply to their question, however, Jesus gave no direct answer. He did not reject the premise behind the disciples' question of an imminent kingdom, but neither did He accept it. He left the issue unsettled, while He reminded them that the time of God's actions belongs to God Himself, and as such it is inaccessible to humans.

According to Luke 24:25, what was the real problem of the disciples? Why is it easy to believe what we want to believe, as opposed to what the Bible really teaches? How can we avoid this trap?

The Disciples' Mission

Read Acts 1:8. Instead of indulging in prophetic speculations, what were the disciples expected to do?

There are four important elements in this passage concerning the disciples' mission:

1. *The gift of the Spirit.* The Spirit always had been active among God's people. According to the prophets, however, there would be a special endowment of the Spirit in the future (*Isa. 44:3; Joel 2:28, 29*). As Jesus Himself was anointed with the Spirit, the Holy Spirit was already at work during the time of His ministry (*Luke 4:18–21*) but officially was not inaugurated until Christ's exaltation in heaven (*John 7:39, Acts 2:33*).

2. *The role of witness.* A witness is a firsthand account. The disciples were fully qualified to give such a witness (*Acts 1:21, 22; 4:20; compare with 1 John 1:1–3*) and were now commissioned to share with the world their unique experience with Jesus.

3. *The plan of the mission.* The disciples were to witness first in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth. It was a progressive plan. Jerusalem was the center of Jewish religious life, the place where Jesus had been condemned and crucified. Judea and Samaria were neighboring areas where Jesus also had ministered. The disciples, however, were not to limit themselves to this locale alone. The scope of their mission was worldwide.

4. *The orientation of the mission.* In Old Testament times, it was the nations that should be attracted to God (*see Isa. 2:1–5*), not Israel that should "take" God to the nations. The few exceptions (for example, Jonah) do not invalidate the general rule. Now the strategy was different. Jerusalem was still the center, but rather than staying and building roots there, the disciples were expected to move out to the uttermost ends of the earth.

Read Luke 24:44–48. What was the core message that the disciples should preach?

In the forty days He spent with the disciples after the resurrection (*Acts 1:3*), Jesus must have explained much truth to them about the kingdom of God, even if there was still much they didn't understand, as their question in Acts 1:6 showed. They were familiar with the prophecies but could now see them in a new light, a light shed from the Cross and the empty tomb (*see Acts 3:17–19*).

He Will Come Again

Read Acts 1:9–11. How does Luke portray the ascension of Jesus? What is the significance that there were two angels speaking to them (see *Deut. 19:15*)?

Luke’s account of the ascension is rather brief. Jesus was with the disciples on the Mount of Olives, and while still blessing them (*Luke 24:51*), He was taken up to heaven. The language, of course, is phenomenological; that is, the scene is portrayed as it looked to human eyes, not as it really was. Jesus was leaving the earth, and there is no other way to do so in a visible form than by going up.

The ascension of Jesus was a supernatural act of God, one of many all through the Bible. This is implied by the way Luke describes it, with the passive *epērthē* (“He was taken up,” *Acts 1:9, NKJV*). Though used only here in the New Testament, this verbal form is found several times in the Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), all of them describing actions of God, which suggests that God Himself was the One who took Jesus up to heaven, as He was the One who raised Him from the dead (*Acts 2:24, 32; Rom. 6:4; 10:9*).

After Jesus already had been hidden by a cloud, Luke reports—only in Acts—the episode of the two figures dressed in white who stood beside the disciples. The description coincides with that of angels in their bright robes (*Acts 10:30, John 20:12*). They came to assure the disciples that Jesus would come back the same way He had gone up, and it is also only Acts that informs us that Jesus went up “before their very eyes” (*Acts 1:9, NIV*).

Thus, the visible ascension became the guarantee of the visible return, which also will happen in a cloud, though “with power and great glory” (*Luke 21:27*), no longer as a private event, as “every eye will see Him” (*Rev. 1:7, NKJV*), and He will not be alone (*Luke 9:26, 2 Thess. 1:7*). The glory of the Second Coming will far exceed that of the ascension.

How can we learn to keep the reality, and promise, of the Second Coming always before us? How should this great truth impact all areas of our life, such as finances, priorities, and moral choices?

Preparing for Pentecost

In His reply in Acts 1:7, 8, Jesus made no commitment with regard to time. Yet, the natural implication of His words was that right after the Spirit came and the disciples completed their mission, He would return (*see also Matt. 24:14*). The angels' remark (*Acts 1:11*) also did not answer the question as to when the kingdom would come, but it could be understood as if it would not be long. This seems to explain why the disciples "returned to Jerusalem with great joy" (*Luke 24:52*). The promise of Jesus' second coming at an unspecified time, which should give them extra encouragement for their mission, was taken to mean that the end was close at hand. Further developments in Acts will demonstrate this idea.

Read Acts 1:12–14. Who else was in the upper room, and how did they prepare themselves for the coming of the Spirit?

Having returned from the Mount of Olives, the disciples gathered in the upper guest room (in Latin, *cenaculum*) of a two-story private house in Jerusalem. Some women followers (*Luke 8:1–3, 23:49, 24:1–12*), as well as Jesus' mother and brothers, were there with the disciples.

Jesus' brothers (*Mark 6:3*) were either younger sons of Joseph and Mary (*Matt. 1:25, Luke 2:7*) or, more likely, sons of Joseph's first marriage, in which case Joseph would be widowed when he took Mary for his wife. Their presence among the disciples comes as a surprise, as they had always been rather skeptical toward Jesus (*Mark 3:21, John 7:5*). Yet, the resurrection and Jesus' special appearance to James (*1 Cor. 15:7*) seem to have made all the difference. Later on James apparently would even replace Peter in the leadership of the Christian community (*Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Gal. 2:9, 12*).

Constantly in prayer (*Acts 1:14*), and constantly in the temple praising God (*Luke 24:53*), they all were no doubt involved in a time of confession, repentance, and the putting away of sin. Even if in their minds the coming of the Spirit would immediately lead to Jesus' return, their spiritual attitude was in full harmony with what was about to happen, as the Holy Spirit comes in response to prayer.

In our daily choices, what are ways we help prepare the way for the work of the Spirit in our lives?

The Twelfth Apostle

The first administrative action of the early Christian community, which numbered about 120 believers (*Acts 1:15*), was to choose a successor to Judas.

Read Acts 1:21, 22. What qualifications was the successor to Judas expected to have? Why would these be so important?

The need was for a witness of Jesus' resurrection (*compare with Acts 4:33*); this is crucial because time and again the resurrection is viewed as powerful evidence for the Messiahship of Jesus and the truth of the whole Christian faith.

The choice, however, was to be made from among those who had accompanied the apostles throughout Jesus' ministry. Paul would later insist that, despite not having been with the earthly Jesus, he was nevertheless entitled to the apostolic office because his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus qualified him to bear witness to His resurrection (*1 Cor. 9:1*). Though admitting to be as "one untimely born" (*1 Cor. 15:8, ESV*), Paul refused to consider himself less qualified than the other apostles (*1 Cor. 9:2, Gal. 2:6–9*). Only the Twelve and Paul, then, were "apostles" in the technical, authoritative sense (*Acts 1:25, 26*); yet, in its basic, general sense as envoys or messengers, the term also could be used for other gospel workers (*Acts 14:4, 14; Gal. 1:19*).

Read Acts 1:23–26. How was Matthias chosen?

The method they used to choose Matthias may seem strange, but the casting of lots was a long-established way of making decisions (*for example, Lev. 16:5–10, Num. 26:55*). In addition, the choice was between two previously recognized candidates of equal qualifications, not a step into the unknown. The believers also prayed to God, believing that the result would reflect His will (*compare with Prov. 16:33*). There is no evidence that the decision was ever challenged. After Pentecost, the casting of lots became no longer necessary due to the direct guidance of the Spirit (*Acts 5:3, 11:15–18, 13:2, 16:6–9*).

If someone were to come to you and ask, "How can I know what God's will is for my life?" what would you answer, and why?

Further Thought: “The whole interim period between Pentecost and the Parousia [Second Coming] (however long or short) is to be filled with the world-wide mission of the church in the power of the Spirit. Christ’s followers were both to announce what he had achieved at his first coming and to summon people to repent and believe in preparation for his second coming. They were to be his witnesses ‘to the ends of the earth’ ([Acts] 1:8) and ‘to the very end of the age.’ . . . We have no liberty to stop until both ends have been reached.”—John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church & the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), p. 44.

“The Saviour’s commission to the disciples included all the believers. It includes all believers in Christ to the end of time. It is a fatal mistake to suppose that the work of saving souls depends alone on the ordained minister. All to whom the heavenly inspiration has come are put in trust with the gospel. All who receive the life of Christ are ordained to work for the salvation of their fellow men. For this work the church was established, and all who take upon themselves its sacred vows are thereby pledged to be co-workers with Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 822.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Acts 1:7 recalls Mark 13:32: “Concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (ESV). Ellen G. White says: “There will never again be a message for the people of God that will be based on time. We are not to know the definite time either for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit or for the coming of Christ.”—*Selected Messages*, vol. 1, p. 188. She adds: “Any one who shall start up to proclaim a message to announce the hour, day, or year of Christ’s appearing, has taken up a yoke and is proclaiming a message that the Lord has never given him.”—*Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Sept. 12, 1893. What is the relevance of such statements for us today?
- ② Someone once said: “God needs witnesses more than lawyers.” What do you think of this statement?
- ③ What was the role of prayer in the early church? Is it a coincidence that at almost every decisive moment in its life, we find a reference to prayer (*Acts 1:24; 8:14–17; 9:11, 12; 10:4, 9, 30; 13:2, 3*)? What is the role of prayer in our lives?

“I Want to Kill People”

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Li Fengyan’s cellphone rang sharply.

“Mom, I am miserable,” said the voice on the other end. It was Fengyan’s daughter-in-law, Yang-yang. She was crying hysterically. “My life is so hard. I don’t know what to do.”

Worried, Fengyan brought Yang-yang to her home, and the two began to talk. Yang-yang spoke of hearing voices that commanded her to act violently. “I want to beat people. I want to kill people,” Yang-yang said. “Hide your knives. If I just see a knife, I will kill someone.”

Fengyan called her pastor at the Tokyo Chinese Seventh-day Adventist Church. Pastor Yu Chuanfu was leading the evening prayer meeting, but he came to her home and prayed and read the Bible with Yang-yang.

Yang-yang liked the prayers and the Bible, and she began to read the Bible regularly as she stayed with her mother-in-law for a while. She also read books by Ellen G. White. The voices ceased, and she started to smile. She started to attend Sabbath services at the Tokyo Chinese church.

Yang-yang’s husband was amazed at the change in his wife. He started going to church with her and his mother. A year later, they were baptized.

Then Yang-yang’s own mother fell ill, and doctors didn’t know what to do. Yang-yang asked church members to pray. She told her mother to throw away the family’s Buddhist idol and trust God instead. As the church members prayed, her mother made a miraculous recovery.

“Before the prayers, her mother did not believe in Jesus,” Fengyan said. “But after the prayers, she believes in God.”

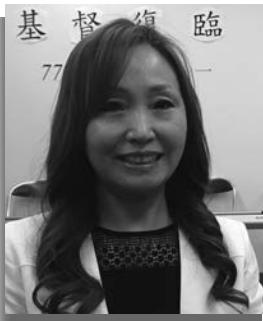
The mother got rid of the idol and, several months later, she and her husband were baptized. And that’s not all. Yang-yang and Fengyan have been telling relatives back in China about God, and several have started attending Adventist churches there.

Fengyan, 53, credits God and the Tokyo Chinese church for the transformation of her family. “Every Sabbath we have a place to worship,” she said.

Eight people have been baptized into the Tokyo Chinese church because of her influence.

The Tokyo Chinese church, the only Chinese-speaking Adventist church in Japan, opened with about five members in 2012 through the support of a Thirteenth Sabbath Offering. Today, the church is overflowing with 50 members and is planning to double the size of its sanctuary.

“Pray for us as we grow,” Pastor Yu said.



Watch LI FENGYAN, left, sing in the church at: bit.ly/want-to-kill

Pentecost



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 2:1–4, John 14:16, Acts 2:5–13, Joel 2:28–32, Acts 2:22–39, Ps. 110:1–3.*

Memory Text: “This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear” (*Acts 2:32, 33, NRSV*).

Pentecost” is from the word *pentēkostē*, the Greek name for the Jewish Feast of Weeks (*Exod. 34:22*); it is also known as the Feast of the Firstfruits (*Num. 28:26*). The term means “fiftieth” and owes its usage to the fact that the feast was celebrated on the fiftieth day from the offering of the barley sheaf on the first day after the Passover. It was a day of joy and thanksgiving, when the people of Israel brought before the Lord “the firstfruits of the wheat harvest” (*Exod. 34:22, NIV*).

The feast then became a fitting symbol for the first spiritual harvest of the Christian church, when the Holy Spirit was poured out more abundantly than ever before, and three thousand people were baptized on a single day (*Acts 2:41*). Following the ascension of Jesus and His exaltation in heaven, this outpouring of the Spirit was a sudden, supernatural event that transformed the apostles from simple and obscure Galileans into men of conviction and courage who would change the world.

Pentecost often is called the birthday of the church, the time that Christ’s followers, Jews and (later) Gentiles, were legitimized as God’s new community on earth.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 14.

The Coming of the Spirit

In obedience to Jesus' command, the believers waited in Jerusalem for the promise of the Spirit, and they waited amid fervent prayer, sincere repentance, and praise. When the day came, they "were all together in one place" (*Acts 2:1, ESV*), probably the same large upper room of Acts 1. Soon, however, they would move to a more public area (*Acts 2:6–13*).

Read Acts 2:1–3. What supernatural elements accompanied the outpouring of the Spirit?

The scene was intense. There was first a sudden noise from heaven like the roaring of a violent windstorm that filled the entire place, and then what looked like flames of fire appeared and rested upon those there.

In Scripture, wind and fire frequently are associated with a "theophany," or a divine manifestation (*for example, Exod. 3:2, 19:18, Deut. 4:15*). In addition, wind and fire also may be used to represent the Spirit of God (*John 3:8, Matt. 3:11*). In the case of Pentecost, whatever the precise meaning of such phenomena, they were signs introducing a unique moment in the history of salvation, the promised outpouring of the Spirit.

The Spirit always had been at work. Its influence on God's people in the Old Testament times was often revealed in a notable way, but never in its fullness. "During the patriarchal age the influence of the Holy Spirit had often been revealed in a marked manner, but never in its fullness. Now, in obedience to the word of the Saviour, the disciples offered their supplications for this gift, and in heaven Christ added His intercession. He claimed the gift of the Spirit, that He might pour it upon His people."—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 37.

John the Baptist foretold the baptism with the Spirit by the coming Messiah (*Luke 3:16; compare with Acts 11:16*), and Jesus Himself referred to it several times (*Luke 24:49, Acts 1:8*). This outpouring would be His first intercessory act before God (*John 14:16, 26; 15:26*). At Pentecost, the promise was fulfilled.

Although the baptism with the Spirit at Pentecost was a unique event related to Jesus' victory on the cross and exaltation in heaven, being filled with the Spirit is an experience to be continuously repeated in the believers' lives (*Acts 4:8, 31; 11:24; 13:9, 52; Eph. 5:18*).

What evidence do you have of the Spirit's working in your life?

The Gift of Tongues

In Acts 2:4, the gift of the Spirit was manifested through speaking in tongues. Yet, this gift was only one of many different manifestations of the Spirit (*Acts 10:45, 46; 19:6*). Others include foretelling the future (*Acts 11:28*), visions (*Acts 7:55*), inspired speech (*Acts 2:8, 28:25*), healing (*Acts 3:6, 12; 5:12, 16*), and qualification for service (*Acts 6:3, 5*).

The gift of tongues at Pentecost did not occur because it is the typical or the most important evidence of the endowment of the Spirit. It was manifested in order to launch the church's world mission. That is, the calling given in Acts 1:8 required the gift of tongues. If the apostles were to cross cultural barriers and reach the ends of the earth with the gospel, they would need to be able to speak in the languages of those who needed to hear what they had to say.

Read Acts 2:5–13. What is the evidence that at Pentecost the apostles spoke in existing foreign languages?

It is estimated that in the first century there were eight to ten million Jews in the world and that up to 60 percent of them lived outside the land of Judea. Yet, many who were in Jerusalem for the feast were from foreign lands and could not speak Aramaic, the language of Judean Jews at that time.

There is no question that most converts at Pentecost were Jews from various lands who could now hear the gospel in their own native languages. That the apostles spoke in existing foreign languages, rather than in unknown ecstatic languages, is evidenced by the term *dialektos* (*Act 2:6, 8*), which means language of a nation or a region (*compare with Acts 21:40, 22:2, 26:14*). Clearly, then, they were speaking in these different languages. The miracle was that simple Galileans could now speak a language that, even hours before, they did not know. For those local Jews who witnessed the scene but were not acquainted with these languages, the only possible explanation was that the apostles were drunk, uttering strange sounds that made no sense to them. "Some, however, made fun of them and said, 'They have had too much wine'" (*Acts 2:13, NIV*).

A powerful manifestation of God is happening before their eyes, and yet these people think it is just drunkenness? How can we be careful not to be so spiritually blind ourselves?

Peter's Sermon

The charge of drunkenness gave Peter the opportunity to explain what was happening. In his speech, the apostle first pointed to Scripture (*Acts 2:16–21*), describing the outpouring of the Spirit as the fulfillment of prophecy.

Compare Acts 2:17 with Joel 2:28. How did Peter understand the time of fulfillment of Joel's prophecy?

Joel's prophecy was about the future age of salvation (*Joel 2:32*), which would be characterized by several signs in the natural world and a lavish outpouring of the Spirit (*Joel 2:28–31*). By interpreting the Pentecost event in light of such prophecy, Peter intended to stress the historical relevance of that moment. But there is an important difference in the way he quotes Joel. Instead of Joel's introductory "afterward" (*Joel 2:28*), which pointed quite generally to the future, Peter said "in the last days" (*Acts 2:17*), indicating that the final act in the great drama of salvation had just begun. This is not, of course, a full description of last-day events but an evidence of the high sense of urgency that distinguished the early church. They did not know when the end would come but were convinced it would not take long.

Read Acts 2:22–32. What was the main point in Peter's presentation of the gospel?

After highlighting the prophetic significance of Pentecost, Peter turned to the recent events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It is the resurrection, however, that received greater emphasis, as it represented the decisive factor in the gospel story. For Peter, the resurrection was the ultimate vindication of Jesus (*Acts 2:22, 27*), and he quoted Scripture to help make his point about the meaning of the resurrection.

Because Jesus was the Messiah, He could not be detained by death. So for Peter and for all the writers of the New Testament, the resurrection of Jesus had become powerful evidence, not only of Jesus as the Messiah but for the whole Christian message of salvation.

With death all around us, always threatening us or our loved ones, why is the resurrection of Jesus such an important truth?

The Exaltation of Jesus

“Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear” (Acts 2:33).

In the third part of the speech, Peter went back to the issue of tongues, which had attracted the people in the first place. Instead of being drunk, which would have been strange at nine o’clock in the morning (*Acts 2:15*), the believers were speaking in tongues because the Holy Spirit had just been poured out from heaven.

Read Acts 2:33–36. What is the connection between Jesus’ exaltation at the right hand of God and the outpouring of the Spirit?

The right hand of God is a position of authority (*Ps. 110:1–3*). Peter’s argument, which he based on Scripture, is that it was because Jesus had been elevated to such a position in heaven that He poured out the Spirit upon His followers. The exaltation did not grant Jesus a status He did not have before (*John 1:1–3, 17:5*). Instead, it represented the Father’s supreme recognition of His prerogative as Lord and Savior (*Acts 2:36*).

This event actually brings us to one of the most important themes in Scripture: the cosmic conflict between good and evil. The point is that the Spirit could not fully come if Jesus were not exalted (*John 7:39*), and Jesus would not be exalted if He had not triumphed on the cross (*John 17:4, 5*). In other words, Jesus’ exaltation was the condition for the coming of the Spirit because it signified God’s approval of Jesus’ accomplishments on the cross, including the defeat of the one who had usurped the rule of this world (*John 12:31*).

The entrance of sin into the world cast a shadow upon God. Jesus’ death was necessary, not only to redeem human beings but also to vindicate God and expose Satan as a fraud. In Jesus’ ministry, the age of salvation was already at work (*Luke 4:18–21*). When He cast out demons or forgave sins, He was releasing Satan’s captives. Yet, it was the Cross that would give Him full authority to do that. So, when Christ’s self-sacrifice was authenticated in heaven, Satan had received a decisive blow, and the Spirit was being poured out to prepare a people for the coming of Christ.

The Firstfruits

Peter's hearers were cut to the heart by his words. Some of them might have been among those who asked for Jesus' crucifixion a few weeks before (*Luke 23:13–25*). But now, persuaded that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed God's appointed Messiah, they cried out in sorrow: "What shall we do?" (*Acts 2:37*).

Read Acts 2:38. What are the two basic requirements for forgiveness?

Repentance means a radical change of direction in life, a turning away from sin (*Acts 3:19, 26:20*), rather than simply a feeling of sadness or remorse. Together with faith, true repentance is a gift of God, but like all gifts, it can be rejected (*Acts 5:31–33, 26:19–21, Rom. 2:4*).

Since the time of John the Baptist, repentance was associated with baptism (*Mark 1:4*). That is, baptism became an expression of repentance, a rite symbolizing the washing away of sins and the moral regeneration produced by the Holy Spirit (*Acts 2:38, 22:16; compare with Titus 3:5–7*).

Read Acts 2:38, 39. What special promise is given to those who repent and are baptized?

The people at Pentecost were offered not only forgiveness of sins but also the fullness of the Spirit for personal growth, for service in the church, and especially for mission. This was perhaps the greatest of all blessings, for the main reason the church exists is to share the good news of the gospel (*1 Pet. 2:9*). So, from this point forward, they would have assurance of salvation and the power of the Holy Spirit, which would enable them for the mission to which the church had been called.

Why is the realization that we have “the remission of your sins” so important for anyone who wants to proclaim the gospel? After all, what hope can you offer to others in Jesus if you don’t have it yourself?

Further Thought: The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost revealed a crucial truth about what happened in heaven and about how God the Father accepted Christ's sacrifice for the sins of the world. The outpouring of the Spirit showed, too, that Christ's work in heaven in our behalf, based on His sacrifice on earth, was now inaugurated. These astonishing events are more manifestations of the wonderful truth that heaven and earth are connected in ways that we just can't fathom now.

"Christ's ascension to heaven was the signal that His followers were to receive the promised blessing. . . . 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."—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 38, 39.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What of Pentecost can the church expect to experience in its life today? What is repeatable, and what is not?
- 2 Dwell more on the fact that Peter made the resurrection of Jesus such an important part of his Pentecost message. What made the resurrection even more astonishing is that whatever Jewish Messianic expectations had existed at the time, no one was expecting a Messiah to be resurrected from the dead. That was not on anyone's spiritual radar; it was not what those awaiting the coming of the Messiah had anticipated. What lessons can we learn from this about how we need to know what the Bible teaches, as opposed to whatever the latest popular teachings are?
- 3 Acts 2:38 talked about the need of baptism. Does this mean that anyone who believed in Jesus but died before being baptized must, of necessity, be lost? Justify your answer.

