"Seek the Lord and Live!"

Major Lessons From Minor Prophets

april–june 2013

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GETTING THE MOST OUT OF CQ

FACTS YOU SHOULD KNOW

CQ is based on the conviction that the Word of God offers transforming power and that group study is one important way to tap into that power. CQ’s purpose is to provide Seventh-day Adventist young adults with a resource for devotional study on mutual topics, which can then be discussed each week in Sabbath School. Many who use the Adult Bible Study Guide find that because CQ deals with the same topics, it enriches lesson study and discussion as a supplemental aid.

About four hundred Adventist young adults contribute to CQ each year. The wide variety and occasional repetition of the content reflect the great diversity of its contributors around the world as they respond creatively and individually to the subject.

POINTER FOR STUDY

1. Through prayer, open your mind to the Holy Spirit’s guidance as you study.
2. The Bible passages on which each week’s lesson is based appear in bold type in the “Logos” portion of the lesson. Read these entire passages.
3. The Bible passages for the week are usually divided into sections on the “Logos” pages. When studying these sections, carefully reread the Bible passages indicated in bold headings before reading the comments beneath the headings.
4. Read the other sections for the week with the perspective you have gained from your own study of the biblical passages.
5. Keep in mind the purposes of each section of the Bible study guide: Introduction is designed to stimulate your interest and focus your thinking on the week’s theme.
   Logos is a guide for direct study of the Bible passages for the week.
   Testimony presents Ellen White’s perspective on the lesson theme.
   Evidence approaches issues raised by the lesson from a historical, scientific, philosophical, or theological perspective.
   How-to discusses what the abstractions in the lesson mean for day-to-day living.
   Opinion is a personal viewpoint on the lesson meant to encourage further thought and discussion.
   Exploration provides the reader with a variety of open-ended, creative ways to explore the topic of the week’s lesson.

CQ AND THE CHURCH

CQ is the General Conference–approved Bible study guide for the young-adult age group. It upholds the beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. However, its contents should not be regarded as official pronouncements of the church.
“With Such an Army of Youth”*

The Millerites were confident that Christ would return on October 22, 1844. When He did not, many of them ceased to believe in a literal Second Coming. Others returned to the Scriptures. Over the next 15 years, they identified important Bible truths forgotten since the early church. Through all of this, the scattered groups of believers were guided by Ellen G. White, a young woman whom they recognized as a prophet.

In the 1850s, there was no Seventh-day Adventist Church. Believers thought of themselves as belonging to “the Great Second Advent Movement.” Eventually, the seventh-day Sabbatarian Adventists were inspired to organize so they could preach the third angel’s message and win people everywhere to a fuller knowledge of our Savior. Thus, in 1863—150 years ago—they formed the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, an organized church focused on mission. The leaders of this movement were young. In 1844, James White was 23, Ellen Harmon (White) 16, Annie Smith 16, and John N. Andrews 15. John N. Loughborough and Uriah Smith were 13, and George I. Butler was just 10. These young men and women led the Bible conferences in the 1840s and 1850s, during which the beliefs of what became the Seventh-day Adventist Church were discussed and agreed upon. They also published pamphlets that explained the new beliefs and a magazine, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (today’s *Adventist Review*), which connected the scattered believers, and without which the church would never have been founded. While still in their 20s, it was they who campaigned to create an organization that would unite all Seventh-day Adventists and provide a basis for mission.

Today, we see pictures of these pioneers in later life, so it is easy to forget that they started our church when they were the age of college students today. As we mark 150 years of Seventh-day Adventists being united for spreading the gospel, there is more need than ever for young Adventist men and women to follow the example of our founders, to once again take the lead in the Great Second Advent Movement.

Del McKray was born in Columbus, Ohio, U.S.A. As a teen, he lived in the Pataskala, Ohio, area. After high school, he moved to Stokesdale, North Carolina, U.S.A., where he still lives.

He worked as an auto body repairman and a long-distance truck driver, traveling across the United States and parts of Canada, before attending Guilford Tech in Greensboro, North Carolina. There he received a degree in advertising and graphic design. Del now works at a high school and as a freelance creative artist, graphic designer, and photographer.

Del’s wife of ten years, Luisa, is originally from Chile, and recently became an American citizen. They have two daughters, Rena and Stacy, and two high-energy Australian shepherd dogs named Napoleon and Cinnamon. During their spare time, Del and Luisa enjoy camping and hiking, or just lounging under their shade tree.

After becoming a Seventh-day Adventist, Del became involved with evangelism and sharing his Christian faith with others. He has attended the Amazing Facts School of Evangelism, ShareHim boot camp, and training sessions at the Carolina Conference. He has helped with several evangelistic campaigns and has been to India as a lay evangelist for Amazing Facts. He also has organized mini–camp meetings for young adults.

Del enjoys taking creative and tech classes to broaden his abilities and to stay on top of new technologies. He hopes to someday do his creative work full time.
Lesson 1: If a spouse commits adultery, yet the innocent spouse still loves and yearns for him or her to return home, that is considered true love. Jesus also loves those who commit spiritual adultery, but with a love that made Him willing to suffer and die for His people.

Lesson 2: At the cross, the righteousness of Jesus and His compassion for us were revealed to the universe as perfect love measured through absolute judgment.

Lesson 3: Jesus is Lord and Commander. We are His soldiers—His boots on the ground—and our mission is to tell the world about Him.

Lesson 4: The nations and the people who live in them are governed by presidents, kings, prime ministers, chiefs, sheikhs, and so on. But there is one Ruler whose reign is without beginning or end. He is Jesus Christ, and He is Lord of all.

Lesson 5: Have you ever noticed that most good and desirable things don’t just appear out of thin air? It usually takes effort to acquire something of value. Those who search for gold and silver or precious stones take whatever measures that are necessary to find them. How much effort do you make in searching out the Savior?

Lesson 6: Are you sorry because you did it, or sorry because you got caught? Our amazing God is eager to forgive us when we are truly sorry for what we have done outside of His will.

Lesson 7: Jesus is a beacon of light to the world. Let Him rescue you from the storms of life.

Lesson 8: Being tossed high in the air could be a frightening experience for a child if that child didn’t have complete trust in his or her father. We also need to have complete trust in our heavenly Father, always remembering that He is in control.

Lesson 9: Guilt is what you feel when you know you’ve done something wrong. God gives us the choice to obey Him or not. Therefore, if we find ourselves guilty before Him, it will be because of our choices.

Lesson 10: Start your day off right by reading God’s Word and praying. Doing so prepares you for whatever the hours ahead might bring.

Lesson 11: Being stuck on a deserted island, wondering when you’ll be rescued, must be terrible. Being stuck in the desert of sin is even worse. Jesus came to rescue us from sin. Even now He is seeking those who desire to be rescued.

Lesson 12: Over two thousand years ago, God delivered to the world the greatest Gift ever. That Gift came as a small package wrapped in swaddling clothes. It was labeled Jesus Christ, Savior, Lord, and Friend of the world.

Lesson 13: Have you ever forgotten to invite someone to an important event? How often do you forget to invite Jesus into your life?
Spiritual Adultery

(Hosea)

“I will plant her for myself in the land; I will show my love to the one I called “Not my loved one.” I will say to those called “Not my people,” “You are my people”; and they will say, “You are my God” ’ ” (Hos. 2:23, NIV).
Kids play “he/she loves me, he/she loves me not”! The book of Hosea, at times, seems like a love-hate relationship between Hosea and Gomer. Hosea, always loving, always forgiving, always going the extra mile to show his love and care for his adulterous wife. Gomer, always choosing a sordid situation as her preferred lifestyle, despite Hosea’s love for her.

Can you believe that God still loves human beings after all we’ve done?

“There are two stories in the book which parallel each other. One is the adulterous wife and a faithful husband, while the other is the adulterous nation and the faithful God. The first illustrates the second. Israel had turned away from God, and was openly practicing idol worship. God however was merciful to them, lovingly maintaining His commitment despite their rejection of Him.”

We live in a world of sin and its effects. The Bible and history make us aware and wary of relationships between individuals, groups, or nations. God calls us from spiritual adultery and enfolds us in His love.

Print, electronic, and social media report scenes of love, hate, and deception. Television and film offer sordid scenes in graphic high-definition. It seems that actors and actresses mimic the Hosea-Gomer relationship, and we pass it off as the norm!

Can you believe that God still loves human beings after all we’ve done? Many times, the way we treat fellow human beings is definitely not Christ-like. After all, we were formed in sin and shaped in iniquity (Ps. 51:5), so maybe that’s the way it should be. Or is there another way? Has God provided an alternative? Is there still time for repentance and restoration? Remember, God pursues us relentlessly.

Let us pay attention to the lessons recorded in the Bible for our instruction. Remember that God’s forgiveness is available to us. We just need to accept it. “As was true for Israel, we have a way of escape. It is through repentance and the applying of God’s Word to our lives.”


Carl Henry, Biloxi, Mississippi, U.S.A.
Hosea was a prophet to both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. However, his prophetic utterances were primarily directed to Israel, beginning toward the end of the reign of Jeroboam II and continuing to the reign of Hoshea, the last king of Israel. It was a period of spiritual decline, political intrigue, and regnal instability (2 Kings 15–17), which culminated with Israel’s conquest by Assyria in 722 B.C.

The Minor Prophets speak of the steadfast love of Yahweh as demonstrated in both acts of judgment and salvation. Their prophecies are rich with hope, and Hosea’s hope was rooted in God’s compassion. The message of Hosea, both from his personal experience with Gomer (chapters 1–3) and from his prophetic pronouncements on God’s people (chapters 4–14), is that both would receive judgment in the form of redemptive punishment, as well as mercy in the form of gracious restoration. The emphasis is on God’s unfailing love and caring compassion for His people, in spite of their wanton unfaithfulness to Him. Yahweh, the God of Israel, as portrayed in Hosea’s prophecies, has an ongoing love for the people of the covenant.

Israel’s Adulterous Unfaithfulness (Exod. 6:4–7; Jer. 2:20)

While Yahweh’s covenant with Israel included deliverance from Egyptian bondage and settlement in the land of Canaan (Exod. 6:4–6), the central feature of it is not an inheritance, but a relationship. Promising to free them from Egyptian bondage (Exod. 6:5, 6), God said, “I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God” (verse 7). This relational dimension lies at the heart of the covenant. It involves a relationship in which He promises to be faithful in providing for all their needs as their God while they promise to be faithful, serving Him only.

However, because they violated their commitment to the terms of the covenant relationship (Hos. 6:7; 8:1), they are no longer His people. The name Yahweh prescribed for Gomer’s second child, Loammi (“not my people”), testifies to the result of their transgressing the covenant: “Call him Lo-Ammi, for you are not my people, and I am not your God” (Hos. 1:9, NIV).

It is not unusual for the prophets to describe Israel’s unfaithfulness to the covenant relationship with Yahweh as adultery, fornication, harlotry, and whoredom (Jer. 2:20; 3:1; Ezek. 16:15–37; 23:37). However, Hosea stands out for his extensive use of this particular imagery (1:2; 2:2; 4; 5:3, 4; 6:10; 9:1). He repeatedly employs this metaphor because for him violation of the...
covenant means breaching the personal relationship between the faithful Husband, Yahweh, and Israel, His chosen bride. Hosea’s own experience with Gomer, whom he buys back after her adulterous escapade (3:1–3), is an enacted prophetic symbol of what Yahweh would do for Israel. Therefore, it lends itself to the description of Israel’s behavior as spiritual adultery.

**Yahweh’s Redemptive Judgment (Hos. 3:4; 5:13; 8:13; 11:8)**

Because of their turning from Yahweh to political leaders (Hos. 5:13; 7:8, 9, 11; 8:9, 10) and to Baal, the fertility god, and other gods (Hos. 2:8, 13; 8:4–6; 13:2), in violation of Yahweh’s specific injunctions against idolatry (Exod. 20:3–6; Lev. 19:4), punishment is inevitable (Hos. 5:1, 14; 7:12, 13). It includes infertility of the land (Hos. 2:9, 12), as well as of the people (Hos. 9:11–14, 16). Israel will cease to exist as a nation (Hos. 3:4; 9:3, 6, 17), but will not be completely destroyed (Hos. 11:9). They will return to Egypt (Hos. 8:13; 9:3), but only so that Yahweh can woo them (literal Hebrew, “speak to her heart”) all over again, in a new wilderness experience (Hos. 2:14). In spite of their spiritual adultery in rejecting the steadfast love of their divine Husband, He still loves them with an unfathomable compassion: “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? . . . All my compassion is aroused” (Hos. 11:8, NIV).

**Yahweh’s Gracious Restoration (Hos. 2:17; 11:11; 14:8)**

Because the inevitable judgment on Israel is itself an act of love, it is not penal but redemptive. Yahweh will restore His people. In a complete reversal of the pronouncement of Hosea 1:8, they will be restored to their status as His covenant people (Hos. 1:10; 2:1, 23), the beneficiaries of His healing and sustaining love (Hos. 14:4–7). They will no longer worship idols (Hos. 2:17; 14:8), but will seek after and know only Yahweh (Hos. 2:19, 20; 3:5; 13:4), who will bring them home from captivity (Hos. 11:11), make the land fruitful (Hos. 2:15, 22), and protect them from harmful animals and military attacks (Hos. 2:18).

**REACT**

1. How does the use of spiritual whoredom imagery in Revelation’s description of the end times (14:8; 17:1, 2, 4, 15, 16; 18:3, 9; 19:2) make the message of Hosea relevant today?

2. What connection is there between the promised restoration of Israel’s covenant status found in Hosea, and the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant relationship between God and His people described in Revelation 21:3, 4, 7?

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Orlando Moncrieffe, Teaneck, New Jersey, U.S.A.
“In the Bible the sacred and enduring character of the relation that exists between Christ and His church is represented by the union of marriage. The Lord has joined His people to Himself by a solemn covenant, He promising to be their God, and they pledging themselves to be His and His alone. He declares: ‘I will betroth thee unto Me forever; yea, I will betroth thee unto Me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in loving-kindness, and in mercies.’ Hosea 2:19. And, again: ‘I am married unto you.’ Jeremiah 3:14. And Paul employs the same figure in the New Testament when he says: ‘I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.’ 2 Corinthians 11:2.

“The unfaithfulness of the church to Christ in permitting her confidence and affection to be turned from Him, and allowing the love of worldly things to occupy the soul, is likened to the violation of the marriage vow. The sin of Israel in departing from the Lord is presented under this figure; and the wonderful love of God which they thus despised is touchingly portrayed: ‘I sware unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord God, and thou becamest Mine.’ . . . ‘And thy renown went forth among the heathen for thy beauty: for it was perfect through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee. . . . But thou didst trust in thine own beauty, and playedst the harlot because of thy renown.’ ‘As a wife treacherously departeth from her husband, so have ye dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel, saith the Lord;’ ‘as a wife that committeth adultery, which taketh strangers instead of her husband!’ Ezekiel 16:8, 13–15, 32; Jeremiah 3:20.

“In the New Testament, language very similar is addressed to professed Christians who seek the friendship of the world above the favor of God. Says the apostle James: ‘Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.’”

**REACT**

Why do you think God instructed Hosea to marry an unfaithful woman?

---

Hosea prophesied during the later years of King Jeroboam II (about 753–723 B.C.). It was a time of material prosperity but of moral and spiritual decline. God called Hosea to prophesy against Israel’s idolatry. Subsequently, Israel was conquered by the Assyrians. None of their possessions could save them.

God used an experience that was familiar to His listeners.

Hosea’s marital life becomes a means for communicating God’s messages. Some find it peculiar that God instructed Hosea to marry a prostitute. “Others observe that the narrative by no means establishes that Gomer was of questionable character when Hosea married her, since the phrase ‘of whoredoms’ may simply describe her ancestry, not necessarily her personal character, or may proleptically describe the woman’s future status. . . .

“It was possibly a permissive command . . . to marry someone he already loved.” Since the children are born in the course of the marriage, her moral fall may have taken place during the course of the marriage.

The imagery of prostitution is also appropriate. The Canaanite religion was essentially a fertility faith. The land’s fruitfulness was linked to the sexual activity of the gods and goddesses. Accordingly, Canaanite worship practices included orgies with male and female prostitutes. In Hosea’s day, idolatry and prostitution were linked with worship. So God used an experience that was familiar to His listeners.

The New Testament also shows how wealth can corrupt. The rich young ruler walked away in despair when Christ asked him to sell all of his possessions. After the encounter, Jesus declared that it is difficult for the wealthy to enter God’s kingdom (Luke 18:18–25). However, in Luke 19, Jesus encounters Zacchaeus, a tax collector who becomes wealthy by defrauding people (verse 8). After his encounter with Christ, he gladly relinquished his possessions in exchange for a relationship with God. Therefore, it is not a problem to possess wealth as long as your prosperity does not possess you.

REACT

What circumstances in your life could God use to get your attention?


Paula Olivier, Maplewood, New Jersey, U.S.A.
God has chosen to portray His relationship with His people as the sacred union between a man and a woman in a marriage relationship. However, Israel spurned God’s love by going after strangers instead of loving her Husband (Ezek. 16:32). In the story of Hosea and Gomer, God demonstrates His unconditional love for His people. Hosea’s love for Gomer, in spite of her unfaithfulness, won her back to him. Hosea portrays the God I know, the God who loves me in spite of my blatant disregard of Him; the God who yearns for me to return to Him after I’ve sinned.

We constantly behave like Gomer. We repeatedly run away from God, our faithful and loving Husband, to embrace the false companions the world offers. But today, God’s appeal is the same as it was for Gomer: “Come home! I love you!”

The question is, how can our broken relationship with God be restored? Let us consider taking the following steps:

Admit that we have strayed from God, that we have broken our covenant with Him. A major step toward healing this relationship is recognizing and confessing our wrong and asking for forgiveness.

Acknowledge that God’s love for us never wavers. We may turn our backs on Him and go our own way, but His constant appeal is for us to return (Hos. 14:1). He promises to love us freely (verse 4), so we can be sure that His greatest desire is for us to receive His love.

Accept God’s forgiveness, believing His promise that He will forgive our sins and remember them no more (Isa. 43:25; Jer. 31:34). Be assured of it. No matter how far we have strayed, not matter what we have done, He is willing to forgive, forget, cleanse, and restore.

**REACT**

1. Think of someone close to you who has caused you much emotional pain, and ask God to help you to take the initiative in beginning the healing process.
2. Pray that God will bless you with the ability to love unconditionally.
3. Encourage someone who has strayed from the church to understand that God’s love and forgiveness are always available.

“Come home! I love you!”

_Hos. 2:14, 19–23; John 17:3_

**How-to Love Is Enough!**

Carol Fider, Mandeville, Jamaica
“Thou shalt have no other gods before me” is the first of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:3). How easy it is to place other people or things ahead of our relationship with God. Israel had her heart set on everything but God in the days of Hosea, so much so that the Bible referred to her as a prostitute chasing after her “lovers.” We, too, have our “lovers” that we chase after.

Jesus says, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matt. 6:33). God is often the last thing on our mind when we are enjoying prosperity. We neglect our relationship with Him to seek our own pleasures, jumping between “lovers” as soon as they fail to satisfy.

It is easy to chase after these other “lovers.” We think they will satisfy the emptiness we have inside as they parade before us the pleasures they have to offer. We spend every waking thought dreaming up new ways to enjoy life, regardless of the cost. We spend long hours at work, pour over our studies—anything to gain material wealth. Yet we neglect the one thing that can really fulfill us—a relationship with God.

Just like Hosea and his wife, God has bought us back for Himself. He wants to be our only “lover.” After all, He did say that He is a jealous God. We seem to forget that when we seek Him, all things will be given to us. Just as a good husband would do for his wife, God will provide and protect us.

Hosea’s desire for his wife gives me hope. Despite me throwing myself at other “lovers,” God still loves me and wants the best for me. He wants to “speak tenderly” to me (Hos. 2:14, NIV). He plans to make me prosperous, to give me hope and a future (Jer. 29:11). However, it is entirely up to me whether or not to accept His love.

**REACT**

1. What value do you place on God’s love for you?
2. Is it appropriate to point out the sins of our friends and family as did Hosea? Explain your answer.
3. How would you explain God’s mercy and forgiveness to people who believe they have done too many terrible things for God to forgive them?
CONCLUDE

Human nature was infused with sin the moment Eve doubted God and bit into the fruit. Since that time, humans have experienced the dynamics of the great controversy in their relationship with God. In spite of our wandering after those things that draw us away from a relationship with our heavenly Father, God continues to reach out to us and calls us to return to His embrace. His love for us is patient and enduring. If He never gives up on us, how can we ever give up on Him?

CONSIDER

• Painting a mural depicting the story of Hosea and Gomer and how it reflects the story of Israel and God.
• Comparing and contrasting the story of Israel and God/Hosea and Gomer with what you see happening in Christianity today.
• Sculpting a scene from the story of Hosea and Gomer, using a medium of your choice.
• Composing a song that portrays Hosea pleading with Gomer to return to him.
• Journaling about your relationship with God. Describe the times you have felt like Gomer and then what it was like when you returned to the arms of the One who loved you.
• Writing a blog post that describes the story of Hosea and Gomer. Find ways to describe the story that would attract individuals who don’t have a friendship with God.
• Celebrating the love God shows us by hosting a gathering of friends. Encourage individuals to come prepared to share how God has continually drawn them to His embrace.

CONNECT

Ellen G. White, Prophets and Kings, chap. 23; White, Steps to Christ, chap. 8.
Love and Judgment—God’s Dilemma

(Hosea)

“You must return to your God; maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always” (Hos. 12:6, NIV).
What factors play into your decision regarding whom you will marry? What characteristics do you look for in your significant other? Are there characteristics you want to avoid in that special person? Our human tendency is to first judge, then love. In many ways, this tendency keeps us safe as we navigate the world of courtship. Once married, however, it is important that this order be reversed. Love first, then judge. This is a divine model God revealed to us in how He related to the Israelites.

Hosea 12:6 states: “You must return to your God; / maintain love and justice, / and wait for your God always” (NIV). What part of this verse means the most to you? Is this verse challenging? Wait for what? This is a particularly challenging concept as we face the trials of life. Today’s world is unimaginably complex. Unfair situations and atrocities are becoming commonplace. The notion of what is acceptable and appropriate is ever changing, and often we are disoriented by the rapidly fluctuating world. As a result, anger and frustration bubble up as a natural reaction to an overwhelmingly bizarre world. Yet God says to wait.

Despite the complex milieu of this world, God has called us. Hosea 12:6 states: “You must return to your God; / maintain love and justice, / and wait for your God always” (NIV). What part of this verse means the most to you? Is this verse challenging? Wait for what? This is a particularly challenging concept as we face the trials of life. Today’s world is unimaginably complex. Unfair situations and atrocities are becoming commonplace. The notion of what is acceptable and appropriate is ever changing, and often we are disoriented by the rapidly fluctuating world. As a result, anger and frustration bubble up as a natural reaction to an overwhelmingly bizarre world. Yet God says to wait.

