

# Paul: Mission *and* Message



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *1 Cor. 1:22–24, 1 Tim. 6:12, 2 Tim. 4:7, 1 Cor. 15:12–22, Acts 15:38–41.*

**Memory Text:** “Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (*Phil. 3:13, 14, NKJV*).

**D**rawing on Old Testament prophetic messages, Jewish history, and the life and teachings of Jesus, Paul developed the Christian concept of salvation history, all centered on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Because of his cultural background in both Judaism and in Greco-Roman society, Paul possessed sufficient insights to allow him to lift the gospel out from the complexity of Hebrew civil, ritual, and moral practices of Jewish life and make it more accessible to a multicultural world.

Paul's 13 letters to the believers applied faith to their lives. He touched doctrinal, as well as practical, topics. He counseled, encouraged, and admonished on matters of personal Christianity, relationships, and church life. Nevertheless, throughout his letters his main theme was “Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (*1 Cor. 2:2, NKJV*).

Paul was not only a man of letters. He also became known as the apostolic missionary par excellence, witnessing to the gospel from Syria to Italy, perhaps even to Spain. Within a decade, Paul established churches in four provinces of the Roman Empire.

This week we will take a look at Paul—both his mission and his message.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 19.

## Greeks and Jews

**Read 1** Corinthians 1:22–24. How do these verses help us to understand the different ways people relate to truth? What can we learn here that can help us in our witnessing to various people groups?

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In the Exodus from slavery in Egypt, God worked remarkable signs of providential care for Israel. Later generations of Jews developed the expectation that any new messenger sent from God should make themselves known by signs and wonders and miracles.

In contrast, in line with their philosophical and scientific heritage, Greeks sought a rational basis for belief, one that would satisfy the demands of human wisdom.

Paul did not dismiss the cultural and spiritual heritage of his target peoples but used it as an entry point for proclaiming Christ crucified. Those who desired signs found them in the life and ministry of Jesus and in the early church. Those who wanted logical elegance and rationality found it in Paul's arguments for the gospel message. Both types of persons ultimately had only one need, and that was to know the risen Christ and "the power of his resurrection" (*Phil. 3:10*). How Paul brought them to that knowledge depended upon the people to whom he was witnessing.

When Paul preached to Jewish listeners, he based his sermons on the history of Israel, linking Christ to David, and emphasizing the Old Testament prophecies pointing to Christ and foretelling His crucifixion and resurrection (*Acts 13:16–41*). That is, he started out with what was familiar to them, with what they revered and believed, and from that starting point he sought to bring them to Christ.

For Gentiles, Paul's message included God as Creator, Upholder, and Judge; the entry of sin into the world; salvation through Jesus Christ (*Acts 14:15–17, 17:22–31*). Paul had to work from a different starting point with these people than he did with the Jews (or with Gentiles who believed in the Jewish faith). Here, too, though, his goal was to lead them to Jesus.

**Think about your own faith. On what is it based? What good reasons do you have for it? How might your reasons differ from those of other people, and why is it important to recognize these differences?**

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## Soldiers and Athletes

As a skilled communicator, Paul in his mission work used the familiar to explain the unfamiliar. He took everyday features of the Greco-Roman world to illustrate the practical reality of new life in Christ. He drew especially from two areas of his converts' world for his teaching metaphors—athletes with their games and the ever-present Roman soldier.

Fondness for athletic accomplishments gripped Paul's world, much as it does ours. Ancient Greeks transmitted their love of competition by holding, over the centuries, no fewer than four separate cycles of Olympic-type contests, located in different parts of Greece. Romans inherited and further promoted athletic competition. Foot races were the most popular events and included a race of men wearing full suits of military armor. Wrestling also was popular. Athletes trained assiduously, and winners were richly rewarded. Ethnicity, nationality, and social class mattered little, since endurance and performance were the goals.

**What** key lessons for the Christian life would Paul's readers have found in the following passages? *1 Cor. 9:24–27, Gal. 5:7, 1 Tim. 6:12, 2 Tim. 2:5.*

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Starting with Marius, Roman emperors replaced temporary soldiers with full-time career warriors, garrisoned them across the Roman Empire, and upgraded and standardized their armor and weapons. By Paul's time, soldiers were recruited from various ethnic and national groups, whether or not they were Roman citizens. In return for rewards at the end of their term of service, soldiers pledged total loyalty to the ruling emperor, who in times of conflict personally led them into battle.

**In** the following passages, what comparisons did Paul make between soldiering and the Christian life? *2 Cor. 10:4, 5; Eph. 6:10–18; 1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 2:3, 4.*

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In what is perhaps Paul's final letter, he applied both soldiering and athletics to his own view of his life as a Christian missionary: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (*2 Tim. 4:7, NIV*).