Best Friends

By BATDELGER BATTSETSEG

My first visit to church was in the ninth grade. The reason is rather embarrassing. I went because my best friend decided to sleep with her boyfriend.

But first my friend, Otko, asked for my advice outside our high school in Mongolia's capital, Ulaanbaatar. I was just 16, but I was sure that she was making a bad decision. I told her not to do it. Then, just to make sure, I asked my older sister what she thought. My sister, who attended a Seventh-day Adventist church, went straight to Otko and told her to wait until she got married.

Otko was furious that I had revealed her secret. She said bad things about me to my classmates, and they started to ignore me. In a single week, I lost my best friend and all my friends at school.

I felt so lonely. I asked my sister if I could go with her to church. The people at church welcomed me. They were warm and friendly, and they taught me about God. After a few months, my classmates slowly began to talk to me again. They noticed that I was going to church, and they asked, "What are you doing? Why are you going to church?" I told them that I was becoming a Christian.

But I wasn't so open with my parents. My parents are Buddhists, as are most people in Mongolia, and they were angry about my interest in Christianity. I kept attending church every Sabbath, but I hid that from my parents. Eventually I told the truth and discovered that my parents had known all along. They accepted my decision to get baptized.

A year and a half after Otko stopped being my friend, she came to my house one evening to acknowledge that I had been right. She sadly told me that she had gotten pregnant and had had an abortion. "But," she said, "You are a heavenly person. I don't want to lose you as a friend. I'm willing to even die for you."

Otko didn't know it, but her words are also in the Bible. In John 15:13, Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends" (NKJV).

Otko and I are good friends to this day, but my best Friend gave His life for me.



BATDELGER BATTSETSEG, 32, left, is the fifth-grade teacher at Tusgal School, the only Adventist school in Mongolia. This quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help build a boarding academy for the school's 9th- to 12th-grade students, freeing up classroom space for more elementary school students.

Life *in the* Early Church



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 2:42–46; Acts 4:34, 35; Acts 3:1–26; Acts 4:1–18; Acts 5:1–11; Acts 5:34–39.*

Memory Text: “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people” (*Acts 2:46, 47, NIV*).

The early church's sense of urgency could not have been stronger. The way that Jesus had answered the question concerning the establishment of the Messianic kingdom, leaving the issue of time open (*Acts 1:6–8*), could be understood to mean that everything depended on the coming of the Spirit and the completion of the apostolic mission. So, when Pentecost came, early believers thought that everything was fulfilled: they had received the Spirit and shared the gospel with the whole world. Not that the apostles had left Jerusalem and had gone out to the world, but the world had come to them (*Acts 2:5–11*).

What happened next was the church's detachment from material goods. Sensing that the time was short, they sold all they had and devoted themselves to learning and to fellowship while continuing to witness about Jesus, but only in Jerusalem. The communal life they developed, though effective in helping the poor, soon became a problem, and God had to intervene to keep the church united. This was also the time when they began to find themselves facing opposition. Yet amid it all, their faith remained unshakeable.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 21.

Teaching and Fellowship

After Pentecost, Luke shifts the narrative to a general description of the inner life of the church in Jerusalem. “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (*Acts 2:42, NKJV*). The four items noted appear to be basically teaching and fellowship. According to verse 46, the teaching was carried out in the temple, while the fellowship was in private homes.

The temple court was surrounded by roofed porches that were frequently used for rabbinic instruction. That the believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching shows that the gift of the Spirit did not lead them to a contemplative religion but to an intense learning process under the apostles, whose authoritative teaching was authenticated by wonders and signs (*Acts 2:43*).

Spiritual fellowship was another distinctive mark of early Christian piety. The believers were constantly together, not only in the temple but also in their homes, where they shared meals, celebrated the Lord’s Supper, and prayed (*Acts 2:42, 46*). By having such daily celebrations, the early Christians expressed their hope in Jesus’ soon return, when His fellowship with them would be restored in the Messianic kingdom (*Matt. 26:29*).

Private homes played a key role in the early church’s life. The believers still attended the temple’s daily ceremonies (*Acts 3:1*), and on Sabbaths they presumably were in the synagogues with their fellow Jews (*James 2:2*), but the distinctive elements of Christian devotion were performed in homes.

Read Acts 2:44, 45; 4:34, 35. What was an important aspect of early Christian fellowship?

Believing that the end was near, they decided that their material possessions, “private property” (to use a more up-to-date term), was not that important anymore. A common use of their material resources, therefore, seemed appropriate. There was no reason to worry about tomorrow, as the Messiah Himself would provide for their needs in the Messianic kingdom (*Luke 22:29, 30*). This sharing allowed them to experience a deeper sense of unity, besides becoming an extraordinary example of Christian generosity.

How generous are you with what you have been given from the Lord?

The Healing of a Lame Man

In Acts 3:1, Peter and John went to the temple for the three o'clock prayer service. This indicates the essentially Jewish character of the church's faith at this early period. That is, the apostles did not go to the temple only to instruct or make new converts but because Peter and John were still Jews and, as such, were still committed to Jewish religious traditions (*Acts 20:16, 21:17–26*), at least up to this point. There they performed an astounding miracle (*Acts 3:1–10*), which gave Peter the opportunity to preach another sermon.

Read Acts 3:12–26. What are some of Peter's main emphases in his sermon?

Five main points characterized early Christian preaching: Jesus was the suffering Messiah (*Acts 3:18*); God resurrected Him (*Acts 3:15*); Jesus was exalted in heaven (*Acts 3:13*); He will come again (*Acts 3:20*); and repentance is necessary for the forgiveness of sins (*Acts 3:19*).

In many ways, this is the same message we are taking to the world, even if the context has changed. The apostles were still in a Jewish setting, when instead of changing religions the people basically just had to “migrate” from the old covenant to the new one. As part of God's people, they had to accept the Messiah and experience the new birth that follows a true acceptance of Jesus.

Now, though the situation is different, the message is still essentially the same: Christ died for our sins, was resurrected, and He will return. This means, then, that we can find salvation in Him. Even in the context of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14, Jesus Christ crucified, Jesus Christ risen, and Jesus Christ returning must be the center of how we proclaim those messages.

“Of all professing Christians, Seventh-day Adventists should be foremost in uplifting Christ before the world. The proclamation of the third angel's message calls for the presentation of the Sabbath truth. This truth, with others included in the message, is to be proclaimed; but the great center of attraction, Christ Jesus, must not be left out. It is at the cross of Christ that mercy and truth meet together, and righteousness and peace kiss each other. The sinner must be led to look to Calvary; with the simple faith of a little child he must trust in the merits of the Saviour, accepting His righteousness, believing in His mercy.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, pp. 156, 157.

The Rise of Opposition

It was not long until the church's success aroused opposition from some Jerusalem leaders. The Jerusalem temple was run by the high priest and his associates, most of whom were Sadducees. The high priest was also the president of the Sanhedrin council, which in those days was composed mostly of Sadducees and Pharisees. Because the Sadducees did not believe in resurrection, they were greatly disturbed that Peter and John were teaching that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Arrested by the temple guards, the apostles were put in custody until the following day, when they were brought before the council (*Acts 4:1–7*).

Read Acts 4:1–18. When asked by what authority they had been acting, how did Peter reply? What was the underlying message in what Peter said that the leaders would have found so threatening?

The challenge about authority posed by the Jewish leaders suggests a concern for power. Peter, however, declared not only that the miracle had been performed in the name of Jesus but also that salvation comes from Him only. The apostles were before the highest Jewish body; yet, they were in the service of a much higher authority. These men were simple, unschooled Galilean fishermen; thus, their courage and eloquence struck those who were there. Although the leaders did not realize it, the point was that the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit, exactly as Jesus had foretold (*Matt. 10:16–20*).

Without being able to deny the miracle—the healed man was also present so that all could see him—the Sanhedrin commanded the apostles to stop preaching. They feared the message as much as the increasing popularity of the movement. Failing to evaluate the evidence properly, they allowed prejudice and desire for self-protection to dictate their actions.

Peter's final words are among the most precious gems of the book of Acts: “ ‘Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard’ ” (*Acts 4:19, 20, NKJV*).

Think about the desire for power and how potentially dangerous it can be, at any level and in any context. As Christians called to be servants, why must we be careful about the lure of power?

Ananias and Sapphira

The pooling of goods in the early church was not compulsory; that is, it was not a formal condition of membership. Yet, there certainly were several examples of voluntary generosity that inspired the whole community. One such example was Barnabas (*Acts 4:36, 37*), who will play an important role later in the book.

However, there were also negative examples that threatened the unity of the church from within, right at a time when attacks from without had just begun.

Read Acts 5:1–11. What are the lessons of this story?

Though Luke has not given us all the details, there is no question that the fundamental problem of Ananias and Sapphira was not the attempt to keep the money but the practice of deceit within the community. Their sin was not the result of an impulsive act but of a carefully laid plan, a deliberate attempt “to test the Spirit of the Lord” (*Acts 5:9, ESV*). They were not under the obligation to sell their property and give the money to the church. Thus, when they committed themselves to doing so, perhaps they were acting in their own interest only, maybe even trying to gain influence among the brethren with what appeared to be a commendable act of charity.

This possibility may help to explain why God punished them so severely. Even if the church’s communal life resulted from the conviction that Jesus was just about to come, an act like that of Ananias and Sapphira at such an early stage could disparage the importance of loyalty to God and become a bad influence among the believers. The fact that there is no mention of Ananias’s being given the chance to repent, as in the case of Sapphira (*Acts 5:8*), may be due only to the shortness of the account.

The bottom line is that, from the beginning to the end, they had acted sinfully, and sin is a serious matter in God’s eyes (*Ezek. 18:20, Rom. 6:23*), even if He does not always punish it immediately. In fact, that punishment is often deferred should constantly remind us of how gracious God is (*2 Pet. 3:9*).

Why must we be careful about pushing the limits of grace, as these two early members of the church did?

The Second Arrest

If the apostles could be used to bring God’s judgment on sin, as in Ananias and Sapphira’s case, they could also be used to bring God’s grace on sinners. Their powerful healing ministry (*Acts 5:12–16*) was tangible evidence that God’s Spirit was working through them. That even Peter’s shadow, it was believed, could heal people is striking. The closest parallel in the Gospels is that of a woman who was healed by touching Jesus’ garment (*Luke 8:43, 44*). Luke, however, does not say that Peter’s shadow actually had healing power but that the people thought so. Yet, even if popular superstition was involved, God would still dispense His grace.

Notwithstanding, the more the apostles were filled with the Spirit, and signs and wonders multiplied, the more the religious leaders were filled with jealousy. This led them to arrest the apostles a second time (*Acts 5:17, 18*). It was only after their miraculous escape (*Acts 5:19–24*) and another bold speech by Peter, stressing that they should “obey God rather than men” (*Acts 5:29*), that some of the authorities began to consider the possibility that supernatural influences could be at work.

Read Acts 5:34–39. How did Gamaliel try to dissuade the Sanhedrin from killing the apostles?

The Sanhedrin was controlled by the Sadducees, with the Pharisees forming an influential minority. Gamaliel was a Pharisee and a doctor of the law. He was so highly regarded among the Jews that he became known as “Rabban” (“our teacher”), rather than simply “Rabbi” (“my teacher”). Paul was one of his disciples (*Acts 22:3*).

Gamaliel recalled two other rebel movements in Israel’s recent history that had also attracted followers and caused turmoil. The leaders, however, were killed and their followers were completely dispersed. The lesson he drew was that if the Christian movement was of human origin, it would soon disappear. On the other hand, if it was a divine movement, as claimed by the apostles, how could they hope to withstand it? Gamaliel’s advice prevailed. The apostles were flogged and once again commanded not to speak in Jesus’ name.

What does this story tell us about how needful and helpful good counsel can often be? How can we learn to be more open to getting counsel even when it may consist of what we don’t necessarily want to hear?

Further Thought: “We are stewards, entrusted by our absent Lord with the care of His household and His interests, which He came to this world to serve. He has returned to heaven, leaving us in charge, and He expects us to watch and wait for His appearing. Let us be faithful to our trust, lest coming suddenly He find us sleeping.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, p. 37.

“The people need to be impressed with the sacredness of their vows and pledges to the cause of God. Such pledges are not generally held to be as obligatory as a promissory note from man to man. But is a promise less sacred and binding because it is made to God? Because it lacks some technical terms, and cannot be enforced by law, will the Christian disregard the obligation to which he has given his word? No legal note or bond is more obligatory than a pledge made to the cause of God.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1056.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Among many other things, Jesus left two immediate legacies to the disciples: the expectation of His soon return and a worldwide mission. How should these two factors impact our sense of mission and the call to preach the gospel to the world?
- 2 Someone once said: “We should be ready as if Jesus would come today but continue working [in the mission of the church] as if He would take another hundred years to come.” What wisdom is found in this sentiment, and how can we apply it to our calling in life?
- 3 Why must the life, death, resurrection, and return of Jesus be central to all that we preach? Or look at it like this: What good is anything we preach without these events?
- 4 What should the story of Ananias and Sapphira teach about just how difficult it is for us to know the hearts of others, either for good or for evil?
- 5 Who are some modern-day Gamaliels whom you know? Or, perhaps, are you in a position to play that role for others? Either way, in class share examples about how the giving or the receiving of wise counsel did some good. What lessons can we learn from these accounts?

Too Scared to Adopt

By SANG SOOK PARK

Since I was a little girl, I wanted to adopt a child. The desire remained strong after I got married and raised a son, but I feared I wasn't qualified.

Finally, I filled out the paperwork. "Send me a child whom I can handle," I prayed. "Give me this sign that the adopted child is from You: Make the first child I meet the one whom You want me to adopt."

This was my prayer for two and a half months. Then the orphanage sent a two-year-old girl, Bomini. But when she arrived, she just glared at me. I wanted to win her heart, so I gave her food and a doll. But she flung down the doll, and she wouldn't allow me to touch her. I sent Bomini back to the orphanage.

"I'm too scared to adopt," I told my husband.

But I sensed God saying, "What happened to all your prayers and request for a sign that the first child would be chosen by Me?" I wept and told God, "I'm too scared to live with this child."

But then I changed my prayer. "If I'm supposed to take this child, give me confidence and the assurance that You will raise her," I prayed. "If I'm not supposed to adopt her, remove this heavy burden that I have to adopt a child."

I prayed this for five days. On the fifth day, I read 2 Samuel 24:14 during my devotions and realized that this was the answer. In this verse, King David says, "I am in great distress. Please let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for His mercies are great."

I remembered that God always had led me and I knew He would continue to care for my family with great mercy. I decided to fall into the hand of the Lord.

"Let's go get the child," I told my husband.

Tears streamed down my cheeks as we drove to the orphanage. I could still see those glaring eyes. Then I thought, *Wait, I'm going to meet this precious daughter of mine.* I prayed, "God, help us love her."



We waited a short time at the orphanage, and then Bomini entered the room. She quietly walked over to me and put her tiny hands into mine. It felt as if the Lord were holding my hands. I prayed, "I will lead this hand to heaven." And we went home.

SANG SOOK PARK, 58, left, runs an adoption agency called Morning Calm Family, which has placed 238 children in 160 Adventist families in South Korea over the past decade. She has adopted four children.

The First Church Leaders



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 6, Acts 7:48, Heb. 5:11–14, Micah 6:1–16, Acts 7, Acts 8:4–25.*

Memory Text: “The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (*Acts 6:7, NRSV*).

Many converts at Pentecost were Hellenistic Jews; that is, Jews from the Greco-Roman world who now were living in Jerusalem (*Acts 2:5, 9–11*). Despite being Jews, they were different from Judean Jews—the “Hebrews” mentioned in *Acts 6:1*—in many respects, the most visible difference being that usually they were not acquainted with Aramaic, the language then spoken in Judea.

There were several other differences, too, both cultural and religious. For having been born in foreign countries, they had no roots in Judean Jewish traditions, or at least their roots were not as deep as those of Judean Jews. They were presumably not so much attached to the temple ceremonies and to those aspects of the Mosaic law that were applicable only to the land of Israel.

Also, for having spent most of their lives in a Greco-Roman environment and having lived in close contact with Gentiles, they naturally would be more willing to understand the inclusive character of the Christian faith. In fact, it was many Hellenistic believers that God used to fulfill the command of bearing witness to the entire world.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 28.

The Appointment of the Seven

Read Acts 6:1. What was the complaint of the Hellenistic believers?

“The cause of complaint was an alleged neglect of the Greek widows in the daily distribution of assistance. Any inequality would have been contrary to the spirit of the gospel, yet Satan had succeeded in arousing suspicion. Prompt measures now must be taken to remove all occasion for dissatisfaction, lest the enemy triumph in his effort to bring about a division among the believers.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 88.

The solution proposed by the apostles was that the Jews choose seven men from among themselves to “serve [*diakoneō*] tables” (*Acts* 6:2), while they would spend their time in prayer and the “ministry [*diakonia*] of the word” (*Acts* 6:4). Since *diakoneō* and *diakonia* belong to the same word-group, the only real difference is between “tables” in *Acts* 6:2 and “the word” in *Acts* 6:4. This, together with the adjective “daily” (*Acts* 6:1), seems to point to the two main elements of the early church’s daily life: teaching (“the word”) and fellowship (“tables”), the latter consisting of the communal meal, the Lord’s Supper, and prayers (*Acts* 2:42, 46; 5:42).

That is, as the authoritative trustees of Jesus’ teachings, the apostles would occupy themselves mostly with the believers’ doctrinal teaching and with prayer, while the Seven would be in charge of the fellowship activities, in the several house-churches. Their duties, however, were not limited to those of deacons as this term is understood today. They were in fact the first congregation leaders of the church.

Read Acts 6:2–6. How were the Seven chosen and commissioned to service?

The candidates were to be distinguished by moral, spiritual, and practical qualities: they should have an honorable reputation and be filled with the Spirit and wisdom. With the community’s approval, the Seven were selected and then commissioned through prayer and laying on of hands. The rite seems to indicate public recognition and the bestowal of authority to work as deacons.

It’s so easy to sow dissension in the ranks, isn’t it? How can we do all in our God-given power to keep peace among us and to focus, instead, on mission?

Stephen's Ministry

After their appointment, the Seven engaged not only in church ministry but also in effective witnessing. The result was that the gospel continued to spread, and the number of believers kept increasing (*Acts 6:7*). This growth started, of course, to bring opposition to the early church. The narrative then focuses on Stephen, a man of rare spiritual stature.

Read Acts 6:8–16. What do these verses teach us about Stephen and his faith and character? Also, what was Stephen preaching that so enraged his opponents?

As a Hellenistic Jew, Stephen shared the gospel in the Hellenistic synagogues of Jerusalem. There were several such synagogues in the city; Acts 6:9 probably refers to two of them, one of southern immigrants (Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria) and one of northern immigrants (those from Cilicia and Asia).

Jesus was no doubt the central issue of the debates, but the charges raised against Stephen indicate an understanding on his part of the gospel and its implications that perhaps surpassed that of the Judean believers. Stephen was accused of speaking blasphemies against Moses and God; that is, against the law and the temple. Even if he was misunderstood on some points—or his words were deliberately twisted—and false witnesses were induced to speak against him, the charges may not have been totally false, as in the case of Jesus Himself (*Mark 14:58, John 2:19*). Stephen's explicit condemnation of the Sanhedrin for the idolatrous veneration of the temple (*Acts 7:48*) reveals that he understood the deeper implications of the death of Jesus and where it would lead, at least in regard to the temple and its ceremonial services.

In other words, while perhaps many Jewish believers of Judean origin were still too attached to the temple and other ceremonial practices (*Acts 3:1; 15:1, 5; 21:17–24*) and were finding it difficult to abandon them (*Gal. 5:2–4, Heb. 5:11–14*), Stephen, and perhaps the other Hellenistic believers as well, quickly understood that Jesus' death signified the end of the entire temple order.

Why must we be careful not to be so locked into some of our cherished notions that we close out new light when it comes?

Before the Sanhedrin

Read Acts 7:1–53. What was Stephen saying to his accusers?

The charges raised against Stephen led to his arrest and trial by the Sanhedrin. According to Jewish tradition, the law and the temple services were two of the three pillars upon which the world rests—the last being good works. The mere insinuation that the Mosaic ceremonies had become outdated was truly considered an assault on that which was most sacred in Judaism; hence, the charge of blasphemy (*Acts 6:11*).

Stephen’s response is the lengthiest speech in Acts, which by itself is an indication of its significance. Though at first sight it seems nothing more than a tedious recital of Israel’s history, we should understand the speech in connection with the Old Testament covenant and the way the prophets used its structure when they stood up as religious reformers to call Israel back to its requirements. When that happened, they sometimes employed the Hebrew word *riḇ*, whose best translation is probably “covenant lawsuit,” to express the idea of God as taking legal action against His people because of their failure to keep the covenant.

In Micah 6:1, 2, for example, *riḇ* occurs three times. Then, following the pattern of the Sinai covenant (*Exodus 20–23*), Micah reminds the people of God’s mighty acts on their behalf (*Micah 6:3–5*), the stipulations and violations of the covenant (*Micah 6:6–12*), and finally the curses for the violations (*Micah 6:13–16*).

This is probably the background of Stephen’s speech. When asked to explain his actions, he made no effort to refute the charges nor to defend his faith. Instead, he raised his voice in the same way the ancient prophets did when they brought God’s *riḇ* against Israel. His long review of God’s past relationship with Israel was intended to illustrate their ingratitude and disobedience.

Indeed, by Acts 7:51–53 Stephen is no longer the defendant but God’s prophetic attorney presenting God’s covenant lawsuit against these leaders. If their fathers were guilty of slaying the prophets, they were even more so. The change from “our fathers” (*Acts 7:11, 19, 38, 44, 45*) to “your fathers” (*Acts 7:51*) is significant: Stephen broke his solidarity with his people and took a definite stand for Jesus. The cost would be enormous; yet, his words reveal no fear nor regret.

When was the last time you needed to take a firm and uncompromising stand for Jesus? Did you, or did you waffle instead? If the latter, what needs to change?

Jesus in the Heavenly Court

Since by definition a prophet (in Hebrew, *nābî*) is someone who speaks for God, Stephen became a prophet the very moment he brought God's *riḥ* against Israel. His prophetic ministry, however, was rather short.

Read Acts 7:55, 56. What was the meaning of Stephen's vision?

“When Stephen reached this point, there was a tumult among the people. When he connected Christ with the prophecies and spoke as he did of the temple, the priest, pretending to be horror-stricken, rent his robe. To Stephen this act was a signal that his voice would soon be silenced forever. He saw the resistance that met his words and knew that he was giving his last testimony. Although in the midst of his sermon, he abruptly concluded it.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 100.

While Stephen stood before the Jewish leaders discharging God's case against them, Jesus was standing in the heavenly court—that is, in the heavenly sanctuary, next to the Father, an indication that the judgment on earth was but an expression of the real judgment that would take place in heaven. God would judge the false teachers and leaders in Israel.

This explains why the call to repentance, a common feature in the previous speeches in Acts (2:38, 3:19, 5:31), is missing here. Israel's theocracy was coming to an end, meaning that the world's salvation would no longer be mediated through national Israel as promised to Abraham (*Gen. 12:3, 18:18, 22:18*), but through the followers of Jesus, Jew and Gentile, who were now expected to leave Jerusalem and witness to the world (*Acts 1:8*).

Read Acts 7:57–8:1, 2. How does Luke report Stephen's death?

