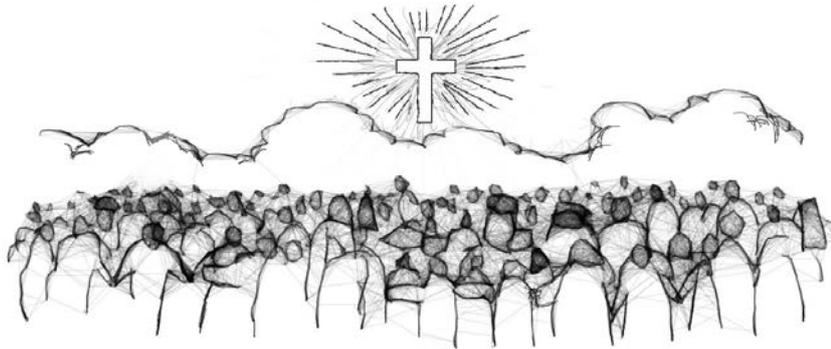


Must the Whole World Hear?



SABBATH—SEPTEMBER 19

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Acts 4:12; Psalm 87:4–6; John 10:16; Romans 2:12–16; John 14:6; Romans 1:18.

MEMORY VERSE: “May God receive glory [praise and honor]. He is able to strengthen your faith because of the good news I preach. It is the message about Jesus Christ. It is in keeping with the mystery that was hidden for a very long time. The mystery has now been made known through the writings of the prophets [special messengers]. The eternal God commanded that it be made known. He wanted all nations to believe and obey him. May the only wise God receive glory forever through Christ Jesus. Amen” (Romans 16:25–27, NIV).

AS WE HAVE LEARNED, THE LORD USES PEOPLE TO BRING THE MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL TO OTHERS. But throughout world history, millions of people have died without knowing the Bible plan of salvation.

Some would say that salvation is found only in the Christian church. But others believe that all religions are equal guides to God and eternal life.

In the end, the important point to remember is that Jesus has revealed to us the character (thoughts; feelings; actions) of God. And this tells us a lot about His love for all people and His desire for as many as possible to be saved. God is a God of justice. And no matter how He works it out, the shout will be heard across heaven: “ ‘King of the ages, your ways are true and fair’ ” (Revelation 15:3, NIV).

NO OTHER NAME UNDER HEAVEN (Acts 4:12)

Some Christians have the belief that only those who hear and answer positively to the Christian gospel can be saved. Such people are called “exclusivists”¹ and believe that all non-Christian religions are in stubborn rebellion (war) against God. They believe that non-Christians are outside the saving grace (mercy; forgiveness) of Jesus Christ.

Some Christians take the further step of claiming that outside their own church there is no salvation, even for other confessing Christians. For them, other churches with their different beliefs have placed themselves outside the care of God and have no chance of entering the kingdom of heaven. For example, in 1302 in his papal bull *Unam Sanctam*, Pope Boniface VIII announced “that for salvation it is necessary that every human person surrender himself or herself to the Roman Pope” (adapted). Some Protestants have taught something nearly the same in their own churches too.

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

The words of the Bible here are very clear: salvation is found only in Jesus Christ and in no other name under heaven. But it is important not to read into these words more than they say.

Imagine a man in a building that is on fire. Before being able to escape, he is overcome by smoke and faints. A firefighter finds him on the floor, grabs him, and brings him outside, where the medics take over. He is rushed to the hospital, and a few hours later he wakes up again.

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

“Among the heathen² are those who worship God unknowingly. They have never received light from gospel workers. But they will not die without being saved first. They may have not known the written law of God. But they have heard His voice speaking to them in nature, and have done the things that the law required. Their works are proof that the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they are recognized as the children of God.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 638.



**Anyone who is saved
will be saved only
through Jesus.**

DEFINITIONS

1. “exclusivists”—a group of people who shut out all others. Certain religious groups believe that only people who accept their religion will be saved. All others will be lost.
2. heathen—people who do not know God or worship God.

HOW MUCH MUST ONE KNOW? (Psalm 87:4–6)

Picking up where we left off on Sunday, we can understand that the work of Christ is the only way of salvation. But some believe that clear and full knowledge of Christ is not necessary in order for one to be saved.

This does not suggest that salvation is available apart from Christ. But God is able and willing to use the benefits of Christ's work to save whomever He wishes. Some believe that there are those who do not know Christ and have never had a chance to know the gospel. But they still feel a need for salvation and act on it. They will be saved. The quote from Ellen G. White at the end of yesterday's study certainly suggests this (think of Job and also of Melchizedek).