**In what ways is faith a fight and in what ways a race? How have you experienced the reality of both metaphors in your own Christian life? Which metaphor best describes your own experience, and why?**

## Paul and the Law

**“Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law”** (*Rom. 3:31, NIV*). **What law must Paul be talking about here?**

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In English translations of Paul’s letters, the word *law* appears about one hundred thirty times, and in Acts of the Apostles, about twenty times. Paul endeavored to get his hearers and readers, regardless of cultural background, to understand that “law” carried several meanings, especially for Jews. Laws such as the Ten Commandments are in force for all people at all times. But Paul did not consider other kinds of laws in the Old Testament and in Jewish culture to be in force for Christians.

In his writings, the apostle used the word *law* broadly in reference to rules for religious ceremonies, civil law, health laws, and purification laws. He wrote about being “under the law” (*Rom. 3:19*) and about being “released from the law” (*Rom. 7:6, NIV*). He described a “law of sin” (*vs. 25*) but also “law [that] is holy” (*vs. 12*). He mentioned the “law of Moses” (*1 Cor. 9:9*) but also the “law of God” (*Rom. 7:25*). Confusing as these phrases may seem to non-Jews, for the Jewish believer brought up in the Hebrew culture, the context would make clear which law was meant.

**Read Romans 13:8–10; Romans 2:21–24; 1 Corinthians 7:19; Ephesians 4:25, 28; 5:3; 6:2. How do these verses help us to understand that God’s moral law, the Ten Commandments, was not nullified at the Cross?**

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Paul realized that the ceremonial laws, detailing how one approached God through priesthood, Hebrew sanctuary, and sacrifices, ceased to be valid after the Crucifixion. They had served their purpose in their time but were now no longer needed. (This point would become especially apparent after the destruction of the temple.)

With the moral law expressed by the Ten Commandments, however, matters are different. In his letters, Paul quotes some of the Ten Commandments and alludes to others as universal ethical demands on all people, Jewish as well as Gentile. Having written against the practice of sin, Paul would not in any way have diminished the very law that defines what sin is. That would make about as much sense as telling someone not to violate the speed limit while at the same time telling them the speed limit signs are no longer valid.

## The Cross and the Resurrection

**“For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified”** (*1 Cor. 2:2, NKJV*).

No question, the cross of Christ was central to all that Paul lived and taught. But Paul didn't teach the Cross in a vacuum; instead, he taught it in the context of other teachings, as well; and one of them, perhaps the one most intricately linked to the Cross, was the Resurrection, without which the Cross would have been in vain.

**Read 1 Corinthians 15:12–22. What do these verses say that show how crucial the death and resurrection of Jesus are to the gospel? Why is a proper understanding of death as a sleep crucial for making sense of these texts? That is, if the dead in Christ are already in heaven, what is Paul talking about here?**

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Unfortunately, the majority of Christian traditions, as well as non-Christian religions, believe strongly in the immortality of the human soul. Against this belief, however, Paul emphasized repeatedly that:

1. Only God has immortality (*1 Tim. 6:16*);
2. Immortality is a gift from God to the saved (*1 Thess. 4:16*);
3. Death is a sleep until Christ returns (*1 Thess. 4:13–15; 1 Cor. 15:6, 18, 20*).

Worship in almost all religions includes numerous false teachings based on the false concept of the immortality of the soul. These errors include things such as reincarnation, praying to saints, veneration of ancestral spirits, an eternally burning hell, and many New Age practices such as channeling or astral projection. A true understanding of the Bible's teaching on death is the only real protection against these great deceptions. How unfortunate, too, that those who show the strongest inclination against accepting this truth are Christians of other denominations.

**A believer closes his or her eyes in death and, after what seems like a moment of darkness and silence, he or she is awakened to eternal life at the Second Coming. What does the truth about the state of the dead reveal to us about God's character?**

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## Getting Along

Paul was a hard worker with a strong personality and singleness of purpose. Such persons can be loners with few friends but many admirers. However, on his travels, two or three fellow workers often accompanied Paul. At least eight of these close fellow workers are mentioned by name (*Acts 13:2; 15:22, 37; 16:1–3; 19:22; Col. 4:7, 10, 11; Philem. 24*). To this must be added Paul's greetings to 24 people in Romans 16, in addition to general greetings to households.

The apostle believed in teamwork, especially in pioneering situations. At the same time, however, he did at times have conflict with fellow laborers.

