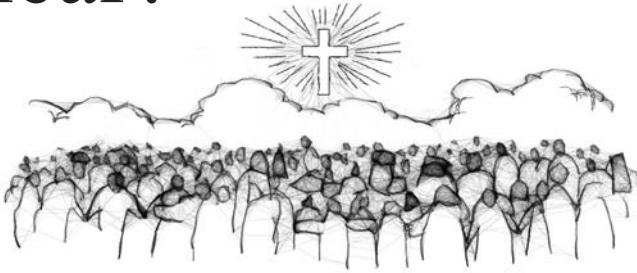


Must *the* Whole World Hear?



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Acts 4:12, Ps. 87:4–6, John 10:16, Rom. 2:12–16, John 14:6, Rom. 1:18.

Memory Text: “Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen” (*Romans 16:25–27, NIV*).

As we have seen, the Lord uses people to bring the message of the gospel to others. However, throughout the ages, millions have died without knowing the biblical plan of salvation. The fact is that a majority of those who have ever lived have not heard the story of redemption or known about the good news of God's grace as revealed in Jesus Christ. This leads to two persistent questions. First, on the day of judgment, how is God going to deal with these billions who have not known Him? Second, is there salvation outside of someone's knowing the plan of salvation as it is in Jesus?

Some would answer that there is salvation in a single Christian denomination only; in contrast, others believe that all religions are equally valid guides to God and eternal life.

In the end, the crucial point to remember is that Jesus has revealed to us the character of God, and this tells us a lot about His love for all humanity and His desire for as many as possible to be saved. God is a God of justice, and however He works it out, the shout will be heard across heaven: “ ‘Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints!’ ” (*Rev. 15:3, NKJV*).

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

No Other Name Under Heaven

Some Christians have the conviction that only those who hear and respond positively to the Christian gospel can be saved. The people, sometimes called “exclusivists,” regard all non-Christian religions as constructs of fallen humans, which express willful rebellion against God. Non-Christians are, they believe for that reason, outside the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Some Christians take the further step of claiming that outside their specific denomination and doctrinal structure there is no salvation, even for other confessing Christians. For them, other denominations with their divergent beliefs have placed themselves outside the care of God and have no chance of entering the kingdom of heaven. For instance, in 1302 in his papal bull *Unam Sanctam*, Pope Boniface VIII declared “that it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff.” Some Protestants have taught something similar in regard to their own denominations, as well.

Read Acts 4:12. What is it saying, and how are we to understand these words?

The words of the Scripture here are very clear: salvation is found only in Jesus Christ and in no other name under heaven. It’s important, however, not to read into these words more than they specifically say.

Imagine a man in a building that is on fire; before being able to escape, he is overcome by smoke and collapses unconscious. A fire-fighter finds him on the floor, grabs him, and brings him outside, where the medics take over. He is rushed to the hospital, and a few hours later he regains consciousness.

The point is that this person, who was saved, had no idea who had saved him. In the same way, anyone who is saved—either before Jesus came in the flesh or after—will be saved only through Jesus, whether or not that person had heard of His name or of the plan of salvation.

“Among the heathen are those who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish. Though ignorant of the written law of God, they have heard His voice speaking to them in nature, and have done the things that the law required. Their works are evidence that the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they are recognized as the children of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 638.

How Much Must One Know?

Picking up where we left off on Sunday, we can see that although the work of Christ provides the only means of salvation, some believe that explicit knowledge of Christ is not necessary in order for one to be saved.

This does not imply that salvation is available apart from Christ but that God is able and willing to apply the merits of Christ's work to whomever He wishes. Some believe that those who do not know Christ and have never been exposed to the gospel, but who under the influence of the Holy Spirit feel a need for deliverance, and act on it, will be saved. The quote from Ellen G. White at the end of yesterday's study certainly implies this (think of Job and Melchizedek).

What light do the following texts shed on this idea?

