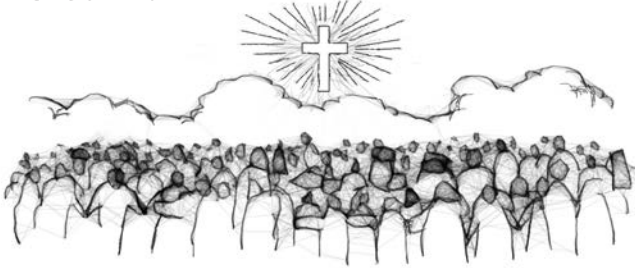


# Must *the* Whole World Hear?



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Acts 4:12, Ps. 87:4–6, John 10:16, Rom. 2:12–16, John 14:6, Rom. 1:18.*

**Memory Text:** “Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen” (*Romans 16:25–27, NIV*).

As we have seen, the Lord uses people to bring the message of the gospel to others. However, throughout the ages, millions have died without knowing the biblical plan of salvation. The fact is that a majority of those who have ever lived have not heard the story of redemption or known about the good news of God's grace as revealed in Jesus Christ. This leads to two persistent questions. First, on the day of judgment, how is God going to deal with these billions who have not known Him? Second, is there salvation outside of someone's knowing the plan of salvation as it is in Jesus?

Some would answer that there is salvation in a single Christian denomination only; in contrast, others believe that all religions are equally valid guides to God and eternal life.

In the end, the crucial point to remember is that Jesus has revealed to us the character of God, and this tells us a lot about His love for all humanity and His desire for as many as possible to be saved. God is a God of justice, and however He works it out, the shout will be heard across heaven: “ ‘Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints!’ ” (*Rev. 15:3, NKJV*).

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 26.

## No Other Name Under Heaven

Some Christians have the conviction that only those who hear and respond positively to the Christian gospel can be saved. These people, sometimes called “exclusivists,” regard all non-Christian religions as constructs of fallen humans, which express willful rebellion against God. Non-Christians are, they believe for that reason, outside the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Some Christians take the further step of claiming that outside their specific denomination and doctrinal structure there is no salvation, even for other confessing Christians. For them, other denominations with their divergent beliefs have placed themselves outside the care of God and have no chance of entering the kingdom of heaven. For instance, in 1302 in his papal bull *Unam Sanctam*, Pope Boniface VIII declared “that it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff.” Some Protestants have taught something similar in regard to their own denominations, as well.

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

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The words of the Scripture here are very clear: salvation is found only in Jesus Christ and in no other name under heaven. It’s important, however, not to read into these words more than they specifically say.

Imagine a man in a building that is on fire; before being able to escape, he is overcome by smoke and collapses unconscious. 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 regains consciousness.

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, whether or not that person had heard of His name or of the plan of salvation.

“Among the heathen are those who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish. Though ignorant of the written law of God, they have heard His voice speaking to them in nature, and have done the things that the law required. Their works are evidence that the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they are recognized as the children of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 638.

## How Much Must One Know?

Picking up where we left off on Sunday, we can see that although the work of Christ provides the only means of salvation, some believe that explicit knowledge of Christ is not necessary in order for one to be saved.

This does not imply that salvation is available apart from Christ but that God is able and willing to apply the merits of Christ's work to whomever He wishes. Some believe that those who do not know Christ and have never been exposed to the gospel, but who under the influence of the Holy Spirit feel a need for deliverance, and act on it, will be saved. The quote from Ellen G. White at the end of yesterday's study certainly implies this (think of Job and Melchizedek).

### **What** light do the following texts shed on this idea?

*Ps. 87:4–6* \_\_\_\_\_

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*John 10:16* \_\_\_\_\_

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*Acts 14:17* \_\_\_\_\_

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*Acts 17:26–28* \_\_\_\_\_

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*Rom. 2:12–16* \_\_\_\_\_

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“God ‘will repay each person according to what they have done.’ To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life” (*Rom. 2:6, 7, NIV*).

Paul here declares that there are some outside of Christianity who will receive eternal life as a result of an “obedience-unto-life” principle (*cf. Lev. 18:5*). For those “Gentiles” who “show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts” because “their consciences also bearing witness” (*Rom. 2:15, NIV*), it will make a difference on Judgment Day because these people have responded to the work of the Spirit in their hearts.

**Because we don't know people's hearts, why in all cases, either with professed Christians or non-Christians, must we be careful not to judge their souls' salvation?**

## Universalism and Pluralism

Some people teach that in the end God is going to save all human beings, regardless of what they believed or even how they lived. “Universalism” is the conviction that all persons are so related to God that they will be saved, even if they never heard or believed the gospel. After all, John 3:16 says, “God so loved the world.” Thus, in this thinking, if He loves everyone, how can anyone be lost, especially if being lost means eternal torment in hell? How could God burn forever someone whom He loves? Hence, we can see how one false doctrine (eternal torment) leads to another (universalism).

