United in the Warmth of Fellowship

2004 Week of Prayer Readings
Psychologists say that the two great needs of a human being are a sense of identity and a sense of belonging. Humans need to know who they are, where they come from, and where they are going. They need to identify themselves with something or someone. We also need to feel that we are not alone; that we belong to someone or something; that we are appreciated, loved, cherished, accepted. Sensing our identity and feeling that we belong give us a sense of security as we travel through life. That is why God invented marriage, family, church, society (Gen. 2:18).

The worldwide Week of Prayer readings for 2004 are designed to remind us that we are united in the warmth of fellowship. No matter where we live in the world, no matter what language we speak, in the cross of Calvary, through Jesus Christ, we are one, and we are united in the warmth of Christian fellowship. Fellowship is generated in the faith we share. We are united in a common mission, experiencing the trials and hardships that we share in Christian life, participating in the emblems of the Communion service (foot washing and the Lord's Supper). As Seventh-day Adventists we are one great spiritual family; we are a fellowship scattered throughout the earth, united in the blessed hope of the return of Jesus, our Lord.

What is the purpose of Christian fellowship? Here is an answer from Ellen G. White:

“The church is a Christian society formed for the members composing it, that each member may enjoy the assistance of all the graces and talents of the other members, and the working of God upon them, according to their several gifts and abilities. The church is united in the holy bonds of fellowship in order that each member may be benefited by the influence of the other. All are to bind themselves to the covenant of love and harmony. The Christian principles and graces of the whole society of believers are to gather strength and force in harmonious action. Each believer is to be benefited and improved by the refining and transforming influence of the varied capabilities of the other members, that the things lacking in one may be more abundantly displayed in another. All the members are to draw together, that the church may become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men” (Lift Him Up, p. 295).

Thus the warmth of Christian fellowship not only will bring us many blessings, individually and corporately, but, more important, will allow us to be used by God to fulfill the most important mission the Lord has entrusted to us: Sharing the love of God with a world that is perishing. This is God’s purpose for us, that we may be a wonderful demonstration of the pardoning grace of Christ, and that we may enjoy the warmth of Christian fellowship.
United in the Fellowship of Christ

Therein lies our safety.

BY JAN PAULSEN

Christian fellowship revolves around a common center located outside those who enjoy it, but uniting them to it and to others in service and purpose. Such fellowship is not the result of what we bring to the table, even though what we bring is an expression of it. The center of our Christian fellowship, of that which we all have and share in common, is our Savior. It is what he has done, is doing, and will do for us that creates fellowship within the community of believers. The closer each member of the community gets to that majestic center, the stronger are the ties that unite them to one another, thus facilitating the mission of the church.

United in the Fellowship of the Cross of Christ

We are united in the fellowship of the cross of Jesus. What a wonderful thought! That is exactly what the church is, a community of believers who have found their true identity at the very heart of the cross. The cross tells us what we need to hear by revealing who we truly are and what we should and can become. First, it undresses our existence, removing its self-deception, by making us fully aware of the fact that we are sinners, thus revealing the dark side of our existence. It reveals not only our condition but also our common and inescapable future: eternal death. In a sense the cross is about sin, judgment, and death: our sin, our judgment, and our death. The Crucified One pierces through our deceitful feelings of cultural, ethnic, educational, financial, and professional superiority and painfully reveals to us that we are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and morally and spiritually naked (cf. Rev. 3:17). It is from that realization that the cry for help and salvation comes out of our hearts and a glorious fellowship is created with the Crucified One and with those who have found in the cross not only judgment but salvation.

Second, the cross depicts for us a new condition and the possibility of a new future. It points to the enjoyment of a new fellowship with the head of a new
humanity, Jesus. It is a humanity that is no longer controlled by a sinful condition, facing a common fatal destiny. The cross speaks to us about breaking away from our solidarity in sin and death—the natural common center of fallen humanity. In fact, it creates a new solidarity of love and gratitude with Christ and with a new redeemed humanity, the church. As believers we have one fundamental thing in common, one thing that is the very ground and essence of Christian fellowship: the cross of Christ. In the crucified Messiah we are confronted with a new experience—a restored fellowship with God; with a new purpose for our lives—the fulfillment of the gospel commission; and with a glorious new future—eternal life.

The shift from sin, judgment, and death to freedom from the power of sin, to peace, and to life in Christ takes place through the surrender of our being to the Lord, through conversion. Consequently we are united in the fellowship of those who have been forgiven through the blood of Christ. Every Adventist around the world should enjoy fellowship with the risen Lord and with one another because we are united in the experience of forgiveness and acceptance by God through Christ. The cross has revealed once and for all the unfathomable love of God for us (1 John 4:9). Through the Spirit, that love reaches us from the cross, is poured out into our hearts (Rom. 5:5), and binds us together in true fellowship (Col. 3:14).

**United in the Fellowship of the Death and Resurrection of Christ**

This radical change from fellowship in sin and death to fellowship in forgiveness and new life is possible through the death and resurrection of Christ. Our common future as sinners was actualized in Christ, who on the cross appropriated our eternal death in order for us to have fellowship with Him and with one another. Adventists enjoy true fellowship only and exclusively through the substitutionary death of Christ for us (Mark 10:45). Throughout the world we hold in common this most wonderful truth: Christ died for us bearing our sins on the cross.

It is through the baptismal rite that we publicly proclaim and acknowledge Christ as our substitute and by faith see ourselves dying when He died, because He died in place of us, rebellious sinners. Through baptism we are incorporated into His death and joyfully recognize that our sinful des-
tiny—eternal death—was experienced by Christ on the cross. There is no other baptism through which we can be united with God except through baptism into Christ. He died once, and we are all baptized into that one death (Rom. 6:3). We can have fellowship with one another because we have in common one fundamental spiritual experience: we were all baptized into Christ. Adventists are united in the fellowship of the death of Christ, which liberated us from the power of sin and death and led us to a new life.

Therefore, we are united with Christ not only in His death but also in His resurrection (Rom. 6:5). Resurrection is both what will take place at the coming of the Lord and a present experience. For the believer there is a dimension of it that is a present reality, well represented in the one baptism through which we are incorporated into Christ. As we come out of the water—representing our death to sin—we are spiritually resurrected to newness of life (Rom. 6:4). The resurrected Savior is now the Lord of our lives, and sin should no longer lord over us (Rom. 6:14). It was to this that Paul was referring when he wrote “I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings” (Phil. 3:10).* The power of the Resurrection is revealed in us through the lordship of Christ in our lives. We are describing here a life shaped by the will of our loving Savior and guided by the power of the Spirit (Rom. 8:6, 7, 13, 14). We are not to pattern our lives according to the will of the world, but to live it to the glory of the Lord, who is able to renew and transform us (Rom. 12:2).

In that important task we are not left to ourselves to define the shape of our new lives. The Spirit is given to us “in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:4). This is the result of the experience of the new birth.

Nicodemus was not able to grasp the significance of the mystery of the new birth (John 3:4). This creative event is the result of the work of God, through the Spirit, in our hearts. One could say that the new birth consists in having new motives, new tastes, and new tendencies through the power of the Spirit. The effects of that miracle are detectable in the lives of those who have been born again. We know that “when the people of God experience the new birth, their honesty, their uprightness, their fidelity, their steadfast principles, will unfailingly reveal it” (Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students, p. 251). Adventists are united in the experience of the new birth through the resurrection of Jesus.

United in the Fellowship of the Glorified Savior

Believers are united not only by the cross and the death and resurrection of Christ but also by the glory of the risen Lord. Peter tells us that God “raised him from the dead and glorified him” (1 Peter 1:21). We have a common future made possible through Christ. His glorification makes it possible for us to be glorified. At the present time the glory of Christ is already in us, but it is still our hope of glory (Col. 1:27). We by faith contemplate it through the study of the Scriptures and through prayer and meditation, and as a result of that beholding, we are being transformed into the likeness of His glory (2 Cor. 3:18). But the full revelation of that glory is still a future event. Speaking about our resurrection, Paul says, “It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory” (1 Cor. 15:43). Since we have a glorious future, we do not face life depressed, or fearful and uncertain. Adventists exist eagerly waiting for the future? And how can you use your experience to help those living in fear?

QUESTIONS FOR SHARING

1. What about the cross makes it so relevant for a generation that considers itself self-sufficient and self-reliant?
2. What does baptism mean to you? How does it link you to fellow believers?
3. How do the death and resurrection of Christ help you face the future? And how can you use your experience to help those living in fear?

*All Scripture quotations in this article are from the New International Version.

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United in the Fellowship of Faith

We must each make a personal choice.

BY ALEXANDER BOLOTNIKOV

“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16).*

In the fall of 1990 Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson was proclaimed by his followers as the Messiah. His followers, the members of the Lubavitch/Chabad Hasidic movement, expected great miracles, the restoration of the Temple, and the complete defeat of Arabs. They were proclaiming to all Jews in the world the message that redemption had already arrived, calling them to pray and keep the commandments of God. However, in the spring of 1994 Schneerson died. None of the expected miracles were fulfilled. Nevertheless, thousands of his admirers gathered for his funeral and waited for three days at his grave to see his resurrection. They were bitterly disappointed and embarrassed.

Today in Brooklyn, New York, where the headquarters of Chabad is located, most of the adherents of the Chabad movement do not want to remember this episode in their history. Even more, no one wants to recall a similar story that occurred with their ancestors in Russia in 1844. On Yom Kippur that year, this ultra-Orthodox Jewish group was waiting for the coming of the Messiah.

But at that time they were not alone. Many Christian believers—in New England and elsewhere—were also waiting and expecting.

For Seventh-day Adventists, however, the events of 1844 are not just a piece of the history of their denomination. Those events led to the discovery of key biblical teachings and doctrines. They embodied the ultimate gospel message to be proclaimed to the entire world.

The word “gospel” comes from the Greek word 

\begin{equation}
\text{evangelion}
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and means “good news.” But what constitutes the good news? The New Testament gives us two specific descriptions. The apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 says that the gospel is the good news about the death and resurrection of Jesus. This message has always been the core of Christian beliefs. Without the resurrection of Jesus there is no hope of eternal life. Without Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice there is no forgiveness of sin.

In these last days the need to proclaim that gospel is more intense. John received an important message to be proclaimed at the close of the great controversy: “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water” (Rev. 14:7).