Ps. 87:4–6 _____

John 10:16 _____

Acts 14:17 _____

Acts 17:26–28 _____

Rom. 2:12–16 _____

“God ‘will repay each person according to what they have done.’ To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life” (*Rom. 2:6, 7, NIV*).

Paul here declares that there are some outside of Christianity who will receive eternal life as a result of an “obedience-unto-life” principle (*cf. Lev. 18:5*). For those “Gentiles” who “show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts” because “their consciences also bearing witness” (*Rom. 2:15, NIV*), it will make a difference on Judgment Day because these people have responded to the work of the Spirit in their hearts.

Because we don't know people's hearts, why in all cases, either with professed Christians or non-Christians, must we be careful not to judge their souls' salvation?

Universalism and Pluralism

Some people teach that in the end God is going to save all human beings, regardless of what they believed or even how they lived. “Universalism” is the conviction that all persons are so related to God that they will be saved, even if they never heard or believed the gospel. After all, John 3:16 says, “God so loved the world.” Thus, in this thinking, if He loves everyone, how can anyone be lost, especially if being lost means eternal torment in hell? How could God burn forever someone whom He loves? Hence, we can see how one false doctrine (eternal torment) leads to another (universalism).

Related to universalism is “pluralism,” the conviction that all religions are equally valid and lead equally to God and salvation. No religion is inherently better than, or superior to, any other religion, at least according to this theology. A pastor in a church in California wrote on the church Web site that his congregation “does not believe that Christianity is superior in any way to other religious beliefs.”

For pluralists, the vast range of religious rituals and beliefs, symbols and metaphors, are mere surface differences concealing a similar core of all religions. Pluralists point out, for example, that most religions emphasize love for God and love for fellow human beings, a form of the golden rule, and hope for a blessed future life. According to them, all faiths, at the core, teach the same thing; hence, they are all valid paths to God, and it is very chauvinistic and arrogant to try to push Christian beliefs upon those who are members of non-Christian faiths.

What does the Bible have to say about both universalism and pluralism? *John 14:6; Rev. 20:14, 15; 21:8; Dan. 12:2; John 3:18; Matt. 7:13, 14; 2 Thess. 2:9, 10.*

No question, both universalism and pluralism are contrary to Scripture. Not everyone will be saved; and all faiths do not lead to salvation.

What answer would you give to someone who argues that Christianity’s claim to be the only true path to salvation (see *John 14:6*) is arrogant and exclusivist? Share your answer with your class on Sabbath.

Sinners in Need of Grace

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:17, NIV). What great hope is found in this verse for all humanity? How can we take this crucial truth and, first, make it our own? How then can we use it to motivate us to reach out to others?

According to the Bible, we are all sinners (*Rom. 3:23*), and God wishes for all to repent (*Acts 17:30, 26:20, 2 Pet. 3:9*) and be saved (*1 Tim. 2:4*). From the Fall in Eden onward, God’s purpose has been to save humanity from the devastation and ultimate eternal death that sin and rebellion have brought to humanity. What more proof do we need than the Cross to show God’s love for us and His desire to save us?

However, Scripture is clear that God will not save those who openly rebel against Him.

Read Genesis 6:11–13, Romans 1:18, 2 Thessalonians 2:12, Revelation 21:8, 22:15. What powerful warning is found in these verses?

God loves all people, but all people are sinners in need of grace, and this grace has been revealed in Jesus. He has called His church to spread the good news of this grace to the world.

“The church is God’s appointed agency for the salvation of men. It was organized for service, and its mission is to carry the gospel to the world. From the beginning it has been God’s plan that through His church shall be reflected to the world His fullness and His sufficiency. The members of the church, those whom He has called out of darkness into His marvelous light, are to show forth His glory. The church is the repository of the riches of the grace of Christ; and through the church will eventually be made manifest, even to ‘the principalities and powers in heavenly places,’ the final and full display of the love of God. Ephesians 3:10.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 9.

In what ways can you personally (not the pastor, not the elder, not the deacon, but you) better learn to “show forth His glory” to a dying world? What must you change in your life in order to do this?