Stoning was the penalty for blasphemy (*Lev. 24:14*), though it is not clear whether Stephen was sentenced to death or lynched by a crowd of fanatics. At any rate, he was the first recorded believer in Jesus to be killed because of his faith. That the witnesses laid their garments at Saul's feet suggests he was the leader of Stephen's opponents; yet, when Stephen prayed for his executioners, he prayed for Saul, as well. Only a person with a superior character and unwavering faith could do such a thing, a powerful manifestation of his faith and the reality of Christ in his life.

The Spread of the Gospel

The triumph over Stephen ignited a massive persecution against the believers in Jerusalem, no doubt instigated by the same group of opponents. The leader of the group was Saul, who caused no small damage to the church (*Acts 8:3, 26:10*). The persecution, however, was turned to good effect.

Indeed, scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, the believers went about preaching the gospel. The command to witness in those areas (*Acts 1:8*) was then fulfilled.

Read Acts 8:4–25. What lessons are revealed in this account?

The Samaritans were half-Israelites, even from the religious standpoint. They were monotheists who accepted the first five books of Moses (the Pentateuch), practiced circumcision, and expected the Messiah. To the Jews, however, Samaritan religion was corrupted, which means the Samaritans had no share whatsoever in the covenant mercies of Israel.

The unexpected conversion of Samaritans astounded the church in Jerusalem, so the apostles sent out Peter and John to assess the situation. God's withholding the Spirit until the coming of Peter and John (*Acts 8:14–17*) was probably meant to convince the apostles that the Samaritans were to be accepted as full members of the community of faith (see *Acts 11:1–18*).

It didn't stop there, however. In Acts 8:26–39, we have the story of Philip and the Ethiopian, a eunuch, who after a Bible study requested baptism. "Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him" (*Acts 8:38, NIV*).

First there were the Samaritans, then the Ethiopian, a foreigner who had come to Jerusalem to worship, and was now on his way home. The gospel was crossing the borders of Israel and reaching the world, as predicted. All this, though, was just the beginning, as these early Jewish believers would soon travel all over the known world and preach the great news of the death of Jesus, who paid the penalty for their sins and offers everyone, everywhere, the hope of salvation.

Peter told Simon that he was "poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity" (*Acts 8:23, NKJV*). What was the solution for his problem, and for anyone who might be in a similar situation?

Further Thought: “The persecution that came upon the church in Jerusalem resulted in giving a great impetus to the work of the gospel. Success had attended the ministry of the word in that place, and there was danger that the disciples would linger there too long, unmindful of the Saviour’s commission to go to all the world. Forgetting that strength to resist evil is best gained by aggressive service, they began to think that they had no work so important as that of shielding the church in Jerusalem from the attacks of the enemy. Instead of educating the new converts to carry the gospel to those who had not heard it, they were in danger of taking a course that would lead all to be satisfied with what had been accomplished. To scatter His representatives abroad, where they could work for others, God permitted persecution to come upon them. Driven from Jerusalem, the believers ‘went everywhere preaching the word.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 105.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Read carefully the Ellen G. White quote above about the dangers the early church faced in regard to being satisfied with themselves and what was accomplished through them. First, it means that, contrary to popular notions, many Jews did indeed accept Jesus as the Messiah. But even more important, what warning should we as a people take away from this today? How can we be sure that we aren’t getting too caught up in protecting what we already have, as opposed to doing what we really should be doing—reaching out to the world?
- ② By the time of the apostles, the relations between Jews and Samaritans were marked by centuries of fierce hostilities. What can we learn from the fact that Philip, likely a Jew, bore witness of Jesus in Samaria? Even as Seventh-day Adventists, we are not immune to cultural and ethnic biases. What should the Cross teach us about how we are all the same before God? What, too, should the universality of Christ’s death teach us about the infinite value of every human being?
- ③ How did Philip approach the Ethiopian (8:27–30)? How can we be more open to opportunities to share the gospel with others?
- ④ What have we learned from Acts 6–8 that might help us to fulfill the church mission more effectively?

Converting a Girlfriend

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Yamaji Hiroshi, a 25-year-old pastor's son, was deeply in love. There was a problem: his girlfriend, Sakiko, wasn't a Seventh-day Adventist.

Hiroshi met Sakiko at an Adventist nursing school outside Japan's capital, Tokyo. After that, they worked together at the Adventist Medical Center on the Japanese island of Okinawa. It was there that they started dating.

Hiroshi tried to convince Sakiko to become an Adventist. He invited her to church every Sabbath. He asked the pastor to give her Bible studies. He praised the truthfulness of the Bible and the virtue of becoming a Christian.

"But she was not willing to become a Christian," Hiroshi said. "She emphatically told me, 'I will never become a Christian!'"

Hiroshi gave up. He realized that he could not convince Sakiko to accept Christ and that maybe they should break up. "But I still liked her," he said.

A passage sprang to mind from Ellen White's *Messages to Young People*, a book that he had read thoroughly as a teenager at an Adventist high school. The passage says, "If men and women are in the habit of praying twice a day before they contemplate marriage, they should pray four times a day when such a step is anticipated" (page 460).

Hiroshi packed his Bible and an Ellen White book and retreated up a nearby mountain for three days of prayer and fasting. "I asked God, 'What should I do?'" he said. "I read and kept a daily prayer journal."

After the fast, Hiroshi accepted a job at a nursing home far away on the Japanese mainland. He reckoned that the distance would destroy or strengthen the relationship, and he prayed that the outcome would align with God's will. The distance was difficult for him.

"I couldn't be with her, take her to church, or give her Bible studies," he said. "I couldn't do anything but pray. I prayed a lot."

It was then that God intervened, he said. In just a few weeks, Sakiko announced that she wanted to be baptized. Her heart had been converted fully, he said. Sakiko was baptized, and the couple later got married.



Hiroshi, now 56, has never forgotten Sakiko's conversion story, and it has become the basis for his work as a leader of the Adventist Church in Japan. His positions include Adventist Mission director, health ministries director, and assistant to the president for evangelism.

"As a pastor, I give Bible studies, I preach, and I love people, but that is all I can do," says Hiroshi (pictured left), the father of five. "To change people's hearts to accept Jesus is God's work. That's God's business."

The Conversion of Paul



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Acts 26:9–11, Deut. 21:23, Acts 9:1–20, 1 Cor. 9:1, Gal. 1:1, Acts 9:20–30.

Memory Text: “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.” (Acts 9:15, NIV).

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus (who became Paul) was one of the most remarkable events in the history of the apostolic church. The importance of Paul, however, goes way beyond conversion itself, for Paul is certainly not the only enemy of the church to have become a genuine Christian. The issue, instead, relates to what he ended up doing for the sake of the gospel. Paul had been an incorrigible opponent to the early believers, and the harm he could have done to the infant church was enormous. He had both determination and official support to destroy the church. Yet, he responded faithfully to God's call on the road to Damascus and became the greatest of the apostles. “From among the most bitter and relentless persecutors of the church of Christ, arose the ablest defender and most successful herald of the gospel.”—Ellen G. White, *Sketches From the Life of Paul*, p. 9.

Paul's previous actions in persecuting the early church always would bring him a deep sense of his own unworthiness, though he could say with a still deeper sense of gratitude that God's grace to him had not been in vain. With Paul's conversion, Christianity changed forever.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 4.

Persecutor of the Church

Paul was a Hellenistic Jew. His birthplace was Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia (*Acts 21:39*). Notwithstanding, to a certain extent he deviated from the Hellenistic stereotype, for he was brought to Jerusalem, where he studied under Gamaliel (*Acts 22:3*), the most influential Pharisaic teacher at the time. As a Pharisee, Paul was strictly orthodox, though his zeal bordered on fanaticism (*Gal. 1:14*). This is why he led Stephen to his death and became the key figure in the ensuing persecution.

Read Acts 26:9–11. How did Paul describe his actions against the church?

Paul says elsewhere that the gospel was a stumbling block to the Jews (*1 Cor. 1:23*). Besides the fact that Jesus did not fit the traditional Jewish expectation of a kingly Messiah, they could by no means accept the idea that the One who had died *on a cross* could be God's Messiah, for the Scripture says that anyone who is hung is under God's curse (*Deut. 21:23*). To the Jews, therefore, the crucifixion was in itself a grotesque contradiction, the clearest evidence that the church's claims about Jesus were false.

Acts 9:1, 2 shows Saul of Tarsus in action against believers. Damascus was an important city about 135 miles north of Jerusalem, and it had a large Jewish population. The Jews living outside Judea were organized in a kind of network whose headquarters were in Jerusalem (the Sanhedrin), with the synagogues functioning as supporting centers for the local communities. There was constant communication between the Sanhedrin and such communities through letters normally carried by a *shaliah*, "one who is sent" (from the Hebrew *shalah*, "to send"). A *shaliah* was an official agent appointed by the Sanhedrin to perform several religious functions.

When Paul asked the high priest, the Sanhedrin's president, for letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, he became a *shaliah*, with authority to arrest any followers of Jesus and bring them to Jerusalem (*compare with Acts 26:12*). In Greek, the equivalent to *shaliah* is *apostolos*, from which the word *apostle* derives. Thus, before being an apostle of Jesus Christ, Paul was an apostle of the Sanhedrin.

When was the last time you were zealous for (or against) something you later changed your mind about? What lessons should you have learned from that experience?

On the Damascus Road

Read Acts 9:3–9. What happened when Paul was approaching Damascus? What is the significance of Jesus’ words in Acts 9:5 (see also Acts 26:14)?

As Paul and his companions neared Damascus, the unexpected happened: about noon they experienced an intensely bright light from heaven and a voice speaking. This was not merely a vision in the prophetic sense but a divine manifestation, aimed somewhat exclusively at Paul. His companions saw the light; yet, only Paul was blinded; they heard the voice; yet, only Paul understood it. The light was the divine glory of the risen Jesus, who personally appeared to Paul at that moment (*Acts 22:14*). Elsewhere Paul insists that he had seen Jesus, which made him equal to the Twelve as a witness of His resurrection and apostolic authority (*1 Cor. 9:1, 15:8*).

The ensuing dialogue with Jesus struck Paul infinitely more than the light itself. Paul absolutely was convinced that, by attacking the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, he was doing God’s work in purifying Judaism from that dangerous and dreadful heresy. To his dismay, however, he learned not only that Jesus was alive but also that by inflicting suffering on His believers he was attacking Jesus Himself.

When speaking to Saul, Jesus used a proverbial saying supposedly of Greek origin that Paul certainly was familiar with: “‘It is hard for you to kick against the goads’” (*Acts 26:14, NKJV*). The image is that of a yoke ox trying to move against the sharp stick used to guide it. When that happens, the animal only hurts itself even more.

This saying may point to a struggle in Paul’s mind—the Bible refers to this as the work of the Spirit (*John 16:8–11*)—that could go back to what happened with Stephen. “Saul had taken a prominent part in the trial and conviction of Stephen, and the striking evidences of God’s presence with the martyr had led Saul to doubt the righteousness of the cause he had espoused against the followers of Jesus. His mind was deeply stirred. In his perplexity he appealed to those in whose wisdom and judgment he had full confidence. The arguments of the priests and rulers finally convinced him that Stephen was a blasphemer, that the Christ whom the martyred disciple had preached was an impostor, and that those ministering in holy office must be right.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 112, 113.

Why is it wise to pay heed to your conscience?

Ananias's Visit

When he realized he was talking to Jesus Himself, Saul asked the question that would give Jesus the opportunity He was looking for: “‘What shall I do, Lord?’” (*Acts 22:10, NKJV*). The question indicates contrition in view of his actions up to that moment, but more important, it expresses an unconditional willingness to let Jesus guide his life from then on. Taken to Damascus, Saul was to wait for further instructions.

In Acts 9:10–19, the Bible reveals how the Lord was working to prepare Saul of Tarsus for his new life as the apostle Paul. In a vision, Jesus gave Ananias the assignment to visit Saul and lay his hands on him for the restoration of his sight. Ananias, however, already knew who Saul was, as well as how many of the brethren had suffered and even lost their lives because of him. He was also well informed of the very reason why Saul was in Damascus, and so, surely, he did not want to become Saul's first victim there. His hesitation was understandable.

Yet, what Ananias did not know was that Saul had just had a personal encounter with Jesus that changed his life forever. He did not know that, instead of still working for the Sanhedrin, Saul—to Ananias's astonishment—just had been called by Jesus to work for Him, which means that Saul was no longer an apostle of the Sanhedrin but Jesus' chosen instrument to take the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles.

Read Galatians 1:1, 11, 12. What special claim does Paul make with regard to his apostolic ministry?

In Galatians, Paul insists that he received his message and his apostleship directly from Jesus Christ, not from any human source. This does not necessarily contradict the role performed by Ananias in his call. When visiting him, Ananias just confirmed the commission Saul had already received on the Damascus road from Jesus Himself.

In fact, the change in Saul's life was so dramatic that no human cause can be assigned to it. Only divine intervention can explain how Jesus' most obsessive opponent would suddenly embrace Him as Savior and Lord, leave everything—convictions, reputation, career—behind, and become His most devoted and prolific apostle.

In what ways does Saul's conversion illustrate the operation of God's wonderful grace? What can you learn from his story concerning those in your life whom you doubt will ever come to true faith?

The Beginning of Paul's Ministry

Acts 9:19–25 gives the impression that after his conversion, Paul remained in Damascus for a while before returning to Jerusalem (Acts 9:26). In Galatians 1:17, however, Paul adds that, before going to Jerusalem, he went to Arabia, where he apparently lived in seclusion for a certain period. “Here, in the solitude of the desert, Paul had ample opportunity for quiet study and meditation.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 125.

Read Acts 9:20–25. How does Luke describe Paul's ministry in Damascus? How well did it go?

Paul's original target when he left Jerusalem with letters from the high priest was the Jewish believers that had presumably sought refuge in the synagogues of Damascus (*Acts 9:2*). Now, after coming back from Arabia, he finally made it to the synagogues, not to arrest believers but to increase their number; not to slander Jesus as an impostor but to present Him as the Messiah of Israel. What must have gone on in the minds of those who, having heard of him only as one of their persecutors, now hear him witness about Jesus? What could they do but marvel at what Saul of Tarsus had become and at what he was doing for the church? (They probably had no idea of the influence this new convert would eventually have!)

Not able to contradict Paul, some of his opponents conspired together to take his life. Paul's account of the episode (*2 Cor. 11:32, 33*) suggests that his opponents denounced him to the local authorities in order to achieve their intent. However, with the believers' help, Paul was able to escape in a basket, possibly through the window of a house built on the city wall.

Paul knew from the start that he would face challenges (*Acts 9:16*). Opposition, persecution, and suffering from various sources would be a constant in his ministry, but nothing would shake his faith or sense of duty, despite the hardships and trials that he faced practically at every step of his new life in Christ (*2 Cor. 4:8, 9*).

Despite struggles and opposition, Paul didn't give up. How can we learn to do the same when it comes to faith—that is, how to persevere amid discouragement and opposition?

Return to Jerusalem

Having escaped from Damascus, Paul returned to Jerusalem for the first time since he had left as a persecutor. This happened three years after his conversion (*Gal. 1:18*). It was not an easy return, as he faced problems both inside and outside the church.

Read Acts 9:26–30. What happened to Paul when he arrived in Jerusalem?

In Jerusalem, Paul tried to join the apostles. Though by that time he already had been a Christian for three years, the news of his conversion sounded so incredible that the apostles, like Ananias before them, were rather skeptical. They feared it was just part of a carefully elaborated plot. It was Barnabas, a Levite from Cyprus (*Acts 4:36, 37*), thus a Hellenist, who broke the apostles' resistance and introduced Paul to them. They, too, must have marveled at what God had done to Paul; that is, once they realized that he was genuine.

Such resistance, however, would never entirely disappear, if not because of Paul's past actions in persecuting the church, then at least because of the gospel he preached. As in the case of Stephen, the Judean believers, including the apostles, were quite slow to understand the universal scope of the Christian faith, a faith no longer based in the Old Testament ceremonial system, especially in the sacrificial system, which had lost its validity with Jesus' death on the cross. Paul's closest circle of relationship within the church in Judea would always be the Hellenistic believers: besides Barnabas himself, it included Philip, one of the Seven (*Acts 21:8*), and Mnason, also from Cyprus (*Acts 21:16*). Several years later, the Jerusalem church leaders would still accuse Paul of preaching basically the same doctrine Stephen had preached before (*Acts 21:21*).

During the fifteen days he stayed in Jerusalem (*Gal. 1:18*), Paul apparently decided to share the gospel with the same nonbelieving Jews whom he had incited against Stephen some time before. As with Stephen, however, his efforts met with strong opposition, posing a threat to his own life. In a vision, Jesus told him to leave Jerusalem for his own safety (*Acts 22:17–21*). With the help of the brethren, he went down to the city port of Caesarea and from there to his hometown in Cilicia, where he would stay for several years before starting his missionary journeys.

Further Thought: “A general slain in battle is lost to his army, but his death gives no additional strength to the enemy. But when a man of prominence joins the opposing force, not only are his services lost, but those to whom he joins himself gain a decided advantage. Saul of Tarsus, on his way to Damascus, might easily have been struck dead by the Lord, and much strength would have been withdrawn from the persecuting power. But God in His providence not only spared Saul’s life, but converted him, thus transferring a champion from the side of the enemy to the side of Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 124.

“Christ had commanded his disciples to go and teach all nations; but the previous teachings which they had received from the Jews made it difficult for them to fully comprehend the words of their Master, and therefore they were slow to act upon them. They called themselves the children of Abraham, and regarded themselves as the heirs of divine promise. It was not until several years after the Lord’s ascension that their minds were sufficiently expanded to clearly understand the intent of Christ’s words, that they were to labor for the conversion of the Gentiles as well as of the Jews.”—Ellen G. White, *Sketches From the Life of Paul*, p. 38.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Dwell more on Jesus’ question to Paul on the Damascus road: “Why do you persecute me?” (*Acts 9:4, NRSV*). For Paul, this question was an indication that Jesus of Nazareth had indeed been resurrected from the dead. But, more than that, it was also an indication of the spiritual identification that exists between Jesus and His church (*see also Matt. 25:34–45*). The implication is obvious: any harm done to the church is harm done to Jesus Himself. In practical terms, what does this mean to us today?
- ② Witnessing for Jesus involves suffering for Jesus. It is not by chance that the Greek word for “witness” (*martyrs*) came to be associated with “martyrdom.” What does it mean to suffer for Jesus?
- ③ There’s an old Latin saying, *Credo ut intelligam*, which means, “I believe in order that I may understand.” How does this idea help us understand what happened to Saul of Tarsus? That is, before his conversion, before Paul became a believer in Jesus, he didn’t understand. Only after his experience was he able to comprehend. What lesson can we draw from this for the times when we may find ourselves frustrated with those who don’t believe in truths that seem so clear to us?

Facebooking the Gospel

By Andrew McChesney, Adventist Mission

South Koreans are among the most diligent Seventh-day Adventist gospel workers. Visit the Middle East, and you will find faithful Koreans in Turkey and Lebanon. Koreans live in Africa and South America. Even remote places in Bangladesh and India have an active Korean presence.

But despite this mission spirit, some young people in South Korea are struggling. The problem is connected with a cultural generation gap and career challenges in a country where Saturday is a workday. But derision from other Christians also hurts. While more than a quarter of South Korea's population of 51 million is Christian, Adventists represent a tiny minority. The Adventist Church is dismissed as a cult, and members are mockingly referred to as "sdas," a play on the church's acronym, SDA.

Six Adventist university students decided that they had seen enough. They created a Facebook group and an online radio station aimed at nurturing young fellow Adventists. "Our focus is to reach young people who feel that they don't belong to mainstream Adventism," said project cofounder Hansu Hyun, 27, a graphic design student at church-owned Sahmyook University in South Korea's capital, Seoul.

Young Adventists have taken notice. The Facebook group, opened in 2014, has about 900 followers, a significant number for the Adventist Church in South Korea. It offers colorful memes with vegetarian recipes and testimonies. For the testimonies, administrators interview young adults or sometimes a national actor who is Adventist, and the testimony is spread across five or more memes. A big hit was made with memes about Adventist war hero Desmond Doss during the theatrical release of *Hacksaw Ridge*.

"We have found that informal content like this is easy for young people to embrace," said project cofounder Taegyun Bong, 25, a theology major at Sahmyook University. "Young Adventists who have left the church have told us that they are finding healing through our ministry."

The radio station, linked to the Facebook group, has the cheeky name RadioSda in a nod to the slur toward Adventists, and it offers a two-hour weekly broadcast. Topics have included church youth leaders talking about how they spend Sabbath afternoons and a law school student discussing Sabbath challenges. Some 700 to 2,000 people tune in every week.



"Our whole project can be described in one word: *willingness*," said cofounder Hyunho Kim, 27, an English literature student. "It's easy to become passive in our Christian life, but we are young people who are willing to act to have an impact on the Adventist community."

The Ministry of Peter



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 9:32–43, Acts 10:9–16, Eph. 2:11–19, Acts 11:1–26, Acts 12:1–18.*

Memory Text: “Then Peter began to speak to them: ‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him’ ” (*Acts 10:34, 35, NRSV*).

With Paul's departure to Tarsus, Peter is again the main character in Luke's narrative of the early days of the Christian church. Peter is portrayed in a sort of itinerant ministry throughout Judea and the surrounding regions. Acts here tells two brief miraculous stories, the healing of Aeneas and the resurrection of Tabitha (Dorcas), which are then followed by the story of Cornelius in chapter 10.

The conversion of Gentiles was the most controversial issue in the apostolic church. Though the discussions that followed Cornelius's baptism were far from solving all the difficulties, the outpouring of the Spirit, reminiscent of what had happened at Pentecost, helped to convince Peter and the brethren in Jerusalem that the blessings of the gospel were not restricted to Jews. Meanwhile, the church in Antioch had already started moving toward the Gentiles, as well.

This week's study also includes the rise of a new, short persecution—this time under King Herod—and its impact on the apostles, who had been spared in the persecution carried out by Paul.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 11.

At Lydda and Joppa

Peter was visiting the Christian communities through the coastal region of Judea. His purpose was probably to give them doctrinal instruction (*Acts 2:42*), but God used him powerfully to perform miracles in the same fashion as those performed by Jesus Himself.

Read *Acts 9:32–35*. What similarities do you see in the miracle of Jesus in *Luke 5:17–26* and the healing of Aeneas?

Despite the brevity of the account, the miracle reminds us of the well-known story of the Capernaum paralytic healed by Jesus (*Luke 5:17–26*). Even the detail about the bed is similar. More important, however, was the impact of Aeneas’s cure, not only in Lydda but also in the coastal plain of Sharon. Having verified for themselves the reality of the miracle, many people turned to the Lord.

Read *Acts 9:36–43*. Review the story of Tabitha’s resurrection. What was so special about her?

Tabitha—the Aramaic for “gazelle;” in Greek, Dorcas—was a believer very dear in her neighborhood because of her works of Christian charity. The story of her resurrection also parallels a miracle performed by Jesus, the resurrection of Jairus’s daughter (*Luke 8:41, 42, 49–56*), which Peter had witnessed. Following Jesus’ example, he asked everybody to leave the room (*see Mark 5:40*). Then he knelt down and prayed, after which he called to the dead woman, “‘Tabitha, get up’” (*Acts 9:40, NRSV*).