What is good about fear and judgment? It sounds paradoxical, but that’s how Scripture puts it. “Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people” (Rev. 14:6). The gospel includes the teaching of God’s judgment. The message of Revelation 14 is uniquely preached by Seventh-day Adventists. It is the heart of our teaching. It holds us together in the fellowship of the message we proclaim.

I am proud to be Seventh-day Adventist, because the history of this movement is characterized by an honest search for biblical truth. Scientists often say that a negative result can also constitute a result. History tells us about many discoveries that originated from mistakes. William Miller’s mistake was conditioned upon certain stereotypes in the biblical interpretation of his day. For our pioneers it took courage to continue to be faithful to God when Jesus did not return as expected. The pain caused by the scoffing from neighbors and by the disappointment itself was very hard to bear. But they were looking to Jesus and searching. Adventists have nothing to hide. We rejoice in the amazing biblical discovery that emerged from the Great Disappointment. That is our common heritage, and we should not forget it.

What Makes Adventists Unique

In 1921 a Swiss former patent clerk, Albert Einstein, received the Nobel Prize for disproving a theory that had dominated science during the entire previous century. His discovery opened up for the scientific community new realities of our universe, and to some extent shaped the technological history of the twentieth century.

The discovery of Christ’s ministry in the heavenly sanctuary shattered the stereotypes in the interpretation of the work of Christ and resulted in a revolution of our understanding of the Bible and the plan of salvation. That makes Adventists unique. Many of our doctrinal teachings are common to other denominations. For instance, many Christians wait with us for the soon return of Jesus. There are
Sabbathkeeping Baptists and Pentecostals. A number of Christian denominations believe that after death individuals await the judgment and don’t go to hell or heaven immediately. Even many non-believers adhere to the principles of healthy living. But the message about Christ’s ministry in the heavenly sanctuary is not preached by any other Christian denomination. This message gave a new vision and perspective to the small group of faithful believers that remained from the disappointed Millerites. It provided them with the understanding that led to the birth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Many people ask, “What does the fact that Jesus entered upon a new phase of ministry in 1844 mean for me? How does it change my life and affect my hope for salvation?” Apparently nothing has really changed with relation to the availability of divine grace. The blood of Jesus shed on Calvary continues to bring forgiveness for our sins. The gospel of judgment proclaimed through the three angels’ messages answers these questions. When Christ entered upon His new phase of ministry, He started the first stage of the final judgment. For His followers this is a message of hope pointing to the fact that the cosmic conflict is about to come to an end.

Judgment on a Positive Note

Thousands of years before the death of Jesus, the psalmist wrote: “Judge me, O Lord” (Ps. 7:8). In many countries ruled by oppressive governments, the courts of law are exclusively seen as instruments of punishment. However, in the West people often go to court to seek justice and protection. David was confident that God’s judgment of him would result in his justification. In the book of Revelation John records the cry of the martyrs who suffered for Jesus through the persecution of the Middle Ages: “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” (Rev. 6:10).

Having Jesus as our advocate means that we have nothing to fear, because the Ancient of Days will pronounce “judgment in favor of the saints of the Most High” (Dan. 7:22).

The salvation process of our world did not end at Golgotha. We cannot enjoy the fullness of salvation while this world suffers from the consequences of sin, and the originator of sin is still alive. Daniel clearly states that the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom only after the pre-Advent judgment. Judgment is good news because it not only focuses on the individual but also emphasizes the community of believers. Salvation is given to us as individuals, but we will not be saved alone. God’s kingdom is the home for all the saved ones and is a place where everyone would enjoy eternal fellowship with God and with one another.

People often say that they need Jesus, not the doctrines. It is true that a set of dry philosophical statements does not respond to our daily needs. However, we cannot have fellowship with Jesus without the Bible. Jesus said, “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39). Every passage of the Scriptures reveals to us the holy and loving character of our Savior. Every verse explains to us the plan of salvation. In order to understand the gospel, we do not need to study doctrinal or theological books, but diligently study the Word of God. The Adventist message is grounded on it. The three angels’ messages, which are the cornerstone of the Adventist message and mission, reveal the plan of salvation for us living in the last days.

It has been said that a real Adventist is always a “first generation” Adventist. We have to appropriate our message personally. The Adventist faith is not a matter of birth or heritage, but a choice. It requires you to study it by yourself, to understand it for yourself, and to live up to it. The common message we have unites us in the worldwide fellowship of the Adventist family. The Adventist faith was my personal choice, a choice I made when I met the true Messiah. What about you? Have you made your personal choice to have fellowship in the faith of God’s remnant?

* All Bible references in this article are from the New International Version.

QUESTIONS FOR SHARING

1. The author sees the disappointment of 1844 as a positive development. How do you see his reasoning?

2. Do you see doctrines in a positive or negative light? What has been your personal experience? And has it changed in light of today’s reading?

3. Rather than dread the judgment, how might we look forward to it with joy and assurance? What kind of experience leads to this outlook?

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Where is my niece?” shouted Veasna, a Cambodian Bible worker. More than 100 children were milling around after being trucked back from a Vacation Bible School program. That morning he had brought with him on his motorcycle a 7-year-old girl named Srey Moni. Now she had disappeared among the thousands in the city of Phnom Penh. Veasna and all the volunteers dropped to their knees and earnestly prayed for God to help them find her. They knew how serious this was, since children were often kidnapped in the city. Then they headed out in different directions to search for her. Veasna drove frantically through the dusty streets looking down every alley for Srey Moni. “Please let me find her, dear Lord,” Veasna cried. Finally he spotted the dirty, tear-streaked face of that lost little girl. With joy he grabbed her up in his arms and raced back to tell the good news.

Jesus showed the same deep passion for the lost when He said, “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?” (Luke 15:4).* More than anything else, Jesus wants to make sure that every one of His lost children is in His arms for eternity.

His last command on earth was “Preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). His last promise was “You shall be witness . . . to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). According to Him, the last end-time sign would be the proclamation of the gospel in all the world (Matt. 24:14). In these last days He raised up a remnant to give a last message “to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people” (Rev. 14:6).

Is Jesus really interested in taking you to heaven? Of course He is! He also wants your neighbor there. What about the 1 billion plus people who have never even heard their heavenly Father's name? He also wants them there. That is probably His deepest desire. There is no greater priority. How does He intend to reach them? One of the ways God has chosen is through the unity of the church. Jesus prayed for unity so that “the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me” (John 17:23). He promises that our connection with Him and the resulting love for one another will draw the world into His arms. Have you seen a family that loves to be together? Aren’t you drawn to be with them? That’s the way God wants to use our unity.

This unity especially impacts the world when we join together in mission, God’s mission. When the love of God streams through us with Veasna-like urgency, the world can’t help but notice.

**What It Means**

This unity means that church members take up the mission right where they live and work. True Christians see each person they meet as a child who must be introduced to their heavenly Father. A Seventh-day Adventist mechanic works his or her trade with thoroughness and honesty. He or she has determined to lead customers to know a God of faithfulness. A Seventh-day Adventist businessperson uses his or her wealth to help others advance, always watching for an opportunity to turn people’s eyes to heavenly treasures.
Beautiful unity comes as the pastor empowers and partners with the members to reach coworkers, customers, neighbors, families, and friends. That is why God gave some to be “pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith” (Eph. 4:11-13). The results? “Were every one of you a living missionary, the message for this time would speedily be proclaimed in all countries, to every people and nation and tongue” (Ellen G. White, Testimonies, vol. 6, p. 438).

Evil powers try to thwart God’s plan by bringing division to the church. But a church unified under God’s mission doesn’t waste its time arguing. A church board may hit a sensitive issue and be locked in a difficult discussion. However, when they kneel down and ask God to fill their hearts with His Spirit, they will know what priorities to pursue, and many problems will dissolve. Then missions will not be a program of the church, but the purpose of all its programs.

There are more than 15 countries with no Seventh-day Adventist church, and millions of people elsewhere who do not have anyone near them who can introduce them to God. God’s passionate mission to reach all people must weld us into a unified worldwide fellowship. When we feel God’s heart, we cannot worry merely about the growth of our own church, conference, or country. The lost sheep are dying while the 99 are well fed.

We are living in a time period where missionaries must go from everywhere to everywhere. Each nationality, transformed by Christ, brings a special and needed perspective. Each group needs the stretching and unity that an expanded mission will bring. Those in city churches especially must look at the pews and ask, “What ethnic groups in my community are not here?” Those of us who are isolated from the unreached must lift our eyes further and leave the 99 in order to go where no one has yet gone. At the very least, let us go via our money and prayers.

**Practical About It**

One church in California decided to repave its parking lot. Some members had been overseas and realized the great impact this money could make elsewhere. The board wrestled with this issue; then they united around a plan to give 10 percent of the budgeted amount to build a church in southern Asia. They did not experience lack at home, just greater blessing.

Our heavenly Father absolutely would not like to spend eternity without any of the people we will pass today. What a joy we experience when we see them through His eyes. This will also bring new unity and excitement to our families. Parents will make it their highest priority to lead their children into a dynamic relationship with God. The children will be drawn to Jesus as they see their parents carve out time from their busy schedules to spend with them. As the whole family experiences God’s love they will want to share it with others. Many children grow up bored with religion, thinking that it consists only of going to church and obeying rules. But parents can determine to change this by bringing Christ’s love more fully into the home and doing mission activities together.

One family I know decided to celebrate their daughter’s birthday in a unique way. After eating together with the guests, they all packed sack lunches. Then each family went into the community to give the lunch to a homeless person. They came back together and shared their experiences. The daughter reported it as “the best birthday yet!” A family can teach health classes together, do a puppet ministry, visit a hospital, go on a church building trip, or give Bible studies. Such mission experiences will tie their hearts to one another in close unity.

For three and a half years Jesus worked to unify His church. The night before His death the disciples were fighting over positions, refusing to serve one another. Then they fled and denied their Lord. Fifty days later they were unified and turned Jerusalem upside down with courageous preaching that would spread throughout the world. What made the difference? The death and resurrection of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. That could happen again today.