Despite the complex milieu of this world, God has called us. This is not a passive call. It is an urgent call. This world is becoming harder to love. Yet this world is in desperate need of Christlike love. So He calls us to cut through the chaos with unconditional love. How disorienting it must have been for Hosea when, after his wife’s unfaithfulness, God called him to remain steadfast in his love for her. He had to wait out his anger and frustration and in the end, return to love. This symbolizes God’s relationship with Israel. Despite the Israelites’ foibles, God loved them. When they turned away from Him, it was akin to adultery, causing Him anguish and despair. Yet in the end, God’s unconditional love for them resulted in forgiveness and restoration.

This world is ugly. This world is hard to love. The people of this world can be frustrating, confusing, and unjust. Practicing love in this world will bring us anguish and disappointment. God’s relationship with Israel in the book of Hosea shows us that even He is not immune to the pain unconditional love can bring. But He loves anyway, and He looks forward to His opportunity to forgive.
The book of Hosea is the first of the books defined as the minor prophets. Scholars place the writing of Hosea as having taken place between 750 and 725 B.C. This places Hosea in the middle of one of the most turbulent periods in Israel's history. “Outwardly, Israel under Jeroboam II was prosperous and successful, more so than in any time since David and Solomon. . . . Its northern boundaries were almost as extensive as those under these early kings (see 2 Kings 14:25, 28).”* Despite their outward prominence, Israel was spiritually and morally unraveling. They were practicing idol worship, adultery, drunkenness, and child sacrifice. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had been replaced with lust, violence, and greed.

Israel’s social unrest soon led to political instability as the reign of King Jeroboam II gave way to a series of assassinations. Beginning with King Zechariah in 747 B.C., five successive kings of Israel gained power through killing the sitting king, thus opening the door for invasion by the Assyrians, Israel’s neighbor to the north. In 722 B.C., Assyrian troops advanced upon Israel’s northern kingdom, striking a crippling blow. As a result of internal ethical rot and their turning away from God, the great kingdom of Israel fell, starting the period known as the Assyrian captivity.

It is frightening to think that even after all Israel had been through with God, it still turned away from Him. It was during a period of social and economic prosperity that the sins of the nation reached their climax. How similar is today’s world to that of Hosea’s Israel? Have our modern luxuries and conveniences altered our relationship with God?

It is a historical irony that as a civilization enters into a period of great prosperity, the social compass of the people begins to point away from God and toward themselves. As this happens, morals are abandoned and society moves from prosperity into great flux, and finally chaos. Just as Hosea’s prophecies predicted, Israel’s waywardness gave way to defeat by a foreign invader. Yet Hosea still wrote about an enduring love by God for His people.

**React**

1. What aspects of modern life are robbing you of time with the Lord?
2. What modern conveniences would you be willing to give up?

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* The SDA Bible Commentary, 2nd ed., vol. 4, p. 885.

Craig Mattson, Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, U.S.A.
Since the beginning of time, God has desired to communicate with His children. Ever since the Fall, He provides a variety of communication methods to make His will known to us. He uses language and terminology that penetrate our limited capacity to understand spiritual things and that can convict even the most stubborn heart.

In the book of Hosea, God uses a variety of metaphors to help Israel comprehend their spiritual condition. Even today, these metaphors, analogies, and parables connect the reader or listener to fundamental spiritual truths. In addition to last week’s husband-wife metaphor, God seeks to open the eyes of His people through these images:

A Senseless Dove (Hos. 7:11, 12; Prov. 7:23)

In Hosea 7, God refers to a simple-minded dove to describe the carelessness of His people. This is a bird believed to have little common sense.

How amazing it is, that in the midst of our rebellion, God does not forsake us.

“The utter simplicity of a dove’s flying right into the bird catcher’s net, without suspecting or observing it (see Prov. 7:23), is effectively used as a graphic illustration of Ephraim’s folly.”1 Israel had turned to the Gentiles for help rather than turning to God. Little did they realize that in rejecting God’s counsel, they were putting themselves in a position that would ultimately lead to their destruction.

We must not repeat Israel’s history. Let us be prudent rather than reckless, for when we are reckless we become senseless and fair game for the snare. As we become wise through our fear in the Lord, our thoughts and actions will fulfill God’s “good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom. 12:2, NIV).

A Trained Heifer (Hos. 10:11–13; Matt. 11:28–30)

In Hosea 10, we find God using the agriculture lifestyle of the average Israelite to describe the condition into which Israel had arrived because of their sin. In ancient times, an ox was commonly used to thresh grain “either by treading with their feet or by drawing a threshing sledge or cart over it.”2 Reflecting on this imagery, the Lord tells Israel that He will “put a yoke on her fair neck” (Hos. 10:11, NIV). Then, in verse 12, “Hosea presents the call to repentance and to the reformation that true repentance brings. God assures His people that if they will conform their lives to His will, and treat their fellows justly, they shall receive their reward.”3
However, they do not heed His call. So He admonishes them for depending on their own strength. This self-dependence led them into the vicious cycle described in verse 13: they (1) planted wickedness, (2) reaped evil, and thus (3) ate the fruit of deception. It was no longer God who held the reins of their plows. Other nations had taken hold.

How many times have we fallen into a similar cycle? We trust in ourselves and earthly things instead of in God. Then we walk around with a heavy yoke around our neck, wondering why we reap such unfortunate circumstances. But even then, God calls us to freedom. “‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light’” (Matt. 11:28–30, NIV). This is not a suggestion but an appeal to wear the yoke of Christ instead of the world’s yoke.

**A Toddling Son (Hos. 11:1, 3)**

In Hosea 11:1 and 3, we witness the intimacy that can exist between God and His people. In these verses, God refers to His people as His children. How amazing it is, that in the midst of our rebellion, God does not forsake us. He teaches us how to walk in His ways. He heals us from our transgressions. And when we go astray, He patiently parents us with tender love and character-building discipline (Heb. 12:6).

**God’s Prevailing Love (Hos. 11:8, 9; Rom. 5:8)**

We must not forget that even in the midst of God’s righteous anger toward Israel, He always was ready to extend forgiveness and compassion. Even in the center of our dreadful sin and rebellion, God demonstrates His love through the gift of His Son (Rom. 5:8). We must not take God’s prevailing love for granted. Rather, let us acknowledge that His love for us is incomprehensible and beyond our imagination. All that is left for us to do is to trust that His love for us is real and that it can provide us with a life-changing experience.

**REACT**

1. What metaphor would you use to describe your current walk with God?
2. In what ways has God been patient with you?
3. What should your response be as you consider God’s expressions of love toward you?

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2. Ibid., p. 919.
3. Ibid.

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Daniel Ortega, Tulsa, Oklahoma, U.S.A.
So often the nation of Israel vacillated between faithfulness and folly. Hosea draws comparisons that point to Israel’s unwillingness to follow God. Ellen White employs language from Hosea as she paints beautiful analogies of what true faithfulness to God looks like:

“The garden of the heart must be cultivated. The soil must be broken up by deep repentance for sin. Poisonous, Satanic plants must be uprooted. The soil once overgrown by thorns can be reclaimed only by diligent labor. So the evil tendencies of the natural heart can be overcome only by earnest effort in the name and strength of Jesus. The Lord bids us by His prophet, ‘Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns.’ ‘Sow to yourselves in righteousness; reap in mercy.’ Jer. 4:3; Hosea 10:12. This work He desires to accomplish for us, and He asks us to co-operate with Him.”

“We are to take root in Christ.”

“As the plant takes root in the soil, so we are to take root in Christ. As the plant receives the sunshine, the dew, and the rain, so are we to receive the Holy Spirit. If our hearts are stayed upon Christ, He will come unto us ‘as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the earth.’ As the Sun of Righteousness, He will arise upon us ‘with healing in His wings.’ We shall ‘grow as the lily.’ We ‘shall revive as the corn, and grow as the vine.’ Hosea 6:3; Malachi 4:2; Hosea 14:5, 7.”

“Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend. The eye of faith will discern God very near, and the suppliant may obtain precious evidence of the divine love and care for him. But why is it that so many prayers are never answered? Says David, ‘I cried unto Him with my mouth, and He was extolled with my tongue. If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.’ By another prophet the Lord gives us the promise, ‘Ye shall seek Me, and find Me, when ye shall search for Me with all your heart.’ Again, he speaks of some who ‘have not cried unto Me with their heart.’ Such petitions are prayers of form, lip-service only, which the Lord does not accept.”

**REACT**

1. How often do you cultivate the garden of your heart?
2. What can you do to systematize a regular routine of prayer, worship, and service to others?

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*Matthew Hargett, Tulsa, Oklahoma, U.S.A.*
When I was three years old, my little brother and I kept my mother busy. We lived on a large farm in the country. One day I decided to walk down our dirt road to see where it would take me. I had only walked about one-eighth of a mile when a large dust cloud appeared in front of me. It was my grandmother driving down the road trying to find me. At the same time, my mother was searching for me in our basement and the nearby fields. If it hadn’t been for their grace and compassion, I would probably have gotten a sound whipping. Instead, they held me close and firmly but compassionately reminded me to stay in our yard at all times. Their anger was overridden by love. In Hosea, God compares the actions of Israel to wandering children. God has every right to be angry with them, but He responds instead with compassion and forgiveness. How can we respond to such love?

Seek to be a friend. Practice the compassion God showed Israel.

Take a minute to pray. Just as my mother and grandmother had compassion on me, God is compassionate toward us, even when we “test” Him. We may not realize it, but we are constantly testing Him through our sinfulness. When temptations arise, we tend to justify it. The more we think about our sins, the more ways we find to get around God’s law. Next time you catch yourself rationalizing something you know to be wrong, include God in your thinking. If you feel unworthy to approach Him at that moment, pray hard! This is when we need Him most. When He gets involved, sin slinks away!

Consider other people. When someone tries your patience, ask God to help you not to think ill of them. After all, they might have just gotten word that someone in their family has died or maybe everything about their day is going wrong. Rather than responding with anger or frustration, try responding with compassion. Seek to be a friend. Practice the compassion God showed Israel time and time again.

**REACT**

1. Since God is compassionate toward us, does that mean we should be less worried about what we do, say, or think? Explain your answer.
2. What can you do when people really get on your nerves?
3. How does God’s compassion influence your thoughts about the relationship between faith and works?

Alexa Fisher, Bristow, Oklahoma, U.S.A.
Usually we think of doves as peaceful birds. In fact, the New Testament portrays the Holy Spirit as a dove. So it is interesting that Hosea uses the dove as a symbol of senselessness. Yes, doves are really not that smart. So it is no wonder that, given Israel’s sexual immorality, Hosea compares them to this silly directionless bird. Doves were easily taken into captivity and traded because when captured, they didn’t put up much of a fight. So Hosea may have compared Israel to a dove because they were not fighters; they did not stand up for their beliefs. Israel seemed to just mindlessly follow their urges and desires.

In Hosea 10, we find another animal analogy. Here the prophet uses a heifer as a symbol of stubbornness. Heifers are not aggressive. They are followers rather than leaders, and they are happy to eat grass and chew their cud all day. They also have a bad habit of going astray, a characteristic that also defined Israel’s behavior.

These images of God’s chosen people paint a sad picture, but they also offer a lesson for today’s church. When I was a girl, my parents and others guided me toward proper Christian behavior. However, some of those people would teach me one thing while doing just the opposite. This caused me to feel disconnected from the church and its leaders. Even now, I sometimes feel as though they view me as unimportant and too young to be of value. Sometimes they remind me of Hosea’s senseless doves—trying with little effort to negotiate the lives of young adults. The leaders I most appreciate in my life are those who make a conscience effort to get to know me, those who are deliberate and respectful in how they approach the young adult way of life. It is refreshing when I see such adults connecting with the youth. These people are just the opposite of senseless birds and wayward heifers. Therefore, they inspire me to stay in the church and to stay close to God!

**REACT**

1. What spiritual lessons can we derive through the positive and negative characteristics that humans and animals have in common?
2. How are you approaching your spiritual responsibilities? Are you operating as a senseless wayward animal or as a mindful human?

*Porsche Hancock, Tulsa, Oklahoma, U.S.A.*
CONCLUDE

The people of Israel often fell away from the Lord. How often do we fall away from Him? We are no better than they are—an adulterous wife, a mindless dove, a toddling child. Yet in the midst of our wandering, God remains the same. He loves us and seeks to bring us back to Himself. However, this does not mean that we should take His love for granted. Instead, we should strive to align our hearts with His heart and our thoughts with His thoughts. We should let Him work through us in ways we never dreamed possible.

CONSIDER

- Listing ways in which you have drifted from the Lord in the past. By each item on your list, make a note of how He brought you back to Himself.
- Composing a piece of music—with or without lyrics—that depicts the wandering heart and the Father who waits with open arms. Share your piece with a friend.
- Memorizing Hosea 12:6. Each time you feel your thoughts begin to wander, take a moment to repeat this verse to yourself. Use this as a simple way to return to God.
- Contacting a friend by phone, e-mail, or text who is currently distant from the Lord. Set up a get-together and use it as an opportunity to minister to him or her and to share the love of Jesus. (Ask the Lord to use you—and He will!)
- Drawing a picture to interpret one of the analogies mentioned in this week’s lesson: a senseless dove, a heifer, or a toddling son. Share this drawing with a friend or your class.
- Praying for those in your life who are wandering from the Lord. Ask Him to show you specific ways to minister to these people and to help bring them back to Him.
- Spending some time in nature talking to the Lord. Ask Him to show you areas in which you are wandering and need to grow closer to Him. Use Hosea 12:6 as part of your prayer.

CONNECT

Joel 2:12, 13; Micah 6:8.
A Holy and Just God

(Joel)

“The Lord thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty are those who obey his command. The day of the Lord is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?”

(Joel 2:11, NIV).
I still remember the first time I saw Russell Crowe in the film *Master and Commander*. The marauding story of “Lucky” Jack Aubrey and a surprise attack from his enemies still rings clear. The damage of battle was heavy, and the crew was badly injured. However, Captain Aubrey had a faith and commitment to his crew that led them through the high-stakes battle to intercept and face their foe.

Like Captain Aubrey, we fight battles against the powers and principalities of darkness. Ours is a spiritual battle, and the skill of Satan’s surprise attacks often catches us off guard: “Proclaim this among the nations: / Prepare for war! / Rouse the warriors! / Let all the fighting men draw near and attack” (Joel 3:9, NIV).

A steadfast commitment to God as our Master and Commander can get us through the darkest moments of our lives. Often we secretly think that God sits in constant judgment of every little mistake we make. This thinking skews our picture of Him into something akin to an all-powerful version of Santa Claus. As we ride the waves of life, we often hit the rocks when thinking of God this way. Breaking free of this subtle thinking requires a great deal of prayer. We are driven to think this way, when clearly the greatness of God in our lives is the total opposite!

The truth is, in Christ Jesus our filthy rags are made clean, and we are given a new life, empowered by His renewed presence in us. No matter what, no matter where we are in our journey, He stands ready to walk with us. Bright rays of God’s hope and glory speak wonderfully to us through Matthew 10:28: “ ‘Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body’ ” (NIV).

Claim today the refuge that can be found only in Christ during times of trouble. Surely His grace is sufficient in all things to deliver you and me from all our valleys of distress. Fear not, for He is God, mighty and worthy above all! This week, and always, I invite you to choose Jesus as your Master and Commander. Lift up your praise and let your faith in the Lord grow, so that you can claim His truth and fight the good fight with renewed confidence.

*Timothy W. Humphries, Brisbane, Australia*
The End of Days and the Coming Revelation of God (Joel 1; 2)
A locust plague is nature run amok. It is life turned against itself.

Normally a grasshopper is a benign creature whose very presence speaks to the richness of farmland and lazy summer days. The grasshopper is the sustenance of birds and myriad other small creatures that inhabit and sustain entire ecosystems. In the Middle East as elsewhere, the grasshopper whirs by day and its cricketlike sounds during late summer harvest nights are comforting reminders of a productive natural cycle.

But sometimes when the harvest is unnaturally plentiful, when the weather is a little out of season, grasshopper numbers explode, and a change comes over the individual creature. Each grasshopper changes in color and shape to become an armored destroyer. Their usual random behavior gives way to swarming patterns. Thus they begin to destroy crops and bring famine.

Joel is poetic in his invocation of the locust plague coming on the land. It was a cyclical disaster familiar to all who read his words. But for Joel, hyperbole was more than literary license. It was to introduce the trauma of the end of days and the coming revelation of God.

God Protects His People (Joel 3:10; Rev. 9:1–11)
The book of Joel is prophetic regarding the final judgment and God acting powerfully on behalf of His people. It moves methodically from the word-picture of a destroying locust army to literal war and destruction. The United Nations complex in New York has an inscription from Isaiah 2:4 regarding the promise that one day the nations will “beat their swords into plowshares.” Joel 3:10 inverts this text: “Beat your plowshares into swords.” And why not? The locust army has destroyed the crop. The harvest now is death and destruction.

The book of Revelation echoes Joel’s imagery of a locust army. In chapter 9, locusts led by Apollyon come from a bottomless pit. The locust plague is used as imagery to introduce the war and destruction that heralds God’s final act as He redeems the faithful. In Revelation 9, the locusts are the war. They are the actual destroyers of life—the agents of Satan himself. But the implicit message of Joel is explicit in this Revelation trum-
pet scene. These locusts do not harm any green thing. They harm “only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads” (Rev. 9:4, NIV). God is protecting His people.

**Our Shelter and Strength (Joel 3:16)**

It is interesting that Adventist pioneer Uriah Smith in his book *Daniel and the Revelation* identified the fifth trumpet as the Islamic incursions into Europe in the Middle Ages. It was a view shared by Ellen White and most of the early Advent believers. Certainly the fearsome aspect of that incursion lives on even in the age of petro-wars. But it is worth commenting on the nature of God revealed then and now. Islam surged into Europe determined to bring God’s vengeance to a corrupt system. They believed Allah drove them to dispose of tonsured priests and Jewish rabbis, even as they spared “people of the Book.” In return there was the “reconquista” of Spain and the Inquisition. God was everywhere and nowhere. Like the locust turned from its usual self into an engine of destruction, so the very concept of God was turned by Muslim and Christian into a God of blood and vengeance.

Muslims presume that Allah is the God of the Old Testament. Joel shows that God defines Himself not by the sword of war, but by His intercession and pity even at the moment of His strange act. “Return to the Lord your God,” pleads the prophet. “For He is gracious and merciful, / Slow to anger, and of great kindness; / and He relents from doing harm” (Joel 2:13, NKJV; see also Exodus 33:18, 19).

Joel further disentangles the God of love from the destroying locust when he writes that “then the Lord will be jealous for His land, / And pity His people” (Joel 2:18, NKJV). This is the Deity who “will be a shelter for His people” (3:16, NKJV) and who promises to pour out His spirit “in those days” (2:29, NKJV).

Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the Somali refugee from Islam who wrote the best-seller *Infidel*, recently wrote of her personal journey. She has rejected Islam and is left with atheism. She cannot accept the Allah of her childhood upbringing, and she encourages Christians to explain the God of love. Perhaps she is looking for the distinction Joel made. Yes, we are in the time of the locust and the destroyer. Satan and his hosts stir the nations to war. And God is about to end it all. He is about to “cut it short in righteousness” (Rom. 9:28) by interceding for His faithful ones and by empowering them to stand firm and witness His sovereignty. The locust army will pass through, but it will not harm those with the seal of God.

**REACT**

1. How effective is the Hebrew poetic device of parallel repetition?
2. What was Joel’s overarching purpose: to strike fear or inspire confidence?
3. What other parallels do you see between the books of Joel and Revelation?

*Lincoln Steed, Hagerstown, Maryland, U.S.A.*
Joel 3 is about God making Himself known through two things: (1) His judgments against those who would destroy His people, and (2) His blessings upon the church, His people. Both are a “legacy of peace,” which is what Christ bequeathed to His disciples shortly before His death. “ ‘My peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.’ John 14:27. . . . The peace that Christ left His disciples is internal rather than external and was ever to remain with His witnesses through strife and contention.”

“The peace that Christ left His disciples is internal rather than external.”

“Christ said of Himself, ‘Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.’ Matthew 10:34. The Prince of Peace, He was yet the cause of division. He who came to proclaim glad tidings and to create hope and joy in the hearts of the children of men, opened a controversy that burns deep and arouses intense passion in the human heart. And He warns His followers, ‘In the world ye shall have tribulation.’ ‘They shall lay their hands on you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues, and into prisons, being brought before kings and rulers for My name’s sake.’ ‘Ye shall be betrayed both by parents, and brethren, and kinsfolks, and friends; and some of you shall they cause to be put to death.’ John 16:33; Luke 21:12, 16. . . .

“The world is no more in harmony with the principles of Christ today than it was in the days of the apostles. The same hatred that prompted the cry, ‘Crucify Him! crucify Him!’ the same hatred that led to the persecution of the disciples, still works in the children of disobedience. The same spirit which in the Dark Ages consigned men and women to prison, to exile, and to death, which conceived the exquisite torture of the Inquisition, which planned and executed the Massacre of St. Bartholomew, and which kindled the fires of Smithfield, is still at work with malignant energy in unregenerate hearts. The history of truth has ever been the record of a struggle between right and wrong. . . .

“What was the strength of those who in the past have suffered persecution for Christ’s sake? It was union with God, union with the Holy Spirit, union with Christ. Reproach and persecution have separated many from earthly friends, but never from the love of Christ.”

2. Ibid., pp. 84, 85.

Leslie Jane Simmons, New York, New York, U.S.A.
Without warning, the earth started to shake violently. People ran in fear, “crying, . . . ‘Oh! What will become of us!’ ”¹ Within minutes the earthquake destroyed the city and killed more than 60,000 people. Survivors sought refuge in boats, but a tsunami swallowed them up. The Great Lisbon Earthquake of November 1, 1755, is considered to have been one of the deadliest earthquakes in history,² and the first of many signs pointing to the end of the age.

On May 19, 1780, an eerie darkness descended on the northeastern part of North America and lasted an entire day.³ People lit candles, birds and other animals retired to sleep, and a “very general opinion prevailed, that the day of judgment was at hand. . . . After midnight the darkness disappeared, and the moon, when first visible, had the appearance of blood.”⁴ Joel foretold these events in chapter 2, verses 30 and 31. As you read these words, notice that, although terrifying, these events are not intended to frighten us but to draw us closer to our Creator.

Just as in the parable of the ten virgins, many of us have “fallen asleep” while we wait for Christ to return. Yet, the events foretold by Joel and the other prophets are the “midnight cry” calling us to wake up, take our lamps, and await our Savior. We can choose to be like the foolish virgins who forgot to maintain their lights, or we can choose to cling to our Source of light, Jesus Christ and His sacrifice for us. If we choose to trust in Him, we have nothing to fear, for “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Joel 2:32, NIV).

REACT

1. What was your reaction to the most recent disaster you saw in the media, and why?
2. How can you use the news of disasters to share the good news of Jesus’ soon return?