Related to universalism is “pluralism,” the conviction that all religions are equally valid and lead equally to God and salvation. No religion is inherently better than, or superior to, any other religion, at least according to this theology. A pastor in a church in California wrote on the church Web site that his congregation “does not believe that Christianity is superior in any way to other religious beliefs.”

For pluralists, the vast range of religious rituals and beliefs, symbols and metaphors, are mere surface differences concealing a similar core of all religions. Pluralists point out, for example, that most religions emphasize love for God and love for fellow human beings, a form of the golden rule, and hope for a blessed future life. According to them, all faiths, at the core, teach the same thing; hence, they are all valid paths to God, and it is very chauvinistic and arrogant to try to push Christian beliefs upon those who are members of non-Christian faiths.

**What** does the Bible have to say about both universalism and pluralism? *John 14:6; Rev. 20:14, 15; 21:8; Dan. 12:2; John 3:18; Matt. 7:13, 14; 2 Thess. 2:9, 10.*

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No question, both universalism and pluralism are contrary to Scripture. 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 (see *John 14:6*) is arrogant and exclusivist? Share your answer with your class on Sabbath.**

## Sinners in Need of Grace

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (*John 3:17, NIV*). What great hope is found in this verse for all humanity? How can we take this crucial truth and, first, make it our own? How then can we use it to motivate us to reach out to others?

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According to the Bible, we are all sinners (*Rom. 3:23*), and God wishes for all to repent (*Acts 17:30, 26:20, 2 Pet. 3:9*) and be saved (*1 Tim. 2:4*). From the Fall in Eden onward, God’s purpose has been to save humanity from the devastation and ultimate eternal death that sin and rebellion have brought to humanity. What more proof do we need than the Cross to show God’s love for us and His desire to save us?

However, Scripture is clear that God will not save those who openly rebel against Him.

**Read** Genesis 6:11–13, Romans 1:18, 2 Thessalonians 2:12, Revelation 21:8, 22:15. What powerful warning is found in these verses?

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God loves all people, but all people are sinners in need of grace, and this grace has been revealed in Jesus. He has called His church to spread the good news of this grace to the world.

“The church is God’s appointed agency 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 through His church shall be reflected to the world His fullness and His sufficiency. The members of the church, those whom He has called out of darkness into His marvelous light, are to show forth His glory. The church is the repository of the riches of the grace of Christ; and through the church will eventually be made manifest, even to ‘the principalities and powers in heavenly places,’ the final and full display of the love of God. Ephesians 3:10.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 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

**“I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings” (1 Cor. 9:22, 23, NIV). What important principle is Paul espousing here, and how can we reflect this same attitude in our own lives?**

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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 men and women, despite their weaknesses, 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” (*Matt. 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 “contamination.”

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

However, as with ancient Israel, too often these mission successes have been obscured by the human shortcomings of the missionaries themselves and their overall mission enterprise. These human shortcomings include (1) poor planning for outreach, inadequate understanding of the task; (2) narrow focus on mission only as education, health care, disaster relief, or development, which overshadow preaching 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 midst of a great controversy, and the enemy will work every way he can to thwart our outreach efforts, whether in our own neighborhoods or in the most “remote” corners of the world. We, though, mustn’t 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: “ ‘So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it’ ” (*Isa. 55:11, NKJV*).

**Further Study:** Read Ellen G. White, “On the Mount of Olives,” in *The Desire of Ages*, p. 633; “Speedy Preparation,” in *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 335; “Extension of the Work in Foreign Fields,” in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 23.

The New Testament employs two Greek nouns, accompanied by the adjective “all,” to express the worldwide extent of Christian mission: “all the *kosmos*” in Matthew 26:13, Mark 14:9, and 16:15, and “all the *oikoumenē*” in Matthew 24:14. While *kosmos*, the more general term for the realm of orderly existence, signifies the planet (with approximately one hundred fifty New Testament occurrences), the more specific *oikoumenē* focuses on the world’s human inhabitants.

How extensive was “the whole world” for the first Christians? Within a few years of the Crucifixion, they had reached modern-day Cyprus, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Macedonia, Greece, and Italy. There is evidence that they propagated 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 Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the “birthday” of the Christian church, began to proclaim the “mighty works of God” to visitors from a list of nations, geographic regions, and ethnic groups (*Acts 2:5–11*). From its first day of life, the Christian church has been aware of the worldwide extent of its mission. If they had that understanding back then, how much more so should we today?