Today we must gaze into the Father’s love and Jesus’ eyes until we see our own selfishness and turn from it with all our hearts. Today we must receive His gracious forgiveness and know that He doesn’t want to spend eternity without us. Today we must put aside our differences and freely forgive one another. Then we can ask for the mighty Holy Spirit because of His promise: “How much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!” (Luke 11:13). As the Holy Spirit falls on us He will bring God’s character into our lives through the fruits of the Spirit. As a result, our God will be known in our workplaces, our churches, our families, and the world.

One day we will join “a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev. 7:9).

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*All Scripture quotations in this article are from the New King James Version.

**QUESTIONS FOR SHARING**

1. What do you see as the primary motivation for mission and evangelism?
2. How can we integrate mission into our daily work and activities?
3. What are the impediments to mission, practically and spiritually? And how may we transcend them?

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So what makes a family?

Sidney and Sierra didn’t just gain a new earthly family; they were introduced for the first time to their heavenly family. It wasn’t a “they lived happily ever after” ending, because those just don’t exist in a sinful world. There were conflicts, as is normal for a family to have, and with two children being brought into an existing family, there were quite a few adjustments that had to be made by and for everyone. Just getting to know one another was the first step.

Each family has their own uniqueness, their own culture that is different from any other family’s. And each person in the family is unique, and doesn’t always get along with other family members. There are differences, and sometimes they are enough to cause a split in a family relationship.

But there’s a common bond there that can never be erased. The fact that they are related, that they are family, is something that can unite them in a way that they’ll never have with those outside the family.

When Sidney and Sierra first arrived on the other side of the country, they were “foreigners.” They didn’t know the people or the culture. Even though the language was the same there, it sounded different to them. And
the land—there were trees, lots of
them, and more green than they’d ever
seen before. It was strange for them.
Their new siblings were different from
them. They looked different and acted
different. But they soon embraced it all,
because there was one common
theme—love. They became part of that
culture rather than just looking in from
the outside. It was as though they had
always been there. They were right at
home, and they were happy.

Now multiply that by a thousand!
And consider 1 John 3:1, 2: “See
what love the Father has given us, that
we should be called children of God;
and that is what we are. . . . Beloved,
we are God’s children now; what we
will be has not yet been revealed.
What do we know is this: when he is
revealed, we will be like him, for we
will see him as he is.”*

We are already God’s children, but
what will it be like in heaven? A thou-
sand times more wonderful than even
being called “God’s children”? In the
meantime we are a worldwide family
right here on earth. How do we deal
with that?

Getting Along in a Worldwide
Family

The Seventh-day Adventist Church
is truly a worldwide denomination.
There are members in more than 200
countries. How many languages, tradi-
tions, and cultures do they represent?
And the countless ways of worshiping
our God and the numerous approaches
to reaching others there must be. We
each bring our own unique ways of
doing things, our different roles to
play, and our own perceptions. But the
core message and values we hold as a
church bring us together and keep us
together. They unite us worldwide, no
matter what the culture, skin color, or
language. This diversity is to be cele-
brated.

But because we are all sinners,
sometimes we may run into problems.
We often don’t know how to deal with
ethnic or cultural differences. We
sometimes shun the person who sees
things differently than we do. If it’s not
our way or the way we’re used to doing
it, we can view it as wrong. Romans 14
gives us advice on how to live like
family: “Welcome those who are weak
in faith, but not for the purpose of
quarreling over opinions. . . . Who are
you to pass judgment on servants of
another? It is before their own lord
that they stand or fall. And they will
be upheld, for the Lord is able to make
them stand. . . . Why do you pass judg-
ment on your brother or sister? Or you,
why do you despise your brother or sis-
ter? For we will all stand before the
judgment seat of God. . . . Let us
therefore no longer pass judgment on
one another, but resolve instead never
to put a stumbling block or hindrance
in the way of another. . . . Let us then
pursue what makes for peace and for
mutual upbuilding” (verses 1-19).

God created His family to be inter-
dependent, not independent. As a
family of God we are to work together
as a team. We are not to condemn, but
we are also not to do whatever we
want when it hurts those around us.
God expects us to respect and love one
another like members of our family.
We are to work together for a common
goal—bringing others to Christ. This
goal alone unites us as a family of God.
Who are we, mealy little sinners that
we are, to look at one another with an
eye of disdain? We all sin, but thank-
fully for us, God is our judge. And
God, through Christ, is the common
denominator who brings us together as
a family.

“Owe no one anything, except to
love one another; for the one who
loves another has fulfilled the law. . . .
Love does no wrong to a neighbor;
therefore, love is the fulfilling of the
law” (Rom. 13:8-10).

Building and maintaining a family
relationship takes time. There are per-
sonality and behavior conflicts, but the
underlying theme is always there for
those who truly love the Lord.

Automatically Members of the
Heavenly Family

“So then you are no longer
strangers and aliens, but you are citi-
zens with the saints and also members
of the household of God, built upon
the foundation of the apostles and
prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as
the cornerstone” (Eph. 2:19, 20).

Christ is the cornerstone of our
entire universe, and every living being
in it belongs to Him—as a citizen of
heaven. Our world is but a minute
object compared with the rest of the
universe, yet Christ is, happily, our
center. Consider Ephesians 1:5, 6: “He
destined us for adoption as his children
through Jesus Christ, according to the
good pleasure of his will, to the praise
of his glorious grace that he freely
bestowed on us in the Beloved.”

We are born with a destiny in mind
by the God of the universe. We are
already God’s children and part of His
heavenly family—if we choose to be.
When someone is born into an earthly
family, that person is automatically an
established part of that family. The
second we accept Christ, we are auto-
metrically brought into the heavenly
family. But obviously, as members of a
family we have the responsibility of
keeping the family together. God calls
each of us to do our part to maintain
peace and unity and to show others
the love that comes from knowing
Jesus Christ.

Welcome to the family.

* All Scripture references in this article are
from the New Revised Standard Version.

QUESTIONS FOR SHARING

1. How can I help make my local
church a better example of the fam-
ily of God?

2. What practical steps can the
church take to foster interracial,
terethnical understanding and
togetherness?

3. How important is it for the
church to come together as a
family?

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We often hear people say, “Life isn’t fair.” Since that day in Eden when a fruit was too good to resist, humankind has struggled to make sense of pain and hurt. Tragedy impacts our lives, taking on different forms and meanings. An HIV/AIDS victim lives with discomfort and stigma, an elderly man is left to die by a hit-and-run driver, a child never returns home from school, a marriage breaks up, a natural disaster strikes, and a war steals away the life of our youth. Suffering happens to the good and the bad, the young and the old, the wealthy and the poor, the Christian and the non-Christian.

Suffering doesn’t discriminate. All human beings suffer because of sin. While Christians pray for protection, they are subjected to pain, loss, grief, and wrong. We exist in an environment in which everyone is exposed to the effects of greed, power, violence, and selfishness. While God wants to protect His children and tuck them like chickens under His wings, Satan is on a mission to destroy safety, security, and faith. God doesn’t prevent heartache, but uses it as a stepping-stone to stronger faith and community. Common experiences and suffering can bring Christians together.

The St. James Church Massacre that occurred in Cape Town, South Africa, on July 25, 1993, is a painful reminder that tragedy can strike at the heart of Christianity. A congregation of 1,300 people worshiping God on a cold Sunday night became targets for a man with a gun and a hand grenade packed in a tin of nails. More than 10 lives were lost and more than 50 recorded as wounded. Such devastation can crush a Christian family, or it can strengthen it. Common experiences and suffering can bring Christians together.

Fr. Frank Retief, minister of the congregation at the time, said, “True faith in Christ is not seen too clearly when everything goes well. When there are no difficulties, it is easy for people to claim to be Christians. But when the pressures come, it is an entirely different story. What a man really believes is seen when the chips are down. What is in the head comes out when there is nothing external to lean on.”

Christians are targets in the spiritual battle between good and evil, and sometimes it appears that we are in the wrong place at the wrong time when disaster hits. Although our journeys are personal and our challenges differ, we all experience adversity, trial, and pain. We have much in common.

A Tough Journey

The Christian walk is not always easy. Christians around the globe find life difficult. Throughout history men and women have struggled with disappointment and distress. Authors have documented the Christian journey, with its trials and suffering. One of the most famous is Job. Job experienced death in the family, loss of property, affliction from boils, and betrayal by friends. John Bunyan introduced us to an adventurous character called Christian in his Pilgrim’s Progress. He shared the high and low points of life’s pilgrimage, highlighting the trouble and danger we are exposed to. Jesus also spoke about hardship—he warned His disciples that “in this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33).* In preparing His disciples for their future, Jesus taught them that suffering was to be expected and that they would weep and lament.

Jesus as Our Example

Jesus taught us many things, and reflecting on His life is one way to find strength to persevere in trial. During the most tragic event in history Jesus displayed courage, perseverance, and stamina. “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats” (1 Peter 2:23). What happened to Jesus wasn’t fair. Hounded by Pharisees, ostracized by His own people, and ridiculed for good deeds, Jesus modeled patience and grace in the face of adversity.

During His short life of 33 years, Jesus prayed for strength to endure. When confronted with difficulties or trying circumstances, He placed His trust in God. Compassion and determination were weapons Jesus used to expose injustice.
Harsh treatment couldn't destroy His faith. Instead, it opened the door of hope. "All that He endured—the blood drops that flowed from His head, His hands, His feet, the agony that racked His frame, and the unutterable anguish that filled His soul at the hiding of His Father's face—speaks to each child of humanity, declaring, It is for thee that the son of God consents to bear this burden of guilt; for thee He spoils the domain of death, and opens the gates of Paradise." 2 Jesus' sufferings will put an end to ours.

Trial Challenges Our Faith

God has the power to override consequences, change the outcome, and stop the pain right now. But He often allows difficult circumstances to develop character and faith. James Dobson says, "We are in a spiritual war with a deadly foe tracking us every hour of the day. We need to be in the best shape possible to cope with the darts and arrows he hurls our way. Flabby, overindulged, pampered Christians just don't have the stamina to fight this battle. Thus the Lord puts us on a spiritual treadmill every now and then to keep us in good fighting condition." True faith must be tested.

Being Christian is not simply being connected to a congregation or observing the traditions of your family. It's about developing a character like Jesus'. Madame Guyon said, "It is the fire of suffering that brings forth the gold of godliness."

