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Uniting Heaven and Earth



Think of the hardest job you've ever done. What made it hard? Was it the expectations or the time allotted for the work or both? Was it your attitude toward the task? Or perhaps it was the people you worked with? Or maybe it just seemed like an impossibility to ever succeed?

Consider the purpose of the plan of salvation: uniting heaven and earth. Sound impossible? Humanly speaking, it certainly is. Nevertheless, just before ascending to heaven, Jesus gave the apostles a seemingly impossible assignment: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (*Matt. 28:19, 20, NKJV*).

Jesus sent Paul to the Gentiles to accomplish this seemingly impossible task: "To open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me" (*Acts 26:18, NKJV*).

Some might throw up their hands when given jobs like that. However, we should not overlook the promises Jesus gave on both these occasions. To the apostles, He added, "And, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (*Matt. 28:20*). And to Paul, Jesus said, "I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you" (*Acts 26:16, NKJV*).

In short, Jesus gives humanly impossible tasks so we will rely on Him, rather than on ourselves, to accomplish them. He never gives us a job without supplying the power to do it. “As the will of man co-operates with the will of God, it becomes omnipotent. Whatever is to be done at His command may be accomplished in His strength. All His biddings are enablings.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 333.

Amazingly, by the time Paul wrote to the Colossians, the gospel had been “preached to every creature under heaven” (*Col. 1:23, NKJV*). Of course, not all accepted it. But if we look carefully at the commissions He gave to the apostles (*Matt. 28:18–20*) and to the apostle Paul, Jesus never promised all would become disciples or all would be converted. The gospel is to be “preached in all the world *as a witness* to all the nations, and then the end will come” (*Matt. 24:14, NKJV, emphasis supplied*). What does that witness look like? How exactly is it to be accomplished?

Jesus gives us humanly impossible tasks so we will rely on Him, rather than ourselves, to accomplish them.

This quarter we’ll study Paul’s epistles to the Philippians and to the Colossians. They have important similarities. Above all, they reveal Christ, the only One able to unite heaven and earth. He is the ladder Jacob saw stretching from earth to heaven (*Gen. 28:12; compare John 1:51*). As the Son of man and the Son of God, He redeems us from sin, and He intercedes for us.

In studying these letters, we will see both these aspects of Jesus. We’ll consider some of the most sublime statements found anywhere about Christ’s divinity and how He gave it all up to save us. We’ll see Paul wrestling from prison with problems in one church he raised up (Philippi) and in one that he himself never even visited (Colossae). The connections Paul established throughout the “world church” of that time enabled him, even from a Roman prison, to respond to challenges. He knew his time was short, and he did all he could to draw the church closer to heaven and to each other. In so doing, he shows us how God’s church today can unite with heaven to fulfill the last-day commission of Revelation 14, which we know as “the three angels’ messages.”

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How to Use This Teachers Edition

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

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

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

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

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

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

Persecuted *but* Not Forsaken



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 3:1; 2 Cor. 4:7–12; Acts 9:16; Philem. 15, 16; Col. 4:9; Phil. 1:1–3; Col. 1:1, 2.*

Memory Text: “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!” (*Philippians 4:4, NKJV*).

An Adventist pastor, imprisoned on false charges, spent nearly two years behind bars. Though at first greatly perplexed, he realized the prison was his God-given mission field. When his fellow prisoners learned that he was a pastor, they asked him to preach. He did, and he gave out literature too. He even baptized prisoners and conducted Communion services.

“At times,” he admitted, “it was difficult ministering in the prison, but there was also joy, especially when you saw prayers answered and lives changed.”

Paul wrote *Philippians* and *Colossians* from prison (see *Phil. 1:7, Col. 4:3*). In fact, in *Philippi* itself, after Paul and Silas were unjustly accused, the jailer put “their feet in the stocks” (*Acts 16:24, NKJV*). At midnight, they were “praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them” (*Acts 16:25, NKJV; emphasis supplied*). Truly they knew how to “rejoice always.”

This week we’ll look at the circumstances that Paul faced. He saw a larger purpose for what happened to him, and perhaps we can learn from him when we, as we inevitably do, face our own trials.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 3.

Paul, the Prisoner of Jesus Christ

Philippians and Colossians are called Prison Epistles because they were written while Paul was in prison (the others are Ephesians and Philemon). Most commentators think they were written while Paul was in Rome, about A.D. 60–62 (*see Acts 28:16*).

Read Ephesians 3:1 and Philemon 1. What is the significance of how Paul characterizes his imprisonment?

Paul has given his life in service to Jesus Christ. If that service includes being a prisoner, he is ready. Paul describes himself as “an ambassador in chains” (*Eph. 6:20, NKJV*). He had been on missionary journeys, raising up churches and training workers for the Lord. He may have asked, “Why am I here when I could be doing so much more without these chains?” Paul was also imprisoned later, when he wrote 2 Timothy, which is considered a Pastoral Epistle. So at least five books of the New Testament were written while he was in prison.

In none of the prison epistles does Paul mention exactly where he was imprisoned; thus, some have suggested either Ephesus or Caesarea. But there is no biblical evidence that Paul was ever imprisoned in Ephesus. Caesarea might seem a more likely possibility, except there is no apparent threat to Paul’s life in this city. There definitely is that threat, however, by the time Philippians was written (*see Phil. 1:20, Phil. 2:17*).

This epistle gives us some other clues as to where Paul was at the time of his imprisonment. First, there was a *praetorium*. This can refer to a provincial governor’s official residence, like the one in Jerusalem, where Jesus was examined by Pilate (*Matt. 27:27, John 18:33*), and in Caesarea, where Paul was imprisoned (*Acts 23:35*). But Paul clearly uses this term not of a place but in reference to people. He says “the whole palace guard” became familiar with the gospel (*Phil. 1:13, NKJV*). In Rome, these were elite soldiers, about fourteen thousand, who protected the emperor and guarded his prisoners.

Second, Paul also sends greetings from the believers in “Caesar’s household” (*Phil. 4:22*). This indicates that Paul was a prisoner in Rome and in contact with those who served the imperial household.

How do we learn to make the best of whatever tough situation we find ourselves in? Why is that not always easy to do?

Paul in Chains

While in Macedonia, Paul mentions multiple imprisonments (2 Cor. 6:5, 2 Cor. 11:23, 2 Cor. 7:5). The first recorded instance was in Philippi (Acts 16:16–24). Later he was imprisoned in Jerusalem briefly before being transferred to prison in Caesarea.

Elsewhere, Paul mentions being “in my chains” (Philem. 10, 13, NKJV). Although under house arrest in Rome, he was chained to an elite Roman soldier. Ignatius, a Christian of the early second century who was chained up like this, described the soldiers as behaving like “wild beasts . . . who only get worse when they are well treated.”—Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 231.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:7–12. In this passage, what reveals how Paul was able to endure the trials he faced? What seems to be the focus of his life?

No matter how hard life got, Paul was able to see a brighter side, and that gave him courage to bear up under stress. Despite Satan hurling everything he could, Paul knew he was not forsaken.

Read 2 Corinthians 6:3–7. What spiritual resources did Paul have available to help him face these difficulties?

Often, we may be tempted to look at our circumstances, our weaknesses, or our past failures and become discouraged. It’s at times like these that we need to remember all the amazing provisions God has made for our success in battling evil. One of the most important is the Bible itself, “the word of truth,” because we can learn from others’ mistakes and also learn how these people have succeeded. Also, the Holy Spirit “makes effectual what has been wrought out by the world’s Redeemer. It is by the Spirit that the heart is made pure. Through the Spirit the believer becomes a partaker of the divine nature. Christ has given His Spirit as a divine power to overcome all hereditary and cultivated tendencies to evil, and to impress His own character upon His church.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 671.

How can we, as laity or as clergy, always “commend ourselves as ministers of God” (2 Cor. 6:4, NKJV)? What does that mean?

Paul in Philippi

During Paul's second missionary journey, shortly after Timothy was added to the team, they are forbidden by the Holy Spirit to continue across Asia Minor (*Acts 16:6*). So, during a vision of the night, Paul sees a man pleading with him to " 'come over to Macedonia and help us' " (*Acts 16:9, NKJV*). So, immediately they head to the seaport nearest Macedonia and sail from Troas across the Aegean Sea to Neapolis, on the European continent. But rather than evangelize there, Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke, who joined them at Troas (as indicated by the use of "we" in *Acts 16:11*), head to Philippi.

In his evangelistic activity, Paul always thought strategically. Philippi was "the chief city of that part of Macedonia" (*Acts 16:12*). In fact, it was one of the most honored cities of the Roman Empire, being given the status of *Ius Italicum*—the highest possible designation a city could be granted. Its citizens had the same privileges as if the city were located in Italy, including exemption from the land tax and the poll tax, and anyone born in the city automatically became a Roman citizen. It was also an important stop along the *Via Egnatia*, which was the main overland road connecting Rome with the East. Establishing an important Christian presence there enabled them to bring the gospel to many other nearby cities, including Amphipolis, Apollonia, Thessalonica, and Berea (*see Acts 17:1, 10*).

Interestingly, the official language in first-century Philippi was Latin, evidenced by the predominance of Latin inscriptions. In *Philippians 4:15*, Paul even addresses them with a Latin-sounding name, *Philippēsiōi*, apparently in recognition of their special Roman status. Nevertheless, Greek was the language of the marketplace and of the surrounding towns and cities and the means by which the gospel was spread. Luke describes how Paul and his team joined people for prayer by the riverside, where Lydia and her household were converted (*Acts 16:13–15*). Being a businesswoman ("a seller of purple"), she would have been one of the major financial supporters in Philippi of Paul's ministry. The time Paul and Silas spent in prison there led to the conversion of another entire household—that of the jailer.

The Holy Spirit knew that Philippi would be the ideal beachhead for the spread of the gospel through Europe, even though there would also be persecution. However evil it is, persecution can, in certain circumstances, enable the gospel to reach people who otherwise might not be reached.

Read Acts 9:16. How does this help us understand some of Paul's trials? How might this help us understand some of our own?

Paul and Colossae

We have no record of Paul ever visiting Colossae, which again tells us something about the effectiveness of his evangelistic strategy. First, it was Epaphras, a resident of Colossae (*Col. 4:12*), who brought the gospel to that city (*Col. 1:7*). But how was he converted? Most likely, it was in the mid-50s, when Paul was in nearby Ephesus and “all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus” (*Acts 19:10; compare Acts 20:31*).

The book of Revelation witnesses to how widely the gospel spread throughout this area (*Rev. 1:4*). The most plausible explanation for this success, including its spread to Colossae, is as a result of the work of Paul’s converts, who first heard the message in Ephesus, the most important city in Asia Minor and a major port. Epaphras heard Paul’s preaching in Ephesus and, becoming one of his coworkers, he took the gospel back to his hometown of Colossae.

The city itself, about nine miles (15 kilometers) southeast of Laodicea, is only now being excavated, so we know less about it compared to more prominent cities of the region. We do know it had a sizable Jewish population with “as many as ten thousand Jews living in that area of Phrygia.” —Arthur G. Patzia, *New International Biblical Commentary: Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 1990), vol. 10, p. 3. Coins minted at Colossae indicate the people there, as in many Roman cities, worshiped a variety of gods. The pagan practices and strong cultural influences obviously presented Christians there with tremendous challenges, not only in evangelizing the city but also just remaining faithful to the pure faith of the gospel. Another prominent Christian in Colossae was Philemon, who may have been converted about the same time as Epaphras.

Read Philemon 15, 16. See also Colossians 4:9. What course did Paul gently urge Philemon to pursue with Onesimus?

Although Roman law required Paul to return Onesimus to Philemon, Paul appeals to Philemon’s heart and conscience as a fellow believer and urges him to treat Onesimus not as a slave but as a brother (*Philem. 16*).

However much we detest the idea of slavery in any form, and wish that Paul would have condemned the practice, how do we come to terms with what Paul says here? (How fascinating that, during slavery in the United States, Ellen G. White specifically told Adventists to defy the law that ordered people to return escaped slaves.)

The Churches of Philippi and Colossae

Read Philippians 1:1–3 and Colossians 1:1, 2. How are the churches in Philippi and Colossae described, and what significance does the depiction have?

Paul's typical greeting in his epistles calls Christians in those places "saints"; that is, through baptism they have been set apart as God's special people, just as the people of Israel, through the practice of circumcision (*Exod. 19:5, 6; compare 1 Pet. 2:9, 10*), had been set apart as a "holy nation." (This has utterly nothing to do with the Roman church's practice of canonizing people as "saints.")

Also interesting is the parallel between the greetings of these two epistles. Paul refers to "overseers and deacons" (*Phil. 1:1, ESV*) in Philippi and "faithful brothers in Christ" (*Col. 1:2, ESV*) in Colossae. When the New Testament speaks of "faithful brothers," they have a specific ministry in the church (*see Eph. 6:21, Col. 4:7, 1 Pet. 5:12*). So, it appears Paul is addressing not only the church members but also the church leaders in these cities. The reference to offices that are more specifically described in other places (*for example, in 1 Tim. 3:1–12, Titus 1:5–9*) witnesses to the existence and importance of organization from the earliest period of the church.

Training coworkers such as Timothy and Epaphras and providing for the leadership of local churches was a priority for Paul and augmented his evangelistic efforts. In other words, there was a strategic approach to both outreach and retention. Our Adventist pioneers followed the New Testament model of church organization, as many *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* articles from the 1850s show. In fact, James White said, "The divine order of the New Testament is sufficient to organize the church of Christ. If more were needed, it would have been given by inspiration."—"Gospel Order," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Dec. 6, 1853, p. 173. Long before Paul wrote to these churches, the apostles had already begun installing officers for the church in Jerusalem (*see Acts 6:1–6, Acts 11:30*), which "was to serve as a model for the organization of churches in every other place where messengers of truth should win converts to the gospel."—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 91.

It is well known that Paul used literary assistants at times in the composition of his epistles. Timothy is also named as a co-sender elsewhere (*see, for example, 2 Cor. 1:1, Philemon 1*). The fact that Paul goes on to use "I" rather than "we" shows that his authority stands behind these epistles also.

Further Thought: “God has chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the spirit and belief of the truth. Therefore stand fast. . . . If you serve God faithfully, you will meet with prejudice and opposition; but do not become provoked when you suffer wrongfully. Do not retaliate. Hold fast your integrity in Jesus Christ. Set your face as a flint heavenward. Let others speak their own words, and pursue their own course of action; it is for you to press on in the meekness and lowliness of Christ. Do your work with steadfast purpose, with purity of heart, with all your might and strength, leaning on the arm of God. The true and exalted nature of your work you may never know. The value of your being you can measure only by the life given to save you. . . .

“For every soul who is growing up into Christ there will be times of earnest and long-continued struggle; for the powers of darkness are determined to oppose the way of advance. But when we look to the cross of Christ for grace, we cannot fail. The promise of the Redeemer is, ‘I will never leave thee nor forsake thee.’ ‘I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.’ ”—Ellen G. White, in *The Youth’s Instructor*, Nov. 9, 1899.

Discussion Questions:

① Paul was imprisoned several times, always unjustly. How do you respond when you are unfairly treated? What Bible promises can you suggest for such times?

② Of the persecution of Christians, Tertullian, an early church leader, said, “The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.”—Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1999), p. 55. At the same time, persecution in some places and times has greatly hindered the work of the church. What are ways that we can support those who suffer persecution for their faith?

③ Think about the memory text for this week in light of the hardships Paul suffered. “Rejoice always.” What does that mean? How are we supposed to do that? Someone you love is sick or dies. You lose your job. You are in great physical pain. Perhaps the key to understanding this is to ask, “Rejoice always in what?” That is, no matter our situation, what can we always rejoice in?

Investing in Thirteenth Sabbath

By VANIA CHEW

An Australian woman took a second look at Thirteenth Sabbath mission projects when her church encouraged members to give more than whatever they had in their pockets on the last Sabbath of each quarter.

Marilene Stevenson remembered a time when church members baked cakes and grew vegetables and sold them to raise money for Sabbath School investment projects. She wondered if she could do something similar and give the money to the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering, also known as the Quarterly Mission Project Offering.

Marilene didn't have the time, or inclination, to bake cakes and grow vegetables. However, she had started using a throat spray that she found helpful and had been recommending to others. When other people expressed interest in the spray, Marilene came up with the idea of buying it wholesale and reselling it. Any profit would go directly to the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering.

That first investment in throat spray spurred Marilene to seek more ways to raise money for mission.

"It really began with me buying stuff that I wanted," she said. "But it turns out that the things that I like to buy are the things that other people want to buy, too; they just don't have the time to go and buy them!"

Working with local farms and factories, Marilene was able to purchase healthy products at wholesale cost and sell them to family and friends at a cheaper rate than retail. She has sold exotic fruits, fresh tofu, and specialty vegan items over the years. She also has made floral arrangements and sold them for special occasions such as Mother's Day.

"It gives me a real buzz," she said. "I'm helping the people who I am selling to and, at the same time, raising money for a good cause."

Since she began investing, Marilene has raised 300 to 600 Australian dollars (US\$200 to \$400) each quarter for Thirteenth Sabbath mission projects.

She encourages all church members to give generously to Thirteenth Sabbath projects, even if it requires an investment to give a little more.

"I hope that it will inspire others to do something more than just a token offering like I was doing," she said. "God has truly blessed me with firsthand experience of His great faithfulness. How can I not want to share that?"



This quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath mission projects are in the South Pacific Division, whose territory includes Marilene's home country of Australia. Thank you for planning a generous offering on March 28.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Philippians 4:4*

Study Focus: *Rom. 8:12–39*

Paul faced many trials and tribulations while spreading God’s message of salvation. Aside from Jesus, few have endured as much suffering as Paul did for the sake of the gospel. His list of hardships deserves our careful consideration and reflection. These hardships include, but are not limited to, tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, hunger, thirst, nakedness, the sword, beatings, homelessness, insults, slander, perplexities, privation, stripes, tumults, travail, sleeplessness, fastings, chastenings, pain, poverty, humiliation, stonings, shipwrecks, frequent journeys, life-threatening situations in various forms—whether from rivers, from robbers (both from among his own people and the Gentiles), or in the city, in the wilderness, at sea, and so on. Paul’s sufferings also come from his dealing with infirmities and weaknesses, along with the challenge of taking care of the churches. Obviously, his imprisonments cannot be ignored, either (*compare with Rom. 8:35; 1 Cor. 4:11–13; 2 Cor. 4:8, 9; 2 Cor. 6:4, 5, 9, 10; 2 Cor. 11:23–29; 2 Cor. 12:10; Eph. 4:1*). Paul’s life was far from easy!

One must take a deep breath to recite the entire preceding list without a pause. Not infrequently, many of us find ourselves discouraged about far less. Nevertheless, if Paul’s list of sufferings is impressive, his unwavering confidence is even more astonishing. He says, “Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us” (*Rom. 8:37, NKJV*).

This week’s lesson emphasizes two major themes:

1. Paul’s sufferings for the sake of the gospel, most particularly his imprisonments.
2. Paul’s strategies for preaching the gospel as effectively as possible, even under the most challenging circumstances.

Part II: Commentary

Illustration

G. Curtis Jones recounts a tale about medical missionary Wilfred Grenfell (1865–1940). When asked why he committed himself so wholeheartedly to Christian missions, Grenfell responded with the following story:

“Into a hospital where I was a resident physician, a woman was brought one night terribly burned. . . . Her husband had come home drunk and had thrown a paraffin lamp over her. The police were summoned and at last

they brought in the half-sobered husband. The magistrate leaned over the bed and insisted that the patient tell the police exactly what happened. He impressed upon her the importance of telling the whole truth as she only had a little while to live.

“The poor soul turned her face from side to side, avoiding facing her husband, who stood at the foot of the bed. Finally her eyes rested on his strong hands, following them up his arms and shoulders and then across to his face. Their eyes met. Her expression of suffering momentarily disappeared, as tenderness and love colored her countenance. She looked at the magistrate and calmly said, ‘Sir, it was just an accident,’ and fell back on her pillow, dead. Grenfell added, ‘This was like God, and God is like that. His love sees through our sins.’ ” —Jones, *1000 Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1986), p. 55.

Curtis Jones describes this kind of love as a “suffering love.” Whether or not one agrees with what the woman did, and a very strong case could be made that she did wrong, still the point is powerful. Much like the love demonstrated by the woman in Grenfell’s story, Paul’s love also embraced suffering.

Suffering Love

In Romans 8:35, Paul expresses his deep assurance of Christ’s love for him—and for all of us—through a rhetorical question, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” The expected answer is a resounding “No one!” If God “did not spare His own Son” (*Rom. 8:32, NKJV*), why would any hardship be able to separate us from the love of Christ? God proved His love by giving us His only Son, and with Him all things (*Rom. 8:32*). Paul did not need further evidence of God’s love. Neither do we.

Paul is so confident in God’s love that he mentions it repeatedly (*Rom. 8:37, 39*). Because of love, Jesus willingly endured suffering and death for us (*John 13:1, 34; John 15:9, 12*). In turn, Paul was willing to endure suffering and death for Him. As a matter of fact, only the love of Christ for us can sustain our faith in times of trial.

In Romans 8:35, Paul catalogs his hardships in a sevenfold list: tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword. Perhaps, this series of seven trials suggests completeness in the sense that it represents the totality of all the hardships Paul endured. As previously noted, Paul’s list of sufferings is much more extensive than this catalog. Up to this point, he had endured all the tribulations in this passage except for the seventh element, the sword. The sword would become his last trial, and he faced it with remarkable courage. His unwavering assurance in Christ enabled him to confront death with inner peace. At the moment of his death, Paul “was looking into the great beyond, not with uncertainty

or in dread, but with joyful hope and longing expectation. As he stood at the place of martyrdom he saw not the gleaming sword of the executioner or the green earth so soon to receive his blood; he looked up through the calm blue heaven of that summer's day to the throne of the Eternal. His language was, O Lord, Thou art my comfort and my portion. When shall I embrace Thee? When shall I behold Thee for myself, without a dimming veil between?"—Ellen G. White, *The Story of Redemption*, pp. 317, 318.

Paul was confident that if we share in Jesus' sufferings, we will also "be glorified with Him" (*Rom. 8:17, NASB*). He fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith. He knew a crown of righteousness would be given to him at the resurrection, when Christ returns (*see 1 Cor. 15:51–55; 2 Tim 4:7, 8*).

Paul's Strategies for Preaching the Gospel

Given the arduous circumstances under which Paul preached the gospel, he needed to employ wise strategies to ensure the success of his work.

First, Paul intentionally selected important cities of the ancient world from which he could more easily spread the gospel message. Thus, for instance, Corinth was chosen for its privileged geographic location. "An opportunity was thus presented for the spread of the gospel. Once established at Corinth, it would be readily communicated to all parts of the world."—Ellen G. White, *Sketches From the Life of Paul*, p. 99. Paul also focused on Philippi because it was one of "the most influential urban centers on his route. . . . Its strategic significance in the history of the empire made it a natural evangelistic step for one being prepared to reach Rome."—Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), pp. 2380, 2381. Likewise, Ephesus was one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire, boasting a population of approximately 250,000 people in Paul's time.

Second, Paul invested time in training people for evangelistic ministry. Indeed, he "made it a part of his work to educate young men for the gospel ministry. He took them with him on his missionary journeys, and thus they gained an experience that later enabled them to fill positions of responsibility. When separated from them, he still kept in touch with their work, and his letters to Timothy and Titus are an evidence of how deep was his desire for their success."—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 102. As far as Timothy is concerned, Paul took him to be not only his coworker but also a coauthor (*see 2 Cor. 1:1, Phil. 1:1, Col. 1:1, 1 Thess. 1:1, 2 Thess. 1:1, and Philem. 1:1*).

Third, Paul followed the "to-the-Jew-first" approach (*Acts 13:46, Rom. 1:16*) as Jesus explicitly commanded (*Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8; Acts 3:25, 26*). This approach explains why Paul began his missionary endeavors in a

new city at the synagogue (*Acts 9:20; Acts 13:5, 14, 46; Acts 14:1; Acts 17:1, 2, 17; Acts 18:4*). Reflecting on the instruction that the disciples' work should start in Jerusalem, Ellen G. White says, "Wherever the people of God are placed, in the crowded cities, in the villages, or among the country by-ways, there is a home mission field. . . . First of all is the work in the family; next they should seek to win their neighbors to Christ, and to bring before them the great truths of this time."—*Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 22, 1888.

Fourth, Paul maintained regular communication with the churches by sending letters to them. Because of his "deep concern for all the churches" (*2 Cor. 11:28, NKJV*), he often couldn't remain long with the new converts in the cities where he preached. Thus, he utilized letters as a means of keeping in touch with the churches and providing instructions to them. The letters also served as a way of filling the void caused by his physical absence (*1 Cor. 5:3, Phil. 2:12*).

Part III: Life Application

Meditate upon the following themes. Then ask your students to answer the following questions.

Preaching the gospel can be challenging for many Christians, especially when societal norms conflict with the Word of God. Across the centuries, countless people have faced suffering, and even death, in the fulfillment of their missionary work. This reality was true in the early days of the Christian mission, and it will be no different at its conclusion (*Rev. 14:13*). As we continue in missionary work and endure the sufferings that attend it, there is only one force that can sustain us: the love of Christ.

Most Christians realize the risks involved in following Christ, but we also must understand the paramount importance of fulfilling the commission, " 'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations' " (*Matt. 28:19, NKJV*). The task is arduous, but we trust in God's guidance every step of the way. Though it may become life-threatening in various forms, the task is rewarding. Jesus says, " 'Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life' " (*Rev. 2:10, NKJV*).

In his missionary work, Paul employed various strategies to ensure its effectiveness: (1) He selected important cities as supporting outposts from which he could more easily spread the gospel message. (2) He invested time in training others. (3) He prioritized reaching those closest to him first. (4) He constantly kept in touch with those to whom he ministered. We should inte-

grate all these strategies into our own missionary endeavors. Paul knew, however, that although strategies are important, they can never replace the role of the Holy Spirit (*1 Cor. 12:1–11, Eph. 4:1–6*). We must never forget this vital point.

Questions:

1. What are some of the challenges that you have faced in preaching the gospel?

2. How have you employed Paul's four missionary strategies previously listed, and what were the results?

Notes

Reasons for Thanksgiving and Prayer



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Phil. 1:1–18, 1 Cor. 13:1–8, Jer. 17:9, Col. 1:1–12, 1 Pet. 1:4, Ps. 119:105, Isa. 30:21.*

Memory Text: “Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (*Philippians 1:6, NKJV*).

Paul quite intentionally begins his epistles with words of greeting—and thanksgiving. “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Col. 1:2, 3, NKJV*).

We, like Paul, have much to be thankful for. We have experienced God's grace in profound ways—ways that even angels cannot comprehend. The same is true of God's gift of peace, which embraces harmony with God and the hope flowing from God's love.

On a human level, we can give and show appreciation to others and hope that people appreciate the things we do for them. Parents pray that their children will love God and appreciate someday, if not now, the real sacrifices they've made to give them the best upbringing they could. But, as human beings, we make many mistakes, and we learn from them (or at least we should).

This week we'll consider Paul's opening words of thanksgiving and prayer in *Philippians* and *Colossians*, which may enrich and strengthen our own prayer life.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 10.

Fellowship in the Gospel

Read Philippians 1:3–8. What is Paul thankful for? What reassurances does he give the Philippians, and why is that important?

Paul established the church in Philippi; thus, we can see the warmth of Christian fellowship pervading his letter. Though separated by hundreds of miles, Paul, chained and imprisoned, carries the church and its members on his heart; he longs for them “with the affection of Jesus Christ” (*Phil. 1:8, NKJV*); he gives thanks to God for them. Paul’s prayer of thanksgiving even gives a glimpse of Jesus’ intercession for us in heaven.

On the high priest’s breastplate were 12 stones representing the 12 tribes of Israel. The people were to be “on his heart” as he interceded for them (*Exod. 28:29, ESV*). In an even greater way, as our High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary, Jesus carries the names of His people with Him before the Father.

Interestingly, the wording of Philippians 1:3 is ambiguous, underscoring the close relationship between Paul and the Philippians. It’s usually translated that Paul remembers them in prayer, but it could also refer to their remembrance of him. In any case, it underscores the close mutuality they share, which the word “fellowship” (Greek: *koinonia*) also underscores. As Paul had fellowship in Christ’s sufferings (*Phil. 3:10*), the Philippians “shared” (Greek: *sunkoinōneō*) in Paul’s sufferings and shared financially to support Paul’s ministry (*Phil. 4:14, 15*). This mutuality, which was “from the first day until now” (*Phil. 1:5*), leads him to thank God for them and to pray for them “with joy” (*Phil. 1:4*).

Interestingly, Paul describes his prison setting quite positively—as providing opportunity for “the defense and confirmation of the gospel” (*Phil. 1:7, NKJV*). His use of these two legal terms suggests his trial is imminent, but also that Paul is actively engaging soldiers and visitors with the gospel. Defending it (Greek *apologia*) against attacks and confirming its eternal verities are both essential. Paul seems to care less about his own future than about vindication of the gospel itself. Whether he lives or dies, Paul is confident that God will finish the “good work” He has begun in all who trust in Him (*Phil. 1:6*).

How do you understand the promise that God will finish the “good work in you” (*Phil. 1:6*)? What does that mean? Will this work ever end before the Second Coming?

Paul's Prayer Requests

Some years ago, there was a pastor who talked about prayers that revolve around *me, me, me*, and *my* needs or desires. He aptly characterized them as “selfish little prayers,” because God has bigger things in mind.

Read Paul's prayer in Philippians 1:9–11. What is its focus, and what big requests does he make? What does it tell you about prayer?

This prayer is only forty-three words in Greek, but it encapsulates all of Paul's concerns, which he will expand on in the rest of the epistle: love, knowledge, discernment, being sincere, not causing offense, and the righteousness we have through Jesus Christ. Underlying this prayer, as well as Paul's previous expressions of thanksgiving, is an emphasis on the church *as a whole*. Paul's prayer is completely others-focused, on behalf of the whole church and for its well-being. Let's look more closely at some of the individual elements of the prayer:

Love to abound more and more. Paul doesn't just pray for more love but for love guided in a specific direction: “in knowledge and all discernment” (*Phil. 1:9, NKJV*). The reference to knowledge is not to merely intellectual knowledge but implies a knowledge of spiritual things that can be gained only by fellowship with God and study of His Word (see *Eph. 1:17, Eph. 4:13, 1 Tim. 2:4*).

Discernment. This is explained by Paul as being able to “approve what is excellent” (distinguishing it from what is morally harmful) “and so be pure and blameless” (*Phil. 1:10, ESV*).

Being sincere. The word in Greek means “judged by the sunlight” and refers to an untainted purity of action: “Everything that Christians do should be as transparent as the sunlight.”—Ellen G. White, *Reflecting Christ*, p. 71.

Not causing offense. This means not being a stumbling block, not saying or doing anything that would make it more difficult for a person to believe.

Righteousness through Christ. Paul dwells at length on this in the epistles of Romans and Galatians and will expand on it also in Philippians 3. We have no righteousness of our own but only what we receive through Christ.

Whatever else we do, how can our love “abound still more and more” (*Phil. 1:9, NKJV*)? Why is that so important for the Christian life? (See also *1 Cor. 13:1–8*.)

Spiritual Discernment Applied

The Philippians were understandably distressed when they heard of Paul's imprisonment. Now his work was severely limited. He could not travel. He could not preach. He could not visit the synagogues and teach people about Jesus as the Messiah. He could no longer raise up churches. The Philippians sent Epaphroditus to ascertain the apostle's condition, to encourage him, and to ensure that his physical needs were being met.

Read Philippians 1:12–18. How did Paul view his imprisonment? What lessons can we learn from his attitude, despite the circumstances he found himself in?

The message Paul sent back with him must have surprised the Philippians. Paul saw his circumstances through different eyes. His spiritual discernment led him to see his imprisonment as a good thing. It didn't hinder his work at all but "actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel" (*Phil. 1:12, NKJV*). Where others saw only chains and bars, Paul saw his Roman guards as potential souls in God's kingdom. He saw also that his imprisonment greatly encouraged others to be more active and more determined to spread the gospel, to speak boldly for Christ without fear of the consequences.

It may be hard to imagine, but some actually thought to benefit from Paul's imprisonment. Apparently, they thought his obscurity would lead to more attention for themselves and their own preaching of the gospel. What a powerful but sad example of human selfishness, even in the church. As Jeremiah said long before Paul: " 'The heart is deceitful above all things, / And desperately wicked; / Who can know it?' " (*Jer. 17:9, NKJV*).

Fortunately, in contrast, some faithful workers also became more zealous to spread the gospel. They loved Paul so much that the suffering they saw him endure for his faith led them to trust Christ more and emboldened them to be even more active for the Lord. It energized them to go where before they were afraid to go; it led them to speak in situations during which before they kept silent; it led to even more people accepting Christ and spreading the gospel of salvation.

What lesson have you learned from experiences that, though unquestionably bad, also brought about some benefits? Even in cases in which a benefit might not be apparent, how can we learn to trust God regardless?

Gospel Fruit

Paul's relationship with the Colossians was different from his relationship with those in Philippi. He included them among those who "have not seen my face in the flesh" (*Col. 2:1*). Nevertheless, Paul assures them, as he did the Philippians, that he thanks God for them and is "always" praying for them.

Read Colossians 1:3–8. What three things does Paul thank God for?

Paul brings together the three virtues that he mentions in other places: faith, hope, and love (*see 1 Cor. 13:13, 1 Thess. 1:3, 1 Thess. 5:8*). Notice that Paul doesn't credit the Colossians for these things. He thanks the Father for them, because as James says they are among the "good and perfect" gifts that we receive from Him (*James 1:17, NIV*). When we see the love God has for us, it leads us to faith in Christ (*Eph. 2:4–8*), and we receive the hope of heaven. Peter describes it as "an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you" (*1 Pet. 1:4, NKJV*).

Paul also emphasizes that the gospel is trustworthy because it is based on "the word of truth." This is an expression Paul uses elsewhere in reference to the inspired word of God (*see 2 Cor. 6:7, 2 Tim. 2:15*). Unlike "the word of men," it works "effectually" in those who believe (*1 Thess. 2:13*) and accomplishes God's will (*Isa. 55:11*). So, when the gospel is proclaimed, the power of God is manifested through the work of the Holy Spirit on the hearts of the hearers, and people respond. The gospel itself produces the fruit because it is "the word of life" (*Phil. 2:16*).

Perhaps what is most amazing is the spread of the gospel in such a short period of time. Within about thirty years of Christ's death and resurrection, Paul could already say it had spread "in all the world" (*Col. 1:6*). A little later in the same chapter, he says the gospel "was preached to every creature under heaven" (*Col. 1:23, NKJV*). The extensive Roman road system made possible rapid communication and travel, which is how Paul's epistles could be circulated so widely and quickly. But it is the power of God working through the word that gives birth to spiritual life in a person (*James 1:18, 1 Pet. 1:23*), making them a new creature in Christ (*2 Cor. 5:17*).

In Colossians 1:5, Paul writes about "the hope which is laid up for you in heaven." What is your understanding of that hope, and why does it apply to you personally, even though you are truly unworthy?

Prayer Power

Read Colossians 1:9–12. What specific requests do you find in Paul’s prayer?