**Read Acts 15:38–41. What happened here, and what does it tell us about the humanity of even these great workers for the Lord?**

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“It was here that Mark, overwhelmed with fear and discouragement, wavered for a time in his purpose to give himself wholeheartedly to the Lord’s work. Unused to hardships, he was disheartened by the perils and privations of the way. . . . This desertion caused Paul to judge Mark unfavorably, and even severely, for a time. Barnabas, on the other hand, was inclined to excuse him because of his inexperience. He felt anxious that Mark should not abandon the ministry, for he saw in him qualifications that would fit him to be a useful worker for Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 169, 170.

The account in Acts reveals that Paul expected his companions to persevere in the toils and perils of their mission. For Paul, the close team constituted a church in miniature. He stressed the importance of setting a good example, the imitation model of mission. Dutiful yet loving relationships among team members became a pattern for the churches, which were often based on households. The team also provided an ideal setting for the training of new evangelists and missionaries. Of course, at times things didn’t always run smoothly, as in the case of John Mark.

**Read 2 Timothy 4:11. What does this text reveal about growth and forgiveness?**

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**We all make mistakes. How can you learn to forgive those whose mistakes have hurt you? And think also about those whom you’ve hurt with your mistakes. How have you sought to bring healing in those situations? Or if you haven’t yet, why not do it now?**

**Further Study:** The apostle Paul has been compared with the butterfly effect in chaos theory: “the flap of a butterfly’s wings in California causes a hurricane in Asia.” His work as a writer and preacher helped turn a Jewish sect in an obscure corner of the Roman Empire into a world religion. The ideas put forth in his 13 letters have probably exerted greater influence than any other ancient Greek literature of comparable size.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1** Paul avoided martyrdom by fleeing to Athens, the intellectual center of the Greco-Roman world. Cities provide shelter for refugees, including Christians. The apostle lost no time; after observing the city’s religious monuments, he reasoned with the Jews and preached in the marketplace. Read Acts 17:16–31. What approach does Paul take with these people, and how does it help us to understand the need to tailor the message for various people groups? At the same time, look at how Paul did not in any way water down or compromise truth in order to reach these people. In our attempts to reach others, how can we be certain that we don’t compromise core beliefs?
- 2** Why is the state of the dead such an important teaching? What are some of the many errors and deceptions that an understanding of this truth protects us against? What about your own culture? What are some of the beliefs against which this truth can be a bulwark?
- 3** Dwell more on the question of the role of signs in regard to faith and the role of logic and reason, as well. In class, let those who are willing talk about how they came to faith and what role such factors as signs or logic, and so on, had in their experiences. Also, what role should they have, not just in coming to faith but in maintaining faith?
- 4** What about the majority of people in your society? What kind of background do they have? What kind of beliefs are the most common? Based on your understanding of their beliefs and background, think through carefully the best approach to reach out to them. What are some entering wedges that will allow you to make contact in a way that will not immediately offend them?

## The Stolen Sermons: Part 2

by GAMINI MENDIS

I remained in the hospital for two weeks in great pain but slowly began to recover. Many pastors came to visit me. Some said that God struck me down because I had visited the Seventh-day Adventist church. The Adventist pastor visited me several times and brought me a book entitled *The Great Controversy*. I had lots of time to read, and by the time I was discharged, I had finished the book. When the Adventist pastor came to visit me at home, I had many questions.

When I had recovered enough to preach at my church again, I went back to visiting the Seventh-day Adventist church to borrow the pastor's sermon notes. Of course, I didn't tell him what I was doing, nor did I tell my own congregation where I was getting my sermon material.

One Sabbath the Adventist pastor preached a sermon on the Sabbath. I borrowed that sermon too. After I preached, members of my church asked me why we worship on Sunday if Saturday is God's holy Sabbath.

Suddenly, I realized that I was trapped by my own cunning. I needed more information so I could answer my congregation's questions. I visited the Adventist pastor and asked him to study the Bible with me, beginning with the Sabbath. After we studied, I asked him all the questions I thought my congregation would ask. Then I called my church members together to give them the same Bible study on the Sabbath. Not all were interested in this new truth, but many wanted to learn more.

Word reached the church leaders in my denomination that I was teaching Seventh-day Adventist doctrines. They told me that if I insisted on preaching like an Adventist pastor I couldn't continue as pastor in my church. By this time I believed in the Sabbath and other Bible truths I had learned through borrowing the pastor's sermons.