The apostles performed many miracles; yet, in fact, these were God’s actions through the apostles’ hands (*Acts 5:12*). The similarities with Jesus’ own miracles were perhaps to remind the church, including us today, that what matters most is not so much who the instrument is but the measure of his or her surrender to God (*see John 14:12*). When we fully allow God to use us for the gospel’s cause, great things can happen. Peter not only resurrected Tabitha, but the miracle also led to many conversions in Joppa (*Acts 9:42*).

Some people think that if only they could see a real miracle, such as what happened here, then they would believe. And though at times miracles helped lead some people to faith, the Bible is filled with stories of those who saw miracles and still didn’t believe. On what, then, should our faith be based?

At Cornelius's House

In Joppa, Peter stayed with a certain Simon, a tanner by trade (*Acts 9:43*). Meanwhile, in Caesarea, about 25 miles (40 kilometers) from Joppa, there lived a Roman centurion named Cornelius. He and his household were devout worshipers of God, though they had not yet formally adhered to Judaism, meaning that Cornelius was still an uncircumcised Gentile. In a God-given vision, he was instructed to send messengers to Joppa and invite Peter to visit him (*Acts 10:1–8*).

Read Acts 10:9–16, 28, 34, 35. What did Peter experience, and how did he interpret it?

It is important to know that Peter's vision was not about food but about people. Yes, it was around noon, Peter was hungry, and the voice told him to kill and eat; yet, God used the vision, not to remove the distinction between clean and unclean animals but to teach Peter about the inclusive character of the gospel.

The vision was explicitly intended to break Peter's resistance against Gentiles. Peter's view was that if he entered Cornelius's house and fellowshiped with him, he would defile himself and so become unfit to worship in the temple or to come before God's presence. First-century Jews from Judea and the surrounding areas did not associate with uncircumcised Gentiles.

The problem was with the contemporary theology, which excluded the Gentiles from the commonwealth of Israel, even though this view had become a perversion of the whole point of Israel's existence as a nation, which was to reach out to the world with a knowledge of the true God.

Because circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic covenant, uncircumcised Gentiles came to be segregated and treated with contempt. They could have no part whatsoever in the blessings of the covenant unless they accepted circumcision and became Jews. Such a concept, though, was incompatible with the universal scope of Jesus' death, as the early believers, over time, were coming to understand.

Read Titus 2:11, Galatians 3:26–28, and Ephesians 2:11–19. What do these texts teach us about the universality of the gospel message? What should they tell us about how wrong it is for Christians to harbor prejudice against any group based on ethnicity?

The Gift of the Spirit

Acts 10:44–48 reveals a critical moment in the early church’s history. It was the first time that the gospel was being preached to uncircumcised Gentiles by one of the apostles. Unlike the Hellenistic believers, the apostles and other Judean believers were not ready to receive Gentiles in the church. Since Jesus was the Messiah of Israel, they thought that the gospel was to be shared only with Jews from near and far. The Gentiles would first have to be converted to Judaism and then be accepted into the community of faith. In other words, before Gentiles could become Christians, they first had to become Jews. That was the thinking that needed to be changed among these early Jewish believers.

The gift of tongues given to Cornelius and his household was added as a clear, observable sign that such a concept was mistaken, that God has no favorites, and that in terms of salvation both Jews and Gentiles stand on equal footing before Him.

Read Acts 11:1–18. How did the church in Jerusalem react to Peter’s experience at Caesarea?

The long-established Jewish prejudice concerning Gentiles led the believers in Jerusalem to criticize Peter for having eaten with uncircumcised people. It seems that they were more concerned with Jewish ceremonial scruples than with the salvation of Cornelius and his family. They might have feared that if the church broke with such practices it would represent a denial of Israel’s faith; they would lose God’s favor, and become liable themselves to the same accusations—from their fellow Jews—that had led to Stephen’s death.

“The time had come for an entirely new phase of work to be entered upon by the church of Christ. The door that many of the Jewish converts had closed against the Gentiles was now to be thrown open. And the Gentiles who accepted the gospel were to be regarded as on an equality with the Jewish disciples, without the necessity of observing the rite of circumcision.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 136.

As at Pentecost, here, too, they spoke in languages previously unknown to them, rather than in ecstatic or heavenly languages. Only the purpose was different: while for the apostles the gift aimed at the church’s world mission, for Cornelius it functioned as a confirmation that God’s grace was operating even among the Gentiles.

The Church in Antioch

Motivated by Cornelius's conversion, Luke briefly interrupts his account of Peter's ministry to show the gospel's initial progress among the Gentiles.

Read Acts 11:19–26. What happened when some Jerusalem refugees came to Antioch?

This section of Acts 11 refers back to Paul's persecution in chapter 8. Thus, while the previous developments were taking place in Judea and elsewhere, some of the Hellenistic believers who were forced to leave Jerusalem were spreading the gospel way beyond the borders of Judea.

Luke gives special attention to the great city of Antioch, in Syria, where refugees began to preach to their fellow Jews and to the Hellenists, and many of them were accepting the faith. Jesus' commission in Acts 1:8 was then being realized through the efforts of these Hellenistic Jewish Christians. They were the ones who became the real founders of the mission to the Gentiles.

Because of the church's success in Antioch, the apostles in Jerusalem decided to send Barnabas to evaluate the situation. Noticing the great opportunities for the advancement of the gospel, Barnabas sent for Paul in Tarsus, feeling he could be a vital helper.

Barnabas was right. During the year he and Paul worked together, large crowds, mostly Gentiles, heard the gospel. The enthusiasm with which they spoke about Jesus Christ made the believers there become known for the first time as "Christians" (*Acts 11:26*). That they "were called" Christians indicates the term was coined by those outside the church, probably as a form of mockery, while the believers preferred to refer to themselves as "brethren" (*Acts 1:16*), "disciples" (*Acts 6:1*), or even "saints" (*Acts 9:13*). By the time Acts was written, "Christian" had become a common designation (*Acts 26:28*), and Luke seems to approve of it. "Christian" means a follower or an adherent of Christ.

What does it mean to you to be called a "Christian"? What about your life is truly Christian? That is, how differently do you live from non-Christians in the things that really matter?

Herod's Persecution

Turning again to Judea, we are faced now with the account of King Herod's executing James, the brother of John and son of Zebedee (*Mark 1:19*). He also wanted to do the same with Peter.

Read Acts 12:1–4. What does this teach about the challenges the early church faced?

The King Herod mentioned here is Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great (*Matt. 2:1*); he ruled Judea from A.D. 40 to 44. As a result of his show of piety, he earned popularity among his Jewish subjects, especially the Pharisees. His attempt to win the favor of the Jews by attacking some apostles fits perfectly with what we know of him from other sources.

Because James's execution was effective in fulfilling Agrippa's agenda, he planned to execute Peter, as well. Peter was arrested and delivered to four squads of four soldiers each to guard him, one squad for each of the four watches of the night. Peter had four soldiers at a time with him: he would be chained to two soldiers, one on each side, and two would guard the entrance. Such extreme precaution was certainly taken to try to avoid what had already happened to Peter (and John) some time before (*Acts 5:17–20*).

Read Acts 12:5–18. What happened in response to the brethren's prayers?

The night before the day that Agrippa had planned to put Peter on trial and execute him, Peter was once again miraculously released by an angel.

Next, we find the story of Agrippa's death at Caesarea (*Acts 12:20–23*). Attempts have been made to identify the cause of his death (peritonitis, an ulcer, even poison); yet, Luke is clear in saying that the king died because of a divine judgment.

James is killed, Peter is delivered, and Herod faces divine judgment. In some cases, we see justice; in others, it doesn't appear that way. What should this teach us about how we just don't have all the answers to all our questions and why we need to live by faith regarding what we don't understand?

Further Thought: “In the tenth chapter of Acts we have still another instance of the ministration of heavenly angels, resulting in the conversion of Cornelius and his company. Let these chapters [8–10] be read, and receive special attention. In them we see that heaven is much nearer to the Christian who is engaged in the work of soulsaving than many suppose. We should learn through them also the lesson of God’s regard for every human being, and that each should treat his fellow man as one of the Lord’s instrumentalities for the accomplishment of His work in the earth.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1059.

“When the church prays, the cause of God will go forward, and His enemies will come to naught, even if this does not exempt the church from suffering and martyrdom; Luke’s belief in the victory of the gospel is thoroughly realistic and recognizes that though the word of God is not fettered, its servants may well have to suffer and be bound.”—I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 206, 207.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Cornelius is described as “a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God” (*Acts 10:2, NRSV*). It is evident that God’s Spirit was already working in Cornelius long before he met Peter. Could it be that his devotional life was an opportunity for God to reach him with the gospel message? What lesson is there for us in his story?
- 2 In class go back to Monday’s final question and ask yourselves this question: What is the cultural, social, and political context in which you live that breeds the kind of ethnic tension that Christians are not supposed to harbor? In other words, when we need to, how can we all as Christians rise above our culture and background?
- 3 Despite their damage, Paul’s efforts to persecute turned out to good effect: the refugees who came to Antioch started preaching to Jews and to Hellenists. In class share a personal experience of pain and suffering that God turned into a blessing.
- 4 James was one of Jesus’ closest disciples (*Mark 5:37, 9:2, 14:33*); yet, he was the first of the Twelve to suffer martyrdom. What other examples do we find in the Bible of faithful people suffering unfairly? What lessons should we draw from these accounts for ourselves about the whole question of suffering?

A Reoccurring Nightmare

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

The dream scared Helen Yen, a retired housewife in Taiwan's capital, Taipei. In the dream, she would go someplace and then realize that she couldn't find her way back home. The nightmare tormented her nightly.

The daylight hours were more pleasant. Helen spent time with her husband, adult children, and granddaughter. She began attending free menopause classes at Taiwan Adventist Hospital.

In the classes, Helen heard that the nearby Sung Shan Seventh-day Adventist Church was seeking volunteers for a new community outreach program. The church planned to offer Tuesday classes on Alzheimer's disease, a major challenge in the local community, as well as cooking classes and Bible studies on Wednesdays and Thursdays.

"I had always wanted to volunteer in the community," Helen said in an interview at the church. "I had never heard of Adventists before. But I just came to this church, and the pastor invited me to help in the kitchen."

Helen went to the church at 6:00 A.M. on Tuesdays to bake bread to sell at the Alzheimer's classes. The bread, also offered to the church's 180 members, helps supplement outreach funding from the Taiwan Conference.

Helen said volunteering gave her a new sense of fulfillment and joy. She began to visit the church every weekday and soon was attending Bible classes led by the pastor's wife, Brenda Huang, who oversees the outreach. Helen, a Sunday churchgoer, heard about the seventh-day Sabbath.

"I felt something strange in my heart," Helen said. "I couldn't go on with the way I was living after discovering this new information."

She started to worship at the Adventist church every Sabbath. "Before, I thought, *I'm very blessed because I have a husband, children, and a granddaughter,*" she said. "Then, I realized that there is something more to life."

Nearly two years after Helen started volunteering, she is preparing to join the church through baptism. "She is our first fruit," said the church's pastor, Raymond Ko. In all, 300 people have visited the church's Sabbath services as a result of the outreach program, he said.



Helen had had the reoccurring nightmare about not being able to find her way back home for a year. "But after I came to this church, I stopped having this dream," she said. "I realized that the Seventh-day Adventist truth is the way home—to heaven."

Your Sabbath School mission offerings help support community outreach programs such as the one that led HELEN YEN, left, to baptism.

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What do these three people have in common? They are united by a desire to see the gospel spread in their countries in the Northern Asia-Pacific Division.

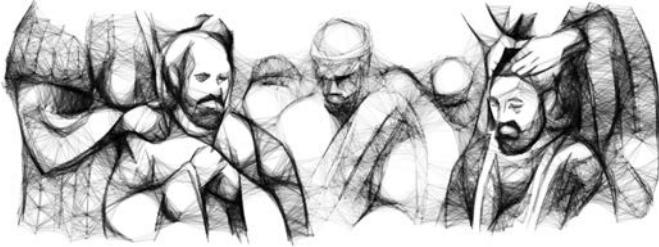
Read about Kurihara Kimiyoshi; a Global Mission pioneer in Japan; Soyloo Serjkhuu, a 14-year-old girl in Mongolia; and Ki-Jo Moon, a Sunday pastor who became an Adventist in South Korea, in this quarter's Youth and

Adult Mission quarterly (bit.ly/adultmission) and Children's Mission quarterly (bit.ly/childrensmision).

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Paul's First Missionary Journey



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 13, 2 Cor. 4:7–10, Rom. 10:1–4, Rom. 3:19, Acts 14:1–26, Romans 9–11.*

Memory Text: “Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses’ ” (*Acts 13:38, 39, NIV*).

Most certainly, the gospel was to go to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. This was a message that, slowly but surely, the early Jewish Christians were starting to grasp.

Our first explicit report of Gentiles joining the faith in large scale relates to Antioch. In other words, it was in Antioch that the first Gentile church was founded, even if it also had a substantial contingent of Jewish believers (*Gal. 2:11–13*). Due to the missionary zeal of its founders and the new impetus provided by the arrival of Barnabas and Paul, the church there grew rapidly, and it became the first important Christian center outside Judea. In fact, in some aspects it even surpassed the church in Jerusalem.

With the apostles still stationed in Jerusalem, Antioch became the birthplace of Christian missions. It was from there, and with the initial support of the local believers, that Paul left on all three of his missionary journeys. It was because of their commitment that Christianity became what Jesus had intended: a world religion, one in which the gospel would be spread to “every nation, tribe, tongue, and people” (*Rev. 14:6, NKJV*).

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 18.

Salamis and Paphos

In Acts 13, Luke shifts the scene back to Antioch in order to introduce Paul's first missionary journey, which occupies two entire chapters (*Acts 13, 14*). From here through the end of the book, the focus is set on Paul and his Gentile missions.

This is the first missionary endeavor in Acts that is intentional and carefully planned by an individual church; yet, Luke is careful in highlighting that such endeavor originated in God, not in the believers' own initiative. The point, however, is that God can operate only when we willingly place ourselves in a position where He can use us.

Read Acts 13:1–12. What main points does Luke want to stress concerning Barnabas and Paul's activities in Cyprus?

A period of intercessory prayer and fasting preceded the departure of the missionaries; in this context, the laying on of hands was basically an act of consecration, or a commendation to God's grace (*Acts 14:26*) for the task at hand.

The island of Cyprus is in the northeastern corner of the Mediterranean Sea, not far from Antioch. It was a natural place to start, as not only was Barnabas from Cyprus but the gospel had also already reached the island. Yet, certainly there was still much to be done.

Once in Cyprus, Barnabas and Paul—and John Mark, Barnabas's cousin (*Acts 15:39, Col. 4:10*), who was with them—preached in the synagogues of Salamis. This was Paul's regular practice: to preach first in the synagogues before turning to Gentiles. Because Jesus was Israel's Messiah, it was more than natural to share the gospel with Jews first.

After Salamis, they moved westward, preaching (we can assume) as they went, until they came to the capital, Paphos. The narrative then revolves around two individuals: a Jewish sorcerer named Bar-Jesus, also known as Elymas, and Sergius Paulus, the local Roman governor. The story provides a good example of how the gospel was met with contrasting responses: on one hand, open opposition; on the other, faithful acceptance even by highly prestigious Gentiles. The language of Acts 13:12 clearly implies conversion.

Think how, in this case, it was a Jew who resisted the truth while a Gentile accepted it. How might this help us understand why sometimes those of other Christian denominations are harder to reach with "present truth" than are those of no faith at all?

Pisidian Antioch: Part 1

From Cyprus, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga, in Pamphylia, on the southern coast of modern Turkey. Before they moved on to Pisidian Antioch, Luke reports two significant incidental changes: Paul becomes the leading figure (up until here, Barnabas always is mentioned first) and Luke stops using Paul's Jewish name ("Saul") and starts referring to him only as "Paul" (*Acts 13:9*). This is probably because from now on Paul finds himself mostly in a Greco-Roman environment.

Acts 13:13 records John Mark's going back to Jerusalem. We are not informed in the texts themselves of the reason for John Mark's desertion. Ellen G. White wrote that, faced with fear and discouraged because of the hardship ahead of them, "Mark was intimidated and, losing all courage, refused to go farther and returned to Jerusalem."—*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 170. God never promised it would be easy. On the contrary, Paul knew from the very beginning that his service for Jesus would involve much suffering (*Acts 9:16*), but he learned to rely entirely on God's power, and in that lay the secret of his strength (*2 Cor. 4:7–10*).

Read Acts 13:38. What was the essence of Paul's message in the Antioch synagogue?

Acts 13:16–41 contains the first of Paul's sermons recorded in the New Testament. It was not, of course, the first sermon Paul gave, and there is no question that it represents only a brief summary of what he said.

The sermon is divided into three main parts. It begins with shared beliefs about God's election of Israel and the kingship of David (*Acts 13:17–23*); this part is intended to establish a point of contact with his Jewish audience. Next, it presents Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promises of a descendant of David who could bring salvation to Israel (*Acts 13:24–37*). The concluding part is a warning against rejecting the salvation that is offered through Jesus (*Acts 13:38–41*).

The climax of the sermon is verses 38, 39, which enclose the core of Paul's message on justification. Forgiveness and justification are available only through Jesus, not through Moses' law. This passage does not say that the law has been abrogated. It only highlights its inability to perform what the Jews expected it to do; namely, justification (Rom. 10:1–4). Such prerogative rests solely with Jesus Christ (*Gal. 2:16*).

What does it mean that salvation is only through Jesus? How do you reconcile the necessity to keep God's moral law with the fact that the law is unable to justify?

Pisidian Antioch: Part 2

Acts 13:38, 39, presents the issue of the law's inability to justify, an important doctrinal concept. Despite the binding character of its moral commandments, the law is unable to bring justification because it cannot produce perfect obedience in those who observe it (*Acts 15:10, Rom. 8:3*). Even if the law could produce perfect obedience in us, that perfect obedience cannot atone for past sins (*Rom. 3:19; Gal. 3:10, 11*). This is why justification cannot be earned, not even partially. We can receive it only by faith in Jesus' atoning sacrifice (*Rom. 3:28, Gal. 2:16*), a gift that we do not deserve. However central it may be to the Christian life, obedience cannot earn us salvation.

Read Acts 13:42–49. How did the synagogue receive Paul's message?

Notwithstanding the harsh way Paul ended his message, the reaction of most in the synagogue was highly favorable. The following Sabbath, however, things changed drastically. It is highly probable that "the Jews" who were rejecting the gospel message were the synagogue leaders, those who represented official Judaism. Luke ascribes their ruthless attitude toward Paul to jealousy.

In the ancient world, several aspects of Judaism, such as monotheism, lifestyle, and even the Sabbath, exerted a strong attraction among non-Jews, and many of them joined the Jewish faith as proselytes. Circumcision, however, was a serious hindrance, as it was considered a barbaric and disgusting practice. Consequently, many Gentiles would attend the synagogues to worship God but without formally converting to Judaism. These were known as "God-fearers," and it might have been the God-fearers, as well as the proselytes, of the Antioch synagogue (*Acts 13:16, 43*) who helped to spread the news about Paul's message among the people in general, and they came in great numbers. The possibility to experience salvation without first having to adhere to Judaism was no doubt particularly attractive to many.

This may help to explain the jealousy of the Jewish leaders. In any case, by rejecting the gospel they were not only excluding themselves from God's salvation but also liberating Paul and Barnabas to turn their full attention to the Gentiles, who rejoiced and praised God for including them in His saving plan.

Iconium

Under the instigation of the Jewish leaders in Antioch, the local authorities incited a mob against Paul and Barnabas and ran them out of town (*Acts 13:50*). The disciples, however, were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit (*Acts 13:52*). The missionaries then headed to the city of Iconium.

Read Acts 14:1–7. What was the result of Paul and Barnabas’s activities in Iconium?

In Iconium, Paul and Barnabas continued their practice of addressing first the Jews before turning to the Gentiles. Paul’s sermon in Antioch (*Acts 13:16–41*) offers the main reason behind the Jewish priority in their ministry: the election of Israel, with all that it involved (*Rom. 3:2; 9:4, 5*), and God’s fulfillment of His promise of a Savior from David’s lineage. Despite the fact that many Jews were rejecting the gospel, Paul never lost hope of a substantial Jewish conversion.

In Romans 9–11, Paul makes it clear that “not all who are descended from Israel are Israel” (*Rom. 9:6, NIV*) and that it is only because of God’s mercy that some of the Jews believe at all. God has not rejected His people, but “at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace” (*Rom. 11:5, NIV*). Paul continued to preach the gospel to Gentiles, though he believed that one day more Jews would come to faith in Jesus.

“Paul’s argument in Romans 9–11 offers a further explanation of the mission strategy he pursues in the narrative of Acts and confronts every generation of Christians with the theological importance of bearing witness to unbelieving Jews.”—David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 401.

The situation was not much different from that in Antioch. The first reaction of both Jews and Gentiles to Paul’s gospel was highly positive, but again the unbelieving Jews, possibly the leaders of the local Jewish community, stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the missionaries, causing a division among the people. As the opponents were planning to attack and lynch Paul and Barnabas, the two missionaries decided to leave the town and move to the next one.

More than just hearing the gospel, Jewish people need to see it lived among those who profess the name of Jesus. If you have Jewish acquaintances, what kind of witness are you presenting to them?

Lystra and Derbe

The next place Paul and Barnabas visited was Lystra, an obscure village some 18 miles (about 29 km) southwest of Iconium. Though they spent some time there (*Acts 14:6, 7, 15*), Luke reports only one story and its developments: the healing of a lame man, probably a beggar, who suffered from that malady from birth.

Read Acts 14:5–19. What did their reaction to Paul reveal about just how steeped in ignorance the people were?

The crowd was so impressed by the miracle that they mistook Paul and Barnabas for gods—Barnabas for Zeus, the supreme god of the Greek pantheon, and Paul for Hermes, Zeus’s attendant and spokesman. In fact, the people wanted to offer them sacrifices.

Latin poet Ovid (43 B.C.–A.D. 17/18) had earlier recorded a legend of these same two gods disguised as humans visiting a town in the same area (“the hills of Phrygia”) and seeking a place to rest. According to the legend, a humble, elderly couple treated them kindly and with hospitality; the rest of the people were indifferent. Because of their kindness and hospitality toward the incognito visitors, the couple had their house transformed into a temple and themselves into priests, while the rest of the town was completely destroyed (*Metamorphoses* 611–724).

With such a story circulating in this region, the reaction of the people to Paul’s miracle comes as no surprise. The story also helps to explain why the crowd assumed that the missionaries were those two gods, and not Asclepius, for example, the god of healing. Paul and Barnabas, however, were able to stop their false worship of themselves. In the end, some opponents from Antioch and Iconium caused a complete reversal of the situation, and Paul was stoned and left for dead.

Read Acts 14:20–26. Where did Paul and Barnabas finish their journey? And what did they do on their way back?

Paul said: “ ‘We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God’ ” (*Acts 14:22, NKJV*). What does that mean? How have you, perhaps, experienced what he is saying there? Most important, how can you learn to grow in faith from whatever “tribulations” you are facing?

Further Thought: “During the life of Christ on earth he had sought to lead the Jews out of their exclusiveness. The conversion of the centurion and of the Syrophenician woman, were instances of his direct work outside of the acknowledged people of Israel. The time had now come for active and continued work among the Gentiles, of whom whole communities received the gospel gladly, and glorified God for the light of an intelligent faith. The unbelief and malice of the Jews did not turn aside the purpose of God; for a new Israel was grafted into the old olive-tree. The synagogues were closed against the apostles; but private houses were thrown open for their use, and public buildings of the Gentiles were also used in which to preach the word of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Sketches From the Life of Paul*, p. 51.