Paul prays “that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will.” Paul describes knowing God’s will as “wisdom and spiritual understanding” (*Col. 1:9, NKJV*). Wisdom comes, first of all, by trusting God fully, being willing to do His will (*John 7:17*), and not leaning on our own understanding (*Prov. 3:5*). But the question often arises, “What is God’s will for me in this situation?” There are four main sources from which we may learn God’s will as we seek it prayerfully:

1. The most important source of wisdom is the Bible. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (*Ps. 119:105, NKJV*).
2. God has given us special wisdom for the last days through the Spirit of Prophecy (*Rev. 12:17, Rev. 19:10*) as manifested through the writings of Ellen White. The Bible encourages us to “believe in the LORD your God, and you shall be established; believe His prophets, and you shall prosper” (*2 Chron. 20:20, NKJV*).
3. God’s will and leading may also be known through providential circumstances, by asking Him to open or close doors (*see Col. 4:3*).
4. The Holy Spirit guides us once we have learned to recognize His voice: “Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, / ‘This is the way, walk in it,’ / Whenever you turn to the right hand / Or whenever you turn to the left” (*Isa. 30:21, NKJV*).

Paul prays that the Colossians may “walk worthy of the Lord” (*Col. 1:10, NKJV*). Of course, no one is inherently “worthy,” but God counts us worthy by His grace and calls us to live in accordance with that high calling (*Eph. 4:1, 1 Thess. 2:12, NKJV*). Paul uses the verb “walk” or “walked” three more times in this letter alone (*Col. 2:6, Col. 3:7, Col. 4:5*). It means to live and act in accordance with God’s law (*Exod. 18:20*), which is possible only through the work of the Holy Spirit (*Ezek. 36:27*).

Paul also prays that their (and our) lives may be “fully pleasing” to the Lord and then lists several ways to do that: “Being fruitful in every good work” (*Col. 1:9, 10, NKJV*); then “increasing in the knowledge of God” (*Col. 1:10, NKJV*); and, finally, in “giving thanks” (*Col. 1:12, NKJV*).

If someone were to ask you, “How do you know that God is leading you in one direction or another?” how would you answer—and why?

Further Thought: “Many are unable to make definite plans for the future. Their life is unsettled. They cannot discern the outcome of affairs, and this often fills them with anxiety and unrest. Let us remember that the life of God’s children in this world is a pilgrim life. We have not wisdom to plan our own lives. It is not for us to shape our future. ‘By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.’ Hebrews 11:8.

“Christ in His life on earth made no plans for Himself. He accepted God’s plans for Him, and day by day the Father unfolded His plans. So should we depend upon God, that our lives may be the simple outworking of His will. As we commit our ways to Him, He will direct our steps.

“Too many, in planning for a brilliant future, make an utter failure. Let God plan for you. As a little child, trust to the guidance of Him who will ‘keep the feet of His saints.’ 1 Samuel 2:9. God never leads His children otherwise than they would choose to be led, if they could see the end from the beginning and discern the glory of the purpose which they are fulfilling as co-workers with Him.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, pp. 478, 479.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Think about the past week and list things you are thankful for. Might you have more to be thankful for than you realize?
- ❷ Dwell on the last line of the Ellen G. White quote above. That’s a very powerful statement of faith. How can you learn to trust God in such a deep way?
- ❸ In light of Colossians 1:6, 23, discuss the following statement: “For forty years did unbelief, murmuring, and rebellion shut out ancient Israel from the land of Canaan. The same sins have delayed the entrance of modern Israel into the heavenly Canaan. In neither case were the promises of God at fault. It is the unbelief, the worldliness, unconsecration, and strife among the Lord’s professed people that have kept us in this world of sin and sorrow so many years. Had the church of Christ done her appointed work as the Lord ordained, the whole world would before this have been warned and the Lord Jesus would have come to our earth in power and great glory.”—Ellen G. White, *Last Day Events*, p. 38. In what ways might we today be guilty of the same things?

Messenger of God

Oscar stood still, praying, as three barking, snarling dogs surrounded him outside a house in Kenya. The owner, who had unleashed the dogs as Oscar approached the house, came over. “Who are you?” he demanded.

“I’m a messenger of God,” Oscar said.

“What message has God sent you with?” the man said.

“It’s the message of God,” Oscar said. “Can I come in?”

The man called off the dogs and tied them up.

He looked at Oscar expectantly after they entered the house. “Let’s pray,” Oscar said. The man didn’t close his eyes. Oscar prayed and then began discussing the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch.

The man wasn’t a Christian. He belonged to a major, non-Christian world religion, but he knew those books of the law. He asked many questions, and the two men became friends. Today, the man and his wife are Seventh-day Adventists.

On another occasion, a homeowner expressed interest when Oscar offered Bible lessons. He sent away his three children, ages 6, 8, and 13. As they left, Oscar saw that they were limping in pain. “Let the children come here so we can pray,” he said. Then he saw that the children had chiggers, a tiny mite with parasitic larvae that live on or under the skin and cause irritation.

Oscar prayed for the children and left to buy medication.

The family thought that the chiggers were caused by witchcraft. But when Oscar returned, he helped the family clean their house and bedding. He instructed the parents to bathe the children, and then he provided the medication. The children were clean. Oscar prayed for the children again, and he studied the Bible with the parents. Later, the family became Adventist and sold land for the construction of a new Adventist church.

In sharing the gospel, Oscar also goes from church to church on Sundays. In Kenya, it’s a tradition to allow visitors to greet church members. But once, a church leader invited Oscar to a worship service and then refused to allow him to speak upon learning that he was an Adventist. Oscar stayed for the worship service. As he left, he recognized several members as his neighbors, and he went over to greet them.

“The Bible is like a big ocean, and this is not the time to wait for the pastor to come and teach you,” he said. “I have lessons that you can study yourself.”

Seven people accepted the Voice of Prophecy Discovery Bible lessons on the spot. Others were wary but later agreed to take the lessons. Today, 43 people from the church are studying the Bible with Oscar. “Not bad for a meeting where I wasn’t allowed to speak,” he said with a smile.

Oscar has worked as a Global Mission pioneer for 10 years, leading 120 people to baptism and planting two churches. He hopes to open a third church soon. Learn more about Global Mission pioneers at bit.ly/GMPioneers.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Philippians 1:6*

Study Focus: *Phil. 1:1–18, Eph. 5:18–21, Col. 1:4–8*

Author D. A. Carson speculates on what is the greatest need of the Christian church today, hypothesizing different answers that people might offer to the question. Carson lists areas such as purity in sexual matters, financial integrity and generosity, evangelism, church planting, biblical thinking, and the genuine experience of corporate worship. He concludes, “There is a sense in which these urgent needs are merely symptomatic of a far more serious lack. The one thing we most urgently need in Western Christendom is a deeper knowledge of God. We need to know God better. . . . One of the foundational steps in knowing God, and one of the basic demonstrations that we do know God, is prayer—spiritual, persistent, biblically minded prayer.”—Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities From Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992), pp. 15, 16.

Paul consistently underscored Christian disciplines, such as prayer and gratitude. Thanksgiving was also a crucial element of his prayers and even a typical section of his letters. He not only expressed his gratitude to God through his prayers constantly but also encouraged his audience to do the same (*Col. 3:17, 1 Thess. 5:18*). He saw gratitude as the fruit of God’s work in one’s heart (*Phil. 1:6, 10, 11*).

This week’s lesson emphasizes two major themes:

1. Gratitude and prayer are inherently connected as are the two sides of a coin.
2. Gratitude and prayer, among other things, serve as tangible manifestations of God’s good work within us.

Part II: Commentary

Illustration

Psychologist Robert A. Emmons quotes a lovely thought by Meister Eckhart: “If the only prayer you say in your life is ‘thank you,’ it would be enough.” In this context, Emmons shares the story of a woman with post-polio syndrome, beautifully illustrating the relationship between gratitude to God in prayer and a meaningful life. She wrote Emmons the following letter:

“One of my most profound experiences of thankfulness came at the birth of my first child. I had wondered, all my growing up years, as to whether I would be able to have children, whether I could care for

children with only one arm, and whether God would choose to bless me in that way. When my daughter was born, all the nursing staff showed distrust of my ability as a caretaker. However, I realized that God had chosen to bless me with a child and he would bless me with the physical needs to care for her. Since God had not chosen to spare me from polio, I knew my having a baby was no sure thing. Therefore, when she was born, I praise[d] God for allowing my husband and [me] to share the joy of molding a new human being into a blessing to God. . . . What greater purpose could I ever have than to raise another human? None, and that was the joy in my thankfulness. The joy of meaning and purpose in life.” Further on, Emmons states, “The evidence is clear that cultivating gratitude, in both our lives and in our attitude toward life, makes us sustainably happier and healthier people.”—Emmons, *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007), pp. 90, 110, 185.

Gratitude and Prayer Are Inherently Intertwined

A customary feature in Paul’s letters is the thanksgiving section, which essentially functions as an act of prayer. This idea can be more clearly illustrated in the following table.

Passage	Thanksgiving and Prayer
Rom. 1:8–10 (ESV)	“I thank my God through Jesus Christ. . . . For God is my witness . . . that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers .”
1 Cor. 1:4 (NKJV)	“I thank my God always concerning you.”
Eph. 1:15, 16 (NKJV)	“Therefore I . . . do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers .”
Phil. 1:3, 4 (NKJV)	“I thank my God . . . always in every prayer of mine.”
Col. 1:3 (NKJV)	“We give thanks . . . praying always for you.”
1 Thess. 1:2 (NKJV)	“We give thanks to God always . . . making mention of you in our prayers .”
2 Thess. 1:3 (NKJV)	“We are bound to thank God always for you.”
1 Tim. 1:12 (NKJV)	“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord.”
2 Tim. 1:3 (NKJV)	“I thank God . . . , as without ceasing I remember you in my prayers night and day.”
Philem. 4 (NKJV)	“I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers .”

Three key observations can be drawn from the preceding table. First, for Paul, giving thanks is an act of prayer, as thanksgiving is consistently interwoven with prayer. Second, even when the thanksgiving section in certain letters of Paul does not mention the term “prayer,” it is important to realize that his gratitude is directed toward God (*2 Thess. 1:3, 1 Tim. 1:12*). Third, the repetition of the term “always” suggests that both prayer and thanksgiving were consistent, even integral, components in Paul’s life.

It is important to note that Paul expected his audience to imitate him with regard to a life of thanksgiving and prayer. For Paul, a visible characteristic of ungodly men is their failure to honor or give thanks to God (*Rom. 1:21*). Conversely, he encouraged the members of the church in Rome to be grateful to God (*Rom. 14:6*). When asking the Corinthians to pray for him and his coworkers, Paul desired that many would give thanks on their behalf (*2 Cor. 1:11*).

In Ephesians 5:18–21 (*NKJV*), Paul describes the characteristics of individuals whose lives are filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit. They (1) engage in reciprocal edification by “speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”; (2) fill their lives with praises to God through “singing and making melody” in their hearts to the Lord; (3) express gratitude “always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”; and (4) submit “to one another in the fear of God.” In this way, giving thanks to God is on the same level as singing praises to Him: it is an act of worship.

In Colossians 3:17, Paul goes a little further by saying, “*Whatever you do* in word or deed, *do all* in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him” (*NKJV, emphasis added*). Likewise, Paul says to the Thessalonians, “In everything give thanks” (*1 Thess. 5:18, NKJV*). Paul stimulated his audience to embody thanksgiving and prayer in their lives, so as to mirror his own deep commitment to these practices.

God’s Work in Us

The letter to the Philippians contains one of the most remarkable statements in all of Paul’s epistles: “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (*Phil. 1:6, ESV*). Some readers may be tempted to interpret the “good work” narrowly, seeing it as a reference to the Philippians’ care and love for Paul, demonstrated through their financial support during his imprisonment. While their concern for Paul and the advancement of the gospel was certainly a result of God’s work in their hearts, Paul is referring to the broader concept of salvation through Christ.

God is portrayed as the One who began the good work of salvation

and will bring it to completion at Christ's return. It is noteworthy that this thought is expressed within the thanksgiving section. In this sense, gratitude is seen as a powerful evidence of God's work in one's heart. Paul says something similar in Philippians 2:12, 13: "Work out your own **salvation** with fear and trembling, for **it is God who works** in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (*NKJV, emphasis added*).

Paul's advice—to work out one's own salvation—is intriguing, to say the least. After all, how do we do that? A good answer can be found in Hebrews 12:2, wherein Jesus is depicted as "the author and finisher of our faith." Thus, Paul asserts, we are supposed to run "the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus" (*Heb. 12:1, 2, ESV*). But that's not all. We must also "lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us" (*Heb. 12:1, NKJV*). Passages, such as Philippians 1:6 and Hebrews 12:2, remind us that salvation is ultimately God's work, not ours. Yet, we are still called to work out our own salvation or, in other words, to "run . . . the race that is set before us" (*Heb. 12:2, NKJV*) by living a life of prayer, seeking the Spirit-given Christian virtues (*Phil. 1:9–11, Col. 1:4–8*), and being grateful for God's work in us (*Phil. 1:3–6*). In sum, we are supposed to "walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God" (*Col. 1:10, NKJV*).

Part III: Life Application

Meditate upon the following themes. Then ask your students to answer the questions at the end of this section.

We all love it when good things happen to us. Whether it's buying a brand-new car, purchasing a house, graduating after years of arduous and intense studies, or escaping from a dangerous situation, we thank God for these things. These are significant milestones that fill our hearts with joy and gratitude. However, if we pay close attention to everything around us, we will find innumerable reasons to be grateful. Nothing, though, should inspire more gratitude than the recognition of God's good work in us. Ellen White says, "Our minds need expansion, that we may comprehend the significance of the provision of God. We are to reflect the highest attributes of the character of God. **We should be thankful** that we are not to be left to ourselves."—*That I May Know Him*, p. 302 (*emphasis added*).

God expects us to bring a sincere attitude of gratitude into our prayers. In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, 18, for instance, the instruction to "give thanks in all circumstances" comes right after the command to "pray without ceasing"

(*ESV*). This notion implies not only that there is always a reason to be thankful but also that our prayers should regularly include expressions of gratitude to God. Notably, Paul does not say, “Give thanks *for* all circumstances” but “*in* all circumstances.” The fact that God gave us His only Son to die for us is reason enough to be thankful every day, demonstrating our gratitude through words of praise in our prayers and good works in our daily lives!

Questions:

- 1. For what spiritual blessings are you thankful to God? For what physical and material blessings are you thankful to Him, as well?**

- 2. What does it mean to give thanks *in* all circumstances, as opposed to *for* all circumstances? What is the crucial difference?**

- 3. What does it mean that we are not “left to ourselves,” as the preceding quote from Ellen G. White states? Why should we feel grateful for this assurance?**

Life *and* Death



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Phil. 1:19–30, 1 Cor. 4:14–16, 2 Cor. 10:3–6, John 17:17–19, Micah 6:8, Acts 14:22.*

Memory Text: “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (*Philippians 1:21, NKJV*).

Death, we're often told, is just part of life. That's a lie. Death is the opposite of life, the enemy of life. Death was no more built into life than wreckage was built into a car. Paul emphatically says that Christ died to “destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (*Heb. 2:14, 15*).

Although ready to die for Christ, Paul was confident of his long-term fate. The most important thing for him in the meantime was, by his own life or death, to honor Christ and to preach the gospel to as many as possible. Perhaps that is one reason we have so many epistles bearing his name. Through his writings, he could reach many people and places, including places that he himself had never visited.

Life is short, and it is vital to make the biggest impact possible for God's kingdom within the span of the years that God grants us. No small part of that impact has to do with our encouraging “the unity of the faith.” As we shall see beginning this week, this theme was one important reason for Paul's writing to the Philippians.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 17.

“Christ Will Be Magnified”

Read Philippians 1:19, 20. What seems to be Paul’s expectation as to the outcome of his trial? What does he consider even more important than being acquitted?

Although Paul was no criminal, this was not the first time that he had been imprisoned, and he was no stranger to persecution. To the Corinthians, he detailed his sufferings up to that time: “In prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness” (2 Cor. 11:23–27, NKJV).

But lest we think these sufferings were uppermost in his mind, Paul immediately adds, “besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:28, NKJV).

Read 1 Corinthians 4:14–16; 1 Thessalonians 2:10, 11; Galatians 4:19; and Philemon 10. What relationship does Paul have with the churches he established and the people he won for Christ?

Like Jesus, who spared nothing to save us, Paul was willing to “spend and be spent” for the sake of fellow believers (2 Cor. 12:15, NKJV). But, paradoxically, the more a person’s actions resemble that of Jesus, the less they are loved or appreciated by some. “All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12). But faithful Christians remain perhaps the most powerful way to glorify God and to reveal the truth of the gospel (*compare Phil. 1:7*). “Paul’s patience and cheerfulness during his long and unjust imprisonment, his courage and faith, were a continual sermon.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 464.

Look at how you live and how you treat people, especially people who don’t treat you nicely. What kind of witness for Jesus do you present?

To Die Is Gain

In case you have not noticed, we are all, as believers especially, involved in the great controversy, which rages all around us and, indeed, in us as well. We all, in one way or another, experience the reality of this cosmic struggle, and we will until the day we die, whenever or however that happens.

Read 2 Corinthians 10:3–6. What is the basis of the spiritual war we wage, and what are our weapons?

The most deadly spiritual weapons are ideas, good and bad. Satan uses criticism, betrayal, embarrassment, fear, peer pressure, and a host of similar tools that Christians should never employ. We are, instead, to use love, mercy, peace, gentleness, longsuffering, kindness, and self-control. Our most powerful weapon, judiciously used, is “the Word of God” wielded by the Spirit (*Eph. 6:17, AMP*), because only God can bring the truth home to a person’s heart. We are merely the instrument that God uses to accomplish His purposes.

Read Philippians 1:21, 22. How do we understand Paul’s point, especially in the context of the great controversy?

Because the battle is spiritual, we’re in a war of ideas and values. Yet, Christ has won the victory at the cross for us, and as long as we stay connected to Him, we can never be defeated, even if we are killed. Paul surrendered his life to whatever happened to him here on earth, however unjust, because he entrusted his life and his future to a higher court.

As Christians, we should not fight so much for our rights as for what is right. It’s not “might makes right,” but “right makes might.” Submission to God’s will is honorable; in fact, it is the only way to be victorious in the war in which we find ourselves. Jesus, of course, is the quintessential example of submission to the will of God, as Paul will bring out in Philippians 2.

In what ways, right now, are you experiencing the reality of the great controversy? How can you draw comfort and strength from knowing that Christ has won the victory for us already?

Being Confident

Read Philippians 1:23, 24. What does Paul mean when he says that “to depart, and be with Christ” is “far better”?

This passage has been greatly misunderstood through the ages. In this week’s passage for study, Paul dealt with the contrast between living and dying. The Christian lives for Christ and may even die for Him. In that sense it is “gain” because our witness is that much more powerful and persuasive (*Phil. 1:21*). No doubt a person believes when willing to die for that belief.

But we must also recognize that the dead are really dead. They “know nothing.” They rest in the grave till the resurrection (*see Eccl. 9:5; John 5:28, 29*). That’s why Jesus said of Lazarus, who had died, “Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep” (*John 11:11*).

If, when people die, they go immediately to heaven, imagine how that would be for Lazarus. After four days of Lazarus frolicking in Paradise, an angel comes with the “bad” news: “Sorry, Lazarus, but Jesus is calling you back to earth. You can’t stay here.”

When we follow error to its logical conclusion, we see how erroneous it is. Death is like a dreamless sleep from which Jesus will awaken His faithful followers at the Second Advent; then, together with the living saints, they will be caught up and taken to heaven to be with Jesus forever (*see 1 Thess. 4:16, 17*).

Paul’s “departing” from the present life to be with Christ means to be with Him in suffering and dying (*2 Tim. 4:6*) in order to “attain to the resurrection from the dead” (*Phil. 3:11, NKJV*). Also, he was no doubt aware that he would close his eyes in death and that the very next thing he would know, in the twinkling of an eye, would be seeing Jesus, who would take him, with all God’s people, to the place Jesus has prepared for all who love Him (*John 14:3, 1 Cor. 2:9*).

Though willing to die for Christ, Paul knew it would be better for the Philippians if he would “remain in the flesh” (*Phil. 1:24, NKJV*). Interestingly, for the Christian, whether it is better to live for Christ or die for Him is not necessarily easy to answer. Paul was “hard-pressed between the two” (*Phil. 1:23, NKJV*), between staying alive or resting in the grave.

Again, however much no one wants to die, have you ever thought about how the moment you die, the next thing you will know is the return of Christ? How might that thought help you understand Paul’s thinking here?

Stand Fast in Unity

Jesus' last prayer for His disciples was dominated by one key theme: unity. Jesus looked beyond the cross to reunion with His Father *and* reunion with us: "Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me" (*John 17:24, NKJV*). Jesus prayed that the Father would keep His children so "that they may be one as We are" (*John 17:11, NKJV*). He also underscored the dire consequences of disunity—it becomes a reason for many not to believe. Twice in this brief prayer, Jesus emphasizes our oneness with Him and the Father is so "that the world may believe" and so "that the world may know that You have sent Me" (*John 17:21, 23, NKJV*).

Read Philippians 1:27 and compare John 17:17–19. What do both Jesus and Paul say is indispensable for unity in the church?

The Greek word in Philippians 1:27 translated "let your conduct be worthy" is *politeuomai*, which means "live as a citizen"—not of any earthly kingdom but as a citizen of the heavenly kingdom. The Sermon on the Mount paints a beautiful picture of what it means to be children of the heavenly Father and members of His kingdom: poor in spirit, meek, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, turning the other cheek, loving one's enemies, blessing those who curse us, doing good to those who hate us. In short, "to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" (*Micah 6:8*).

It's difficult to be upset or angry with someone like that, or is it? Sometimes we resent people who seem to be too good. We may even be tempted to cut them down to size or find a weak point to prove that they're not as good as they seem, all so that we feel better about ourselves. Instead, why not see how much more loving we can be, how generous, how merciful, how humble?

Ellen G. White spoke of those who "love the world and its gain better than they love God or the truth."—*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 277.

So often disunity in the church ultimately stems from pride. "As pride and worldly ambition have been cherished, the spirit of Christ has departed, and emulation, dissension, and strife have come in to distract and weaken the church."—*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, pp. 240, 241.

How crucial that we each learn the humility and meekness that Jesus modeled for us! What a different church we would have, wouldn't we?

United and Fearless

Read Philippians 1:27–30. How does our unity and “striving together for the faith of the gospel” relate to fearlessness?

Satan’s strategy is to divide and conquer. Disunity is deadly. Jesus said, “If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand” (*Mark 3:25, NKJV*). It’s a simple principle that Satan is delighted for us to forget. Our unity helps enable us to fulfill our prophetic role as the remnant of Bible prophecy (*Rev. 12:17*), proclaiming the “everlasting gospel” to “every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people” (*Rev. 14:6*). Because unity is crucial to fulfill our mission to spread this God-given message, and Jesus’ prayer in John 17 highlights “the truth” of God’s Word as one of the most important keys for unity (*John 17:17, 19*), our message cannot be separated from our mission or our unity. All three stand or fall together. If one of these three keys is missing, we can’t succeed. However, if we have all three in place, there is nothing to fear. We need not be “in any way terrified” by opposition (*Phil. 1:28, NKJV*). Satan is a defeated foe. Even if we should be put to death for our faith, nothing can harm us if we “become followers of what is good” (*1 Pet. 3:13, NKJV*). The devil is powerless to stop the onward march of God’s truth.

Read the following Bible passages and briefly summarize their common theme: Matthew 10:38, Acts 14:22, Romans 8:17, 2 Timothy 3:12.

Life itself in this fallen world is hard, even for the “best” of us. Job was a righteous man; even the Bible says that he “was blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil” (*Job 1:1, NKJV*). And yet, overnight, calamity struck him and his family. Who hasn’t learned, either by personal experience or by seeing what happened to others, that life here is lived, it seems, on a precipice, and you never know when you will go over the edge? Suffering, to some degree, is the lot of us all. In the end, though, better to suffer for Christ’s sake than for anything else.

What hope, what comfort, should we, as Christians, have amid our suffering?

Further Thought: “From the rack, the stake, the dungeon, from dens and caves of the earth, there falls upon his ear the martyr’s shout of triumph. He [Paul] hears the witness of steadfast souls, who, though destitute, afflicted, tormented, yet bear fearless, solemn testimony for the faith, declaring, ‘I know whom I have believed.’ These, yielding up their lives for the faith, declare to the world that He in whom they have trusted is able to save to the uttermost.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 512.

“Never was there so great a diversity of faith in Christendom as at the present day. If the gifts [of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers (*Eph. 4:11–13*)] were necessary to preserve the unity of the primitive church, how much more so to restore unity now! And that it is the purpose of God to restore the unity of the church in the last days, is abundantly evident from the prophecies. We are assured that the watchmen shall see eye to eye, when the Lord shall bring again Zion. Also, that in the time of the end the wise shall understand. When this is fulfilled there will be unity of faith with all whom God accounts wise; for those that do in reality understand aright, must necessarily understand alike. . . . From considerations like these, it is evident that the perfect state of the church here predicted is still in the future; consequently these gifts have not yet accomplished their purpose.”—R. F. Cottrell, “Introduction,” in Ellen G. White, *Early Writings*, p. 140.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ In light of the above quotation from R. F. Cottrell, what is necessary for the Holy Spirit to bring unity into God’s church today? How important for church unity is the putting into practice of counsels given through the gift of prophecy?
- ❷ How would you explain the Bible teaching on death to a friend who believes that Paul and other Christians who have died are now “with Christ” in heaven?
- ❸ How do we understand the terrible reality of suffering in this world? Why is the great controversy motif so helpful in giving us some understanding of it all? Why though must we, in the end, ultimately look at Jesus on the cross as the fullest possible expression of the Father’s love and learn to trust Him even in the worst of times?

Peacocks to the Rescue!

An outbreak of baby cobras alarmed Beulah Fernandez, director of Sunshine Children's Home and School on a Seventh-day Adventist campus in Bangalore, India. She had good reason to be worried. Five years earlier, a boy had been bitten by a cobra while chasing a calf through a mango grove. Even though he had been rushed to the hospital, he had ended up undergoing several operations and a year of complicated treatments before recovering.

Now baby cobras seemed to be everywhere on the 10-acre campus: on the road, in the garden, under the car, and even outside the door of Beulah's house.

"O Lord!" she prayed. "This is supposed to be a safe place for children. Please help!"

Snake catchers were called, but they were accustomed to catching snakes in city buildings and closed spaces.

It was a difficult task to find the baby cobras on the large campus of trees bearing mangos, bananas, jackfruit, sapota, papaya, custard apples, avocados, coconuts, guavas, figs, passion fruits, and soursop.

Staff members and children prayed earnestly.

Then a staff member spotted a peacock on the campus. Could it be? A peacock on the campus in the middle of a big city? Peacocks are known to eat venomous snakes.

A short time after that, another staff member saw a second peacock.

A few evenings later, staff members and children were treated to a majestic display of a peacock and his female counterpart, a peahen, majestically strutting around the garden.

Everyone watched in wonder as the shiny blue peacock fanned out its long, brilliant tail feathers marked with eye-like designs.

After that evening, the baby cobras disappeared.

Even though the snakes were gone, the peacock and peahen remained on the campus like stately guardians to the children and staff members.

Even today, someone screams out almost daily, "Peacock!"—and the children run out to look at a beautiful bird.

Beulah believes that the peacocks were the answer to their fervent prayers. In the 45-year history of the school and children's home, no peacocks had ever before visited the campus.

"We believe that God sent the peacocks," she said. "God indeed does love and care for His children and can still amaze us with beautiful solutions to all our troubles."

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Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Philippians 1:21*

Study Focus: *Phil. 1:19–30, 1 Thess. 4:14–16*

Martin Luther King, Jr., once said, “If a man hasn’t discovered something he will die for, he isn’t fit to live.”—quoted in Mark Water, *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations* (Alresford, Hampshire, England: John Hunt Publishers Ltd., 2000), p. 404. Paul expressed a similar sentiment, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (*Phil. 1:21, NKJV*). These are not empty words! Paul truly was willing to die for Christ (*Rom. 14:8*), which he ultimately did (*2 Tim. 4:6–8*).

Quoting from Psalm 44:22, Paul announced to the Lord, “ ‘For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter’ ” (*Rom. 8:36, NKJV*). Thus, his words in Galatians 2:20 should not surprise us: “ ‘I have been crucified with Christ’ ” (*NKJV*). Paul was willing to die for Christ because he was committed to living for Him. Paul continues, “ ‘It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God’ ” (*Gal. 2:20, NKJV*). Thus, Paul lived and died for the sake of the gospel.

This week’s lesson emphasizes three major themes:

1. God summons us to live mission-minded lives, even calling us to be willing to die for Him.
2. Death is likened to sleep, for which the solution is the resurrection of the body, not the immortality of the soul.
3. Christ calls us to unity in His Spirit. Because we are all involved in a spiritual war, we must not only use the right weapons but also fight together in unity.

Part II: Commentary

Illustration

The story is told about John Bradford, who was burned to death at the stake on July 1, 1555. Bradford “was chaplain to King Edward Sixth of England, and was one of the most popular preachers of his day. But he was a martyr to his faith. As he was being driven out to Newgate to be burned, permission was given him to speak, and from the wagon in which he rode to his death the entire way out from West London to

Newgate he shouted: ‘Christ, Christ, none but Christ.’”—Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996), p. 787. As did Paul, Bradford gave himself to mission by living and dying for Christ.

Living and Dying for Christ

Paul’s statement in Philippians 1:21 is one of the most noteworthy in all his letters. His willingness to live for Christ—which implies enduring inevitable hardships—and even to die for Him, underscores the hope expressed in the preceding verse, “And I trust that my life will bring honor to Christ, whether I live or die” (*Phil. 1:20, NLT*).

A puzzling concept, however, is Paul’s assertion that dying is gain. What does he mean by that? How can one benefit from his or her own death? Based on Paul’s desire, expressed in Philippians 1:23, “to depart and be with Christ” (*NKJV*), some have inferred that Paul is affirming that he would be in the presence of Christ immediately after death. But such a notion contradicts plain scriptural teachings about the non-immortality of the soul and death as a slumber. To understand what Paul meant by referring to death as gain, it is helpful to examine his use of the term “gain” (from the Greek *kerdos*) and its cognate verb “to gain” (from the Greek *kerdainō*), elsewhere in his writings. In Philippians 3:7, 8, Paul mentions that what he previously considered as gain (*kerdos*), he now counts as loss “because of Christ” (*Phil. 3:7, NRSV, emphasis added*); that is, “because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus” (*Phil. 3:8, NRSV, emphasis added*). Paul further explains, “Because of him I have suffered the loss of all things . . . so that I may gain [*kerdainō*] Christ” (*Phil. 3:8, CSB*). Thus, for Paul, dying is gain in the sense that he will ultimately gain Christ by seeing Him at His second coming (*2 Tim. 4:8*).

It is also possible that “gain” (*kerdos*) in Philippians 1:21 has a missionary sense. In 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, Paul uses *kerdainō* as a missionary term: “I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win [*kerdainō*] the more; . . . to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win [*kerdainō*] Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win [*kerdainō*] those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law . . . that I might win [*kerdainō*] those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win [*kerdainō*] the weak” (*NKJV*).

In that regard, the following comment on Philippians 1:21 is helpful: “[Paul] is concerned with magnifying Christ. If his Lord saw best for him to bear testimony through living and ministering, he would rightly represent Him. But the death of a righteous man can also be a powerful affirmation of the efficacy of the gospel of grace. The contrast between

his death and the death of one who dies without hope would be so marked that its influence would bring *gain for the kingdom of Christ. Hearts are touched and softened* by the calm assurance and confidence of the one whose trust is completely in his God, even in the hour of death.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 147, emphasis added. Paul believed that his death would mark the culmination of his missionary work (*Phil. 2:17; compare with 2 Tim. 4:6, 7*). Also, he likely thought that giving his life would “encourage the Philippians to further self-sacrifice, or . . . might cause some to investigate the faith to which he held so tenaciously.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 160.

Paul viewed death as gain because he would see Christ in his next conscious experience at the resurrection. At the same time, Paul was also certain that between his death and the Second Coming, he would be sleeping in the tomb.

Death Is Like a Sleep

Paul compared death to sleep (*1 Thess. 4:14, 15*), suggesting a state of unconsciousness. This idea aligns with Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels (*Luke 8:52, 53; John 11:11–13*). One clear example is the story of the resurrection of Jairus’s daughter. Interestingly, while Matthew and Mark mention only that people ridiculed Jesus’ affirmation that the girl was sleeping (*Matt. 9:24; Mark 5:39, 40*), Luke’s observation as a physician is more precise: “And they ridiculed him, *knowing that she was dead*” (*Luke 8:53, NKJV, emphasis added*). Additionally, the book of Acts—also written by Luke—portrays the death of Stephen by affirming, “he fell asleep” (*Acts 7:60, NKJV*). The same is said about David (*Acts 13:36*).

Referring to the death of “the fathers,” Peter says they “fell asleep” (*2 Pet. 3:4, NKJV*). Scholars debate whether by “the fathers” Peter meant the previous generation of Christians or the patriarchs, but this distinction is irrelevant. Whatever the case is, death is depicted as a state of unconsciousness, similar to what happens when we fall asleep every night. It is also noteworthy that “many bodies of the saints *who had fallen asleep* were raised” at Jesus’ resurrection (*Matt. 27:52, NKJV, emphasis added*). This passage in the Gospel of Matthew is important, not only because it likens death to sleep but also because it clearly points to the resurrection of the body as the remedy for death.

As noted previously, Paul’s belief that death is likened to sleep is deeply rooted in Jesus’ teachings and aligns with the thought expressed by other apostles. Thus, the Bible does not portray death as a state of consciousness, as many think.

Unity in Christ

Philippians 1:27 begins a section in the letter (*Phil. 1:27–30*) in which Paul shifts from discussing his own suffering to the suffering of his audience in their work for Christ. Two crucial themes emerge in Philippians 1:27: a Christlike manner of life and unity. Believers are called to display outstanding conduct and remain united, despite the hard-hearted opposition and suffering that they face for their faith in Christ.

Paul uses two key phrases to highlight the type of connection that should characterize the relationship among believers; that is, “one spirit” and “one mind” (*Phil. 1:27, NKJV*). This language of companionship runs throughout the letter. In this context, Paul affirms that the Philippians would complete his joy “by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (*Phil. 2:2, ESV*). In Philippians 4:1–3, Paul hints that unity is crucial for the fulfillment of mission.

Philippians 4:3 presents four compound words introduced by the Greek particle *syn* (“with” or “together with”); *syzygos* (“yokefellow”); *syllambanō* (literally, “take together”); *synathleō* (“struggle along with”); and *synergos* (“fellow worker”). Thus, Paul mentions women who “labored with” (*NKJV*) him in the gospel and also “fellow workers” (*NKJV*), all of whom were involved in mission.

Part III: Life Application

Meditate upon the following themes. Then ask your students to answer the questions at the end of this section.

Jesus said, “ ‘A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master’ ” (*Matt. 10:24, NKJV*). Among other things, this teaching includes rejection, suffering, and even martyrdom. In John 15:20, Jesus says, “ ‘ “If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you” ’ ” (*NKJV*). As workers in the cause of Christ, we are supposed to be prepared for hard times. The Bible reveals that Satan is working diligently in this world in order to prevent the gospel from being preached to all nations, tribes, languages, and peoples, for “ ‘he knows that he has a short time’ ” (*Rev. 12:12, NKJV*). God’s people must work diligently, too.