I decided to become a Seventh-day Adventist, turn my church into a Seventh-day Adventist church, and bring as many members of my congregation with me as would listen. Sundays became Bible study days in my church, and several Adventist pastors came to help me teach the people. For three or four months, we studied the Bible intensely and tried to understand God's will for our lives and our church. Then we held a baptism in which 20 members of my church joined the Seventh-day Adventist family. Later 13 more people were baptized. More than half the members of my little congregation have joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

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*GAMINI MENDIS continues to work as a pastor in the same area of Sri Lanka where he once pastored a charismatic church. He now has three Seventh-day Adventist churches.*



## The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *1 Corinthians 1:22–24*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Understand that God communicates His message in different ways to different people.

**Feel:** Appreciate that people differ in their cultural backgrounds and understandings and that God will reveal Himself to them in different ways.

**Do:** Choose to be open to new and creative methods of faithful witness, even if they may be untraditional and untried.

► **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: People Think and Feel Differently.**

**A** The apostle Paul contrasts the different approaches of Jews and Greeks to spiritual things (*1 Cor. 1:22*). What differences do you see even among your own friends and family?

**B** Paul says that he becomes “all things to all men” so that he can reach them for Jesus (*1 Cor. 9:19–23*). How did he demonstrate this in his ministry?

**C** If preaching Christ crucified was a “stumbling block” to Jews and “foolishness” to Greeks, were there ways Paul could have shared this doctrine in a more sensitive way with his audiences (*1 Cor. 1:23*)?

**II. Feel: Sensitivity to Differences**

**A** What practical steps could I take to become more sensitive to cultural differences when sharing with neighbors and friends?

**B** How often do we review our worship services for how “visitor-friendly” they are?

**III. Do: Sharing in His Cross-Cultural Mission**

**A** How can I sensitively practice Paul’s principle of “all things to all [people]”—adapting the message and delivering it in different ways, without compromise?

**B** What simple changes could we make to ensure that those from a non-Christian background are more comfortable visiting our church?

► **Summary:** God invites us to share the good news of salvation in ways that will be attractive and meaningful to different people.

## Learning Cycle

### ►STEP 1—Motivate

**Spotlight on Scripture:** *1 Corinthians 1:22–24*

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** God’s message is timeless, but it must be expressed in different ways to different people in order to catch their attention, their understanding, and their hearts.

**Just for Teachers:** The apostle Paul adapted his language and missionary methods according to his audience. Throughout history, missionaries have followed his lead. When Adventist missionaries Fernando and Ana Stahl began working among the indigenous people in the Peruvian Andes, they tried selling literature door-to-door. They soon discovered this was not the most effective method among a poor population that was 95 percent illiterate. So, they changed their approach—starting schools, clinics, and markets.

Subsequently, educator and congressman Jose Antonio Encinas wrote, “The basic thing is that they [the Adventists] are transforming the spirit of the Indian, bringing him into civic life, making him aware of his rights and obligations, separating him from the vices of coca and alcohol, removing superstition, curing illnesses, showing the best way toward human dignity.”—Quoted in J. Samuel Escobar, “Religion and Social Change at the Grass Roots in Latin America,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 554 (Nov. 1997): p. 100.

**Discuss:** Encourage your class to consider principles of effective ministry from Paul’s example. How can they apply those principles today?

### ►STEP 2—Explore

**Just for Teachers:** As you explore the different ways that God’s Word is communicated to people, be sure to emphasize that this does not mean compromising the truth in any way. It’s all about reaching people in ways that are meaningful to them.

## Bible Commentary

### I. Master of Metaphor (Review *1 Timothy 6:12* with your class.)

“Fight the good fight of faith” is just one of the powerful metaphors in

this week's lesson (*1 Tim. 6:12*). Metaphors, or word-pictures, help us see something more vividly and colorfully—they add an extra layer of meaning to communication. Some of Christianity's most powerful imagery comes from Paul's writings. Consider, for example, Paul's statement: "So you are no longer a slave, but God's child" (*Gal. 4:7, NIV*). What a beautiful way to picture the freedom and sense of belonging that comes through Jesus.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul uses the metaphor of a human body to describe the church: "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (*Rom. 12:4, 5, NIV*). This is a rich image that helps us to understand better how the church functions under the guidance of God. Paul mines this image for further insights in his first letter to the Corinthians (*vss. 12–26*). Some of Paul's metaphors are startling: he likens himself to a woman in the pain of childbirth (*Gal. 4:19*) and as a mother giving her child milk (*1 Cor. 3:1, 2*).

But perhaps Paul's strongest metaphors are for describing salvation. In just a sample of these word-pictures, he likens salvation to the experience of being adopted (*Rom. 8:15*), reconciled (*Rom. 5:10*), justified (*Gal. 2:16*), liberated (*Rom. 6:18*), married (*Rom. 7:2–4*), redeemed (*Eph. 1:7*), and the recipient of an inheritance (*Rom. 8:17*).