⁴. Wearner, Fundamentals of Bible Doctrine.
The Old Testament is full of stories of Israel’s waxing and waning relationship with God. As time went by, they would repeatedly neglect His laws. Time and again He would send another crisis to humble them and draw them back to Him as they once again recognized their need for Him.

Our relationship with God can also follow a wavelike pattern. If things go too smoothly, we tend to become self-reliant, drifting away from the day-by-day saving relationship with Jesus that is so essential to life. Then we, too, need God to mete out judgment to us so that we can once again acknowledge our dependence on Him. Following is a three-step process to aid both personal and corporate revival:

**Recognize God’s judgment.** Deuteronomy 28 provides an in-depth list of blessings God would shower upon Israel if they were to obey all His commandments. However, it does not stop there. It also details the curses that would fall on them if they did not obey. We need to periodically take a look at our lives and consider whether God is perhaps using hardship or trials to get our attention.

**Renounce sin.** In Joel 1, the prophet calls all of the leaders and inhabitants of the land to fast and pray to God for deliverance. In order to be revived, we must recognize our sinful state and our immense need for a Savior. We also must cry out to the Lord with all earnestness and humility. In 1 John 1:9, we learn that “if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (NKJV).

**Return to God.** God wants to restore us to Him—He does not find joy in watching us suffer. Joel 2:12–14 says, “‘Even now,’ declares the Lord, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.’ Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing—grain offerings and drink offerings for the Lord your God” (NIV). How do we find the way back to God? John 14:26 states that Jesus will send the Holy Spirit to teach His followers all things and to call to their remembrance His words and teachings.

**REACT**
What steps can you take today to restore a right relationship with God?

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Kriselle Dawson, Lae, Papua New Guinea
In the highlands of Papua New Guinea, a story is told of a young man who grew up in the early 1980s. During an initiation ceremony, he was cautioned about the dangers of the surrounding tribes. The village elders told him that his deceased father had been a warrior who had killed many of the enemy’s tribesmen. The young man was advised to avoid associating with the enemy tribes.

However, the young man felt that he was part of a new generation where education, media, intermarriage, and business were fragmenting traditions. The old men’s advice held no significance for him because he lived most of his life away from the village. However, one evening he was out with friends from the enemy tribes. During that night, someone poisoned his drink. He died the next day.

Like this young man, many people today are walking straight into destruction because they refuse to accept the Bible’s life-and-death warnings. Many people think the Bible is irrelevant, a relic of a bygone era. However, the fulfillment of its prophecies and the imminence of Jesus’ return, challenge human ignorance of God’s Word.

The Old Testament prophets said the Messiah would come. They spoke about His power and glory. Peter’s experience on the Mount of Transfiguration confirmed that the prophets were right (Luke 9:28–36). So Peter wrote in such a way that his readers would trust the Scriptures. He described the prophets’ words as a lamp in a dark world, showing people how to live (2 Pet. 1:19).

The prophet Joel was proven right after he warned Judah about an invasion of hostile armies, which took place with the Babylonian invasions (Joel 1:1–12). Similarly, Peter explained why people could trust the prophets’ messages, distinguishing their words from the words of the false prophets (Jeremiah 23).

We should not wait any longer to witness the fulfillment of prophecy so that we can know it is authentic. The evidence is right before our eyes. The apostle Peter, a personal witness of fulfilled prophecy, describes Scripture as the sure word of prophecy (2 Pet. 1:19). There is no alternative. If we ignore its precepts, it will be at the price of our lives.

**REACT**

How does fulfilled prophecy strengthen your faith?

Andrew Opis, Lae, Papua New Guinea
CONCLUDE

Metaphors are word-pictures that leave an imprint on your mind. A powerful metaphor leaves an imprint so real you tell it to your children and they tell it to their children. In the book of Joel, locusts are used as a metaphor to illustrate the destruction at the end of days. This metaphor was meant to alert God’s people throughout all time to the coming ruin. Our protection from the coming storm is in God alone (Rev. 7:14–16).

CONSIDER

• Writing a story with a metaphor that illustrates the destruction at the end of time.
• Singing your favorite song about faith in God.
• Memorizing a text about God’s protection that will give you peace in times of trouble.
• Listing the different ways Bible writers wrote about the trouble that is yet to come.
• Drawing a self-portrait that shows the emotions you felt when you saw the destruction caused by the earthquake and tsunami that destroyed parts of Japan on March 11, 2012.

CONNECT

Joel 1 and 2; Revelation 7.
“A lion has roared! Who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken!

Who can but prophesy?” (Amos 3:8, NKJV).
Introduction

R.O.A.R.! (Retribution for the Oppressors Who Afflict the Righteous)

Amos 1; 2; Matt. 25:31–46

“How long shall we be afflicted? How long shall we be oppressed?” This is the cry of the righteous when they are abused by those who are in positions of power. Albert Einstein once said, “In matters of truth and justice, there is no difference between large and small problems, for issues concerning the treatment of people are all the same.”* Matthew 25:46 tells us that those who fail to care for people in need will “‘go away to eternal punishment’” (NIV).

No matter how the storm rages, let us stay in God’s ship.

As Christians, we, too, are or will be oppressed, whether it is by our office managers, our teachers, or our government. It is important that we remain faithful to God, because just as a lion is the king of the animal world, so God is the King of this world. His strength is perfect and He never forgets His people. Just as there was the R.O.A.R. in the time of Amos, so also will there be the R.O.A.R. in this day and age.

I remember in my first year of medical school, there was a period of inclement weather. As a result, classes were postponed. When we returned to school, we were informed that the makeup sessions for the missed lectures were scheduled for the following Saturday. I was furious, but this fury proved futile. The sessions were still held on Saturday. However, God always comes through for His people. He touched the heart of the IT technician to record the lectures for me so I could watch them during my lunch breaks during the following week!

At times, we will find ourselves in situations that test our relationship with God; but we must remember that He will always deliver His people. True faith is trusting in Him regardless of the difficulties in which we find ourselves. This week, as we learn from the book of Amos about God’s care of His people, let us remember that He is faithful and that He always keeps His promises. There is no burden beyond His strength, no problem outside His solution, no need beyond His care. Let us never be shaken. No matter how the storm rages, let us stay in God’s ship.

The book of Amos depicts God’s judgment upon the people of Israel for withdrawing themselves from His Word and for oppressing people who were less fortunate than they. God’s lionlike roar is a reminder of His powerful anger, and it foreshadows the judgment that is cast upon those who make Him angry. The actions of the Israelites are similar to those of many people today.

History has documented numerous instances in which God’s people were oppressed. Some reasons for the oppression include religious and political affiliation, nationality, race, and gender. Even today, the phenomenon of political tribalism as seen throughout the Bible seems also to be the modern setting for the grossest crimes against humanity. An intricate interplay of all these factors, along with the immeasurable power of deception, precipitated the slaughter of Jews and prisoners of war at the height of World War II.

Furthermore, these crimes were committed not by stereotypical rebels, gunmen, or other unsavory types of people, but by doctors of medicine acting under the authority of their country’s government. There was a clear breakdown, not only of the rule of law, but also of adherence to the Lord’s teachings.

Of course, our Lord could not let these actions go unpunished. At the end of the war, many of these doctors were taken into custody and tried for crimes against humanity. These trials became known as the Nuremberg Trials. Then, as during Amos’s time, “The Lord roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds dry up, and the top of Carmel withers” (Amos 1:2, NIV). First Corinthians 4:5 speaks to this, as all the things hidden, including all our sins, will be brought to the fore.

**REACT**

1. What are some of the Bible passages that speak to similar occurrences in the last day?
2. What recent developments in the international arena reflect the prophecies of the Second Coming?
3. How will the Lord protect His people in the last days? See *The Desire of Ages*, chapters 3 and 73.
Privileges and Responsibilities (Amos 3:1; 1 Cor. 2:12–14)

Having children and raising them is not for the faint of heart. Even for God, raising children proved to be an arduous task. The children of Israel were His chosen people, and they took a great deal of pride in being so privileged. God protected them and delivered them from some horrible events. However, when they became proud and complacent, they began to rebel. As a result, many of them were destroyed because they failed to respond to His countless warnings and opportunities to repent.

As Christians, we also are given privileges. We have hope and a Father who is always there, watching and guiding us. He is there to see us grow, and He gives us experiences that help us to mature spiritually and to become more like Him. As His children, we also receive correction and teaching through the Holy Spirit, another gift only Christians can possess (1 Cor. 2:12–14).


As soon as the disciples and the other people present during Pentecost received the Holy Spirit, their first action was to begin preaching and ministering (Acts 2). This reveals that with each gift and privilege we receive from our Savior, comes responsibility. It is imperative that we act on these responsibilities, for the Bible warns: “That servant who knows his master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows” (Luke 12:47, NIV). We are not to be like the Pharisees and Sadducees who became proud and selfish because they were God’s children. Instead, we are to be loving, considerate, gentle, and generous people who represent the Savior.

The Peril of Privilege, Part 2 (Matt. 25:14–30; Eph. 1:3)

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul makes it clear that we all receive spiritual blessings. God has created each person with gifts and talents oriented toward specific purposes. We need to note, however, that with these blessings come responsibilities. We all will be expected to give an account of what we have done with them. Jesus will examine each of us individually, giving us our reward based on how well we have used and
multiplied our gifts. “In the great final day of judgment those who have drifted along, dodging opportunities and shirking responsibilities, will be classed by the great Judge with evildoers.”*

Based on Paul’s experience, we see that Christians have a twofold vocational privilege: “Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things” (Eph. 3:8, 9, NIV). Our responsibility is to share Christ with the world, so that as we proclaim Him to others, God, through the Holy Spirit, may reveal and enlighten any who are willing to hear. The Lord is merciful, and He wants to help us discover our gifts. He wants to show us how to use our entrusted talents in the best possible way to bless others and to share His love with them.

**REACT**

1. Why do some people fail to use their gifts to fulfill the purpose God intended?
2. What are some of the special gifts God gives to His people, and how would you respond to someone who complains that he or she has no talent?
3. The Israelites were proud of being God’s chosen people. This pride proved to be destructive, and it prevented them from sharing the gospel with others. How is pride present in our church today?

“Doing good is a work that benefits both giver and receiver. If you forget self in your interest for others, you gain a victory over your infirmities. The satisfaction you will realize in doing good will aid you greatly in the recovery of the healthy tone of the imagination. The pleasure of doing good animates the mind and vibrates through the whole body. While the faces of benevolent men are lighted up with cheerfulness, and their countenances express the moral elevation of the mind, those of selfish, stingy men are dejected, cast down, and gloomy. Their moral defects are seen in their countenances. Selfishness and self-love stamp their own image upon the outward man.

“We are His stewards.”

That person who is actuated by true disinterested benevolence is a partaker of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust; while the selfish and avaricious have cherished their selfishness until it has withered their social sympathies, and their countenances reflect the image of the fallen foe rather than that of purity and holiness.”¹

Matthew speaks about the King coming in all His glory and speaking to those on His left saying, “I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me” (Matt. 25:42, 43, NIV). The inhumanity demonstrated here was that of not doing good.

“That which lies at the foundation of business integrity and of true success is the recognition of God’s ownership. The Creator of all things, He is the original proprietor. We are His stewards. All that we have is a trust from Him, to be used according to His direction.

“This is an obligation that rests upon every human being. It has to do with the whole sphere of human activity. Whether we recognize it or not, we are stewards, supplied from God with talents and facilities and placed in the world to do a work appointed by Him.”²

**REACT**

1. Is not doing good the same as bad? Explain your answer.
2. How are you using the talents God has blessed you with to further the gospel?

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Roxanne Smith, St. Catherine, Jamaica, West Indies
Amos speaks of God’s judgment and the need to be prepared for His coming. Do Amos’s prophecies speak to us today? We have heard the voice of the Lord many times, but we fail to listen to His call. We need to share the gospel with both the privileged and the poor in our society. However, at times, we are guilty of inhumane treatment toward others in order to lift ourselves up. Instead, let us look to Jesus to change our ways and to prepare for His return. Following are ways we can do this:

Listen to God’s judgment. Amos listened to the Lord’s voice, and his prophecies came to pass. However, other people refused to listen because they did not want to turn from their sinful ways. Do we still hold on to things that do not give us hope?

Nothing is more important than God’s work.

Live God’s Word. We should meditate on God’s Word daily and ask the Holy Spirit to help us live by its principles. We should tell others about Jesus and help them to understand God’s promises and His judgment. Just as Amos warned the nations living in sin, the same is asked of us today. Let us tell everyone about our Savior.

Help God’s people. We are sometimes caught up in our selfish ways and tend to be unfriendly toward other Christians. We gossip about church members and cause them to feel uncomfortable. However, God says that inasmuch as you have done these things to others, you have done them to Him as well (Matt. 25:40). Therefore, we must be careful of the things we do to God’s people. It is important to be positive in all situations so that those who are discouraged will not leave. If we want to help others, then we must ensure that the environment is welcoming. If we love God, we will defend the poor and needy around us, because this is what Jesus did when He was on earth.

Go on God’s errands. To whom much is given, much is expected, and as such we should spread the Word of God to every corner of the world. First, however, we must educate the people around us, starting in our homes and communities. We are commissioned to prepare for the return of Christ. Nothing is more important than God’s work, so we must be willing to put Him first in everything we do.
Lighthouses guide ships at sea. They are important for safe navigation and arrivals. God’s prophetic messages are like lighthouses. These messages illuminate the path our lives should take and guide us in the right direction so we can safely reach God’s kingdom. His prophetic messages also point us to Jesus and show us that goodness is not just about doing great things, but that goodness is also about the little things that make great changes in the lives of others.

Isaiah 58:6–11 tells us that when we do good to others, our light will shine forth and we will be blessed. It has been my observation over the years that many Christians fail to reach out to the people they meet and greet every day, and even to those with whom they work closely. I believe Christians can improve a lot when it comes to helping others. Just a smile or even a “Hello” could brighten someone’s daily routine. As Christians, we must not be stumbling blocks for others when we neglect to be kind and helpful.

It is important for us to have a close relationship with Christ through prayer and Bible study. It is imperative that we allow the Holy Spirit to help us be like Jesus each and every day. Being like Him should be our goal. This week’s lesson has further instilled in my mind that God can and will use me, once I allow Him to. I am an empty vessel to be filled with His Holy Spirit.

Search the Word of God, and as you do, ask for wisdom and understanding to discern how He wants you to help others. Stand up. Stand tall. Stand brave. And let your light so shine.

**REACT**

1. What is available at your disposal so that you can be a lighthouse to bring others closer to God?
2. How have you been a lighthouse in the past week?

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*Sheneka Davidson, Kingston, Jamaica, West Indies*
CONCLUDE
We are the Laodicean church, wandering in the world and falling into Satan’s snares. So that God can work in us to give us a Christlike nature, He sends us His Holy Spirit as He also did in Amos’s time. “He who is truly converted will be so filled with the love of God that he will long to impart to others the joy that he himself possesses.”*

CONSIDER
• Using graph paper to chart your spiritual life year by year. Start from the time you were baptized until today. Mark points for each year regarding your spiritual growth in the books you have read, the people you have witnessed to, service work you have done, and people whom you have helped lead to baptism. Note the highs and lows on your chart. What do you think contributed to them?
• Sending a card through the mail or through e-mail to a friend to tell that person what you have discovered in the past weeks during your personal devotional time.
• Play, sing, or read the words to the hymn “I Need Thee, Precious Jesus” (no. 484 in The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal). Compose a poem from the thoughts that come to your mind as you do so.
• Offering to pray for the people you meet during the day for the needs they have.
• Keeping a journal of your spiritual experiences and how God is revealing more of Himself to you.
• Baking cookies or repackaging store-bought ones with the words from John 3:16, 17 written out and placed in the bag. Give them to a friend who seems to be in need of the message in these two verses.

CONNECT
Ellen G. White, The Desire of Ages, chap. 74.

Seek the Lord and Live

(Amos)

“Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and thus may the Lord God of hosts be with you, just as you have said!”

(Amos 5:14, NASB).
The magnificent century-old trees were gone. New buildings gleaming in the sun had replaced the stately sentinels of time where scores of students had pressed forward. I sighed with nostalgia, reliving my days as a college student. As I drove past familiar buildings, I chuckled, silently recalling the grueling nights of term paper revisions and final exam study sessions. How earnestly I had labored to find just the right words, just the right answers!

I was too busy searching for something else I thought was important.

Life is full of questions. Some are not nearly as daunting as those in chemistry class, but they are questions just the same. In fact, as soon as we wake up each morning, we begin to answer a series of questions. How do I feel? What will I eat for breakfast? What will I wear? The list goes on and on. Ultimately, though, all of our answers are affected by how we answer the one big question—the earth-shattering, life-changing, eternity-longing, final-exam question. Will I enjoy this life and eternity in heaven with Jesus because I accept His death on the cross for me? How we answer this question determines not only what our search for other answers will look like but what our lives will look like as well.

When I read the Old Testament account of the Israelites, I think of them as foolish. Just like Paul called the Galatians foolish, I think Amos should have said, “O foolish Israelites!” Were they not paying attention? God gave them the answers to the final exam question in Life 101: “‘Seek Me and live’” (Amos 5:5, NKJV) and “‘Seek good and not evil, that you may live’” (verse 14, NKJV). I wonder how those foolish Israelites could have missed it. They wouldn’t have needed to rob the poor to get more because God would have been enough. They wouldn’t have questioned a former sheep breeder turned prophet because they would have known what a called life looks like. Somehow, though, they missed the study guide, the cheat sheet. Those foolish Israelites!

As I wind my car around the campus searching for familiar sights, I find myself at a dead end. How did I end up here when there were warning signs all along the road? I was too busy searching for something else I thought was important. O foolish me!

May the Holy Spirit guide you in your study this week so that you do not miss all the answers God wants to give to you.
Israel was at the height of its power when Amos prophesied. But Israel was deteriorating socially. Adultery, robbery, and murder were rampant. God sent Amos to call attention to the sins of His people so that they would repent.

**Hate Evil; Love Good (Ps. 97:10)**

Amos is “the great prophet of the ‘righteousness of God.’ ”¹ He called for justice toward others and pointed out that because Israel had been given special “opportunity to know the will of God, she would be expected to live by this higher standard of righteousness.”²

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**God created us as free moral agents.**

Amos’s advice? Hate evil. As we come closer to God, we will see sin as the real barrier to our relationship with Him. Amos’s second piece of advice? Love good. Keep close to God and do those things that turn your attention to Him. “Have an unalterable attachment to whatever leads to God, and contributes to the welfare of your fellow creatures.”³

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**Religion as Usual (Amos 5:24)**

True prophets will come into conflict with established religion. Amos challenged “the religious leaders who condoned a vicious system of exploitation and privilege because it was financially profitable. They were blind to the suffering. For Amos, religion was not worthy of the name if it did not lead to justice and righteousness. His theme was: ‘Let justice roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream’ ” (5:24).⁴ God was not pleased with Israel’s showy worship, their feast days, and special offerings. He was looking instead for heartfelt repentance and worship.

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** Called to Be a Prophet (Amos 7:14, 15)**

Amaziah, idol priest of Bethel, sent a message to Jeroboam, the king of Israel. “‘Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel’” (Amos 7:10, NIV). Amos said, “‘Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land’” (Amos 7:11, NIV). Was Amaziah trying to stir up trouble? Maybe. But there was punishment ahead for the king and Israel unless they repented of their sins.

Amos had taken his message of repentance to the “midst of the house of Israel,” where there was idolatry and apostate worship. But Amaziah didn’t want God’s message to be heard. He told Amos to flee to Judah and to prophesy from there. Amos declared that he was not a prophet by profes-
sion, but simply because of God’s call. “It is a common mistake to suppose that those who have not been educated according to generally accepted standards have not been educated at all. The Lord taught Amos in the solitude of the fields, of the valleys, and of the hills of Judea as he tended the sheep and as he gathered the fruit of the sycamore-fig tree.”

God needed a spokesperson who would not back down when people in authority tried to silence God’s message, someone willing to respond to God’s call, someone who believed in the righteousness and faithfulness of God, even when dealing with the disobedient. This spokesperson was Amos.

**The Worst Type of Famine (Amos 8:11)**

The Israelites had disobeyed God for so long that it was too late to avoid His judgments. “Deep sorrow sometimes stimulates men to heed the Holy Scriptures. Unfortunately, such sorrow often comes too late to produce any beneficial result. This is so, not because God’s love is withdrawn from the sinner, but because the sinner has become so hardened in his iniquities that he wishes only to escape the consequence of his transgressions, and not to forsake his evil ways. He has grieved the Holy Spirit beyond all hope of true repentance and reformation of character.”

God created us as free moral agents. He allows us to choose our course of action, but we must accept the results of our actions. Just before Christ’s second coming, those who have chosen to keep their evil ways will suffer with the seven last plagues. They will want relief and may even seem to turn to God. But it won’t be a true turning, and He will not be able to answer their prayer.

**Judah’s Ruins Restored (Amos 9:11–15)**

Now Amos looks to the promise of future restoration. This was fulfilled when the Israelites returned from Babylonian exile. Because Israel didn’t live up to God’s expectations, the Gentiles were given Israel’s lost opportunities. God’s promises will be enjoyed by all those who follow Him. “There are many systems of philosophy and political life which try to base law and all human relationships upon the nature of man. . . . All such systems, whether communism, or humanism, or socialism, are doomed to fail because of one fatal flaw: they do not recognize the sinful, self-centered nature of man. They ignore God and deify man. Amos saw clearly, seven centuries before Christ, what some men have been unable to see today.”

**REACT**

How can we learn to recognize our sinful nature? What can you do when you see that sinfulness in yourself?

2. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 980.
Most Christians would never consider themselves prophets. However, God has entrusted each of us with a message: repent and return to God to be saved. This isn’t a duty to be taken lightly nor a duty we should assume others will handle. “Everywhere there is a tendency to substitute the work of organizations for individual effort. . . . Multitudes leave to institutions and organizations the work of benevolence; they excuse themselves from contact with the world, and their hearts grow cold. They become self-absorbed and unimpressible. Love for God and man dies out of the soul.

“The responsibility rests upon all.”

“Christ commits to His followers an individual work—a work that cannot be done by proxy. Ministry to the sick and the poor, the giving of the gospel to the lost, is not to be left to committees or organized charities. Individual responsibility, individual effort, personal sacrifice, is the requirement of the gospel.”

How many of us feel unqualified or unable to work for God? We make excuses that others have more money, more power, or more obvious spiritual gifts, but these are not valid excuses. But consider this: “Daniel was a prince of Judah. Isaiah also was of the royal line. David was a shepherd boy, Amos a herdsman, Zechariah a captive from Babylon, Elisha a tiller of the soil. The Lord raised up as His representatives prophets and princes, the noble and the lowly, and taught them the truths to be given to the world.” The same calling is given to every Christian today.