Thus, Christ summons us to live for mission. And if we die while engaged in our missionary task, we are assured that we will sleep in the tomb, awaiting the resurrection at the Second Coming. God does not forget those who die in faithfulness to the third angel’s message. They are promised, “ ‘ “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” ’ ” ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, and

their works follow them' ” (*Rev. 14:13, NKJV*). For now, endurance is necessary (*Rev. 14:12*). We are called to take up our cross and follow Christ (*Matt. 10:38*) until the day we will exchange the cross for the crown of life (*Rev. 2:10*). Meanwhile, we must work together against a common enemy. Paul says, “We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but . . . against spiritual hosts of wickedness” (*Eph. 6:12, NKJV*). United in Christ and clothed with the armor of God, we will overcome!

Questions:

- 1. Think about a time when you suffered religious persecution. How did suffering for Christ's sake strengthen your faith?**

- 2. To what mission has Christ called you? How are you fulfilling that work for Him?**

Unity Through Humility



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Phil. 2:1–11, Jer. 17:9, Phil. 4:8, 1 Cor. 8:2, Rom. 8:3, Heb. 2:14–18.*

Memory Text: “Fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind” (*Philippians 2:2, NKJV*).

Unity is strength. But knowing what is true is not the same as doing it. We all fail sometimes, despite our best efforts at unity. But that's not the same as deliberately undermining unity. No wonder, then, that as Paul continues writing to the Philippians, he wants them to be “of one accord, of one mind.”

Paul bases the necessity of unity on the teaching and example of Jesus. It's a theme that we find throughout the New Testament and especially in the epistles. The origin of disunity in the universe stemmed from the pride and thirst for position and power of a single angel in heaven, a sentiment that spread quickly, even within a perfect environment (*see Isa. 14:12–14*). It then gained a foothold in Eden through a similar discontent with the rules God had put in place and the desire for rising to a higher sphere than that which God had designed (*Gen. 3:1–6*).

This week we'll look at the biblical basis for unity in the church, focusing especially on the amazing condescension of Jesus, the lessons we can gain from beholding Him, and how we can grow to be more like Him.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 24.

Disunity in Philippi

Read Philippians 2:1–3. What factors seem to have led to disunity within the church? What does Paul suggest as a remedy?

It must have been a tremendous disappointment for Paul to see the church that he established and loved so much racked with rivalry and consumed with contention. He uses very strong language to describe the problems. “Selfish ambition” translates a word (Greek, *eritheia*), used earlier in Philippians 1:17 (*ESV*) to refer to Paul’s self-interested rivals in Rome who were bent on promoting themselves rather than advancing the cause of Christ.

“Selfish ambition” is among the works of the flesh (*Gal. 5:20, NKJV*), and as James indicates, “where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there” (*James 3:16, NKJV*). The Greek word for “conceit” is used only here in the New Testament, but appears in extrabiblical literature in the sense of arrogance, hollow pride, and having an inflated sense of oneself. Paul uses a closely related word in admonishing the Galatians: “Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another” (*Gal. 5:26, NKJV*).

Note the remedies Paul lists for these problems:

1. *Consolation in Christ.* Paul will proceed to use Christ’s own example as a powerful motivation.
2. *Comfort of love.* Jesus reveals divine love and commands us to “love one another as I have loved you” (*John 15:12*).
3. *Fellowship of the Spirit.* The presence of the Holy Spirit creates a close Christian relationship like the one that pervaded the early church (*Acts 2:42; compare 2 Cor. 13:14*).
4. *Affection (or compassion).* We see this divine quality frequently manifested in the life of Christ (*see Matt. 9:36, Matt. 20:34, and Mark 1:41*) and described in the parables of the good Samaritan (*Luke 10:33*) and the prodigal son (*Luke 15:20*).
5. *Mercy.* This quality, exemplified by Jesus, is to be seen also in the lives of His followers (*Luke 6:36*).
6. *Being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.* What a picture! It is difficult to imagine how Paul could emphasize the importance of unity more strongly. As Paul will point out, the mind we are to have “was also in Christ Jesus” (*Phil. 2:5*).

The Source of Unity

Think more about Paul's emphasis on unity in Philippians 2:2, saying essentially the same thing in four different ways. Note also his focus on the mind, thoughts, and feelings. While the religious leaders tended to emphasize outward behavior, Jesus focused on our thoughts and feelings. For instance, the rich young ruler claimed to have always kept the law. Yet, by telling him to sell all he had, give to the poor, and follow Him, Jesus tested his attachment to worldly things. He also said it's what comes from the heart (or mind) that defiles a person: "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies" (*Matt. 15:19, NKJV*), and "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (*Matt. 12:34, NKJV*).

Read Philippians 2:3, 4. What practical steps does Paul urge to have unity in the church?

Paul's words provide a picture of humility: lowliness of mind, esteeming others better than ourselves, looking out for the interests of others and not merely our own. Easier said than done, right? But these are principles important to keep in mind in all our interactions. Often in conversation there is the tendency to concentrate on our reply to whatever is being said, rather than focused on listening in order to understand what the other person is saying and trying to see the issue from their point of view. Often strife arises from simple misunderstandings that could be avoided simply by active listening. We may not agree, but listening and seeking to understand the other person's viewpoint is the first step for fostering healthy communication and trust.

Paul speaks of the unity "[produced by] the Spirit" (*Eph. 4:3, AMPC*), which creates "the peace that joins us together" (*Eph. 4:3, EXB*). If there is strife in the church, the Holy Spirit can calm the waters and bring us into unity, creating harmony. In the same chapter, Paul speaks of "the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God" (*Eph. 4:13, NKJV*). The two are related. Having the same faith, the same understanding of Scripture that springs from knowing Christ and His teachings, is vital for unity to prevail among us.

What kind of death to self would lead us to where we, indeed, esteem others better than ourselves? How can we learn to do that? How different would our relationships be if we all lived like that?

Mind Implant or Mind Surgery?

An increasing number of companies around the world are working on technology that combines the processing power of computers with the human brain. In other words, by connecting minds to computers, scientists hope to impact our thoughts through the computers. Although implant use with the human brain may promise positive results, which include helping to manage epilepsy, depression, and Parkinson's disease, more sinister uses are not difficult to imagine. Mind control cannot be far away.

In some ways, it's already here. Our mind is like a computer, only far superior. The constant information flow, to which we are daily exposed, "programs" our mind, conditions our thoughts, and guides our actions. When we immerse ourselves in media, the worldly way people think stamps its impression on our minds, and we begin thinking the same way. It's as if other people's minds were implanted or melded into ours.

We are, like Jesus, to be "spiritually minded" (*Rom. 8:6*). "No one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God," which Paul contrasts with "the spirit of the world" (*1 Cor. 2:11, 12, NKJV*). Who is our teacher? And what are we learning?

Read Philippians 2:5. What do you think it means to have the "mind" of Christ?

Ultimately, we can change our mind, but we can't change our heart; only God can. The Holy Spirit needs to perform heart surgery on us, wielding the "sword of the Spirit" (*Eph. 6:17*), the "living and powerful" Word of God, "piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (*Heb. 4:12, NKJV*). Only through the Holy Spirit can we really know ourselves because, by nature, our own heart deceives us (*Jer. 17:9*). The Hebrew word for "deceitful" (*'aqov*) refers to bumpy ground that trips us up; by extension, it means thoughts that are tortuous, twisted, and crooked. We must be transformed by the "renewing" of our mind in order that we may "prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (*Rom. 12:2, NKJV*).

Why is it so important that we follow what Paul tells us here: "Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things" (*Phil. 4:8, NKJV*)?

The Mind of Christ

Muhammad Ali once said, “I am the greatest.” In August 1963, six months before winning the world heavyweight boxing championship, he even released a record album titled “I Am the Greatest.” Ali, no doubt, was a great athlete, but he was not an example to follow if one wants the mind of Christ.

In contrast, Jesus was perfectly sinless. Though He was tempted “in all points . . . as we are” (*Heb. 4:15*), He never sinned, not even by a thought. Nevertheless, *Hebrews 5:8* indicates, “though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered” (*NKJV*). Jesus’ submission to the Father’s will was always perfect. There was never a moment He refused to submit, though no doubt many times it was not easy.

Read *Philippians 2:5–8*, which some consider the most powerful and beautiful texts in Scripture. What is Paul saying to us here? What are the implications of these words? Most important, how do we apply to our own lives the principle expressed here?

Jesus, who is equal with God, who is God, not only took upon Himself human flesh but became a “bondservant” (*doulou*, a servant, a slave) and then offered Himself as a sacrifice for our sins! In another place, Paul says that He became “a curse for us” (*Gal. 3:13*). God, our Creator, died on the cross in order to be our Redeemer as well, and that required Him to become a curse for us.

How do we begin to wrap our minds around what this is saying? Even more so, how do we do what the texts tell us to do, and that is to have the same kind of willingness to humble oneself and to sacrifice oneself for the good of others?

In another place, Jesus said: “But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (*Matt. 23:11, 12, NKJV*). This, in many ways, reflects what Paul was telling us, in *Philippians 2:5–8*, to do as well.

In more powerfully graphic terms, Paul was saying here what he said earlier about not doing anything “through selfish ambition or conceit” (*Phil. 2:3, NKJV*).

How should we respond to what Christ has done for us, as depicted in *Philippines 2:5–8*? What response could possibly be “adequate” or worthy of what Christ has done for us, perhaps other than to fall on our knees and worship? Why is it so wrong to think that our works can add to what Christ has already done for us?

The Mystery of Godliness

A popular verse in the Bible is 1 Corinthians 8:2: “If anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know” (NKJV). There is no subject about which we know everything. We can always learn something more about anything. How much more true is that of eternal realities connected with the Godhead and the Incarnation? Paul frequently refers to Christ’s amazing condescension in becoming a human being. It’s a subject that even eternity will be inadequate to exhaust.

Read Romans 8:3, Hebrews 2:14–18, and Hebrews 4:15. What characterized Jesus’ condescension and His taking of human nature?

How was it possible for the eternal Son of God, through the operation of the Holy Spirit (*see Luke 1:35*), to become a divine-human being in Mary’s womb? It boggles the mind how the infinite and eternal could suddenly become a finite human being subject to death. That is the heart of what Paul calls “the mystery of godliness” (1 Tim. 3:16).

In the beautiful hymn of Philippians 2, Paul here elaborates on this condescension more fully in some respects than anywhere else in Scripture.

- “Being in the form of God” (Phil. 2:6). The word *morphē* (form) refers to His divine nature, that Jesus was equal to the Father (compare John 1:1).
- “Emptied Himself” (Phil. 2:7, NASB). The mysterious nature of Jesus emptying Himself of His divine prerogatives—so that He could become truly human and tempted as we are—is astonishing.
- “He humbled himself” (Phil. 2:8). In taking human nature, Jesus moved from universal supremacy to utter servanthood, the opposite of Lucifer’s aim.
- “Death, even the death of the cross” (Phil. 2:8). There was no more ignominious way to die than the way Jesus chose, having planned it with the Father in the “counsel of peace” (Zech. 6:13), illustrating it beforehand through Moses lifting up the serpent (Num. 21:9, John 3:14), and thus becoming “sin for us . . . that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor. 5:21).

How can, and should, focusing on what Jesus did for us at the cross—seeing the Cross as our example of surrender and humility—make us more humble, as well as more submissive to God?

Further Thought: “All the paternal love which has come down from generation to generation through the channel of human hearts, all the springs of tenderness which have opened in the souls of men, are but as a tiny rill to the boundless ocean when compared with the infinite, exhaustless love of God. Tongue cannot utter it; pen cannot portray it. You may meditate upon it every day of your life; you may search the Scriptures diligently in order to understand it; you may summon every power and capability that God has given you, in the endeavor to comprehend the love and compassion of the heavenly Father; and yet there is an infinity beyond. You may study that love for ages; yet you can never fully comprehend the length and the breadth, the depth and the height, of the love of God in giving His Son to die for the world. Eternity itself can never fully reveal it. Yet as we study the Bible and meditate upon the life of Christ and the plan of redemption, these great themes will open to our understanding more and more.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 740.

“When we are receiving a training, as did Moses in the school of Christ, what shall we learn?—to become puffed up?—to have an exalted opinion of ourselves?—No, indeed. The more we learn in this school, the more we shall advance in meekness and lowliness of mind. We are not to feel that we have learned everything worth knowing. We should put to the best use the talents God has given us, that when we are changed from mortality to immortality, we shall not leave behind that which we have attained, but may take it with us to the other side. Throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity, Christ and His work of redemption will be the theme of our study.”—Ellen G. White, Manuscript 36, 1885.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What are ways that you have experienced for yourself the reality of God’s love? In class, talk about the different ways you have come to know and experience His love.
- ❷ What exactly does it mean that Jesus came “in the likeness of men” (*Phil. 2:7*)? Compare Romans 8:3. Discuss these passages in light of each other.
- ❸ What challenges to unity does the church in your area face? Whatever the issues, why would a willingness to be humble, to not do anything through “selfish ambition or conceit” (*Phil. 2:3, NKJV*), be a great way to at least start working through the issues?

Money Never Runs Out

Eleven-year-old Alvan Harold liked hearing coins jingling in his pocket as he walked home from school in Kisumu, Kenya. Then he could stop by a shop and buy some crunchy nuts or a cold ice cream.

One day, the fifth-grade Bible teacher shocked Alvan by talking about his beloved pocket money. “You should not spend all your pocket money on nuts and ice cream,” she said. “Save some to give to God on Sabbath.”

Alvan put money in the offering plate on Sabbath. It was money that his father gave him on Sabbath morning. Teacher spoke about that money, too.

“When you give money from your parents in church, you are only giving for your parents,” she said. “You aren’t giving your own money.” She read Malachi 3:8: “Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, ‘In what way have we robbed You?’ In tithes and offerings” (NKJV).

Alvan thought that Teacher was criticizing him, and he didn’t like that. But then he thought, *Maybe she is just a little bit right.*

It was Thursday, and Alvan had already spent all his pocket money for that week. He decided to save money for God the next week. But the next week, he again spent all his money.

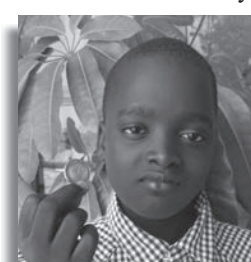
Two months passed, and Alvan was terribly disappointed with himself. He just couldn’t seem to save money for offering.

One day, he and his 17-year-old brother, Allan, passed an ice-cream shop as they walked home. Alvan had a 20-shilling coin (20 U.S. cents) in his pocket, and he decided to spend it on ice cream.

But his big brother stopped him. “It’s childish to walk around eating ice cream,” he said. “I won’t walk around with someone eating ice cream.” Alvan was annoyed. He wanted ice cream, but he couldn’t argue. So he didn’t buy it.

When Sabbath arrived, he still had the 20 shillings in his pocket. He put the coin in the offering plate along with 20 shillings that his parents had given him that morning. It felt good to give his own money to God. He had given up something he really wanted for the offering money, and realized it wasn’t such a loss.

The next week, Alvan managed to save another 20 shillings, and he gave it as offering. He liked the feeling! He decided to give 20 shillings every Sabbath—and he has to this day. To his surprise, he has never run out of money again.



Before, he never had enough money to last the week. But now he always has enough money. In fact, he often has more than 20 shillings left over, and he gives the extra money to Father to put into savings.

Sometimes Alvan is tempted to buy nuts or ice cream, but he reminds himself that he must have 20 shillings for God on Sabbath.

“I remind myself that God’s work is better than what I want,” he said.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Philippians 2:2*

Study Focus: *Phil. 2:1–11*

Philippians 2:1–4 begins a section in which Paul discusses Christ’s example of humility for Christian life (*Phil. 2:1–18*). Christ is our supreme model of submission to God, love for Him, and union with Him. During His earthly ministry, Christ nurtured deep communion with the Father and repeatedly underscored their unity (*John 5:19; John 10:30, 38; John 12:45; John 14:9, 10; John 17:11, 21–24*). Likewise, Jesus highlighted His unity with the Holy Spirit (*John 14:16, 26; John 15:26; John 16:7*).

The members of the Godhead exist eternally in a harmonious and loving relationship, providing a blueprint for the unity and love that should define the relationships among believers. Paul stresses this theme, not only in Philippians but also elsewhere. For instance, at the beginning of 1 Corinthians, he says, “Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (*1 Cor. 1:10, NKJV; compare with Rom. 15:5–7, Gal. 3:26–29, Eph. 4:1–6, Col. 3:12–15*).

This week’s lesson emphasizes three major themes:

1. Living in unity and demonstrating love for one another are fundamental Christian responsibilities and the expected behavior of every follower of Jesus.
2. As Christians, we are called to cultivate a Christlike manner of thinking. Paul emphasizes what a Christlike mindset entails.
3. Our finite minds are unable to comprehend fully the infinite condescension of Christ in becoming man. This condescension is an unfathomable mystery.

Part II: Commentary

Illustration

“For safety reasons, mountain climbers rope themselves together when climbing a mountain. That way, if one climber should slip and fall, he would not fall to his death. He would be held by the others until he could regain his footing.

“The church ought to be like that. When one member slips and falls, the others should hold him up until he regains his footing. We are all roped together by the Holy Spirit.”—Michael P. Green, *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), p. 66.

Unity and Love

In Philippians 2:1–4, Paul hints that selfish ambition is a major cause of disunity within the church. He states, “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit” (*Phil. 2:3, NKJV*). The words “ambition” and “conceit” translate, respectively, from the Greek nouns *eritheia* and *kenodoxia*, both of which are rare in the New Testament. The first occurs seven times, almost exclusively in Paul’s letters (*Rom. 2:8; 2 Cor. 12:20; Gal. 5:20; Phil. 1:16; Phil. 2:3; James 3:14, 16*). The second occurs only this once. Interestingly, the term *eritheia* does not occur in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, and *kenodoxia* occurs only three times, but in noncanonical books. Thus, it seems that Paul’s usage of these words in Philippians 2:3 is not based on the Greek version of the Old Testament. Conversely, both words appear in ancient lists of vices, in the writings of philosophers, to criticize rivalry (see Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, vol. 43 of Word Biblical Commentary [Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2004], p. 87). Not surprisingly, *eritheia* appears in the catalogs of sins recorded in 2 Corinthians 12:20 and Galatians 5:20. Clearly, Paul uses these words to pinpoint behaviors that Christians must avoid.

Philippians 2:1–4 shows that in order for unity to become a reality in the church, one must not only avoid the rivalry and selfishness that undermine harmony but also practice the Christian virtues essential for fostering a sense of togetherness. A harmonious atmosphere is characterized by consolation, comfort, love, fellowship, affection, and mercy (*Phil. 2:1, NKJV*). In such an environment, people agree “wholeheartedly with each other,” love one another, and work “together with one mind and purpose” (*Phil. 2:2, NLT*).

Yet, Paul is not advocating for uniformity but rather for unity through diversity. In condemning “selfish ambition” and “conceit,” he presents the opposite attitude; that is, “lowliness of mind” (*Phil. 2:3, NKJV*). This attitude is further explained in the subsequent sentence: “Let each esteem others better than himself” (*Phil. 2:3, NKJV*). This thought is so important that Paul repeats it with different words in the next verse, “Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (*Phil. 2:4, NKJV*). Paul is not asking his audience to abandon their own personal interests but to consider the interests of others with deep attention, rather than indifference. Jesus is our Supreme Example in this regard. Thus, Paul exhorts his audience to develop a Christlike mindset.

A Christlike Mindset

Philippians 2:1–8 presents terms from the Greek root *phren* (or *phron*). This root is employed to stress the use of “one’s faculty for thoughtful planning.”—Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), p. 324. In this context in Philippians 2:2, Paul exhorts his audience to “**think** the same thing [*to auto phronēte*] by having the same love, [being] united in spirit, and thinking the one thing [*to hen phronountes*]” (author’s translation). This synchronicity is possible only if “with **lowliness of thought** [*tapeinophrosynē*] every person regards others as more important than himself” (*Phil. 2:3, author’s translation*). The climax of this line of reasoning is reached in the following statement: “In your lives you must think [*phroneite*] and act like Christ Jesus” (*Phil. 2:5, NCV*). Paul urges the Philippians to develop a Christlike way of thinking, because only this thinking can lead to a Christlike way of acting.

Scholars debate whether the term “this” in Philippians 2:5 (“*this mind*,” *NKJV*) refers to the humility mentioned in Philippians 2:1–4 or to the meekness of Jesus, as demonstrated by His attitude portrayed in Philippians 2:6–8. In either case, Jesus stands as the standard to be imitated. As Tom Wright puts it, “Everyone must be focused on something other than themselves; and that something is Jesus Christ himself, the king, the Lord, and the good news which has come to take the world over in his name.”—Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), p. 98.

As Christians, we are called to cultivate a Christlike way of thinking and acting. Paul argues that Jesus was fully aware of who He was (*Phil. 2:6*), and yet, He willingly emptied Himself (*Phil. 2:7*) and humbled Himself (*Phil. 2:8*). Paul explains that (1) Jesus emptied Himself “by taking the form of a servant”; that is, by “being born in the likeness of men” (*Phil. 2:7, ESV*), He (2) humbled Himself “by becoming obedient to the point of death” (*Phil. 2:8, ESV*). In summary, Jesus became a Servant (see *Matt. 20:28, Mark 10:45*) and sacrificed Himself for the salvation of others (see *2 Cor. 8:9, Heb. 12:2*) in obedience to the will of God (see *Matt. 26:39, Rom. 5:19*). Those with a Christlike mindset are willing to do the same.

An Unfathomable Mystery

In 1 Timothy 3:16, Paul provides a summary of Jesus’ mission. His incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, and even an allusion to the proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles and the conversion of some

of them, are portrayed with an incredible economy of words. Both Jesus' earthly ministry and its results are shown as the content of the mystery of godliness.

The Greek term *mysterion* ("mystery") occurs 28 times in the New Testament, mostly in the Pauline letters (21 times). Almost always, this term holds significant Christological weight in Paul's writings. For instance, in Romans 16:25, Paul links the mystery with the gospel message. Likewise, in Ephesians 3:2–13, he speaks of the mystery repeatedly in the context of his ministry to the Gentiles. Paul notes that "the mystery was made known" to him "by revelation" (*Eph. 3:3, ESV*), through which he was able to have a better "understanding of the mystery of Christ" (*Eph. 3:4, NRSV*). Various scholars agree that the phrase "the mystery of Christ" can be understood as "the mystery, which is Christ." Paul develops this idea more extensively in Colossians. He speaks about a "mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations" (*Col. 1:26, NKJV*). Further, he refers to "this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you" (*Col. 1:27, NKJV*; see also *Col. 2:2, Col. 4:3*). In Ephesians 6:19, the apostle Paul mentions his work of proclaiming "the mystery of the gospel" or "the mystery, which is the gospel." In Romans 11:25, the mystery has to do with the fact that the gospel would reach the Gentiles. Further on, Paul implies that God's grace is a mystery, impossible to fathom (*Rom. 11:33*). Indeed, it is! Jesus was willing to endure "the cross, despising the shame" (*Heb. 12:2*). As Paul puts it in Philippians 2:8, Jesus humbled Himself to the point of death, "even death on a cross" (*ESV*).

Part III: Life Application

Meditate upon the following themes. Then ask your students to answer the questions at the end of this section.

"A visitor to a mental hospital was astonished to note that there were only three guards watching over a hundred dangerous inmates. He asked his guide, 'Don't you fear that these people will overpower the guards and escape?'"

"'No,' was the reply. 'Lunatics never unite.' "—Michael P. Green, *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), p. 65. This story illustrates the potential for growth that a community forfeits as a result of the lack of unity. Disunity is a terrible condition and something Christians should avoid at all costs.

Nothing can be more threatening to the health of a community of believers

than the lack of unity. That is why Paul was so worried about it and made it clear that living in unity is not just a Christian virtue but also a commandment: “Fulfill my joy by being like-minded” (*Phil. 2:2, NKJV*), and “Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (*Phil. 2:4, NKJV*).

Jesus is our ultimate example of looking out for the interests of others. He became poor so that, through His poverty, we might become rich (*2 Cor. 8:9*). Thus, Paul’s call for his readers to develop a Christlike way of thinking should come as no surprise. We must follow in the footprints of Jesus, practicing humility and obedience to God. Although we may not fully grasp the extent of Christ’s condescension in becoming man, we know enough to live in unity with one another.

Questions:

1. What does it mean to look out for the interests of others? What are some ways that we can put that idea into practice?

2. Why is unity among believers so important? What can we do to foster unity within the church?

Shining as Lights in the Night



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Phil. 2:12–30; Rom. 3:23, 24; Rom. 5:8; 2 Tim. 4:6; 1 Cor. 4:17; 2 Tim. 4:21, 13; Luke 7:2.*

Memory Text: “Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world” (*Philippians 2:14, 15, NKJV*).

God told the Hebrews to obey because that obedience “is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’ ” (*Deut. 4:6, NKJV*).

Centuries later Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life” (*John 8:12, NKJV*). He has also said, “ ‘You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden’ ” (*Matt. 5:14, NKJV*). How can we be that light? Only through a close connection with Jesus, “the true light that gives light to everyone” (*John 1:9, NIV*). As *Philippians 2* says, God “has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (*Phil. 2:9–11, NKJV*).

The light and power of heaven is available to all of us who have surrendered our lives to Jesus. But too often either we expect God to do it all or our own ideas and plans get in the way. That’s why Paul’s words to the *Philippians* are so relevant today.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 31.

We Work Out What God Works In

Having just presented Jesus as the perfect example of humility and obedience to God's will, Paul now turns to the Philippians themselves. He affirms their obedience to the Lord after they received the gospel message (see *Acts 16:13–15*, 32, 33) and urges them to continue in that obedience.

Having presented the example of Christ's life and the Cross as the way of salvation, Paul now focuses more directly on how this all works in practice.

Read Philippians 2:12, 13. What does Paul mean by saying, “Work out your own salvation”? How would you describe the relation between faith and works?

In these two verses, Paul does not present a different gospel from what he outlines in Romans and in his other epistles. We can be sure his message here agrees with the gospel of justification by faith, which he also preached in Philippi and other places. But it's also important to consider all the Bible says on a given topic, especially on the topic of salvation, which can be so misunderstood.

Read Romans 3:23, 24; Romans 5:8; and Ephesians 2:8–10. What do these passages teach about salvation?

Without question, salvation is God's work, and we can take absolutely no credit for it ourselves. Even faith itself is a gift, encouraged through the work of the Holy Spirit. Our own works cannot save us; however, through the new birth, God re-creates us spiritually, enabling us to do good works. God's Spirit works in us, empowering our will to choose the right, to resist temptation, and to make right choices.

Thus, we work out what God works in, “with fear and trembling” (*Phil. 2:12*). Does that mean we should be afraid of God's judgment on our often feeble efforts to obey? Of course not. This phrase refers to sensing God's presence (see *Ps. 2:11*) and our need to obey Him.

In what ways have you experienced Christ working in you? How, though, does your fallen nature fight against what God is doing in you, and how can you resist that pull?

Light in a Dark World

In Philippians 2:14, Paul urges the Philippians to “do all things without complaining and disputing” (*NKJV*). The challenges to church unity are so serious that it cannot be maintained without significant effort on our part. Unity within the church is a by-product of our union with Christ and obedience to His Word. And it’s vital to our witness, as Paul proceeds to point out, calling us to “shine as lights in the world” (*Phil. 2:15*).

On a moonless night, away from the glare of cities and street lights, more stars are visible, and they seem to shine much more brightly. It’s the contrast that makes the difference. The blacker the sky, the more clearly the stars stand out. It’s the same with our witness. The greater the moral darkness around us, the starker the contrast between the lives of God’s true followers and that of worldlings. How important it is, then, not to let the artificial lights of worldly ideas, pressures, and practices cause our witness to fade into the background or to disappear entirely.

Read Philippians 2:15, 16. How does Paul describe what we, as children of God, are to be and to do?

“Blameless” means “faultless, without reproach.” It is used especially of Job and his blameless character (*see Job 1:1, 8, NKJV; Job 2:3, NKJV; see also Job 11:4; Job 33:9*). The Greek word translated “harmless” literally means “unmixed, pure.” Jesus, in view of the vicious attacks that His witnesses are likely to face, encourages us to be “harmless as doves” (*Matt. 10:16*). Paul similarly urges us to be “simple concerning evil” (*Rom. 16:19, NKJV*). Our modern media channels are not known for pure, uplifting, and inspiring content. In times like these, David’s practice is a great rule for us today: “I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes” (*Ps. 101:3*).

We should never fear being different—our faith should increasingly set us apart. The goal is to “shine as lights in the world” (*Phil. 2:15*). The only way to do that is to reject conformity to this world (*Rom. 12:2*) by “holding fast the word of life” (*Phil. 2:16, NKJV*). Our choices determine whether we have lived with “the day of Christ” in view or have “run in vain” (*Phil. 2:16, NKJV; compare 1 Cor. 9:24–27*).

If there are areas of your life that you would consider “worldly” (and there probably are), how can you be cleansed from them?

A Living Sacrifice

Read Philippians 2:17; 2 Timothy 4:6; Romans 12:1, 2; and 1 Corinthians 11:1. What is Paul saying in these passages?

Paul has already expressed a surprisingly ambivalent view toward whether he lives or dies in service to Christ (*Phil. 1:20–23*). Now he suggests the very real possibility of “being poured out as a drink offering” (*Phil. 2:17, NKJV*). This imagery is based on the ancient practice of libations, which involved pouring out a liquid (such as oil, wine, or water) as an offering to God (*see, for example, Gen. 35:14, Exod. 29:40, 2 Sam. 23:15–17*). The apparent “waste” of a valuable liquid in an act of devotion may remind us of Mary’s act of anointing Jesus’ head and feet with the “very costly oil of spikenard” (*Mark 14:3–9, NKJV; John 12:3, NKJV*). While not a drink offering per se, it clearly represented an enormous sacrifice that fittingly illustrated the infinite sacrifice of Christ for our salvation.

Should Paul be executed for his work of spreading the gospel, he would rejoice because his life was being “poured out” as an offering to God. Because libations in the Hebrew Bible generally do not stand alone but accompany a sacrifice (*see Num. 15:1–10, Num. 28:1–15*), Paul would consider the giving of his life as the fitting complement to the “sacrifice and service” of believers in Philippi, who, through faith, have chosen to devote their lives to God as a “living sacrifice” (*Rom. 12:1*).

The early Christians, including those in Philippi (*Phil. 1:27–29*), were active in sharing their faith. They went spreading the gospel from house to house (*Acts 5:42*). They opened their homes for the study of the Scriptures (*Acts 12:12; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philem. 1, 2*), and were able to give reasons from the Scriptures for what they believed (*Acts 17:11, Acts 18:26, 1 Pet. 3:15*). Our Adventist pioneers did the same. Rather than relying on pastors to spread the message to their neighbors, they shared their faith, gave Bible studies, and prepared people so they would be ready for baptism when the minister returned.

In short, at great personal sacrifice to themselves, that is, as a “living sacrifice,” they worked to spread the gospel. Should we do any less?

Reflect on what it would mean for your life to be a “living sacrifice.” How much do you sacrifice for the kingdom of God, and what does your answer tell you about yourself?

Proven Character

Timothy's role as a co-sender of this epistle has already been mentioned (*Phil. 1:1*). Now Paul begins to detail how valuable Timothy is as one of his coworkers. He is described as an evangelist (*2 Tim. 4:5*) whom Paul had sent to Macedonia (*1 Thess. 3:2*; compare *Acts 18:5, Acts 19:22*) and, on several occasions, to Corinth (*1 Cor. 4:17, 1 Cor. 16:10*). Previously he had worked with Paul and Silas in Corinth (*1 Thess. 1:1, 2 Thess. 1:1*) and later in Ephesus (*1 Tim. 1:2, 3*; compare *Acts 19:22*). Paul describes Timothy as being "like-minded" (*Phil. 2:20, NKJV*). The Greek word (lit. "equal in soul") suggests he was like Paul in many ways, including his commitment to Christ, his energetic efforts to spread the gospel, and his concern for the Philippians specifically.

Why do you think Paul speaks so positively and at such length about Timothy here (see *Phil. 2:19–23*)? What else does Paul say about him (see *1 Cor. 4:17, 2 Tim. 1:5*)?

Another quality of Timothy's mentioned by Paul is his "proven character" (*Phil. 2:22, NKJV*). The Greek word describes a person who has been thoroughly tested by trials (*Rom. 5:4*) and whose character and service has proved to be genuine (*2 Cor. 2:9, 2 Cor. 9:13*). Paul knows this to be true of Timothy because he has seen it demonstrated through the many occasions that they worked alongside each other in spreading the gospel.

It is the difficult experiences of life that test our mettle and demonstrate who we are on the inside. Ellen G. White puts it this way: "Life is disciplinary. . . . There will be provocations to test the temper; and it is by meeting these in a right spirit that the Christian graces are developed. If injuries and insults are meekly borne, if insulting words are responded to by gentle answers, and oppressive acts by kindness, this is evidence that the Spirit of Christ dwells in the heart."—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 344. She goes on to say that if "the hardships and annoyances that we are called to bear" are "well endured, they develop the Christlike in the character and distinguish the Christian from the worldling."—*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 344.

Think about the provocations, hardships, and annoyances you have faced recently. Have these been "meekly borne" and "well endured"? What can you do to enable these experiences to help make you more disciplined?

“Hold Such Men in Esteem”

Read Philippians 2:25–30. How does Paul describe Epaphroditus? What specific attitudes and actions of this Christian worker reveal his character?

Epaphroditus is mentioned only in this letter, but we learn quite a bit about him from the few brief mentions that appear. Judging from his name (which refers to the cult of Aphrodite), he was converted from a pagan background. Calling him a “fellow worker” suggests he was active in ministry, perhaps working alongside Paul in Philippi. Being a “fellow soldier” (*compare Phil. 1:27*) probably refers to conflict Epaphroditus faced in spreading the gospel, willing even to risk his life (*Phil. 2:30*).

As the “messenger” (Greek: *apostolos*) appointed by the church in Philippi, Epaphroditus is sent to minister to Paul in prison and to care for any other needs he may have (*Phil. 2:25*). He was the one the Philippians entrusted with their financial gifts for Paul (*Phil. 4:18*). These offerings were critically important because whatever food, clothing, bedding, or other necessities Roman prisoners might need would have to be purchased at their own expense or brought to them by family and friends (*compare Acts 24:23*). Near the end of his second imprisonment in Rome, Paul asked Timothy to “do your utmost to come before winter” and “bring the cloak” left at Troas (*2 Tim. 4:21, 13, NKJV*). Paul would apparently need this thick woolen overcoat in his cold stone cell. It was also Epaphroditus who was entrusted with carrying this epistle back to Philippi (see Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 479).

Perhaps because of the problems in Philippi (see *Lesson 4*), Paul “considered it necessary” to send Epaphroditus back sooner than anticipated, and thus urges the Philippians to “welcome him in the Lord with great joy” (*Phil. 2:29, NIV*). Paul wants to make sure they do not worry about his own situation in jail. He also underscores that Epaphroditus is the kind of person Christians are to hold in high esteem, not because of their wealth or social status but because of their sacrificial spirit in following the example of Jesus (*Phil. 2:6–11, 29, 30; compare Luke 22:25–27*). The Greek word for *esteem* or *honor* appears only a few times in the New Testament: for the centurion’s servant who was “valued highly” (*Luke 7:2, NRSV*), for those who are shown honor by their placement at a feast (*Luke 14:8*), and of Jesus as the “precious” cornerstone (*1 Pet. 2:4, 6*). For Epaphroditus to be included in that group, he must have been, indeed, a faithful man.