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, go over your answer to the final question on Tuesday’s study about Christian claims being exclusivist and arrogant. Does exclusivism necessarily translate into arrogance? If not, why not?
- 2 The church’s understanding of the size and extent of “the whole world” has expanded since the Day of Pentecost. Jesus’ gospel commission to “‘go therefore and make disciples of all the nations’ ” (*Matt. 28:19, NKJV*) will remain present truth for the church until Christ returns. How does the proclamation of the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6–12 fit in with the Great Commission?
- 3 How would you answer this question: If people can be saved without ever having heard the gospel, what’s the point of risking life and limb in order to spread it to them?

## Providential Bus Encounter

by KUSUMAWATHIE PERERA

One morning I was riding a bus to Colombo, the capital city of Sri Lanka. I saw Francis, a longtime family friend, sitting nearby. I hadn't seen him in a long time and was surprised to learn that he had become a Seventh-day Adventist. I, too, had become a Christian two years earlier.

"I was paralyzed and unable to do anything," I told Francis. "Then some Christians prayed for me, and God healed me. I attended their church, but some things they do in their worship service make me uncomfortable—jumping around, shouting, and rolling on the floor, and talking in strange languages. Lately, I haven't gone to church."

Francis offered to bring a friend to visit me. "We can study the Bible together. I'll tell you a little about the Seventh-day Adventists and what we believe," he offered.

A few weeks later, Francis came with his pastor. We had a pleasant visit, and the pastor talked about God and Jesus in such simple and easy-to-understand language that I felt very close to Him. Then he prayed for my family and me. His prayer was like a beautiful conversation with a friend.

Francis and the pastor visited me often and shared God's truths with me. I enjoyed the Bible studies, but my husband wanted nothing to do with God.

One day, my husband came home drunk when the pastor and Francis were still there. My husband often got drunk, sometimes becoming violent, breaking up the furniture and terrifying the children and me.

When the pastor saw my husband's condition, he prayed for him. I knew that my husband would never remember even seeing the pastor, but I was glad that the pastor was willing to pray for him.

The next morning, my husband was sober. He remembered almost nothing of the previous day's drinking binge, but he remembered that the pastor had prayed for him. In some mysterious way that prayer had touched him, and he said he was healed from drinking. I wanted to believe him, but he had promised to stop drinking before, and it never lasted. But from that day on, my husband never touched alcohol again.

When the pastor and Francis visited again, I told them what had happened to my husband, and we rejoiced together. When I completed Bible studies, I was baptized and became a Seventh-day Adventist. Although my husband has not yet given his life to God, I know he believes, and one day he will come to the Savior.

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## *The Lesson in Brief*

► **Key Text:** *Matthew 8:5–13*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Understand that God’s salvation is not limited to any special religious group and is not bound to any one culture or people group.

**Feel:** Foster compassion for those peoples who have not yet heard the good news about Jesus.

**Do:** Identify specific steps for sharing the good news with neighbors and friends who come from different cultural backgrounds.

► **Learning Outline:**

### I. Know: God’s Love for All People

**A** What does describing Abraham as the father of “many nations” tell us about God’s mission on earth (*Gen. 17:4–6*)?

**B** Prophets such as Isaiah share a vision for Israel to become a missionary people. What were the details of that vision (*see, for example, Isa. 52:10*), and how did Israel respond?

**C** Jesus shared not only with the righteous but also with sinners (*Luke 15:2*). What do the following passages tell us about Jesus’ attitude toward Gentiles and His vision of who will be saved (*Mark 5:1–20, Luke 17:11–19, Matt. 8:11, 15:21–28*)?

**D** In what ways did the apostles Peter (*Acts 10*) and Paul (*Rom. 11:13*) grow in their understanding of God’s mission?

### II. Feel: The Responsibility for Unreached People Groups

**A** How does reading about the apostle Paul’s total dedication and sacrifice to share the good news with non-Jewish people make you feel?

**B** What do you appreciate most about Jesus as you read of the way He treated non-Jewish people?

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

**A** Think of workmates or neighbors from different cultural backgrounds you may have. What practical steps can you take this week to start building bridges and closer friendships with them? How can you make cross-cultural mission work a regular part of your prayer life?

► **Summary:** We are invited as Jesus’ disciples to love all people as He did and to join in His mission to share salvation to all people groups.

## Learning Cycle

### ►STEP 1—Motivate

**Spotlight on Scripture:** *Romans 2:12–16*

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** In His infinite love and justice, God will ultimately save many who have never even heard the name of Jesus, but this in no way diminishes the mandate that God has given us to go into all the world to make disciples.

**Just for Teachers:** This week’s lesson addresses a sensitive topic that has produced vigorous debate among theologians through the centuries. The Bible reveals certain key principles of how God will achieve His mission to the world, but we’re best to be cautious about specifics that have not been revealed.