A Christian friend of mine has experienced suffering most of his life. I have been encouraged many times by his smile while in pain and his service to others when he was badly wronged. Once when I was visiting, he placed a piece of paper in my hand. It read, "The greatest danger we face is in finding ourselves comfortable on this earth." He wanted me to realize that this life is temporary and that trial is to be expected. James said, "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial" (James 1:12). "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance" (James 1:2, 3). Often the road we walk is rocky. But God encourages us to persevere and look beyond today. While it seems illogical, tragedy and suffering can bring us closer to Jesus and closer to one another.

I Hurt When You Hurt

Christians are impacted by the pain others experience. The book of Lamentations provides an eyewitness account of the despair surrounding the fall of Jerusalem. The grief was of major proportions. The people of Judah had been captured and slain. Women had been raped, children starved to death. There was ruin and destruction, fear and uncertainty. The people were distressed and without comfort. Lamentations captures in writing the chaos that impacted this rebellious society. Jeremiah found the scene difficult. "His heart was wrung with anguish over the ruin wrought by sin."
Emotionally Jeremiah was probably at an all-time low. The suffering experienced by other human beings penetrated right to the heart of Christians. Christians suffer when others suffer. I hurt when you hurt.

Jesus left us a beautiful example of ministering to others. “Our Saviour went from house to house, healing the sick, comforting the mourners, soothing the afflicted, speaking peace to the disconsolate. He took the little children in His arms and blessed them, dispersing right to the heart of Christians. People long for something better—Christians are called to share their circumstances. “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2).

Christians who have suffered can relate to others who are hurting. Trials provide opportunities for us to love one another.

Praying, preparing meals, washing, caring for children, going for walks, giving hugs, listening—there are many things we can do for someone who is hurting. Praying for one another is powerful, because it helps those we pray for and at the same time strengthens our trust in God. Preparing a meal, vacuuming the floor, and washing clothes are practical ways to share. Caring for children, going for walks, dispensing plenty of hugs and humor may help others. Holding someone’s hand in silence speaks volumes, while others may ask for time alone. A safe place is what they’re looking for. It’s not our job to find reasons or try and explain their suffering from our perspective. Just listen.

It’s true. Life isn’t fair. Trial and suffering we all have in common. But no one should have to suffer alone. Fellowship doesn’t end at personal struggle, illness, or heartache. “The deepest, most intense level of fellowship is the fellowship of suffering, where we enter into each other’s pain and grief and carry each other’s burdens. . . . It is in the times of deep crisis, grief and doubt that we need each other most.”

Everyone needs support to pull through painful experiences. Share the load in your church family. Make that phone call, buy some flowers, send a card. Share hope. It’s another thing we all have in common in the unity of Christian fellowship.

The Lord puts us on a spiritual treadmill every now and then to keep us in good fighting condition.”

“Without water humans have lived almost a week. Without food, a few have remained alive for nearly three months. Yet without hope, no one can survive.” Christian fellowship provides hope for broken hearts. Our shared experiences allow us to lean on one another and provide support when someone is struggling to make sense of circumstances. “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2).

Everyone needs support to pull through painful experiences. Share the load in your church family. Make that phone call, buy some flowers, send a card. Share hope. It’s another thing we all have in common in the unity of Christian fellowship.

**QUESTIONS FOR SHARING**

1. As humans we find it natural to ask “Why?” in the face of suffering. How desirable is it that we strive to transcend that attitude? And if we ever reach that stage, how do we relate to those who still question?

2. In what ways might we express solidarity with those who hurt?

3. How is Jesus an example to us in suffering?
United in the Fellowship of Joy

Joy overflowing, regardless of external circumstances

BY LEO RANZOLIN

It was midnight! Two great warriors of the gospel were in prison! Their clothes had been ripped off. They had been severely beaten and their bodies were aching with pain! A jailer came in and threw them into an inner prison, probably without light and breathable air! Their feet were fastened in the stocks. They were surrounded by other prisoners, some sleeping and others yelling and screaming!

What was their response to suffering, pain, and discomfort? They started praying and singing (Acts 16:25). What a scene of indescribable joy! The results? An earthquake shook the prison, the doors were opened, and the jailer, thinking all prisoners had escaped, decided to kill himself. Paul cried, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!” “The jailer called for lights, rushed in, and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’” (Acts 16:28, 29).*

The apostles’ joy transformed the life of the poor jailer and brought light into his family. Tenderly he began to wash their stripes while his wife prepared a good meal for them. A midnight Bible study followed, and a whole family was united with Christ in the fellowship of His joy.

In the cold, dark cell of a prison, light shone into the life of a jailer!

Praise ascended to heaven, and grace descended to a poor sinner!

Joy and happiness flowed into the home of a gloomy family!

First, let us take a look at the Philippian church to gain a better understanding of how their members were brought together in the fellowship of joy. In vision Paul was called to go to Macedonia (Acts 16:9). Here was an opportunity to bring the message of the gospel to Europe! The first convert was a woman by the name of Lydia, a seller of purple. She had a spirit by which she predicted the future, enriching her owners (Acts 16:16). Commentators explain that this “spirit” was a “Python spirit,” a “demonic spirit.” She annoyed the apostles every time they passed by, and Paul finally commanded the spirit to come out of her. The irate owners instigated the crowd to attack Paul and Silas, and they ended up in jail. The jailer’s family were the next to come to Christ.

Here we have a picture of the first members, and in reality the nucleus, of the Philippi church. It illustrates the scope of the gospel and how this message unites all classes and genders. Lydia was a rich woman, a prosperous seller of purple and of a high class. The young woman was a slave and a member of one of the poorest classes, and the jailer could be classified as middle class.

What was the result of this ministry? In Acts 16:34 we read that the jailer “was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God.” Joy is associated with salvation in the Bible.

Second, let us look at the Philippian church 10 years later. Paul was in prison again. He was at the end of his ministry, but he could not forget the Philippian church. They had demonstrated the love of God and portrayed the model of the caring church. When they heard that Paul was confined in the Mamertine prison in Rome, they sent a young man, Epaphroditus, to cheer him up. Paul was overwhelmed by the display of affection from the Philippian believers. The same spirit of joy and praise that he displayed in the Philippian jail permeated his life. He remembered Lydia, the rich businessperson, who’d been so hospitable. He remembered the slave girl, now transformed by the spirit of joy in Christ. He remembered the keeper of the prison and his family and their tender, loving care toward him. He remembered how glad he was to have accepted the call to go to Macedonia.

Why was Paul so happy? Why all the rejoicing inside a gloomy prison? Epaphroditus had brought love and joy. Paul was filled with joy. They had not forgotten him. Through Epaphroditus he sent a letter to the Philippians—a letter full of joy. As a matter of fact, the words “joy” and “gladness” appear about 18 times in the Epistle to the Philippians. Paul’s letter was also filled with counsel and warnings to
help the church be united in the fellowship of Christ's love and joy and peace. What a powerful message Epaphroditus took back to the Philippians! A message of love and compassion, of joy and hope.

Third, we may ask, “How can we live in joy and happiness in a world filled with hatred? How can we be united in the fellowship of joy among so much sadness?” Paul repeatedly told the Philippians to rejoice in Christ: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Phil. 4:4). He was in prison, and his message was still the same as in the first imprisonment. “I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances” (Phil. 4:11).

We may be imprisoned by distress, depression, and disappointment; flogged by criticism; bound by circumstances; worried about current events. Remember what Paul said: “Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord!” (Phil. 3:1).

The great preacher and speaker of the Voice of Prophecy, the late H.M.S. Richards, Sr., said: “Every true Christian has a right to be happy, and ought to be happy. Faith in God should bring joy. The psalmist says, ‘My soul shall be joyful in the Lord: it shall rejoice in his salvation’ (Psalm 35:9). Why shouldn’t we be glad? Jesus says we should be happy. Our sins have been forgiven. Jesus is alive and, through His Holy Spirit, is with us now.” Then Richards concludes, “Christ’s presence has been with us. Let us put our confidence in Him and look for joy” (Walking Through the Bible With H.M.S. Richards, p. 361).

I like the experience of the oyster. It could be annoyed by the intruder grain of sand that was placed inside its shell. However, instead of complaining or trying to throw away the invader, the oyster builds, little by little, a layer of a milky substance, transforming that painful experience into a beautiful pearl. The Lord expects us to use the trials and tribulations of life for growth and maturity in our Christian journey.

By manifesting Christian joy and happiness, we are encouraging others to share in the benefits of the gospel and to be united in the fellowship of joy in Christ around the world. Ellen G. White says: “Christians who gather up gloom and sadness to their souls, and murmur and complain, are giving to others a false representation of God and the Christian life” (Steps to Christ, p. 116). And she summarizes why we should rejoice: “Rejoice that you are one with God, one with Christ, and with the whole family of heaven” (The Desire of Ages, p. 493). Yes, we are united in the fellowship of His joy.

Our joy should spring up from Christ, and as a result of our fellowship and relationship with Him. Peter says: “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:6-9).

Finally, remember always to: be united in the joy of His love, receiving and returning love, which is the source of the greatest joy; be united in the joy of His service, making it a delight to do His will; be united in the joy of His blessing; be united in the joy of gratitude. Rejoice, always, as you survey the many blessings we receive from Him. And even though things might not be going according to our wishes, God has a plan for our lives. In majestic words Habakkuk gives us the right perspective: “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior” (Hab. 3:17, 18).

*All Bible verses in this article are taken from the New International Version.

QUESTIONS FOR SHARING
1. What ingredients, would you say, went into Paul’s abundant joy?
2. Do you find it realistic to be joyful always? How do you relate to this reading?
3. What’s the source of the Christian’s joy?

Leo Ranzolin is a former vice president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, now retired in Florida.
The heat had really been unbearable for the two disciples as they had walked all day up and down through the mountains toward Jerusalem. At twilight they came across a village and asked for hospitality. The night had come, and they were hungry and tired. Inviting them to come in, a servant took off their sandals and poured fresh water on their feet. What a delight! That was the best thing that could have happened to them after a day of walking in the dust. They felt as if their entire body had been made new. No other sensation could have been more appropriate.

No longer tired, they were still very hungry, however. Suddenly the smell of fresh-baked bread touched their nostrils. The two disciples had never dreamed of such a thing at the end of the day. Bread was usually baked early in the morning! More was to come. Juice, the best juice they ever drank.