What light do Psalm 87:4–6; John 10:16; Acts 14:17; Acts 17:26–28; and Romans 2:12–16 give on this idea?

“God ‘will give to each person in keeping with what he has done.’ God will give eternal life to those who keep on doing good. They want glory [praise to God], honor, and life that never ends” (Romans 2:6, 7, NIV).

Paul here seems to teach that there are some outside of Christianity who receive eternal life as a result of an “obedience-unto-life” principle (law). (Compare³ this with Leviticus 18:5.) For those “gentiles” who “show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts” because “their consciences also bearing witness” (Romans 2:15, NIV), it will make a difference on Judgment Day. Such people have responded to the work of the Spirit in their hearts.

We do not know people's hearts. So, why must all of us—Christians and non-Christians alike—be careful not to judge one another's hearts or whether someone is saved or not?

DEFINITIONS

3. compare—to show how two or more things are the same or different.

UNIVERSALISM⁴ AND PLURALISM⁵

(John 14:6; Matthew 7:13, 14)

Some people teach that in the end God is going to save all humans, no matter what they believed or even how they lived. “Universalism” is the belief that all persons are so related to God that they will be saved, even if they never heard or believed the gospel. John 3:16 says: “God so loved the world.” So, in this thinking, if God loves everyone, how can anyone be lost, especially if being lost means eternal suffering in hell? How could God burn forever someone whom He loves? Then we can see how one false teaching (in this case eternal suffering) leads to another false teaching (universalism).

Related to universalism is “pluralism.” Pluralism is the belief that all religions are equally good and lead equally to God and salvation. No religion is better than any other religion. A pastor in a church in California wrote on the church Web site that his church group “does not believe that Christianity is better than other religious beliefs.”

For pluralists, the wide range of religious services, beliefs, symbols, and metaphors (word-pictures) are just surface differences. Under each of them are the same values and beliefs for all religions. Pluralists point out that most religions teach love for God and love for fellow humans and hope for a blessed future life. According to them, all faiths teach the same thing. So, they are all good paths to God. And they believe it is very rude to try to push Christian beliefs upon those who are members of non-Christian faiths.

Read John 14:6; Revelation 20:14, 15; Revelation 21:8; Daniel 12:2; John 3:18; Matthew 7:13, 14; and 2 Thessalonians 2:9, 10. What does the Bible have to say about both universalism and pluralism?

No question, neither universalism nor pluralism are acceptable in the Bible. Not everyone will be saved; and all faiths do not lead to salvation.

What answer would you give to someone who argues that Christianity’s claim to be the only true path to salvation (read John 14:6) is being too exclusive?⁶ Share your answer with your class on Sabbath.



According to the pluralists, all paths of wisdom lead to the same place.

DEFINITIONS

4. universalism—the belief in the final salvation of all souls.
5. pluralism—the belief that all religions are equally good and lead equally to God and salvation.
6. exclusive—shutting out all others from the truth.

SINNERS IN NEED OF GRACE (John 3:17)

“ ‘God did not send his Son into the world to judge the world. He sent his Son to save the world through him’ ” (John 3:17, NIV). What great hope is found in this verse for everyone? How can we accept this important truth and make it our own? How can it encourage us to reach out to others?

According to the Bible, we are all sinners (Romans 3:23), and God wishes for all to repent (turn from sin) (Acts 17:30; Acts 26:20; 2 Peter 3:9) and be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). From the Fall in Eden onward, God’s purpose has been to save humans from the eternal death that sin and rebellion (war against God’s law) have brought. What more proof do we need than the Cross to reveal God’s love for us and His desire to save us?

But the Bible is clear that God will not save those who openly rebel (war) against Him.

What powerful warning is found in Genesis 6:11–13; Romans 1:18; 2 Thessalonians 2:12; Revelation 21:8; and Revelation 22:15?



The Cross is proof of God’s love for us and desire to save us.

God loves all people. But all people are sinners in need of grace. And this grace has been given in Jesus. He has called His church to spread the good news of this grace to the world.

“The church is God’s chosen group to work for the salvation of men. It was organized for service. And its mission is to carry the gospel to the world. From the beginning it has been God’s plan that His church shall reflect the fullness of His capable love and power to the world. He has called the members of the church out of darkness into His marvelous light to show forth His glory. The church is the storehouse of the riches of the grace of Christ. In the end, the church will show the final and full truth of God’s love to the whole universe. Ephesians 3:10.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles [Teachers and Leaders]*, page 9.