Further Thought: “The one who stands nearest to Christ will be he who on earth has drunk most deeply of the spirit of His self-sacrificing love,—love that ‘vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, . . . seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil’ (1 Corinthians 13:4, 5),—love that moves the disciple, as it moved our Lord, to give all, to live and labor and sacrifice, even unto death, for the saving of humanity. This spirit was made manifest in the life of Paul. He said, ‘For to me to live is Christ;’ for his life revealed Christ to men; ‘and to die is gain,’—gain to Christ; death itself would make manifest the power of His grace, and gather souls to Him. ‘Christ shall be magnified in my body,’ he said, ‘whether it be by life or by death.’ Philippians 1:21, 20.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 549.

“The time is not far distant when the test will come to every soul. The mark of the beast will be urged upon us. Those who have step by step yielded to worldly demands and conformed to worldly customs will not find it a hard matter to yield to the powers that be, rather than subject themselves to derision, insult, threatened imprisonment, and death. . . .

“When multitudes of false brethren are distinguished from the true, then the hidden ones will be revealed to view, and with hosannas range under the banner of Christ. Those who have been timid and self-distrustful will declare themselves openly for Christ and His truth. The most weak and hesitating in the church will be as David—willing to do and dare. The deeper the night for God’s people, the more brilliant the stars. Satan will sorely harass the faithful; but, in the name of Jesus, they will come off more than conquerors.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, pp. 81, 82.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Think about the warning in the above quote about those who “step by step yielded to worldly demands and conformed to worldly customs.” What might that include? Discuss how this might apply not only to individuals but to the church as a whole.
- ❷ God says, “ ‘Those who honor Me I will honor’ ” (1 Sam. 2:30, NKJV). In what ways do we honor God? Is it the same as to “give glory to Him” (Rev. 14:7, NKJV)? Why, or why not?
- ❸ How can we understand the concept of working out our own salvation without falling into the trap of legalism?

No Devil Strings

By OLIVIA FAIRFAX

Marovo Lagoon tribesmen were considered the most warlike and cannibalistic of the Solomon Island tribes. They worshiped the spirits of their ancestors, whose skulls were kept after death. They lived in fear of the devil.

But around 1902, a Marovo chief named Tatagu began to wonder if he really needed to fear the devil. He decided to find out and not to attach a vine to the prow of his canoe on a fishing expedition. Vines were supposed to appease the devil and ensure a good catch. Without the vine, the fishing trip was a huge success. Chief Tatagu returned home to find a newborn son. He named the boy Kata Ragoso, which means “no devil strings.”

Kata Ragoso’s life would go on to reveal God’s power to transform a community and remove the strings and ties that the devil had over people.

Kata Ragoso grew up at a time when dishonest European traders enticed Solomon Islanders into their ships with foreign goods to kidnap them as slaves. But in 1914, when Kata Ragoso was about 12, a small white boat called the Advent Herald sailed into Marovo Lagoon. The crew didn’t try to entice or kidnap. Instead, Captain Griffiths F. Jones asked Chief Tatagu for land for a school. The next year, a school was built at Sasaghana, and Kata Ragoso enrolled as one of its first 23 students. At the school, he accepted Jesus and was among the first 10 Solomon Islanders to be baptized in 1918. He went on to work as a mission teacher, translator, and printing press operator. In 1935, he was ordained as an Adventist minister.

During World War II, Kata Ragoso was placed in charge of the Adventist work in the Solomon Islands. When the Japanese army invaded, they ordered him to kill people with white skin and from the Allied forces. For declaring that he would rather obey God than man, he was interrogated, flogged, and ordered shot. The interrogating officer, who had a strong dislike for the Adventist Church, instructed the firing squad to shoot at the count of three. He counted, “One, two . . .” but was unable to say “three.” He tried many times before giving up. After 10 days in prison, Kata Ragoso escaped. For the rest of the war, he led a rescue operation for Allied soldiers whose planes or ships were attacked. He rescued 27 U.S. pilots and 187 Australian and New Zealand soldiers.

Kata Ragoso died in 1964 at the age of 62, having served the church for 37 years. During that time, he saw the Marovo transformed from a warring community into a merciful people serving God.



This quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath mission projects are in the South Pacific Division, whose territory includes the Solomon Islands. Thank you for planning a generous offering in March.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Philippians 2:14, 15*

Study Focus: *Phil. 2:12–30, James 2*

Christians are called to be lights in a dark world. Jesus said, “ ‘You are the light of the world’ ” (*Matt. 5:14, NKJV*). Similarly, Paul also revealed his desire for Christians to shine as light bearers in a world engulfed in darkness. His words to the Philippians, “You shine as lights in the world” (*Phil. 2:15, NKJV*), are very similar to the message sent to the Ephesians, “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light” (*Eph. 5:8, NKJV*).

The metaphor of light is a powerful missionary symbol, used both in the Old and New Testaments. In Isaiah, God declares to His Servant, the Messiah, “ ‘I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth’ ” (*Isa. 49:6, NKJV*; compare also with *Isa. 42:6*). This passage is applied to Jesus in the New Testament (see, for instance, *Luke 2:32, John 8:12, John 9:5, Acts 26:23*), but it is also applied to the church (*Acts 13:47*) because it continues Jesus’ mission of being Light to the world.

This week’s lesson emphasizes three major themes:

1. We will consider the relationship between faith and works (*Phil. 2:12, 13*).
2. As Christians, we are called to be lights to the world, following in Jesus’ footprints and sharing our lives with others.
3. The trials and hardships that we face in our Christian walk strengthen us for greater challenges in God’s work. They are God’s tools for developing essential qualities that are indispensable for fruitful ministry.

Part II: Commentary

Illustration

Dwight L. Moody tells the story of two men “who had charge of a revolving light in a lighthouse on a storm-bound and rocky coast. Somehow the machinery went wrong, and the light did not revolve. They were so afraid that those at sea should mistake it for some other light, that they worked all the night through to keep the light moving around.” Moody concludes, “Let us keep our lights in the proper place, so that the world may see that

the religion of Christ is not a sham but a reality.”—Moody, *Anecdotes, Incidents, and Illustrations* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1990), p. 36. Jesus used the metaphor of light in order to illustrate that faith becomes “visible” through good works (*Matt. 5:16*).

Faith and Works

C. S. Lewis makes this intriguing statement about the relationship between faith and works: “Christians have often disputed as to whether what leads the Christian home is good actions, or Faith in Christ. . . . The Bible really seems to clinch the matter when it puts the two things together into one amazing sentence. The first half is, ‘Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling’—which looks as if everything depended on us and our good actions: but the second half goes on, ‘For it is God who worketh in you’—which looks as if God did everything and we nothing. I am afraid that is the sort of thing we come up against in Christianity. I am puzzled, but I am not surprised.”—Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), pp. 148, 149.

In fact, Paul clarifies the relationship between faith and works in Philippians 2:12, 13. While we must work out our salvation, works do not have a salvific role. As James teaches, works are the evidence of a genuine and saving faith (*James 2:18; compare with James 2:14*). A faith without works is not faith whatsoever. In James’s words, this type of faith is dead (*James 2:17, 26*) and useless (*James 2:20*).

When saying “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,” Paul is likely referring to the accountability that falls upon each Christian concerning the salvation they already have embraced through faith, which must be done “with fear and trembling” (*Phil. 2:12, NKJV*). In the original text in Greek, the phrase “with fear and trembling” is placed in the beginning of the sentence for emphasis: “With fear and trembling, work out your own salvation.”

Scholars debate the meaning of the phrase “with fear and trembling,” offering several interpretations, asserting it entails (1) concern over the possible risk of failure, (2) an attitude of submission to God, (3) humble devotion to God, or (4) a combination of all these things. Paul also applies this language in other parts of his writings. In 1 Corinthians 2:3, “fear” and “trembling” seem to reflect Paul’s anxiety about potentially failing in his mission in Corinth. In 2 Corinthians 7:15, these words point to the confidence Paul had that the Corinthians would accomplish what was expected of them (*see 2 Cor. 7:16*). In Ephesians 6:5, these words emphasize the importance of having a sense of duty. An analysis of these passages suggests that, by and large, the phrase “with fear and trembling” in Philippians 2:12 points to the high sense of responsibility believers are supposed to develop with regard to their salvation. Their works are an indication that they are taking this matter seriously.

Lights to the World

The imagery of light is consistently applied in the Bible as a metaphor for mission. In the Old Testament, God Himself is described as the ultimate Source from whom light emanates. The psalmist says, “The LORD is my light” (*Ps 27:1, NKJV*; see also *Ps. 4:6, Ps. 89:15, Ps. 118:27, Isa. 2:5*). Similarly, speaking on behalf of his people, the prophet Micah utters, “The LORD will be a light to me . . . He will bring me forth to the light” (*Mic. 7:8, 9, NKJV*; see also *Isa. 60:1, 2, 19, 20*).

In Isaiah 42:6 and Isaiah 49:6, the Servant of the Lord is referred to as “‘a light to the Gentiles’ ” (*NKJV*). In Isaiah 49:6, the reader is provided with this further explanation: “ ‘That You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.’ ” New Testament authors understood the metaphor and applied it consistently (*Luke 2:32, John 8:12, John 9:5, Acts 13:47, Acts 26:23*).

It is interesting that the most significant metaphor for the church in the early chapters of Revelation is the lampstands. In that regard, various scholars agree that the abandonment of the first love by some in the church of Ephesus has to do with the waning of their missionary zeal (*Rev. 2:4*). Thus, Jesus warns that, unless they repent, He would remove their “lampstand from its place” (*Rev. 2:5, NKJV*).

As mentioned previously, the phrase “the ends of the earth” occurs in Isaiah 49:6 in connection with the metaphor of light. It shows up twice in the book of Acts to portray the scope of the church’s missionary task (*Acts 1:8, Acts 13:47*). Although the metaphor of light does not occur in Acts 1:8, it may be implied, based on Acts 13:47. These data shed light on Paul’s exhortation to the Philippians to shine “as lights in the world” (*Phil. 2:15, NKJV*). It’s important to note that Paul suggests that believers are truly lights in the world (*Phil. 2:15*) when they demonstrate unity among themselves (*Phil. 2:14*). After all, “the calling to be light is also a calling into the fellowship of light. Paul saw Christians as being joined together in a community by which they could encourage and strengthen one another as children of light (*Eph. 5:8, 15–20*).”—John M. Terry, Ebbie C. Smith, and Justice Anderson, eds., *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), p. 26.

Qualities for a Successful Ministry

From the description of Timothy and Epaphroditus in Philippians 2:19–30, one can infer several qualities essential for a successful ministry. Paul portrays Timothy as one who (1) is “like-minded” (*Phil. 2:20, NKJV*), (2) sincerely cares for others (*Phil. 2:20*), (3) seeks “the things which are

of Christ Jesus” (*Phil. 2:21, NKJV*), (4) has a proven character (*Phil. 2:22*), and (5) demonstrates an attitude of service (*Phil. 2:22*). The Greek word rendered as “like-minded” is *isopsichon*, which occurs only here in the New Testament. It also appears once in the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament), in Psalm 55:13, where it is translated as “my equal” (*NKJV*).

Regarding Epaphroditus, Paul first portrays him in relation to himself: he is a brother, a fellow worker, and a fellow soldier. He is also a messenger (from Greek, *apostolos*) sent from Paul to the Philippians, and someone who ministered to Paul’s need (*Phil. 2:25*). This indicates that Epaphroditus was a very faithful and loyal companion. Afterward, Paul portrays him in relation to the Philippians. In that regard, Paul states, “He was longing for you all” (*Phil. 2:26, NKJV*). In other words, Paul is saying, “He misses you.” This suggests that, as a Christian leader, Epaphroditus deeply loved and cared for those whom he served. Epaphroditus was such a committed Christian leader that “for the work of Christ he came close to death, not regarding his life” (*Phil. 2:30, NKJV*). These men gave their all for the work of Christ. God also expects us to give our best, too!

Part III: Life Application

Meditate upon the following themes. Then ask your students to answer the questions at the end of this section.

We are completely dependent on God for salvation, which we receive through faith. Paul couldn’t have made it clearer when he said, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God” (*Eph. 2:8, NKJV*). It is through faith we journey from this life to the life to come. The letter to the Hebrews made this point very clear by consistently repeating the phrase “by faith” (*see Hebrews 11*). By faith, Abraham “dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, . . . for he waited for the city which has foundations” (*Heb. 11:9, 10, NKJV*).

The experience of salvation unavoidably leads us to good works. Because good works are designed to benefit others (*Gal. 6:9, 10*), they are not natural for sinners (*Jer. 13:23*). That is why it is God who enables us to perform them (*Phil. 2:13*).

Jesus said to the disciples, “ ‘Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works’ ” (*Matt. 5:16, NKJV*). This command underscores the close relationship between letting our light shine and performing good works. By performing good works, believers are shining their light in this dark world. Darkness is a symbol of sin (*see, for instance, John 3:19*,

20; Luke 22:53) and its effects (*see, for instance, Ps. 82:5, Eph. 4:18*). Christians are called to enlighten this world with “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4, NKJV), so as to shine on those “whose minds the god of this age has blinded” (2 Cor. 4:4, NKJV).

Questions:

1. How are good works and the experience of salvation connected?

2. What are ways you can let your light shine in this dark world?

Notes

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Confidence Only *in* Christ



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Phil. 3:1–16; Rom. 2:25–29; John 9:1–39; Eph. 1:4, 10; 1 Cor. 9:24–27.*

Memory Text: “That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead” (*Philippians 3:10, 11, NKJV*).

There’s something about us that remains suspicious about salvation by faith alone, apart from the works of the law. That is, for some reason, we all tend to lean on our works, as if they could add to our salvation. In a rather striking way, Paul deals with this point in a vigorous polemic against those who insist that circumcision is necessary for salvation.

To guard against the possibility that some might consider their works, such as circumcision, as contributing to their salvation, Paul makes it clear that righteousness is from Christ as a gift that comes by faith, not by the law. Though circumcision might not be an issue today, the principle it deals with certainly is.

The Protestant Reformation itself started over this very issue: the role of faith and works in the experience of a follower of Christ. In the end, Christ is everything to us, “the author and finisher of our faith” (*Heb. 12:2*). If our priorities are in the right place, we will live with the assurance of God’s love and enjoy the promise, even now, of salvation, all while placing “no confidence in the flesh” (*Phil. 3:3*).

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 7.

Rejoicing in the Lord

Read Philippians 3:1–3. What positive and negative notes does Paul sound here, and how are they related? How does he describe believers?

Paul begins on a very positive note and almost sounds as though he is wrapping up his letter. But he's not done. He returns to one of the main themes of this epistle: rejoicing in the Lord. And he will give a number of reasons for that here. Most important, we are to have confidence in Christ, not in ourselves: "We . . . rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh" (*Phil. 3:3*). Who among us has, in one way or another, learned the hard way about not putting confidence in the flesh?

The strong warning "Beware" (three times) is not found anywhere else in Scripture. Apparently, the Philippians knew very well what threat Paul was referencing. Rather than three separate problems, the warning appears to refer to a group of false teachers described in three different ways.

Wicked or irreligious people in Israel were sometimes referred to as "dogs" (*Phil. 3:2*; compare *Ps. 22:16*; *Isa. 56:10*; *Matt. 7:6*; *2 Pet. 2:21, 22*). False teachers could also aptly be described as "evil workers." Referring to them as "the mutilation" (*Phil. 3:2, NKJV*) or "those who mutilate the flesh" (*ESV*) shows that, as in Galatia and other locales, they were seeking to impose circumcision on Gentile believers, contrary to the ruling of the Apostolic Council (*see Acts 15*).

Interestingly, it seems that one solution to spiritual challenges, including the spread of false teachings, is to "rejoice in the Lord" (*Phil. 3:1*; compare *Phil. 4:4*).

Anything we *rejoice* about brings us *joy* (as in English, the two Greek words for these ideas are related). God wants us to be joyful, and His Word is a kind of instruction manual for true happiness and lasting joy. These include receiving God's mercy (*Ps. 31:7*); placing our trust in Him (*Ps. 5:11*); receiving the blessings of salvation (*Ps. 9:14*); adopting God's law as our way of life (*Ps. 119:14*), including the Sabbath (*Isa. 58:13, 14*); believing His Word (*Ps. 119:162*); and raising godly children (*Prov. 23:24, 25*).

Life can be very difficult for us all, no matter how well things might be going at the moment. But even if they are not going well now, what things can you and should you rejoice about? What is stopping you from doing it?

Paul's "Past Life"

It is a common experience for Christian converts to think of their lives in terms of before they accepted Jesus and after, just as Paul does in Philippians 3. Nevertheless, rightly or wrongly, we sometimes speak of those who are not Christians as being "good people," and, at least according to the world's standards, many indeed are. In contrast, compared to God's standards, no one is, not even Christians.

In Philippians 3:4–6, Paul points to many things in his life of which he had once been proud. What are they? How would you describe the "good" in your own life (past and present)?

Paul makes an implicit contrast between believing Jews who are spreading false doctrine and uncircumcised believers who rely fully on Christ for their salvation and put no confidence in mere human works such as circumcision (*see Heb. 6:1, Heb. 9:14; compare Rom. 2:25–29*). Even though Paul's past life and pedigree would have been quite impressive to his fellow Jews, none of these things contributed to his salvation. In fact, they actually hindered it because they blinded him for a while to his need of Christ.

Paul was not just circumcised—he was an "eighth day-er," meaning he, an Israelite by birth and belonging to the people of the covenant, was circumcised on the eighth day. Furthermore, he was from the tribe of Benjamin, whose territory included some of the most important cities of Israel. Paul not only knew Hebrew but, as a student of Gamaliel the Elder (*Acts 22:3, Acts 26:4, 5*) and a Pharisee, he would have been steeped in knowledge of the law and how it was, at least according to tradition, to be applied.

Paul was so zealous for the law that he persecuted the church because of its perceived threat to the Jewish way of life, which he thought the law prescribed. Interestingly, though "blameless" in terms of that human-originated "righteousness," Paul realized the law was actually far deeper and more demanding than he could imagine, and that without Christ he stood before it condemned.

Compare Romans 7:7–12 with Matthew 5:21, 22, 27, 28. What crucial point do both Jesus and Paul make about the law, and why is "faith in Christ" (*Phil. 3:9, NKJV*), rather than the law, the only source of righteousness? Look at it this way: How well do you keep the law, at least in the way Jesus said we should?

The Things That Matter

As yesterday's study pointed out, the things that previously made Paul proud were actually hindrances to faith because they blinded him to his need of Christ. Paul uses the language of commerce, gain and loss, to describe his spiritual ledger prior to faith. Although we don't like to think about it much, every human being has a "spiritual ledger." Previously, Paul's ledger was measured by the Jewish values of the time rather than by the biblical values as taught by Jesus.

After his conversion, his spiritual ledger looked very different because its scale of values dramatically changed, from the "currency" of Judaism to the "currency of heaven."

"He who came down from heaven can speak of heaven, and rightly present the things which form the currency of heaven, on which he has stamped his image and superscription. He knows the danger in which those are placed whom he came to uplift from degradation, and to exalt to a place beside himself upon his throne. He points out their peril in lavishing affection upon useless and dangerous objects. He seeks to draw the mind away from the earthly to the heavenly, that we may not waste time, talent, and opportunity, upon things that are altogether vanity."—Ellen G. White, in *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 1, 1890.

In the world of first-century Judaism, Paul had been a rapidly rising star until, by becoming blind at the sight of the glorified Jesus on the Damascus road (*Acts 9*), his spiritual eyesight was corrected, and he saw clearly.

John 9 tells the story of another man who was blind and then saw Jesus clearly. Jesus said He came into the world so "that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind" (*John 9:39, NKJV*). How might this principle be applied to your own life?

What could be more valuable than eternal life in heaven and on the new earth? Yet worldly values blind so many to this reality. There is an inherent competition between the things valued here (*see Matt. 13:22; Luke 4:5, 6; 1 John 2:16*) and the things Heaven values—likeness to Christ and souls saved.

The world can blind us to spiritual truths and to what is really important. What is the key to keeping our eyes focused on what truly matters?

The Faith of Christ

Paul's main point must not be missed. There was a wonderful exchange that he experienced on the Damascus road, trading his old, law-based life for the presence of Christ Himself—"that I may gain Christ and be found in Him" (*Phil. 3:8, 9, NKJV*).

To be found "in Him," that is, in Christ, is an interesting expression. Read *Ephesians 1:4*, *2 Corinthians 5:21*, *Colossians 2:9*, and *Galatians 2:20*. Based on these passages, what do you think Paul means by this idea?

Paul's reference to being in Christ has been widely discussed. Not surprisingly, perhaps the best explanation of it comes from Paul himself: "That in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him" (*Eph. 1:10, NKJV*). That has been God's purpose from the start. And Paul makes clear how that happens: "You are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (*1 Cor. 1:30, NKJV*).

Being "in Christ" comprehends everything that the plan of salvation encompasses, from the dawning of our spiritual intelligence (wisdom), to justification by faith (righteousness), to preparation for heaven (sanctification), and finally to glorification at the Second Advent (redemption). Salvation is Christ's work from start to finish—for us and in us. Thus, by gaining Christ, we have everything we need.

Read *Philippians 3:9*. What two things does Paul contrast, and why is this contrast important to always remember?

As Paul came to realize, having one's "own righteousness" is not real righteousness because the law cannot give life (*see Gal. 3:21, 22*); only Christ can, through faith. And not just any faith. After all, the devils believe and tremble (*James 2:19*). The only saving faith is "the faith of Christ." Only *His* faith has obeyed fully and can obey. (The Greek word for faith, *pistis*, also means faithfulness.) So, if we are in Christ and He lives in us (*Gal. 2:20*), then we live by *His* faith through our faith in Him.

Just One Thing—Knowing Christ

Read Philippians 3:10–16. What are some of the main points Paul makes in this passage?

Surely there is nothing more important than knowing Christ, which guarantees in the end that He will know us and acknowledge us before the Father (*see Matt. 7:21–23; Matt. 10:32, 33*). How do we know Him? Through His Written Word—reading it and living it. We cannot know Him face-to-face as the disciples did. But interestingly, despite that knowledge, they still failed to comprehend His words, underscoring our need of the Holy Spirit to guide us (*see John 16:13*). The more we know Him, the closer we come to Him, because we experience “the power of His resurrection” (*Phil. 3:10*), which raises us to “newness of life” (*Rom. 6:4, NKJV*).

Another way we come closer to Jesus is through “the fellowship of His sufferings” (*Phil. 3:10, NKJV*). Every trial faced, every painful experience borne, helps us to know and appreciate more what Jesus went through for us, and also to understand Him and His will more clearly.

A third way we come closer is by pressing onward “toward the goal” (*Phil. 3:14, NKJV*). What is that goal? It translates a word used only here in the New Testament (*skopos*). It refers to the finish line of a race and the prize awarded the victor. Paul calls it “the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (*Phil. 3:14, NKJV*). Just as Christ, through His death and resurrection, ascended upward to heaven, God invites us to receive the same heavenly reward—eternal life.

Obviously, we have not attained that yet. We will not be perfected in the fullest sense until our “lowly body” is transformed “that it may be conformed to His glorious body” (*Phil. 3:21, NKJV*). But by knowing Him and inviting His presence into our lives every day, we press on toward the goal of being like Jesus in every way possible now. This is the “one thing” Paul focused on, too. Just like running a race (*see 1 Cor. 9:24–27*), we pay no attention to where we’ve been or who trails us. Our single focus is on the things that lie ahead—that heavenly prize that awaits us. The image here is vivid: a runner’s full focus on the goal, straining every muscle and leaning forward to reach the finish line.

Why, in your walk with the Lord, is it so important not to keep looking back, at least back at your sins and failures, but instead to look ahead to what you have been promised right now in Christ?

Further Thought: “He who would build up a strong, symmetrical character, he who would be a well-balanced Christian, must give all and do all for Christ; for the Redeemer will not accept divided service. Daily he must learn the meaning of self-surrender. He must study the word of God, learning its meaning and obeying its precepts. Thus he may reach the standard of Christian excellence. Day by day God works with him, perfecting the character that is to stand in the time of final test. And day by day the believer is working out before men and angels a sublime experiment, showing what the gospel can do for fallen human beings.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 483.

“Those who wait for the Bridegroom’s coming are to say to the people, ‘Behold your God.’ The last rays of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is a revelation of His character of love. The children of God are to manifest His glory. In their own life and character they are to reveal what the grace of God has done for them.

“The light of the Sun of Righteousness is to shine forth in good works—in words of truth and deeds of holiness.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 415, 416.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Dwell more on this question of rejoicing in the Lord. Notice that it is not saying to rejoice in your trials (though that’s biblical too) but in the Lord. Why is it so important to always keep before us the Lord, His goodness, His power, His love, and His salvation? How would doing that greatly benefit you amid the inevitable trials of life?
- ❷ Notice how the above quotations describe the role of grace in producing the “good works” we do as Christians. Why is this function of grace so important as we look forward to the soon coming of Christ? That is, though we are not saved by good works, are we really saved if we don’t have them?
- ❸ Dwell more on this idea of not having confidence in the flesh. What does that mean? Why should we not have confidence in it? Is not our flesh a gift from God?

Unexpected Church Visit

Gilbert Fimaka woke up on a Sunday with a strong desire to go to church.

The 22-year-old medical missionary shared his longing with his roommate, a fellow medical missionary. The two young men were just wrapping up a three-week mission trip in rural Zambia.

“I’m thinking about visiting a church here,” Gilbert said. “I’d like to share the Word of God and also tell them about the seventh-day Sabbath.”

Then he laughed. His roommate also laughed. The idea seemed preposterous. But in his heart, Gilbert wanted to go. So, he went.

As he entered the closest church, he felt nervous. He knew that he couldn’t just say, “This is not the day of worship.”

To his surprise, the church members quickly made him feel at home. Many recognized him from his medical work, and they welcomed him warmly. They even gave him a seat of honor with the church leaders.

Then it was time for the sermon. To Gilbert’s surprise, he was invited to preach. He felt humbled as he approached the pulpit, but he was scared to talk about the Sabbath. So, he opened his Bible to the book of Job.

As Gilbert spoke, he heard a voice say, “Talk about the Sabbath.” He ignored it and continued preaching. The voice spoke a second time.

When the voice spoke a third time, Gilbert turned in his Bible to Leviticus 23:3 and read, “Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work on it; it is the Sabbath of the Lord in all your dwellings” (*NKJV*). Then he read Matthew 28:1 and Genesis 2:1–3.

“The seventh day does not fall on a Sunday but on a Saturday, so the true day of worship is not Sunday but Saturday,” he said.

When he finished the sermon, a church leader stood up and announced, “I will stop worshipping on Sunday and only worship on Saturday.”

As people left the church, many talked loudly. Some were weeping. “We didn’t know that we were worshipping on the wrong day,” said one. “From now on, we will worship on Saturday,” said another.

A short time later, the church leader was baptized in a Seventh-day Adventist church, and many other church members began studying the Bible in preparation for baptism.



This mission story illustrates the “Mission For All” objective of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s “I Will Go” strategic plan, which says in part, “Christ mingled, showed sympathy, ministered to needs, won confidence, then invited people to follow Him. The goal is to take a genuine interest in people, leading them to Christ and inviting them to unite with the Seventh-day Adventist Church as disciples of Christ who make disciples.” Read more at IWillGo.org.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Philippians 3:10, 11*

Study Focus: *Philippians 3*

After asserting that believers shine in this world by performing Christ-centered good works, Paul now shifts attention to the necessity of trusting solely in Christ for salvation. The apostle expresses concern about the influence of false teachers who were promoting a flesh-based approach, thereby distorting the gospel message and endangering the entire Christian community in Philippi. It seems that a form of false teaching, similar to that in Galatia, was creating some confusion regarding what Gentile Christians were supposed to believe and do in order to be saved.

Paul took this matter very seriously. After all, the gospel message was at stake! Paul is so extremely concerned about the infiltration of false masters and their teachings that he refers to them as dogs and evil workers (*Phil. 3:2, NKJV*). These are strong terms, used to express contempt and disapproval. By addressing these issues in Philippi, Paul provides precious lessons on how to deal with false teachings. These lessons are crucial for the church today. After all, to a greater or lesser degree, all our churches suffer the attack of false teachers.

This week's lesson emphasizes three major themes:

1. Rejoicing in the Lord is the opposite of relying on human strength.
2. A genuine conversion leads to a radical change, from confidence in the flesh to confidence in Christ.
3. Knowing Christ is a progressive experience. As we draw closer to Him, our intimacy with Him will deepen more and more. One's intimacy with Christ must continue to grow until the day we see Him face-to-face.

Part II: Commentary

Illustration

“The king of Italy and the king of Bohemia promised John Huss safe transport and safe custody. They broke their promises, however, and Huss was martyred. Thomas Wentworth carried a document signed by King Charles I which read, ‘Upon the word of a king you shall not suffer in

life, honour, or fortune.’ Shortly afterwards, however, his death warrant was signed by the same monarch. ‘Put not your trust in princes,’ were his last words. ‘It is better to trust in the Lord’ than in anyone or anything else.”—Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996), p. 1525.

Rejoicing in the Lord Versus Confidence in the Flesh

In Philippians 3:1–3, Paul introduces a warning against pride in human achievements. The exhortation, “Rejoice in the Lord,” in verse 1 expresses a concept that is often found in the Old Testament, especially in the book of Psalms. A few remarkable examples include: “The king shall have joy in Your strength, O LORD; and in Your salvation how greatly shall he rejoice” (*Ps. 21:1, NKJV*); “Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous” (*Ps. 32:11, NKJV*); “Let the righteous one rejoice in the LORD” (*Ps. 64:10, ESV*; compare with *Ps. 97:12*); “Rejoice the soul of Your servant” (*Ps. 86:4, NKJV*); “For you have made me rejoice, LORD” (*Ps. 92:4, CSB*); “May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the LORD” (*Ps. 104:34, ESV*); “The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced” (*Ps. 126:3, NRSV*). In fact, rejoicing in the Lord is a commandment repeatedly highlighted throughout the book of Deuteronomy (see *Deut. 12:7, 12, 18*; *Deut. 14:26*; *Deut. 16:11, 15*; *Deut. 26:11*; *Deut. 27:7*).

In Philippians 3:1–3, the idea of rejoicing occurs twice in some English translations—“rejoice in the LORD” (*Phil. 3:1*) and “rejoice in Christ Jesus” (*Phil. 3:3, NKJV, etc.*). However, the original text in Greek uses two different words. In Philippians 3:1, Paul employs the term *chairō*, which the New Testament frequently portrays happiness and well-being. On the other hand, in Philippians 3:3, Paul uses the term *kauchaomai*, which the King James Version regularly translates as “boasting,” both in Romans (see *Rom. 2:17, 23*), and especially in 2 Corinthians, where it is also translated as “glory” or “glorying” (*2 Cor. 5:12*; *2 Cor. 7:14*; *2 Cor. 9:2*; *2 Cor. 10:8, 13, 15, 16*; *2 Cor. 11:12, 16, 18, 30*; *2 Cor. 12:1, 5, 6, 9, 11*). The verb *kauchaomai* conveys a more nuanced sense of exultation than does *chairō*.

Therefore, the original text translated as “rejoice in Christ Jesus” in Philippians 3:3 also could be translated as “boast in Christ Jesus” (as in the *NRSV*) or “glory in Christ Jesus” (as in the *ESV*). Paul uses a strong word in order to make it clear that confidence in Christ and reliance on human efforts are mutually exclusive: one thing naturally invalidates the other! In this sense, Paul’s expression is very similar to what he says in Galatians 6:13, 14. Paul reproves those who boast in the flesh (*Gal. 6:13*) and affirms that the only reason for his boasting is the cross of Christ (*Gal. 6:14*).

Paul uses the term “flesh” in Philippians 3:3 to refer to human efforts performed with the goal of obtaining salvation. However, in the words of the New English Translation, when it comes to salvation, we “do not rely on human credentials” (*Phil. 3:3, NET*). Indeed, we completely depend on Christ’s credentials. This idea is likely what Paul meant when saying that we boast in Christ. Rejoicing “in the Lord” (*Phil. 3:1, NKJV*) and boasting “in Christ Jesus” (*Phil. 3:3, NRSV*) are parallel concepts, just as in Psalm 34:2: “My soul will make its boast in the LORD; the humble will hear it and rejoice” (*NASB*).

From Confidence in the Flesh to Confidence in Christ

The warning against pride in human achievements, introduced in Philippians 3:1–3, is developed in Philippians 3:4–6. One should notice that the phrase “confidence in the flesh” is a key expression in Philippians 3:1–6 (*NKJV*). It occurs no fewer than three times. As mentioned previously, in Philippians 3:3, Paul contrasts confidence in the flesh with boasting in Christ. In Philippians 3:4, the apostle contends that no other Jew had as much confidence in the flesh as he did. In Philippians 3:5, 6, he presents seven reasons why he, more than anybody else, could have confidence in the flesh: (1) “circumcised the eighth day,” (2) “of the stock of Israel,” (3) “of the tribe of Benjamin,” (4) “a Hebrew of the Hebrews,” (5) a Pharisee, (6) persecutor of the church, and (7) blameless. Interestingly, circumcision opens the list, whereas blamelessness concludes it. It seems Paul believed his efforts would secure his salvation. However, upon meeting Christ, he realized the ineffectiveness of his achievements to get saved.

In Philippians 3:7–9, Paul contrasts his post-conversion life with his pre-converted experiences, as described previously. The terms “gain” and “loss” stand out in this short passage. Verses 7 and 8 are arranged in a concentric order, as follows:

- A. “What things were **gain** to me” (*Phil. 3:7a, NKJV*),
- B. “I have counted **loss** for Christ” (*Phil. 3:7b, NKJV*).
- B’ “I also count all things **loss**” (*Phil. 3:8a, NKJV*),
- A’ that I may **gain** Christ” (*Phil. 3:8b, NKJV*).

This concentric structure, also known as chiasmic structure, emphasizes the radical change in Paul’s mindset. In addition to the term “loss” (from the Greek *zēmia*), Paul also uses its verbal form, “to suffer loss” (from the Greek *zēmioō*), in Philippians 3:8. This accentuation makes the emphasis on the change of his mindset even more remarkable. The items in the sevenfold list of autobiographical boasting are considered as loss in light of “the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus” (*Phil. 3:8, NKJV*). The knowledge of Christ brought all things in Paul’s early life into the right perspective. Paul turned from confidence in the flesh to confidence

in Christ (*Phil. 3:8*), from a law-focused righteousness to a Christ-centered righteousness, completely dependent on faith in God's grace (*Phil. 3:9*).

Knowing Christ Is a Progressive Experience

In Philippians 3:10, Paul indicates that the ultimate purpose of his life was to know Christ. The fact that he mentions Christ's sufferings, death, and resurrection suggests that knowing Christ involves not only a cognitive but, especially, a relational experience in a process of gradual growth (*see also 2 Pet. 3:18*). While this idea is somehow implicit in Philippians 3:10, Paul further elaborates on this thought in Philippians 3:12–16.