Each of these mini-stories or metaphors of salvation provides a window to a truth about salvation. If we focus on just one of the metaphors, then we lose the richness provided by the others. For example, Paul's metaphor of redemption and justification had a particular resonance for people steeped in the Roman system of law.

When we present the good news about Jesus, like Paul we must take care to express it in terms that people will best understand.

**Consider This:** If you were sharing the gospel with an unbeliever with no background in Christianity, what metaphors do you think would be most helpful? Which of Jesus' parables might be appropriately used here?

## II. Meeting People Where They Are (*Review 1 Corinthians 1:22–24 with your class.*)

Often when we think about our mission to the community, we think about methods to attract them to the church. So we talk about things such as compelling preaching, inspiring music, and friendly church members. And we invite the community to special church events that we think will appeal to them.

All these things are vitally important, but we must never forget that the whole idea of mission is for us to go to where people are, rather than expecting them to come to us. Jesus demonstrated this in His incarnational ministry when He came down from heaven and “made his dwelling” among us (*John 1:14, NIV*).

The apostle Paul follows Jesus’ example of going to the people. He traveled all over the then-known world, meeting people in the marketplace, in the streets, in the Areopagus. And he knew that an effective ministry must start from where people are, building on their current knowledge and experience, before leading them to where Jesus wants them to be.

In today’s passage, Paul says that he preaches “Christ crucified” to the Jews and Gentiles. While this is true, he adapted his message to his audience. For example, in Acts 14, he and Barnabas visit the pagan town of Lystra, and not once do they mention Christ crucified. However, a little earlier, when speaking to the Jews, Paul did talk about Christ’s death and resurrection (*Acts 13:31–39*). The time would come to share the story of Christ’s crucifixion with the pagans, but he needed to do some spiritual groundwork with them first.

**Consider This:**

1. How can we know when it is appropriate to share certain truths with people?
2. What guards can we put in place to ensure that in our desire to connect with people, we don’t water down our message?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

**Just for Teachers:** Ellen G. White urges us not to be “stereotyped in one manner of working” but to adapt our methods of witness in creative ways.—*Evangelism*, p. 106. Yet, just because an outreach idea is new or imaginative, does it always follow that it will be effective in bringing people to Christ? Explore with your class different ways to assess whether new ideas for outreach are appropriate or not.

**Application Question:** Ellen G. White counseled, “Be very careful not to present the truth in such a way as to arouse prejudice, and to close the door of the heart to the truth.”—*Evangelism*, p. 141. How would you communicate an eternal truth such as the Sabbath or the state of the dead in a manner that doesn’t arouse prejudice?

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**Activity:** Divide the class in three or four groups and assign each group a spiritual truth and a “difficult” audience. For instance,

Spiritual truth—“The soon return of Jesus” and

Difficult audience—“a group of educated professionals.”

Or,

Spiritual truth—“God created the earth” and

Difficult audience—“some young university students.”

Discuss: (a) ways to build bridges of trust and to attract interest in the subject, and then (b) specific ways to actually communicate the truth to this audience. Which step in the process is easier? Do we sometimes concentrate all our energy on the first step—building bridges—and not enough on the second—actually communicating truth? Come together as a class and discuss what you learned from this exercise.

**Thought Question:** One of the dangers of being overly cautious in our desire not to offend or speak inappropriately is that we never get around to actually sharing our faith. How do we find the right balance?

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## ►STEP 4—Create

**Just for Teachers:** Explore with your class the power of symbols in our everyday lives. Note how they’re even important on Web sites where symbols make it intuitive for people to know where to click for actions or certain information. For example, an envelope icon for “Send” or a shopping cart icon to look at your online orders or a little magnifying glass for “Search.” These icons are visual metaphors. Marketers know the power of metaphor. Discuss with your class its importance in our spiritual lives and the ways in which certain word-pictures will be more meaningful to different people.

**Activity:** Read with the class some of Jesus’ metaphors of the kingdom. (Review Matthew 13 for the largest collection of “kingdom parables,” such as the kingdom of heaven is like a net, a treasure in a field, yeast, etc.)

Invite the class individually or in small groups to work on some contemporary metaphors of salvation. What parables might He use today? Encourage them to be creative in their ideas (for example, the kingdom of heaven is like the Internet, or God is the Master Recycler). After a few minutes, invite some class members to share their ideas and discuss how these modern-day metaphors might impact people from different backgrounds.