“In all their missionary endeavors Paul and Barnabas sought to follow Christ’s example of willing sacrifice and faithful, earnest labor for souls. Wide-awake, zealous, untiring, they did not consult inclination or personal ease, but with prayerful anxiety and unceasing activity they sowed the seed of truth. And with the sowing of the seed, the apostles were careful to give to all who took their stand for the gospel, practical instruction that was of untold value. This spirit of earnestness and godly fear made upon the minds of the new disciples a lasting impression regarding the importance of the gospel message.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 186.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Dwell more on the story of John Mark’s fleeing when things got hard. Paul and Barnabas later had an argument over John Mark, when Barnabas wanted to use him again and Paul didn’t (see *Acts 15:37*). Years later, however, Paul wrote: “Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry” (*2 Tim. 4:11, NKJV*). What lessons are here for us regarding those who, in certain circumstances, prove unfaithful to their calling?
- 2 Review Paul and Barnabas’s response to the Lystrians when they were mistaken for gods (*Acts 14:14–18*). How can we respond when tempted to take credit for what God has done?
- 3 Read *Acts 14:21–23*. Based on Paul and Barnabas’s example, what can we individually and as a church do to nourish or strengthen the faith of new converts?
- 4 How can we make sure that we don’t let man-made traditions, or even beliefs that we have held for a long time, get in the way of advancing in truth, as did the religious leaders who opposed Paul?

Pornography vs. Gospel

By TAKAHASHI TORU

The day was long and disappointing as I went door to door to sell Seventh-day Adventist books in the southern Japanese city of Shizuoka. No one wanted to buy a book.

Near the day's end, I suddenly found myself on a strange, dark street. Uneasily, I walked over to the nearest house. Pornographic magazines were strewn around the yard. Piles of the magazines were stacked up near the front door. The magazines were everywhere.

I backed away. Fear seized me, and I wanted to run. Then I panicked.

"Hello, my name is Takahashi Toru!" I yelled at the house. "I'm from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and I have some books that will change your life!"

The words came from a speech that we are trained to give by Youth Rush, a student literature evangelism program. When I panicked, I began to blurt out the speech.

The front door opened, and a severely obese man stepped out. Still following my speech, I asked, "Would you like a health book?"

I expected the man to say, "No," and I was prepared to run.

But the man, his voice rumbling in a deep bass, said, "Yes, I'd like a health book."

I nervously held out a small missionary book. The man took it and opened it with interest.

"Yes, I want to get this," he said, pulling out some money.

After the sale, I fled. I was scared, and I wanted to get far away. As I ran, I prayed for the man and thanked God for His protection.

Then I stopped in my tracks. I had an epiphany. My heart was just as filthy as that man's yard. Still, Jesus had walked into my heart and offered hope. Jesus said, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you" (Ezekiel 36:26, NKJV).

As I stood on the street, gratitude overwhelmed me. I felt so thankful that Jesus had dared to enter my heart. With that newfound appreciation, I marched over to the nearest house and immediately sold a book.



TAKAHASHI TORU, left, a 21-year-old media-journalism student, received his Youth Rush training at Tokyo's Setagaya Church, which trains Adventist young people from across Japan to share the gospel message. Part of this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help the church expand its work.

The Jerusalem Council



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 15; Gal. 2:11–13; Exod. 12:43–49; Rom. 3:30; Lev. 18:30; Rev. 2:14, 20.*

Memory Text: “We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are” (*Acts 15:11, NIV*).

After more than two years, Paul and Barnabas returned to Syrian Antioch. Because the whole church there had been involved in sending them out as missionaries, it was natural that they would give a report to the church. The report's emphasis, however, was not on what they had accomplished but on what God Himself had done through them.

The object of the report, of course, was the success of the mission among the Gentiles, though many Jews had also come to faith. Since the episode of Cornelius, however, the conversion of uncircumcised Gentiles had become an issue (*Acts 11:1–18*), but now that large numbers of them were being admitted to church membership, things became particularly complicated. Many believers in Jerusalem were not happy. For them, Gentiles would need first to be circumcised, that is, to become Jewish proselytes in order to become part of God's people and have fellowship with them.

Acts 15 is all about the Gentile problem reaching a critical level and about the church working together to find a solution. The Jerusalem Council was a turning point in the history of the apostolic church in relation to its worldwide mission.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 25.

The Point at Issue

From the beginning, the church at Antioch consisted of both (Hellenistic) Jews and uncircumcised Gentiles (*Acts 11:19–21, Gal. 2:11–13*) who apparently lived in peaceful fellowship with each other. That fellowship, however, was shattered by the arrival of a group of believers from Jerusalem.

Read Acts 15:1–5. What was the problem the church was facing?

Traditionally called Judaizers, those individuals from Judea were possibly the same ones identified in verse 5 as believing Pharisees. The presence of Pharisees in the church should not surprise us, as Paul himself had been a Pharisee prior to his conversion (*Phil. 3:5*). This group seems to have gone to Antioch on their own initiative (*Acts 15:24*), though another episode that also took place in Antioch some time later shows that most Jews, including the apostles, were not very comfortable with the presence of uncircumcised Gentiles in the church (*Gal. 2:11–13*).

In his Epistle to the Galatians, Paul does not speak positively about the Judaizers, dubbing them as troublemakers (*Gal. 1:7, 5:10, ESV*) and “false brothers” (*Gal. 2:4, ESV*) whose real motive was to undermine the spiritual freedom of the gospel and bring the Gentile converts into the slavery of legalism.

Their point was rather simple: unless the Gentiles were circumcised and kept all the other Jewish ceremonial laws, they could not be saved. Salvation—so they believed—was to be found only within God’s covenant community and, according to the Old Testament, there was no other way to become part of God’s chosen people except through circumcision (*Gen. 17:9–14, Exod. 12:48*). In short, Gentiles could be saved only if they first became Jewish proselytes.

Paul and Barnabas, of course, could not agree with such requirements, which went against the very nature of the gospel. The aggressive approach of the Judean visitors, however, generated a heated discussion; the word in Acts 15:2 (*stasis*) has the sense of “conflict” or “dissension.” Yet, the matter was too important to be dealt with at the local level only. The unity of the church was at stake. The brethren of Antioch then decided to send a number of delegates to Jerusalem, including Paul and Barnabas, to find a solution.

Put yourself in the position of the Judaizers. What arguments could you make for your case?

Circumcision

One of the great issues in this conflict was circumcision. This was not a human institution (*contrast Matt. 15:2, 9*). Rather, it had been commanded by God Himself as a sign of His covenant with Abraham's descendants as His chosen people (*Gen. 17:9–14*).

Read Exodus 12:43–49. In addition to Israelite males, who else was supposed to be circumcised?

The blessings of the covenant were not restricted to born Israelites but were extended to any slave or sojourning stranger who wished to experience it, as long as he were to be circumcised. After circumcision, the stranger would have the same status before God as the born Israelite: “He shall be as a native of the land” (*Exod. 12:48, NKJV*).

Circumcision, therefore, was indispensable (for a male) to be a full member of God's covenant community. And because Jesus was the Messiah of Israel, it seemed natural that the Judaizers would insist that no Gentile could benefit from His salvation without first becoming a Jew.

Read Romans 3:30, 1 Corinthians 7:18, and Galatians 3:28, 5:6. What was Paul's understanding of circumcision?

By saying that no Gentile could be saved without first joining Judaism, these men were mixing up two distinct concepts: covenant and salvation. Being a member of God's covenant community did not guarantee salvation (*Jer. 4:4, 9:25*). In addition, Abraham himself was saved (justified) by faith, which happened before, and not because, he was circumcised (*Rom. 4:9–13*). Salvation has always been by faith, whereas the covenant was a gracious provision through which God would make Himself and His saving plan known to the entire world. Israel had been chosen for this purpose (*Gen. 12:1–3*).

The problem, however, was that by too closely associating covenant and salvation, these believers came to view circumcision as meritorious. God's saving grace, however, does not operate where human works operate. So, to impose circumcision on believing Gentiles as a means of salvation was to distort the gospel's truth (*Gal. 1:7, 2:3–5*), nullify God's grace (*Gal. 2:21*), and make Jesus of no benefit (*Gal. 5:2*). Furthermore, it was a denial of the universal character of salvation (*Col. 3:11, Titus 2:11*). Paul could never agree to this type of thinking.

What's the danger of thinking that salvation comes from merely being a member of the right church?

The Debate

Read Acts 15:7–11. What was Peter’s contribution to the debate in Jerusalem?

Luke, of course, does not report all the proceedings of the meeting. It would be interesting to know, for example, the supporting arguments of the Judaizers (*Acts 15:5*), as well as Paul’s and Barnabas’s responses (*Acts 15:12*). The fact that we have only Peter’s and James’s speeches shows the importance of these men among the apostles.

In his speech, Peter addressed the apostles and elders, reminding them of his experience with Cornelius years before. In essence, his argument was the same one that he had used before the brethren in Jerusalem (*Acts 11:4–17*). God Himself had shown His approval of Cornelius’s conversion (even though he was an uncircumcised Gentile) by giving him and his household the same gift of the Spirit that He had given the apostles at Pentecost.

In His divine providence, God had used no less a person than Peter to convince the Judean believers that He makes no distinction between Jews and Gentiles with regard to salvation. Even if they lacked the purifying benefits of Old Covenant rules and regulations, the believing Gentiles could no longer be considered unclean, because God Himself had cleansed their hearts. Peter’s final statement sounded very similar to what we would expect from Paul: “ ‘We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are’ ” (*Acts 15:11, NIV*).

Read Acts 15:13–21. What solution to the Gentile problem did James propose?

James’s speech suggests he was in a position of authority (*compare with Acts 12:17; 21:18; Gal. 2:9, 12*). Irrespective of what he might have understood by the rebuilding of David’s tabernacle, which in Amos’s prophecy refers to the restoration of David’s dynasty (*Amos 9:11, 12*), James’s main purpose was to demonstrate that God had already provided for Gentiles to join, in a sense, a reconstituted “people of God,” and thus they could be incorporated into Israel.

Because of this, his decision was that no further restrictions should be imposed on Gentile converts, other than those that normally would be required from foreigners who wished to live in the land of Israel.

The Apostolic Decree

Read Acts 15:28, 29. What four prohibitions did the council decide to impose on Gentile converts?

The main issue for which the council had been convened was satisfactorily resolved. Because salvation is by grace, believing Gentiles were exempted from circumcision when they joined the church. Yet, they should abstain from four things: (1) meat offered in sacrifice to idols in pagan rituals and then served in a temple feast or sold in the market; (2) blood consumption; (3) meat of strangled animals, that is, meat whose blood had not been drained; and (4) sexual immorality in its various forms.

Most Christians today treat the dietary prohibitions (prohibitions 1–3) as temporary recommendations. Because those things were particularly repulsive to Jews, the prohibitions—they argue—were intended only to bridge the gap between Jewish and Gentile believers. It also often is claimed that all other Old Testament laws, including the Levitical food laws (*Leviticus 11*) and the Sabbath commandment (*Exod. 20:8–11*), which are absent from the list, are no longer binding for Christians.

The so-called apostolic decree, however, was neither temporary nor a new code of Christian ethics that excluded everything else related to the Old Testament. In fact, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (*Acts 15:28*), the apostles and elders of the church reproduced the regulations of *Leviticus 17–18* only concerning Israel's resident aliens.

In the context of *Leviticus*, these prohibitions mean the renunciation of paganism. Any foreigner who wished to live in Israel had to abdicate those pagan practices to which he or she had grown accustomed (*Lev. 18:30*). Likewise, any believing Gentile who wished to join the church was required to take a firm stand against paganism.

This, however, was just the first step. Once in, he or she naturally was expected to do God's will by obeying those commandments that are universal, pre-Mosaic, and not intrinsically ceremonial, such as the Sabbath (*Gen. 2:1–3*) and following the differentiation between clean and unclean food (*Gen. 7:2*).

That the decree was not temporary is clear, for example, from *Revelation 2:14, 20*, where the first and the last prohibitions are repeated, implicitly contemplating the other two, as well. In fact, historical evidence shows that the decree was still considered normative by Christians long after the New Testament period.

When disputes arise, how can we learn to sit together, to listen to each other, and in a spirit of respect and humility work through the issues?

The Letter From Jerusalem

Read Acts 15:22–29. What additional measures were taken by the Jerusalem church concerning the council’s decision?

The first measure was to write a letter to the Gentile believers in order to inform them of what had been decided. The letter, written in the name of the apostles and elders of Jerusalem, was an official document that reflected the ascendancy of the Jerusalem church—certainly because of the apostles’ leadership—over the other Christian communities. Written in A.D. 49, which is the most probable date of the council, this letter is one of the earliest Christian documents we have.

The Jerusalem church also decided to appoint two delegates, Judas Barsabas and Silas, to accompany Paul and Barnabas to Antioch; their assignment was to carry the letter and confirm its content.

Read Acts 15:30–33. How did the church in Antioch react to the letter?

When the letter was read, the church was filled with great joy because of the encouraging message: circumcision was not to be required from Gentile converts. They also raised no objection to the demands of the letter (the fourfold apostolic decree). The first most serious division in the early church was thus reconciled, at least in theory.

At the close of the council, Paul’s gospel was fully recognized by the church leaders in Jerusalem, who extended to him and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship as a sign of acceptance and trust (*Gal. 2:9*). Yet, those Jewish Christians who continued to live by the Jewish law would still find it highly problematic to have table fellowship with the Gentiles, who, for all intents and purposes, did remain ritually unclean.

This issue is shown, for example, by the incident involving Peter in Galatians 2:11–14. “Even the disciples,” says Ellen G. White, “were not all prepared to accept willingly the decision of the council.”—*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 197.

Be honest with yourself: how difficult is it for you to have fellowship with believers from other races, cultures, and even social classes? How can you be purged of this decidedly anti-gospel attitude?

Further Thought: “The Jewish converts generally were not inclined to move as rapidly as the providence of God opened the way. From the result of the apostles’ labors among the Gentiles it was evident that the converts among the latter people would far exceed the Jewish converts in number. The Jews feared that if the restrictions and ceremonies of their law were not made obligatory upon the Gentiles as a condition of church fellowship, the national peculiarities of the Jews, which had hitherto kept them distinct from all other people, would finally disappear from among those who received the gospel message.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 189.

“The Jewish Christians living within sight of the temple naturally allowed their minds to revert to the peculiar privileges of the Jews as a nation. When they saw the Christian church departing from the ceremonies and traditions of Judaism, and perceived that the peculiar sacredness with which the Jewish customs had been invested would soon be lost sight of in the light of the new faith, many grew indignant with Paul as the one who had, in a large measure, caused this change. Even the disciples were not all prepared to accept willingly the decision of the council. Some were zealous for the ceremonial law, and they regarded Paul with disfavor because they thought that his principles in regard to the obligations of the Jewish law were lax.”—Page 197.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, go back to Monday’s final question. How do we understand the fact that belonging to the “right” church does not guarantee salvation? For example, certainly ancient Israel was the “right church,” but that does not mean everyone in it was saved. If being in the true church does not guarantee salvation, then what is the advantage of being a part of it?
- 2 How to accept uncircumcised Gentiles into the community of faith was one of the first most important administrative issues faced by the early church. What might be some comparable issues in our church today, and what does the example of Acts 15 teach us on how to deal with them?
- 3 In class, have some people take the position of the Jews who insisted that Gentiles must become Jewish proselytes first before joining the church, which they saw (and rightly so) as an extension of the covenant promises made to Israel. What are their arguments, and how can you respond? How could a debate like this show us why issues that today seem so clear-cut could, in a different time, seem much more difficult than they do to us now?

One More Question

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Byongju Lee looked with puzzlement at the poem that someone had texted him. He didn't recognize the phone number. Many people might have deleted the message as a wrong number, but not Lee. He texted back, "Who is this?"

His cell phone rang. "Who is this?" a woman's voice asked. "You texted me first," Lee replied. It turned out that the caller had wanted to text the poem to a friend but had misdialed the number by a single digit.

Many people might have hung up at that point, but not Lee. He asked one more question, "Are you a poet?"

"No, I'm an elementary school teacher. I write poems as a hobby."

"Oh really?" Lee said. He thought he recognized her accent and asked one more question. "Do you live in Busan?" he said, referring to South Korea's second-largest city.

"No, I live in Jinju," the woman said.

"I actually graduated from high school in Jinju," Lee said.

The woman asked which one and eagerly shared that she had studied over the street from his school. Then the woman asked, "What do you do?"

"I'm a church pastor," Lee said.

"Which denomination?"

The question made Lee think that the woman wasn't a Buddhist, the second-largest faith group, comprising 15 percent of the population. Christians account for 27 percent of the population of 51 million.

"I'm a Seventh-day Adventist pastor," Lee said.

"I see," the woman said. "Do you know Noah's Ark?"

Lee was surprised. Noah's Ark is a local Adventist offshoot.

The woman explained that she had worshiped briefly with a Noah's Ark group two decades earlier. She had left the group convinced of one thing—that the biblical Sabbath is not on Sunday.

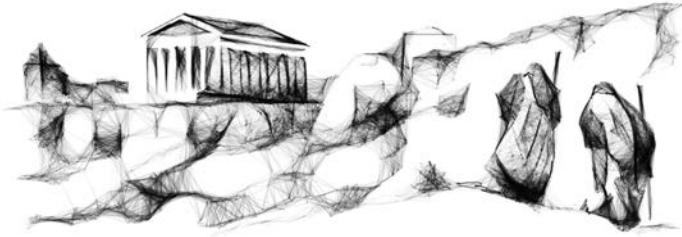
That evening, Lee sent the woman a follow-up text message. "It was great to meet you today!" he wrote. A year later, she was baptized.

Evangelism is easy, Lee said. "If I had ignored the text message, maybe she wouldn't have become a church member," he explained. "But I tried to form a relationship by asking just one more question."



BYONGJU LEE, 51, left, is the Sabbath School and Personal Ministries director for the Adventist Church's Korean Union Conference in Seoul, South Korea.

The Second Missionary Journey



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 16, Rom. 3:28, Gal. 2:16, Acts 17, 1 Cor. 1:23, Acts 18:1–10.*

Memory Text: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city” (*Acts 18:9, 10, NIV*).

Back in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas nurtured the church and engaged in further evangelistic work. This was seemingly the last time they worked together, as a sharp disagreement led to their separation. The reason for Paul and Barnabas's disagreement was Mark, Barnabas's cousin (*Col. 4:10*). When Paul invited Barnabas to return to the places they had evangelized in their previous journey, Barnabas wanted to take his cousin along, but Paul was against it because of Mark's past failure (*Acts 13:13*).

Paul and Barnabas's separation, however, was turned into a blessing, because in dividing their efforts they could cover a wider area than they had first planned. Barnabas took Mark and returned to Cyprus, Barnabas's homeland (*Acts 4:36*). Meanwhile, having invited Silas to join him, Paul went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches there. Before coming to Antioch the first time, Paul had spent several years in Tarsus (*Acts 9:30; 11:25, 26*). Now he had the opportunity to revisit the congregations he had established there. Nevertheless, God's plan for him was much greater than Paul first conceived.

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

Back in Lystra

Luke's selective choice of events brings Paul almost straight to Derbe and Lystra. About Syria and Cilicia, the only thing he says is that Paul went through those regions confirming the churches (*Acts 15:41*).

Read Acts 16:1–13. What does Paul's action here teach us about how sensitive he was in seeking to reach others?

Though Timothy's father was a Gentile, his mother was a Jewish Christian; her name was Eunice. Despite being uncircumcised, Timothy knew the Scriptures from childhood (*2 Tim. 3:15*), implying he was also a pious person. As a Christian, he already had earned the respect and the admiration of all the local believers.

Because Jewish identity was passed on through the mother's line rather than the father's, Timothy was a Jew. He had not been circumcised on the eighth day after birth, perhaps because his father, a Greek, viewed circumcision as barbaric.

Wishing to have Timothy as a co-worker and knowing that, as an uncircumcised Jew, he would be forbidden to enter the Jewish synagogues under the charge of apostasy, Paul had him circumcised. Paul's motivation for doing so, therefore, was entirely practical and should not be seen as in contradiction to the gospel he preached.

After revisiting the places that he had been in his first journey, Paul decided to go southwest, possibly to Ephesus, in the province of Asia, but the Holy Spirit prevented him from doing so. He then moved north, trying to go to Bithynia, but again in some undisclosed way the Spirit prevented him from going there. Because he already was passing through Mysia, Paul's only option was to go westward to the seaport of Troas, from where he could sail in a number of directions.

In a night vision, however, God showed him he should sail across the Aegean Sea to Macedonia. When his companions learned about the vision, they concluded that God had indeed called them to share the gospel with the Macedonians.

Think about why Paul circumcised Timothy. What should this teach us about being willing to do certain things that we might not always agree with or deem necessary, but that will serve a greater cause?

Philippi

Once in Macedonia, Paul and his companions traveled to Philippi, where they established the first Christian congregation in Europe.

Read Acts 16:11–24. Where did the missionaries go on Sabbath, and why? What ultimately happened to them there?

Whenever Paul arrived in a city, his practice was to visit the local synagogue on Sabbath in order to witness to the Jews (*Acts 13:14, 42, 44; 17:1, 2; 18:4*). That in Philippi he and his group went to a riverside to pray—together with some women, both Jewish and Gentile worshipers of God—probably means there was no synagogue in the city. The significance of this is that Paul did not go to Jewish synagogues on Sabbaths only for evangelistic purposes, but also because this was his day of worship.

Read Acts 16:25–34. Review the story of the jailer’s conversion. What did he need to do to be saved?

Paul and Silas’s answer to the jailer’s question is in full harmony with the gospel, since salvation is entirely through faith in Jesus (*Rom. 3:28, Gal. 2:16*). What we cannot conclude from the episode, however, is that belief in Jesus is all that is necessary for baptism, at the expense of the proper doctrinal and practical instruction.

What do we know about the jailer? Was he a Jew or a Jewish proselyte? In either case, what he needed was to believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior. What if he were a Gentile who already knew and worshiped God, such as Cornelius, Lydia (*Acts 16:14*), and several others in Acts? What if he previously had attended Paul’s evangelistic meetings in the city? Whatever the facts about him, the brevity of the account should not be used as an excuse for quick baptisms.

Read Acts 16:31–34. What does this teach us about just how complete and full Christ’s sacrifice was for us? How can you learn, day by day, to rest in the assurance of Christ’s righteousness covering you as your only hope of salvation?

Thessalonica and Berea

When Paul and Silas were released from prison, the missionaries departed from Philippi (*Acts 16:35–40*). From Philippi, Paul and his companions went straight to Thessalonica, the capital city of Macedonia.

Read Acts 17:1–9. How did the Thessalonian Jews react to Paul’s successful preaching among the Gentiles?

Once again we see Paul looking for the synagogue where he could share the gospel. Many devout Greeks and not a few prominent women were persuaded by Paul’s message. That these converts “joined Paul and Silas” (*Acts 17:4*) seems to mean they formed a separate group and met apart from the synagogue, probably in Jason’s house.

Moved with jealousy, their opponents started a riot. Their intention was to bring Paul and Silas—Timothy is not mentioned—before the city’s assembly and accuse them. As they could not find the missionaries, Jason himself and a few other new believers were dragged to the local authorities under the charge of sheltering political agitators.