The Mission Call

“I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings” (*1 Cor. 9:22, 23, NIV*). **What important principle is Paul espousing here, and how can we reflect this same attitude in our own lives?**

The Lord of missions, in His wisdom, chose to work through humans to bring the message of forgiveness and salvation to the world. God chose men and women, despite their weaknesses, to work together with the Holy Spirit and the angels. Israel was to be God’s steady “light” in Old Testament times, but too often they put their light “under a basket” (*Matt. 5:15, NKJV*). Too many times the blessings they received were kept inside Israel. Instead of mixing and sharing, they shut themselves away from the nations in order to escape “contamination.”

God’s next plan for world mission called for the salt method—to go “and make disciples” (*Matt. 28:19, NKJV; Mark 16:15, 20; Acts 1:8*). The history of Christian missions sparkles with stories of self-sacrificing missionaries who went as salt to the world, bringing the gospel of life to individuals, communities, and sometimes entire nations.

However, as with ancient Israel, too often these mission successes have been obscured by the human shortcomings of the missionaries themselves and their overall mission enterprise. These human shortcomings include (1) poor planning for outreach, inadequate understanding of the task; (2) narrow focus on mission only as education, health care, disaster relief, or development, which overshadow preaching the gospel; (3) underfunding and understaffing by the sending organizations; (4) missionaries unsuited to the task; and (5) nations that forbid the preaching of the gospel.

Of course, no one ever said that it was going to be easy. We are in the midst of a great controversy, and the enemy will work every way he can to thwart our outreach efforts, whether in our own neighborhoods or in the most “remote” corners of the world. We, though, mustn’t be discouraged, because we have been given many wonderful promises of power, and we can be sure that God will fulfill His purposes on earth. As we have been told: “ ‘So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it’ ” (*Isa. 55:11, NKJV*).

Further Study: Ellen G. White, “On the Mount of Olives,” in *The Desire of Ages*, p. 633; “Speedy Preparation,” in *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 335; “Extension of the Work in Foreign Fields,” in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 23.

The New Testament employs two Greek nouns, accompanied by the adjective “all,” to express the worldwide extent of Christian mission: “all the *kosmos*” in Matthew 26:13, Mark 14:9, and 16:15, and “all the *oikoumenē*” in Matthew 24:14. While *kosmos*, the more general term for the realm of orderly existence, signifies the planet (with approximately one hundred fifty New Testament occurrences), the more specific *oikoumenē* focuses on the world’s human inhabitants.

How extensive was “the whole world” for the first Christians? Within a few years of the Crucifixion, they had reached modern-day Cyprus, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Macedonia, Greece, and Italy. There is evidence that they propagated the gospel as far as southern Russia (ancient Scythia) in the north, Ethiopia in the south, India in the east, and Spain in the west.

Did the early Christian missionaries believe they had to reach the whole world with the gospel? According to Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the “birthday” of the Christian church, began to proclaim the “mighty works of God” to visitors from a list of nations, geographic regions, and ethnic groups (*Acts 2:5–11*). From its first day of life, the Christian church has been aware of the worldwide extent of its mission. If they had that understanding back then, how much more so should we today?

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, go over your answer to the final question on Tuesday’s study about Christian claims being exclusivist and arrogant. Does exclusivism necessarily translate into arrogance? If not, why not?
- 2 The church’s understanding of the size and extent of “the whole world” has expanded since the Day of Pentecost. Jesus’ gospel commission to “‘go therefore and make disciples of all the nations’ ” (*Matt. 28:19, NKJV*) will remain present truth for the church until Christ returns. How does the proclamation of the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6–12 fit in with the Great Commission?
- 3 How would you answer this question: If people can be saved without ever having heard the gospel, what’s the point of risking life and limb in order to spread it to them?

Providential Bus Encounter

by KUSUMAWATHIE PERERA

One morning I was riding a bus to Colombo, the capital city of Sri Lanka. I saw Francis, a longtime family friend, sitting nearby. I hadn't seen him in a long time and was surprised to learn that he had become a Seventh-day Adventist. I, too, had become a Christian two years earlier.