One cannot forget such an experience, even today. Imagine that after wandering for hours in the dust,}

under the sun, you come across a waterfall, and it is fresh—so fresh. Then you open your bag, and you have a delicious salad, an Italian pizza, fruits, and juice. What a sensation! No wonder Jesus has chosen for the Lord’s Supper to consist of the foot-washing celebration and the bread and the wine to meet the need of His fellow humans as a sign of communion all through the ages.

When we come to church today, many have probably lost the feeling of what it means to walk in the dust, to be thirsty and hungry.

In some parts of the world they still know. Once, while serving in a certain part of the world, I visited a church located in the middle of nowhere. It was the Sabbath for the Communion service. Everything was ready on the table, and I started my sermon. As I came to the point at which I was explaining the meaning of foot washing, I noticed a man crying silently. When the time came to choose a partner for the foot washing, I decided to go to that man and ask him why he was crying.

“Very simple,” he said. “When you talked about our sins being washed away just like we would wash our feet and be pure, I thought that it was impossible for me when I looked at my feet covered with such thick dust.” He said, “My life is like that.” And I looked at his feet. They were red, covered with dust accumulated after walking barefoot for miles from his village to the church.

Suddenly I felt very proud of my Lord, for I thought that if I could wash the feet of that brother, give them the original color, it would mean to me that there would be no sin that God couldn’t wash away.

So I started to wash his feet, and the water became so red that the bottom of the vessel disappeared, but his feet had regained the original color.
What a lesson! In Jesus Christ the same thing can happen to our sins. So the next time you wash the feet of your brother or sister, remember what Jesus has already done for you. He has cleansed you. He has made you a new creature. This is the beauty of the warmth of fellowship with the Lord and with fellow believers. There is forgiveness for all.

But there is more to come! You can see it, and you can taste it. Bread is offered today; it is a day of communion, a time of reconciliation for all. If there is a place for fellowship, it is when we eat together, when we share what we have prepared. It is not fun to eat alone. Usually you do it in a few minutes. In my country food is like a religion. A real meal will last at least one hour. It is not a matter of the quantity you eat, but the pleasure to be with the people you like. It is communication. Jesus offers more than communication; He offers communion.

Communion brings power. In Luke 24:30, 31, we find a fantastic incident that proves how much power is given when you eat together with the Lord. Jesus was at table with two disciples. He took the bread. He prayed about the bread. He cut it and shared it with the disciples. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized Him. Do you have your eyes opened? Can you really see who is sitting next to you, in front of you? Do you know your neighbor? Do you know them in a way that will make you more vulnerable? Try it!

But there is another challenge. Do you see Jesus? Are your eyes opened? Have you recognized Him? Do you know Him? Do you love Him? The text says concerning the two disciples, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” (verse 32).* Is your heart burning inside of you like the heart of the disciples? Have you gotten the strength to run out and tell the good news to all your friends? Will you be able to explain from the Scriptures who Jesus is and what kind of communion He wants?

In the same chapter, Luke 24:37-43, we have another story of Jesus eating with His disciples. They seemed to have been terribly puzzled about the presence of this visitor. Jesus said, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts. Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (verses 38, 39). Then He said, “Have you anything to eat?” (verse 41). And Jesus “took it and ate” in their presence (verse 43).

It seems that eating together gives confidence. Eating together brings understanding. It is a time to relax, to think differently. The disciples listened to Jesus, and suddenly they understood. The Lord wants us to understand the purpose of all things. Why did He have to suffer? Why did He have to die? It is time to come closer to the Lord, to sit in His presence, to have a solid meal with Him. It is a matter of salvation. I urge you to understand what Jesus is offering you in the Lord’s Supper.

Are You Reluctant, Afraid?

You may be scared to approach Jesus, to eat with Him. I can understand your feelings. Maybe you have tried before, and you have been disappointed because nothing happened. Maybe you think that your turn is over, that it will never happen another time. Remember the experience of Peter (John 21:15-19). Again we have Jesus eating with His disciples, and questions are raised. These are not ordinary questions, but questions that address important issues in our lives, questions about important turning points.

That is what happened to Peter. “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Three times Jesus asked the same question: “Do you love me?” A question about love is always important. Remember when you started to speak or think about love. It was a vital topic that kept you alert. Indeed, it was of the highest importance for Peter to clarify his feelings and his understanding about the love he had for Jesus. Don’t you think it is important to know where you are with respect to Jesus? Was the love of Peter enough for him to follow Jesus? Is your love for Jesus enough for you to follow Him?

The Lord’s Supper is a fantastic opportunity to have fellowship with the Lord and with other believers. It is a chance to develop real friendship with Him. Do you have a friend? Do you enjoy his or her company? Eating with the Lord means that there is a purpose to life. Have you discovered the purpose of your life? Eating with the Lord tells you that there is hope. Do you have a hope? Eating with Jesus nurtures our physical life, our spiritual life, and our mental and emotional life. But above all, participating in the Lord’s Supper contributes to the creation of full fellowship with Him and others. Why not start looking for an occasion to eat with the Lord? It’s good!

Adventists look forward to the time when we will meet again in a glorious fellowship with the Lord, to eat at His table in the kingdom of God. We should take advantage of every opportunity we now have to anticipate that moment by participating in the fellowship of the Lord’s Supper, thus uniting with fellow believers around the world.

*All Scripture quotations in this article are from the New Revised Standard Version.

QUESTIONS FOR SHARING

1. What lessons do you find in the fact that Jesus took an ordinary practice in the ancient world (foot washing) and transformed it into a sacred rite in His kingdom?

2. Are you sometimes reluctant to participate fully in the Lord’s Supper (and the foot washing that precedes it)? If so, why? If not, how can you share with others what you’ve found?

3. How can this service become a time of reconciliation for the church?

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We all need a guide through the many [strait] places of life, as much as the sailor needs a pilot over the sandy bar or up the rocky river; and where is this guide to be found? We point you to the Bible. Inspired of God, written by holy men, it points out with great clearness and precision the duties of both old and young. It elevates the mind, softens the heart, and imparts gladness and joy to the spirit. The Bible presents a perfect standard of character; it is an infallible guide under all circumstances, even to the end of the journey of life. . . .

The commentaries written about the Word do not all agree. Often they come into collision with one another. God does not ask us to be guided by them, but by His Word. All can search the Scriptures for themselves. And they may know that the teaching of this precious Book is unchangeable. The opinions of human beings differ, but the Bible always says the same thing. The Word of God is from everlasting to everlasting.

God did not leave His Word to be handed down from generation to generation by oral transmission and traditional unfolding. Had He done this, the Word would gradually have been added to by man. Let us thank God for His written Word.

The Bible is the key that unlocks the mysteries which it is essential for human beings to understand in order to gain eternal life. The Bible is its own expositor. Its bright beams are to shine into all parts of the world, that sin may be revealed. The Bible is a chart, pointing out the waymarks of truth. Those who are acquainted with this chart will be enabled to tread with certainty the path of duty, wherever they may be called to go.1

The Unifying Power of the Bible

Christ and His Word are in perfect harmony. Received and obeyed, they open a sure path for the feet of all who are willing to walk in the light as Christ is in the light. If the people of God would appreciate His Word, we should have a heaven in the church here below. Christians would be eager, hungry, to search the Word. They would be anxious for time to compare scripture with scripture, and to meditate upon the Word. They would be more eager for the light of the Word than for the morning paper, magazines, or novels. Their greatest desire would be to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of God. And as a result, their lives would be conformed to the principles and promises of the Word. Its instruction would be to them as the leaves of the tree of life. It would be to them a well of water, springing up unto everlasting life. Refreshing showers of grace would refresh and revive the soul, causing them to forget all toil and weariness. They would be strengthened and encouraged by the words of inspiration. . . .

The Bible, and the Bible alone, can produce this good result. It is the wisdom of God and the power of God, and it works with power in the receptive heart. O what heights we might reach if we would conform our wills to the will of God. It is the power of God that we need, wherever we are. The frivolity that cumbers the church makes it weak and indifferent.

The whole Bible is a revelation of the glory of God in
Christ. Received, believed, obeyed, it is the great instrumentality in the transformation of character. And it is the only sure means of intellectual culture.2

**Studying Together in Unity**

How shall we search the Scriptures? Shall we drive our stakes of doctrine one after another, and then try to make all Scripture meet our established opinions, or shall we take our ideas and views to the Scriptures, and measure our theories on every side by the Scriptures of truth? Many who read and even teach the Bible, do not comprehend the precious truth they are teaching or studying. Men entertain errors, when the truth is clearly marked out, and if they would but bring their doctrines to the Word of God, and not read the Word of God in the light of their doctrines, to prove their ideas right, they would not walk in darkness and blindness, or cherish error. . . .

Those who sincerely desire truth will not be reluctant to lay open their positions for investigation and criticism, and will not be annoyed if their opinions and ideas are crossed. This was the spirit cherished among us forty years ago. We would come together burdened in soul, praying that we might be one in faith and doctrine; for we knew that Christ is not divided. One point at a time was made the subject of investigation.

Solemnity characterized these councils of investigation. The Scriptures were opened with a sense of awe. Often we fasted, that we might be better fitted to understand the truth. After earnest prayer, if any point was not understood, it was discussed, and each one expressed his opinion freely; then we would again bow in prayer, and earnest supplications went up to heaven that God would help us to see eye to eye, that we might be one, as Christ and the Father are one. . . . We did not generally study together more than four hours at a time, yet sometimes the entire night was spent in solemn investigation of the Scriptures, that we might understand the truth for our time. On some occasions the Spirit of God would come upon me, and difficult portions were made clear through God's appointed way, and then there was perfect harmony. We were all of one mind and one Spirit.

We sought most earnestly that the Scriptures should not be wrested to suit any man's opinions. We tried to make our differences as slight as possible by not dwelling on points that were of minor importance, upon which there were varying opinions. But the burden of every soul was to bring about a condition among the brethren which would answer the prayer of Christ that His disciples might be one as He and the Father are one. . . .

In those days God wrought for us, and the truth was precious to our souls. It is necessary that our unity today be of a character that will bear the test of trial. We are in the school of the Master here, that we may be
trained for the school above. We must learn to bear disappointment in a Christlike manner, and the lesson taught by this will be of great importance to us.