Read Acts 17:10–15. What was the response of the Berean Jews in comparison to that in Thessalonica?

The term *eugenēs* (*Acts 17:11*) originally meant “well born” or “of noble birth” but came to denote more generally a “fair-minded” attitude, which is likely the case here. The Jews from Berea are praised not simply because they agreed with Paul and Silas but because of their willingness to examine the Scriptures by themselves and on a daily basis to see if what the missionaries were saying was correct. A merely emotional response to the gospel, without the necessary intellectual conviction, tends to be superficial and short-lived.

Before long, however, persecution interrupted Paul’s productive ministry in Berea, compelling him to move farther south, to Athens.

When was the last time you diligently searched the Scriptures in order to find out “whether these things [whatever they were] were so”?

Paul in Athens

Athens, the intellectual center of ancient Greece, literally was given to idols. Marble statues of persons and gods were found everywhere, especially at the entrance of the agora (public square), which was the hub of urban life. Paul was so distressed about such dominant idolatry that he changed his usual practice of going first to the synagogue, and pursued a dual course of action: he disputed weekly in the synagogue with Jews and devout Gentiles, and daily in the public square with the Greeks. (*See Acts 17:15–22.*)

As the Athenians were always ready to hear something new, some philosophers took interest in Paul's teaching and invited him to address the Areopagus, the high council of the city. In his speech, Paul did not quote from the Scriptures or recap the history of God's dealings with Israel, as he did when speaking to a Jewish audience (*compare with Acts 13:16–41*); this approach would not make much sense with this audience. Instead, he presented some important biblical truths in a way that cultured pagans could understand.

Read Acts 17:22–31. In his Areopagus speech, what great truths about God and salvation and history and humanity did he preach to these people?

Most of Paul's words sounded ridiculous to that sophisticated pagan audience, whose concepts about God and religion were distorted greatly. We do not know how Paul intended to end his message, for he seems to have been interrupted the very moment he referred to God's judgment of the world (*Acts 17:31*). This belief collided head on with two Greek concepts: (1) that God is utterly transcendent, having no dealings whatsoever with the world or concern in human affairs, and (2) that when a person dies there can be no resurrection at all. This helps to explain why the gospel was foolishness to the Greeks (*1 Cor. 1:23*), and the number of converts in Athens was small.

Yet, among those who came to believe were some of the most influential people of Athenian society, such as Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, and Damaris, whose mention by name implies she was of some status, if not also a member of the council herself (*Acts 17:34*).

Paul's different approach before the Areopagus shows his awareness of social and cultural differences. He even quoted a pagan poet (*Acts 17:28*) in order to make his point. What should this teach us about how we can use different methods to reach different people?

Paul in Corinth

Acts 18:1–11 recounts Paul’s experience in Corinth, where he would stay for one and a half years. Aquila and Priscilla would become Paul’s lifelong friends (*Rom. 16:3, 2 Tim. 4:19*). The account implies they were already Christians when they came to Corinth, probably because of the deportation of Jews from Rome by the Emperor Claudius. Roman historian Suetonius seems to indicate that the deportation occurred due to disturbances in the Jewish community associated with the name of “Christ” (*Claudius 25.4*), which would perhaps be the result of the preaching of the gospel by local Jewish believers. Thus, it is possible that Aquila and Priscilla themselves had been involved in such activities. In any case, besides sharing the same faith and the same Jewish background, Paul and his new friends also shared the same trade.

Read Acts 18:4–17. What was the result of Paul’s missionary activities in Corinth?

When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, they brought some financial support from the churches there (*2 Cor. 11:8, 9*), which allowed Paul to devote himself entirely to preaching. Paul’s policy was to live at his own expense during his ministry, though he also taught that “those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel” (*1 Cor. 9:14, NKJV*).

Despite the strong Jewish opposition to Paul’s message, some Jews did believe, as well as some Gentile worshipers of God. Among the converts were Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household. Many Corinthians also believed and were baptized. The situation among the Jews, however, was rather tense, as the following episode demonstrates (*Acts 18:12–17*), and Paul possibly was planning to leave Corinth soon, but in a night vision he received divine encouragement to stay on (*Acts 18:9–11*).

On his way back to Antioch, Paul took Aquila and Priscilla with him and left them in Ephesus, where he spent a few days before resuming his trip. While there, he had the opportunity to preach in the local Jewish synagogue, whose positive response made him promise that, God willing, he would come back (*Acts 18:18–21*). This happened right in his next journey.

Paul, frustrated by his reception, needed encouragement from the Lord in regard to the salvation of souls in Corinth. What do the Lord’s words to him (*Acts 18:10*) say to us when we might feel something similar to what Paul felt?

Further Thought: “Those who today teach unpopular truths need not be discouraged if at times they meet with no more favorable reception, even from those who claim to be Christians, than did Paul and his fellow workers from the people among whom they labored. The messengers of the cross must arm themselves with watchfulness and prayer, and move forward with faith and courage, working always in the name of Jesus.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 230.

“If, in the closing scenes of this earth’s history, those to whom testing truths are proclaimed would follow the example of the Bereans, searching the Scriptures daily, and comparing with God’s word the messages brought them, there would today be a large number loyal to the precepts of God’s law, where now there are comparatively few. . . .

“All will be judged according to the light that has been given. The Lord sends forth His ambassadors with a message of salvation, and those who hear He will hold responsible for the way in which they treat the words of His servants. Those who are sincerely seeking for truth will make a careful investigation, in the light of God’s word, of the doctrines presented to them.”—Page 232.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In the context of the last paragraph of Monday’s study, discuss in class the implication of the following statement: “There is need of a more thorough preparation on the part of candidates for baptism. . . . The principles of the Christian life should be made plain to those who have newly come to the truth.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, pp. 91, 92.
- 2 Dwell more on Wednesday’s final question. How can we as a church show the same understanding Paul had of cultural differences and the same willingness to meet the people where they are without compromising the gospel or our own religious identity?
- 3 Read Acts 17:32–34. What can we learn from the three responses that met Paul’s message in Athens? “(1) Some mocked. They were amused by the passionate earnestness of this strange Jew. It is possible to make a jest of life; but those who do so will find that what began as comedy must end in tragedy. (2) Some put off their decision. The most dangerous of all days is when a man discovers how easy it is to talk about tomorrow. (3) Some believed. The wise man knows that only the fool will reject God’s offer.”—William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), p. 133.
- 4 Paul actually quoted a pagan writer (*Acts 17:28*) in order to make his point with the Athenians. What should that tell us about how, at times, using sources like this could be of value? What dangers are there, as well?

Not Rich, Not Poor

By ANDREW McCHESNEY, Adventist Mission

Chang dreamed of money and wealth in China.

He thought his backpack-producing factory would make him rich, so he felt perplexed when the business fell on hard times. An online friend offered some unusual advice: “Go to church.”

Chang was too busy for church until after his factory went bankrupt, but he was not impressed with what he saw on his first visit. Then someone told him that if he went to church, God would bless him. “I wanted God to bless me with more money, so I went back a second time,” he said.

Around that time, Chang was hired to work as a restaurant cook in another city. Upon his arrival, he immediately began to look online for a church. “I wanted to find a church so I could earn more money,” he said.

He found the addresses of two churches—a large Sunday church and a small Seventh-day Adventist house-church. “I don’t know why, but I decided to go to the small church,” he said.

One day, a church member spoke with Chang about the Sabbath. “If you keep the Sabbath, you will get more blessings,” he said.

Chang wanted more money, so he asked the church to pray for him to keep the Sabbath. The next day, he told his manager that he wanted Sabbath off or he’d quit. “Don’t quit,” the manager said. “Keep your Sabbath.”

When the restaurant owner heard about the arrangement, he angrily ordered Chang to work on Sabbath. Chang promptly quit. Remarkably, all the restaurant’s employees also quit in a show of solidarity.

Almost immediately, church members proposed that Chang take health courses at an Adventist sanatorium. Chang liked the idea. With a nutritionist certificate, he could land a high-paying job. But he also had a growing desire to know God. He prayed for Bible training. The next day, two people from different churches called him separately to recommend that he attend an upcoming Bible training in another city. The training changed his heart. He lost his desire for money and became a Bible worker.

Chang, 34, said his life can be summed up by Isaiah 55:8, which says, “‘For

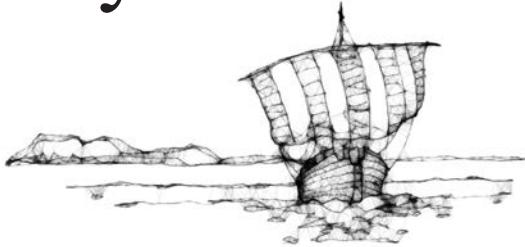
My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ says the LORD” (NKJV).

“I don’t feel rich now, but I don’t feel poor, either,” he said. “A preacher once told me that she lacks nothing. I said, ‘Really, you have so much money that you lack nothing?’ Now I can understand what she meant. I lack nothing.”

Your Sabbath School mission offerings help support Global Mission pioneers such as Chang.



The Third Missionary Journey



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 18:24–28; Acts 19; Acts 20:7–12, 15–27; 2 Cor. 4:8–14; Acts 21:1–15.*

Memory Text: “I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God’s grace” (*Acts 20:24, NRSV*).

Luke’s account of Paul’s third journey starts rather abruptly. The text says only that after spending some time in Antioch, the center of Paul’s missions, the apostle set out on another journey, passing successively “through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples” (*Acts 18:23, NRSV*). So, the first 1,500 miles of the journey are covered in one sentence.

This is because the focal point of the journey was Ephesus, where Paul spent more time than in any other city in the course of his journeys. From the evangelistic standpoint, the ministry in Ephesus was very fruitful; the impact of Paul’s preaching reached the whole province of Asia (*Acts 19:10, 26*). It was probably during this time that the churches of Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea were founded, perhaps through Epaphras (*Col. 4:12, 13*), one of Paul’s co-workers (*Col. 1:7, Philem. 23*).

A remarkable thing about this journey is that it is the last one of Paul’s recorded in Acts. Paul undertook it as a free man. Luke records yet another journey, this time to Rome, but as a prisoner.

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

Ephesus: Part 1

Acts 18:24–28 records that while Paul was still on his way to Ephesus, a Jewish believer named Apollos came to that city. He was an eloquent man and well-versed in the Scriptures. That Apollos was a follower of Jesus is clear from the way Luke describes him: “he had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately” (*Acts 18:25, NIV*). Yet, he knew only John’s baptism. Having been baptized by John the Baptist, Apollos became acquainted with Jesus during Jesus’ earthly life, but he must have moved away from the area—probably back to Alexandria—before the Passion/Pentecost events.

This explains why Aquila and Priscilla would give him further instruction. Though being able to show from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel (*Acts 18:28*), Apollos needed to be updated as to the developments of Christianity since Jesus’ ministry. However, Aquila and Priscilla did more for Apollos: with the other believers in Ephesus, they gave him a recommendation letter addressed to the churches in Achaia (*Acts 18:27*), which allowed him to have an effective ministry in Corinth (*1 Cor. 3:4–6, 4:6, 16:12*).

Read Acts 19:1–7. What happened to Paul when he arrived in Ephesus?

Apollos’s story is connected to the account of the twelve men Paul met in Ephesus upon his arrival in that city, because their situation was very similar. Their description as “disciples” (*Acts 19:1*) and Paul’s question to them (*Acts 19:2*) clearly indicate that they were already believers in Jesus. At the same time, their answer to Paul shows that, similar to Apollos, they were former disciples of John the Baptist who had become followers of Jesus without having experienced Pentecost. They were to have an opportunity to enjoy a deeper experience with the Lord.

“On his arrival at Ephesus, Paul found twelve brethren, who, like Apollos, had been disciples of John the Baptist, and like him had gained some knowledge of the mission of Christ. They had not the ability of Apollos, but with the same sincerity and faith they were seeking to spread abroad the knowledge they had received.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 282.

We should view their new baptism in light of this unique situation. They were not coming from another Christian denomination, nor were they experiencing conversion. They were only being integrated into mainstream Christianity. That they received the Spirit and spoke in tongues probably means they, like Apollos, were Christian missionaries who now were being empowered fully to witness about Jesus Christ wherever they went.

Ephesus: Part 2

In Ephesus, Paul followed his practice of preaching in the synagogue first. When opposition arose, he and the new believers moved to the lecture hall of a certain Tyrannus, where Paul preached daily for two years (*Acts 19:8–10*). Luke’s summary of Paul’s Ephesian ministry is that the entire province was intensely evangelized (*Acts 19:10, 26*).

In *Acts 19:11–20*, Luke adds a few miracle stories describing the triumph of God’s power in a city where magic and other superstitious practices were rather common. There is no doubt that God could heal through Paul, but that even handkerchiefs and aprons touched by the apostle had healing power (*Acts 19:12*) may sound strange to some, though this bears resemblance to Jesus’ healing of the woman with the hemorrhage (*Luke 8:44*). The Ephesian superstitious beliefs may have led God to perform “extraordinary” miracles, as Luke says (*Acts 19:11, NIV*). This is, perhaps, an example of God’s meeting the needs of the people at their own level of understanding.

Satisfied with the results of his mission in Ephesus, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem (*Acts 19:21*). Luke does not give a reason for this trip, but we know from Paul’s own writings that he wished to deliver the funds he had collected to relieve the poverty of the Jerusalem church (*Rom. 15:25–27, 1 Cor. 16:1–3*). The pooling of goods of the first years, and a severe famine in the days of Claudius, impoverished the Judean believers, and Paul saw in their appeal for help (*Gal. 2:10*) an opportunity to strengthen both their trust in his apostleship and the unity of a now transcultural church, despite knowing the risks to which he would be exposed (*Acts 20:22, 23; Rom. 15:31*).

Read Acts 19:23–41. What was the real reason for the opposition to Paul that arose in Ephesus at the end of his stay there?

The opposition had to do with pagan worship, which severely was threatened by Paul’s ministry. Demetrius’s real motivation was clearly financial, but he was able to turn it into a religious matter because the temple of Artemis (or Diana), reckoned as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, was located in Ephesus.

Read Acts 19:27. Notice how artfully Demetrius was able to bring in religious “piety” in his attempt to keep the money flowing in. Why must we as Christians be careful not to use our faith, or a pretended piety in regard to our faith, in the same way?

Troas

After the riot (*Acts 19:23–41*), Paul resolved to leave Ephesus. But he took an extended detour through Macedonia and Achaia instead of going straight to Jerusalem (*Acts 20:1–3*). On this journey, representatives of some Gentile churches were with him (*Acts 20:4*).

Read Acts 20:7–12. What’s wrong with the common argument that these verses help prove the Sabbath was changed to Sunday?

Paul’s stopover in Troas ended with a church meeting “on the first day of the week” (*Acts 20:7*). They gathered together “to break bread,” which probably refers to the Lord’s Supper, with or without the fellowship meal that often was combined with it since the early days of the Jerusalem church (*Acts 2:42, 46*). That there is no mention of a cup nor of any prayers does not rule out this possibility. The point, however, is that this episode often is mentioned as evidence that in Paul’s time, at least Gentile churches already had replaced Sabbath with Sunday as a day of worship.

Yet, before making such a claim, it is necessary to establish the precise day on which the meeting took place, as well as the nature of the meeting. The reference to the use of lights (*Acts 20:8*), together with the fact that Paul’s message continued until midnight (*Acts 20:7*), and then until daybreak (*Acts 20:11*), not to mention the deep sleep of Eutychus (*Acts 20:9*), makes it clear it was a night meeting.

The question, though, is whether it was the night before Sunday or the night after Sunday. The answer depends on what system of time reckoning Luke is using, whether the Jewish system from sundown to sundown or the Roman one from midnight to midnight. If it is the former, then it was Saturday night; in case of the latter, it was Sunday night.

Either way, the context of Acts 20:7–12 indicates that, even if the meeting was on a Sunday night, it was not a regular church meeting but a special one due to Paul’s departure the following morning. It is hard to see, then, how this isolated and exceptional episode affords support for Sunday keeping. The fact is, it doesn’t.

Dwell more on all the reasons for the validity of keeping the seventh-day Sabbath. How does the powerful biblical support for the Sabbath help affirm us in our identity as Seventh-day Adventist Christians and the calling that we have been given to spread the three angels’ messages to the world?

Miletus

On his way to Jerusalem, Paul made another stop, this time at Miletus, where he had the opportunity to convey his farewell address to the Ephesian church leaders.

Read Acts 20:15–27. What was Paul’s emphasis in the introductory part of his speech?

Since he already had made plans for a new journey, which included Rome and Spain (*Rom. 15:22–29*), Paul believed that he would never return to Asia. So, he started his speech with a kind of accountability report of the years spent in Ephesus. Such a report, however, aimed not only at the past, that is, the way he had lived among the Ephesians, but also at the future, for he feared what could happen to him in Jerusalem.

Paul’s fear was not unfounded. The Jerusalem church viewed him with some skepticism, if not hostility, due to his past as persecutor and the circumcision-free gospel he preached (*Acts 21:20–26*). To the Jewish authorities, he was nothing but a traitor and an apostate from their religious traditions (*Acts 23:1, 2*). By mid-first century, especially on account of Roman misrule, Judea also was gripped by revolutionary and nationalistic ideals. This atmosphere influenced all segments of Jewish society, including possibly the church. In such context, the activities of that former Pharisee among the Gentiles must have made him a figure of notoriety (*Acts 21:27–36*).

Paul also had more concerns. In Acts 20:28–31, Paul focused on how the church leaders in Ephesus should handle the subject of false teachers, whom he compared to savage wolves who would try to misguide and pervert the flock. So even in the church itself, and even in the earliest days of the church, the danger of false teachers was real. As Solomon said in another time and another context: “There is nothing new under the sun” (*Eccles. 1:9, NKJV*). A history of the Christian church reveals the incredible damages that false teachers have brought to the church. The problem will exist until the end (*2 Tim. 4:3*), too.

No question, Paul had a lot of things on his mind, a lot of concerns; and yet, his faithfulness and his diligence never wavered.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:8–14. What is Paul saying here that we need to apply to ourselves, especially when trials come? Where does Paul put his ultimate hope?

Tyre and Caesarea

After Miletus, Luke records Paul's journey in some detail. Still en route to Jerusalem, the apostle spent a week in Tyre, on the Phoenician coast, where the ship was to be unloaded (*Acts 21:1–6*). However, while he was there, the believers urged him not to go to Jerusalem. That the believers were led by the Spirit to warn Paul not to go to Jerusalem is not necessarily in contradiction to the apostle's earlier guidance. The Greek *etheto en tō pneumati* in *Acts 19:21* likely should be rendered as “resolved/purposed in the Spirit” (*ESV, NRSV, NKJV*), rather than as if Paul had come to this decision all by himself. The point is that the Spirit may have shown the Tyrean Christians the dangers that lay ahead of Paul; and so, out of human concern, they recommended that he not proceed with his intent. Paul himself was not sure about what would happen to him in Jerusalem (*Acts 20:22, 23*). Divine guidance does not always make everything clear, even for someone like Paul.

Read *Acts 21:10–14*. What special incident took place in Caesarea concerning Paul's trip to Jerusalem?

Agabus was a prophet from Jerusalem who had already been introduced in the famine episode in *Acts 11:27–30*. In a way similar to some Old Testament prophecies (for example, *Isa. 20:1–6, Jer. 13:1–10*), his message was an acted one; it functioned as vivid illustration of what would happen to Paul when he arrived in Jerusalem and how his enemies would hand him over to the Gentiles (the Romans).

Those who were with Paul apparently took Agabus's message as a warning, not as a prophecy, and so they tried by all means to convince the apostle he should not go up to Jerusalem. Though deeply touched by their reaction, Paul was determined to accomplish his mission, even at the cost of his own life. For him, the integrity of the gospel and the unity of the church were more important than his own personal safety or interests.

“Never before had the apostle approached Jerusalem with so sad a heart. He knew that he would find few friends and many enemies. He was nearing the city which had rejected and slain the Son of God and over which now hung the threatenings of divine wrath.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 397, 398.

Misunderstood, maligned, mistreated, and often reviled, Paul nevertheless pressed on in faith. How can we learn to do the same in discouraging circumstances?

Further Thought: “The success attending the preaching of the gospel aroused the anger of the Jews anew. From every quarter were coming accounts of the spread of the new doctrine by which Jews were released from the observance of the rites of the ceremonial law and Gentiles were admitted to equal privileges with the Jews as children of Abraham. . . . His [Paul’s] emphatic statement, ‘There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision’ (*Colossians 3:11*), was regarded by his enemies as daring blasphemy, and they determined that his voice should be silenced.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 390.

“And he could not count upon the sympathy and support of even his own brethren in the faith. The unconverted Jews who had followed so closely upon his track, had not been slow to circulate the most unfavorable reports at Jerusalem, both personally and by letter, concerning him and his work; and some, even of the apostles and elders, had received these reports as truth, making no attempt to contradict them, and manifesting no desire to harmonize with him.”—Page 398.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 The twelve disciples Paul met in Ephesus were former followers of John the Baptist who already had become disciples of Jesus (*Acts 19:1–7*). Why do you think that it is correct to use this passage to require rebaptism of Christians—already baptized by immersion—from other denominations who join the Adventist faith? Is there any significance in the fact that Apollos was not rebaptized?
- 2 Think about Paul’s situation. He is rejected by his own countrymen who don’t believe in Jesus. Even of the Jews who do believe in Jesus, many view Paul with great suspicion, even distrust, because they think he is perverting the “landmarks.” Many of the pagans hate the gospel he is proclaiming. And yet—what? Why did Paul press on, despite all this opposition? Though we are not Paul, what can we take away for ourselves from his story?
- 3 Think about some of the other arguments that people use to try to prove either that the Sabbath was changed to Sunday or that it is no longer binding. How do we answer those arguments and do it in a way to show that obedience to the Sabbath is no more legalism than is obedience to any of the other nine commandments; that is, if we obey by faith and with the understanding of where our only hope of salvation lies?

“Just Go!”

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Kiyong Kwon, owner of a private accounting business, is known in South Korea for leading more people to Christ than perhaps any Seventh-day Adventist pastor. But he almost didn't.

The story started in late 2000 when Kwon began to study Bible prophecy. He realized with new urgency that each prophecy in Daniel had been fulfilled except Jesus' second coming. He wondered what Noah would do if he were alive today. Perhaps Noah, regardless of his career, would dedicate his life to a single mission: to proclaim Jesus' return. Kwon grew convinced that he should devote his life to proclaiming Jesus' return by becoming a church planter.

One morning as he prayed, he felt God say, “Just go!” The command scared him. He began giving excuses: “I don't have any experience. I am not a pastor. I'm already 40. I'm afraid I'll fail.”

“But every morning God's calling was so clear that it was painful for me,” Kwon said.

So, he prayed, “If You really want me to go, show me what to do from beginning to end. Then I'll go.”

Kwon thought this was a reasonable prayer, but he didn't receive an answer. He prayed for seven days straight. On the seventh day, after praying, he opened *Church Compass*, the magazine of the Adventist Church's Korean Union Conference. He saw a quotation from the book *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White* that shocked him. It read: “God will have men who will venture anything and everything to save souls. Those who will not move until they can see every step of the way clearly before them, will not be of advantage at this time to forward the truth of God. There must be workers now who will push ahead in the dark as well as in the light, and who will hold up bravely under discouragements and disappointed hopes, and yet work on with faith, with tears and patient hope, sowing beside all waters, trusting the Lord to bring the increase. God calls for men of nerve, of hope, faith, and endurance, to work to the point” (pages 213, 214).