"I was paralyzed and unable to do anything," I told Francis. "Then some Christians prayed for me, and God healed me. I attended their church, but some things they do in their worship service make me uncomfortable—jumping around, shouting, and rolling on the floor, and talking in strange languages. Lately, I haven't gone to church."

Francis offered to bring a friend to visit me. "We can study the Bible together. I'll tell you a little about the Seventh-day Adventists and what we believe," he offered.

A few weeks later, Francis came with his pastor. We had a pleasant visit, and the pastor talked about God and Jesus in such simple and easy-to-understand language that I felt very close to Him. Then he prayed for my family and me. His prayer was like a beautiful conversation with a friend.

Francis and the pastor visited me often and shared God's truths with me. I enjoyed the Bible studies, but my husband wanted nothing to do with God.

One day, my husband came home drunk when the pastor and Francis were still there. My husband often got drunk, sometimes becoming violent, breaking up the furniture and terrifying the children and me.

When the pastor saw my husband's condition, he prayed for him. I knew that my husband would never remember even seeing the pastor, but I was glad that the pastor was willing to pray for him.

The next morning, my husband was sober. He remembered almost nothing of the previous day's drinking binge, but he remembered that the pastor had prayed for him. In some mysterious way that prayer had touched him, and he said he was healed from drinking. I wanted to believe him, but he had promised to stop drinking before, and it never lasted. But from that day on, my husband never touched alcohol again.

When the pastor and Francis visited again, I told them what had happened to my husband, and we rejoiced together. When I completed Bible studies, I was baptized and became a Seventh-day Adventist. Although my husband has not yet given his life to God, I know he believes, and one day he will come to the Savior.

KUSUMAWATHIE PERERA is a farmer's wife in north-central Sri Lanka.

Jeremiah, the topic for next quarter, written by Imre Tokics, reveals the reality of God's desire for humans to obey Him and the human tendency not to. The book recounts Jeremiah's ministry as he preached God's message to a people who, for the most part, didn't want to hear it.

The book takes us through decades of biblical history as the Lord used Jeremiah to proclaim truths that have been the foundation of the biblical message from the beginning. Of all the spiritual truths taught in the book, these words catch the essence of so much of what the Lord seeks from His people: "Thus says the LORD: 'Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD'" (*Jer. 9:23, 24*). Jeremiah takes a spiritual journey from the lowest depths of human depravity to heights and grandeur and majesty of the Lord, who, from those heights, cries out to all of us in our fallen state.

Lesson 1—The Prophetic Calling of Jeremiah

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **The Prophets** (*Isa. 1:19, Jer. 11:2–6, Ezek. 18:23*)

MONDAY: **Jeremiah's Family Background** (*Jer. 1:1*)

TUESDAY: **Prophetic Calling of Jeremiah** (*Jer. 1:4, 5*)

WEDNESDAY: **Reluctant Prophets** (*Jer. 1:6*)

THURSDAY: **The Almond Branch** (*Jer. 1:11–19*)

Memory Text—*Jeremiah 1:5, NKJV*

Sabbath Gem: Despite opposition, Jeremiah could not be sold or bought; he stood as "a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall" (*Jer. 1:18*), not in his own strength but in the Lord's.

Lesson 2—The Crisis (Within and Without)

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **A Quick History** (*Judg. 2:1–15*)

MONDAY: **The Two Kingdoms** (*1 Kings 12:26–31*)

TUESDAY: **Two Evils** (*Jer. 2:1–28*)

WEDNESDAY: **The Babylonian Threat** (*Jer. 27:6*)

THURSDAY: **Swearing Falsely** (*Jer. 7:4*)

Memory Text—*Jeremiah 2:3, NKJV*

Sabbath Gem: God's people faced challenges, but their greatest crisis came from within in the sense that the people's hearts had become so hardened and damaged by sin and apostasy that they refused to heed the warnings that God was sending to them.

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