We have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn. God and heaven alone are infallible. Those who think that they will never have to give up a cherished view, never have occasion to change an opinion, will be disappointed. As long as we hold to our own ideas and opinions with determined persistency, we cannot have the unity for which Christ prayed.

The Bible should never be studied without prayer. The Holy Spirit alone can cause us to feel the importance of those things easy to be understood, or prevent us from wrestling truths difficult of comprehension. It is the office of heavenly angels to prepare the heart to so comprehend God's Word that we shall be charmed with its beauty, admonished by its warnings, or animated and strengthened by its promises.

We should make the psalmist's petition our own: “Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.” Temptations often appear irresistible because, through neglect of prayer and the study of the Bible, the tempted one cannot readily remember God's promises and meet Satan with the Scripture weapons. But angels are round about those who are willing to be taught in divine things; and in the time of great necessity, they will bring to their remembrance the very truths which are needed. Thus “when the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him.”

United in Service to Others

The understanding of the Bible is the only means by which we can hope to sow the seeds of truth in the hearts of others . . . By the ministration of the Word in private families and in the church, truth is to be made known.

This is the Lord's appointed agency, by which His dealings are to be kept fresh from generation to generation. Much should be made of the ministration of the Word. When the services of the Lord's house are looked upon as the instrumentality through which the Holy Spirit operates by the Word, a power higher than human power works, and the services are made of extraordinary power, not because of the great efficiency of the speaker, but because of the might and power of God.

It will not do merely to read God's Word; for the truth it contains is like treasure hid in a field; it does not lie upon the surface, and only the earnest, persevering searcher is rewarded by finding the jewels of priceless worth—the inexhaustible riches of Christ Jesus. Never, till I made a business of searching the Bible, did I know what treasures it contains.

Few realize what they lose by not searching the Scriptures . . . “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” The experience you gain by a study of God's Word will enable you to be a help to others. As you appropriate the precious promises it contains, you will find help and assurance. Your light will shine brighter and brighter unto the perfect day; for you will know Him whose going forth is prepared as the morning. The precious Saviour watches over each one of His little flock . . .

He gave His own precious life that you might not perish; and each one should bear in mind that his life is given him, not to be lightly esteemed, but to be used in God's service. A life of faithful service to God is the only happy life. Living for Him, we may enjoy a sweet sense of peace and assurance.

Those who sincerely desire truth will not be reluctant to lay open their positions for investigation and criticism, and will not be annoyed if their opinions and ideas are crossed.

QUESTIONS FOR SHARING

1. How open should we be to new ideas of truth? Why am I sometimes resistant to correction or to new concepts?
2. How does the reading describe the approach to Bible study among the Adventist pioneers? Do you sense the same eagerness for Bible study now? If not, how do you explain the difference? What might change the situation?
3. How would you list the benefits that you've experienced from personal Bible study?

Ellen G. White was one of the pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Her work continues to be a prophetic voice among Adventists.
BY CHARLES MILLS

A Note to Parents and Teachers

Fellowship is a big word for a child to understand. Yet fellowship binds the members of God's church together in these last days.

As the Second Coming approaches, your local church must become more than a place for social interaction and spiritual nurture. It must transform itself into a fortress of love, protecting all inside from Satan's unrelenting attacks. In the safety of fellowship God's children will find comfort, compassion, and calm reassurance as earth's history grinds to its inevitable conclusion.

These readings attempt to emphasize that important concept in a way that's entertaining, instructional, and meaningful for the young. Here are a few activities you and your children might choose to enjoy this week.

A. Form a Fellowship Club made up of your children and a few friends. Meet with them each morning or evening, and read aloud the Week of Prayer reading for that day.

B. Create Fellowship Cards with Bible promises on them to give friends and neighbors. Invite the children to make them attractive with colorful drawings.

C. Have your children start and maintain a My Fellowship Journal in which they record the good things others do for them and the good things they do for others. Explain that true fellowship is rooted in action. It requires that we do, say, and pray something for another person.

FIRST SABBATH

Family Reunion

Memory Gem

"Now we tell you what we have seen and heard because we want you to have fellowship with us" (1 John 1:3, ICB).

Visual Aid

Find an old family photo album, and look at the pictures together. Choose pictures of family groups and out-of-town relatives. Ask, "What do you like most about Uncle (name) or Aunt (name)? What stories does Grandfather or Grandmother like to tell? What happened right before or right after this picture was taken?"

Story

I have a picture tucked away in one of my photo albums that's important to me. Taken about six years ago, it shows my mother and her three sisters sitting on a couch. Somebody must have told a joke, because they're all laughing.

I especially like my mother's face because it looks so happy and content, even with the ugly wig she had to wear to hide the results of taking a strong medicine.

Today, three of those four laughing people have gone to their graves, and we wait for Jesus to return and wake them up. But I still see their smiles and remember their laughter whenever I look at that picture. We had been enjoying a
family reunion with all our relatives there.

The most fun we had—other than eating way too much food—was sharing the stories and adventures we’d experienced since our previous time together. We played games, sang songs, took pictures, and enjoyed being related to one another.

All too soon the day finished, and we returned to our homes. “Be sure to write,” we said. “Keep in touch. We’ll be praying for you.” How quiet and lonely the house seemed after the last car drove away.

One day in Jerusalem a bunch of people got together to talk about Jesus. They spoke of how He had healed the sick and encouraged the sad. They laughed at the funny things He’d done and how He ran around playing hide-and-seek with children. They spoke of the important lessons He had taught.

Then the room grew quiet as someone remembered the terrible cross and that first lonely Sabbath without Him. I imagine some sniffled and dabbed eyes as they relived that event.

Then I imagine someone saying, “Listen to us. We’re sitting around remembering the bad days, when we should be talking about the fact that Jesus isn’t in the tomb anymore!”

Shouts echoed around the room as faces that moments before had been sad and crying now smiled and laughed with excited joy. “He’s alive! He’s Alive!” they repeated again and again.

They were so glad that Jesus wasn’t dead anymore that they decided to start a church to which they could come and talk about Him every week. Not only that, but they wanted to share His story with anyone who would listen. They wanted the whole world to know about the beautiful life, tragic death, and glorious resurrection of God’s Son. And so they started a church.

Do you know what? You attend that church every Sabbath. You sit with your friends and hear stories and sing songs and enjoy Bible readings about Jesus, who walked this earth and gave His life to save everyone.

Because you love Christ and choose to spend time with Him each week, you, like those people in Jerusalem, can say to everyone you meet, “Now we tell you what we have seen and heard because we want you to have fellowship with us” (1 John 1:3, ICB).

You can enjoy your special church family reunion every Sabbath until Jesus comes.

**Application**

If there’s someone in your church family who can’t attend church because of sickness or lack of transportation, ask your parents for help. Maybe you can pick him or her up on your way or stop by for a visit on your way home. Drop off a cassette of the sermon. Include a little note saying how much you like having them in your family.

**Discussion**

1. What do you like best about worshiping God?
2. How does having that weekly family reunion make you feel closer to Jesus?
3. How would you make your church experience more enjoyable?

**Activity**

Prepare a special song or poem about the fun you have at church, and ask your pastor or Sabbath school teacher if you could share it with the congregation or class.

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**SUNDAY**

**God With Skin On**

**Memory Gem**

“If we live in the light, we share fellowship with each other” (1 John 1:7, ICB).

**Visual Aid**

Gather some cultural artifacts specific to a certain people or race (Native American leatherscraft or wall hangings; African pottery or carvings; German clocks or figurines; Japanese silk kimonos or temple bells; South American blankets or wooden statuettes; etc.). Explain that every culture in the world enjoys a unique way of expressing itself artistically.

Look around your home or Sabbath school room. Ask, “How do we express ourselves artistically? What are the meanings of our pictures, drawings, carvings, and wall hangings?”

Then ask, “As Seventh-day Adventist Christians, how can we, through our lives, show others how much we love Jesus?”

**Story**

Do you know what a doctrine is? If you take your pencil, hold it out in front of you at arm’s length, and then let go of it, what will your pencil do? Right! It will drop to the ground. Clunk. Have you ever tried to read a book underwater? No! Why? Oh, yeah, you won’t be able to breathe. Besides, the pages would get limp and tear apart.

Let’s say you decide to stop eating for a year. No peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches, no tomato soup, no strawberry shortcake. Nothing. Would that be a good idea? Why? Oh, your body needs food to stay alive!

The force of gravity, the body’s constant need for oxygen, and the importance of food are like doctrines. You believe in them with all your heart. That’s why you don’t jump out of airplanes without a parachute, swim underwater without an air supply, or skip a thousand meals in a row.

Your doctrines are also like the beautiful paintings, drawings, pottery, or other artwork of a culture. They reveal aspects of the beauty of Jesus, and they enrich our lives. People can look at you and say, “Hey, you’re a
Christian, aren’t you? I can tell by the way you talk and act and smile.”

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is made up of people who believe the same doctrines. That’s why each Saturday, while others in the neighborhood go shopping or mow their lawns, you and your family hop in the car and drive to church. That’s why when someone dies, we can all say, “Won’t it be wonderful to see that person again in heaven?” That’s why when the world becomes a scary place to live, we can look at one another and smile, knowing that soon Jesus will come and end the trouble and pain.

Late one night a little boy became frightened by a thunderstorm. Crash, bang, boom, the storm shouted. Lightning flashed and thunder rolled. Finally the boy got up and ran to find his father. “Daddy, Daddy,” he cried. “I’m scared.”

“Son,” the father responded, “God loves you, and He’ll take care of you.”

“I know God loves me,” the boy agreed between sobs, “but right now I want somebody who has skin on.”

What a wonderful illustration of the Seventh-day Adventist Church—your church. When the people in a church believe and obey the beautiful laws and doctrines outlined in the Bible, their church becomes like God with skin on. Anyone who drops by on a Sabbath morning will receive a better understanding of Jesus just by fellowshipping with people like you.

Application
Would you like to know more about what Seventh-day Adventists believe? Ask your church pastor, Sabbath school teacher, or Christian caregiver to explain to you the beautiful doctrines of your church. You’ll learn interesting stuff about baptism, angels, the Bible, and heaven. Enjoy!