Moreover, Paul is aware that a more complete knowledge of Christ will be attained only in the resurrection (*Phil. 3:10, 11*). This idea seems to be the context for the statement in Philippians 3:12: "Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected" (*NKJV*). Next, Paul explains how he pursues the goal described in Philippians 3:10, 11, by suggesting that the task is twofold: (1) he forgets "those things which are behind," and (2) he reaches forward to "those things which are ahead" (*Phil. 3:13, NKJV*). However, one thing does not disassociate from the other. In fact, Paul refers to these two things as a single action, when saying "one thing I do" (*Phil. 3:13, NKJV*). This one thing is driven by a clear purpose: to pursue "the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (*Phil. 3:14, NKJV*). The prize and the call refer to the same thing, as in the Good News Translation: "The prize, which is God's call through Christ Jesus." They are most likely metaphors for the resurrection, at which time Paul will fully know Christ. Until then, believers are called to keep growing in the knowledge of Christ as they pursue the prize (*Phil. 3:15, 16*).

Part III: Life Application

Meditate upon the following themes. Then ask your students to answer the questions at the end of the section.

The Bible clearly teaches that our salvation does not depend on our own efforts. This teaching is a compelling reason to rejoice in the Lord day by day. After all, if salvation were dependent on our good works, we wouldn't have any hope! From a biblical perspective, joy is our response to what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. Things may not go as well as we wish or expect. Yet, we have reasons to rejoice, as so beautifully expressed in the song of Habakkuk: "I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation" (*Hab. 3:18, NKJV*).

In the life of a true believer, there is no room for pride in human achievements. When one understands that salvation is not dependent on what we

can do but depends completely on what God has done and is doing for us in Christ, those things considered gain are now deemed as loss, “for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ” (*Phil. 3:8, NKJV*). Christlikeness becomes the aim of one’s pursuit, and good works naturally come as a result. As Paul affirms elsewhere, “For we are His [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works” (*Eph. 2:10, NKJV*).

As Christians, we are a work in progress. This notion is what Paul meant in the thanksgiving section of his letter to the Philippians when he said, “He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (*Phil. 1:6, NKJV*). Until that day comes, we must forget “those things which are behind” and reach forward to “those things which are ahead” (*Phil. 3:13, NKJV*)!

Questions:

1. Think more on the idea that our salvation isn’t dependent on our own good works. Why is this teaching such good news? Why should this inspire us with hope?

2. Many people are stuck in a spiral of self-loathing and recrimination for their past sins. Though they intellectually accept Christ’s forgiveness, they have yet to internalize it. As a result, they cannot fully let go of the past. Think more about the idea that we must forget “those things which are behind” and reach forward to “those things which are ahead” (*Phil. 3:13, NKJV*). What astonishing permission does this command give us? Why is this directive so liberating and healing to the human heart?

A Heavenly Citizenship



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Phil. 3:17–4:23, 1 Cor. 15:42–44, John 14:27, Ps. 119:165, Job 1:21, 1 Tim. 6:7.*

Memory Text: “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God” (*Philippians 4:6, NKJV*).

This week's lesson concludes our study of *Philippians*, and it is packed with valuable lessons and maxims for daily living. It seems that many of the high moral values that guided the apostle Paul's life are found in the closing verses of the epistle. Similar to the teachings of Jesus, which focus on the inner person, what Paul shares with us are secrets to living a joyful Christian life.

Even when things don't go the way we would like, which happens more often than we would like, we don't need to be worried or anxious or discouraged. Instead, there are principles that will help us find inner strength to face the challenges that life brings, and thus we can experience a settled and lasting peace that only God can give. The present and the future are in His hands, and He will supply everything we need.

Most important, we need not place our hopes in earthly systems of government, which regularly disappoint us. As Christians, we are citizens of God's heavenly kingdom. And with that citizenship comes privileges, wonderful privileges. And responsibilities, too.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 14.

Role Models

All of us have, at one time or another, found people we admire and want to emulate. For children, it's especially important that they have good role models. Ideally, this would be their father and mother. As they grow, they will find other role models, perhaps connected with their chosen career or even in biographies they have read. They can also learn how various Bible characters dealt with challenges and compare them to their own life experiences.

Unfortunately, in today's media, bad role models abound. We are bombarded with clickbait—stories detailing the salacious problems and messed-up lives of celebrities. Paul's readers in Philippi, though of course not dealing with the internet, nevertheless faced similar challenges.

The fact is, the world Paul lived in was very corrupt, immoral, and evil, as is ours today. There has always been—and always will be, at least until the end—more than enough evil to go around. The question for us is: How do we respond to it?

Read Philippians 3:17–19. How are good and bad role models described in this passage? What keys are given to distinguish between them?

We must not miss Paul's love toward those with whom he disagrees—he weeps over them! Notice also that he doesn't call them *his* enemies but “enemies of the cross of Christ” (*Phil. 3:18*). Paul recognized that much larger issues were at stake, namely, how the Cross breaks down barriers and places us all on the same level, as sinners in need of a Savior (*see Eph. 2:11–14*).

Also, not to be overlooked is how Paul urges the Philippians to focus on the good examples, not the bad; to observe carefully those whose manner of life is much like his own. Interestingly, Paul uses similar language in warning the Romans to “note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them” (*Rom. 16:17, NKJV*). The deceivers in Rome are described as those who “do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ but their own belly” (*Rom. 16:18, NKJV*).

Though, of course, Jesus is the only perfect pattern, there are others who, at least in certain areas, could be good role models. At the same time, what kind of role model do you present to others?

“Stand Fast in the Lord”

Read Philippians 3:20, 21. How does Paul vividly describe what Christian “citizenship” looks like?

Unlike the enemies of the Cross, who “set their mind on earthly things” and have no greater god than their bellies (*Phil. 3:19*), Christian citizenship is in heaven, and our ruler is Jesus Christ Himself. To underscore the point, Paul highlights the need for “these humble bodies of ours” (*Phil. 3:21, NET*), subject to disease, deterioration, and death, to be transformed to be like Christ’s glorious resurrection body.

How do the following passages describe the glorified state?

- *Job 19:25–27* _____
- *Luke 24:39* _____
- *1 Cor. 15:42–44* _____
- *1 Cor. 15:50–54* _____
- *Col. 3:4* _____

In the end, through Jesus, death, “the last enemy,” will be destroyed (*1 Cor. 15:26*). And that is our greatest hope, the ultimate promise that we have been given in Jesus—not only the end of death but a whole new body, even a “glorious body” (*Phil. 3:21, ESV*).

In a book about how to find “salvation” without God, which argued, rather foolishly, that overcoming the fear of death is “salvation,” author Luc Ferry does admit that Christianity “enables us not only to transcend the fear of death, but also to beat death itself. And by doing so in terms of individual identity, rather than anonymity or abstraction, it seems to be the only version that offers a truly definitive victory of personal immortality over our condition as mortals.”—Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011, Kindle edition), p. 90. Quite an admission, coming from an atheist.

Thus, for Paul, our heavenly citizenship includes the promise of the resurrection and eternal life in a whole new existence that we can barely imagine now.

Why is the promise of eternal life so crucial to all that we believe? What could this world possibly offer that’s worth forfeiting what Christ offers us?

Rejoice in the Lord—Always

Read Philippians 4:4–7. How are we to experience “the peace of God”?

After touching on, again, the need for unity (*Phil. 4:1–3*), Paul moves on to another theme: rejoicing in the Lord (*Phil. 4:4–7*).

How many times have you been stressed over things that ultimately melted effortlessly away as quickly as they appeared? For good reason, Jesus repeatedly emphasized that we should not worry (*see Matt. 6:25–34, Matt. 10:19*), and Peter reminds us that we can cast all our worries or anxieties (*ESV*) on the Lord, “because He cares for you” (*1 Pet. 5:7, ESV*). In fact, the increasing problems worldwide should inspire us with hope that the coming of the Lord is near (*compare Matt. 24:33, Luke 21:28, James 5:8*).

The antidote to anxiety *in everything*, including every situation, is sending up a prayer of faith (*Phil. 4:6, 7*). Clearly, we are to believe and act on our prayer as having been answered even before we see its realization, because we are to pray “with thanksgiving.” Also added is the word “supplication” (Greek: *deēsis*), signaling times of extremity and urgency (*see, for example, Luke 1:13, Phil. 1:19, 1 Tim. 5:5, James 5:16*). Our prayers are still “requests,” but we can know our petitions have been received as long as we ask “according to His will” (*1 John 5:14, NKJV*). Then we can rest and have peace, knowing that all our requests are in God’s hands.

How do the following passages enlarge our understanding of God’s peace? *Ps. 29:11, Isa. 9:6, Luke 2:14, John 14:27, 1 Cor. 14:33.*

God’s peace is something the world can never give, because God’s peace comes from the assurance that we have the gift of eternal life through Jesus our Savior (*Rom. 5:1, Rom. 6:23*). This peace impacts every aspect of life and “surpasses all understanding” (*Phil. 4:7, NKJV*). It cannot be grasped by the mind alone, as the Greek word *nous* (minds) used here indicates.

How would you describe to someone what it means to experience “the peace of God”?

Think on These Things . . .

The peace that surpasses understanding will also “guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (*Phil. 4:7, NKJV*). Our inner life needs protection. Interestingly, Philippians 4:7 uses a military metaphor in connection with God’s peace. The Greek verb (*phroureō*) is used to describe a garrison of soldiers guarding a city against invasion (*2 Cor. 11:32; compare Acts 9:24*).

Another very important aspect of inner peace involves living in harmony with God’s will. “Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them” (*Ps. 119:165*).

Read Philippians 4:8, 9. What specific actions are urged?

Paul introduces Philippians 4:8, 9 with “furthermore” (*GNV*) and a list of six virtues, followed by a succinct summary of them and encouragement to imitate Paul’s example. This closing cross-cultural exhortation fits well within the Greco-Roman setting of Philippi, with its dual emphasis on virtue and example. Interestingly, though, the focus is on biblical virtues, which is quite obvious from Paul’s omission of the four cardinal Greek virtues (prudence, justice, temperance, and courage).

1. *True*—not accidentally, the list begins with the cardinal biblical virtue of truth, which Jesus (“Truly, I say . . .”) and the whole New Testament frequently emphasize (*see, for example, Acts 26:25, Rom. 1:18, 1 Cor. 13:6, 2 Cor. 4:2, Eph. 4:15, 1 Tim. 3:15, James 1:18, 1 Pet. 1:22, 1 John 2:21*).
2. *Noble*—the Greek word refers to a personal virtue (*compare its other uses in 1 Tim. 3:8, 11; Titus 2:2, where it is translated as “reverent” in the NKJV*).
3. *Right*—this virtue is defined by God’s righteous character (*compare its use in Phil. 1:7*).
4. *Pure*—thought and action flowing from God’s justifying righteousness received by faith (*see 1 John 3:3*).
5. *Lovely*—aesthetic beauty, seen widely in God’s creation.
6. *Admirable*—“kind and winsome and gracious” (*AMPC*).

Paul gives two further qualifications, lest a pagan meaning be imputed to any of these virtues: “If anything is excellent or praiseworthy” (*Phil. 4:8, NIV*), we are to think on these heavenly virtues. Then, to remove all doubt and potential misunderstanding, Paul calls us to practice what we have learned, received, heard, and seen from his own example (*Phil. 4:9*).

Keys for Contentment

Read Philippians 4:10–13, 19. What keys does Paul reveal for a contented, happy life?

When extreme circumstances strike (hunger, illness, injury, loss), one begins to reflect on the things that really count and to dwell on the blessings that are usually taken for granted. When we are “brought low” (*Phil. 4:12, ESV*), “in need” (*NIV*), or left with “almost nothing” (*NLT*) is when faith rises to the occasion.

Conversely, when we “live in prosperity” (*NASB*), it should always be with the recognition that it could vanish in an instant (*see Prov. 23:5*). As both Job and Paul remind us, we brought nothing into the world when we were born, and we will take nothing with us to the grave (*Job 1:21, 1 Tim. 6:7*).

Note the following Bible promises:

- Psalm 23:1—“The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need” (*GNB*).
- Matthew 6:32—“Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things” (*NKJV*).
- 1 Peter 5:7—“Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you” (*NLT*).
- Philippians 4:19—“My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (*NKJV*).

And, most wonderful of all: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (*Phil. 4:13, NKJV*). Perhaps none of us can fully grasp what “all things” entails. Certainly, as with any request for God’s help and strength, we must ask according to His will. But many times, we don’t even ask for things we know fit His will. That’s why James 4:2 says, “You do not have, because you do not ask” (*ESV*).

Here are some things we can ask for confidently because we know they are in harmony with God’s will:

- Salvation for a loved one or friend (*1 Tim. 2:3, 4*)
- Courage to share our faith (*Rev. 22:17*)
- Forgiveness when we confess and forsake wrong (*1 John 1:9*)
- Strength to obey God’s commandments (*Heb. 13:20, 21*)
- Love for those who hate and mistreat us (*Matt. 5:44*)
- Wisdom for challenging situations (*James 1:5*)
- Understanding the truth in God’s Word (*John 8:32*)

How do you deal with the things that you have prayed for that have not yet come, or perhaps might never come?

Further Thought: “Those only who are constantly receiving fresh supplies of grace, will have power proportionate to their daily need and their ability to use that power. Instead of looking forward to some future time when, through a special endowment of spiritual power, they will receive a miraculous fitting up for soul winning, they are yielding themselves daily to God, that He may make them vessels meet for His use. Daily they are improving the opportunities for service that lie within their reach. Daily they are witnessing for the Master wherever they may be, whether in some humble sphere of labor in the home, or in a public field of usefulness.

“To the consecrated worker there is wonderful consolation in the knowledge that even Christ during His life on earth sought His Father daily for fresh supplies of needed grace; and from this communion with God He went forth to strengthen and bless others. . . .

“Every worker who follows the example of Christ will be prepared to receive and use the power that God has promised to His church for the ripening of earth’s harvest.”—Ellen G. White, *God’s Amazing Grace*, p. 117.

“God knows our wants, and has provided for them. The Lord has a treasure house of supplies for His children, and can give them what they need under all circumstances. Then why do we not trust Him? He has made precious promises to His children on condition of faithful obedience to His precepts. There is not a burden but He can remove, no darkness but He can dispel, no weakness but He can change to power, no fears but He can calm, no worthy aspiration but He can guide and justify.

“We are not to look at ourselves. The more we dwell upon our own imperfections, the less strength we shall have to overcome them.”—Ellen G. White, *That I May Know Him*, p. 224.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Think of some of your brightest instances of answered prayer. How have they helped you experience God’s peace that surpasses understanding? What about those prayers that are not answered? How can you still experience the promised peace?
- ❷ In the context of Philippians 4:8, what do you spend your time thinking about? How well does what you think about strengthen your faith and walk with the Lord?
- ❸ Discuss the final quotation above. What are the implications of the statement, “The more we dwell upon our own imperfections, the less strength we shall have to overcome them”? What is the key, then, to overcoming?

Becoming a Rich Adventist

Little Rene liked everything about Seventh-day Adventists. In his native province in the Philippines, all rich people seemed to be Adventist. They had big rice farms and a good standard of living. Rene wanted a similar lifestyle.

One day, several Adventist children invited him to read the Bible with them. Then the son of his father's employer, an Adventist rice farmer, invited him to Sabbath School and church.

For the first time, Rene heard about the Sabbath. It sounded logical. He also noticed that the Adventist children dressed well. He liked that they didn't swear. He wanted to be like them.

When he was 12, he was baptized and joined the Adventist Church.

He didn't become rich, and his life seemed to grow worse. His family despised him for his faith and stopped supporting his studies. He was forced to quit school. After four years, he had had enough. At 16, he left the church and joined his father in the rice fields of the Adventist farmer. Soon he was drinking, smoking, gambling, and eating all kinds of unclean food.

Two years passed, and a 17-year-old named Rodel knocked on the door.

"I'm a missionary," he told Rene's mother. "Can I come in?"

"What kind of missionary?" she asked.

"1000 Missionary Movement," he said.

"What's that?" she said.

"I'm a Seventh-day Adventist missionary," he said.

"Ahh," Mother said. "My son is an Adventist, but he has backslidden."

"Where is he?"

"He's sleeping."

As a hardworking farmer, Rene was exhausted. Mother led Rodel to him.

"My friend, why have you stopped being an Adventist?" Rodel said.

Rene was surprised but made it clear that he wouldn't return to the church.

"My family hated me as an Adventist."

"Can I invite you to church?"

"I don't think so. I can't go."

Rodel left. But a year and a half later, when Rene was 20, he returned.

"My friend, come fishing with me," he said.

Rodel didn't try to convince Rene to go to church. He simply befriended him. They went fishing together. After a while, Rene found himself back in church on Sabbaths.



Rene Tucaldo is chief financial officer of the 1000 Missionary Movement, whose headquarters in Silang, Philippines, were constructed with the help of a 1996 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering. Read more next week.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Philippians 4:6*

Study Focus: *Phil. 3:17–4:23*

Jesus and the apostles portray Christians as living simultaneously in two different realms. Jesus said, “ ‘Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s’ ” (*Matt. 22:21, NKJV*). Although members of human society, believers must ever bear in mind that they may already enjoy some privileges of their heavenly citizenship. More than that, they are warned to seek these benefits as a signal of their union with Christ: “If then you were raised with Christ, *seek* those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God” (*Col. 3:1, NKJV; emphasis added*).

As members of the heavenly commonwealth, we must “walk worthy of the calling with which” we were called (*Eph. 4:1, NKJV*). This calling includes living with joy and peace, regardless of the difficulties we face in our work for Christ, knowing that the heavenly city is our definite home (*Heb. 13:14*). By faith, Abraham “waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (*Heb. 11:10, NKJV*). There is “an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven,” for us (*1 Pet. 1:4, NKJV*).

This week’s lesson emphasizes three major themes:

1. Members of the heavenly commonwealth live with maturity, serving as models worthy to be emulated.
2. Christian joy, like peace, is not dependent on external circumstances, for it is rooted in a close relationship with God through Christ.
3. A joyful and contented life is possible, even in this tumultuous world, but it requires obedience to biblical principles.

Part II: Commentary

Illustration

The story is told of Dr. Thomas Lambie, who “went to Ethiopia as a medical missionary. After some time he wanted to buy land for a mission station. An Ethiopian law said that no land could be sold to foreigners. Because Dr. Lambie had great love for Christ and the Ethiopians, he gave up his American citizenship and became an Ethiopian citizen. Then he bought the properties needed for his work.”—Paul Lee Tan,

Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times (Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996), p. 1176. Likewise, believers are individuals who, because of their love for Christ, are willing to give up their earthly citizenship for the sake of the heavenly citizenship. They see themselves as “strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (*Heb. 11:13, NKJV*).

Members of the Heavenly Commonwealth

Paul suggests that Christian leaders should be patterns or examples to be copied by others (*Phil. 3:17, NKJV*). This notion is contrasted with the conduct of false teachers, described as “enemies of the cross of Christ” (*Phil. 3:18*). They are further portrayed as doomed to destruction, worshippers of their own impulses, “whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things” (*Phil. 3:19, NKJV*). Conversely, Christians must be aware that their “citizenship is in heaven” (*Phil. 3:20, NKJV*) and live accordingly.

The Greek word translated as “example” in Philippians 3:17 is *symmimētēs*. It occurs only once in the New Testament, which suggests that Paul deliberately chose this word so as to convey a very specific and unique message. In literal translation, it means “fellow-imitator,” someone “who joins others as an imitator.”—William F. Arndt, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 958. In fact, Paul coined this term “to stress his desire that there be a community effort in following his example: ‘Imitate me, one and all of you together!’ ”—Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 43 (Dallas: Word, Inc., 2004), p. 217. This notion is similar to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:1: “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ” (*NKJV*). Ultimately, Christ is the perfect model for Christians. In Christ, believers can become good models for others, as Paul also indicates in 1 Thessalonians 2:14: “For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus” (*NKJV*).

As citizens of heaven, we must live with purpose, holding on to the hope that our Savior will come from heaven and transform our mortal bodies into glorious ones (*Phil. 3:20, 21*). Until that day comes, we must wait for Him (*Phil. 3:20*) and stand fast in Him (*Phil. 4:1*), assured that our heavenly status is far better than our earthly status.

Joy and Peace

Paul teaches that Christian joy and peace are not dependent on external circumstances. He makes it clear when affirming, “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!” (*Phil. 4:4, NKJV*). As we know by

experience, in a sin-filled world, it is impossible to live always under perfect circumstances. So, how can we rejoice always if joy is dependent on external circumstances? In fact, to experience joy always is possible only “in the Lord.” Here we see “the true basis of Christian joy and the sphere in which it thrives.”—*Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 43, p. 173.

It is important to note that the call to rejoice in the Lord is not just good advice—it is a command. Living with joy is so important for Paul that he refers to it three times throughout the letter (*Phil. 3:1; Phil. 4:4, 10*). As an example to his audience (*Phil. 3:17*), he can urge them to rejoice in the Lord (*Phil. 3:1, Phil. 4:4*) because he himself did the same (*Phil. 1:18; Phil. 2:17, 18; Phil. 4:4*). Joy is one of the major themes in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. The Greek verb *chairō* (“to rejoice”) occurs eight times (*Phil. 1:18 [two times]; Phil. 2:17, 18, 28; Phil 3:1; Phil. 4:4, 10*); the verb *synchairō* (“rejoice together”) occurs two times (*Phil. 2:17, 18*); and the term *chara* (“joy”) occurs five times (*Phil. 1:4, 25; Phil. 2:2, 29, ESV; Phil. 4:1*). What makes this call to joy even more remarkable is that the person who wrote it was in prison!

Christian peace, like joy, is not dependent on external circumstances. Jesus said, “ ‘Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you’ ” (*John 14:27, NKJV*). Again, this kind of peace is possible only in the Lord. Jesus said, “ ‘I have told you this so that you might have peace in me’ ” (*John 16:33, NABRE, emphasis added*). Likewise, when using the phrase “peace of God,” Paul indicates that God is the source of peace. The phrase also can mean “the peace produced by God” or “the peace that God gives.” Whatever the exact meaning is, believers can experience the peace that “surpasses all understanding” (*Phil. 4:7, NKJV*) only through their relationship with God. Paul would say, **the peace of God** (*Phil. 4:7*) is possible only because “**the God of peace** will be with you” (*Phil. 4:9, NKJV; emphasis added*). In short, how do believers who are conscious of their heavenly citizenship live? They live with joy and peace.

Instructions for a Happy Life

A joyful life does not happen by chance. It is necessary to follow certain principles and, for this reason, Paul provides a series of instructions in *Philippians 4*, many of them in the form of imperatives.

“**Rejoice** in the Lord always” (*Phil. 4:4, NKJV*). The repetition, “Again I will say, rejoice” (*Phil. 4:4, NKJV*), indicates that this commandment must be taken very seriously.

“**Let your gentleness be known** to all men” (*Phil. 4:5, NKJV*). “The

Greek word translated as ‘gentleness’ (*epieikēs*) is an interesting, multi-faceted term. In the context of how we treat others it means to be kind and gentle, while in relationships it is to be courteous and tolerant, and in legal situations it connotes leniency.”—Grant R. Osborne, *Philippians: Verse by Verse*, Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), p. 167.

“**Be anxious for nothing**” (*Phil. 4:6, NKJV*). This command is likely based on Jesus’ teaching, “ ‘Do not be anxious about your life’ ” (*Matt. 6:25, ESV*; see also *Matt. 6:27, 28, 31, 34*). Achieving this state doesn’t sound easy, does it? Paul hints that we can overcome anxiety by presenting our prayers, supplications, thanksgivings, and requests before God.

“**Meditate** on these things” (*Phil. 4:8, NKJV*). Paul lists a series of good things we should think on: things that are true, noble, just, pure, lovely, and of good report. He adds that these things are virtuous and praiseworthy.

“The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, **these do**” (*Phil. 4:9, NKJV*). In other words, follow good models!

Again, it is noteworthy that the result of following these guidelines is presented through a remarkable statement, “And the peace of God . . . will guard your hearts” (*Phil. 4:7, NKJV*). Only two verses later, in a near-synonym statement, Paul strongly suggests that the peace of God is possible only because “the God of peace will be with you” (*Phil. 4:9, NKJV*).

Part III: Life Application

Meditate upon the following themes. Then ask your students to answer the questions at the end of the section.

J. I. Packer rightly said, “Lack of good models always tends to lower standards, and unfortunately good models have been in short supply throughout this century.”—Packer, “Some Perspectives on Preaching,” in *Preaching the Living Word* (Geanies House, Scotland: Christian Focus, 1999), p. 31. God expects us, as Christians, to fill this gap (*Matt. 5:13, 14*). As citizens of the heavenly commonwealth, we are called to please God by “being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (*Col. 1:10, NKJV*), until the day we partake in the inheritance of the saints (*Col. 1:12*).

For now, we can enjoy gladness and peace, even amid the surrounding negative circumstances. Such joy and peace are possible only by means of a close relationship with God. Though there may be no peace on earth, we can find peace in Christ (*John 14:27*). A life of peace and joy is not the result of

chance. The Bible gives us a series of instructions to help us achieve the abundant life that God intends for His children. In general terms, no other set of instructions can surpass the Ten Commandments. Ellen G. White puts it very masterfully when she says, “Our prosperity and happiness depends upon our unwavering obedience to the law of God. . . . Not one of those ten precepts can be broken without disloyalty to the God of Heaven. To keep every jot and tittle of the law is essential for our own happiness, and for the happiness of all connected with us.”—*The Signs of the Times*, March 3, 1881.

Questions:

- 1. What are some of the ways that we, as Christians, can be good models today, both in our churches and in our communities?**

- 2. What is the connection between obedience to the law and a life of joy and peace?**

The Preeminence of Christ



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 1:26, 27; Col. 1:13–19; John 1:1–3; Eph. 1:22; 1 Cor. 12:12–27; 1 Cor. 4:9; Rom. 6:3, 4.*

Memory Text: “He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist” (*Colossians 1:15–17, NKJV*).

With this week's lesson, we resume our consideration of Colossians (see *Lessons 1 and 2*). In Lesson 2, Thursday, we saw that in Colossians 1:9–12, Paul prays for believers in Colossae, asking that they may live in a way pleasing to God. In verses 12 and 13, he contrasts two realms: that of light and of darkness, “the kingdom of light” (*Col. 1:12, NIV*) and “the dominion of darkness” (*Col. 1:13, NIV*). God the Father has qualified us to share in the eternal inheritance of the realm of light, delivered us from the power of darkness, and “transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (*Col. 1:13, 14, ESV*).

In other words, it is in Jesus, the person of Jesus, who is also God our Creator, that we have redemption. He worked out our redemption for us, and by faith in Him we have been moved from the realm of darkness into the kingdom of His beloved Son.

This week we will look at one of the most comprehensive and sublime statements about Jesus in the New Testament. What does it mean that Jesus is “the image of the invisible God,” yet also “the firstborn over all creation” (*Col. 1:15, NIV*)?

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

Image of the Invisible God

When we look in the mirror or at a photograph, we see an image of ourselves, but it is a flat, two-dimensional portrayal. In some respects, a sculpture gives a clearer idea yet still falls far short of the living, breathing, animated reality. The biblical concept of image, while sometimes referring to these lesser representations, suggests something broader still.

Read Genesis 1:26, 27; Genesis 5:3; 1 Corinthians 15:49; 2 Corinthians 3:18; and Hebrews 10:1. Summarize the various meanings of “image” in these passages. How might they differ from the description of Jesus as the image of God?

Human beings were created to be as much like God as possible—physically, spiritually, relationally, and functionally. Still, they reflect God’s image in certain aspects only, and sin has damaged even that. But Jesus enables us to “see” the invisible God. “He who has seen Me,” Jesus said, “has seen the Father” (*John 14:9, NKJV*). He is “the exact imprint” of God’s nature (*Heb. 1:3, ESV*). He is God’s thought made audible and God’s character made visible.

Read Matthew 11:27 and John 1:1, 2, 14, 18. Why is Jesus uniquely able to reveal the Father?

Note other ways in which Jesus described His relation to God the Father:

- “My Father has been working until now, and I have been working” (*John 5:17, NKJV*).
- “I and My Father are one” (*John 10:30, NKJV*).
- “No one comes to the Father except through Me” (*John 14:6, NKJV*).

Jesus also repeatedly described Himself in an absolute sense in terms of God’s name: “I AM” (*see Exod. 3:14*); “I am the bread of life” (*John 6:35*); “I am the light of the world” (*John 8:12*); “I am the good shepherd” (*John 10:11, 14*); “I am the resurrection, and the life” (*John 11:25*); “I am in the Father, and the Father in me” (*John 14:11*); and “Before Abraham was, I am” (*John 8:58*).

If Jesus were anyone other than God Himself, what would it mean except that the Father sent some created being to die for us? Why is that so radically, and crucially, different from God Himself, in the Person of Christ, dying for us?

Firstborn Over All Creation

In the New Testament, the terms “firstborn” and “first begotten” almost always refer to Jesus (*see Luke 2:7, Rom. 8:29, Heb. 1:6, Rev. 1:5*), including both occurrences in Colossians. But even when it refers to others, it does not necessarily mean the one born chronologically first. The biblical concept of the “firstborn” emphasizes the special relationship a son bears to his father, regardless of birth order. Also, there are instances of younger sons being more prominent: Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, to name a few.

David, though the youngest of eight sons, is anointed king (*1 Sam. 16:10–13*), and through the psalmist God said, “I will make him My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth” (*Ps. 89:27, NKJV*). He also tells Moses, “Israel is my firstborn son” (*Exod. 4:22, ESV*). In this sense, then, the term connotes first in terms of preeminence.

Read Colossians 1:15–17. What reasons does Paul give for Jesus being called “the firstborn over all creation” (*NKJV*)?

Clearly, Paul does not mean to suggest that Jesus was the first being created. In fact, he categorically excludes that possibility. Twice, in two different ways, he says Jesus created all things. They were created by Him and for Him (*Col. 1:16*). In both cases, Jesus is indicated as the personal agent through whom God carried out the process of Creation (*see also Eph. 3:9, John 1:1–3, Rev. 4:11*).

Paul’s statement is as comprehensive as possible. All means all—spatially (heaven and earth), ontologically (visible and invisible), and functionally (thrones, dominions, principalities, powers). The latter terms normally refer to angelic beings (*see Eph. 3:10, Eph. 6:12*). As if to make sure he cannot be misunderstood, Paul also indicates that Jesus existed “before all things” (*Col. 1:17*). The Greek expression can mean precedence in rank as well as in time, but in every other instance in Paul’s writings, it refers to time (*see, for example, 1 Cor. 2:7, Gal. 1:17, Eph. 1:4*).

Another reason Paul gives for Jesus’ preeminence is that “all things are held together in him” (*Col. 1:17, NET*). The Greek word (*synistēmi*) literally means “bring together” or “unite.” Jesus is the unifying factor of the universe, not only because of His role as Creator but also because He is the Redeemer.

God, the Creator, died for us. What could our works add to that? Why is the idea that our works could add to what Christ has done already for us blasphemous?

Head of the Body (the Church)

Read Ephesians 1:22 and Colossians 2:10. What does “head” mean in these passages? What does Paul mean when he calls Jesus the “head of the church” (*Eph. 5:23*)?

It is natural to speak of the head in a metaphorical sense in reference to a leadership position, as reflected in countless languages across the globe. We find similar use throughout the Old and New Testaments. Notice how “head” is used in the following verses:

1. Exodus 18:25—Moses chose “able men out of all Israel, and made them heads over the people, rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens.”
2. Numbers 31:26—“the heads of the fathers’ houses” (*ESV*).
3. Deuteronomy 28:13—God will make Israel “the head, and not the tail” if they will obey Him.
4. Isaiah 7:8—“For the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin.”
5. Hosea 1:11—“The children of Judah and the children of Israel shall . . . appoint for themselves one head” (*NKJV*).
6. Micah 3:9—“You heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel” (*NKJV*).
7. 1 Corinthians 11:3—“The head of every man is Christ.”

Thus, Christ as the head of the church provides leadership, guidance, and nourishment for the church’s unity and growth (*see Col. 2:19*).

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12–27. Here also Paul describes the church as a “body.” What other aspects of the church are conveyed by this metaphor?

Just as the body cannot live without the head, when a part of the body is lost or injured, life can be much more difficult. We often don’t recognize how important something is until we lose it.

If you had to give up a limb or an eye, what would you choose? What does this tell you about how vital each person is as a member of the church?

The “Beginning” (and Initiator)

Read Colossians 1:18. What is the connection between the idea of Christ as the head and Him as the “beginning”?

In Hebrew the words for head (*ro'sh*) and beginning (*rē'shit*) are related. The first instance of the latter word in Scripture is in Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning [*rē'shit*] God created the heaven and the earth.” Jesus is head of humanity and of the church, not only because of the Incarnation but also because He is the Creator.

In Greek, the word for beginning (*archē*) has a broad meaning. Here, “beginning” refers to Jesus as the source or initiator of the church (*Col. 1:18*), and therefore its Head, just as He is the “beginning” or initiator of Creation.

Jesus is not only the initiator in terms of Creation and the church, He is also—through His resurrection from the dead (*Rom. 6:3, 4*)—the initiator of the new creation. Because the wages of sin is death, His victory over death also shows His victory over sin and His power to re-create us in His image. All this demonstrates why He is “the firstborn from the dead” (on the meaning of “firstborn,” see Monday’s study). His is the preeminent resurrection, even though not the first (Moses was the first, which is why the dispute with the devil ensued over his body [*Jude 9*]). Without Christ’s resurrection, no one else could be raised from the dead.

It’s helpful at this point to review briefly all the reasons Paul has given for Jesus having preeminence:

1. He is the perfect manifestation of the invisible God.
2. He is the agent by whom all things were created.
3. He existed before all things, and all things are brought together in Him.
4. He is the head of the church, which is His body.
5. He is the initiator of Creation and the re-creation.
6. He has conquered sin and death and thus earned the right to resurrect all who put their trust in Him as Savior.
7. Jesus has always existed, but now, by virtue of all this, He has come to have the preeminence as Head of humanity and Head of the church.

What must you change so that you can better experience Christ’s preeminence in your own life?

To Reconcile All Things

Read Colossians 1:19, 20. What is this reconciliation that comes through the Cross, and how comprehensive is it?

Paul uses a very interesting expression in Greek to culminate his description of Jesus, obliquely pointing back to the Father, who was mentioned in Colossians 1:12. It is His fullness that the Father was pleased to have dwell in Jesus (*compare Col. 2:9*). What is this “fullness”? John refers to it as being the Father’s glory, “full of grace and truth” (*John 1:14*).

But, based on this passage, that “fullness” encompasses a lot. It embraces God’s eternity and self-existence and His power to create and re-create. Most important, it underscores His wisdom in conquering sin and death through the most unimaginable means—the Cross. And thus, He transformed that most inglorious object into a testimony of His eternal love for every created being. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (*John 3:16*).

The only way sin could really be defeated forever, and all things be reconciled that could be reconciled, is summed up in that one glorious truth: God loved—He loved the universe, and He loved us so much that He risked everything to save us through Christ’s death on the cross. The Greek word for “world” is *kosmos*, which can encompass the whole universe. Paul refers to this universal demonstration in the context of following Christ: “We have been made a spectacle to the world [*kosmos*, universe], both to angels and to men” (*1 Cor. 4:9, NKJV*).

“Heaven viewed with grief and amazement Christ hanging upon the cross. . . . By a life of rebellion, Satan and all who unite with him place themselves so out of harmony with God that His very presence is to them a consuming fire. The glory of Him who is love will destroy them. At the beginning of the great controversy, the angels did not understand this. . . .

“But not so when the great controversy shall be ended. Then, the plan of redemption having been completed, the character of God is revealed to all created intelligences. . . .

“Well, then, might the angels rejoice as they looked upon the Saviour’s cross. . . . Christ Himself fully comprehended the results of the sacrifice made upon Calvary. To all these He looked forward when upon the cross He cried out, ‘It is finished.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 760, 764.