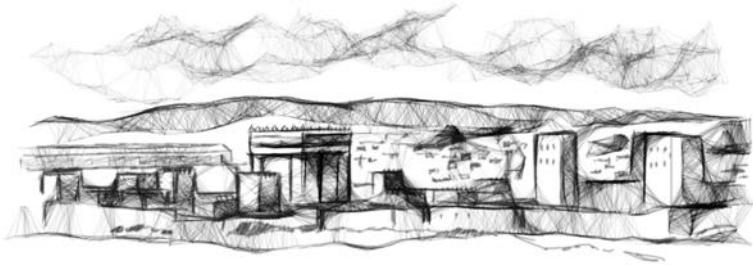


“That was my answer from God!” he said. “I was not supposed to pray to know what to do from the beginning to the end. I had to push ahead.”

Kwon gave up and planted a church. “Surprisingly,” he said, “I didn't have to do anything. When God works, there are miracles.”

KIYONG KWON, 56, left, has planted three churches in South Korea. Part of this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help plant the first Adventist church in Sejong, South Korea. Read more about Kwon next week.

Arrest in Jerusalem



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 21; Rom. 2:28, 29; Gal. 5:6; Acts 22; Acts 23:1–30; Matt. 22:23–32.*

Memory Text: “The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, ‘Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome’ ” (*Acts 23:11, NIV*).

Soon after Paul's first missionary journey, it became clear that there was a fundamental disagreement in the church on how the Gentiles were to be admitted into the faith (*Acts 15:1–5*). Perhaps sensing a growing conflict, Paul conceived a plan to promote unity in the church. Because at the council he was asked to remember the poor (*Gal. 2:10*), he decided to invite the Gentile churches to provide financial aid to the brethren in Judea, the “collection for the saints” (*1 Cor. 16:1*), perhaps hoping that it could help build bridges between the two groups.

This could explain his determination to go to Jerusalem at the end of his third journey, despite the risks. On one hand, he had a genuine love for his fellow Jews (*Rom. 9:1–5*); on the other, he longed for a united church (*Gal. 3:28, 5:6*). As Jews and Gentiles were equally saved through faith, not through the works of the law (*Rom. 3:28–30*), any social alienation between them based on the ceremonial requirements of the law was against the inclusive nature of the gospel (*Eph. 2:11–22*).

Let's follow Paul as he enters this new phase of his life and mission.

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

Meeting the Jerusalem Leaders

When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, he warmly was received by believers associated with Mnason, with whom he was to stay (*Acts 21:16, 17*).

In Acts 21:18–22, James and the Jerusalem elders expressed their concerns about Paul’s reputation among local Jewish believers zealous of the Mosaic law. They had been informed that he was teaching the Jewish converts who lived abroad to forsake Moses, telling them “not to circumcise their children or observe the customs” (*Acts 21:21, NRSV*).

This, of course, was not really true. What Paul did teach was that, in terms of salvation, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision meant anything, as both Jews and Gentiles were equally saved by faith in Jesus (*Rom. 2:28, 29; Gal. 5:6; Col. 3:11*). This is different from explicitly encouraging Jews to disregard the law and its requirements. Obedience is not, of course, in itself a synonym for legalism, though it could deliberately be twisted to mean just that.

Read Acts 21:23–26. How was Paul to demonstrate he still was a faithful Jew?

Paul was advised to be politically correct. He should show the falsity of the rumors about him by doing something very Jewish: sponsor the Nazirite vow of some Jewish believers. This vow was a special act of piety through which a Jew would consecrate himself to God.

Unfortunately, Paul yielded. Heroes, including the biblical ones, have their flaws, as we can see in the lives of Abraham, Moses, Peter, and several others. It could be argued that Paul was just following his principle of behaving like a Jew when dealing with Jews (*1 Cor. 9:19–23*), or that he himself is reported to have taken a vow not long before (*Acts 18:18*), though the precise nature of this vow is not clear. This time, however, it was a compromise, as it signified his endorsement of the legalistic motives behind the recommendation. The implication of such an attitude was exactly the one the apostle vigorously tried to oppose: that there are two gospels, one for Gentiles, of salvation by faith, and another for Jews, of salvation by works. “He [Paul] was not authorized of God to concede as much as they asked.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 405.

In our attempts to be relevant, how can we be careful not to make a similar kind of error?

Riot in the Temple

Having accepted the church leaders' suggestion, Paul would need to undergo a seven-day ritual purification to assist the completion of the men's vow (*Num. 19:11–13*). At the same time, Jewish tradition stipulated that any person coming from Gentile lands would be unclean and so unable to enter the temple. This is why Paul had to purify himself before going to the priests to give notice of his purification process related to the Nazirites (*Acts 21:26*).

Read Acts 21:27–36. What happened to Paul at the end of his seven-day period of purification?

A riot ensued, caused by those who stirred up the crowd against Paul, accusing him of attacking the most sacred symbols of Jewish religion, in particular of having desecrated the temple. As one of Paul's travel companions was a Gentile believer from Ephesus named Trophimus (*Acts 21:29*), they thought the apostle had introduced him into the temple's inner court, where only Jews could enter. If the accusation were legitimate, Paul would be guilty of a most serious offense. Along the wall that separated the outer from the inner court, there were signs in Greek and Latin warning Gentile visitors not to enter farther in, otherwise they would be personally responsible for their ensuing death.

“By the Jewish law it was a crime punishable with death for an uncircumcised person to enter the inner courts of the sacred edifice. Paul had been seen in the city in company with Trophimus, an Ephesian, and it was conjectured that he had brought him into the temple. This he had not done; and being himself a Jew, his act in entering the temple was no violation of the law. But though the charge was wholly false, it served to arouse the popular prejudice. As the cry was taken up and borne through the temple courts, the throngs gathered there were thrown into wild excitement.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 407.

When the news of the riot reached a Roman fortress, the Roman commander, Claudius Lysias (*Acts 21:31, 32; 23:26*), came with troops and rescued Paul before the crowd could kill him.

As the target of the attacks, Paul was arrested and bound with chains while the commander tried to inquire about what was going on. At the hysteric shouting of the crowd, he ordered the apostle to be taken to the fortress.

Rumors, false ones at that, helped start this riot. Why must we be so careful with the kinds of rumors we listen to or, even worse, spread?

Before the Crowd

Acts 21:37–40 tells what happened next. As Paul was being taken into the Roman fortress for interrogation, he asked the commander for permission to address the people, who were still frantically clamoring for his death.

As he addressed the commander in the Greek language, the latter thought Paul might have been a certain Jew from Egypt who had some three years before initiated a revolt in Jerusalem against Roman occupation. The revolt, however, was put down by the Roman forces; many of his followers were either killed or arrested, while the Egyptian escaped.

After saying that he was from Tarsus, not from Egypt, Paul was granted permission to speak. In his speech, he did not offer a detailed response to the accusations raised against him (*Acts 21:28*) but told them the story of his conversion, highlighting his devotion to Judaism, to the point of having persecuted believers in Jesus. When confronted with a number of revelations from the Lord, he had no choice but to follow them. This explained the complete turnaround in his life and his call to preach to the Gentiles. Rather than get into a theological discussion, Paul recounted to them his own experience and why he was doing what he did.

Read Acts 22:22–29. How did the mob react to Paul’s statement that he was an apostle to the Gentiles?

The decision to let Paul speak did not work out well. By referring to his commitment to the Gentiles, Paul seemed to be confirming the truth of the charges against him (*Acts 21:28*), and the crowd got riled up again.

The Roman commander may not have understood everything Paul said; so, he decided to have him examined by flogging. Yet, besides being a pure-blooded Jew (*Phil. 3:5*), Paul also had Roman citizenship, and when he mentioned this, the commander had to back down. As a Roman citizen, Paul could not be subject to that kind of torture.

Read Paul’s speech (*Acts 22:1–21*). What evidence do you see that besides defending himself Paul was also preaching to his fellow Jews? Why would he tell his conversion story? What is it about conversion stories that can have so much power?

Before the Sanhedrin

When the Roman commander realized that Paul did not represent any threat to the empire; that is, that the issue involved internal disputes of the Jews, he asked the Sanhedrin to take up the case (*Acts 22:30; 23:29*).

Read Acts 23:1–5. How did Paul start his defense before the Sanhedrin?

Paul's introductory statement was met with a slap on the mouth, perhaps because, as a prisoner, his reference to God sounded blasphemous. His impulsive reaction gives us a glimpse of his temperament. By calling the high priest a "whitewashed wall" (*Acts 23:3*), he could be echoing Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees' hypocrisy in Matthew 23:27. Yet, since Paul did not really know he was addressing the high priest, the possibility that he had bad eyesight is not to be entirely ruled out.

Read Acts 23:6–10. How did Paul ingeniously try to disrupt the proceedings?

The Sanhedrin was composed of both Sadducees and Pharisees who were opposed to each other on a number of issues, doctrine being one of them. The Sadducees, for example, whose scriptural canon included only the first five books of Moses (the Pentateuch), did not believe in the resurrection of the dead (*Matt. 22:23–32*).

Paul's statement (*Acts 23:6*), however, was more than a clever tactic to distract the Sanhedrin. Since his encounter with the resurrected Jesus on the Damascus road lay at the foundation of his conversion and apostolic ministry, belief in the resurrection was the real issue for which he was being judged (*Acts 24:20, 21; 26:6–8*). Nothing else could explain how he had changed from his former zeal to become what he was now. If Jesus had not been raised from the dead, then his ministry was pointless, and he knew it, too (*1 Cor. 15:14–17*).

That night, as Paul was in the fortress, the Lord appeared to him with this encouragement: " 'Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome' " (*Acts 23:11, NKJV*). Given the circumstances, such a promise might have been particularly meaningful to Paul. His long-cherished wish to preach in Rome (*Acts 19:21, Rom. 1:13–15, 15:22–29*) would still come to pass.

Transfer to Caesarea

Upset with the fact that they had not yet gotten rid of Paul by legal means, a group decided to orchestrate a plan through which they would ambush and kill him on their own.

Read Acts 23:12–17. What was their plan, and how was it thwarted? What does this teach us about how passionate people can be for causes that are wrong?

That more than forty Jews conspired together against Paul and bound themselves with an oath reveals how much hatred the apostle had aroused in Jerusalem. Luke does not give us the identity of these men, but they were extremists willing to do whatever it took to protect the Jewish faith from its alleged traitors and enemies. Such a level of religious fanaticism, coupled with a revolutionary and nationalistic fervor, was not uncommon in first-century Judea and its environs.

In some providential way, however, the news about the plot reached the ears of Paul's nephew. It is somewhat disappointing that we know almost nothing about Paul's family, but apparently he and his sister had been brought up in Jerusalem (*Acts 22:3*), where she married and had at least one son. Anyway, Paul's nephew—the diminutive *neaniskos* (*Acts 23:18, 22*) and the fact that he was taken “by the hand” (*Acts 23:19*) imply he was still a teenager—was able to visit him in the fortress and tell him the story.

Read Acts 23:26–30. What message did commander Lysias send governor Felix about Paul?

The letter provided Felix with a fair report of the situation. In addition, it shows how Paul was benefited by his Roman citizenship. The Roman law fully protected its citizens, who had the right, for example, to have a legal trial, in which they could appear before the court and defend themselves (*Acts 25:16*), and the right to appeal to the emperor in case of an unfair trial (*Acts 25:10, 11*).

Irrespective of Felix's reputation, he treated Paul in the proper legal manner. After a preliminary interrogation, he ordered him to be kept under guard until the accusers arrived.

Think about God's providence in Paul's life. How often have you humbly acknowledged God's providence in your own life despite the trials and suffering you might have gone through?

Further Thought: “On this occasion, Paul and his companions formally presented to the leaders of the work at Jerusalem the contributions forwarded by the Gentile churches for the support of the poor among their Jewish brethren. . . .

“These freewill offerings betokened the loyalty of the Gentile converts to the organized work of God throughout the world and should have been received by all with grateful acknowledgment, yet it was apparent to Paul and his companions that even among those before whom they now stood were some who were unable to appreciate the spirit of brotherly love that had prompted the gifts.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 399, 400.

“Had the leaders in the church fully surrendered their feeling of bitterness toward the apostle, and accepted him as one specially called of God to bear the gospel to the Gentiles, the Lord would have spared him to them. God had not ordained that Paul’s labors should so soon end, but He did not work a miracle to counteract the train of circumstances to which the course of the leaders in the church at Jerusalem had given rise.

“The same spirit is still leading to the same results. A neglect to appreciate and improve the provisions of divine grace has deprived the church of many a blessing. How often would the Lord have prolonged the work of some faithful minister, had his labors been appreciated! But if the church permits the enemy of souls to pervert the understanding, so that they misrepresent and misinterpret the words and acts of the servant of Christ; if they allow themselves to stand in his way and hinder his usefulness, the Lord sometimes removes from them the blessing which He gave. . . .

“After the hands are folded upon the pulseless breast, when the voice of warning and encouragement is silent, then the obdurate may be aroused to see and prize the blessings they have cast from them. Their death may accomplish that which their life has failed to do.”—Pages 417, 418.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 By going to Jerusalem despite knowing he would not be welcome, Paul put the interests of the church above his own personal interests. To what extent should we follow his example?
- 2 What can we learn from Paul’s compromise in Jerusalem? How can we be politically correct without surrendering the principles we live by? Or can we?
- 3 Church unity is always so important. How can we learn to work together, unified, even when we have different views of things?

Claiming 100 Baptisms

By ANDREW McCHESNEY, Adventist Mission

Kiyong Kwon had 20 church members when he planted his first church in South Korea, and he was delighted to see a young stranger show up for the first Sabbath service.

“Why did you come to this small church?” Kwon asked.

“I just don’t have any luck,” the guest replied. “But someone told me that if I went to a new church, it would bring me luck.”

Kwon offered Bible studies, and the young man was baptized.

But Kwon wanted even more members. One day, he prayed from morning to evening, “Please give me people. Give me souls to fill this church.”

The next day, a neighbor stopped Kwon. “Yesterday, I felt like going to church,” she said. “Please take me to your church.”

The day after that, Kwon got a phone call. “My sister is an Adventist who has wanted me to go to church for 10 years, but I have never gone,” the caller said. “But now I feel like going.”

Kwon studied the Bible with both women, and both were baptized.

More than 40 people were baptized that first year. A year later, when the 98th person was baptized, Kwon prayed for 100 baptisms. He then remembered a woman whom he hadn’t seen in three years. He found her running a children’s art school, and he visited her with flowers. “You should be that 100th person to be baptized at my church,” he told her.

When the woman agreed, Kiyong informed her that she needed Bible studies first and to expect him at her home the next evening. “Make sure your husband is there, too,” he said.

After Kwon left, the woman called her husband, a devout Buddhist and a business owner, who recently had decided to learn English. He had purchased several English-language books, including a Bible, and had been struggling to read the Bible at his office. In desperation, he prayed, “If you are the real God, send someone to teach me the Bible.”

At that moment, his wife called and announced, “Elder Kwon will come to our house tomorrow to teach us the Bible.”

“Her husband was shocked beyond words,” Kwon said.

The next day, Kwon found the married couple and their adult children eagerly waiting to study the Bible. The whole family was baptized.



KIYONG KWON, 56, left, has planted three churches in South Korea. Part of this quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help plant the first Adventist church in Sejong, South Korea. Read more about Kwon last week and next week.

Confinement *in* Caesarea



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Acts 24, Acts 25, Acts 26, 1 Cor. 1:23.*

Memory Text: “‘Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am—except for these chains’” (*Acts 26:29, NRSV*).

Paul’s transfer to Caesarea began a two-year imprisonment in that city (*Acts 24:27*), more precisely in Herod’s praetorium (*Acts 23:35*), which was the official residence of the Roman governor. During those years, he had several hearings in which he would appear before two Roman governors (Felix and Festus) and a king (Agrippa II), thus further fulfilling the ministry that God gave him (*Acts 9:15*).

In all the hearings, Paul always claimed innocence, alleging that no evidence could be produced against him, as the absence of witnesses demonstrated. In fact, the whole narrative is intended to show that Paul had done nothing worthy of arrest and that he could be released had he not appealed to Caesar (*Acts 26:32*). These hearings, though, did offer him opportunities to witness about Jesus and the great hope found in the promise of the resurrection.

Yet, those were still years of deep anxiety, as well as of tedious confinement in which the apostle seems to have had no support of any kind from the church in Jerusalem, whose leaders “still cherished a feeling that Paul should be held largely responsible for the existing prejudice.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 403.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 22.

Before Felix

Five days after Paul's transfer to Caesarea, a group of important Jewish leaders—the high priest, some members of the Sanhedrin, and a professional lawyer named Tertullus—came down from Jerusalem and formally laid before Felix their case against the apostle (*Acts 24:1–9*).

This is the only trial in Acts in which the accusers employed a lawyer. In his speech, Tertullus tried an interesting strategy to win the governor's favor. It was simply not true that, under Felix, the Jews had enjoyed a long period of peace. In fact, no other governor had been so repressive and violent, and this repression generated an enormous antagonism among the Jews toward Roman rule. With a lot of ingenuity, Tertullus used the governor's own administrative policy to convince him that he would achieve political stability in this case also only by means of severe repression.

Then, he went on to press three specific charges against Paul: (1) that Paul was an agitator who constantly was fomenting unrest among Jews throughout the empire (*Acts 24:5*); (2) that he was a ringleader of the Nazarenes (*Acts 24:5*), which implicated Christianity as a whole as a kind of disruptive movement; and (3) that he had attempted to defile the Jerusalem temple (*Acts 24:6*).

Read Acts 24:10–19. How did Paul answer each one of the charges?

Two further points raised by Paul were devastating to the accusers' case: (1) the absence of the Asian witnesses (*Acts 24:18, 19*), which had the potential of rendering the trial invalid, and (2) the fact that the Jews there could speak only about Paul's hearing before the Sanhedrin the week before (*Acts 24:20*), and as such they had nothing to accuse him of except that he believed in the resurrection of the dead (*compare with Acts 23:6*).

Felix immediately understood the weight of Paul's arguments, also because he was somewhat acquainted with Christianity, probably through his Jewish wife, Drusilla. The fact is that he decided to adjourn the proceedings until further notice (*Acts 24:22*).

Felix's response (*Acts 24:24–27*) revealed much about his character: he procrastinated, he was able to be bribed, and he was opportunistic. Paul had little chance of a fair hearing with someone like Felix.

Read Acts 24:16. Paul said that he strove always to have a “conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men.” What does that mean? What, if anything, would you have to change in order to say the same thing?

Before Festus

After two years holding Paul in prison just to win the favor of the Jews, Felix was replaced by Porcius Festus as the governor of Judea (*Acts 24:27*). Festus ruled from A.D. 60 to 62.

Read Acts 25:1–5. How does this help reveal the hatred that preaching the truth can cause in those who don't want to believe it?

Probably because they already had failed once in their attempt to convince Felix of the charges against Paul, the leaders did not want to take any chances again. In what appears to have been Festus' first visit to Jerusalem, they requested, as a favor to them, a change of jurisdiction, asking him to hand Paul back to them so he could be tried by the Sanhedrin in accordance with Jewish law.

Yet, the request was only a camouflage to conceal their real intent: to kill Paul. Although Festus was willing to reopen the case, he said that the hearing would take place in Caesarea, not in Jerusalem, which means that Paul would be tried by Roman law.

As soon as Festus was back in Caesarea, he convened the tribunal, and Paul's opponents started laying out the charges against Paul (*Acts 25:7*). This time Luke does not repeat the charges, but based on Paul's answer (*Acts 25:8*) we can see that they were similar to the ones brought two years before, perhaps with the further emphasis that, for being an agitator, Paul also represented a threat to the empire.

Read Acts 25:9–12. When sensing that Festus could use him for political reasons, how did Paul react?

In the end, Festus turned out not much different from Felix with regard to his political strategies (*Acts 24:27*). Unwilling to lose the Jews' support so early in his administration by declaring Paul innocent, he thought of granting them their original request: to have the apostle tried by the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.

This, however, was not acceptable to Paul, who knew he could not expect to be treated fairly there, left to the whim of his enemies. So, capitalizing on his Roman rights, he insisted that he was entitled to be tried by a Roman tribunal, and envisaging no other way out of that precarious situation, he resolved to appeal to the highest instance of Roman justice, which was the emperor himself.

Before Agrippa

Festus agreed to grant Paul's request to be sent to Rome (*Acts 25:12*). Meanwhile, the governor took advantage of a state visit by Herod Agrippa II to consult him concerning Paul's case, in particular regarding what kind of information he should send to the emperor in his official report. Festus was not yet acquainted enough with Jewish affairs, and Agrippa could certainly help him (*Acts 26:2, 3*).

Read *Acts 25:13–22*. What did Festus tell Agrippa about Paul, and how did the king respond?

Agrippa II, the last of the Herodians, came to Caesarea with his sister Bernice to salute the new governor.

In his description of Paul's case, Festus revealed his surprise that the charges against him were not related to any capital offense, whether political or criminal. Instead, they had to do with matters concerning Jewish religion, in particular a certain Jesus, "who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive" (*Acts 25:19, ESV*). Paul had already stated before the Sanhedrin that he was on trial because of his belief in Jesus' resurrection, and now Festus made it clear that this was indeed the real point at issue.

Read *Acts 25:23–27*. How does Luke describe the ceremony in which Paul appeared before Agrippa?

"And now Paul, still manacled, stood before the assembled company. What a contrast was here presented! Agrippa and Bernice possessed power and position, and because of this they were favored by the world. But they were destitute of the traits of character that God esteems. They were transgressors of His law, corrupt in heart and life. Their course of action was abhorred by heaven."—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 434.

What should this story teach us about how outward appearances, which may be pleasing to human sight, can often be deceptive about the reality behind the appearance? What about ourselves, too? How different is the appearance from the reality?

Paul's Defense

With the scene set and the royal guests seated alongside the governor, the prisoner was brought in to present his defense, which was aimed primarily at Agrippa, as Festus had already heard it before (*Acts 25:8–11*).

Read Acts 26:1–23. What was Paul doing in his speech before Agrippa?

Paul's speech was in fact an autobiographical report of his life both before and after his conversion. In terms of content, it recalls the one in *Acts 22:1–21*, which he spoke before the crowd in Jerusalem.

The apostle began by trying to secure Agrippa's favor. He acknowledged his gratitude for the opportunity to state his case before such an eminent person, all the more so because Agrippa was well acquainted with all the customs and issues related to Jewish religion. For that reason, Agrippa could be of great assistance in helping the Roman governor understand that the charges brought against him had no merit and were false.

The speech can be divided into three parts. In part one (*Acts 26:4–11*), Paul described his former Pharisaic piety, which was widely known among his contemporaries in Jerusalem. As a Pharisee, he believed in the resurrection of the dead, which was essential to the fulfilment of Israel's ancestral hope. The Jews, therefore, were being inconsistent in opposing his teaching, for there was nothing in it that was not fundamentally Jewish. But he understood their attitude quite well, and that was because he himself had once found it so incredible that God could have raised Jesus that even he persecuted those who believed that way.

In part two (*Acts 26:12–18*), Paul reported how his perspective had changed since his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus and the call that he received to take the gospel message to the Gentiles.