Discussion
1. What do you like best about being a Seventh-day Adventist?
2. If someone said to you, “I don’t believe in God,” what would you say?
3. What’s the best way to learn about Jesus?

Activity
Clip newspaper or magazine pictures that illustrate what happens when people don’t believe in or obey God. Paste them on a poster board, and write these words across the top: “I Want to Show These People God’s Love.” Then at the bottom, draw yourself holding a Bible.

MONDAY
Team Effort

Memory Gem
“The apostles were doing many miracles and signs. And everyone felt great respect for God. All the believers stayed together” (Acts 2:43, 44, ICB).

Visual Aid
Hold up a picture of a large suspension bridge (such as the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco). Have the children identify the different parts (roadway, support wires, towers, shore anchors, suspension spans, guardrails).

Suggest that for something to work properly, all the many parts must work together.

Story
Many years ago two friends graduated from a Chicago law school. Overton earned the highest marks of all the students in the school even though he was blind. When he stood up to receive his diploma, everyone cheered. But he lifted his hands for silence. “I must give half the credit for my achievement to my good friend Kaspryzak,” he announced.

Heads nodded in understanding. Everyone knew why Overton had made that announcement. The two students met the day school began. Kaspryzak gladly took up the task of leading Overton around the campus, taking him to classes, to the cafeteria, and to the library, where he’d read the assignments aloud for his blind buddy.

But wherever they went, Overton carried their books because Kaspryzak had no arms. They soon figured out how to do everything together, each making up for the other’s lack. Overton acted as Kaspryzak’s arms. Kaspryzak acted as Overton’s eyes. By working side by side, they earned their law degrees, and they excelled in their studies.

Maybe you have a friend who helps you be the best you can be too.

Remember that little church in Jerusalem we talked about? Well, those people learned the same lesson that Overton and Kaspryzak learned. By working together, they could do much more than if they worked alone.
“I can’t preach very well,” one said, “but I’m good at telling stories to children.”

“Well, I can preach,” another chimed in, “but whenever I try to tell stories to children, they don’t pay any attention.”

“Great,” yet another announced. “While you two preach and tell stories, I’ll prepare the Sabbath meal.”

“That works out perfectly,” another said, “because when I try to cook food, our dog leaves the house and doesn’t come back for a week. I’d better take up the offering and lead the singing.”

And so it went, each person finding something important to do.

Jesus said, “Go and make followers of all people in the world. . . . Teach them to obey everything that I have told you” (Matt. 28:19, 20, ICB).

Before any church or group of people can do that, they’ve got to get organized.

Guess what? You have a part to play in accomplishing the mission of God’s church today. Yes, you! You’re unique. You’ve got a combination of talents that no one else has. It’s your job to discover how you can best serve Jesus in His church. So you’d better get busy!

**Application**

Make a list of your special talents. Are you friendly? Can you sing or play an instrument? Can you paint a picture? Do people say you’re a great storyteller? Are you handy around the kitchen? Once you’ve made your list, tell your church pastor or Sabbath school teacher, “I want to be an active member of this church. Here’s what I can do to help accomplish the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.”

**Discussion**

1. When you try hard to do something, how do you feel when you get it done?
2. How is your church like your family?
3. What do you think is more important to Jesus, your talents or your desire to be of service to others?
4. Which do you think is more important to the people you serve?

**Activity**

 Invite a couple friends to join you to develop one new talent a month for the next three months. If you like music, try learning a new instrument. Enjoy telling stories? Learn a fresh exciting one from your collection of *Primary Treasure* or *Guide* magazines. Like arts and crafts? Tackle a new craft you’ve never done before.

**TUESDAY**

**All in the Family**

**Story**

When I was a little boy, my family and I lived in the Philippines. As a missionary my father traveled around the many islands there helping churches care for the tithes and offerings dropped in collection plates each Sabbath.

I liked the Philippines. They had trees to climb, mud puddles to splash in, monkeys to watch, and all kinds of colorful sights to see.

Each Friday after sundown worship my mother would say, “Come, Charlie. Let’s get ready for Sabbath school.”

While most kids simply showed up on Sabbath morning to enjoy the songs and activities, I helped my mom prepare the night before. We cut out felts illustrating Bible stories, painted pictures of birds and butterflies, glued borders on card-

**Memory Gem**

“Make me very happy by having the same thoughts, sharing the same love, and having one mind and purpose” (Phil. 2:2, ICB).

**Visual Aid**

Gather individual pictures of your extended family. Ask the children to examine them carefully, looking for similarities between you and those related to you.

Tell them that even though you don’t look like some of the people in the pictures, you are related to them.

The next day at church, people would arrive eager to enjoy the program my mother had prepared.

The kindergarten/primary Sabbath school room filled to overflowing, sometimes with as many adults as children! Every week we sang songs, listened to stories, put money in the offering plate, read verses from the Bible, and prayed.
When I glanced at my mom, I saw her looking at all those people like she looked at me—with a big smile on her face and a bright gleam in her eyes. “We're a family,” she'd tell the crowded room. “We're all brothers and sisters in the family of God.”

I didn't understand what she meant. Those people didn't look like me. While my skin was almost white, theirs was a beautiful brown. Our faces, our eyes, even the way we talked, were different. How could they be my brothers and sisters?

Many years later I stood before another group of people, this time in the country of Japan. Now I was the missionary. I suddenly understood what my mom had meant. The men and women in my English language class weren't just my students. They were my family. I cared about them just like I cared about Bill, Bob, and Susie—my brothers and sister back in America. I felt a genuine love for them, exactly like I felt for my uncles and aunts and grandparents. Mom was right! When you love God, everyone is a member of your family.

That's when I knew that I'd never have to feel lonely or afraid. I could walk up to a member of my spiritual family and say, “Excuse me. I'm your brother. You see, we're all part of the family of God.” The church is indeed a family. Skin color? Doesn't matter.

Language? Who cares! The house you live in? Not important. We're all related in love. We all have the same heavenly Father. We're family!

Application

For fun, start calling your friends “brother” and “sister.” Instead of saying, “Hey, Tasha, you want to play video games with me?” say, “Hey, Sister Tasha, you want to play video games with me?” Tasha will probably say, “What did you call me?” Then you can explain about that beautiful, exciting, love-filled heavenly family to which we all belong.

Discussion

1. What do you enjoy most about being in a family?
2. When a family member gets hurt or sick, what can you do to help them get better?
3. How does it make you feel to know that God is your heavenly Father?

Activity

Gather some magazines, and create a new family tree. Find pictures of people who don't look anything like you, and paste them on a tree that you've drawn. Include a picture of you, too. Write across the top, “The Beautiful Family of God.”

**WEDNESDAY**

**Family of Tears**

**Memory Gem**

“God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5, ICB).

**Visual Aid**

Show a collection of medical aid equipment, such as a wheelchair, a pair of crutches, bandages, medicine bottles, thermometer, etc. Place a bandage on a child. Let someone sit in the wheelchair or use the crutches. Demonstrate how each item is used.

Ask, “Do Christians need these sometimes? What should we do when a member of our church family gets hurt or sick?”

**Story**

It was the worst night we had ever spent. No one slept. No one ate. We just held one another's hands, prayed hard, and waited.

It began earlier that day, when my nephew's little son Andrew ate and played at a fast-food restaurant. Suddenly he fell and hit his head. He cried some, but no one thought much about it until later when he threw up. Then he wanted to sleep.

What Andrew's mom and dad didn't know was that when he fell, Andrew hit his head hard right behind one of his ears, and his brain began to swell.

That night an emergency medical team took Andrew to the hospital, where doctors in white gowns and masks, holding sharp stainless-steel instruments and surrounded by flashing, beeping machines, began desperately trying to save his life. My wife and I rushed to the hospital, and what we saw made us cry. Our precious little Andrew was dying.

That's why we spent the night without sleeping or eating, just holding on to one another and praying for the doctors and nurses working on Andrew. Andrew's grandmother,
uncles, and aunts came from far away to join us. We waited as time and time again they rushed our little boy to the operating room.

With the first light of day came hope, and Andrew lived.

Today, Andrew is a bright, happy little boy who likes to tell silly jokes and take part in Adventurer Club activities. He may wonder why, whenever my wife or I see him, we give him an extra tight hug. He doesn’t remember that night, but we do. Maybe we’re just so glad that he likes to tell silly jokes and take part in Adventurer Club activities. Maybe we’re just so thankful that God heard our prayers.

Being a member of a family isn’t all fun and games. Sometimes there are tears. But that’s exactly why God created the idea of family on this earth. He knew there’d be moments of sorrow, fear, and dread. He put together moms and dads, aunts and uncles, cousins and grandparents, to help us face the uncertainties that are part of living in a sinful world.

If you ask Andrew what a family is, he would probably say, “That’s who takes care of me where I live.” Andrew is part of a big church family, too, made up of people who are willing to encourage one another during dark, stormy nights. Someday he’ll understand that loving families often mingle laughter with tears.

Application
Ask your caregiver to take you for a visit to a hospital. Head for the children’s ward, and share some small gifts or toys with the boys and girls who must stay there. Tell them that you’ll be praying for them. Remind each one that they are part of a big family—the family of God.

Discussion
1. Did Jesus ever cry for His earthly family? Find the story behind His tears.
2. Did you ever have a sick relative in the hospital? What was it like to visit him or her?

3. How do you feel when someone you love gets hurt?

Activity
Watch your local newspaper for reports of sick or injured children. Write them an encouraging letter, and ask your caregiver to mail it to the hospital where they are staying.

THURSDAY
The Gift of Joy

Memory Gem
“They will have joy and gladness. All sadness and sorrow will be gone far away” (Isa. 51:11, ICB).

Visual Aid
Prepare a collection of pictures, some showing sad events (funeral, sickness, violence, etc.) and others showing happy events (wedding, picnic, playing, camping, Christmas, etc.). Ask, “Is this a joyful event or a sad event?” Then ask, “What makes this event joyful [or sad]?”

Story
When I was a little boy, I wanted a Lionel train set more than anything else in the world. Whenever I’d visit my favorite toy store, I’d head straight to the train display and watch the big black locomotive puff smoke and pull lines of colorful cars around the shiny metal tracks. It was awesome!

One December I took my father by the hand and pulled him up to the display. “Look,” I said. “That’s what I want for Christmas!”