“To everyone who becomes a partaker of His grace the Lord appoints a work for others. Individually we are to stand in our lot and place, saying, ‘Here am I; send me.’ Isaiah 6:8. Upon . . . the individual Christian, whether he be merchant or farmer, professional man or mechanic—the responsibility rests upon all. It is our work to reveal to men the gospel of their salvation. Every enterprise in which we engage should be a means to this end.”

Like the many prophets who have gone before, share God with the world, trusting in Him to give you the power you need. He will not let you down.

**REACT**

What lessons can be drawn from studying the lives of Bible prophets, and how can you apply those lessons to your ministry?

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2. Ibid., p. 148.
3. Ibid.

_Amanda Ernst, Charlotte, North Carolina, U.S.A._
Why is there so much hate in this world? It seems that individuals care only for themselves. As a teacher, I see students all day long giving ugly looks to anyone who even seems to be looking at them. Even with first-graders, this attitude is prevalent.

Are we in the same situation as the Israelites?

What about those of us who profess to be Christians? What about Seventh-day Adventists? Jesus is coming soon, but do we act like it? Or does self govern our decisions? Where are the people who hate evil and love good?

In the book of Amos, God calls Israel to put aside all the worldly influences and practices they have embraced and return to Him. If they don't, they will be lost. Amos 5:18 says that the day of the Lord is darkness. It will be like a man who runs from a lion only to be bitten by a snake when he gets home (verse 19). To those who fear the Lord, the day of the Lord is light; but to those who mock the Lord with insincerely kept feasts and sacrifices, that day is a darkness so deep there is no light and no way out.

Are we in the same situation as the Israelites? Do we attend Sabbath School and church out of habit? Perhaps we attend just because our friends and family do. What would it take to change? For the Israelites it took humiliation and exile in another land. What will it take for you? A death, a house burning down, or just a word spoken in kindness to help you to realize where you need to be?

God calls us to be His people. He has given us His Word to live by. He has called us out of the darkness. The devil prowls around looking for people to fool. When we let the world influence our lives, God’s Word can have little effect upon us. Will you seek the Word of God and live?

**REACT**

1. What evil have you come to expect as normal?
2. What can you do to reorient your moral compass?
In Amos, God calls a generation to stand up for what is right and to seek the Lord. Are we seeking God? There are so many things that can distract us—Facebook, Twitter, the latest electronic device, perhaps even drugs and alcohol.

By ourselves we are helpless to overcome these distractions as they morph into addictions. We may have a desire for something different, but we don’t know where to start. God is calling us and giving us the desire to know Him. The real question is, are we willing to let God lead us in developing a Christlike character? Following are behaviors that, when practiced, put us in a position to be molded and shaped into His likeness.

**Praying.** If we don’t feel that desire in our hearts to know Christ, then pray for it. He will give us hearts that seek Him. It is not that we don’t feel the Lord giving us that hunger. Rather, most of us are resisting His pleadings. Just like we learn to run better after months of training, so too we can learn to commune with Christ as we repeatedly seek Him in prayer.

**Giving God your heart.** I can ask God to take my heart, but often I cannot even give it to Him, because my pride won’t let me. Instead, I must ask Him to take my heart and let Him change it to be like His. The Bible says, “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh” (Ezek. 36:26).

**Studying the Bible.** As we spend time with Christ through Bible study, He will become real to us. Soon He will return. Studying the Bible helps us to prepare to meet Him.

**Laying aside self.** The more we study God’s Word, the more we will learn that we must put God and others before ourselves. “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves” (Phil. 2:3, NIV). Are you willing to lay self aside? Are you willing to ask the Savior to walk with you and strengthen you?

**REACT**

1. For you, what is the best way to have devotions?
2. In what way is self our biggest enemy? What should you do about it?

Joanna Meyer, Monument Valley, Utah, U.S.A.
God is calling us to seek Him. But in this day and age, seeking God is not always the easiest thing to do. So many other things clamor for our attention: work, family, friends, school, not to mention the media with which we constantly seem to be involved. The devil knows how to keep each of us so busy that we really don’t have the time it takes to develop a personal relationship with Christ.

It really comes down to the great controversy between good and evil. All the choices we have to make today and every day hinge on this. Are we going to choose God’s way or Satan’s way? If we choose God’s way, we must surrender our entire lives to Him. We must make Christ our personal Friend. Otherwise, there is no point in saying that we are Christians. We might just as well live the worldly life, if we are not going to give Christ our all. There is no point in trying to look good to those around us. What really matters is what God thinks!

The way I see it, that is really why Christ died on the cross to save us. He wants to share life with us on a personal level. He wants to be friends with us. He wants to be our Savior. In fact, He actually craves a relationship with us. It is so easy to say, “Well, there are so many other people in the world, why would He want me?” But He does. He wants each of us. We each hold a special spot in His heart.

Take the time to get to know Christ in a new way. Think about what it is that is holding you back from really seeking Him. Set those things aside and make the time to find Christ. He is waiting for you with outstretched arms.

**REACT**

1. How can you personally strengthen your relationship with Christ?
2. How does Christ dying on the cross show us that He wants a personal relationship with us?
3. What is preventing you from seeking the Lord?
CONCLUDE
Athletes work on their training program to peak at the right time. The Israelites never understood this principle. Time and again they failed to follow God’s plan to make them spiritually fit. Instead, they focused on idols and other things. They were so blind and deaf that even when God sent Amos, they were not willing to listen. God is looking for modern “Amoses” to lead people to Him. He is encouraging us to be careful not to fall into the trap of just going through the motions but instead to have a deep relationship with Him.

CONSIDER
• Keeping a journal, jotting down how much time you spend on various activities, such as Bible study, sleeping, eating, working, watching TV, friending on Facebook, and so on. What do your journal entries tell you about your priorities?
• Asking five people to define justice. How do their responses compare with Amos’s message?
• Writing on a rectangular sheet of cardboard or poster board words that summarize Amos’s message. Roll the sheet into a cone to make a megaphone and tape it so it maintains its shape. Place it somewhere to remind you to be a modern Amos.
• Jotting down how many times in one day you shared Jesus through words and kind deeds. What made it easy or difficult to do so?
• Tearing out pictures and words from news magazines that reflect the modern-day struggle between good and evil/justice and injustice.
• Singing a song or playing music that reminds you of God’s love.

CONNECT
Eager to Forgive
(Jonah)

“I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord”

(Jon. 2:9, NIV).
Have you ever been accused of something you didn’t do? It’s not a good feeling, is it? In the Bible and throughout history, there are plenty of examples of people who didn’t deserve the things that happened to them. In fact, Scripture tells us to expect such miscarriages of justice: “If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things” (Eccles. 5:8, NIV). We feel a great deal of sympathy for people in such situations and find comfort in God’s promise that justice will be restored when He comes again.

But another kind of injustice also disturbs us. This injustice occurs when people get more than we think they deserve. A story in the newspapers caught my eye a few years ago. It was about a young man named Michael Carroll. Michael won the equivalent of US$15 million in the National Lottery in the United Kingdom. He had been in and out of prison throughout his teens and went on to spend his millions on fast cars, drugs, and more gambling until it was all gone. He is said to have had no regrets about wasting his good fortune.

Many people were angered by how Carroll wasted his fortune. Because he didn’t spend it more wisely, they felt that he didn’t deserve to win. The prophet Jeremiah summed up this attitude when he complained to God: “Yet I would speak with you about your justice: / Why does the way of the wicked prosper? / Why do all the faithless live at ease?” (Jer. 12:1, NIV). In this week’s lesson, we will see how Jonah struggles with feelings like this as God gives the gift of forgiveness to the people of Nineveh who, in Jonah’s opinion, don’t deserve it.

Imagine how you would feel if someone you knew who had a wild reputation took Bible studies and became baptized, while all of your life you had “played by the rules.” Would you be happy for them? Or would you think they didn’t deserve to just walk in and be accepted as part of the church?

Let’s remember what Paul said: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23, NIV). So actually, we all get more than we deserve. What more could we possibly want?

Jenny Waller, Reading, England
All the available evidence suggests that the book of Jonah was included among the Hebrew sacred documents known as “the Twelve” by at least the early second century B.C. However, Jonah’s adventures are so full of bizarre events and ironic twists that the book appears to some to be a comic tale, perhaps a foil to the visions, predictions, and warnings in the other Minor Prophets.

**This short story raises many questions.**

In some ways, the book of Jonah appears to be historical. There is a reference to him in 2 Kings 14:25. Jonah spoke “the word of the Lord God of Israel,” foretelling the Israelites’ triumphs in war, despite the fact that their wicked king, Jeroboam II (c. 793–753 B.C.) had “made Israel to sin” (verse 24). Second Kings contains no record of Jonah’s Nineveh mission, and critics are divided as to the date/authorship of the book of Jonah. However, the book begins with the Hebrew phrase “Now the word of the Lord came unto. . . .” This signals inspired, authentic prophecy. Jesus provides further authentication when He drew a parallel between Jonah and Himself (Matt. 12:38–41), declaring that He would be “in the heart of the earth” for “three days and three nights.” Jonah’s “whale” swims in the context of Mesopotamian legends. The Ninevites worshiped Dagon, half man, half fish. Isaiah may have been picturing a well-known legendary creature when he referred to “leviathan that crooked serpent” and to “the dragon . . . in the sea” (Isa. 27:1). The monster, obedient to God, is a personification of death.

Jonah was to announce, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” The number 40 is the number of years the Israelites wandered in the wilderness and the number of days Christ spent being tempted in the desert (Luke 4:2). So this number symbolizes a time of testing. God knew Jonah did not want Him to grant probation to the Ninevites. So why did He send Jonah to Nineveh? This short story raises many questions. Yet it continues to have allure and to challenge our preconceived notions about God and His intentions for His world.

**REACT**

1. Explore further the possibility that the story of Jonah is filled with symbolism prefiguring Christ’s experience on earth.
2. How can questioning Jonah’s story increase our faith?


Margaret Arbuckle Paterson, Bracknell, England
God Cares About All People (Jon. 1:1–17; 3:1–10; 4:2)
Throughout the story of Jonah, we see that God cares about individuals. Jonah is clear about how God relates to the Israelites, the people of God. God is gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, and full of love. What Jonah doesn’t understand and is not willing to accept is that God’s love extends to unbelievers—including Israel’s enemies, the Ninevites.

Consider how God relates to Jonah as an Israelite. Despite Jonah’s disobedience, God rescues him, gives him a second chance to obey, and patiently reasons with him regarding the salvation of the Ninevites. In the most difficult of circumstances, God makes Himself known to the ship’s captain and the sailors through the storm, the confession of Jonah, and the calming of the sea. These individuals respond positively and are, therefore, accepted by Him.

However unpalatable for Jonah, the Ninevites also are shown to be the object of God’s love, mercy, and compassion. The book of Jonah does not dwell on the wickedness of the Ninevites but on the fact that they repent and are forgiven by God and saved from destruction.

God Created and Controls the Natural World (Jonah 1)
An underlying assumption of the book of Jonah is that there is one true God. Jonah confesses to the sailors who that God is. “ ‘I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land’ ” (Jon. 1:9, NIV). Here God is portrayed as the Creator who is active in the natural world. He is in control of life and death. The calming of the storm saves the lives of the captain and the sailors. Despite being thrown into the sea in the middle of a storm and being swallowed by a fish, God saves Jonah’s life. God forgives the Ninevites, and their lives are saved. God delivers those who call on His name (Jon. 1:14–16; 2:2; 3:10).

In the Jonah narrative, God delivers all who called upon His name. Jonah, the prophet of God, needs deliverance from the fish and from death, because he has deliberately disobeyed God. While still inside the fish, Jonah says, “ ‘In my distress I called to the Lord, / and He answered me’ ” (Jon. 2:2, NIV). In the storm the sea captain and the sailors are
victims of someone else’s sin; but they cry out to God in their terrifying ordeal, and He responds to them. The Ninevites, infamous for their evil doing and violence, repent and turn to God for deliverance. Whether we find ourselves in trouble of our own making or because of the circumstances around us, we know that if we pray to God, He will answer.

**God May Be Merciful Instead of Sending Punishment (Jon. 4:2)**

That God should ever change His mind may be difficult for us to comprehend. Jonah, however, suspects that God might change His mind about punishing the Ninevites. “‘O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity’” (Jon. 4:2, NIV).

The Lord’s deliverance from sin and destruction generally invites from people a response of thanksgiving; but Jonah’s response was one of anger. What motivated this anger? Like us, his motives were probably mixed. Fortunately, the salvation of others doesn’t depend on our forgiveness. Jesus invites us to forgive others as our response to being forgiven by Him (Matt. 6:12–15).

“Instead of rejoicing that God’s grace had forgiven the penitent Ninevites, he allowed his selfish and sinful pride to make him resentful. Because what he predicted did not come to pass, he felt he would be regarded as a false prophet. Reputation was to him of more value than all the souls in the Assyrian capital. He may also have reasoned that the Lord’s knowledge of the future would be discredited among the heathen because of this unfulfilled prophecy. . . .

“The mercy of God toward the Ninevites (ch. 3:10) enraged Jonah. Divine mercy had spared his own life when he was disobedient, but he was jealous when God extended the same mercy toward others.”*

**REACT**

1. Is it easy to accept that God can forgive individuals when we consider their behavior to be completely unforgivable? Explain your answer.

2. What do we mean if we say that God can change His mind?

3. Has God’s mercy toward another person ever made you angry? Why? How did you work your way through that anger? What can Jonah’s experience teach you about God’s mercy to prevent you from getting angry next time?

* The SDA Bible Commentary, 2nd ed., vol. 4, p. 1006.

Erica Hole, Binfield, England
“When Jonah learned of God’s purpose to spare the city that, notwithstanding its wickedness, had been led to repent in sackcloth and ashes, he should have been the first to rejoice because of God’s amazing grace; but instead he allowed his mind to dwell upon the possibility of his being regarded as a false prophet. Jealous of his reputation, he lost sight of the infinitely greater value of the souls in that wretched city.”

Ellen White compares Jonah’s reaction to God’s mercy to that of a believer faced with the disappointment of 1844: “In Newberry, N.H., I was shown in vision some things concerning our disappointment in 1844. We were visiting at the house of Brother Morse, who had been a firm believer that Christ would come to this earth in 1844. I was shown the passing of the time was a great disappointment to Brother Morse. He could not explain the delay. He did go back and renounce his past experience as error and call it all a delusion, fanaticism, as many others had done. But he was bewildered. He had lost his whereabouts, and was desponding, doing nothing to cheer or strengthen the faith of others. . . .

“The disappointment of Brother Morse was similar to that of Jonah. The Lord had given Jonah the very message He wished him to carry: ‘Preach unto it the message that I shall give thee, saith the Lord.’ The event predicted did not come, yet the message of warning was no less from God. . . .

“I was shown that instead of Brother Morse feeling disconsolate and unreconciled as did Jonah, he should feel the deepest gratitude to God that Christ did not come to this earth in 1844 and destroy the wicked. But that in His mercy and loving-kindness, He gave them still time to repent of their sins and prepare for His coming.”

**REACT**

1. Are we sometimes more focused on what people think of us rather than on sharing the good news?
2. Discuss why the Ninevites responded to a foreign prophet but the Jews failed to recognize the Messiah.
3. When have you felt disappointed by God? How were you able to overcome it?

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2. White, MS 6, 1876.
We can identify with Jonah because he is as uncomprehending as we sometimes are when it comes to understanding how much God loves us. So we can listen to how God answers Jonah just as if He were addressing us directly.

God is love, and love longs to forgive.

God wants Jonah to believe in a transformed life. Jonah really does understand God’s character: “I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity” (Jon. 4:2, NIV). So why, when he sees God’s love in action, does he resent it so much? Although he knows about God’s character in theory, he doesn’t really get it. But do we really “grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ”? Do we really “know this love that surpasses knowledge” (Eph. 3:18, 19, NIV)?

It’s not about you. It seems that Jonah’s religion was all about him. God punishing Nineveh would make his preaching seem powerful and his prophecy accurate. Jonah didn’t just run away from the preaching part of God’s plan for him; he ran away from the forgiveness part too. But God is love, and love longs to forgive. Jonah, having been rescued from the depths of the ocean, should have understood that. Always remember that “neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39, NIV).

Believe that there’s enough love to share. Jonah’s reaction to the forgiveness of Nineveh reminds us of the prodigal son’s brother. “Don’t I get any credit for all my good behavior?” he complained, as if the father’s love for his brother meant less love for him (see Luke 15:28, 29).

There is little point in being dedicated to evangelism if we provisionally welcome new believers as trainee Christians, rather than wholeheartedly as our brothers and sisters in Christ. If anything, they have lessons to teach us—lessons about trust, faith, and transformed lives. And about listening for the truth with an open heart.

**REACT**

1. Do we go to church to be proved right?
2. Do we think we are better, and less sinful, than people who do not go to church? Does God love these people less than He loves us?
3. Are you running away from something that God wants you to do?
Scripture tells us about a number of people who were close to God but who still became angry with Him. Jeremiah was angry with God because he was being persecuted by the very people to whom he was preaching. So he accused God of lying: “Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail” (Jer. 15:18, NRSV). Then there was Job. After so much suffering, he declared that he wished he had never been born and challenged God to “cease then, and let me alone” (Job 10:20). Jonah also was angry with God, but for a very different reason. God told him to preach salvation to the Ninevites. Yet instead of obeying, he ran away, argued with God, and wanted to die.

Commentators have suggested a variety of reasons for Jonah’s anger. Perhaps he was angry because Nineveh was Israel’s enemy, or because he felt that his credibility as a prophet of doom was undermined by Nineveh’s repentance. Ultimately though, “Jonah’s problem [is] with the love of God.” It was not that God’s love fell short. Jonah acknowledged that He is “‘gracious and compassionate . . . slow to anger and abounding in love’ ” (Jon. 4:2, NIV). And that is exactly what angered him. Somehow, the fact that God’s love extends to everyone, even the Ninevites, seemed to Jonah to devalue the special relationship that he and the Israelites had with God.

God responds to the anger directed at Him in different ways. He told Jeremiah to repent and carry on with His work (Jer. 15:19). As a way of putting Job’s suffering in perspective, God directed him to consider His awesome power in creating all that there is (Job 38–41). In Jonah’s case, God simply asked, “‘Have you any right to be angry?’ ” (Jon. 4:4, NIV; see also verse 9).

We may have the right to be angry at the injustice that occurs in this world, or to be frustrated with God’s silence and apparent lack of concern. However, we have no right to be angry with God’s love.

**REACT**

1. What does the story of Jonah teach us about God’s love and about our response to God’s call in our life?
2. What do you think happened to Jonah at the end of the story?

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Jenny Waller, Reading, England
CONCLUDE

God’s love is divine. Holy. Unconditional. Extravagant. Indescribable. Unpredictable. Surprising. Annoying. Intrusive. Irritating. Disturbing. Jonah experienced all of these facets of God’s love. But what he did not realize was that God’s love could reach far beyond himself. He knew God loved him, yet he certainly did not know that He could love “those other people.” Those people of different color, accent, culture, reputation, socioeconomic status, religion, and educational level. Jonah, though rescued from the bottom of the sea, still could not grasp “how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, . . . this love that surpasses knowledge” (Eph. 3:18, 19, NIV).

CONSIDER

• Doing a word search of the word love in the Bible, then writing your own definition based on what you discover.
• Doing community service work with immigrants who do not speak your language.
• Tutoring children who need help with reading or math, or working as a teacher’s aide in a special education program.
• Reading 1 Corinthians 13 in different versions of the Bible for 30 days and keeping a journal of your thoughts regarding this chapter. In your journal, record your feelings about this verse, your reservations regarding such love, your prayers to God regarding how to develop and display such love in your life, and the joy you receive as you continue to develop such love through the power of the Holy Spirit.
• Drawing or sculpting what God’s love looks like to you.

CONNECT

Hosea 11; Romans 8:38, 39; Ephesians 3:14–21.
Jo Ann Davidson, Jonah: The Inside Story (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald®, 2003).
God’s Special People
(Micah)

“He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God’” (Mic. 6:8, NIV).
The Mariana Trench is located in the Pacific Ocean, and at 36,201 feet deep,¹ it is the deepest point in the sea. Picture yourself throwing an object into the trench. After the object goes down through thousands of feet of water, there is no hope of retrieving it. That is how forgiveness is with God. “Thou will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea” (Mic. 7:19). And once God does so, He has no remembrance of them. It is as though we have never sinned.

There were times when the children of Israel were rebellious toward God and when, as a consequence, He planned to destroy their land. They needed a Savior. Micah tried persuading the Israelites to come back to God. They turned from their ways and repented. They once again walked in accordance with His requirements. Micah predicted that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, the same Messiah who always has been present from everlasting to everlasting.

As long as we confess our sins, Jesus Christ is faithful and just to forgive and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Christ gives each of us the opportunity to have a clean slate. He is a God of second chances; and He is always willing to forgive.

As we focus on the book of Micah, “We see how relevant it is to our world. We despair of human nature; we are overwhelmed by the evil we see around us. We are appalled by our godless society and often dismayed that the Church still seems so divided and ineffective.”² Thank God Micah does not end on a sad note. There is hope! While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

This week’s lesson is about God’s saving grace. It is something that He offers to us even though we don’t deserve it. God, in His mercy, forgives and throws our sin in the depths of the sea. “O give thanks unto the Lord; . . . for his mercy endureth forever” (1 Chron. 16:34).

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Becoming Like the World (Mic. 1:4–9)

To help us understand what took place in Israel, we will explore briefly the history of the nation. Israel had been divided into two kingdoms, with Israel in the north and Judah in the south. The capitals of Israel and Judah, Samaria and Jerusalem respectively, had become the centers of idolatry and iniquity. In the north, people started violating the commandments of God. Samaria had been built by the wicked Omri. His son, Ahab, followed in his steps and erected a temple to Baal (1 Kings 16:23–33). Iniquity was slowly making its way into Judah. All of these acts greatly affected the religion of the people, and as a result, they were gradually becoming corrupted. There was no way in which the northern kingdom could remain firm to the true teachings of God.

Going Against God (Mic. 6:1–4)

Micah 6:4 says, “‘I brought you up out of Egypt / and redeemed you from the land of slavery. / I sent Moses to lead you, / also Aaron and Miriam’ ” (NIV). Here God is reminding His people what He has done for them.

Have we forgotten all that Christ has done for us? If we look back at our lives, we can see how God has always been faithful. The Israelites had a personal experience with God. He freed them from the hands of the Egyptians (Exod. 14:21–31), and yet they were unfaithful to Him. He asked, “‘O My people, what have I done to you?’ ” (Mic. 6:3, NKJV). It was as if He were asking, “What did I do to deserve this rebellion?” That probably was us when we needed help on an exam, or had trouble finding a job, difficulty paying our bills, or were in the hospital and the doctors couldn’t diagnose the illness. Then He manifested Himself to us. Still, after all of these experiences, we sometimes forget who brought us through. This is the same thing the Israelites did. Had it not been for the
tender mercies of our loving heavenly Father, many of us would not have gotten where we are today. We were made to glorify Him and put Him above all things. When we go against Him, we betray Him.