Further Thought: “A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”—C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, Collier Books, 1952), p. 41.

“The Father is all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and is invisible to mortal sight.

“The Son is all the fullness of the Godhead manifested. The Word of God declares Him to be ‘the express image of His person.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 614.

“Christ is the pre-existent, self-existent Son of God. . . . In speaking of his pre-existence, Christ carries the mind back through dateless ages. He assures us that there never was a time when He was not in close fellowship with the eternal God. . . .

“He was equal with God, infinite and omnipotent. . . . He is the eternal, self-existent Son.”—Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 615.

Discussion Questions:

1 Dwell more on the question of the eternal deity of Jesus. Think through the implications of the entire plan of salvation and the meaning of the sacrifice at the cross if Jesus had been anything other than the eternal God, One who had never been created but had always, from eternity past, existed. Why is that teaching so important? In class, talk about what it would mean if, in fact, Jesus were not eternal but, in some fashion, had been created. Again, what is lost in that kind of thinking?

2 When we think about Jesus, the gospel, and the plan of salvation, why must we keep the concept of the entire universe’s involvement and interest in what Jesus has done here as part of our thinking? What must have gone on in their minds when they saw their Creator, their eternal Creator, on the cross? It’s one thing for us to be awed by it, but the unfallen universe knew Him in His eternal glory. What must have gone through their minds as they witnessed the One whom they had worshiped in heaven die on the cross?

3 What would you say to someone who does not believe that the Father and the Son have always coexisted? Why is this such an important truth? How would you explain that there has never been a time when the Father was without the Son, except at the cross, when there was a temporary “sundering of the divine powers”? (See Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 924.)

Losing Two Jobs Over Faith

Rodel won Rene to Christ by taking him fishing.

Ellen White says, “Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me’ ” (*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 143). Rodel practiced Christ’s method: spending time with Rene, ministering to his needs, and winning his confidence. Then Rene followed Jesus.

After Rene returned to Christ, Rodel asked if he could stay at Rene’s house. Rene’s parents weren’t thrilled about having the young Seventh-day Adventist living in their home in the Philippines, but they didn’t say anything. Rodel also encouraged Rene to go back to school, and Rene did.

“I’m waiting for you to graduate, and then I’ll take you to Manila to become a missionary in the 1000 Missionary Movement,” Rodel said.

Rodel had served as a missionary with the 1000 Missionary Movement, an organization that is part of the Adventist Church’s Southern Asia-Pacific Division, when he had first met Rene about a year and a half earlier.

While Rene studied, Rodel lived with him and helped pay for his studies by working together in the rice fields. Rene graduated when he was 23.

Rodel made good on his promise and brought Rene to the headquarters of the 1000 Missionary Movement in Silang, near the Philippine capital, Manila.

But then he had another idea. He said Rene should further his education before becoming a missionary. The two young men enrolled in the Adventist University of the Philippines in Silang. Rene majored in accounting, and Rodel in theology.

It took six years for Rene to graduate. He didn’t receive any support from home. During that time, he married Love Jhoie.

After graduating, he worked as a company accountant for three months. Then he was fired for not working on a Friday night. He claimed the promise of Jeremiah 29:11, “ ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’ ” (*NIV*). He prayed, “God, I know that You have a plan for me.”



Months passed, and a hospital hired him as an accountant. But then he learned that he could not become a regular employee unless he was baptized into the denomination that owned the hospital. He resigned.

Rene Tucaldo is chief financial officer of the 1000 Missionary Movement, whose headquarters in Silang, Philippines, were constructed with the help of a 1996 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering. Read more next week.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Colossians 1:15–17*

Study Focus: *Col. 1:15–20*

The Bible says that Jesus has the preeminence in all things (*Col. 1:18*). But what does that idea mean? Many English versions render the Greek word *prōteuō* as “first place” rather than as “preeminence” (*see, for instance, the NRSV, NASB, CSB, CEB, etc.*). The verb *prōteuō* occurs only in this passage in the New Testament, suggesting that it was carefully selected for a reason. It emphasizes Jesus’ unique and unsurpassed position. The original text implies that Jesus’ resurrection grants Him the authority to become Lord of all things: “He is the beginning, **the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything**” (*Col. 1:18, NRSV; emphasis added*). In other words, Jesus was Lord by right; now He becomes Lord in fact! Universal supremacy and sovereignty are the expected results of His victory over death. John the revelator also highlights this notion when affirming that Jesus is “**the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth**” (*Rev. 1:5, NKJV; emphasis added*). Jesus’ death and resurrection inevitably lead to His rulership over all things.

This week’s lesson emphasizes two major themes:

1. Jesus’ titles, as presented in Colossians 1:15–20, emphasize His redemptive work on behalf of the human race. He is the Image of the invisible God, the Firstborn over all creation, the Head of the body, and the Beginning.
2. Jesus came into this world to perform reconciliation between God and humanity, in a particular sense, but also between God and the whole creation, in a broader sense.

Part II: Commentary

Illustration

“A pastor of a church in Boston met a young boy in front of the sanctuary, carrying a rusty cage in which several birds fluttered nervously. The pastor inquired, ‘Son, where did you get those birds?’

“ ‘I trapped them out in the field,’ the boy replied.

“ ‘What are you going to do with them?’

“ ‘I’m going to play with them, and then I guess I’ll just feed them to an old cat we have at home.’

“When the pastor offered to buy them, the lad exclaimed, ‘Mister, you don’t want them, they’re just little old wild birds and can’t sing very well.’

“The pastor replied, ‘I’ll give you two dollars for the cage and the birds.’

“ ‘Okay, it’s a deal, but you’re making a bad bargain.’

“The exchange was made, and the boy went away whistling, happy with his shiny coins. The pastor walked around to the back of the church property, opened the door of the small wire cage, and let the struggling creatures soar into the blue.

“The next Sunday he took the empty cage into the pulpit and used it to illustrate Christ’s coming to seek and to save those who—like the birds—were destined for destruction. The difference was that Christ had to purchase our freedom with his own life.”—Michael P. Green, *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), pp. 297, 298.

As we will see further on, Paul’s portrayal of Christ in Colossians 1:15–20 is a poem that extols His role as Creator (*Col. 1:15–17*) and Redeemer (*Col. 1:18–20*). In these few verses, the story of redemption is told with an incredible economy of words.

Jesus’ Titles and His Redemptive Work

Colossians 1:15–20 is a hymn in praise to Christ for His work of redemption. In applying several titles to Jesus, Paul resorts to the Old Testament, so as to demonstrate that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament covenants.

Image of the Invisible God (*Col. 1:15*). The phrase “the image of the invisible God” points to the true humanity of Jesus, thereby referring to His incarnation. The Greek word translated as “image” is *eikōn*, which is frequently used in the biblical record in order to indicate that something is a representation of something else. Thus, for instance, the statue of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 2:31–3:18 is called *eikōn* various times in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament. Obviously, the concept of representation can be traced back to Genesis 1:26, 27, where Adam is referred to as created in the image of God. Jesus came into the world as the Second Adam to represent and reveal God. This idea means that if God the Father had come into the world instead of Jesus, He would have been like Jesus.

The Firstborn Over All Creation (*Col. 1:15*). All the titles ascribed to Jesus in Colossians 1:15–18 serve to highlight His preeminence, each calling attention to different aspects of His redemptive work. The

title “firstborn over all creation” in Colossians 1:15 (*NKJV*) foreshadows the similar title in Colossians 1:18, “firstborn from the dead,” and is related to it. Paul’s usage of the term “firstborn” is rooted in the Old Testament. Usually, the title “firstborn over all creation” is interpreted in two ways: (1) it portrays Jesus as ruler over all creation and, hence, His uniqueness and superiority; (2) it portrays Jesus as eternally pre-existent and the Creator of all things. After all, “by Him all things were created. . . . All things were created through Him and for Him” (*Col. 1:16, NKJV*), and “He is before all things” (*Col. 1:17, NKJV*). It is unnecessary to take one view at the expense of the other, as they complement each other.

The Head of the Body (*Col. 1:18*). As other metaphors applied to Jesus in the New Testament, the phrase “the head of the body” suggests Jesus’ authority over the church but also His tender care for her. Thus, as the Head of the church, Jesus provides for her growth (*Eph. 4:15*) by nourishing her (*Col. 2:19; Eph. 5:29, 30*). Most important, He saves her (*Eph. 5:23*) because He loves her (*Eph. 5:2, 25*). In a sense, the metaphor of the Head is quite similar to the image of the Shepherd. As such, Jesus leads the church “to living fountains of waters” (*Rev. 7:17, NKJV*); knows her and is known by her (*John 10:14*); and loves her to the point of giving His life for her (*John 10:11, 15*), with the purpose of granting her eternal life (*John 10:28*).

The Beginning (*Col. 1:18*). The image of Jesus as the Beginning of all things is not uncommon in the New Testament. To a greater or lesser degree, all instances of this image build upon Genesis 1:1. Thus, while the initial statement in Matthew 1:1 does not apply the term “beginning,” the phrase “book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ” is an allusion to the book of Genesis (*see Gen. 5:1; also Gen. 2:4*). The Gospel of Mark opens with the statement, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (*Mark 1:1, NKJV*), which, for many scholars, is reminiscent of Genesis 1:1. The Gospel of John opens with the statement, “In the beginning was the Word” (*John 1:1, NKJV*), and continues, “He was in the beginning with God” (*John 1:2, NKJV*). Similarly, John begins his first letter by alluding to both his Gospel and the book of Genesis (*1 John 1:1*). Further on, he states, “You have known him who is from the beginning” (*1 John 2:13, 14, NKJV*). Finally, in the Apocalypse, John ascribes to Jesus the title, “the Beginning of the creation of God” (*Rev. 3:14, NKJV*). Thus, the title “the beginning” (*Col. 1:18*) points to Jesus’ role as our Creator and Redeemer.

Firstborn From the Dead (*Col. 1:18*). Paul’s use of the title “firstborn from the dead” (*Col. 1:18*) is very similar to John’s use of the same title in Revelation 1:5, *NKJV*. Both authors likely have Psalm 89:27 in mind: “I will make him My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth” (*NKJV*).

In a sense, Psalm 89 is a sort of commentary on 2 Samuel 7:8–16, which details God’s covenant with David. A close reading of Psalm 89, however, will show that, ultimately, the text is talking about One greater than a human figure (*see, for instance, Psalm 89:29, 36*). The New Testament indicates that Jesus is the eschatological Son of David (*see, for instance, Matt. 1:1*). When applying the title “firstborn” to Jesus (*Col. 1:18*), Paul is referring to Him as the fulfillment of God’s covenantal promise to David.

Jesus’ Work of Reconciliation. All that Jesus did (*Col. 1:15–18*) results in His having the first place in everything (*Col. 1:18*). According to Paul, Christ is all those things because “in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (*Col. 1:19, ESV*). In other words, Jesus was fully God at the same time that He was fully man. As such, He fulfilled the prerequisites necessary for reconciling man to God (*Col. 1:20–22*). In Ephesians 2:14–17, Paul uses reconciliation language in connection with the idea that Jesus came into the world to be our peace (*Eph. 2:14*), thus both making peace (*Eph. 2:15*) and preaching peace (*Eph. 2:17*). Not only man but “all of God’s creation will be pacified and reconciled, and full harmony will be restored.”—Grant R. Osborne, *Colossians & Philemon: Verse by Verse*, Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), p. 46.

Part III: Life Application

Meditate upon the following themes. Then ask your students to answer the questions at the end of this section.

In Colossians 1:15–20, Jesus is presented as the exalted Lord of all creation. He is our Lord! Jesus’ lordship is based on the fact that He rose from the dead victorious to be our King and Intercessor in the heavenly sanctuary. We can trust Him and surrender ourselves to Him completely, trusting that He will restore us to His image. Paul says that God “predestined” us “to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren” (*Rom. 8:29, NKJV*).

In Christ, we have the promise of all-inclusive restoration. “Through the blood of His cross,” we now have peace with God (*Col. 1:20, NKJV*). As Isaiah had prophesied centuries ago, Jesus came to be the Prince of Peace (*Isa. 9:6; compare with Eph. 2:14*). Further on, Isaiah says, “the chastisement for our peace was upon Him” (*Isa. 53:5, NKJV*). In Romans 5:10, Paul affirms that “when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son” (*NKJV*).

The Bible teaches us that Jesus is our Creator and Redeemer. He came into this world and died on the cross to purchase us back to Himself. The One who created us (*John 1:1–3*) is the same One who came in the flesh (*John 1:14*) “ ‘to give His life as a ransom for many’ ” (*Matt. 20:28, NKJV*). Through His death and resurrection, He conquered sin and death and attained the preeminence over all things in heaven and on earth. Thus, because “of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen” (*Rom. 11:36, NKJV*).

Questions:

1. What does it mean to be conformed to the image of Jesus? In what practical ways do you see that work of transformation, by God’s grace, happening in your life?

2. How is Jesus the Lord of your life? What does His preeminence over all things mean for you? How does His preeminence give you hope?

Notes

Reconciliation *and* Hope



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Col. 1:20–29, Eph. 5:27, Eph. 3:17, Rom. 8:18, Eph. 1:7–10, Eph. 3:3–6, Prov. 14:12.*

Memory Text: “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Paul continues the theme of reconciliation, which was so vividly highlighted in Colossians 1:20 (*see Lesson 8, Thursday*). There he described its cosmic scope, while what follows it becomes personal and individual. Through His death on the cross, Jesus has accomplished reconciliation for everyone and everything, especially human beings, who were alienated from the life of God through sin, but now can be reconciled to Him through faith.

The process of individual reconciliation is unpacked in this week's passage. As with the cosmic sphere, it happens through the death of Christ. On the individual level, the cross, far from being a passive symbol, becomes an active reality, with God's love transforming people as they hear the gospel and receive Christ Himself, the hope of glory.

Paul also talks about “the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations” (*Col. 1:26, NKJV*). What is this mystery, and what all does it envision—for the individual and for the universe? How does this “mystery” relate to the gospel that Paul has so passionately proclaimed?

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

Reconciled From Wicked Works

Read Colossians 1:21, 22. What is Paul alluding to with his reference to alienation and being enemies? And what is the expected end result of Christ's death (see also Eph. 5:27)?

Paul has always painted a dark picture of humanity, at least humanity apart from the righteousness of Christ. And who today, almost two thousand years later, could argue with that sentiment? Someone once said that the one Christian doctrine that doesn't need to be taken on faith is the sinfulness of humanity.

However, since the entrance of sin, God has taken the initiative to reconcile us, as bad as we are, to Himself. That is, from the start, God has worked to solve the problem of sin, even if the solution could be found only in His own death on the cross.

In Eden, He called out to Adam, His masterpiece of creation, "Where are you?" (*Gen. 3:9, NKJV*). And today, He continues to seek His one lost sheep—us. He seeks us out one by one. He has a perfect plan to reach us, applying the embryonic gospel promise of Genesis 3:15, putting enmity between us and Satan.

Sometimes the gospel is made so complicated and theoretical that it has little practical meaning for twenty-first-century living. But it's really quite simple and straightforward.

The gospel has three parts:

First, because we are helpless to save ourselves, Jesus came and died for our sins. (*See Rom. 5:6–8.*)

Second, by accepting His death as ours through faith, repentance, and baptism, we are justified and set free from the condemnation of sin. (*See Rom. 5:9–11; Rom. 6:6, 7.*)

Third, the life we live now is the result of being united with Christ, experiencing His re-creating power, and His living His life in us. (*See 2 Cor. 5:17–21, Gal. 2:20.*)

These are not necessarily separate steps or events. They can happen all at once, as soon as we are ready to accept Jesus into our lives. And they can be renewed every day as we give ourselves to Him each morning. Regardless of how each one of us has experienced the saving work of Christ in our lives, the foundation rests always upon the death of Jesus. To that we must always return.

When you look at yourself, your character, and your innermost being, what does the sight tell you about your need of the Cross?

If You Continue in the Faith

Read Colossians 1:23 (NKJV). What do you think Paul means by remaining “grounded and steadfast” in the faith? (See also Col. 2:5 and Eph. 3:17.)

There are four different types of “if” statements in Greek, each with different nuances. The one with which Colossians 1:23 begins assumes that the condition is true. That is, Paul encourages the Colossians with the thought that they will, indeed, continue in the faith. As Paul soon indicates, he has already seen evidence of their faith and steadfastness (Col. 2:5). Nevertheless, their hope is still conditional on their persisting on the path of faith that they have entered.

This idea of persisting is the meaning of the Greek word translated “continue” (Col. 1:23, NKJV). It is used of the scribes and Pharisees who continued to demand of Jesus an answer as to what should be done with the woman caught in adultery (John 8:7); also of Peter continuing to knock at the door after Rhoda recognized his voice but left it locked and ran inside to tell the others (Acts 12:16). It is also used by Paul, who encourages Timothy to remain faithful to the doctrinal and practical instructions he has given (1 Tim. 4:16). His meaning here is similar except that it is applied to believers generally.

As we will see in next week’s lesson, Paul is concerned that the Colossians may chase after human-based ways of salvation instead of holding fast to the hope offered by the gospel (see, for example, Col. 2:8, 20–22). The word “grounded” refers to having laid a solid foundation of faith and love based on God’s Word (see Matt. 7:25, Eph. 2:20, Eph. 3:17).

Related to this idea is the Greek word translated “steadfast,” referring to an immovable structure and, by extension, to a Christian who cannot be “moved away from the hope of the gospel” (Col. 1:23). The same word is used in 1 Corinthians 15:58: “be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (NKJV).

Contrary to the common belief of “once saved, always saved,” Paul is saying something completely different.

What has been your experience regarding the importance of continuing to exercise faith? That is, why must you always make a conscious choice to do that? What will happen if you don’t?

God's Eternal Plan

Read Colossians 1:24, 25. What does Paul say about his suffering for Christ's sake?

Though Paul wrote Colossians while under house arrest in Rome, perhaps his greatest suffering came from not being able to labor intensively from place to place and house to house, as he had done previously (*Acts 20:20*). These afflictions (or tribulations), which Christ forewarned of (*Matt. 24:9, John 16:33*), “are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (*Rom. 8:18*). This is the bigger picture. As Paul had written to the Christians in Philippi, so now to the Colossians he rejoices over his sufferings, which are for their benefit (*Col. 1:24*).

Paul may be in prison, but “the word of God is not bound” (*2 Tim. 2:9*). While Paul was in this confinement, Philippians, Ephesians, and Philemon were also written. After his release, God inspired him to write the important counsels found in 1 Timothy and Titus. Then, during his final imprisonment in a Roman jail, he wrote 2 Timothy. In short, these final years provided Paul the opportunity to write a significant portion of the New Testament, which probably included Hebrews.

God's eternal plan envisioned all of this and more. The Greek word Paul uses in Colossians 1:25, generally translated “stewardship,” is *oikonomia*. Used in a limited sense (*as, for example, in 1 Tim. 1:4*), it refers to “God's way of ordering things.”—Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), p. 164. That would include Paul's apostleship. But in a broader sense, it includes all the provisions God has made in the plan of salvation. The ministry of Paul, the other apostles, and even the prophets of the Old Testament (*Eph. 2:20, Eph. 3:5*), including Moses, were designed “to fulfill the word of God” (*Col. 1:25*), all in connection with this divine plan.

Although we will look more closely at this topic in tomorrow's study, it is helpful at this point to notice that Paul recognized his ministry as just one small part of a much larger, long-range divine plan that began being implemented “from the foundation of the world” (*Matt. 13:35, Eph. 1:4*).

Think about your own life. How might the decisions you make (big and small) fit within God's larger plan? Can we really know whether a decision is actually “small”? How might it have larger ramifications that will become apparent only later?

Mystery of God Revealed

Read Colossians 1:26, 27. Paul twice talks about “the mystery.” What mystery?

In another place, Paul refers to “the mystery of God,” which is God’s eternal purpose “ordained before the ages for our glory” (*1 Cor. 2:7, NKJV*) and revealed through the plan of salvation. Peter speaks of this truth as something that the prophets anticipated and that “angels desire to look into” (*1 Pet. 1:10–12*). It was devised “before the foundation of the world” (*1 Pet. 1:20*) and “kept secret since the world began” (*Rom. 16:25*). However, through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, this mystery has been unveiled (*2 Cor. 3:14*).

How do the following references to the mystery of God illuminate various aspects of the plan of salvation?

1. *Eph. 1:7–10* _____

2. *Eph. 3:3–6* _____

Ultimately, “all things” in heaven and on earth will be brought together into complete oneness in Christ. This was the focus of Christ’s prayer in John 17. Exactly how this would come about was a mystery that has now been revealed through the gospel.

Why God would love us so much that He would give Jesus, heaven’s priceless treasure, for our salvation, will be our study throughout eternity. But we know this: Christ “died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again” (*2 Cor. 5:15, NKJV*). As a result, all who believe in Christ, both Jews and Gentiles, share equally in the promises of God through the gospel and have been brought together into one body, the church.

“Christ in you” (*Col. 1:27*) refers to Christ’s dwelling in the heart by faith (*Eph. 3:17; compare Gal. 2:20*). This spiritual union with Christ enables believers even now to “sit together in heavenly places” (*Eph. 2:6*) and taste “the powers of the world to come” (*Heb. 6:5*). Through Christ’s presence in our lives, He is already beginning to unite us with heaven. It is the gospel working in the hearts of believers that “has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light” (*Col. 1:12, NKJV*).

Power of the Gospel

Read Colossians 1:28, 29. What is Paul's focus? Why do you think "everyone" (*ESV*) is repeated three times?

The focus of Paul's preaching was Christ and Him crucified (*1 Cor. 1:23*). According to Ephesians 5:27, the purpose of Christ's sacrifice is "that He might present her [the church] to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish" (*NKJV*). Thus, the aim of Paul's gospel preaching is to "present everyone mature in Christ" (*Col. 1:28, ESV*). He does this by teaching and warning—teaching the various points of Christian doctrine and practice (*2 Thess. 2:15, 1 Tim. 4:11, 1 Tim. 5:7, Titus 1:9*) and warning of the consequences for rejecting the gospel and of the dangers of false teachers (*Acts 20:29–31, Rom. 16:17*).

This is how we grow to be mature Christians, by accepting the teachings and heeding the warnings of Scripture. Maturity is an important concept. The parents of a newborn baby celebrate every milestone—first words, learning to walk, and learning to read. What parent would not be alarmed if their child, after several years, was still unable to walk or talk? Growth and development are normal and expected. The same is true of the Christian life.

The Greek word translated "mature" (*teleios*) means perfect and without defect. Through the process of Christian growth, we become keenly aware of the depth of God's law and that its requirements are "exceedingly broad" (*Pss. 119:96, NKJV*). We understand it extends to "the thoughts and intents of the heart" (*Heb. 4:12*).

But we need to be careful, which is why Paul used the word "warning" in Colossians 1:28. The way that "seems right . . . is the way of death" (*Prov. 14:12, NKJV*). Spiritual discernment comes from a Spirit-guided knowledge of God's Word. False teachings usually have some truth but either add to or take away something of what the Bible says (*see Isa. 8:20*). The latter often succeeds, if not by directly doubting what God says, then at least by questioning whether it is really possible or whether it is applicable to our day. We must be wise as serpents but harmless as doves when it comes to discerning doctrinal truth from error.

How do you understand what it means to be "perfect in Christ Jesus" (*Col. 1:28*)? How does an understanding of what Jesus accomplished for us at the cross help in knowing what it means to be "perfect in Christ Jesus"?

Further Thought: “We have no righteousness of our own with which to meet the claims of the law of God. But Christ has made a way of escape for us. . . . If you give yourself to Him, and accept Him as your Saviour, then, sinful as your life may have been, for His sake you are accounted righteous. Christ’s character stands in place of your character, and you are accepted before God just as if you had not sinned.

“More than this, Christ changes the heart. He abides in your heart by faith. You are to maintain this connection with Christ by faith and the continual surrender of your will to Him; and so long as you do this, He will work in you to will and to do according to His good pleasure. . . .

“So we have nothing in ourselves of which to boast. We have no ground for self-exaltation. Our only ground of hope is in the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and in that wrought by His Spirit working in and through us.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, pp. 62, 63.

“The light given me has been very forcible that many would go out from us, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils. The Lord desires that every soul who claims to believe the truth shall have an intelligent knowledge of what is truth.”—Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 363.

Discussion Questions:

① Read again the memory text: “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor. 5:21). What does this mean? What does it mean that Christ became sin for us, and how should that help us understand the substitutionary nature of the Cross? Also, what does it mean to be “made the righteousness of God in him”?

② Dwell more on the question of “once saved, always saved,” which many Christians believe. Why do we believe that this is a false doctrine? What obvious dangers does it present to someone who believes this? How can we, even while rejecting that doctrine, still have assurance of salvation?

③ How “grounded and steadfast” (Col. 1:23, *NKJV*) in your faith are you? How well do you know what you believe and why you believe it? What can you do to know better what you believe? And why is it so important that you are “grounded and steadfast” in the faith?

Moving the Two-Day Weekend

After losing two jobs because of his Seventh-day Adventist faith, Rene prayed to God again in the Philippines. “Lord,” he said, “it seems that being Adventist is only for the rich. I can’t find a job that doesn’t require me to work on Saturdays. How can we survive?”

Even though he had a university degree, Rene took odd jobs at construction sites. The pay, however, wasn’t enough to feed his growing family. He now was the father of two young children. He prayed again, “God, can You help me find a job that will support my family?”

Then he saw an advertisement for an accounting job in the Middle East. He would have to leave his family in the Philippines. He applied for the position and, after an interview, was hired. It was a challenging time.

When Rene arrived, he learned that the national weekend was on Thursdays and Fridays. That meant people were required to work on Saturdays and Sundays.

While Rene had to go to the office on Saturdays, he didn’t actually have to work. He read the Bible and Ellen White’s writings. His boss only came in on Saturday nights, so Rene didn’t work during the day. But he still felt bad. He was at work on Sabbath. He felt as though he was compromising his faith, and he longed to go to church on Sabbath. “God,” he prayed, “if You give me a chance to go to church on Saturday, I will keep the Sabbath holy until I die.”

For two years, he prayed this prayer. Then he spoke with his boss.

“Please give me Saturday for my Sabbath rest,” he said.

“No, I can’t allow you,” his boss replied. But he allowed for an exception, saying, “If my king declares Friday and Saturday to be the weekend, then you are free to rest.”

Rene prayed, “You heard what my boss said. Can You please help?”

Three months later, Rene’s boss was in Europe when the king signed a decree that the country’s weekend would be moved to Friday and Saturday. Rene, who had been praying the whole time, didn’t hear the news and went to the office as usual at nine o’clock on Saturday morning. After sitting down, he checked his email to see if any important messages had come in. It was

then that he saw the message from his boss. He read, “Rene, I heard the news from my king. I remember my promise to you that you are free to rest if my king declares Friday and Saturday to be the weekend.” Rene closed the office and went to church. He was so happy that he cried.



Rene Tucaldo is chief financial officer of the 1000 Missionary Movement, whose headquarters in Silang, Philippines, were constructed with the help of a 1996 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering. Read more next week.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *2 Corinthians 5:21*

Study Focus: *Col. 1:20–29, Romans 5, 2 Cor. 5:18–21*

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul teaches that we have all things in Christ. Jesus is our Creator and Redeemer. The apostle elaborates on this idea by ascribing to Jesus titles that reflect what He has done for us. Jesus is the Head of the church, the Beginning, and the Firstborn from the dead, resulting in His preeminence in all things (*Col. 1:18*). Paul says that “it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell” (*Col. 1:19, NKJV*). In other words, Paul is asserting that Jesus is God! Simply put, Paul is telling us that Jesus does what He does because He is who He is! As fully God, He is able to create and redeem. In Colossians 1:19, 20, Paul implies that God was pleased with two things: (1) that in Jesus all His fullness should dwell, and (2) that through Jesus all things should be reconciled to Him. These two ideas indicate that Jesus’ divine status and His work of reconciliation are inseparable.

This week’s lesson emphasizes three major themes:

1. God takes the first step in reconciling us to Himself. For that purpose, He sent Jesus into the world to bring humanity back to Him. But, in response, we must “continue in the faith” and not be “moved away from the hope of the gospel” (*Col. 1:23*).
2. In our work for Christ, we must remember that we are merely His agents in a much bigger divine plan.
3. The power of the gospel causes us to mature for salvation in Christ.

Part II: Commentary

Illustration

“Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s parents disapproved so strongly of her marriage to Robert [Browning] that they disowned her. Almost weekly, Elizabeth wrote love letters to her mother and father, asking for a reconciliation. They never once replied. After ten years of letter writing, Elizabeth received a huge box in the mail. She opened it. To her dismay and heartbreak, the box contained all of her letters to her parents. Not one of them had ever been opened!

“Today those love letters are among the most beautiful in classical English literature. Had her parents opened and read only a few of them, a reconciliation might have been effected. The Bible is God’s letter of reconciliation to us. We should open and read it thoroughly and often.”—Michael P. Green, *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), p. 297.

Reconciliation, Faith, and Hope

The Bible clearly indicates that God initiated the process of reconciling humanity to Himself. When our first parents fell into sin, God visited the Garden of Eden to seek them (*Gen. 3:9*). Paul says that “our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies” (*Rom. 5:10, NLT*). This teaching echoes Paul’s sentiment in Colossians 1:21, 22. Notably, God’s initiative in bringing about reconciliation is a pervasive theme in Romans 5:5–11, as one can see in the table below.

Rom. 5:6 (<i>ESV</i>)	“While we were still weak ,	at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.”
Rom. 5:8 (<i>ESV</i>)	“While we were still sinners ,	Christ died for us.”
Rom. 5:10 (<i>ESV</i>)	“While we were enemies	we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son.”

There is a close parallelism between verses 6, 8, and 10 (*see also Eph. 2:4, 5*). When we were still weak, when we were sinners and enemies, Christ died for us, thereby reconciling us to God. Paul also touches on this theme elsewhere, with minor adjustments, as the table below shows.

Passage	Ultimate Agent	Action	Patient	Beneficiary	Intermediate Agent
2 Cor. 5:18 (<i>ESV</i>)	God	reconciled	us	to Himself	through Christ
2 Cor. 5:19 (<i>ESV</i>)	God	was reconciling	the world	to Himself	in Christ
Col. 1:20 (<i>ESV</i>)	God	reconciled	all things	to Himself	through Him [Christ]
Eph. 2:4, 5 (<i>ESV</i>)	God	loved, made alive	us		together with Christ

God is always the ultimate Agent and Initiator of the reconciliation process. In Galatians 4:4, 5, Paul uses adoption language to refer to God's initiative in reconciling us to Himself. As John eloquently states, "We love Him because He first loved us" (*1 John 4:19, NKJV*). Reconciliation is made possible through the death of Christ (*Rom. 5:6; 2 Cor. 5:21; Col. 1:20; Eph. 2:13, 16; etc.*), and it results in peace with God (*Eph. 2:14–19*). Because we have been adopted as God's children (*Rom. 8:15; Gal. 3:26; Gal. 4:4–6; 1 John 3:1, 2*), our elevated status, through faith in Christ, results in access to Him (*Rom. 5:2, Eph. 2:18, Eph. 3:12, Heb. 10:19–22*).

In response to God's initiative, we must "continue in the faith" and not be "moved away from the hope of the gospel" (*Col. 1:23, NKJV*). Faith and hope are Christian virtues that go hand in hand (*1 Cor. 13:13, Gal. 5:5, 1 Thess. 1:3, 1 Thess. 5:8, 1 Pet. 1:21*). We believe and hope in God for salvation (*1 Pet. 1:21*), not in human achievements.

Players in a Much Bigger Plan

In Colossians 1:25, Paul states that he "became a minister according to the stewardship from God . . . to fulfill the word of God" (*NKJV*). Paul knew that his ministry was not an end in itself. He was just a player in a much bigger plan. Otherwise, how could he rejoice in his sufferings (*Col. 1:24*)? Only someone who knows that our afflictions in this world are but a momentary pang, when compared to the "exceeding and eternal weight of glory" God is preparing for us (*2 Cor. 4:17, NKJV*), is able to rejoice in them. Paul affirms that the fulfillment of the Word of God has to do with "the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints" (*Col. 1:26, NKJV*). Truly, Paul understood that he was really an actor in a story much bigger than himself.

For the fulfillment of His eternal purpose, God has called many characters throughout the centuries to enact their role in the story of redemption. For instance, Joseph did not realize, at first, that God was guiding events to preserve the people through whom the promised Messiah would come. Yet, this orchestration of events was precisely what God was doing. On the way to Egypt, "for a time Joseph gave himself up to uncontrolled grief and terror. But, in **the providence of God**, even this experience was to be a blessing to him. He had learned in a few hours that which years might not otherwise have taught him."—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 213, emphasis added. Finally, the years taught Joseph that God was leading all the events " 'to save many people alive' " (*Gen. 50:20, NKJV*).

What about other biblical characters? There are so many that it is impossible to talk about them all (*see Hebrews 11*). For instance, what about the book of Ruth? In light of the broader biblical narrative, Ruth's story shows that God is working, even when it seems He is not. Ruth played an important role

by becoming the great-grandmother of David, the great king of Israel (*Ruth 4:13, 21, 22*). She was but a character in a much bigger story. God made a covenant with David by promising that He would set up his seed after him and “establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (*2 Sam. 7:12, 13, NKJV*). This promise is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus, the eschatological Son of David (*Matt. 1:1*). God is leading all the events on earth for the fulfillment of His eternal purpose in Jesus Christ! This purpose is the mystery that was hidden but has now been revealed (*Col. 1:26*).

Maturity in Christ

As Christians, we are called to grow in maturity by believing and putting into practice the Word of God. Paul indicates that the goal of the gospel is to “present every man perfect in Christ Jesus” (*Col. 1:28, NKJV*). God wants us to grow as we prepare ourselves for the Second Coming, knowing that “He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (*Phil. 1:6, NKJV*).

Spiritual growth involves at least three things. First, we must grow in faith. When writing to the Corinthians, Paul made it clear that he expected their faith to increase (*2 Cor. 10:15*). Similarly, in 2 Thessalonians 1:3, Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians because their “faith grows exceedingly” (*NKJV*). Second, we must grow in knowledge. Peter warns us to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (*2 Pet. 3:18, NKJV; see also 2 Pet. 1:3*). Likewise, Paul urges the Colossians to “walk worthy of the Lord” and increase “in the knowledge of God” (*Col. 1:10, NKJV*). Third, we must grow in love. Thus, Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 3:12, “May the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you” (*NKJV; see also Phil. 1:9*). Obviously, spiritual growth comes from God. Believers are called to grow “with the increase that is from God” (*Col. 2:19, NKJV; see also Phil. 1:6; 1 Cor. 3:6, 7; 2 Cor. 9:10*).

Part III: Life Application

Meditate upon the following themes. Then ask your students to answer the questions at the end of the section.

It is incredibly encouraging to know that God takes the initiative in our salvation, isn't it? Without His initial outreach, would we even be able to approach Him on our own? Surely not! As Wilson Tozer persuasively said, “Before a man can seek God, God must first have sought the man.”—Tozer and W. L. Seaver, *Prayer: Communing With God in Everything—Collected Insights From A. W.*

Tozer (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2016), p. 238.

The Bible shows that God took the initiative, not only on a cosmic level by reaching out to the only sheep that went astray (our planet, earth) but also on a personal level. After all, isn't this exactly what Jesus did with the Samaritan woman at the well (*John 4:1–42*), Nathanael (*John 1:48*), and many others?