Paul says, finally, that the impact of what he had seen (*Acts 26:19–23*) was such that he had no choice but to obey and to carry out his missionary activity, the only reason that he was now on trial. The real issue behind his arrest, therefore, was not that he had violated the Jewish law or desecrated the temple. Rather, it was because of his message of Jesus' death and resurrection, which was in full harmony with the Scriptures and allowed believing Gentiles to have an equal share in salvation.

Read Acts 26:18. According to that text, what happens to those who have salvation in Christ? How have you experienced this reality?

Paul Before the Leaders

Although Paul was speaking to Agrippa, Festus was the first to react, as seen in Acts 26:24. Festus would have had no problem if Paul had spoken about the immortality of the soul, but even the ancient Greco-Romans knew that both concepts—immortality and resurrection—do not go along well with one another. Thus, they kept the former and rejected the latter. This is why Paul says elsewhere that the gospel was foolishness to Gentiles (*1 Cor. 1:23*).

In a respectful manner, Paul defended the sanity of his ideas and turned to Agrippa, a Jew who could not only understand him but also who could confirm that what he was saying was in agreement with the Hebrew prophets (*Acts 26:25, 26*).

Read Acts 26:27, 28. What was Agrippa’s response to Paul’s pressing question?

Paul’s question put Agrippa in a difficult position. As a Jew, he would never deny his belief in the Scriptures; on the other hand, if he gave an affirmative answer, there would be no option but for him to accept Jesus as the Messiah. His reply was a clever escape from the logical trap he was in: “‘Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?’” (*Acts 26:28, NRSV; compare with ESV, NIV*)—this is a better translation of the Greek than the traditional, “‘You almost persuade me to become a Christian.’” (*NKJV*).

Paul’s rejoinder reveals an impressive level of commitment to the gospel: “‘Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am—except for these chains.’” (*Acts 26:29, NRSV*). In his last words in that hearing, the apostle did not plead to be free, as were those listening to him. Instead, he wished they could be like him, except for the chains that bound him. Paul’s missionary zeal greatly surpassed his care for his own safety.

Read Acts 26:30–32. How did Agrippa express his conviction of Paul’s innocence?

Festus needed Agrippa’s help only to fill in the report (*Acts 25:25–27*). Paul’s appeal to Caesar had already been formally granted (*Acts 25:12*). The prisoner was no longer under the governor’s jurisdiction.

Read Acts 26:24–28. What did Paul ultimately appeal to, and what should this tell us about what our final authority in matters of faith should always be?

Further Thought: “Did the mind of Agrippa at these words revert to the past history of his family, and their fruitless efforts against Him whom Paul was preaching? Did he think of his great-grandfather Herod, and the massacre of the innocent children of Bethlehem? of his great-uncle Antipas, and the murder of John the Baptist? of his own father, Agrippa I, and the martyrdom of the apostle James? Did he see in the disasters which speedily befell these kings an evidence of the displeasure of God in consequence of their crimes against His servants? Did the pomp and display of that day remind Agrippa of the time when his own father, a monarch more powerful than he, stood in that same city, attired in glittering robes, while the people shouted that he was a god? Had he forgotten how, even before the admiring shouts had died away, vengeance, swift and terrible, had befallen the vainglorious king? Something of all this flitted across Agrippa’s memory; but his vanity was flattered by the brilliant scene before him, and pride and self-importance banished all nobler thoughts.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, pp. 1066, 1067.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, discuss Paul’s decision to appeal to Caesar. Was this decision correct (*compare with Acts 25:25; 26:31, 32*)? To what extent can we legitimately make strategic decisions to protect ourselves instead of relying entirely on God’s care?
- 2 Reflect on Paul’s statement to Agrippa: “ ‘Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision’ ” (*Acts 26:19, NKJV*). What does it tell us about Paul? How faithful are we to our missionary calling as Christians (*1 Pet. 2:9, 10*)?
- 3 Paul had a passion for people—not for numbers, but for people. In his final hearing in Caesarea, he said to his audience that his heart’s desire was that all of them would be like him; that is, saved by God’s grace (*Acts 26:29*). He did not wish his own freedom or justice more than he wished them to experience God’s salvation. What can we learn from his example here? How much are we willing to sacrifice in order to see the gospel spread?
- 4 Agrippa had a chance to hear the gospel right from the mouth of Paul. And yet, he rejected it. How can we be careful not to miss great opportunities when they appear right before us? That is, how can we stay spiritually attuned to the realities around us?

Going House to House

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Kiyong Kwon, a business owner in South Korea, decided that he and other church members needed to go house to house to share the gospel and fill a church that he had planted. “House-to-house work is difficult,” Kwon said. “Most people are not home during the day. Those who are usually don’t want to talk. But I obeyed Ellen White’s advice.”

That advice is found in Ellen G. White’s book *Christian Service*, page 113, and reads, “Of equal importance with special public efforts is house-to-house work in the homes of the people. In large cities there are certain classes that cannot be reached by public meetings. These must be searched out as the shepherd searches for his lost sheep.”

So, every Thursday, Kwon and other church members went from house to house. They didn’t carry religious literature or offer Bible studies. Instead, they asked, “How can we help you and your family?”

One day, Kwon pressed many doorbells without any response. But the front door swung open at one house, and a woman said, “Come in.”

Kwon entered the house but expressed shock at the instant invitation. “Do you know who I am?” he said. “Why did you let me in?”

“I know that you are evangelizing,” she said.

“But most people reject me,” he persisted. “Why are you welcoming me?”

The woman explained that she had dreamed that night that a tall stranger would visit. In the dream, the tall man had opened her front door and told her, “Come out! Hurry!”

“When you pressed the door bell,” she said, “I saw you on the intercom TV screen, and you looked tall. So, I let you in.”

Kwon, growing more surprised by the minute, asked whether he could be of help. “My daughter is depressed,” the woman said. “Please help her.”

“Bring your daughter to the living room,” Kwon said.

“No, my daughter refuses to come out of her room.”

“It will be different this time,” Kwon said. “Just tell her to come out.”

Surprisingly, the daughter came to the living room, and Kwon prayed and read the Bible with her.

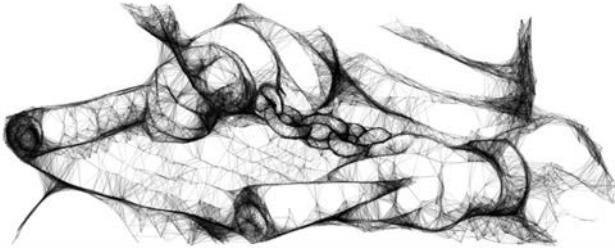
He returned the next Thursday and read the Bible with her again. The daughter started attending church and was baptized.

“This has been my experience repeatedly,” Kwon said. “It is God who does the mission.”



KIYONG KWON, 56, left, has planted three churches in South Korea. Part of this quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help plant the first Adventist church in Sejong, South Korea. Read more about Kwon last week and next week.

Journey to Rome



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 27, Acts 28, Rom. 1:18–20.*

Memory Text: “Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar.”
(*Acts 27:24, ESV*).

Paul had long wished to visit Rome, but his arrest in Jerusalem changed everything. By giving in to the legalistic pressure of the Jerusalem church leaders, he ended up in Roman custody for almost five years, including the time he spent on the sea journey to Italy. This change represented a severe blow to his missionary plans.

Despite the setback, Jesus Himself promised that the apostle would still testify of Him in Rome (*Acts 23:11*). Even when we fail Him, God may still give us another chance, though He does not always spare us from the consequences of our actions. Not only was Paul taken to Rome as a prisoner, but there is no biblical evidence that he ever went to Spain, as he had hoped to do (*Rom. 15:24*). After being released from what is known as the first Roman imprisonment, Paul would be arrested again, this time to suffer martyrdom (*2 Tim. 4:6–8*) under Nero in A.D. 67.

Yes, Paul made it to Rome, and while waiting in his house-prison to be tried before the emperor, he spoke, despite his chains (*Eph. 6:20, Phil. 1:13*), without hindrance to whoever came to him (*Acts 28:30, 31*), including important figures from Caesar's household (*Phil. 4:22*).

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

Sailing to Rome

After about two years of confinement in Caesarea (*Acts 24:27*), Paul was to be sent to Rome. Judging by the first person plural and the richness of details used to describe the long and turbulent sea journey to Italy (*Acts 27:1–28:16*), Luke was accompanying Paul, as was another Christian named Aristarchus (*Acts 27:2*). Another important character in the story was the Roman centurion, Julius, who had other prisoners as well in his charge (*Acts 27:1*).

It was late summer when they departed. The Fast (*Acts 27:9*) refers to the Day of Atonement, in the second half of October. Because of the winter conditions, travel in the Mediterranean was normally avoided between November and March. This time, however, they faced difficulties from the beginning, and only after much delay they reached the small bay of Fair Havens, in the island of Crete (*Acts 27:8*).

Read *Acts 27:9–12*. While in Fair Havens, how did Paul intervene in the story, and how was his intervention received?

Paul's warnings went unheeded, and so they decided to sail westward another 40 miles to a harbor (Phoenix) where they could winter with safety. Unfortunately, with a sudden change in the weather, they were caught in such a violent tempest that the crew had no option but to let the ship be driven southwest by the wind, away from land. Soon they began to throw the cargo overboard and even some of the ship's gear in a frantic attempt to lighten it, as it was already taking on water. The situation was dramatic. After several days of scant daylight, poor visibility, heavy rain, and raging winds, without knowing where they were and in complete exhaustion, they "finally gave up all hope of being saved" (*Acts 27:20, NIV*).

Read *Acts 27:21–26*. What was Paul's second intervention in the story?

In prophetic words, Paul told the crew a message he had just received from God. There was no reason to despair or lose hope. There would still be danger and loss, but all of them would survive.

Why would such a faithful and dedicated servant of the Lord like Paul have to suffer through so much? What lessons can we learn from his experiences?

The Shipwreck

In his second intervention in the story, Paul assured all who were on board—276 people altogether (*Acts 27:37*)—that, though not everything would come out fine, there would be no casualties; only the ship would go down (*Acts 27:22*). Fourteen days later, the apostle’s words were fulfilled. Still under a terrible storm and with the ship completely adrift, the sailors sensed land was near, possibly because they could hear the noise of breakers (*Acts 27:27*). After a series of soundings, and fearing the ship would be driven against the rocks along the shore, they dropped four anchors from the back of the ship in order to reduce their speed; meanwhile, they desperately asked their gods for daylight to come (*Acts 27:28, 29*).

Read *Acts 27:30–44*. What lessons are here for us in this story?

In the beginning of the journey, the centurion treated Paul well but had no reason to trust the apostle’s nautical judgment earlier in the trip. After two weeks, however, things were different. Paul had already gained the centurion’s respect with his prophetic intervention about the shipwreck (*Acts 27:21–26*), which was heading now to its fulfillment.

Paul urged the people on board to eat, otherwise they would not have the strength to swim and get ashore. Divine providence does not necessarily exempt us from doing what would normally be our duty. “Throughout this narrative a nice balance is maintained between God’s assurance of their safety and the efforts of the people involved to ensure it.”—David J. Williams, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), p. 438.

As morning approached, the sailors came in sight of land; it was a bay with a beach, where they decided to run the ship aground. The ship, however, never reached the beach. Instead, it struck a sandbar and ended up breaking apart by the force of the waves. The soldiers’ plan to kill the prisoners to prevent them from escaping was stopped by the centurion, mainly because of Paul. In the end, as God had promised, not a single life was lost.

What should it say to us about the power of Paul’s witness, and his character, that in a desire to keep Paul alive the soldiers were forbidden to kill any of the prisoners?

In Malta

It was only upon reaching the shore that the survivors learned they were in Malta, a small island in the center of the Mediterranean, just south of Sicily. In the two weeks they had been adrift in the sea, yielded to the force of the wind, they had covered about four hundred seventy-five miles since Fair Havens, in Crete. Now they would have to wait out the three months of winter before continuing their journey (*Acts 28:11*).

Read Acts 28:1–10. What happened to Paul on the island of Malta, and how was God able to use him?

The people of Malta were very friendly and hospitable, and their first action toward Paul and his group, who were all wet and cold, was to light a fire to warm them up; the temperature in Malta at this time of the year would not be higher than about 50°F.

The incident of the snake drew the people's attention to Paul. At first, the local pagans viewed the fact that he was bitten as an act of divine retribution. They thought Paul was a murderer who had managed to escape from death by drowning but was still caught by the gods, or perhaps the Greek goddess *Dikē*, the personification of justice and vengeance. Because the apostle did not die, he was hailed as a god, as had happened in Lystra several years before (*Acts 14:8–18*). Though Luke does not dwell on the episode, it is probably safe to assume that Paul took advantage of this situation to bear witness of the God he served.

Publius was either the Roman procurator of Malta or just a local dignitary, but he welcomed Paul and his companions for three days until they found a more permanent place to stay. At any rate, the healing of this man's father gave Paul the opportunity to engage in a sort of healing ministry among the Maltese people.

In Luke's account, there is no mention of a single convert or of any congregation Paul left behind when he departed from Malta. Such omission might be entirely coincidental, but it illustrates the fact that our mission in the world goes beyond baptisms or church planting; it also involves concern for people and their needs. This is the practical aspect of the gospel (*Acts 20:35; compare with Titus 3:14*).

How fascinating that these islanders, who were ignorant about God's law, had a sense of divine justice. Where, ultimately, did that come from? See Rom. 1:18–20.

Paul in Rome, Finally

After three months in Malta, Paul and his companions were finally able to continue their journey (*Acts 28:11*). They arrived in Puteoli (*Acts 28:13*)—modern Pozzuoli, in the Bay of Naples—from where they would travel to Rome by road (*see Acts 28:11–16*).

The news of Paul's approach quickly reached Rome, and from there a group of believers traveled several miles south to welcome him. Though he had never been to Rome, the apostle had numerous friends in the city: co-workers, converts, relatives, and many others who were very dear to him (*Rom. 16:3–16*). The meeting on the Appian Way must have been particularly moving, especially in view of the shipwreck and the fact that Paul was now a prisoner. As a result of such a unique demonstration of love and care on the part of his beloved friends, the apostle thanked God and felt deeply heartened as he was about to face trial before the emperor.

In his official report, Festus certainly must have written that according to Roman law, Paul was not guilty of any significant crime (*Acts 25:26, 27; 26:31, 32*). This probably explains why he was allowed to rent a private dwelling (*Acts 28:30*) instead of being sent to a regular prison or military camp, though after Roman fashion he was chained to a soldier the whole time. That Paul was at his own expense implies he was able to carry on his own trade (*Acts 18:3*).

Read Acts 28:17–22. What did Paul do as soon as he settled down?

Though Paul could not go to the synagogue, the synagogue could come to him. So, soon after his arrival, following his policy of going first to the Jews (*Rom. 1:16*), he called together the local Jewish leaders to state his innocence and explain, as he had done before, that he had been arrested for no reason other than the hope of Israel (*Acts 23:6, 24:15, 26:6–8*). His intention was not so much to defend himself as to create an atmosphere of trust that allowed him to preach the gospel, showing how Jesus' resurrection was the fulfillment of Israel's ancestral hope. Surprised that they had not received any information from Jerusalem about Paul, the Jews decided to hear him.

Read Acts 28:22. What does this tell us about the hostility against the believers still at this time? How can we stay faithful even when others are talking against our faith?

The Victory of the Gospel

On a set day, the Jews came in large numbers to hear Paul's presentation of the gospel (*Acts 28:23*).

Read Acts 28:24–31. What was Paul's point in quoting Isaiah in this context?

The quotation from Isaiah 6:9, 10 describes what happens when people refuse to accept the divine message. Though some Jews believed, others didn't, and so, because of this great dispute, the apostle had no choice but once again to turn to the Gentiles (*Acts 13:46, 47; 18:6*).

Paul had to wait two years to be tried by the emperor. Meanwhile, though restricted to his house-prison, he was still able to share the gospel without hindrance with those who came to him. The last scene of Acts is one that emphasizes the victory of the gospel, as no force, whether Jewish or Roman, had been able to stop its progress.

It is not clear why Luke finishes his book at this point, as there is evidence that, due to the weakness of the case against Paul, he was released from this imprisonment, went on another missionary journey, and was again taken to Rome and executed (*2 Tim. 4:6–8*). Perhaps, from the standpoint of Luke's literary purpose, by having preached even in distant Rome, the gospel already had reached the "ends of the earth" (*Acts 1:8*).

"Paul's patience and cheerfulness during his long and unjust imprisonment, his courage and faith, were a continual sermon. His spirit, so unlike the spirit of the world, bore witness that a power higher than that of earth was abiding with him. And by his example, Christians were impelled to greater energy as advocates of the cause from the public labors of which Paul had been withdrawn. In these ways were the apostle's bonds influential, so that when his power and usefulness seemed cut off, and to all appearance he could do the least, then it was that he gathered sheaves for Christ in fields from which he seemed wholly excluded."—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 464.

From the standpoint of the church's mission, however, it could be said that the book of Acts—or the history of the spreading of the gospel—is not yet finished, and it is here that each one of us enters the picture. Many more exciting and dramatic chapters have been written throughout the centuries, sometimes with the blood of God's faithful witnesses. Now it is our turn to add one more chapter, the last one (we hope!), and bring the mission Jesus left with the disciples to its full completion—"and then the end will come" (*Matt. 24:14, NKJV*).

Further Thought: “Christ has given to the church a sacred charge. Every member should be a channel through which God can communicate to the world the treasures of His grace, the unsearchable riches of Christ. There is nothing that the Saviour desires so much as agents who will represent to the world His Spirit and His character. There is nothing that the world needs so much as the manifestation through humanity of the Saviour’s love. All heaven is waiting for men and women through whom God can reveal the power of Christianity.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 600.

“Long has God waited for the spirit of service to take possession of the whole church so that everyone shall be working for Him according to his ability. When the members of the church of God do their appointed work in the needy fields at home and abroad, in fulfillment of the gospel commission, the whole world will soon be warned and the Lord Jesus will return to this earth with power and great glory.”—Page 111.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How does Luke portray Paul’s faith in God throughout the whole journey to Rome? How were others affected by such unconditional faith?
- 2 Despite everything he had gone through, Paul never gave up his faith or his mission. In Rome, he continued to preach despite his limited freedom. What can we do when tempted to give up on our proclamation of the gospel to someone?
- 3 Read Romans 1:14, 15. Why did Paul feel himself under obligation—or a debtor—to preach the gospel to everybody? Are we less obligated than he was? Consider this statement: “To save souls should be the lifework of everyone who professes Christ. We are debtors to the world for the grace given us of God, for the light which has shone upon us, and for the discovered beauty and power of the truth.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 53.
- 4 Read again the passage from Isaiah that Paul used. How could this idea apply to us? Yes, we have been given a great deal of truth, but if we harden ourselves to it, or even to aspects of it that might conflict with our own wishes or desires, what danger could we face spiritually?
- 5 Imagine being the soldier chained to Paul. What do you think he saw in the man to whom he was so closely tied?

Healthy Church for the Rich

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Kiyong Kwon, a business owner and church planter, chose an affluent suburb of South Korea's capital, Seoul, to open his second church. His first church, opened in a rural area four years earlier, was filled to overflowing, and he wanted a new challenge. "When God first called me, I said, 'I can't,'" Kwon said. "But after I witnessed God's power, I became bolder."

He reasoned that impoverished people can accept God more easily than the wealthy. He wondered how to share the gospel with those who have everything and decided that even the wealthy need good health. So, he opened the Bundang NEW START church and a vegetarian restaurant in an office building in the suburb of Bundang. "I decided God's health message is the way to share the last-day gospel," he said. The new church began organizing health seminars, cooking classes, and Bible studies.

Among the first attendees was a pharmacist who seemed to enjoy the weeklong health seminar. After the seminar finished, participants interested in more information were invited to attend Bible studies on Daniel and Revelation. But the pharmacist didn't come. Kwon made some inquiries and learned that the pharmacist had taken a week of vacation to attend the health seminar. She didn't have free time for Bible studies. So, Kwon made audio recordings of the Bible studies and sent them to her.

"The woman was really shocked by what she heard, but she didn't want to leave her Sunday church," Kwon said.

The pharmacist's mind began to change as she continued to listen to the Bible studies. She thought about keeping the Sabbath and worshiping at the church. As she pondered what to do, she began to suffer a bad headache. She worried that she might have brain cancer, but doctors couldn't find anything wrong. Still, the pain persisted.

Finally, her 24-year-old daughter said, "Do you know why you have the headache? It's because you know what's right but you aren't doing it. I'll go to the Sabbath church with you."

The pharmacist and her daughter showed up at church the next Sabbath, and they are faithful members today.

"From these kinds of experiences, I realize that this is God's business," Kwon said. "Hearts are not changed because of anything that people do."



KIYONG KWON, 56, left, has planted three churches in South Korea. Part of this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help plant the first Adventist church in Sejong, South Korea. Read more about Kwon last week.

Our study guide for next quarter, *Oneness in Christ* by Denis Fortin, will focus on the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and what unity in Christ means to us. Fundamental belief no. 14, “Unity in the Body of Christ,” states: “The church is one body with many members, called from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. . . . 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. Through the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures we share the same faith and hope, and reach out in one witness to all. This unity has its source in the oneness of the triune God, who has adopted us as His children.” The guide’s purpose is to provide biblical instruction on Christian unity for us as Seventh-day Adventists, who, now, as always, face challenges to that unity. However, in Scripture we find insights and instructions on how to live God’s gift of oneness in Christ. Those insights and instructions about living out the unity we have been given, will be our topic this quarter.

Lesson 1—Creation and Fall

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **Love as a Foundation of Unity** (*Gen. 1:26, 27*)

MONDAY: **The Consequences of the Fall** (*Gen. 3:16–19*)

TUESDAY: **Further Disunity and Separation** (*Gen. 11:1–9*)

WEDNESDAY: **Abraham, Father of God’s People** (*Gen. 12:3, 18:18*)

THURSDAY: **God’s Chosen People** (*Deut. 7:6–11*)

Memory Text—*Genesis 15:5, 6, NKJV*

Sabbath Gem: Any attempt at understanding the nature of church unity must begin with God’s plan at Creation and then the need for restoration after the Fall. God works through people to restore unity and to make His will known to lost humanity.

Lesson 2—Causes of Disunity

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **“Return, O Backsliding Children”** (*Jer. 3:14–18*)

MONDAY: **Right in His Own Eyes** (*Judg. 17:6*)

TUESDAY: **The Division of the Hebrew Nation** (*1 Kings 12:1–16*)

WEDNESDAY: **Schism in Corinth** (*1 Cor. 1:10–17*)

THURSDAY: **“Wolves Will Come”** (*Acts 20:25–31*)

Memory Text—*Proverbs 9:10, NKJV*

Sabbath Gem: Disobedience and carelessness led Israel into apostasy and disunity. Obedience to God’s laws was intended as a means to preserve the people from the natural consequences of sin and to sanctify them in the midst of many foreign nations.

Lessons for the Visually Impaired The regular *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* is available free each month in braille and on audio CD to sight-impaired and physically handicapped persons who cannot read normal ink print. This includes individuals who, because of arthritis, multiple sclerosis, paralysis, accident, and so forth, cannot hold or focus on normal ink-print publications. Contact Christian Record Services for the Blind, Box 6097, Lincoln, NE 68506-0097. Phone: 402-488-0981; e-mail: info@christianrecord.org; Web site: www.christianrecord.org.