A Message of Hope (Mic. 5:2; 7:18–20)
The lifestyle of the Israelites in Micah’s time was not appealing to God. They needed someone to save them from their sins. Micah predicted that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (5:2). God gave His Son to be the spotless Lamb who would save those who are lost. Jesus Christ had to become human, while remaining fully God, in order to pay the price for our sins. No matter what we may have done in the past, God is willing to forgive us and to cast our sins into the depths of the sea (7:18–20). Christ came to save the entire human race. Even before we were born, He died for us. We do not deserve to be saved, but salvation is our gift to receive. We need to accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and personal Savior, and let His Holy Spirit transform our lives.

Walking With God (Mic. 6:8)
The Christian walk is a continuous journey. When we accept Jesus, it will not be an automatic, immediate turn around. We will continue to encounter trials and tribulations. We will be faced with temptations that we never expected to come our way. There will be ups and downs from day to day. However, when we spend time with God, we will receive strength. His strength is made perfect in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). A constant life of prayer and Bible study must be part of our daily walk with Him. This will help us to develop a relationship with Him and expand our understanding of who He is and how we can become like Him. We will then have the strength to stand up for God no matter what situations might arise. As we grow in Him, the world will become less and less appealing. Romans 12:2 says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (NKJV). Our only desires as children of God should be to serve Him and Him alone, and to draw others to Him.

REACT
1. What similarities do you see between the current church and the Israelites?
2. In what ways do you see worldly pleasures creeping into your life?

Onyx Walker, Upper Santa Cruz, Trinidad and Tobago, West Indies
Israel had a serious problem with idolatry. God constantly had to remind His people that He was the only true God. Micah addressed this issue early in his pleadings with these stubborn people. His words were a cry coming from the heart. God is our Creator and Redeemer and must be acknowledged as such. To steer us away from idolatry we are reminded that “God’s law must be exalted, His authority maintained; and to the house of Israel was given this great and noble work. God separated them from the world, that He might commit to them a sacred trust. He made them the depositaries of His law, and He purposed through them to preserve among men the knowledge of Himself. Thus the light of heaven was to shine out to a world enshrouded in darkness, and a voice was to be heard appealing to all peoples to turn from idolatry to serve the living God.”

“Whatever we put first in our lives becomes our god. When I study the Scriptures, I am alarmed for the Israel of God in these last days. They are exhorted to flee from idolatry. I fear that they are asleep and so conformed to the world that it would be difficult to discern between him that serveth God and him that serveth Him not. The distance is widening between Christ and His people, and lessening between them and the world. The marks of distinction between Christ’s professed people and the world have almost disappeared. Like ancient Israel, they follow after the abominations of the nations around them.”

Whatever we put first in our lives becomes our god. Whether its entertainment, fashion, family, friends, or education, they can all become idols. We should never exalt anything or anyone to a position only God should have in our lives. Let us examine ourselves to see if there is anything between us and God. Jesus Christ loves us so much. Let us give Him our entire lives. He alone deserves our worship. Allow Him to always have first place in your heart.

**REACT**

1. What similarities do you see between Israel and God’s church today? Are there young adults you know who have a relationship with God?

2. What are some of the things in your life that weaken your connection with Christ? What can you do to get rid of them?

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*Dwayne Waldron, Scarborough, Tobago, Trinidad and Tobago, West Indies*
Often we allow our surroundings to shape who we are in negative ways. For example, when we conform to societal norms, we compromise our faith. This was what Micah was preaching against as he ministered to Israel.

Imagine being put in a position of basically having to condemn your country. This was the nature of the prophecy Micah had to preach. Israel knew about the true God and His coming Son, their Savior. Yet they preferred to worship idols. Two main themes are found in Micah’s message to God’s people: “(1) the condemnation of the sins of the people and the consequent chastisement in captivity, and (2) the deliverance of Israel and the glory and gladness of the Messianic kingdom. Throughout the book of Micah threatening and promise, judgment and mercy alternate.”*

In addition, Micah laments that the wounds of God’s people are incurable (Mic. 1:9). It is ruin without remedy. No man can help them and God will not, because they will not repent. There is indeed balm in Gilead and a Physician there; but they will not seek His help. He also laments that the enemy has come to the gate of Jerusalem. Soon after the destruction of Samaria and the ten tribes, the Assyrian army, under Sennacherib, came to the gate and laid siege to Jerusalem.

Giving these prophecies must have been a bitter task for Micah. Yet he knew what he had to do. He knew he had to bring forth the word of the Lord because in doing so hope would come.

**REACT**

1. A similar message is being preached to us today (1 Pet. 4:14–17). Time is running out. Ask yourself these questions: What idols do I have? Do I live for Christ? In what big or small ways might I be compromising my faith?
2. In your part of the world, what societal norms are Christians following at the expense of their faith?
3. God alternates judgment with mercy and threats with promises. What does this teach us about God? What hope does this give us?

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*The SDA Bible Commentary, 2nd ed., vol. 4, p. 1012.*
God’s prophets were to woo His people back to Him. As His mouthpieces, they had the unpopular assignment of showing people their sins. Micah understood that the sins of God’s people involved worshiping other gods. How can we prevent ourselves from doing the same?

Spend time with God. This is one of the basic activities in which we need to engage in order for us to grow as Christians. God created us to have fellowship with Him. Spending quality time with Him is one way for us to find joy in our Christian walk. It may be hard to grasp the concept of God being a closer Friend than even our best earthly friend, but with experience we can learn what it means to have Him for a Friend. Jesus made spending time with His Father His number-one priority and thus set the example for how we are to relate to our Creator.

Worship is a passion, reverence, and joy we can experience any time we sense God’s presence.

Develop a prayer life. Prayer is communion with God. Jesus prayed often and during difficult circumstances (Luke 5:16; 22:39–42). If prayer was so important to God’s Son, how much more so should it be to us! When we spend quality time with God in prayer, we get to know Him personally. If we pray only on a random basis, it is impossible to have a close relationship with Him. God reveals Himself to those who are willing to pay the price of separating themselves from everything else in order to seek Him in prayer (Jer. 29:12, 13).

Worship God. So often we take worshiping God for granted. We forget how insignificant we—His creatures—really are without Him. So we need to humble ourselves and submit to Him. We should worship God every day of the week, not just on Sabbath. Worship is a passion, reverence, and joy we can experience any time we sense God’s presence. The most important knowledge in the world is knowledge of God. Since true worship must be “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24), we can only worship God if we have a right concept of Him.

REACT

How does God use prophecy today? How is it manifested?

Chantelle Woods, Chaguanas, Trinidad and Tobago, West Indies
God’s people had turned completely away from Him. They chose to follow King Omri in idol worship and his son, King Ahab, who did more evil than any king before him. As a result, God caused His people to no longer be satisfied (Mic. 6:14). No matter how much they had, they never had enough. There are times when we, too, become so mired in sin that it seems easier for us to stay there than to find a way out. God, however, is always willing to extend His loving arms and pull us safely back into His fold. His promise to be merciful still calls out to all who fear Him (Luke 1:50, 54, 55).

“When Satan sees that we are submitting to Christ, he attempts to keep us on his side by constantly reminding us of our sins. He even “hires” those within our circle of influence as deep sea divers to retrieve our past sins long after God has thrown them into the depths of the ocean. We should never allow Satan to deceive us into thinking that we are too bad for God to rescue us. “The only true forgiveness is that which is offered and extended even before the offender has apologized and sought it.”

Thank God for His willingness to send Jesus to die for our sins. When God tosses our sins into the sea, He remembers them no more and neither should we.

“We have all done things for which we are ashamed, and we live in the tension of what we have been and what we want to be. Because our hope is in Christ, however, we can let go of past guilt and look forward to what God will help us become. Don’t dwell on your past. Instead grow in the knowledge of God by concentrating on your relationship with Him now. Realize that you are forgiven, and then move on to a life of faith and obedience. Look forward to a fuller and more meaningful life because of your hope in Christ.”

REACT

1. Why do people often find it so easy to remind others of their past mistakes?
2. What can we as Christians do to avoid becoming deep sea divers?

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CONCLUDE

God desired to restore His relationship with His people, even though they had abandoned Him for other “lovers.” Instead of turning away from them, God turned toward them, seeking to win them back. He initiated the reconciliation, speaking words of love. Micah is caught between these two lovers who are experiencing a broken relationship. He delivers messages of a restoring love. Things will change. The relationship will be restored. One day the Redeemer will make all things new. The key is not to resist God’s love.

CONSIDER

• Writing a description of each of the characters found in The Return of the Prodigal by Rembrandt. What do these characters say about our heavenly Father’s love? Which of them do you identify with and why?
• Spending a month or so working with homeless people in your city. Listen to their stories about how God is working in their lives.
• Visiting a synagogue and talking to the rabbi about his thoughts regarding how Israel responded to God’s love.
• Sending cards that you make yourself containing messages of hope to friends who may not be in a personal relationship with God.
• Preparing a dinner for friends, neighbors, or your Sabbath School class during which you share with each other your spiritual journeys with God.
• Imagining that you are Micah the prophet. What message, using modern language, art, or technology, would you create to depict how God feels about people?
• Spending time in nature or viewing nature photography online. What does the beauty and wonder of creation teach us about God’s love? How can nature restore us?

CONNECT


Tutoring God’s Goodness
(Habakkuk)

“ ‘The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea’ ” (Hab. 2:14, NASB).
“Trust Me.”
“But I can’t see! I need to see.”
“Look at Me.”

It isn’t easy to tell people—especially the young blooded—that they need to rely on a God who is unseen. How can we test His trustworthiness? How can we compare Him to something else or find out if there are other options? We cannot. However, with the help of God’s Holy Spirit and through trust in God Himself, we can develop a saving relationship with Him. Then as we do so, we begin to understand that there is no need to quantify His goodness and His Word.

Keeping our eyes “ever toward the Lord” is not an easy thing for anyone—especially when most of us have the spiritual attention span of a two-year-old. However, we will find that as we focus on Him, all our fears will vanish. This could be for several reasons, but possibly the most important are as follows:

1. There is nothing negative about God, so when you’re seeing Him alone, you can’t help but see the good in every situation—even amid turmoil! “Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble” (Ps. 119:165, NKJV).

2. God is love and His love is faithful. So while you focus on Him rather than on your problems, He will “pluck your feet out of the net.” Often, though, we want to dictate how He saves us. “Well, Lord, maybe You could part this sea for me and let me walk through on dry land. Or maybe You could just provide a little boat for me to travel across in. Or, how about a helicopter ride?” However, it’s not really our business to demand how He rescues. We are to ask for faith to accept whatever help He gives us.

So as we go through this week’s lesson—and our lives—let us seek to trust God in practical ways with our darkest secrets and heaviest burdens. Each day, may we be comforted by the following promise: “ ‘Do not fear, for I am with you; / Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. / I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, / Surely, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand’ ” (Isa. 41:10, NASB).

So, let’s try a little harder to just close our myopic eyes and really trust Him more each day. No peeking now!

Lisa Munroe, Kingston, Jamaica, West Indies
“When all that is good falls apart, / what can good people do? The Lord is in his holy temple; / the Lord sits on his throne in heaven” (Ps. 11:3, 4, NCV).

There are no limits to His grace, love, and mercy.

David, a man after God’s own heart, was chosen by God “to be captain over his people” because he kept the Lord’s commandments (1 Sam. 13:14). In spite of David’s relationship with Bathsheba and his subsequent murder of Uriah, he still stands out, not only because the promised Messiah was of his lineage, but also because David knew God and God knew him. It is only by knowing God personally that we can learn to trust Him amid every circumstance. By establishing a personal relationship with Him, we learn that He remains unchanged in spite of any hardships we face. Amid civil unrest, natural disasters, and economic recession, God is in control and He remains the same. “Since God is in heaven, the psalmist has nothing to fear. The persecuted have a Protector to whom they can always appeal. The psalmist replies to his advisers with an unequivocal conviction. He knows his God.”*

David is an example of human failing overcome by God’s matchless love. When the prophet Nathan confronted him, David did not offer excuses. Instead, he acknowledged his transgressions (2 Sam. 12:1–25). God requires us to trust Him and submit to Him despite our circumstances, so that each day we can see evidence of His divine love and favor. God’s love is unchanging. The only way to rest with confidence in His love is by daily recognizing that He is preparing us to spend eternity with Him.

Daily consecration to God and submission to the Holy Spirit’s guidance are the only way for self to disappear and for God to enter our lives. Remember that He is unaltered by storms, He is not frightened by the things that frighten us, and He has all power to turn any tragedy into triumph. As He did for Joseph, who was physically imprisoned, He can do for each and every one of us who are imprisoned by sin. There are no limits to His grace, love, and mercy.

**REACT**

How can you daily seek to know God and to be known by Him?

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Injustice Upon Injustice, Yet God Waits (Hab. 1:12–17)

Habakkuk 1:12 begins by asking God, “Are you not from everlasting, / O Lord my God, my Holy One?” (NKJV). The prophet then reiterates, as if from memory, his knowledge of God’s judgment on those who have turned their backs on Him. However, Habakkuk’s style lacks conviction. He immediately proceeds to question God about the mistreatment of the people around him by those who no longer fear God. Like many of the prophets, Habakkuk lived in a country that turned its back on the Lord. Trusting in Him becomes no easy matter when no outward sign of His presence shines through. Injustice upon injustice piles up, prompting Habakkuk to cry out in desperation. But ultimately, he never gives up his faith in the Lord’s power to rescue the downtrodden. Is this not the highest form of faith?

Habakkuk was faithful to the end of his life even though he did not live to see God’s promise fulfilled. He showed how it is possible to have faith in God even though it seems He is doing nothing to correct evil. At the end of his book, Habakkuk wrote, “You [God] went forth for the salvation of Your people, / For salvation with Your Anointed. / You struck the head from the house of the wicked, / By laying bare from foundation to neck” (Hab. 3:13, NKJV). Though he did not see evidence of his prayer in his daily life, he persevered, writing the end of his book as a foretelling of God’s ultimate victory over evil.

How to Live by Faith (Hab. 2:2–4; Rom. 1:17)

Habakkuk advises that there may be a wait involved before God rescues His people from the wicked. “The vision is yet for an appointed time; / But at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. / Though it tarries, wait for it; / Because it will surely come, / It will not tarry” (Hab. 2:3, NKJV). God’s deliverance moves at His pace, not at ours. He is in control of the outcome of our situations, however dire. God stresses the point that we must remain faithful to the end.

Habakkuk also compares the two points-of-view of his time—faithfulness and unfaithfulness. In verse four, he states that the wicked are full of themselves. Meanwhile, those who are faithful live by faith. Paul echoes this when he states that “the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith” (Rom. 1:17, NKJV).
How do you or I become one of the faithful? The unfaithful turn their backs on God. They are impatient, unwilling to wait for His word to become fully realized. By contrast, the faithful turn to God, even in their worst circumstances. They wait on Him. They trust His promises, even if those promises do not spare them from present tribulations.

**Why Can the Law Not Save? (Gal. 3:10–14; Heb. 10:36–38)**

In Galatians, Paul writes that a curse hovers over anyone who relies on the law to save himself or herself. Jesus took that curse upon Himself when He died on the cross. Paul states that we are justified only by faith because we cannot obey the law. Through faith we receive the Holy Spirit. Through faith Christ redeems us. However, the journey of faith requires perseverance. Habakkuk writes concerning the heartache of watching injustice occur right in front of him, and of being unable to see the Lord right the wrong of the evildoers.

In Hebrews, we read that the righteous live only because of faith, and if a person turns away from God, that person slides into unrighteousness and can be lost forever if he or she does not repent. We need endurance so that when we’ve done God’s will, we might receive what He has promised. Faith, then, is not about knowing 100 percent that something is true, right, correct, or provable by sight. Instead, faith is about slogging through those periods of life when the answers and reasons become obscured by doubt, sadness, and mourning. Faith is a true commitment to God and Christ.

**Reliance on God in Spite of Our Questions (Ps. 13:1; Phil. 4:11–13)**

Paul learned how to be content in any circumstance. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13, NKJV). In my own case, I often think that this verse talks about accomplishing a great goal. However, that is not Paul’s intent. He makes clear in the context of the surrounding verses that regardless of the circumstances in which he finds himself, he has learned contentment and that the Lord can give him strength for all of life’s challenges. Psalm 13:1 asks, “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? / How long will you hide your face from me?” (NIV). This question is one we all ask at one time or another. The Lord hears it; but as we have seen in Habakkuk’s time, He chooses to fulfill His promises in His own time. It is our duty to remain faithful, holding on to these promises in faith.

**REACT**

1. What is one way to remain faithful to God in the midst of a horrible situation happening in your own life?
2. Habakkuk and many other people in the Bible questioned God. So do we. Why?
3. Is it all right to question God’s timing, when we know His promises will come true? Why, or why not?

Jeremy Vetter, Moscow, Idaho, U.S.A.
“At the time Josiah began to rule, and for many years before, the true-hearted in Judah were questioning whether God’s promises to ancient Israel could ever be fulfilled. . . .

“The anxious questionings were voiced by the prophet Habakkuk. Viewing the situation of the faithful in his day, he expressed the burden of his heart in the inquiry: ‘O Lord, how long shall I cry, and Thou wilt not hear!’ . . .

“And then, his faith reaching out beyond the forbidding prospect of the immediate future, and laying fast hold on the precious promises that reveal God’s love for His trusting children, the prophet added, ‘We shall not die.’ . . . With this declaration of faith he rested his case, and that of every believing Israelite, in the hands of a compassionate God. . . .

“The faith that strengthened Habakkuk and all the holy and the just in those days of deep trial was the same faith that sustains God’s people today. In the darkest hours, under circumstances the most forbidding, the Christian believer may keep his soul stayed upon the source of all light and power. Day by day, through faith in God, his hope and courage may be renewed. ‘The just shall live by his faith. . . .’

“We must cherish and cultivate the faith of which prophets and apostles have testified—the faith that lays hold on the promises of God and waits for deliverance in His appointed time and way. The sure word of prophecy will meet its final fulfillment in the glorious advent of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, as King of kings and Lord of lords. The time of waiting may seem long, the soul may be oppressed by discouraging circumstances, . . . but with the prophet who endeavored to encourage Judah in a time of unparalleled apostasy, let us confidently declare, ‘The Lord is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him.’ Habakkuk 2:20. Let us ever hold in remembrance the cheering message, ‘The vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come.’”*

REACT

How can we reach the point in our lives where we are able to live by faith even during our darkest moments?


Andrew Lawrence, Kingston, Jamaica, West Indies
Many people today believe only what they can observe. Because of this, they have difficulty believing in God. How can such people and indeed those of us who claim to believe God, recognize His presence and trustworthiness? Following are ways to help us to assess the foundations of our trust in the Lord:

**Realize that precedence takes prominence.** The Bible is full of God’s promises to His people. And He kept them all. In Habakkuk 2:3, we learn that His promises can at times take a while to be fulfilled. But He encourages us to be patient because even though they seem forgotten, they will be fulfilled (Hab. 2:3).

**Understand the economy of God’s salvation.** Most people are governed by a “something for something” value system. The world we live in has taught us that we must give to get. Yet there is nothing we can do for God or give to Him that will help us to earn our salvation.

**Know that what we share with God stays with God.** Sometimes we confide in someone whom we thought was a friend only to discover that later they have told our secrets to other people. However, when we approach God with a broken and contrite spirit, pouring our heart out to Him, we do not need to worry that He will “tell the whole world.” In fact, He does just the opposite. He pushes the delete button, thereby completely removing our sins from us. The psalmist put it this way: “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, / so great is his love for those who fear him; / as far as the east is from the west, / so far has he removed our transgressions from us” (Ps. 103:11, 12, NIV). Also read Isaiah 38:17 and Micah 7:19. Once we truly repent, we have a fresh start. We receive Christ’s robe of righteousness so that we may stand guiltless before the Father!

**REACT**

1. How does today’s lesson help you to see our “unseen” God in a very real way?

2. Why do we sometimes find it necessary to test God’s trustworthiness? Is doing so necessarily a bad thing? Explain your answer.

Lisa Munroe, Kingston, Jamaica, West Indies
In a world plagued with depression and pain, it is easy to become discouraged and to feel a sense of hopelessness. For some, the Second Coming seems so far away as to be beyond their reach. What words of comfort can Habakkuk 3:2, 13, Romans 1:17, and Galatians 3:11 give us about remaining strong when all seems lost?

The book of Habakkuk was written between 610 and 605 B.C. Yet we can all identify with the prophet’s plea, “O Lord, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save!” (Hab. 1:2). It is hard to have faith when all around us we witness suffering and pain, when we see enemies of the gospel prosper while God’s people struggle to survive. However, Habakkuk’s message to us is plain: “the just shall live by his faith” (2:4).

Observe the signs of the end that are upon us. The culmination of spiritual warfare is much closer than ever before. However, we sometimes get so caught up in our worldly struggles and temptations that we forget the tremendous victory ahead of us. It is now that we should be excited about serving our Lord and rejoicing in Him just as Habakkuk did (Hab. 3:17, 18). How much closer are we to the Second Coming than he was! Realizing this, we should have even greater reason to be steadfast in our faith than he was. If we focus on our fears and struggles, and wonder at the state of the world today, we run the risk of missing eternity.

Remember that God uses our struggles to strengthen our faith in Him. So instead of viewing the stresses and strains of life as pitfalls, see them as elevators taking us to new spiritual heights. Without rain we would never fully enjoy the sunshine. Without strife we would not fully experience the joy that salvation brings.

**REACT**

1. What pitfalls and struggles are you experiencing that could cause your faith in God to become weak?
2. How can you transform these fears and struggles into reaffirmations of your faith?
3. How can the present state of the world inspire you to have hope?

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*Casey-ann Brady, St. Catherine, Jamaica, West Indies*
CONCLUDE

Even though there were many people in Israel who had chosen to no longer follow God, a faithful group clung to Him with hope. We may not always understand why senseless things happen in this world, but we are not called to have perfect understanding. Instead, we are called to have faith, even when our eyes cannot see. We are called to exercise faith even when it seems that all around us is falling apart. Our faith cannot be subjective. It must be based on the Word of God, which we allow to transform our lives. The reward of such a faith is eternal life.

CONSIDER

- Analyzing and describing the components of faith, including the object of, subject of, substance of, proof of, fruit of, consequences of, and reward of faith. Use Bible verses to support your answers.
- Listening to the song “I Will Praise You in This Storm” by Casting Crowns, which describes how we can praise God no matter how we are buffeted by life’s storms.
- Role-playing with several friends the story of Israel in the book of Habakkuk. Ask your church’s worship team for an opportunity to share it with the congregation.
- Painting a series of notecards that illustrate having faith in God. Share them as an encouragement with friends who are struggling with difficulties in their lives.
- Organizing a debate on the subject of having faith in the absence of seeing God in action. Have teams choose the side they want to defend: (1) why you should or (2) why you should not continue to have faith even when things seem to be falling apart around you. Following the debate, discuss as a group how faith in the end times will be all that we have to see us through.
- Composing a poem about your experience of having faith in God when you were going through a difficult time. When you have completed it, find a way to share it in a meaningful setting with others.