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

THE MISSION CALL (1 Corinthians 9:22, 23)

“I have become all things to all people so that in all possible ways I might save some. I do all of that because of the good news. And I want to share in its blessings” (1 Corinthians 9:22, 23, NlrV). What principle (rule) is Paul giving in 1 Corinthians 9:22, 23? How can we reflect this same attitude (thought; feeling) in our lives?

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

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

But too often these mission successes have been limited by the human weaknesses of the missionaries themselves and their mission organizations. These human weaknesses include (1) poor planning for outreach, limited understanding of the task; (2) limited goals that see mission only as education, health care, disaster relief, or development, which overlook the preaching of the gospel; (3) underfunding and understaffing by the sending organizations; (4) missionaries unsuited to the task; and (5) nations that forbid the preaching of the gospel.

Of course, no one ever said that it was going to be easy. We are in the middle of a great controversy (war between Christ and Satan). And the enemy will work every way he can to stop our outreach work in our own neighborhoods or in the farthest corners of the world. But we must not be discouraged, because we have been given many wonderful promises of power. And we can be sure that God will fulfill His purposes on earth. As we have been told: “The words I speak are like that. They will not return to me without producing [making] results. They will accomplish [succeed] what I want them to. They will do exactly what I sent them to do” (Isaiah 55:11, NlrV).



We are to be God’s light to the world.

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Read Ellen G. White, “On the Mount of Olives,” in *The Desire of Ages*, page 633; “Speedy Preparation,” in *Fundamentals [the ABCs] of Christian Education*, page 335; “Extension [The Spreading] of the Work in Foreign Fields,” in *Testimonies [Messages] for the Church*, volume 6, page 23.

The New Testament uses two Greek nouns, followed by the adjective “all,” to show the worldwide work of Christian mission: “all the *kosmos*” in Matthew 26:13; Mark 14:9; and Mark 16:15; and “all the *oikoumenē*” in Matthew 24:14. *Kosmos* means “the planet.” But the more specific word *oikoumenē* focuses on the world’s people.

How large was “the whole world” for the first Christians? A few years after the crucifixion (Christ’s death on the cross), Christian missionaries had reached modern-day Cyprus, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Macedonia, Greece, and Italy. There is proof that they carried the gospel as far as southern Russia (ancient Scythia) in the north, Ethiopia in the south, India in the east, and Spain in the west.

Did the early Christian missionaries believe they had to reach the whole world with the gospel? According to the Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost,⁷ the “birthday” of the Christian church, began to preach the “mighty works of God” to visitors from a list of nations, geographic areas, and different groups (Acts 2:5–11). From its first day of life, the Christian church has been aware of the worldwide goal of its mission. If they had that understanding back then, how much more so should we today?

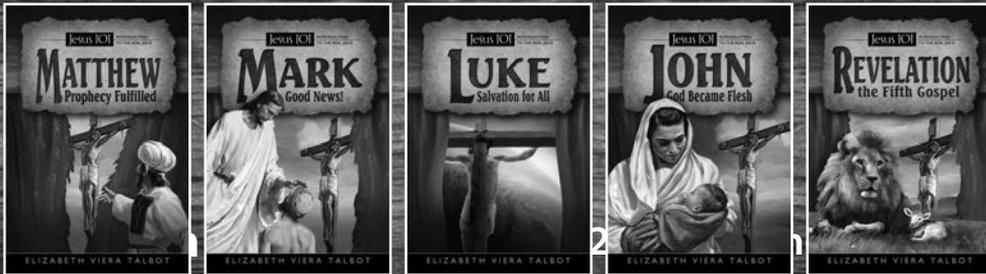
DEFINITIONS

7. Pentecost—the time when Jesus’ followers received the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit after Jesus went back to heaven (Acts 2:1–4).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① In class, go over your answer to the final question on Tuesday’s study. Does being too clannish (excluding others outside the group) lead to being snobbish? If not, why not?
- ② The church’s understanding of the size of “the whole world” has expanded since Pentecost. Jesus’ gospel command in Matthew 28:19 will remain present truth for the church until Christ returns. How does the preaching of the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6–12 fit in with the Great Command?
- ③ How would you answer this question: If people can be saved without ever having heard the gospel, what is the use of risking life in order to spread it to them?

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