While God takes the initiative to save us, we must not forget that He expects us to respond to His love by loving Him back and playing our part in His divine plan of cosmic salvation. God can use us despite our weaknesses and limitations. In His power and strength, we can do more than we think we can. Yet, we have to keep in mind that we are merely actors in a divine story much bigger than our own particular narrative threads. One day, we will be able to comprehend more fully the role our individual stories played in the grand narrative of redemption. Until that day comes, God wants us to grow in faith, knowledge, and love, as instruments of reconciliation and hope!

Questions:

1. In what ways has God sought you in the past? Share an experience with the class.

2. What part do you have in the grand scheme of salvation? With whom have you shared your story of God's redemptive love? How has your story already impacted the lives of others in a meaningful way?

Complete *in* Christ



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Colossians 2; Heb. 7:11; Isa. 61:3; 1 Cor. 3:6; Deut. 31:24–26; Rom. 2:28, 29; Rom. 7:7.*

Memory Text: “So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ” (*Colossians 2:16, 17, NKJV*).

Have you ever been asked why you keep the Sabbath? Perhaps even this week's memory text was used as “evidence” against it. Yet, the text was written not about the fourth commandment, but in response to errors taught by some false teachers in the church. What were these errors?

First, the false teaching is described as “philosophy,” “the tradition of men,” “the basic principles of the world,” and “not according to Christ” (*Col. 2:8, NKJV*).

It also involved circumcision and the keeping of Jewish festivals (*Col. 2:11, 16*), along with Jewish purity rituals and regulations connected with food (*Col. 2:16, 21*). It involved the worship of or with angels or an attempt to emulate angelic worship (*Col. 2:18*).

And, finally, it was based on “the commandments and doctrines of men” and possibly involved ascetic practices (*Col. 2:22, 23*).

These false teachers were clearly religious and sincere, but they also got the gospel wrong. This week we'll see why. And we will see why the memory verse has nothing to do with our keeping the seventh-day Sabbath.

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

The Wisdom and Knowledge of God

Job asked, “Where can wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?” (*Job 28:12, NKJV*). Paul answers: in Christ, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (*Col. 2:3, NKJV; compare 1 Cor. 1:30*). If we have Christ, we have everything, even the “full assurance of understanding” the purpose of life (*Col. 2:2, NKJV*). Through Him the mystery of God, which embraces the entire plan of salvation, has been revealed.

Read Colossians 2:1–7. What is Paul’s purpose in writing this epistle?

The Greek word *paraklēthōsin* means “encouraged” or “strengthened” (*Col. 2:2*). Paul’s desire is not only to help the believers in Colossae recognize false teachings but also to “unite” (*sumbibasthentes*) them in Christian love. The tense used for both verbs—“encouraged” and “united”—indicates Paul’s confidence that this epistle will achieve its intended purpose.

He did, however, commend them for “your good order, and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ” (*Col. 2:5, NKJV*).

The Greek term *taxis*, translated “order,” is used in the New Testament in reference to the priestly orders of Aaron (*Luke 1:8, Heb. 7:11*) and Melchizedek (*Heb. 5:6, 10, NKJV; Heb. 6:20, NKJV; Heb. 7:11, 17, NKJV*), but Paul applies it to order in the church (*1 Cor. 14:40*), including here. Sometimes there is a tendency to consider church order and organization as merely an ecclesiastical institution with no theological significance.

But by prescribing proper decorum in worship (*see, for example, 1 Corinthians 11*), and specifying how elders and deacons should be selected (*1 Timothy 3, Titus 1*), Paul was very careful to preserve order in the church. Through these measures, God’s wisdom and the teachings of the Bible are preserved and promulgated.

As a result of the correct teaching that the Colossians had received from Paul’s associates, they had “steadfastness” of faith. It cannot be shaken because it rests on a solid biblical foundation that, if adhered to, would help protect them from the errors being promoted by the false teachers.

What has been your experience with the need for “order” in your own spiritual life?

Rooted and Growing in Christ

The theme of Colossians is one of the clearest maxims for living the Christian life: “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him” (*Col. 2:6, NKJV*). We receive salvation by receiving a Person, not just a body of teachings. But receiving Jesus also includes accepting all His teachings, as given through the apostles and prophets of the Bible (*see Eph. 2:20*).

More than anything else, accepting Christ means a death to self, a complete surrender of self to the living Christ.

The Living Word (Jesus) cannot be separated from the Written Word (the Bible). They are two sides of the same coin. In fact, only through Scripture can we know Jesus. We “walk” or live our lives “in Him,” meaning that we allow His Word and His Spirit to guide us in all our decisions and practices.

In Colossians 2:7, Paul employs a common biblical metaphor that likens Christians to plants. We become rooted in Christ by accepting Him as our Savior and ordering our life according to His Word. That is how we become “established in the faith.”

How do the following passages illuminate the plant metaphor as a symbol of believers? (*See Isa. 61:3, Matt. 3:10, Luke 8:11–15, 1 Cor. 3:6*)

Paul clearly delineates the two alternatives open to believers. One is to remain a “planting of the LORD” (*Isa. 61:3*) and continue being complete in Christ by holding on to Him and His teachings. The other could be likened to an artificial plant that may look real but is actually lifeless. By adopting human philosophies and traditions, we are taken “captive” (*Col. 2:8, ESV*). Although Christ has set us free, it is possible to be enslaved again with a yoke of bondage (*Gal. 5:1; compare Acts 15:10*).

In short, accepting unbiblical teachings means rejecting Christ, because those who buy into false teachings have, unfortunately, adopted a different gospel and have accepted human authorities over the authority of Scripture (*see Gal. 1:6–9*). This was a danger in the early church and remains so today.

What has been your own experience with what it means to die to self in order to receive Christ? Why must that be a continual process?

Nailed to the Cross

Read Colossians 2:11–15. What issues does Paul seem to be combating here?

How often have we seen these texts, especially Colossians 2:14, misused as an argument against the law and keeping the Sabbath?

To help understand these texts, two main interpretations have been proposed by Seventh-day Adventists: First, the “handwriting” nailed to the cross is the list of charges leveled “against us,” similar to the writing Pilate hung on Jesus’ cross (*Matt. 27:37; John 19:19, 20*). Or, second, the ceremonial law written by Moses (*see Deut. 31:24–26*) was nailed to the cross.

When we look at the verse in its larger context, we can see that it is clearly talking about the ceremonial law.

Paul also refers to “circumcision made without hands” (*Col. 2:11*), that is, “of the heart” (*Rom. 2:28, 29; compare Deut. 30:16*), in apparent contrast to fleshly circumcision, which was one of the most important stipulations of the ceremonial law (*Lev. 12:3; compare Exod. 12:48*).

Paul then connects this inward change with “putting off the body of the sins of the flesh” and with baptism by immersion. With this baptism, we identify ourselves with Christ’s death and resurrection (*Col. 2:11, 12*).

This conversion experience is then likened to having been “dead in trespasses” and “made . . . alive” with Christ, who “forgave us all our trespasses” (*Col. 2:13, NRSV*).

The word “ordinances” (*Col. 2:14*) refers to legal decrees, whether secular (*Luke 2:1, Acts 17:7*) or ecclesiastical (*Acts 16:4*). This Greek word’s only other occurrence in Paul’s writings refers to the ceremonial law, which formed a wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles (*Eph. 2:14, 15*).

Because Paul has already referred to the forgiveness of sins and the inner change symbolized by baptism, it is unlikely he would return to that topic again with a different metaphor not used anywhere else in Scripture. Rather, Paul seems to be emphasizing a similar point as made in Ephesians: that the Gentile believers in Colossae need not worry about keeping the ceremonial law, including circumcision, nor about the purity laws that went with such a commitment (*compare Acts 10:28, 34, 35*).

Clearly, Paul was not suggesting that the Ten Commandments were nailed to the cross, not when elsewhere he defines sin as violation of the Ten Commandments (*Rom. 7:7*).

Shadow or Substance?

Read Colossians 2:16–19. What Jewish-Christian practices are highlighted here by Paul?

To this day, scholars do not agree on exactly what the issues were that Paul was addressing here. What we can be sure of is that Paul's epistle itself provides quite a bit of information on what seems to have been a Jewish-Christian divisive influence on this predominantly Gentile church (*Col. 2:13*). That is, the Jewish believers were pushing things that were not necessary for the members to follow.

Clearly, Colossians 2:16 lists a number of regular Jewish practices that were apparently continued among some Jewish converts to Christianity. But even the elements in Colossians 2:18 fit the same context. Jesus criticized pretensions to humility among the religious leaders (*for example, Matt. 6:1, 5, 7, 16*). From the scrolls of Qumran, we learn that angels featured prominently in some Jewish conceptions of worship. So, the problems that Paul was confronting in Colossae were most likely similar to those he confronted elsewhere.

Since Colossians 2:16 is so often misunderstood, it is important to consider it in greater detail. Notice these points:

Paul's use of "therefore" (*ESV*) signals that this is a conclusion drawn from what he has already said. Previously, the need for literal circumcision was dismissed because it is the inward change of the heart that matters (*Col. 2:11–15*).

"Food and drink" refer to the meal and drink offerings that the Israelites brought to the temple.

The specification of "a festival or a new moon or sabbaths" (*Col. 2:16, NKJV*) apparently alludes to Hosea 2:11, where the same sequence of ceremonial days are referred to, which includes ceremonial sabbaths (*see, for example, Lev. 23:11, 24, 32*).

Crucial to our understanding of this verse is Paul's own interpretation: that these "are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ" (*Col. 2:17, NKJV*). These ceremonial days, like the sacrifices, pointed to the work of Christ (*see 1 Cor. 5:7, 1 Cor. 15:23*). The seventh-day Sabbath, in contrast, was instituted in Eden, before sin, and long before the ceremonial sacrifices of the sanctuary were adopted; therefore, it was not a shadow to be done away with after the Cross.

Although the seventh-day Sabbath is not at issue here, how might you apply Paul's counsel about not passing judgment on others?

Commandments of Men

Read Colossians 2:20–23. How do you understand Paul’s admonitions in light of the other elements discussed in this chapter?

As in his epistle to the Galatians, Paul characterizes the concern over keeping Jewish ceremonies as “the basic principles of the world” (*Col. 2:8, 20, NKJV; compare Gal. 4:3, 9*). In other words, like the earthly temple, these things belong to the earth, but our citizenship is in heaven. We need not be encumbered with the ceremonial law because it merely foreshadowed the reality that we now enjoy through Christ. That is, even though originally given by God, these ordinances, having served their function, are no longer needed.

Because all these regulations were done away with at the Cross, as indicated by the divine hand rending the temple veil (*Matt. 27:51; compare Dan. 9:27*), Christians (including Jewish-Christians) are not subject to these regulations. By submitting to them, we would actually be identifying ourselves with this world, which is passing away, in contrast to the new world promised us in Christ.

After all, we look forward to “new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness” (*2 Pet. 3:13*) and not merely a renovation of this old one.

Besides the fact that Pharisees and scribes had added additional human requirements on top of the Mosaic regulations (*see Mark 7:1–13*), the perpetuation of Old Testament ceremonies, which had been fulfilled by Christ, could no longer be considered divinely required, but only as humanly imposed duties. Indeed, it seems that they were becoming a burden to faith, as opposed to something that would enhance it. It’s so easy to start to look at doing all these things as not only making oneself superior to those who don’t, which is bad enough, but also perhaps even subtly as somehow being meritorious for salvation, a trap into which we don’t want to step.

Throughout Christian history, Bible experts have succumbed to the temptation to make religious pronouncements, usurping the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding believers as to what the text means. Christ Himself is the fountain from which springs the truth of the Scriptures as taught by Paul and the other Bible writers.

How can we make sure we understand that our only foundation for salvation is from what Jesus has done for us, outside of us, in place of us—regardless of whatever He does in us?

Further Thought: “As in the days of the apostles men tried by tradition and philosophy to destroy faith in the Scriptures, so today, by the pleasing sentiments of higher criticism, evolution, spiritualism, theosophy, and pantheism, the enemy of righteousness is seeking to lead souls into forbidden paths. To many the Bible is as a lamp without oil, because they have turned their minds into channels of speculative belief that bring misunderstanding and confusion. The work of higher criticism, in dissecting, conjecturing, reconstructing, is destroying faith in the Bible as a divine revelation. It is robbing God’s word of power to control, uplift, and inspire human lives. By spiritualism, multitudes are taught to believe that desire is the highest law, that license is liberty, and that man is accountable only to himself.

“The follower of Christ will meet with the ‘enticing words’ against which the apostle warned the Colossian believers. He will meet with spiritualistic interpretations of the Scriptures, but he is not to accept them. His voice is to be heard in clear affirmation of the eternal truths of the Scriptures. Keeping his eyes fixed on Christ, he is to move steadily forward in the path marked out, discarding all ideas that are not in harmony with His teaching. The truth of God is to be the subject for his contemplation and meditation. He is to regard the Bible as the voice of God speaking directly to him. Thus he will find the wisdom which is divine.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 474, 475.

Discussion Questions:

- ① What does it mean that in Christ “dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily,” and that He “is the head of all principality and power” (*Col. 2:9, 10, NKJV*)? See also John 1:1, Hebrews 1:3, and 1 Peter 3:22.
- ② We’ve all probably heard Colossians 2:14–16 used as an argument against the seventh-day Sabbath. What other problems, besides what the lesson this week brought out, come with the use of these texts to argue that we no longer need to keep the fourth commandment?
- ③ How do you deal with those who insist that we *must* keep the ceremonial laws as well? Though, perhaps, one could find some spiritual or theological blessings in keeping them, what problems arise from insisting that they must be kept?
- ④ Ellen G. White wrote above that we should regard the Bible “as the voice of God speaking directly” to us. Why must we, then, guard ourselves diligently against anyone or anything that would weaken our faith in the authority and inspiration of *all* Scripture, even the parts that, in places, might make us uncomfortable?

Risking Prison or Death

After six months of going to church on Sabbaths, Rene was summoned by his boss. “The other accountant doesn’t work as well as you,” he said. “Can I ask you a favor? Can you work for at least one hour on Saturday?”

Rene remembered he had prayed for two years, “God, if You give me a chance to go to church on Saturday, I will keep the Sabbath holy until I die.”

He shook his head. “I cannot,” he said.

“You have to,” his boss said. “Only one hour. What time is your church?”
“Eight to 12.”

“Then in the afternoon. You can come at one o’clock.”

“But it’s Saturday.”

“It’s OK.”

“It’s not OK with me.”

Rene’s boss looked at him long and hard.

“It’s up to you,” he said, and left.

Six weeks later, the boss gave an ultimatum with a thinly veiled threat. “What’s your final decision?” he asked. “You have to work this coming Saturday. If you don’t, I don’t know what I will do.”

Rene knew he was working in a country hostile to Christianity. People didn’t have the right to exercise their religion. He had heard about people being imprisoned and facing death for their faith.

Back at home, he cried, “Lord, it seems like I have a lot of problems. Do You want me to die here?”

Three days later, Rene went to church on Sabbath. He lived in an apartment located in the same building as his office.

As he left the building, a coworker asked, “Are you not coming in today?”
“I will not come,” Rene replied.

Rene had a company cell phone, and he switched it off. He didn’t want to be tracked when he went to church.

That afternoon, his boss made a surprise visit to the office. He repeatedly called Rene but couldn’t reach him on the phone.



Later, the coworker told Rene, “The boss was like the devil. His eyes were very red, like he wanted to eat you. He might want to send you to prison. Please don’t get us in trouble, too.”

Rene Tualdo is chief financial officer of the 1000 Missionary Movement, whose headquarters in Silang, Philippines, were constructed with the help of a 1996 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering. Read more next week.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Colossians 2:16, 17*

Study Focus: *Colossians 2*

In the conclusion of Colossians 1, Paul expresses his desire for his audience to grow in maturity in Christ (*Col. 1:28*). In Colossians 2, he elaborates on this idea. Colossians 2:1–5 sets the basis for what comes next. Paul wants his readers to “knit together in **love**” (*Col. 2:2, NKJV, emphasis added*), to attain “to all riches of the full assurance of **understanding**, to the **knowledge** of the mystery of God” (*Col. 2:2, NKJV, emphasis added*), and to strengthen their **faith** in Christ (*Col. 2:5; emphasis added*). In short, Paul wants his readers to grow in their faith, in their knowledge of the mystery of God, and in their love for Christ and for one another. In essence, Paul is exhorting his audience to be “complete” in Christ or, to use a different term, to demonstrate “maturity” in the exercise of their faith. In Colossians 2:6–23, Paul gives more details on how this goal can be accomplished.

This week’s lesson emphasizes two major themes:

1. Completion in Christ involves knowing Him and growing in Him. This protects us from being misguided by false teachers.
2. Completion in Christ also involves trusting solely in Him for salvation, not in regulations. It is important to note, however, that the Cross makes the ceremonial law unnecessary, not the moral law. The Old Testament ceremonial events were but shadows of the future work and sacrifice of Christ. These types came to an end with His death. The Ten Commandments, nevertheless, including the seventh-day Sabbath, are still valid for Christians.

Part II: Commentary

Illustration

“When James Garfield, later to become President of the United States, was principal of Hiram College in Ohio, one father asked him if the course of his [son’s] studies could not be shortened so that his son might be able to complete his studies in less time. ‘Certainly,’ Garfield replied. ‘But it all depends on what you want to make of your boy. When God wants to make an oak, he takes one hundred years. When he wants to make a squash, he requires only two months.’ ”—Michael P. Green, *1500 Illustrations for*

Biblical Preaching (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), p. 356.

Paul said, “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (*Phil. 1:6, ESV*). Commenting on David’s spiritual journey, Alan Redpath expresses the same idea: “The conversion of a soul is the miracle of a moment, the manufacture of a saint is the task of a lifetime.”—Redpath, *The Making of a Man of God: Lessons From the Life of David* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 2013), from the Foreword.

Knowing Christ and Growing in Him

From reading Colossians, we can conclude that Paul was very worried about the infiltration of false teachers into the church. This concern is likely expressed by the sentence “What a great conflict I have for you” (*Col. 2:1, NKJV*). In this context, the term “conflict” probably means “anxiety” or “concern.”—William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 17. The Greek word translated as “conflict” is used elsewhere in reference to a struggle against human or spiritual opposition (*for instance, 1 Thess. 2:2*). In this context, it is employed to describe the apostle’s “untiring labor—an intense wrestling and struggle for the spread, growth, and strengthening of the faith as the goal of his mission.”—David J. Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors: Their Context and Character* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), p. 290.

The term “conflict” comes from the context of sports, more specifically from the athletic contests. Thus, it suggests the idea of excruciating effort. These data indicate that Paul did not view dealing with false teachings as a minor matter. Should we? Very likely, by his conflict or struggle for the Colossians, Paul intended his prayers to be for them. Paul prayed that their hearts might be strengthened so that they would not be misled by false teachings. Paul wanted them to be “knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ” (*Col. 2:2, ESV*).

The concept of knowledge is very important in Colossians. Throughout the letter, Paul wants his audience to have knowledge of “the grace of God in truth” (*Col. 1:6, NKJV*); God’s “will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding” (*Col. 1:9, NKJV*); “the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you” (*Col. 1:27, NKJV*); “the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ” (*Col. 2:2, NKJV*). Thus, in short, Paul shows that the antidote against false teachings is knowledge of God and Christ (*Col. 2:1–4, 8*). This knowledge comes from the Word of God, as Paul hints in Colossians 3:16: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (*NKJV*).

Christ, Our Only Hope of Salvation

In Colossians 2:11–15, Paul extols Christ’s saving work for us. In Christ, we were circumcised “with the circumcision made without hands” (*Col. 2:11, NKJV*), meaning the work of Christ in our heart. We were “buried with Him in baptism” and “raised with Him” (*Col. 2:12, NKJV*). In other words, God made us alive with Christ and “forgave us all our sins” (*Col. 2:13, NIV*). In short, Paul is saying that Christ is our only hope of salvation.

However, some of Paul’s statements in Colossians 2, especially from Colossians 2:11–23, are used by many today to suggest that the apostle is talking about the cancellation of the Ten Commandments; more specifically, it is argued that the seventh-day Sabbath is no longer valid, nor binding upon Christians. Contrary to this assertion, Colossians 2 is not about the cancellation of the Ten Commandments. Paul implies several times throughout his letters, in Colossians and also elsewhere, that the Ten Commandments are valid for Christians, as one can see in the following passages.

Paul quotes the fifth commandment in Ephesians 6:2, 3; the sixth, seventh, and eighth in Romans 13:9; and the tenth in Romans 7:7 (*and also in Romans 13:9*). In Colossians 3:20, he repeats an exhortation that is found in Ephesians 6:1: “Children, obey your parents” (*NKJV*). Based on Ephesians 6:1–3, one can conclude that the exhortation “Children, obey your parents” (*both in Eph. 6:1 and Col. 3:20*) is grounded on the validity of the fifth commandment (*Eph. 6:2, 3; compare with Exod. 20:12*). In all these passages, it is implied that the Ten Commandments remain mandatory for believers under the new covenant. Additionally, the vice and virtue lists in the Pauline Epistles—and specially the vice list found in Colossians 3:5–9—are backgrounded by the Ten Commandments (see David W. Pao, *Colossians & Philemon*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012], p. 220).

A non-Adventist scholar recognizes, “There are good reasons for believing . . . that the Ten Commandments . . . are still binding on us. When Jesus, for example, talks about ‘the commandments,’ it is clear that it is the Ten Commandments he has in view (*Luke 18:20*). Similarly, when Paul talks about the law in Romans 7:7, he is referring to the Ten Commandments.”—Iain D. Campbell, *Opening Up Exodus, Opening Up Commentary* (Leominster, UK: Day One Publications, 2006), p. 83.

Regarding the seventh-day Sabbath, the evidence from the New Testament points out that it is binding for believers under the new covenant. Like Jesus, Paul was a Sabbath keeper (*see Luke 4:16, Acts 17:2*). In Revelation 14:6, 7, an allusion to the fourth commandment underscores the validity of the seventh-day Sabbath for Christians. Similarly, when Paul and Barnabas protested against being worshiped by idolaters, they called attention to the worship of “the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them” (*Acts 14:15*,

NKJV; see *Exod. 20:11*). It is also possible that in his portrayal of Christ's preeminence in Colossians 1:15–20, Paul has both Genesis 1 and 2 and Exodus 20:8–11 in mind. These two passages have in common the theme of Sabbath (see John K. McVay, “Colossians,” in Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, ed., *Andrews Bible Commentary: New Testament* [Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2022], pp. 1745, 1751–1753).

Given that Paul was a Sabbath keeper, he clearly cannot be arguing for the cancellation of the Ten Commandments in Colossians 2:11–23. Thus, the “handwriting of requirements” (*Col. 2:14, NKJV*) nailed on the cross is not referring to the moral law. Instead, it may be a reference to the ceremonial law or a sort of debt certificate. Likewise, Colossians 2:16 is not discussing the weekly seventh-day Sabbath. Instead, the text may refer to (1) the ceremonial sabbaths, (2) the sacrifices offered during Jewish festivals or, perhaps, (3) keeping the seventh-day Sabbath for the wrong reasons. For details, see John K. McVay, “Colossians,” in Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, ed., *Andrews Bible Commentary: New Testament* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2022), pp. 1752, 1753.

Part III: Life Application

Meditate upon the following themes. Then ask your students to answer the questions at the end of the section.

Philippians 1:6 is certainly one of the most well-known passages in the Bible. We love this promise: “He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (*NKJV*). It is essential to remember that completion in Christ involves the process of getting to know Him through His Word. Indeed, there is no way to remain in Him unless His words abide in us (*John 15:7*). From the Word of God we receive nourishment for spiritual growth (*1 Pet. 2:2*), which includes growth in faith (*Rom. 10:17*). As the psalmist says, “And those who know Your name will put their trust in You” (*Ps. 9:10, NKJV*). The knowledge of God and His Word prevents us from being misguided by false teachings.

The true knowledge of God naturally leads to submission and faithfulness to Him. In that regard, the moral law plays a critical role, since it teaches us about God's character and reveals His will to us. Yet, some people say that the law is an obstacle to the gospel. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. The reality is quite the opposite. In the words of Joe M. Sprinkle, a non-Adventist scholar, the moral law “is a prelude to the gospel” in the sense that it “points to Christ who is the fulfillment of the law.”—Sprinkle, *Biblical Law and Its Relevance: A Christian Understanding and Ethical Application for*

Today of the Mosaic Regulations, quoted in Roy E. Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians: Original Context and Enduring Application* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), p. 4, footnote 2.

Questions:

1. Share a favorite Bible text with the class. In what way has this text nourished you, strengthened your relationship with God, or protected you from false teachings?

2. How does the moral law point to Jesus? How is Jesus the fulfillment of the law? Why is it false to say that the moral law is an obstacle to the gospel?

Notes

Living With Christ



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Col. 3:1–17, Rom. 1:18, Rom. 6:1–7, Eph. 4:22–24, Deut. 7:6–8, 1 Sam. 16:23.*

Memory Text: “But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection” (*Colossians 3:14, NKJV*).

It's commonly urged not to be so heavenly-minded; otherwise, we'll be of no earthly good. While true in some sense, there's an equally important concept that Paul highlights in Colossians 3: if we are too earthly-minded, we will be of no heavenly use to the Lord.

Paul draws our attention to many practical, real-life principles that are born of heaven and can be understood only by those who are “risen with Christ” (*Col. 3:1*).

Paul's counsels are very down-to-earth principles that will enhance all our relationships, and not just within the church.

Jesus said, “ ‘Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you . . . that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust’ ” (*Matt. 5:44, 45, NKJV*).

Sound impossible? It is, humanly speaking. We need to die before we can really live for God. It's why we must be heavenly-minded if we hope to be of any earthly use to our heavenly Father.

This week we'll see ways in which living with Christ can make a difference, now and eternally.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 14.

Heavenly-Mindedness

Read Colossians 3:1–4. What condition does Paul indicate is necessary for us to be heavenly-minded? What do you think that means?

From a mountaintop, it is possible to survey a vast landscape that is all around you. From time immemorial, mountains have been frequented by those seeking a closer experience with God (*see Ps. 121:1, 2*). Even human-made mountains, called ziggurats, have been constructed by pagans for a similar purpose—to meet with the gods. Interestingly, the city of Ur, which Abram was called to leave, had a very large ziggurat visible from miles around. But changing one’s elevation will never by itself draw anyone closer to heaven in a spiritual sense. Human effort never could.

Instead, only through a miracle of grace, whereby we died with Christ and were raised with Him (figuratively pictured by baptism [*Col. 2:12, 13*]), is it possible to draw nearer to heaven.

Notice that from the beginning of Colossians 3, the repeated emphasis on what is above, that is, what there is in heaven: “those things which are above,” “where Christ is,” “things above,” “with Christ in God,” “with Him in glory” (*Col. 3:1–4, NKJV*).

Admittedly, there is much in the Christian life that defies explanation. How can a person really “die” and “be raised” when, to all appearances, he or she is the same person and has had no such life-and-death experience? There is much that does not make sense to the natural mind, uninfluenced by the Holy Spirit. But to those who are spiritually-minded, because they have received the new heart promised by God, death to sin and being raised with Christ are genuine realities. As the hymn affirms: “You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart.”

Nevertheless, Paul gives these commands because there is a constant need for this spiritual life to be renewed (*see 2 Cor. 4:16*). We can, indeed, fall away and be lost! And we are never safe from temptation in this life.

We must, therefore, choose daily to “seek those things which are above” (*Col. 3:1*). Our eternal life is safely “hidden with Christ in God” (*Col. 3:3, NKJV*), but the outward expression of that life will be anything but hidden.

Where are your thoughts: usually above or usually below? If the latter, how do you change their direction?

End Earthliness

We hear many slogans today: “End war!” “End deforestation!” “End nuclear weapons!” But one we have probably never heard is “End earthliness!” That just doesn’t fit with the sensibilities of our world. Not that any of the other slogans are wrong or what they advocate is wrong. They’re just very shortsighted, considering the nearness of eternity. Our focus needs to be higher, eternally higher.

Read Colossians 3:5, 6 (*see also Rom. 6:1–7*). **How do we experience what it means to be dead to self and to earthliness and alive to “those things which are above” (Col. 3:1)?**

Even though spiritually we have died with Christ, our “members”—that is, the temptations that our body and mind present us—need to be put to death.

But we should realize two things in connection with this command.

First, in Colossians 3:1, the Greek form that Paul uses assumes that we have, in fact, been raised with Christ. Second, the command in Colossians 3:5 is a consequence of that fact (“Therefore”). We can put to death earthly things (fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, covetousness, etc.) only because we have been raised with Christ and have His spiritual life and power to put these things out of our minds and lives.

Interestingly, the only other occurrence in Greek of the exact phrase that appears in Colossians 3:6, “the wrath of God,” is in Romans 1:18. God “gives” people up to their own wicked ways, and so His wrath is also “coming” (*see Rev. 6:16, 17*) “on those who are disobedient” (Col. 3:6, *NRSV*). In Romans 1:18, Paul refers to “ungodliness and unrighteousness,” equating “uncleanness” (*using the same Greek word found in Colossians 3:5*) very specifically with people who indulge “the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies” (Rom. 1:24, *NKJV*).

How do they dishonor their bodies? First, because they refuse to recognize the Creator but also by “vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful” (Rom. 1:26, 27, *NKJV*).

How do we follow the words “mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth” (Col. 3:5)?

Renewed in Knowledge

Read Colossians 3:6–11. How does Paul continue with this train of thought?

The initial words of Colossians 3:8 signal the dramatic and decisive change from death to life: “But now.” The word “now” in Greek is emphatic. Now, that is, *because* you are risen with Christ and seek those things that are above, your present life is to show a marked contrast with your former life. Having put to death “what is earthly in you” (*Col. 3:5, ESV*), “now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth” (*Col. 3:8, NRSV*).

Both anger and wrath can describe God’s righteous response to sin (touched on yesterday) as it can for Jesus (*Mark 3:5, Rev. 6:16*). By contrast, we are urged to “be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (*James 1:19, 20, NKJV*). Malice wishes misfortune on another. Slander is designed to defame. Paul also condemns language that is abusive and obscene. Finally, lying to one another is forbidden (*compare Lev. 19:11, 18*), “since you have put off the old man with his deeds” (*Col. 3:9, NKJV*).

What does Paul mean by the “old man” in contrast with the “new man”? See Romans 6:6 and Ephesians 4:22–24.

The verbs Paul employs for this transformation from the old to the new allude to clothing, as if one took off old filthy garments and was clothed with new white garments (*compare Zech. 3:4*). A similar old/new distinction is made in regard to the old and new covenants, which are characterized respectively by the external letter of the law and by the law inscribed by the Spirit in the heart (*2 Cor. 3:4–18*).

These metaphors describe conversion and its effects, which Paul calls a “new creation” (*2 Cor. 5:17, NKJV*). We are “renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him [Christ]” (*Col. 3:10, NKJV*), who is the image of the invisible God (*Col. 1:15*). Gaining a knowledge of Christ through His Word transforms us “into the same image from glory to glory” (*2 Cor. 3:18*). This places us above all ethnic, geographical, and social boundaries (*Col. 3:11*), because we are citizens of a higher kingdom.

Character of the New Life

Having described the bad habits and negative qualities that are removed and put away when we come to Christ, Paul proceeds to the positive—like moving from darkness to light.

Read Colossians 3:12–14. How are believers described, and how do you think it relates to the qualities they are to “put on”?

Like Israel, called by God to be His special people and reflect His character, believers in Jesus are “the elect of God” (*Col. 3:12, NKJV*), His “chosen ones” (*ESV*). Not all, though, live up to this calling. As Jesus said, “ ‘Many are called, but few are chosen ’ ” (*Matt. 22:14; compare Matt. 24:22, 24, 31*). Paul’s references to the elect have a similar meaning (*Rom. 8:33, 2 Tim. 2:10*). Also, like Israel, believers are “loved” by God and “holy” (*Deut. 7:6–8*). This privilege carries with it an important responsibility: to “proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (*1 Pet. 2:9, NKJV*). And we do that by how we live now.

The eight qualities mentioned by Paul are quite a list! “Tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another,” and “above all . . . love” (*Col. 3:12–14, NKJV*). These can spring only from a heart united with Christ, because they describe His character and how He has dealt with us. We are to forgive others “even as Christ forgave you” (*Col. 3:13*). Love is “the bond of perfection” (*Col. 3:14, NKJV*), because it is His love toward us that binds us to Him and enables us to truly love others (*1 John 4:11, 12*).

These qualities impact our relationships in two ways. First, showing love, mercy, kindness, and forgiveness toward others blesses us and others. It is fulfilling to love and bless others. People will normally respond to us in kind, and we continue to receive God’s mercy and forgiveness (*Matt. 5:7, Matt. 6:14*). Second, and more important, it glorifies God and may encourage others to believe and follow Jesus, because it shows the power of divine grace. “No other influence that can surround the human soul has such power as the influence of an unselfish life. The strongest argument in favor of the gospel is a loving and lovable Christian.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 470.

How well are you representing Jesus in the way you treat others, especially those who may be unkind to you?

Living the New Life

Paul's concern for peace and harmony in the church appears clearly in the last verses of Colossians 3. We've already looked at God's peace in some detail (*see Lesson 7*). Unlike the *pax Romana*, the *pax Christi* is not a peace imposed from the outside but is to "rule" us from within. That can happen only if Christ is in control.

Read Colossians 3:16, 17. What specifically enables Christ to be in control, and what role does music play in all this?

The language is very descriptive. It pictures the word of Christ making its home in us. That happens when we read the Bible attentively in order to listen and learn from God's wisdom. Apparently, though the Greek text is somewhat ambiguous, music plays an important role in "teaching and admonishing one another" (*Col. 3:16*).

But not just any music. Paul uses very specific terminology both here and in Ephesians 5:19: "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs."

Though we can't be certain, it seems a distinction is made here between the existing Old Testament collection of psalms and a growing New Testament collection of hymns. "Spiritual songs" may be a more general term for any song of praise related to the spiritual life or the life of the church. The words of the songs are the means of teaching the truth and giving instruction on living the new life of a Christian. Many great hymns of the past few centuries have powerfully uplifting messages of hope and assurance, so needed in a world that so easily drags us all down.

Music's influence is powerful. David's playing of the harp had a soothing effect on King Saul (*1 Sam. 16:23*). But when David became his rival, Saul's anger and resentment rose (*1 Sam. 18:10, 11*). Calm classical music has been clinically shown to reduce anxiety, optimize brain function, increase relaxation, help with pain, and increase socialization.

Who among us has not seen for themselves the powerful influence music, for good or bad, can have on our emotions and thoughts? Music—the right music—can be spiritually uplifting.

We are told that whatever we do, "do all in the name of the Lord Jesus" (*Col. 3:17*). Can you truly say that you do that? If not, how can you change; that is, what must you stop doing if you cannot do it in the name of the Lord?

Further Thought: “When the Spirit of God controls mind and heart, the converted soul breaks forth into a new song; for he realizes that in his experience the promise of God has been fulfilled, that his transgression has been forgiven, his sin covered. He has exercised repentance toward God for the violation of the divine law, and faith toward Christ, who died for man’s justification. ‘Being justified by faith,’ he has ‘peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Romans 5:1.

“But because this experience is his, the Christian is not therefore to fold his hands, content with that which has been accomplished for him. He who has determined to enter the spiritual kingdom will find that all the powers and passions of unregenerate nature, backed by the forces of the kingdom of darkness, are arrayed against him. Each day he must renew his consecration, each day do battle with evil. Old habits, hereditary tendencies to wrong, will strive for the mastery, and against these he is to be ever on guard, striving in Christ’s strength for victory. . . .