CONNECT

“I Will Praise You in This Storm” Ps. 32:6; Lam. 3:22, 23; Rom. 3:3; James 1:2–4

Ellen G. White, Prophets and Kings, chap. 32; White, The Ministry of Healing, p. 62; White, Christ’s Object Lessons, p. 360, paragraphs 2, 3; White, Early Writings, pp. 72, 73.

Deena Bartel-Wagner, Whitesboro, New York, U.S.A.
The Day of the Lord
(Zephaniah)

“The Lord will be awesome to them, for He will reduce to nothing all the gods of the earth; people shall worship Him, each one from his place, indeed all the shores of the nations”

(Zeph. 2:11, NKJV).
Jerrod “the Beast” Paynes sits handcuffed to the stainless-steel bar bolted to the table in front of him. The prosecutor parades around the courtroom reading aloud the list of Jerrod’s crimes—the most recent being the murder of little Anthony Carson. “This man is a danger to society. Think of all the other innocent Anthony Carsons of the world. It’s time to set an example. People like Paynes never change. He doesn’t deserve to live.”

Several people in the courtroom murmur in agreement; but Jerrod remains silent with his head bowed. Some people in the audience applaud as the prosecution demands the death penalty for first-degree murder.

“The judgment is near. Go humbly to God in repentance.”

“It ain’t good, kid,” Jerrod’s defense attorney whispers. He winks. Theodore Preston is notorious for finding loopholes in the most airtight of cases. With a smug smile, Preston strides to the center of the courtroom and proceeds to denounce every claim made against the prosecutor. This witness is unreliable. That piece of evidence is not admissible in court.

The court erupts with objections. The judge bangs his gavel for order. “I’m sorry,” Judge Freedmont sighs, “but I’m afraid I have to agree with the evidence provided by Mr. Preston. I will have to allow Mr. Paynes to go free.” The courtroom again erupts into angry shouts.

“Your Honor!” a voice calls out. “Permission to speak?”

“Go ahead, Mr. Paynes.”

“I committed every one of those crimes including killing that little boy, and I accept my punishment. I can’t say how sorry I am for all the crimes I’ve committed. I deserve to die.”

The judge looks at the killer. “By the power vested in me, I hereby declare you pardoned of all charges.” A tear slides down Jerrod’s cheek as he protests. Judge Freedmont raises a hand. “You may not have asked for mercy, but I can tell that you are truly a changed man.”

Released from his bindings, Jerrod throws himself down on his hands and knees crying, “Thank you!” Then he gets up and solemnly walks over to the Carson family. “I can’t bring your son back, but I will be your humble servant forever.”

Though this story is fiction, it applies to each of us. The judgment is near. Go humbly to God in repentance. Trust in His mercy. The time is now.

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Tamara Naja, Bowling Green, Kentucky, U.S.A.
A Day of Darkness (Zephaniah 1)

Zephaniah 1 paints a picture that some may not like to look at—a God who is stern, telling His people that He will “‘consume everything’” (verse 2, NKJV). We’d rather view God as a loving Father. However, the issue here is not with God but with our understanding of love. A human father who loves his children will not scream at his children just for the sake of screaming at them. However, if he sees his children running into oncoming traffic, he will scream at them to alert them of the danger they are facing. He screams at them because he loves them and wants to save them.

Likewise, God wants to save His children, and sometimes screaming at us is the only way He can get our attention. The problems Judah faced are much like our problems today. The people of Judah were complacent, and in Revelation 3:14–18, we read that the Christians in Laodicea were also complacent or “lukewarm.” So God warned them (screamed at them) that He was about to spit them out of His mouth (verse 16). Because Christ’s message to the Laodicean church is viewed “as applying in a special sense to the church from 1844 to the close of time,”* His call to church members in Laodicea to give up their complacency is also a call to us. It is His way of screaming at us not to run into the road or else we will get hit by a car.

Seek the Lord (Zeph. 2:1–3)

In Zephaniah 2:1–3, God begs His people to seek Him. However, we might ask that if they are His people, why do they need to seek Him? Perhaps the following illustration will help us to understand. A young man sees a girl in class every day. He really likes her, but he will never have a relationship with her unless he seeks her out and gets to know her. So proximity has nothing to do with relationship. Just because the people of Judah were God’s people means nothing because they had ceased to nurture a relationship with Him. Jesus talked a great deal about people seeking salvation. Especially note Matthew 7:7, 8 and Luke 15:11–32.

What a wonderful God we have! He longs to be with us as much as a groom longs to be with his bride!

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A Corrupt City (Zeph. 3:1–5)

There are times in our lives when those who know us best and love us the most will point out our character flaws. It can hurt when they show us that we are prideful, disobedient, and untrustworthy. Yet such times can be opportunities to change before we hurt someone or make a mistake we will regret. God’s message to Jerusalem in Zephaniah 3:1–5 was such a message. He describes Jerusalem as being “rebellious,” “polluted,” and “oppressing” (verse 1, NKJV). They neither listened to Him, nor obeyed Him, and the judges were “evening wolves / That leave not a bone till morning” (verse 3, NKJV), so they can repent and return to Him.

In Matthew 23:13–39, Christ speaks to the scribes and Pharisees in a similar manner. How might He be speaking to the church today and to you personally?

God’s Greatest Delight (Isa. 62:5; 65:19; Zeph. 3:9–20)

The last part of Zephaniah is filled with jubilation and hope for Jerusalem. God no longer stands in judgment of His people. He is with them, and He has cast out their enemy. In Zephaniah 3, we read about a meek and humble people who trust their God and who speak the truth. Here God tells His people how He will treat those who follow Him. He will “quiet” them with His love and rejoice over them “with singing” (verse 17). Compare this description with the description of the new Jerusalem and God’s people there in Revelation 21 and 22.

What a wonderful God we have! He longs to be with us as much as a groom longs to be with his bride! He has the itinerary set for the greatest time in our lives. So let us seek Him and find Him, so that He can offer us the power to follow and obey Him.

REACT

1. What is our part in the plan of salvation?
2. Are there areas in your life that God is calling you to change?
3. In addition to seeing Jesus face to face, what will delight you the most about heaven?

“In the darkest days of her long conflict with evil, the church of God has been given revelations of the eternal purpose of Jehovah. His people have been permitted to look beyond the trials of the present to the triumphs of the future, when, the warfare having been accomplished, the redeemed will enter into possession of the promised land. These visions of future glory, scenes pictured by the hand of God, should be dear to His church today, when the controversy of the ages is rapidly closing and the promised blessings are soon to be realized in all their fullness.

“For I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour.”

“Many were the messages of comfort given the church by the prophets of old. . . . Despised of men, persecuted, forsaken, God’s children in every age have nevertheless been sustained by His sure promises. By faith they have looked forward to the time when He will fulfill to His church the assurance, ‘I will make thee an eternal excellency, a joy of many generations.’ Isaiah 60:15.

“Often the church militant is called upon to suffer trial and affliction; for not without severe conflict is the church to triumph. ‘The bread of adversity,’ ‘the water of affliction’ (Isaiah 30:20), these are the common lot of all; but none who put their trust in the One mighty to deliver will be utterly overwhelmed. ‘Thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and He that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name, thou art Mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour.’ ”

**REACT**

1. How did you feel the last time you were having difficulties? Were you able to find comfort in the promises of God? Or were you lost in the “spirit of heaviness”?

2. How often, when in the middle of a trial, do you stop to look past to the “triumphs” of the future?


Jessica Marie White, Ooltewah, Tennessee, U.S.A.
Zephaniah’s name means “Yahweh has concealed” or “Yahweh has protected.”¹ Zephaniah began prophesying when Josiah was king of Judah.² While the exact date of his prophecy is not known, he clearly denounced the errors of the day.

Zephaniah brought a message from God telling of great trouble on the horizon. He preached about the judgment that was coming, the unfaithfulness of the leaders, and Judah’s unwillingness to be corrected by God. At the same time he talked of hope.

**The “Day of the Lord is the focal point of Zephaniah’s prophecy.”**

“His stern denunciations of the sins of the people and his impassioned cries for repentance have given him the name ‘puritan’ ” (Hester, *The Heart of Hebrew History*). “Taking a hint from Zeph. 1:12, artists of the Middle Ages regularly represented Zephaniah as the man with the lamp, searching Jerusalem for sinners to bring them to punishment” (Jack P. Lewis).³

The “Day of the Lord is the focal point of Zephaniah’s prophecy. On this day, the nearness and severity of which are emphasized, the Lord would come as a mighty and just warrior-judge to punish the whole world, including Judah. Through this purifying judgment the nations would become genuine worshippers of the one true God.”⁴

**REACT**

1. Is reform a negative or positive experience? Explain your answer. What can you do to make it positive?
2. Does obeying God always lead to reform, or can you obey God and continue to live a comfortable life?
3. If you ignore God and His reform messages, how far might you go in the wrong direction?
4. When is it right to tell others of coming judgments? How can we do so in ways that will encourage them to heed God’s messages?

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Once while I was shopping with a friend, we were both looking at the same shirt. I thought it was dark pink. My friend contested that it was red. Happily, as we learn through Zephaniah’s prophecies, God sees things not just a shade differently but radically different from us. This is because He sees through eyes of grace and mercy. When we humbly come before Him, He will draw us to Himself and show us how to reflect His image. Think of colors as representing ways we can humbly seek the Lord. Then imagine dousing yourself with these godly colors:

Seek the One who loves you beyond all you can comprehend.

**White.** The Bible instructs us to seek righteousness. This means obeying Him in all aspects of life, standing up for what is just, and choosing to be unblemished in a tarnished world. Color your life white by doing what you know is right. Don’t take the easy way out or ignore your conscience. Not acting when you feel the Holy Spirit nudging you can be just as wrong as committing an outright sin. Let Christ guide you so that His righteousness will shine through every decision you make and every action you take.

**Purple.** We are children of the Most High King! Each day, spend time with Him, learning how to best represent Him. Every action, every word, every look, should show that we are His adopted children. We can only do this if we spend time with Him each day, getting to know Him better through Bible study and prayer.

**Brown.** God’s children must be humble. We are in desperate need of a Savior to wash our sins away. We are no better than anyone else, because without God, our best is worth less than dirt. Remember that we are to rely on God for everything. Humble your heart before Him.

**Red.** God’s love for us is what saves us. His love prompted Him to send His Son to shed His blood for us. Such love overwhelms us, humbles us, redeems us. It should be the focus of our lives. Let His love humble your heart today. Seek the One who loves you beyond all you can comprehend, and then share that love with the world.

**REACT**

1. How does God reward those who humbly seek Him in their daily lives?
2. Can non-Christians truly have humility in their hearts without God?
3. How do humble hearts help us to know and understand God better?
Opinion

Restoration of God’s People

Zephaniah speaks of the day of the Lord and God’s judgment on His people as well as on Israel’s oppressors. In between the vivid descriptions of God’s wrath is a call to repent and to humble oneself before Him (Zeph. 2:1–3). At the end, Zephaniah speaks of God’s remnant whom He preserves through it all. After judgment is complete and wickedness is removed, there will be great rejoicing (Zeph. 3:17). Although this was written for Israel at a time of widespread rebellion against God, it can also be applied to the world now as we await Jesus’ return.

We are not God’s people by birth or by church affiliation.

There will come a day when God will remove from us the things that plague our lives. Those who have no love or respect for Him or His creation will be done away with. God will gather His people from all over the earth and take them home where there will be no more pain, no more tears. “ ‘At that time I will gather you; / at that time I will bring you home’ ” (Zeph. 3:20, NIV).

It is interesting to note that judgment is not only pronounced on the wicked, but also on God’s people who have not walked in the truth. We are not God’s people by birth or by church affiliation, like many people believe. Neither are we saved by anything we do, though some have tried. We are children of God by having faith and trust in Him and by walking daily with Him. We need to remember that we must repent of our sins and consecrate ourselves daily to Him. This is the only way we can become God’s remnant—a people whom Christ will look for when He returns.

REACT

1. In the Bible, salvation often comes to God’s people when they meet together to seek Him and repent. Do you think people today should gather together and corporately repent, humbling themselves before God? When should repentance be a personal matter?

2. Why do you think Zephaniah focuses on the judgment and preservation of the remnant, but not on reaching the lost? Do you think Christians spend so much time reaching out that they forget to reach in?
**CONCLUDE**
The book of Zephaniah takes us through a whole range of emotions. The book begins with God chastising His children, much like a parent who reprimands a child for bad behavior. It continues with a list of the punishments that will befall the people who have turned their backs on the Lord. However, the story doesn’t end there! It ends with God’s people begging for forgiveness. God, like any good Father, hears the cries of His children, forgives them, and they are exalted. What a great end to what could have been such a tragic story!

**CONSIDER**
- Drawing or painting a picture that portrays the despicableness of God’s people when they had fallen away from Him, but then their joy when they were forgiven. Give your picture an appropriate name and share it with your class.
- Rewriting Zephaniah 3:14–20 as a poem—one that rhymes or that is free verse. Leave the poem in your Bible as a reminder of the celebration that comes when one is reunited with God.
- Making a chart of the emotions captured in the three chapters of Zephaniah. Use different colored pens for each of the emotions.
- Sharing with a friend a time when you felt as though God was chastising you. Explain how it made you feel and how awesome it felt when you knew you were back in God’s favor and that He had forgiven you.
- Journaling about a time when you strongly felt the forgiveness of Jesus in your life. Explain how it made you feel and what kind of lifestyle changes you made because of it.
- Going on a nature walk to spend some time thinking about how God’s people had fallen away from Him. Find something (a leaf, flower, twig, etc.) that you can use as a bookmark for Zephaniah 3. Each time you see this bookmark, think of the beauty of God’s forgiveness and what it means to you.

**CONNECT**

Allison Sauceda, Centerville, Ohio, U.S.A.
First Things First
(Haggai)

“‘The silver is mine and the gold is mine,’ declares the Lord Almighty” (Hag. 2:8, NIV).
War had ravaged a great city. Food was scarce and famine began to sweep the country. People needed to work together to rebuild the city and find food. But whatever food could be found was hoarded, and no one exerted any effort to help their neighbor. One day a visitor came to the dilapidated city, but no one would even talk to him. He was hungry and tired. Spying a cauldron by a crumbling wall, he took it to a nearby stream, washed it, and filled it with water. He built a fire, placed the cauldron over it, and placed two smooth stones at the bottom of the pot. As the water began to boil, he sniffed the air approvingly. Villagers came to see what this stranger was doing. “Oh,” he said, “I’m making stone soup!”

“The puzzled villagers began to wonder what his stone soup would taste like and wished they could have some too. “You know,” the man said, “stone soup with cabbage is delicious.” Soon a villager approached hesitantly, holding a cabbage he’d retrieved from its hiding place, and added it to the pot. “Mmmm,” the visitor said. “This smells fabulous! Now if only I had carrots, this stone soup would be scrumptious.” A few minutes later another villager appeared with carrots. As the visitor continued to stir, he told the villagers how wonderful this soup would taste with beans, potatoes, mushrooms, onions, spices, and salt. Soon these items also were brought forward and added to the mix until there was a delicious meal for all. That day the people learned that when everyone contributes what they can, a greater good is achieved.

Sometimes we are called upon to do great things we cannot accomplish on our own and don’t even feel like doing them in the first place. It is then that we need to work together to accomplish the things God has called us to do. In Haggai, we find people who had just returned from captivity and who were called to rebuild the temple. However, they selfishly worked for their personal gain by rebuilding their homes. Several years later, the temple had still not been completed, and God sent prophets to urge the people to complete the work He had called them to do.

Even now, God is calling young people to work for Him. Are we missing out on His blessings because we have not done what He has asked us to do?

Lauren Lombard, Columbia, Maryland, U.S.A.
The events related in Haggai occur approximately throughout the second year of Darius Hystaspes, 520 B.C. During this time, the people of Judah were reluctant to rebuild the temple as God had commanded them to (chapter 1). Instead, they focused upon constructing their own homes and meeting other personal needs. Because of this lack of commitment to God’s command, the Lord told Haggai that the crops they planted would die (Hag. 1:1–11). Within a month of speaking this message and having realized the effects of the drought, Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, and Joshua, the high priest, along with the people, once again began to work on the temple (verses 12–15).

As this work progressed, God told Haggai to proclaim that the new temple would outshine the old one because the “desire of all nations” (Hag. 2:7) would come to it. God also proclaimed that the temple’s glory would not be based upon size or the materials used to build it but upon the glory of God’s presence working in and throughout the temple (Hag. 2:6–9). In his final message of the book, Haggai declares that the Lord will make Zerubbabel like a signet ring (Hag. 2:23). This is due to Zerubbabel’s commitment to the work of rebuilding the temple and to his leadership regarding the return of Judah from the bondage of Palestine. As a result of his faithfulness, the Lord set him alongside David as part of the lineage of Jesus Christ.

Today, it is often the case that God’s priorities take second or third place to the desires of our human nature. Therefore, as Christians, we must be ever mindful of what takes precedence in our lives. When doing God’s will is our top priority, we show our love and loyalty to the tasks He sets before us. Let us pray for strength and courage to follow Zerubbabel’s example of placing God’s work above all else.

**REACT**

1. Where do your personal priorities lie in contrast to God’s priorities?
2. What things do you give higher priority to than the Lord’s priorities?
3. How can you make God’s priorities your own?

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The Foundation (Hag. 1:1–15; Matt. 6:33)

At the beginning of Haggai, God lays the foundation of His appeal. He begins with a question about time, which is a question about priorities. It has been several years since the people returned from exile to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. While they returned to their homeland vowing to do so, they soon became more concerned about their own houses rather than God’s house. However, we see in these verses a patient God who waits many years before drawing their attention back to their true purpose.

Jesus essentially repeated this same exhortation in Matthew 6:33 saying, “ ‘Seek first his [God’s] kingdom . . . and all these things will be given to you as well’ ” (NIV). This is not a self-centered request by God, but a simple reality He wants us to understand. Uniting with God gives us access to His vast resources and puts us under His protection. When we separate ourselves from Him, it can be rightly said of us, “ ‘You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it’ ” (Hag. 1:6, NIV).

I Am With You (Hag. 1:12–14; Heb. 13:8)

Few things are more painful in our human experience than feeling all alone. Rejection, isolation, and marginalization happen to all of us in big and small ways at some point in our lives. Whether it is a relationship ending, a move to a new town, a letter of rejection, or just being snubbed by people we thought were our friends—being “on the outside” cuts us to the bone. Sin brings isolation (Gen. 3:8). But when God reaches out to us, it is always with the promise that He will never leave us or forsake us. As the people hear God’s appeal through Haggai, they are stirred to action. When they return to the construction site of the temple, God gives them the best and most sufficient promise He can, saying, “ ‘I am with you’ ” (Hag. 1:13, NIV).

Do Not Fear (Hag. 2:1–5; 1 John 4:8, 18)

The book of Ezra states that when the returning Jews first came together to lay the foundation of the new temple, those who had seen the previous temple built by Solomon wept (Ezra 3:11, 12). They wept because this new foundation was inferior to the previous temple. They felt inadequate
to do what God was putting on their hearts to do. It is in this context that God speaks words of encouragement. He reiterates His promise that He is with them and then tells them, “‘Do not fear’” (Hag. 2:5, NIV).

In our sinful condition, almost every decision we make is based on fear—fear of what someone will think, of what someone will say, of what may happen, and so on. But God invites us to be fearless. The apostle John knew this personally and wrote, “God is love. . . . There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4:8, 18, NIV). When we turn on a light, darkness flees. Likewise, fear takes flight when God enters our lives.

**The Fulfillment of Our Desires (Ps. 103:2–5; Hag. 2:6–9)**

After encouraging the recommitted Israelites not to fear, God warns them that He is about to shake things up. Looking down through the generations, He sees the long-awaited Messiah walking into the very courtyard they would be constructing. This “‘desired of all nations’” (Hag. 2:7, NIV) would bring a glory to their temple that would “‘be greater than the glory of the former house’” that Solomon built (verse 9, NIV).

All the desires of the human heart are met and satisfied most fully in God. When you think about a time when God seemed most real and close, you will recall that you also felt satisfied or content. The result of experiencing God is peace and referenced by God Himself in verse 9.

**His Signet Ring (Hag. 2:22, 23; Zech. 2:8; 4:6)**

The book of Haggai concludes with the fulfillment of the message delivered at the beginning of the book. This fulfillment is found most visibly in the person of Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel had brought his “kingdom” under God’s, found that God met his deepest desires, and had worked not by his own might, nor his own power, but by His Spirit (Zech. 4:6). God now declares of his servant, “‘I will make you like my signet ring’” (Hag. 2:23, NIV).

This is an affectionate analogy that speaks to the tenderness of God. A signet ring was something important to its owner and would have been made of precious metals. In addition, it would bear the seal of the owner. It contained great power and authority when used to stamp official documents. Likewise, when we are connected to God, we will feel valued and find a new power in our lives.

**REACT**

1. How can God’s promise to be with us and His exhortation “not to fear” help with the things that “aren’t working” in our lives?

2. Do you feel like God’s signet ring? What is hindering you from that experience?

Rick L. Johns, Richmond, Virginia, U.S.A.
“The message of counsel and reproof given through Haggai was taken to heart by the leaders and people of Israel. They felt that God was in earnest with them. . . .

“As soon as Israel decided to obey, the words of reproof were followed by a message of encouragement. ‘Then spake Haggai . . . unto the people, saying, I am with you, saith the Lord. And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel’ and of Joshua, and ‘of all the remnant of the people; and they came and did work in the house of the Lord of hosts, their God.’ Verses 13, 14.

“To His children today the Lord declares, ‘Be strong.’”

“In less than a month after the work on the temple was resumed, the builders received another comforting message. ‘Be strong, O Zerubbabel,’ the Lord Himself urged through His prophet; ‘be strong, O Joshua; . . . and be strong, all ye people of the land, saith the Lord, and work: for I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts.’ Haggai 2:4.

“To Israel encamped before Mount Sinai the Lord had declared: ‘I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them: I am the Lord their God.’ Exodus 29:45, 46. And now, notwithstanding the fact that they had repeatedly ‘rebelled, and vexed His Holy Spirit’ (Isaiah 63:10), God once more, through the messages of His prophet, was stretching out His hand to save. As a recognition of their cooperation with His purpose, He was renewing His covenant that His Spirit should remain among them: and He bade them, ‘Fear Not.’

“To His children today the Lord declares, ‘Be strong . . . and work: for I am with you.’ The Christian always has a strong helper in the Lord. The way of the Lord’s helping we may not know; but this we do know: He will never fail those who put their trust in Him. Could Christians realize how many times the Lord has ordered their way, that the purposes of the enemy concerning them might not be accomplished, they would not stumble along complainingly.”