Dad admired the handsome train and listened to it chug, chug, chug around the track. Then he bent low and examined the price tag posted at the corner of the display. I heard him whistle softly to himself before walking away.

I didn’t sleep much that Christmas Eve. I kept thinking about that Lionel train and its cool collection of boxcars and flatbeds, the coal tender, and the red caboose. I hoped that my set would come with a tunnel, too.

Christmas morning dawned bright and cold. As instructed by my dad, I stayed in my room until he called me. When he did, I rushed down the stairs. There, under the brightly lit tree, was a big black locomotive pulling a line of cars around a shiny track.

“Hooray!” I shouted as I ran across the living room rug and dropped to my knees beside my new toy. But when I examined the locomotive, I noticed it wasn’t as beautiful as the one I’d seen in the store. The cars weren’t as colorful. The caboose, less detailed. Then it hit me. This wasn’t a Lionel.

Dad joined me by the tracks. “Do you like it, Charlie?” he asked. “It’s not the one you wanted, because Lionel trains are expensive. With you and your sister in church school and your two brothers away at college, we don’t have a lot of money to spend. I think you’ll have a great time playing with..."
this one, though. See? It's even got some plastic logs on the flatcar!"

I was disappointed. Terribly disappointed. But then I thought about what Dad had just said. While this train wasn't the one I wanted, it was all he could afford. Dad gave me the very best he could under the circumstances. I knew that by giving me this train, he'd have to do without something he wanted. He'd sacrificed for me because he loved me.

Turning, I looked up into Dad's smiling, hopeful face. "It’s wonderful," I said. "It’s the best train set in the whole world."

Long ago Jesus sacrificed everything for us. He died on a cruel cross so that we could live forever with Him. Each week we have the privilege of coming to church to celebrate that wonderful gift. Even though we live in a painful, sad, imperfect world, someday that will change. That’s the joy Christians share. That’s the joy that makes us a family.

Why not close your eyes right now and thank your heavenly Father for His amazing gift.

**Application**

Whenever a sad thought pops into your mind, stop and ask yourself, "What joyful thing can I think about?" Then replace the sad thought with a joyful one.

**Discussion**

1. Why does Jesus want you to think joyful thoughts?
2. If you could sit down and talk with Jesus, what would you say to Him?
3. What two stories from the life of Christ show that He was a happy person?

**Activity**

Make a "Joyful" list, writing down the things for which you're most thankful. Draw pictures if you want. Then place this list where you'll see it every day.

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**FRIDAY**

**The Beauty of Smelly Feet**

**Memory Gem**

"So be humble under God’s powerful hand. Then he will lift you up when the right time comes" (1 Peter 5:6, ICB).

**Visual Aid**

Show a bird’s nest, ant colony, spiderweb, or some other example of the creative work of one of God’s creatures. Talk about the hard work and ingenuity that went into the construction. Ask, "Could you do this?"

Then explain that humans can do great things, but we shouldn’t be too proud of our accomplishments, because the smallest of God’s creatures are capable of amazing feats.

**Story**

You may have noticed now and then that your church family does something unusual. When you walk into the sanctuary, instead of seeing the pastor up front ready to preach a sermon, you notice a table covered by a large white cloth.

After everyone gets seated, the pastor says a few words, and then most people get up and leave. Is church over? Nope. Everyone’s gone off to get his or her feet washed.

Feet washed? At church? That’s right. Why do they do this? And what’s under that big white cloth? Let’s find out!

First, we follow the adults out of the sanctuary to smaller rooms, where we discover large basins of water. Then, amid smiles and hugs, the adults start washing each other’s feet. Do their feet need washing? Not really. They’re doing this to remember a time when 12 people with dirty feet met together and Jesus did something amazing.

Before the disciples met in an upper room for what would be their last meal with Jesus before His death, they had spent the day walking on the dusty paths and crowded streets of Jerusalem. Their feet got covered with dust and mud and lots of yucky stuff left behind by passing animals. Those smelly feet needed a good scrubbing. But as they filed into the room no one in the group offered to do what needed to be done. Servants usually washed feet, and they didn’t have enough money to hire one.

So there they sat with their stinky feet, waiting. Then Jesus jumped up, grabbed a towel and basin of water, and got busy. He scrubbed clean every toe, heel, and ankle. Jesus didn’t need a servant. Jesus was a servant.

When the adults in your church wash each other’s feet, they’re saying, “I want to be like Jesus. So I’ll wash your feet!”

After everyone returns to the sanctuary, someone removes the white cloth from the table, revealing shiny containers filled with little crackers and tiny glasses of grape juice. “Not much of a meal,” you say to yourself. “I hope they have more food at the potluck!”

This isn’t a meal. It’s a remembrance of a meal—the one that Jesus and His disciples enjoyed after everyone got their feet washed. Knowing He was about to be crucified, Jesus told His disciples, “This grape juice is like My blood that’s going to be spilled for you. This bread is like My body that will be broken on the cross.”

Your church family listens to Christ’s words every time they celebrate the Lord’s Supper. When they eat the little pieces of bread, they remember Jesus’ sacrifice. When they drink the grape juice, they remember Jesus’ blood.

This brings a great feeling of togetherness among church members. They enjoy the fellowship of the Lord's
Supper, and so can you. The next time you help someone or enjoy a potluck or drink a glass of juice, remember Jesus and His sacrifice. He became a servant, spilled His blood, and allowed angry people to break His body for you.

Application
When you do something kind for someone, don’t think, I did something kind. Instead, think, I did what Jesus would do.

Discussion
1. What are some ways you can be a servant?
2. Has anyone been a servant for you lately?
3. When you think of Jesus, what picture pops into your mind?

Activity
Keep track of all the good things your parents or friends do for you during the next seven days. Write them down; then let everyone know that you’re thankful for their kindness.

SECOND SABBATH
Church Under Construction

Memory Gem
“May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor. 13:14, NIV).

Visual Aid
Open a Lego set with lots of colorful pieces and parts. Have everyone in your group gather material to make their own car. Don’t let participants see the work of the other(s). When everyone is finished, compare the results, noticing the many differences in design.

Story
Let’s pretend that you and a few of your friends are highly trained college-educated engineers. Since you’re talented and successful, you decide to start a business called Kid Power Design Company.

You print business cards, buy a bunch of computers, rent the entire floor of an office building, install phone lines, and hire top-notch secretaries. Then you hang up your company sign and wait for your first customer.

Knock, knock. Sure enough, a man appears with a request. “I’ll pay you $10 million to build a brand-new car for me. It has to be the fastest, safest, most beautiful car ever made.”

“Yes, sir!” you and the others respond. “We’ll start work right away.”

Everyone gathers in your big conference room to begin work. You, being the president, hand out assignments. “Bill, you design the wheels and axles. Tom, you create a smooth-running engine with lots of pep. Sally, you’re in charge of the transmission. Elizabeth, you construct the interior while Sam and Beth make the exterior body shell. Let’s get busy!”

Off everyone goes to his or her office. Computers hum, printers print, pencils scratch, and calculators calculate. Each person does his or her best.

After months of hard work they all come together and assemble the completed parts. Bill brings in his wheels and axles. Tom lugs in the shiny new engine. Sally shows up with her expertly crafted transmission. Elizabeth appears with the interior, while Sam and Beth wheel in their completed body shell. Each part is perfect, beautiful. Every member of the design team has done a tremendous job.

“Now, let’s put it together!” you shout with joy. “I can hardly wait to see our beautiful car.”

That’s when everyone notices a problem. While they made each part of the car perfect in design, nothing fits with anything else. Tom’s engine and Sally’s transmission don’t bolt together. Bill’s wheels and axles won’t fit under Sam and Beth’s body shell. And Elizabeth’s stunning interior isn’t the right size to rest under the gently curving roof. The project is a disaster. When the client sees the collection of mismatching parts, he withdraws his order.

What happened? The answer is simple. When we build something, everyone must have the same detailed plan.

Then when we bring the various parts together for final assembly, everything will fit properly.

That’s not only the correct way to build a car; it’s also the best way to build a church family. When every man, woman, and child uses the Bible as their guide, their talents can be brought together to do amazing things for God. Without the Bible, church is a disaster!

Want to help prepare the world for Jesus’ return? Join the pastor, church leaders, Sabbath school leaders, and every other member of your church to carefully study God’s Word. Then get to work preparing your friends and neighbors to meet Jesus.

Application
Grab an easy-to-read translation of the Bible (such as the International Children’s Bible [Word Publishing]), and select a few verses to enjoy. Tomorrow, select a few more. Your parents or pastor can help you find some really fun stories, too.

Discussion
1. What would happen if a group of people tried to prepare a meal without discussing it first?
2. Who created the plans for your body?
3. What does the Creator know about you that no one else knows?

Activity
When you read a verse in your Bible that you especially like, write it down on a slip of paper, and share it with a friend. Don’t forget to draw an illustration to go with it.

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The world in which we live is fragmented by ethnic and racial prejudice, crime and murder, abuse of women and children, religious intolerance, and even oppressive governments. The fissures run deep in society in general and in the hearts of those who suffer the consequences of that fragmentation. In the midst of a convoluted world of dissension and strife we find the Adventist movement standing tall, with a message of unity in fellowship with God through Christ and with one another. Preserving that fundamental unity in a world church that is rapidly growing is a miracle of the Spirit.

But God wants to use the leaders of the church and each church member in nurturing that unity. Under the guidance of the Spirit we should create an environment in our local churches and in all our institutions that will foster that fellowship. This unity includes visible structures, but it is at heart—and fundamentally—of a spiritual nature. It is based on a commitment to “one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:4-6, NIV).

It is time for all of us to emphasize that which holds us together as a people, as the end-time remnant people of God. The readings for this Week of Prayer identify some of those elements: We are united in the fellowship created by the cross—by the death and resurrection of Christ and by the hope of His return in glory. Our common faith and mission belong to the center of our fellowship constituting us into a global family. Our joy in Christ, together with our trials, binds us together around the world. This fellowship expresses itself during worship, particularly in the rite of humility and the Lord's Supper, and is nurtured through the study of the Bible.

May God bless and guide each one of you as you seek to strengthen the unity of the church through fellowship with Christ. Finally, “if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, . . . make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose” (Phil. 2:1, 2, NIV).