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One of the great eighteenth-to nineteenth-century thinkers, Pierre Laplace, wrote a book about the motion of the planets. He called it *Celestial Mechanics*, and he presented a copy of the book, in person, to Emperor Napoleon. Someone had told Napoleon beforehand that the book never mentioned God. The emperor took the book and said, “Mr. Laplace, they tell me you have written this large book on the system of the universe, and have never even mentioned its Creator.” Laplace, unflinchingly, responded, “I have no need of that hypothesis.”

This story is a metaphor for what’s been known as “the modern era,” an era in which logic, reason, and science have formed the foundation of all truth. According to this view, all reality can be reduced to formulas, to laws, and to scientific predictions. If it can’t be explained through logic, reason, and science, it isn’t real.

Experience never should take away from the importance of correct biblical teaching.

In recent years there’s been a backlash against this thinking. People don’t believe, and rightly so, that all reality can be explained in cold rationality alone. There’s something about us that

no formula, no test tube, and no scientific law ever could capture.

This backlash has spilled over into all realms of life, including religion; however, as with most reactions, it has in some cases gone too far, even to the point of pushing aside or ignoring the concept of doctrinal truth. What’s important, we’re told, isn’t teachings or doctrine but experience. What does your faith do for you now—that’s what matters. Instead of saying, “Here are compelling reasons to believe in Jesus Christ and His promise of salvation,” the trend (again, a backlash) is to say, “Our community of faith invites you to join us in our venture of trust and commitment.”

Now, this doesn’t have to be all bad. Did not Jesus say that His truth would have concrete and practical results in our lives (*John 8:32*)? Of

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course. Truth is not just knowledge of doctrines and texts but something that influences the believer on a personal level. Truth affects the spiritual life and impacts how a person will relate to the challenges of daily living. There is a practical, life-changing aspect of our religion that never should be denied or denigrated. At the same time, the role of experience never should take away from the importance of correct biblical teachings.

This quarter we want to look at both aspects of our faith: doctrine and experience. In our study during this quarter we will focus on 13 essential themes of the Christian faith, 13 essential teachings. Each week's lesson will attempt to maintain a careful balance between a correct biblical understanding of these various elements of our faith and how they impact our daily experience. It's our hope that at the end of the quarter you not only will understand these themes better but also have been enriched as far as your Christian experience is concerned. Each lesson is not just about truth but about "the truth as it is in Jesus."

After all, He is the One who is the Alpha and Omega of our faith. There may be 13 different themes, but they will have one focus: the One in whom "we live, and move, and have our being" (*Acts 17:28*).

Reinder Bruinsma, born in the Netherlands, has served in various offices in his long career in the church. Bruinsma is the author of almost twenty books, some of which have been translated into a number of languages, and was president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Netherlands when he wrote this Bible study guide.

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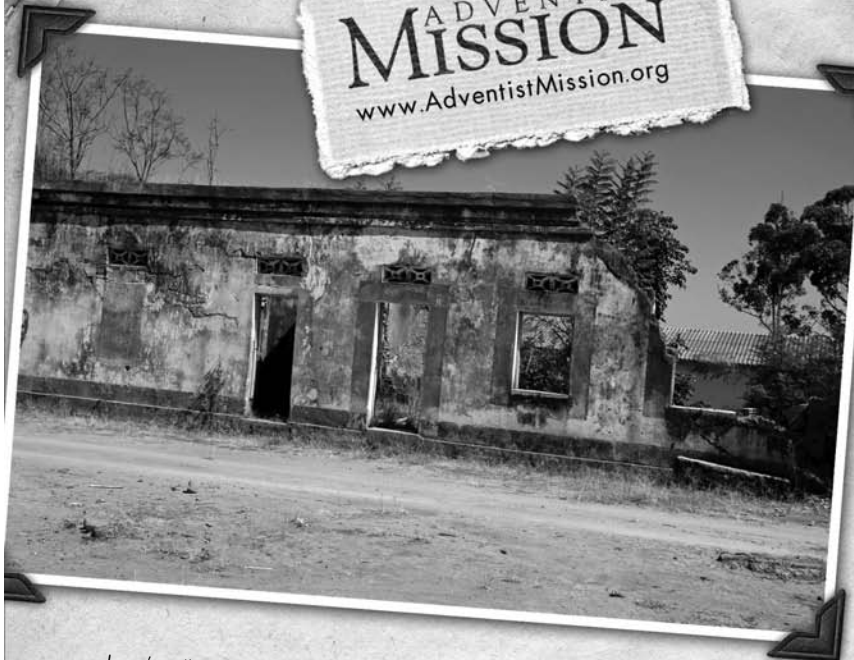
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ADVENTIST MISSION

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Imagine living in a war zone. Imagine a child walking to school and finding the school in ruins—burned, pillaged, deserted. Imagine knowing that his only hope for an education lies in the ashes under his feet.

The children of Angola know the feeling. For 35 years their country was wracked by civil war, war that left lives and buildings in ruins. But in 2002 the war ended. The people now live in freedom. But many of the Adventist schools still lie in ruins. Hope for an education must wait a while longer.

I want to help these children get the education they deserve. I want to see them learning to read and write and praise God. I'm glad that this quarter part of our Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help rebuild two Adventist primary schools and will help the Adventist university in central Angola. I've seen the face of despair. And I've seen the face of hope. For me it's personal.