“The power of a higher, purer, nobler life is our great need. The world has too much of our thought, and the kingdom of heaven too little.

“In his efforts to reach God’s ideal for him, the Christian is to despair of nothing. Moral and spiritual perfection, through the grace and power of Christ, is promised to all. Jesus is the source of power, the fountain of life. . . . In our behalf He sets in operation the all-powerful agencies of heaven. At every step we touch His living power.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 476–478.

Discussion Questions:

- ① What has been your own experience with the promise that you have been “justified by faith”? How has this wonderful promise changed your life? How is that promise linked to the idea that you also “have been raised with Christ”?
- ② What does it mean to you to be heavenly-minded? Is it more important than doing earthly good? Where is the balance?
- ③ Think about the kind of influence your life has on others. And though we tend to think of this in the context of our individual influence, what about our influence as a church? How does your local church impact your local community?
- ④ Read Colossians 3:11. What should this tell us about the unity we should have in Christ?

Facing an Ultimatum

On the Sabbath that Rene chose to go to church rather than to the office, he returned after sundown to the building where he lived and worked. A coworker handed him a letter from the boss. He had been fired.

Rene was shocked. He didn't know what would happen next. As a foreigner working in a country hostile to Christianity, he wondered if he could stand firm for God if he were sent to prison or faced death.

He prayed, "Lord, is this the time for me to go home to the Philippines? If You want me to die here, it's fine with me. Many people know I'm fighting for my faith."

Early the next morning, he went to the office and emailed his boss. "I respect you," he wrote. "You are my friend and big brother. I know we need to discuss the problems that I have caused when you come to the office."

That night, his boss came to work. He seemed upset. Rene prayed, "Please help. Let my boss calm down. But if it's Your will that I die, I accept it."

Then the boss summoned Rene. Rene tried to stand up but couldn't. His knees wouldn't support him. He felt like he was dying.

With all his strength, he lifted himself out of his chair and walked awkwardly, hunched over, to his boss's office. As he raised his hand to knock on the door, he heard a voice whisper, "Don't be afraid. I am the true God. I am faithful to My promises."

A moment later, he opened the door and saw his boss's stern face. As he walked in, the voice whispered twice, "I am the true God. I am faithful to My promises." With each repetition, the voice grew louder.

The boss handed two pieces of paper to Rene and said, "Choose one." When Rene expressed bewilderment, the boss said, "One is a work contract. The other is a plane ticket." Relieved, Rene prayed silently, "Thank You, Lord, it isn't prison." He chose the plane ticket.

But the boss said, "Read the contract first."

Rene saw his pay would be doubled if he worked one hour on Saturdays. He chose the ticket again. As he wondered how he would pay for it, he heard the voice again, saying, "I am the true God. I am faithful to my promises."



Rene returned home to the Philippines. On the plane, he prayed, "You say, 'I am the true God. I am faithful to My promises.' What is Your promise to me?" The voice whispered, "You won't be able to use up all your money before you find a new job."

Rene Tucaldo is chief financial officer of the 1000 Missionary Movement, whose headquarters in Silang, Philippines, were constructed with the help of a 1996 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering. Read the rest of the story next week.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Colossians 3:14*

Study Focus: *Col. 3:1–17*

In Colossians 3:1–17, Paul discusses the characteristics of an authentic Christian life. He emphasizes the believers' union with Christ. Such a union means that the believer shares in Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and glorification. Paul elaborates on this notion by saying that Christ is our life (*Col. 3:4*). We died with Him. Our life is hidden with Him in God (*Col. 3:3*). We were raised with Him (*Col. 3:1*). Thus, we must "seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God" (*Col. 3:1, NKJV*), which implies that we reign with Him (*see Rom. 5:17*).

The theme of "union with Christ" is a topic addressed elsewhere in the New Testament. In fact, this teaching comes from Jesus (*John 15:5*). Paul, in referring to the believer's deep connection with Christ, uses the phrase "in Christ" (*see, for instance, Rom. 6:11, 2 Cor. 5:17, among many other passages*). Paul also suggests that the life of a true believer is, in a sense, a "replay" of Jesus' mission. Thus, as followers of Jesus, we must walk as Jesus walked (*1 John 2:6*). Our old self was crucified with Christ (*Rom. 6:6, Gal. 2:20*). We died with Him (*Rom. 6:5*) and were buried with Him (*Rom. 6:4, Col. 2:12*). We were raised with Him (*2 Cor. 4:14, Col. 3:1*) and sat with Him in the heavenly places (*Eph. 2:6*).

This week's lesson emphasizes two major themes:

1. The true believer is one who has replaced an earthly mindset with a heavenly mindset.
2. The true believer exhibits the characteristics of a new life in Christ.

Part II: Commentary

Illustration

"In the old Roman walls the mortar seems to be as hard as the stones, and the whole is like one piece; you must blow it to atoms before you can get the wall away. So is it with the true believer: he rests upon his Lord till he grows up into him, till he is one with Jesus by a living union, so that you scarce know where the foundation ends and where the upbuilding begins; for the believer becometh all in Christ, even as Christ is all in all to him."—Charles H. Spurgeon, "Faith's Sure Foundation," in *The*

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons, vol. 24 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1878), p. 463.

Earthly Mindset Versus Heavenly Mindset

In Colossians 3:1–11, Paul discusses the contrast between the new life in Christ and the old life with its fleshly desires. Paul begins the section with the phrase, “If then you were raised with Christ” (*Col. 3:1, NKJV*). However, there is no doubt as to the believer’s participation in Christ’s resurrection. Indeed, the phrase could be rendered, “If then you were raised with Christ, and you have been.” This sentence completes the thought introduced in Colossians 2:20: “If you died with Christ” (*NKJV*). Paul is arguing that because the Colossians died with Christ (*Col. 2:20*) and were raised with Him (*Col. 3:1*), they must live accordingly. It is important to note that the expression “were raised” is in the passive voice in both English and Greek. The use of the passive voice indicates that the new life in Christ is not the result of human achievements but the work of God in the heart. This principle is a corrective to the teaching that humans can reach salvation through their own efforts.

In the early verses of Colossians 3, Paul encapsulates the concept of the new life in Christ through the phrase “those things which are above” (*Col. 3:1, 2; in Greek, ta anō*). Conversely, the old life is portrayed by means of a similar phrase, “things on the earth” (*see Col. 3:2, 5; in Greek, ta epi tēs gēs*). Paul strongly exhorts his audience to do two things in relation to the things above. They must seek them (*Col. 3:1*) and set their mind on them (*Col. 3:2*). The Greek word translated as “set one’s mind on” is *phroneō*. This term reflects the act of thinking (*see Rom. 12:3, 1 Cor. 4:6, Phil. 1:7, Phil. 3:15*). In other words, Paul is saying that heavenly things should occupy our thoughts. Colossians 3:1–4, which introduces the new section, is saturated with references to Christ: we were raised with Christ (*Col. 3:1*), Christ is at God’s right hand (*Col. 3:1*), our life is hidden with Christ (*Col. 3:3*), and Christ is our life (*Col. 3:4*). For Paul, seeking and thinking about the things above is synonymous with living a life for, and through, Christ until the day we share in His glory (*Col. 3:4*).

To live for Christ means to be dead to earthly things (*Col. 3:2, 3*). To make this point very clear, Paul provides a list of vices that believers should avoid at all costs (*Col. 3:5*). He further mentions that “because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience” (*Col. 3:6, NKJV*). In these two verses, Paul is characterizing the old life before conversion. The sons of disobedience are those who seek earthly things and set their minds on them. This contrasts with the attitude of those who died to self and were raised with Christ.

To further characterize the old life, Paul presents a second list of

vices: “Anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth,” and lies (*Col. 3:8, 9, NKJV*). Paul labels the man who lives according to “the things on the earth” as the “old man” (*Col. 3:9*) and the man who lives according to the things above (*Col. 3:1*) as the “new man” (*Col. 3:10*). The contrast between the two is further highlighted through the verbs “put off” (from the Greek *apekdyomai*) and “put on” (from the Greek *endyō*). Paul is employing a wordplay in order to emphasize an important Bible truth: the old man is immersed in his deeds (*Col. 3:9*), whereas the new man “is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him” (*Col. 3:10, NKJV*). Further on, the apostle provides more insight into what the new life in Christ looks like.

Characteristics of the New Life in Christ

Paul begins the new section in Colossians 3:12–17 with the word “therefore.” By using this term at the beginning of the new section, Paul indicates that the exhortations in Colossians 3:12–17 must be seen as a consequence, or result, of what he discussed in Colossians 3:1–11. Those who seek the things above and think about them, in accordance with Colossians 3:1, 2 (and have been regenerated spiritually, as symbolized by the new man in Colossians 3:10), are now portrayed as “the elect of God, holy and beloved” (*Col. 3:12, NKJV*).

According to Paul, the true believer is someone who puts **off** certain things (*Col. 3:8*) so as to put **on** other things, such as “tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering” (*Col. 3:12, NKJV*). Whereas the old man’s life is characterized by lying “to one another” (*Col. 3:9, NKJV; from the Greek allelōn*), the new man’s life is characterized by “bearing with one another (*Col. 3:13, NKJV; also from the Greek allelōn*) and “forgiving one another” (*Col. 3:13, NKJV*). However, Paul says, “above all these things [that is, the virtue list in *Col. 3:12, 13*], **put on** love, which is the bond of perfection” (*Col. 3:14, NKJV, emphasis added*). Paul implies that all the other virtues can be put into practice only if love marks the relationships within the church. In other words, Paul is saying that when we love, we demonstrate “tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering” (*Col. 3:12, NKJV*). We also bear with one another and forgive one another (*Col. 3:13*). What a powerful statement!

The new life in Christ also is characterized by the presence of God’s peace (*Col. 3:15*). This peace within the church community is possible only because God reconciled all things to Himself through Christ, who “made peace through the blood of His cross” (*Col. 1:20, NKJV*). In other words, peace in human relationships is a result of peace with God.

Finally, the new life in Christ includes an unyielding adherence to the Word of Christ (*Col. 3:16*). By saying that the word of Christ must

“**dwell** among you richly as you **teach** and **admonish** one another with all **wisdom**” (*Col. 3:16, NIV, emphasis added*), Paul implies that Jesus’ teachings ought to occupy our entire lives. This statement is very similar to the one found in Colossians 1:28: “He is the one we proclaim, **admonishing** and **teaching** everyone with all **wisdom**, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ” (*NIV, emphasis added*). Three important things can be noted, based on the parallels between these two verses. First, Christ and His teachings are inseparable in the sense that it is not possible to accept Christ without accepting His teachings. Second, the goal of proclamation is to present “everyone fully mature in Christ” (*Col. 1:28, NIV*). Third, people who have experienced a true conversion are involved in mission. Paul closes his teachings in Colossians 3:1–17 with a summarizing thought: he implies that those who live a new life do all things “in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him” (*Col. 3:17, NKJV*).

Part III: Life Application

Meditate upon the following themes. Then ask your students to answer the questions at the end of the section.

The assertion that Christ is our life (*Col. 3:4*) is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable statements in the Bible. If Christ is our life, without Him we “can do nothing” (*John 15:5*), and through Him we “can do all things” (*Phil. 4:13*). If Christ is our life, His grace is sufficient for us (*2 Cor. 12:9*). If Christ is our life, we “have been crucified” with Him, and we no longer live, but He lives in us (*Gal. 2:20*).

Paul is talking about such a profound relationship with Christ that we participate in His life, death, resurrection, and glorification. In order to emphasize this reality, the apostle constantly uses the phrase “with Christ” (seven times!) throughout his letter to the Colossians. Thus, we died (*Col. 2:20*), were buried (*Col. 2:12*), were raised (*Col. 2:12, Col. 3:1*), were made alive (*Col. 2:13*), and are hidden (*Col. 3:3*) *with Christ*, in such a way that we “will appear *with Him* in glory” (*Col. 3:4, NKJV; emphasis added*).

“In some mysterious fashion, every believer in Christ is united with Christ, so that his death is ours, his burial is ours, his new life is ours, his position in heaven is ours, and his glorious return is ours. . . . When we become ‘one spirit’ with Christ, our debts are transferred to him, and his assets are transferred to us.”—“Christ, Your Life: Colossians 3:4,” in *Devotions on the Greek New Testament: 52 Reflections to Inspire & Instruct*, ed. J. Scott Duvall and Verlyn D. Verbrugge (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), pp. 102, 103. Nothing could grant us a deeper sense of belonging than our union with Christ!

Questions

1. Christ is our life. What does this remarkable statement suggest to us about the kind of relationship we can, and indeed must, have with Christ?

2. What does it mean to participate in the life, death, resurrection, and glorification of Christ? How do you participate in these things in your life today?

Notes

Living With Each Other



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Col. 3:18–4:6; Eph. 5:22–25, 33; Prov. 22:6, 15; 1 Pet. 2:16; 1 Thess. 5:17.*

Memory Text: “Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one” (*Colossians 4:6, NKJV*).

When people live and work in close proximity, they meet a variety of challenges. Differences of opinion may cause tensions; arguments may ensue. The closer the relationship, the more important it is for everyone in that relationship to get along.

The closest relationships are, of course, within the family. The home has sometimes been called “the family firm.” It’s an interesting way to describe how the home operates. There are definite similarities between running a business and running a household. There should be general agreement on values, goals, and objectives. Everyone should get along with each other and do their part well for things to run smoothly. The same principles apply to the church, which is essentially a large family.

In our passage for this week, Paul provides some vital principles for how a Christian family functions best. Because the Christian home should be governed by biblical principles, it necessarily functions somewhat differently from the typical Roman household. Paul also gives other valuable principles that are helpful for a variety of social relations, both inside and outside the home.

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

Husbands and Wives

Several sets of instructions for Christian homes are included in the New Testament (see *Eph. 5:21–6:9*, *Col. 3:18–4:1*, *Titus 2:1–10*, *1 Pet. 2:18–3:7*). Notably, these “household codes,” as they are called, are not completely hierarchical but include elements to make the relationships more reciprocal and mutually edifying.

Read Colossians 3:18, 19. What balance do you see? What additional counsels does Paul give in Ephesians 5:22–25, 33?

Some men quote, “Wives, submit to your husbands” (*Col. 3:18, ESV*) and stop there, but notice the important qualifier Paul adds: “as is fitting in the Lord.” Nowhere does the New Testament teach that women are to submit to all men; nor that wives are subservient or subjugated; nor that they are to blindly submit to their husbands’ every whim or desire. Paul’s point is that the wife’s loyalty is to the Lord first and to her husband second. The wife’s individuality must not be swallowed up by her husband, nor can he act as her conscience.

Christ’s love for the church in giving Himself up for her illustrates how husbands should love their wives (*Eph. 5:25*). They will be faithful regardless of the cost. They will make decisions that are in the best interests of the wife, though normally these interests should be aligned. Love like this makes it easier for the wife to obey God’s command to respect her husband (*Eph. 5:33*).

A healthy Christian marriage is characterized by mutuality—consulting each other, thinking things through together, and making decisions as a couple. Sometimes, when making decisions that have serious implications for the whole family, it may be appropriate to include children in these discussions, but never should parents quarrel in front of them. After such a process, if the husband and wife are unable to come to an agreement, the biblical path to peace is for the wife to acquiesce to her husband’s judgment, provided it does not violate the Word of God. By the same token, most, if not all, husbands can recall times they were happy that they listened to their wives and took their advice. The more the husband and wife work together as a team, the happier the marriage will be.

How can we avoid doing what has, unfortunately, been done all through history: taking the beautiful principles expressed in these texts and turning them into something evil?

Parents and Children

Children have a vital role as part of the family firm. They need to know they are loved and valued as members of the family and citizens of the heavenly kingdom. Family worship is crucial, simple but regular, morning and evening. At an early age, children can start helping with cleaning and other responsibilities. Most important, they should heed Paul's command: "Obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord" (*Col. 3:20, NKJV*).

Read the following passages. What principles are given for raising children?

1. *Prov. 22:6, 15* _____

2. *Matt. 19:14* _____

3. *Deut. 6:6, 7* _____

4. *Prov. 1:8, 9* _____

Rightly trained for the Lord, by precept and example, children will be a blessing to the family, the church, and beyond. And Paul's instruction for parents, like his instruction for husbands and wives, is balanced and reciprocal: "Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged" (*Col. 3:21, NKJV*). How parents, particularly the father, interact with and discipline children profoundly impacts their spiritual upbringing.

Studies show, too, that when both parents go to church, a higher percentage of children remain churchgoers, as opposed to if only one parent goes. Even more surprising, consistent church attendance by the father, even more than by the mother, means a greater number of children remain in church as adults. The role of the father, then, in the spiritual formation of his children, cannot be underestimated. How crucial that fathers take their roles seriously.

Not all fathers, however, have been (to put it mildly) exemplary role models for their children. How can knowledge of God as our Father help bring healing where needed, especially when earthly fathers have caused great damage?

Work Relations

Read Colossians 3:22–25 and Colossians 4:1. What instructions are given to slaves? What principles are here for work relations generally?

People today sometimes bring up slavery as a way to relegate some of the Bible's counsels to the past, if not to discredit Scripture entirely. But, ironically, this takes little to no account of the historical contexts within Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church. Human beings are made in God's image and, like all of God's intelligent beings, are designed for freedom. Mosaic laws prohibited Israelites from being perpetual slaves (*Deut. 15:12*) and stipulated six years as the maximum term of service to pay off financial indebtedness (*Exod. 21:2–6, Lev. 25:39–43*). The slavery in the Bible, however repugnant to our modern sense, was not normally like the abominable practices of slavery that have been seen in the Western world, which was a scourge and horrific crime against humanity.

In New Testament times, the church had to operate within the framework of Roman law, which provided for owning slaves: "But, unlike modern forms of slavery, Roman law afforded slaves considerable rights and opportunities, and attempting to overturn the practice could have threatened the advancement of the gospel."—Clinton Wahlen, "Culture, Hermeneutics, and Scripture: Discerning What Is Universal," in Frank M. Hasel, ed., *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Adventist Approach* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute/Review and Herald Academic, 2020), p. 166.

In fact, within the church, unlike more generally within the Roman Empire, the slave's first obligation was to the Lord. And their masters were instructed to treat them fairly, "knowing that you also have a Master in heaven" (*Col. 4:1, NKJV*). Moreover, Paul instructed Philemon not to treat Onesimus any longer as his slave but as his brother (*Philem. 16*). Actually, in both the Old and New Testaments, believers are called slaves (or servants) of God (*see, for example, Ps. 34:22, Luke 17:10, 1 Pet. 2:16*).

Even if we don't like the cultural circumstances in which some Bible texts were written, we still must accept the authority of the text itself. Otherwise, we have placed ourselves and our culture above Scripture. The better option is to look at everything the Bible says about a topic before reaching a conclusion about what the Bible is telling us about it.

Consider how this passage could apply to your relationships at work. How might its principles be helpful to you as a boss or an employee?

Praying for One Another

Read Colossians 4:2–4. What principles for prayer do you find in these verses? What prayer requests does Paul make?

Some of the most important words we can say to someone who is struggling with issues of various kinds, be they family, health, money, or something else, are “I’m praying for you.” This is heaven’s chosen means of connectivity and interactivity. “It is a part of God’s plan to grant us, in answer to the prayer of faith, that which He would not bestow did we not thus ask.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 525.

Notice the impactful descriptions of prayer Paul uses: “continue” (or persevere), “earnestly,” “being vigilant,” and “with thanksgiving”—signaling that this is a prayer of faith (*Col. 4:2, NKJV*). He tells us to pray “always” (*Eph. 6:18*) and “without ceasing” (*1 Thess. 5:17*). Most amazingly, even though “we know not what we should pray for as we ought . . . the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered” (*Rom. 8:26*).

Reread Colossians 4:3. What “door for the word” (*NKJV*) might God open for you to share your faith?

Significantly, Paul also prayed for the right words to speak. Sometimes, when we read his letters or his speeches in the book of Acts, we imagine that the apostle was always eloquent, with never a doubt as to what he should say. But here he asks for prayer that he may proclaim the message “clearly” (*Col. 4:4, NIV*). He also uses a very important Greek word (*dei*) in the last phrase of the verse, which could be translated “as I must speak,” pointing to the divine necessity of the work of proclaiming the gospel. He recognized the importance of presenting the message to people at the highest levels of the Roman government, including Caesar’s household.

“It is not always necessary to bow upon your knees in order to pray. Cultivate the habit of talking with the Saviour when you are alone, when you are walking, and when you are busy with your daily labor. Let the heart be continually uplifted in silent petition for help, for light, for strength, for knowledge. Let every breath be a prayer.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, pp. 510, 511.

Walking in Wisdom

What is the most important truth that we, as Christians, can know? Of course, it is that Jesus Christ died for our sins and that, through faith in Him, we can have eternal life. This is a truth that we could have never figured out on our own. Instead, it was a truth that had to be told, or revealed, to us. And it has been revealed to us—in the Word of God.

There’s a great deal of truth, knowledge, and wisdom that we would never have known were it not for what God has revealed to us in His Word. But this knowledge and wisdom have not been given to us just as knowledge, just as something to know. Rather, we are to live out in our own lives this truth, this knowledge, and this wisdom.

Read Colossians 4:5, 6. In what situations does Paul indicate we especially need to “walk in wisdom”? Why might that be?

Unfortunately, as Christians, sometimes we are anything but Christian! And, as Paul indicated (quoting Isaiah 52:5), Israel was also a stumbling block for unbelievers: “For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you” (*Rom. 2:24*). How we act toward others, especially those not of our faith, matters a lot (*see Titus 2:5, 2 Pet. 2:2*). A Christian home, a gathering of youth for prayer rather than for mischief; simple kindnesses; and a calm, patient spirit speak volumes to those who are watching to see whether our profession is genuine or not.

In Colossians 4:6, Paul focuses especially on the words we speak: “Let your speech always be gracious” (*ESV*). More than simply kind or polite, the words we speak should be prompted and permeated by God’s grace through the influence of the Holy Spirit.

“Seasoned with salt.” Opposite to the world’s definition of “salty” speech, our words should be fitting and appealing to those we address.

“That you may know how you ought to answer each one” (*NKJV*). Only the Holy Spirit can give us the right words at the right time for the right purpose and prepare the minds of the hearers for the message we “must” share (here, too, *dei* is used—see yesterday’s comments on *Colossians 4:4*).

Think about your words, your actions, and how you walk before others. What message are you sending about your faith and what it means to be a Christian?

Further Thought: “Every member of the family should realize that a responsibility rests upon him individually to do his part in adding to the comfort, order, and regularity of the family. One should not work against another. All should unitedly engage in the good work of encouraging one another; they should exercise gentleness, forbearance, and patience; speak in low, calm tones, shunning confusion; and each doing his utmost to lighten the burdens of the mother. . . .

“Each member of the family should understand just the part he is expected to act in union with the others. All, from the child six years old and upward, should understand that it is required of them to bear their share of life’s burdens.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, pp. 179, 180.

“We must let Christ into our hearts and homes if we would walk in the light. Home should be made all that the word implies. It should be a little heaven upon earth, a place where the affections are cultivated instead of being studiously repressed. Our happiness depends upon this cultivation of love, sympathy, and true courtesy to one another. . . . We should be self-forgetful, ever looking out for opportunities, even in little things, to show gratitude for the favors we have received of others, and watching for opportunities to cheer others and lighten and relieve their sorrows and burdens by acts of tender kindness and little deeds of love. These thoughtful courtesies, that, commencing in our families, extend outside the family circle, help make up the sum of life’s happiness; and the neglect of these little things makes up the sum of life’s bitterness and sorrow.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, pp. 539, 540.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ For married couples, what principles have helped you in your relationship? What advice do you have for the unmarried, and how they should prepare for the challenges that marriage always brings?
- ❷ Many loving, caring parents who raised their children in fine Christian homes often have to deal with adult children who reject the faith. What advice and comfort can you give them? What might be better not to say at all?
- ❸ Discuss further the admonition to “walk in wisdom.” In contrast, what does it mean to walk in “stupidity” as opposed to wisdom? What did you learn from the different times you might have walked in one or the other?

“Nothing Is by Chance”

Shortly after Rene arrived in the Philippines, he received an offer to work as an accountant with the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA). After one and a half years with ADRA, he worked for eight years as an accountant with the Adventist Church’s Cavite Mission. Rene enjoyed working with the Adventist Church. Life was simple and comfortable. As a boy, he had thought that becoming an Adventist was a path to wealth. But now he had no desire to be rich. He just wanted to serve others until Jesus’ second coming.

One day, Rene unexpectedly received an invitation to replace the retiring treasurer of the 1000 Missionary Movement, which is part of the Adventist Church’s Southern Asia-Pacific Division and trains hundreds of missionaries every year at its headquarters in Silang, a city in the Cavite Mission.

Rene wondered if he was dreaming. He had wanted to be part of the 1000 Missionary Movement ever since he had given his heart to Christ through the friendship of one of its missionaries.

That missionary, Rodel, now worked as an ordained pastor in the Philippines, and he would be surprised and pleased if Rene became treasurer. But Rene wondered, “Can I handle the job of treasurer? I’m only a simple accountant.”

That night, Rene dreamed that he was working at the 1000 Missionary Movement. Then the president of the Southern Asia-Pacific Division asked him to submit his resume for consideration for the job. A short time later, a division committee approved his candidacy, and he was hired.

Rene hasn’t looked back. As he has been faithful to God, he has seen relatives who once despised his faith join the Adventist Church. Two months after he moved back to the Philippines, his parents were baptized. “That was God’s gift to me,” he said. “It was like God was saying, ‘Because you have been loyal to Me, I have a gift for you.’ ” His two sisters also were baptized.

Meanwhile, the company where he had worked abroad collapsed during the COVID-19 pandemic. If he had accepted the pay increase, he would have lost everything. Today, he said, he owes all to the Lord who declares, “For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, . . . plans to give you hope and a future” (*Jer. 29:11, NIV*). “Nothing is by chance,” Rene Tualdo said. “God had a plan for me.”



The headquarters of the 1000 Missionary Movement in Silang, Philippines, was constructed with the help of a 1996 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering. Just as that offering is still being felt across the Southern Asia-Pacific Division and beyond through the work of the 1000 Missionary Movement, this quarter’s offering can also have a long-lasting impact. Thank you for your generous offering next Sabbath. Watch a short YouTube video with Rene at bit.ly/Rene-1000MM.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Colossians 4:6*

Study Focus: *Col. 3:18–4:6*

Colossians 3:18–4:1 contains a series of household rules. Paul summarizes how wives and husbands, children and parents, and slaves and masters are supposed to behave in light of the gospel message. As we will see, Paul is not one-sided in his discussion. He has specific instructions for all these groups and expects them to fulfill their duties as a demonstration of their faithfulness to God. Thus, wives are expected to submit to their husbands “as is fitting in the Lord” (*Col. 3:18, NKJV*); children must obey their parents because “this is well pleasing to the Lord” (*Col. 3:20, NKJV*); and bondservants must obey their “masters according to the flesh,” “fearing God” (*Col. 3:22, NKJV*).

Interestingly, “in each category, the party typically viewed as more vulnerable is addressed first. The commands to the vulnerable party are helpfully paired with specific commands to the one having more power. Paul calls on the powerful ones to not abuse their power but to use it wisely. This allows the vulnerable to more willingly submit to those in authority.”—Douglas Mangum, ed., “The Christian Home ([Col.] 3:18–4:1),” *Lexham Context Commentary: New Testament* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020). After addressing these issues, Paul turns to specific exhortations regarding the external influence that church members, through prayer, wisdom, and seasoned speech, may exert by presenting their faith to outsiders.

This week’s lesson emphasizes two major themes:

1. Biblical principles concerning both family and work relations;
2. Instructions about vigilant prayer, the wise walk, and gracious speech.

Part II: Commentary

Biblically Based Family and Work Relations

In Colossians 3:18–4:1, Paul addresses three pairs of human relationships, with specific exhortations for each one. Notably, the first group mentioned pertains to wives and husbands. This arrangement is not accidental, as Paul wants to emphasize that marriage is the basis for all other types of human relationships. The relationship between a man and a woman in marriage is such a crucial topic that it is referred to by Paul several

times throughout his letters (*1 Cor. 7:1–7, 27–31; 1 Cor. 11:3; and Eph. 5:21–33*).

Relationship Between Wives and Husbands

Paul's command for wives to submit to their husbands (*Col. 3:18*) has been a matter of much debate. The parallel passage in Ephesians 5:22 is almost synonymous: "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord" (*NKJV*). However, before making this statement, Paul first says, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (*Eph. 5:21, NIV*). The verb "submit" in Ephesians 5:22 does not occur in the original text in Greek but is correctly supplied, based on its occurrence in Ephesians 5:21. This provision suggests that Ephesians 5:22 is connected with Ephesians 5:21 and should be interpreted in that context. Thus, in a sense, not only are wives called to submit to their husbands, but husbands are also called to submit to their wives "out of reverence for Christ" (*Eph. 5:21, ESV*).

Paul's command for wives to submit to their husbands must not be interpreted in the sense of women's inferiority. Rather, "what is involved here is that in voluntarily subordinating herself to her husband the wife is to see this as done in subordination to the Lord, because in the marriage relationship her husband reflects the Lord while she reflects the Church."—Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 42 (Dallas, TX: Word, Incorporated, 1990), p. 368.

Notably, in both Ephesians and Colossians, the expected attitude of husbands toward their wives is the same: "Husbands, love your wives" (*Eph. 5:25, Col. 3:19, NKJV*). While the command to wives is almost synonymous in the parallel passages—"Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord" (*Eph. 5:22, NKJV*) and "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord" (*Col. 3:18, NKJV*)—the command to husbands shows a noteworthy distinction: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her" (*Eph. 5:25, NKJV; see also Eph. 5:28*), and "Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them" (*Col. 3:19, NKJV*). In Ephesians, husbands are expected to demonstrate a sacrificial love, just as Jesus did for the church.

In Colossians, the command for husbands to love their wives is coupled with the additional instruction not to "be bitter toward them." The Greek word is *pikrainō*, which is cognate to the word *pikros*, used to portray "a characteristic regularly attributed to a tyrannical overlordship."—James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), p. 249. Wives are expected to submit themselves voluntarily to their husbands, as they would submit themselves to the Lord.

Relationship Between Children and Parents

Paul's instructions for children and parents are based in reciprocal responsibilities, similar to his approach with wives and husbands. The command for children to obey their parents (*Col. 3:20*) is rooted in the fifth commandment. This basis is evident in Ephesians, in which, after giving a virtually identical command (*Eph. 6:1*), Paul quotes Exodus 20:12 (see *Eph. 6:2, 3*). Children are expected to be not only obedient to their parents but also a source of joy to them (*Prov. 15:20, Prov. 23:24, etc.*).

In turn, parents must not provoke their children. There is debate as to what Paul meant by using the term “provoke” (*Col. 3:21*). Nevertheless, Ellen G. White provides insight into its meaning when commenting on the words of Colossians 3:21: “Satan is well pleased when parents irritate their children by speaking harsh, angry words. Paul has given a caution on this point: ‘Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged.’ They may be very wrong, but you can not lead them to the right by losing patience with them.”—*Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 24, 1907.

Relationship Between Slaves and Masters

Finally, Paul addresses the relationship between slaves and masters. Both slaves and masters are expected to fulfill their duties in light of their responsibilities before God. Slaves are given two commands. First, they should obey their “masters . . . fearing God” (*Col. 3:22, NKJV*). The phrase “fearing God” is commonly understood as the basis for the second command, “since you fear God.” Slaves or bondservants should keep in mind that, ultimately, their service to an earthly master is representative of their service to the Lord Jesus (*Col. 3:23, 24*).

Contrary to what many people may think, slavery in the first century differed considerably from the form practiced in the Western World in recent times. Differences include the following: In New Testament times, “racial factors played no role; education was greatly encouraged (some slaves were better educated than their owners) and enhanced a slave’s value; many slaves carried out sensitive and highly responsible social functions; slaves could own property (including other slaves!); their religious and cultural traditions were the same as those of the freeborn; no laws prohibited public assembly of slaves; and (perhaps above all) the majority of urban and domestic slaves could legitimately anticipate being emancipated by the age of 30.”—S. Scott Bartchy, “Slavery: New Testament,” *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al., vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 66.

It is important to note that Paul is not legitimizing slavery, which we know is a reprehensible practice in any context whatsoever. He is simply

acknowledging a feature of the first-century culture. An eventual abolition of first-century slavery would have caused drastic economic repercussions, even for the slaves themselves. In this context, Paul provides a sharp exhortation to slave owners, urging them to treat those working for them in a just and fair manner (*Col. 4:1*), no matter how hard this may be for us today to understand.

Vigilant Prayer, Wise Walk, and Gracious Speech

It is noteworthy that the exhortations in Colossians 4:2–6 follow Paul's discussion of family and work relations. In this new section, Paul reveals his concern that the church community should bear good testimony to the external public. This sequence of themes suggests that for the gospel to influence outsiders, it must first shape the conduct of insiders, particularly within households. According to Paul's instructions in this passage, three steps must be followed for the gospel to reach outsiders in a powerful manner:

First, vigilant prayer (*Col. 4:2–4*). If we want to reach people for Christ, praying is an excellent starting point. Better yet, prayer is the best way to start! Paul even asked the church to pray, not only for themselves but also for him and Timothy, so they would have an open door for preaching.

Second, wise walk (*Col. 4:5*). As the New International Version puts it, “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.” The verb translated as “walk” in the NKJV is regularly used in the New Testament to indicate conduct. Not infrequently, it is rendered as “to live” or “to behave” (*see, for instance, Mark 7:5, Rom. 13:13, and Col. 2:6 in the NIV*).

Third, gracious speech (*Col. 4:6*). By gracious speech, Paul likely meant qualities such as courtesy, sweetness, and kindness, so as to cause a good impression on outsiders and attract them to the gospel of Jesus.

Part III: Life Application

Meditate upon the following themes. Then ask your students to answer the questions at the end of the section.

“A family is not simply a group of people dwelling under one roof. By that definition any hotel or prison could qualify. A family is not a group of people bearing the same name. Persons with the same name may live all over the nation and be total strangers. . . . Family is not simply people but a spirit of oneness. It is a spirit produced through loving and longing, laughter and tears, shared joy and sorrow, mutual struggle and respect, faith and joy and sorrow, . . . faith and faithfulness, and a common pursuit of worthy goals.”—Herschel H. Hobbs, *My Favorite Illustrations* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1990), p. 98. Our

churches, as extensions of our homes, should be places where one can find love, comfort, respect, and a deep sense of belonging.

Jesus said, “ ‘A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another’ ” (*John 13:34, 35, NKJV*). The New Testament authors took this very seriously (*see Rom. 13:8, Gal. 5:14, 1 Thess. 4:9, Heb. 13:1, James 2:8, 1 Pet. 1:22, 1 Pet. 4:8, 1 John 3:23, 2 John 5*). As Jesus did, Paul and James also related the practice of love with fulfilling the law (*see Rom. 13:8, 10; Gal. 5:14; and James 2:8*). Our households should be places where everyone reveals this love through prayer, a wise walk with the Lord, and gracious speech.

Questions:

- 1. In what ways is your church an extension of your home? What can your church do to foster more of a family spirit among its members?**

- 2. Our love for one another shows that we are Christ's disciples. How can our churches and households reveal this love more fully?**