**REACT**

1. Why is it so hard for us to believe the Lord is always with us?
2. What changes are you willing to make to have a “be strong” attitude?

* Ellen G. White, Prophets and Kings, pp. 575, 576.

Timothy L. Nelson, Takoma Park, Maryland, U.S.A.
Once the Jews returned to Jerusalem after being in exile, they were to rebuild the temple. However, everyone became preoccupied with building their own homes.

We, too, have fallen into that mind-set of forgetfulness when it comes to God’s house. We also concentrate on what we can obtain in this life rather than on what we are to do for God’s kingdom. Thus God’s work is neglected and will crumble like ancient ruins. How can we change? Here are a few steps:

*Pour concrete.* We must begin with a firm foundation. Isaiah 28:16 reminds us that God will lay a stone for a foundation, a tried stone, a precious cornerstone that will be our sure foundation. Jesus is that cornerstone. He will be there with us. We need to remember that when we start with Him as our foundation, our homes, churches, and schools will stand.

*Add the framing and walls.* Everyone needs people to lean on. Just like the walls of a building that hold up a roof, when we become involved with other church members, we are better able to support one another. Lend a helping hand when you can. Try a new ministry, or befriend a new believer.

*Make a sturdy roof for protection.* “The eyes of the Lord are over the righteous” (1 Pet. 3:12). Go through life knowing that God is watching over you and protecting you.

*Dedicate your building.* Just as we dedicate a newborn baby, we need to dedicate our temple so that Jesus may be there! By also dedicating our time to help in any way we can, we will help to maintain the house of the Lord.

**REACT**

1. How do you think you can help build up God’s temple?
2. Why is it important to value God’s house more than your own?
The Creator of the universe announces Himself as King when He tells Zerubbabel by way of Haggai that He promises to be there for him. As governor of Judah, Zerubbabel has many concerns. Thus, he lets God’s advice guide him. His obedience allowed his relationship with the Creator to develop. Likewise, when we allow the Word to guide our decision making, we are telling God that He is our King and we are His servants.

Prioritize your duties. Live out God’s purpose. And benefit from His promises.

Many of us go to church to socialize and to be entertained. However, God wants us to help Him build His church. Zerubbabel worked diligently to do just that. God calls us to do a great work based on our heart’s willingness to put Him first in our lives. Making God a priority strengthens the covenant we have with our Creator. Then we can tap into the promises of Abraham, the heart songs of David, and receive the blessings of Christ’s sacrifice. Thus we become equipped to fulfill God’s purposes.

Through Haggai, God told Zerubbabel that on the day He destroys his enemies, He will honor Zerubbabel and make him like a signet ring on His finger (see Hag. 2:23). Because a ring is circular, it has no beginning or end. Throughout history, rings have symbolized a promise or a covenanted statement. So here God is promising Zerubbabel that He has chosen him and will be with him forever.

As the King of kings, God wants to make a personal covenant with His people. God chooses you as He chose Zerubbabel. Are you willing to be under His reign and protection? As you do His will, you will get to know Him better. Haggai gives us a clear message from God. Prioritize your duties. Live out God’s purpose. And benefit from His promises.
CONCLUDE
How do you prioritize your life? Do you make lists? Organize? When you prioritize, how does God fit into the list? What about His family and your church? Should these be set apart when we organize our lives, or should they be an integral part of our lives and our priorities? When God created us, we were His first priority. He created everything just for us. So how have our priorities gotten so skewed?

CONSIDER
• Reading articles about people who have won a lottery. What are the first things on their lists when they win large sums of money? What does this tell us about their priorities? What usually happens to these people? What does this teach us about the importance of our priorities?
• Creating a list of priorities in your life. What would other people learn about you from this list? What did you learn about yourself in the process of making the list?
• Moving up one of your priorities on your list. What changes will you need to make in order to do this? How can you make these changes?
• Asking your friends how they prioritize their lives, and why?
• Looking at your local church’s budget and its goals. What does each tell you about its priorities? Do the priorities and the money budgeted for each priority match up?
• Asking a child what is the most important thing in his or her life, and why?

CONNECT
"‘In that day each of you will invite his neighbor to sit under his vine and fig tree,’ declares the Lord Almighty’"  

(Zech. 3:10, NIV).
Once there was a woman who claimed to have visions in which she could speak directly with God. Daily, she went to the priest to learn the meaning of her visions. The priest, not believing her, told her that he would tell her if the next night she would ask God to reveal to her the priest’s worst sin. The woman agreed. However, the next day she returned to the priest with a bewildered look on her face. The priest, getting a little worried, asked her what she had learned. “Well,” the woman began, “God said that He had forgotten your sin and that you had a clean slate.”

A clean slate. That is what Israel needed to realize they had. Zechariah 1:3 clearly shows that God was waiting with open arms for His people to realize that they had a clean slate.

“ ‘Return to Me . . . and I will return to you’ ” (NKJV). As with Israel so many years ago, God is also waiting with open arms to bless you. Chapter 3 reveals to us that the Lord forgave Israel, gave them a clean slate, and restored them as a priestly nation. In verse 10, Zechariah paints a picture of peace, satisfaction, and safety. This picture, however, does not just apply to Israel. The Lord is ready to paint you in that picture as well!

There is nothing you can do to make the Lord stop loving you. He is always waiting with arms wide open for His children to return to Him. He is ready to forgive and has promised in Micah 7:19 that He will forgive our sins and cast them into the depths of the sea. When Christ forgives us, He holds nothing against us. We are new. We begin again with a clean slate just like the people of Israel did.

Today, let God wipe your slate clean.

* Author unknown.

Nicole Hamilton, Dayton, Tennessee, U.S.A.
The One Great Human Flaw (Deut. 4:9; Ps. 106:21, 22)

When we read the stories about ancient Israel, we see that they lived through seasons of triumph and spiritual highs, times when their enemies were swallowed up and the land was fruitful. However, we also see that they lived through times of great apostasy. There were many reasons why they disobeyed God’s commands, but one reason in particular weaves its way throughout all the stories in which they strayed from God. They were forgetful.

Moses often recited to the Israelites the great and mighty works of God as he instructed them to stay on the path of righteousness and faith (Deut. 4:9). And in Deuteronomy 31:19, we read that God instructed His people to learn a song that would teach them about who He is. We read this song in Deuteronomy 32. Yes, God found special ways to make sure His people would remember Him, because He was well aware of their forgetful nature. The prophecies of Zechariah was another one of those reminders. God called Zechariah to remind the people how He had led Israel so that they would not act the way their ancestors had.

How Often the People Forgot (Judg. 3:7; 8:33, 34; Ps. 78:42, 43)

In the Bible, we often see how God’s people forgot to remember Him and His commands, how they often turned away from Him as they forgot about His mighty acts on their behalf. One book that shows this cycle of forgetfulness and turning away is the book of Judges.

During the time of Zechariah, God’s people returned from exile after many years of living under the oppression of surrounding nations. As the temple lay in ruins, they nursed their discouragement and soon forgot about the power of God to save them.

The God Who Never Forgets (Ps. 106:44, 45; Isa. 55:7; 2 Tim. 2:13)

Often we become discouraged when Satan reminds us about all the ways we have sinned, how we have gone too far, and that our lives lie in ruins. However, God does not forget His people who have forgotten about
Him and gone their own way. Instead, God remembers and recounts His covenant of love and acts upon it.

In Zechariah’s message, we find visions of hope springing forth from God’s desire to encourage and uplift His people so that they may leave their failings behind and remember to trust in their Redeemer. Our God is a covenant-keeping God who saves and establishes His people in His love.

The Invitation—Jesus (Isa. 1:18; 43:18; Zech. 1:3)

God invites us to return to Him, but this is not because He is far away. The spirit of repentance opens up our hearts to receive His love. God is not saying that He will simply come down to us. He is asking that we return to Him. He is pleading with us to answer His call with humble hearts. In Christ, we find the invitation to return, “‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls’” (Matt. 11:28, 29, NIV).

The book of Zechariah is filled with prophecies about the coming Messiah, the hope of Israel (see Zech. 9:9; 11:12, 13; 12:10; 14:3–9). God remembers His covenant and calls His people back to a right relationship with Him. Zechariah encourages us to believe that God will refurbish our temples of flesh with His Spirit of truth and grace. Let us resolve to accept His invitation to forget our past sins and to press on toward “the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14, ESV).

REACT

1. When have you forgotten about God? What was your life like then?
2. What stops you from accepting the invitation of love given by Jesus Christ? How do the accusations of Satan discourage you?
3. What assurance do you find in the way that God spoke to His people in the past?
4. Read Deuteronomy 32. As you do, think about the Lord and His love and care for us.

Brian M. Nyamwange, Loma Linda, California, U.S.A
Zechariah “beholds Joshua the high priest, ‘clothed with filthy garments,’ standing before the Angel of the Lord, entreatling the mercy of God in behalf of his people who are in deep affliction. . . . Because Israel had been chosen to preserve the knowledge of God in the earth, they had been, from their first existence as a nation, the special objects of Satan’s enmity, and he had determined to cause their destruction. He could do them no harm while they were obedient to God; therefore he had bent all his power and cunning to enticing them into sin. Ensnared by his temptations, they had transgressed the law of God, and thus separated from the Source of their strength, and had been left to become the prey of their heathen enemies. They were carried into captivity to Babylon, and there remained for many years. Yet they were not forsaken of the Lord. . . . The people were awakened to see their guilt; they humbled themselves before God, and returned to him with true repentance. . . .

“The fact that the acknowledged people of God are represented as standing before the Lord in filthy garments should lead to humility and deep searching of heart on the part of all who profess his name. Those who are indeed purifying their souls by obeying the truth will have a most humble opinion of themselves. But while we should realize our sinful condition, we are to rely upon Christ as our righteousness, our sanctification, and our redemption. . . . He is able to silence the accuser with arguments founded not upon our merits, but on his own.

“The filthy garments are to be removed, and Christ’s robe of righteousness is to be placed upon us. By repentance and faith we are enabled to render obedience to all the commandments of God, and are found without blame before him. Those who shall meet the approval of God are now afflicting their souls, confessing their sins, and earnestly pleading for pardon through Jesus their Advocate. Their attention is fixed on him, and when the command is given, ‘Take away the filthy garments,’ and clothe him with ‘change of raiment,’ and ‘set a fair miter upon his head,’ they are prepared to give him all the glory of their salvation.”*

With God all things are possible. Make things right with your Savior. He is waiting for you.

Having an unforgiving spirit will cause us to lose out on eternity. What does it really mean to forgive? With the help of a dictionary and God’s Word, I came to understand that forgiveness is about pardoning someone who has offended us or refusing to be angry with or resenting someone who offends us. When we forgive someone, we are to let go of anger and strife. But how often do we really do that? Sometimes we fool ourselves into believing that we have forgiven someone, but then when we see that person, the resentment swells up again. Thankfully, however, God’s grace will always be greater than our sins.

In a vision, Zechariah saw the high priest Joshua being cleansed of his sins. Like all of us, Joshua had fallen short of God’s grace, but when he stood before the Lord he was cleansed of his sins. Before God could further instruct Joshua, he had to be cleansed and given a new robe which symbolized Christ’s righteousness (Zech. 3:3–5). Then Joshua was told that if he walked in God’s ways and kept His commandments, he would be given a place in God’s house (verses 6, 7). So it is with us. When God pardons our sins, He gives us His robe of righteousness as a sign that we are freed from sin’s condemnation. He says to us, “Go, and sin no more” (John 8:11; also see John 5:14). God’s forgiveness frees us from guilt. It is up to us to accept His forgiveness and to let Him redirect our lives.

Through God’s grace, He is willing to forgive us if we genuinely ask Him to do so. It also shows us that when we are in His presence, He can change us into what He wants us to be. He is willing to help us the same way He helped Joshua. He longs to point out our sins, not to condemn us, but to forgive us. It may sound impossible, but all we have to do is ask God to forgive us and help us not sin again, then trust that He will do so.

**REACT**

How does God’s forgiveness help us to understand how we are to forgive others?
You shut the door of your dorm room, lock yourself in, and begin your daily pity party. “Why, God? Why?” is the preliminary to a list of complaints running through your head. At the heart of it all, you are asking the question the psalmist ponders in Psalm 74:10: “How long will the enemy mock you, O God? / Will the foe revile your name forever?” (NIV). You realize you have problems, even though you do everything right. You attend Friday night vespers. You dress up for the Sabbath. You crack open your Bible every so often, even when it’s not required for class. You even woke up early and went to Sabbath School once this semester, but when you look around at all the supposed heathens, you can’t help but point your finger at God and complain, “It’s not fair!”

Here you are putting up the good fight, while your classmates are partying, cheating on tests, or stealing “ready-made” terms off the Internet. Yet you’re the one failing the class or unable to get a girlfriend or boyfriend. Why do the wicked seem to prosper? Why doesn’t God strike them down? But more important, how can you avoid the pity party? By remembering this particular mega-theme found in Zechariah: the Messiah will come to rescue any of us from sin who desire to be rescued, and then He will reign as our King.

So while you may not love the cheating person sitting next to you in Biology 101, remember that God does, and He wants to save that person as much as He wants to save you. He says to us through Christ, “ ‘But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute 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).

You can thank God for that. None of us likes a storm!

**REACT**

1. How often do you find yourself being jealous or even hating people, when you should practice what is taught in Matthew 5:44, 45?
2. How often do you thank God for His blessings?
Some Christians are under the false impression that they can do something to make it into heaven. This, however, can never be so. In Romans 6:23, the Bible states, “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord” (NKJV). When we sin, we can only look forward to the penalty of death, but God, in His mercy, made a way out for us through the death of His only begotten Son Jesus.

There is nothing we can do of ourselves.

There is nothing we can do on our own to atone for our sin. No matter how much money we donate to worthy causes, or how regularly we pay our tithe, or even how many good deeds we may do, nothing we do on our own is worthy of earning us eternal life, for we are all sinful beings.

In Romans, Paul says, “What I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing” (Rom. 7:19, NIV). After Adam and Eve fell, we all gained a natural inclination to sin, thereby causing all our good deeds to be as filthy rags before the throne of our Father in heaven (Isa. 64:6). So how could we even believe that those same good deeds could save us? Philippians 2:13 says that “it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (NIV). Only when He is in us can we do what is right. Only through Him can we attain the righteousness that enables us to pass the judgment at the throne of God.

The angel told Zechariah, “‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty” (Zech. 4:6, NIV). Only with the Holy Spirit living in us can we gain eternal life. There is nothing we can do of ourselves. Let us invite the Holy Spirit into our lives so that we can enter into the heavenly kingdom.

**REACT**

1. Do you ever find yourself thinking that your good deeds can get you into heaven? If so, why?
2. How can you help others understand that good works do not get you into heaven?
3. If we can save ourselves through our good deeds, then what would have been the purpose of Christ’s death?
CONCLUDE

In our Christian journey, it is good to reflect on the past to see where we were when we began the journey and to contrast that with where we are today. We do this, not so much to see our mistakes, but to see how God has intervened in our lives and how He has led us from the very beginning. Do you remember the story of the footprints in the sand? In difficult times, when we leaned heavily upon the Lord, there was only one set of footprints, revealing not where the Lord had supposedly abandoned us, but rather where He began to carry us.*

CONSIDER

• Drawing, painting, photographing, or sculpting an image that portrays the hope you have that keeps you pressing forward.
• Playing, singing, or reading the hymn “It Is Well With My Soul” (no. 530 in The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal). Research the story of Horatio Spafford, the man who wrote the lyrics to this song. Compare or contrast what happened to him to your own spiritual journey.
• Memorizing a Bible text that will give you hope that Jesus is always there for you. Matthew 28:20 is one such verse.
• Compiling a list of a few of your greatest trials and tribulations. Next to each one, record the outcome and reflect on how God was involved.
• Praying with the residents of nursing homes when you visit on Sabbath afternoons with your singing group.
• Collecting some items in nature that remind you of Jesus’ everlasting love and the sacrifice He made for you so you could belong to Him. If you do not live near a park, google nature pictures or check out nature books or DVDs from your community’s library.

CONNECT

2 Chronicles 7:14; Lamentations 3:25, 26; 1 Corinthians 13:7.
Ellen G. White, Maranatha, chap. 13.
White, Steps to Christ, chap. 2.

Heaven’s Best Gift
(Zechariah)

“The Lord their God will save them on that day as the flock of his people. They will sparkle in his land like jewels in a crown”

(Zech. 9:16, NIV).
After a devasting earthquake in a certain country, rescuers searched relentlessly for three days in hopes of finding survivors. While they were packing to leave the school site where they had been digging, one man continued searching among the rubble. The other workers beseeched him to abandon his efforts. Surely there could be no more survivors. Still he continued. Finally he saw movement in an opening he had created, and when he shouted his son’s name, he heard a faint reply. “Father! Father!” So he removed more rubble, and there he found his son along with one of his friends. Seeing his father, the boy turned to his friend and said joyfully, “I told you so! I told you my dad would come for us!” Later, people learned that it was the father’s promise to always look out for his son that gave the boys hope to stay alive. What faith! What love!

The promise of a Savior has been passed from generation to generation, giving hope for life.

Today, the human race is trapped in the ruins of sin and suffering. But throughout history, the promise of a Savior has been passed from generation to generation, giving hope for life. This Savior is to dig people out from the rubble of sin. “In the shadow of the cross every man may stand forever safe from the fallout of sin.”1 This promise gives us hope and affirms our faith.

“The Lord their God will save them on that day. . . . / They will sparkle in his land / like jewels in a crown” (Zech. 9:16, NIV). Zechariah was the prophet who wrote these words. The word prophet in Hebrew is nabi, meaning “one called (by God),” or “one who has a vocation (from God).”2 God called Zechariah to rebuke the nation of Judah for its transgressions. This week, we will look again at Zechariah’s prophecies. As we see their fulfillment, let us have hope for the future and reaffirm our faith in Christ’s return.

2. The SDA Bible Dictionary, s.v. “Prophet.”
Quickly answer this question: Where are you from? Did you answer immediately? Or did you have to think about it? Did you respond with a sense of belonging? I live in South Africa, halfway around the world from my “home” country of Scotland. I have spent half of my life in countries other than Scotland. As a foreigner in another country, it is easy to have a heightened sense of patriotism. When it comes to sporting events, you cheer on your home nation because doing so provides you with a sense of belonging. With that in mind, try to put yourself in the shoes of the people from Jerusalem during Zechariah’s time. They had been in exile in Babylon for approximately fifty years. Then they faced many challenges in rebuilding Jerusalem.

Zechariah brings a message from the God of hope and promise.

The tribes in the areas surrounding Jerusalem tried to disrupt the reconstruction. They even obtained a letter from the Persian king ordering a stop to the building (Ezra 4). This order wasn’t overturned until Darius came to power (chapters 5 and 6). If your hometown had been decimated like this, how would you feel? Surely you would long for your town to be returned to its former glory. This is the situation in which we find Zechariah.

Zechariah brings a message from the God of hope and promise. Beginning with chapter 8, he proclaims God’s purposes regarding the restoring of Jerusalem. Chapters 12 and 14 focus on the destruction of Jerusalem’s enemies and the coming of the promised Messiah. The key to fully understanding these prophecies is in the middle of these chapters. Chapter 12:10 points out that “they will look upon me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him” (NIV). This points to Jesus and the sacrifice He would make for the restoration of God’s people. If the prophecies were about an earthly kingdom, why would the people be mourning? From verse 10 to the end of chapter 13, the plan of salvation is outlined. It ends with a promise that is as relevant to us now as it was to the Jews in Zechariah’s time—the Messiah will uphold as His own those who stand for God.

REACT

The Jews misinterpreted Zechariah’s prophecy with regards to its “earthly” nature because they were wishing for an earthly kingdom. How can we guard against misinterpreting Scripture according to our personal biases?
Hope in Zechariah (Zech. 8:3–5; 2 Pet. 3:13)
The book of Zechariah offers us a glimpse into the way of life and the mind-set of a nation lying in ruins. It also offers us the hope of a home where righteousness dwells and where we can live eternally with our Savior. Not only does the Lord of hosts promise to save Israel of old, He also assures our salvation. In the book of Zechariah, we learn about God’s desire for a perfect and righteous universe. In Zechariah 8:8, we find this promise from God, “‘I will bring them back to live in Jerusalem; they will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God’” (NIV). Thus hope is kindled in our hearts.

The book of Zechariah teaches us about the Messiah.

The Truth in Zechariah (Zech. 8:3, 16, 23; John 14:6)
Jerusalem was to be called the City of Truth. Truth and lies are two themes that run throughout the Bible. Satan is the father of lies. Jesus is the truth. The Bible teaches early on about the struggle between the two. Briefly review Genesis, chapters 1–3. The conflict continues with Noah, Abraham, and Moses, the prophets, and the kings. Finally, Jesus Himself comes, the Son of God, “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

In the book of Zechariah, truth is shown to be the foundation of everything that will bring salvation to an individual. “These are the things that ye shall do: Speak ye every man the truth to his neighbour; execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates” (Zech. 8:16). Then people will say, “We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you” (verse 23).

The Messiah in Zechariah (Zech. 9:9; 11:12, 13; 12:10; Matt. 21:5; 24:30; 26:15; 27:9, 10; John 19:37)
The book of Zechariah teaches us about the Messiah. He shows us Christ’s triumphal entry in Jerusalem and tells us how much money Judas would receive to betray Him to the authorities. Then in Zechariah 12:10, the prophet shows the Messiah on the cross, pierced for our sins. The Hebrew phrase or explanation for pierced “is frequently used of thrusting through with a weapon (Num. 25:8; Judges 9:54; 1 Sam. 31:4; 1 Chron. 10:4). John notes that this scripture was fulfilled when one of the Roman soldiers pierced the side of Jesus (John 19:37).”1
The Promised Blessings in Zechariah (Zech. 10:1–3; Matt. 6:33)

In Zechariah 10:1–3, we learn that if we are to receive God’s blessings, we must seek Him rather than false gods. In Zechariah’s time, these false gods were idols, and “people who pretended to reveal the will of the gods.” Verse 1 of chapter 10 “shows that if God’s people are to receive the promised blessings, they must seek them from the Lord, not from idols (v. 2). The assurance of abundance (ch. 9:17) prompts the prophet to appeal to his people to trust in God alone for their material and spiritual benefits.” “Christ would have us make first things first, and assures us that things of lesser importance and value will be supplied to each according to his need.”

“The figure of the latter rain is used to describe the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the last days [Joel 2:23]. It is now the ‘time of the latter rain,’ when men ought to send up earnest petitions that the spiritual grace that prepares the church for the coming of the Son of man may speedily be realized.”

**REACT**

1. Who is the Son to me and how much does He influence my life on a daily basis?
2. How much has what the Messiah done for you actually changed you?
3. What are some modern-day idols (false gods) that we worship?

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1. *The SDA Bible Commentary, 2nd ed.*, vol. 4, p. 1113.
2. Ibid., p. 1108.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 1107.
5. Ibid., vol. 5, p. 352.
6. Ibid., vol. 4, p. 1108.

George Garanewako, Cape Town, South Africa
“Five hundred years before the birth of Christ, the prophet Zechariah thus foretold the coming of the King to Israel. This prophecy is now to be fulfilled. He who was so long refused royal honours now comes to Jerusalem as the promised heir to David’s throne.”

“It was the sight of Jerusalem that pierced the heart of Jesus.”

“This day, which seemed to the disciples the crowning day of their lives, would have been shadowed with gloomy clouds had they known that this scene of rejoicing was but a prelude to the suffering and death of their master.”

“When the procession reached the brow of the hill, … Jesus halted, and all the multitude with Him. …

“They are surprised and disappointed to see His eyes fill with tears, and His body rock to and fro like a tree before the tempest, while a wail of anguish bursts from His quivering lips, as if from the depths of a broken heart.”

“The tears of Jesus were not in anticipation of His own suffering. … The thought of His own agony did not intimidate that noble, self-sacrificing soul. It was the sight of Jerusalem that pierced the heart of Jesus.” He saw “Jerusalem that had rejected the son of God and scorned His love, that refused to be convinced by His mighty miracles, and was about to take His life. He saw what she was in her guilt of rejecting her Redeemer, and what she might have been had she accepted Him who alone could heal her wound. He had come to save her; how could He give her up?”

The Lord pleads today, “How can I give thee up? How can I see thee devoted to destruction? Must I let thee go to fill up the cup of thine iniquity? One soul is of such value that, in comparison with it, worlds sink into insignificance.”

REACT

It took 500 years for Zechariah’s prophecy to be fulfilled. How patient are we as we wait upon the fulfillment of the Lord’s promises to deliver us or meet our needs?

2. Ibid., p. 571.
3. Ibid., p. 575.
4. Ibid., p. 576.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., pp. 577, 578.
When a friend gives us a gift, we know that gift will not last forever, so we take care of it in hopes it will at least last a long time. If it is a piece of clothing, we are careful not to stain or tear it. If it is a beautiful object, we put it where we can see it but yet not where it will get bumped or damaged. Through Israel, God gave the world the Messiah. How can we even begin to appreciate this greatest gift of all—God’s Son, our guarantee of salvation? Below are three ways:

**There is no safer place to be than where the Gift has led you.**

*Learn to love the Gift.* Loving God is not only about emotion. “It is a divine principle of thought and action that modifies the character, governs the impulses, controls the passions, and ennobles the affections.”* “If you love Me, keep My commandments’ ” (John 14:15, NKJV). Obedience to Christ is an expression of our love and gratitude for the gift of salvation we have in Him. As we look forward to His second coming, let us tell others about Him through words and deeds.

*Cling to the Gift.* No matter what comes your way, there is no safer place to be than where the Gift has led you. It doesn’t matter what nationality you are or what language you speak (Rev. 14:6); if you cling to Him and Him alone, you will be saved.

*Make Christ King of your life.* Christ will return as King of kings to reward those on earth who are His subjects. Have you made Him King of your life? Talk to Him often in prayer. Thank Him often for all that He does for you; and live out His life through service to others (Isaiah 58; Mic. 6:8).

**REACT**

1. What comes first—love for Christ or obedience to Him? How can loving Christ help us to obey Him? How can obedience help us to love Him?
2. How does 1 Corinthians clarify God’s love and therefore the type of love we are to have?
3. What haven’t you yet surrendered to Christ, so that He rules over all of your life?
4. In what other ways can you make Christ King of your life?
5. Are you yearning for the Gift’s return? Why, or why not?

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Tichaona Jorofani, Cape Town, South Africa
The world today is in short supply of good shepherds. No, not the sheep-herding kind. But leaders who can motivate the flock, who look out for its well-being, and who can encourage the sheep when they need it. These leaders come in many forms—presidents, managers, teachers, youth leaders, parents, aunts, and uncles, just to name a few.

What makes a good leader? Good leaders are approachable. They are able to inspire those in their care to be the best that they can be. They focus on worthy goals, and they are willing to risk their position as leader for something they believe in. Does this sound like Someone we know?

Jesus is the perfect example of a good shepherd. He is approachable (Matt. 11:28). He knows who He is (John 4:25, 26). He inspires us to be the best we can be (Phil. 4:13). He focuses on a goal (John 14:2, 3), and we all know the risk He took for a worthwhile project (John 10:11).

In Zechariah, we see how God used the prophet to make sure that His people knew their Shepherd was coming (Zech. 9:9). The Gospels show the fulfillment of this promise in the life of Jesus, and how after His death and resurrection, He returned to heaven. Does this mean He left His people on earth without a Shepherd? Not at all (John 14:26). What about hope for the future? Definitely (John 14:1–3)! Here we see that not only did Jesus give us the Holy Spirit, but the promise of a life with Him—the same promise Zechariah gave Jerusalem’s inhabitants.

Today, more than ever, we need leaders like Jesus. Especially in the church, where compromising on important issues for the sake of peace is not an option, but at the same time where sensitivity toward each person’s spiritual journey is maintained. With the world in the state that it’s in, people need someone to guide them, to believe in them, to know who they are and what they stand for without feeling guilty or afraid to do so.

REACT

1. With the media playing a major, often negative role in the character formation of many young adults, think of practical ways to exhibit Christ’s leadership skills in our neighborhoods and communities.

2. Is there someone in your local church whom you can mentor or be mentored by?

Tarryn-Joy Edwards, Cape Town, South Africa
CONCLUDE
The one commodity we cannot live without is hope. Without hope, everyday challenges would crush most of us. Zechariah foretold the greatest gift of all—Jesus, the Messiah. His prophecies were fulfilled. This gives us confidence to take the long perspective, the eternal perspective, and to believe in Jesus’ promises. Communicating this hope to others requires us to be brave like Zechariah and to not compromise, no matter what the cost.

CONSIDER
• Asking three people to share a time when things seemed hopeless. What gave them courage?
• Using a concordance to look up verses containing the word hope. Memorize three of them.
• Baking bread or cookies and sharing them with someone who may be discouraged. Pray with them when you deliver them.
• Using Play-Doh or some other modeling compound to create a sculpture that represents hope.
• Cutting out a paper cross. On the cross, write why you are thankful for Jesus and how His death gives you hope.
• Thanking someone who has encouraged you and given you hope by calling them, sending an e-mail, or writing them a note.
• Composing a song or writing a poem about hope.

CONNECT
Max Lucado, He Chose the Nails (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2000).
Lest We Forget!

(Malachi)

“‘My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations,’ says the Lord Almighty’ ” (Mal. 1:11, NIV).
Have you ever been disappointed in a love affair? How did you feel? Were you hurt, angry, or jealous? Think of God. He is committed to loving us, but we often forget Him. Yet He does not forget or desert us; neither does He change His purposes toward us. His commitment demands our reciprocal actions. A common saying you might have heard is, “The greater the privilege the greater the responsibility.” In handling our responsibility, we should realize that we have nothing to fear with the Lord on our side. Sometimes, however, we hurt ourselves by holding back, by allowing fear and feelings of inadequacy to take over. Then we forget our responsibility and do nothing.

In this quarter’s lessons on “Seek the Lord and Live,” we have learned that God’s love and commitment to His created beings calls us to be accountable to Him for the gifts He freely bestows on us. Our first lesson on accountability is to recognize the gifts God has freely bestowed. Then our gratitude and commitment should follow. As we desperately search to discover hidden potentials within ourselves, respect increases for work, worship, stewardship, and fellowship. Thus, the quality of the finished product is improved and respect is given both to God and to other people. Thus we become more proficient and successful.

You will notice in this week’s lesson that God’s burden is expressed by His message of love, “I have loved you very deeply.” However, the insensitive and careless retort is, “Really? When was this?” (Mal. 1:2, 3, TLB). Opportunity is given for Israel to return to God, but still the greatest challenge remains—how to develop and nurture a relationship with God and how to show this through stewardship. Building such a relationship with God means we must include Him in our daily lives. We must pray to Him, not just simply talk about Him. We must develop and nurture an intimate connection with our heavenly Father. This includes reading His Word and bearing witness to what He has done for us. As we continue to do so, we’ll become more like Him.

God does not forget. He has a permanent record of those who respect, reverence, and reflect His character. This makes life more vibrant, interesting, and sensitive. This week, I invite you to accept and appreciate His faithful, covenant love and, in return, give Him your willing committed service, “Lest we forget!”

Cecily Daly, Huntsville, Alabama, U.S.A.
Empty Routines or Genuine Worship? (Mal. 1:6–12)

Is worship singing? Praying? Giving our tithes and offerings? Can true worship be laid out in a church bulletin? Does worship take place only in a church building, or can worship happen at home, in your car, on a bus or airplane or train? Do we do worship, give worship, or experience worship?

When we worship anything or anyone, we declare our reverence and honor toward that item or person. When we worship God, there is singing, praying, giving, kneeling, and service—all declaring reverence and honor to God. In such declarations, whether given in private, in church, or in public, is God’s worth ever cheapened? Is His honor ever shamed?

Worship should be an integral part of the believer’s expression of faith in God. God’s love calls forth worship. How we respond to this call reveals to Him and to the people around us the reverence and honor we ascribe to our Creator. It is better not to worship God at all rather than to worship Him carelessly or indifferently. God’s love for us mandates and expects the very best from us in worship. The book of Malachi presents several failures of Israel’s worship, which give us insights into true reverence of God.

During the time of the Old Testament prophet Malachi, the postexilic Hebrews had been in a steady spiritual decline. They followed various religious practices and ceremonies, but these had become empty routines instead of genuine worship. God was not pleased. In response, “He commissioned the prophet Malachi to bear a stern message of warning, reminding the Jews of their past experiences as a nation and calling upon them to return to God and to the requirements of the covenant relationship.”

Israel’s Indifference Toward God (Mal. 1:1–4)

God took issue with Israel’s religious indifference and plainly stated where they had fallen short. In reply, Israel challenged the Lord to prove that they had indeed fallen short. As initial evidence of their condition, God reminded them that He had kept His part of the covenant, which He made with the nation long before. He said, “‘I have loved you,’” (Mal. 1:2, NKJV). However, they asked, “‘In what way have You loved us?’” (verse 2, NKJV). “God responds by reminding them that it was by virtue of His love that they had become a nation (ch. 1:2–4).” God said that they showed lack of honor for Him by despising His name. Their response was, “‘In what way have we despised Your name?’” (verse 6). God said they showed lack of honor for Him in sacrifices and offerings. Their next re-
sponse was, “‘In what way have we defiled You?’” (verse 7, NKJV). God replied that they offered blind, sick, lame, and stolen sacrifices.

**Israel’s Indifference Toward One Another (Malachi 2)**

Not only does Israel have a problem relating to God, they have a problem relating to one another. Marriage meant nothing and returning tithe was virtually nonexistent. Wickedness was exalted, and service to God was considered useless. The Lord was not pleased with this. He was tired of their hypocrisy. He was disgusted by their false piety. Yet the people defended their behavior. They suggested that God had no grounds for His claims against them. God responded by pointing out how they failed to discriminate between sacred and common in worship and between good and evil in daily life. “They condone evil with the excuse that it really does not matter, and imply that God should not care so long as they keep up the forms of religion (verse 17).” As a result of their apathy and forgetfulness, God reminded them of the judgment to come. However, even in judgment, God promises deliverance for those that are righteous through Jesus, the Sun of Righteousness.

**What About Us? (Ps. 51:17)**

Today we do not sacrifice animals as an act of worship. The new covenant calls for a different sacrifice—our hearts. David declared in Psalm 51:17, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; / a broken and contrite heart, / O God, you will not despise” (NIV). In order to give God our hearts, we must surrender our lives to Him. When we do so, we take time to prepare for worship. We ascribe to God the honor due His name (Ps. 29:2). When we surrender our hearts to Him, we present ourselves to Him as a sacrifice. “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Rom. 12:1, 2, NKJV).

God gives us the Holy Spirit to help us. God’s grace is our strength. We are to accept these gifts by faith, live out our faith moment by moment, and always remember what God has done for us.

**REACT**

1. Compare your preparation for worship and your offering of worship to that of Israel’s in Malachi’s time. How does your worship honor or dishonor God?

2. The Jews had forgotten God’s deliverance from Babylonian captivity and demonstrated their forgetfulness through irreverent worship and bad relationships. Today, are we any different?

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2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
“‘The burden of the word of the Lord to Israel’ through Malachi was that the lessons of the past be not forgotten and that the covenant made by Jehovah with the house of Israel be kept with fidelity.”1

“God blesses the work of men’s hands.”

“In the time of ancient Israel every offering brought as a sacrifice to God was carefully examined. If any defect was discovered in the animal presented, it was refused; for God had commanded that the offering be ‘without blemish.’”2

The priests of Malachi’s day were weak role models who did not live up to the Levitical covenant. They did not practice mutual love and respect for each other, but, instead, totally disrespected God’s promise of life and peace for the descendants of Jacob.

“The covenant of ‘life and peace’ God had made with the sons of Levi—the covenant which, if kept, would have brought untold blessings—the Lord now offered to renew with those who had once been spiritual leaders, but who through transgression had become ‘contemptible.’”3

“God blesses the work of men’s hands, that they may return to Him His portion. . . . He gives health and ability to acquire means. Every blessing comes from His bountiful hand, and He desires men and women to show their gratitude by returning Him a portion in tithes and offerings—in thank offerings, in freewill offerings.”4

Widespread immorality caused men to break their marital covenant by divorcing their wives to marry pagan women whose nature was perverted.

“Among the Jews [under Mosaic law] a man was permitted to put away his wife for the most trivial offenses, and the woman was then at liberty to marry again. This practice led to great wretchedness and sin. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared plainly that there could be no dissolution of the marriage tie, except for the unfaithfulness to the marriage vow.”5

**REACT**

What steps are you willing to take to reaffirm your covenant with God?

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4. Ibid., pp. 707, 708.
5. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 63.

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Evidence

Trading Trust—God and You

We struggle so much with trusting people that the thought of trusting God borders on the ridiculous. Yet we acknowledge that He is the ultimate in wisdom, love, and commitment, so . . .

Can we trust God? One way of knowing if you can trust a person is by evaluating how dependable that person is. Is she who she says she is? Does he easily “forget” his promises? God is and always has been dependable—even when we haven’t been (Mal. 3:6). So, yes, we can rely on Him and His promises.

Isn’t my money my money? Not really.

What’s His agenda? God says, “‘Return to me, and I will return to you’” (Mal. 3:7, NIV). Here God is saying, “Change what you’re doing and come back to Me.” Yes, He wants us to “hang out” with Him, not just in pretentious ways, but because we are committed to doing the right thing.

So, what’s the catch? Check out Malachi 3:8. Here, God asks us to step it up with regards to how we handle our money. He goes on by saying that we are thieves! Now He’s getting personal! Isn’t my money my money? Not really. Everything we have is really His. So, if He asks us for a mere 10 percent back, shouldn’t we be glad to return to Him such a small fraction?

“My bad, God,” we mumble—because really, we want the blessing. However, God says, “Let’s trade—My trust for your trust. You give 10 percent. I’ll bless you 200 percent.” But, that’s not a trade! So what? God doesn’t mind. If we can muster up the courage to put our actions where our money is, God promises to deliver abundantly (Mal. 3:10). Who would ever be dumb enough not to take Him up on it? Not me, because not only does He promise, He also delivers—big time!

REACT

1. What other resource of God’s do we steal or mishandle?
2. Many people and businesses reap the benefits of double tithing. Have you ever tried it? Do it for a month and blog about all the blessings God gave you as a result.
God did not need to use a GPS (Global Positioning System) to guide the Israelites on their journey to the Promised Land. He lead them supernaturally by a cloud, His GPS (God’s Perfect System), all because He wanted them to remember His leading and where He had led them from (Deut. 6:10–12). However, due to sin and disobedience, the Israelites became so distracted that they went in circles for 40 years before reaching their destination.

Just as we depend upon a GPS that is designed to work in any weather, anywhere in the world, 24 hours a day, God, our Master Guide, wants us to always remember that He controls the weather (Ps. 135:6, 7). He is omnipresent (Ps. 139:7–10). He never sleeps (Ps. 121:4). He will never forsake us (Deut. 31:8).

So how do we guard ourselves from atmospheric factors and sources of error that easily distract us? How do we remember God’s presence in our daily lives?

Be consistent in prayer. God wants you to believe that He is who He says He is (Heb. 11:6). How you connect with your GPS for exact directions is how God wants you to connect with Him. He wants you to have no other gods before Him (Exod. 20:3). He wants you to consult Him about everything. He listens and remembers.

Be grateful. When was the last time you thanked God without asking Him for something? Gratitude is an important part of love. Expressing thanks is a wonderful way to exercise the mind when it comes to remembering what God has done for you and your friends and family (Eph. 5:20; 1 Thess. 5:18).

Reflect God. Our lifestyle and surroundings should always reflect God (1 Pet. 2:5, 12). We should be mindful that how we treat others and that what we eat, think, feel, say, and do reflect the nature of our relationship with Christ (Rom. 12:1).

Let us protect our minds so that we can glorify God. Then let us remember His presence in our lives and help others to do the same.

**REACT**

1. Why is it important to remember God’s presence in your life?
2. What is one of the best ways to help others to remember God?
As we read Malachi, it is clear that God does not support sin. We become ever mindful of the consequences of sin and its role of separating us from God. We see that God does not change and that we must choose to forsake all others in order to receive Him fully. We have to give ourselves. Clearly we cannot hold on to what is not of God and expect to be drawn closer to Him.

We see that His righteousness is what covers us so that our sins are blotted out and we are able to stand in His presence and receive His blessings. It is God’s righteousness that burns the impurities from our lives and allows us to take advantage of His grace, mercy, and love. Therefore, we must start from our current position and allow God to move us from the magnetism of our sins to true repentance and the acceptance of His righteousness.

Malachi 2:8–10 and 3:8 remind us that when we leave the path ordained by God, we abandon His principles and face eternal death. These principles include caring for our fellow humans, returning to God our tithes and offerings, praising Him, and setting a good example for others so they will be encouraged to follow God.

Our only hope is to surrender ourselves to God and ask Him to help us so that His will can be done in our lives. Thus we submit ourselves to the purification process. Thus the doors open to our true mission—to reflect God in our lives, to testify of Him, glorify Him, and to serve Him.

God is the Refiner. He qualifies us to do His work. Embrace His righteousness!

REACT
1. Reread Malachi and ponder the significance of each chapter to you personally.
2. Do you believe that God loves you? Why should He? How will believing that God loves you change your life?
3. What temporal treasures are you afraid of losing by accepting God’s righteousness? What will you gain if you accept His righteousness as your own?
4. If God’s righteousness is the key to eternal life, then why do so many people, perhaps even yourself, believe that you must become a better person before giving your heart completely to Him?
CONCLUDE
With our busy schedules at school, work, and home, we often find ourselves forgetting our keys, appointments, and even the important words spoken from the ones we love. Many of us are so caught up with daily life that we lose sight of the first love we had for God. Like Judah, we fail to listen to that inner voice God has equipped us with to guide and protect us. Getting back in touch with His unforgettable love requires a commitment. Do you remember the wonder of His love when you first received it? You could not wait to arise in the morning to speak with Him. God is the same. He cannot wait to hear from you! By starting our day with Him, our love for Him grows stronger. “‘They will be mine,’ says the Lord Almighty, ‘in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him’ ” (Mal. 3:17, NIV).

CONSIDER
• Asking God to wake you up at a set time to have worship with Him.
• Establishing a daily Bible reading plan. The following Web sites list a variety of such plans. Pick one according to your needs and interests:
  (a) http://www.vop.com/article/180/site-categories/bible-school/read-the-bible-in-a-year;
  (b) http://www.zondervan.com/Cultures/en-US/Product/Bible_Plans.htm?QueryStringSite=Zondervan;
  (c) http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/readingplanning/.
• Finding a prayer partner with whom you can be accountable.
• Posting tweets or creating a blog about how to stay connected with God. Write about what works, what doesn’t, and why.
• Putting an audio Bible on your smart phone. Listen to it while you’re walking to and from class, commuting to work, exercising, or as a way to relax before you go to sleep.
• Writing a poem about your desire to awaken each day with God and to walk with Him throughout the ensuing hours.
• Using the topical index of The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal to find hymns about staying close to God. Choose two of them to memorize so that you can recall them throughout any given day.

CONNECT
Exodus 19:5; Deuteronomy 4:5, 6; Isaiah 60:20; Luke 1:76–79; 1 Peter 2:9.

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If you have not received a copy of CQ for third quarter 2013, here is a summary of the first two lessons:

Lesson 1: Revival—Our Great Need

Logos: Job 5:17–19; Ps. 94:12; Prov. 29:15, 17; Zech. 3:1–5; Matt. 25:1–13; John 3:10, 11; 2 Cor. 1:20; Gal. 6:14, 15; Eph. 4:30; Col. 1:13–17; Heb. 17:7–11; 1 Pet. 1:6, 7; Rev. 3:14, 15.

Memory Text: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him and he with Me” (Rev. 3:20, NKJV).

Key Thought: In every generation, God’s Spirit strives to bring revival to the hearts of His people.

Laodicea is the last church in Revelation’s sequence of seven churches. The name means “a people judged.” It is also a fitting symbol for God’s last-day people. Laodicea was located in an open valley in southwestern Turkey. It was an important financial capital, a fashion mecca, and an educational and medical center. Its inhabitants were independent, self-confident, and rich. The one vital natural resource that the city lacked, however, was water. The water was piped in through Roman aqueducts from a spring five miles south of the city. By the time the water reached Laodicea, it was lukewarm. Jesus used that symbolism to represent the lukewarm condition of His last-day church, described as self-confident, complacent, apathetic, and spiritually indifferent. It is a church that has lost its passion and that needs spiritual revival. Nevertheless, the Laodicean message is filled with hope. Christ speaks to His people in love, offering to meet their heart needs and revive their deepest spiritual longings.

Lesson 2: The Heartbeat of Revival

Logos: Pss. 34:1; 50:23; 67:3; 71:6; Dan. 9:8–13; Matt. 6:5–13; 17:1, 2; 18:19, 20; Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16; 9:18; John 17:20–24; Acts 1:4, 8, 14; 2:42; 4:31, 33; 6:3, 4; Eph. 5:20; 6:18; Phil. 4:6.

Memory Text: “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!” (Matt. 7:11, NKJV).
Key Thought: Revival is all about a God of loving-kindness seeking to deepen His relationship with us.

The great revivals throughout Scripture were bathed in prayer. The Old Testament records the prayers of the patriarchs and prophets as they sought for revival. Moses, David, and Daniel petitioned the Almighty for power. The book of Acts reveals New Testament believers on their knees seeking the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It was on His knees alone with the Father that the Savior received His greatest strength. “A revival need be expected only in answer to prayer.”—Ellen G. White, Selected Messages, book 1, p. 121.