Because of the grace they’ve received, Christians gladly accept the Great Commission given to them to go into all the world to make disciples. They do this even though they know God’s unfathomable love and mercy reach out in different ways to those who will never hear the gospel story.

**Opening Activity:** Many popular stories are based on the concept of “goodies” versus “baddies,” or “good guy” against “bad guy.” But in many of the stories Jesus told, He complicates the picture and mixes up the “goodies” and “baddies” in ways we wouldn’t have expected. Discuss the following stories with your class: the two brothers—illustrating how sinners would enter heaven ahead of the religious leaders (*Matt. 21:28–32*); the good Samaritan—where a reviled Samaritan is the hero (*Luke 10:25–37*); the wedding banquet—where those on the first invitation list miss out (*Matt. 22:1–10*). Discuss with the class the importance of these stories. What do they tell us about how God conducts His mission on earth?

### ►STEP 2—Explore

**Just for Teachers:** What is the correct balance between the all-encompassing grace and mercy of God and the clear teaching that not all people will be saved? How do we present the unique claims of the gospel without appearing arrogant or intolerant of others and their beliefs?

## Bible Commentary

I. Hearing Versus Doing (Review *Romans 2:12–16* with your class.)

In this passage, the apostle Paul makes a distinction between those who hear and those who do. In God's eyes, according to Paul, there's a mighty chasm between the two groups. God views as righteous those who obey the law, not those who hear the law.

This distinction between hearing and doing is a familiar biblical theme. James describes someone "who listens to the word but does not do what it says" (*James 1:23, NIV*) and warns, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (*vs. 22, NIV*). Titus refers to people who "claim to know God" but by their actions deny him (*Titus 1:16, NIV*). Jesus Himself said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven'" (*Matt. 7:21, NIV*).

In this passage, the apostle Paul puts a twist on Jesus' words and suggests that there will be people who enter the kingdom of heaven who have never said, "Lord, Lord." These people have never had the opportunity to hear about Jesus, or the story of salvation, but they've been listening to their God-given conscience, and they've done something about what they've heard. In the eyes of God, that's what really counts. As Ellen G. White says, these people "are in a more favorable condition" than so-called Christians who "by their daily life contradict their profession." —*The Desire of Ages*, p. 239.

Churches are full of people who have heard hundreds of sermons, who hear Scripture read publicly each week, but whose lives and actions remain unchanged. According to the apostle Peter, although they have knowledge, they're "ineffective and unproductive" in that knowledge (*2 Pet. 1:8, NIV*).

What we believe is important. Who we believe in is vital. But if our beliefs are merely intellectual and make no difference to our lives, they're worthless. And in the wideness of God's mercy, He makes provision for those of His precious children who have acted on their God-given consciences, even without a full knowledge of salvation.

**Consider This:** What is the difference between hearing the Word of God and doing it?

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## II. No Other Name (*Review Acts 4:12 with your class.*)

The Bible clearly identifies the Source of salvation. It's not an idea. It's not a philosophy. It's not a sacred text. It's not even a religion. The only Source

of salvation is a Person—Jesus Christ.

In Acts 4, Peter talks to the Sanhedrin, the leading religious body of Israel. Both he and John speak with such confidence and authority and show such bravery that Luke says the leaders were “astonished” and “took note that these men had been with Jesus” (*Acts 4:13, NIV*).

Note the theme of all of Peter’s sermons and speeches in the book of Acts. They’re not about philosophy, psychology, or fine points of exegesis. They’re simply and profoundly about a Person—the One who had loved and forgiven him so much. His sermons are drenched in the topic of Jesus. Peter finishes his speech to the Sanhedrin by making a statement that is still controversial nearly two thousand years later—Jesus is the only name that can bring salvation. It shocked the first-century religious leaders, and it scandalizes many people today.

And yet, this is the unique claim of Jesus, that He is “ ‘the way and the truth and the life’ ” (*John 14:6, NIV*). God may plant seeds of truth in other philosophies and religions and in people’s hearts, but salvation comes through Jesus alone.

**Consider This:** What would you say to someone who dismisses Jesus’ claim as bigoted and insensitive to other religious paths?

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### ►STEP 3—Apply

**Just for Teachers:** Ask your class if there’s a difference between the following two ideas: (1) thinking that the church is responsible for God’s mission to the world and (2) seeing the church as a participant in God’s larger mission in the world? If a difference is perceived, why is that distinction important?

**Activity:** Invite seven volunteers to help reenact the parable of the good Samaritan from Luke 10. Participants are needed to play the following roles:

1. A narrator
2. Jesus
3. Expert in the law
4. The Samaritan (only speaking part is in a portion of verse 35)
5. The Levite (passes the beaten man on the other side of the road)
6. The priest (passes the beaten man on the other side of the road)
7. The victim

(If you do not have sufficient class members, a narrator can cover the parts of Jesus and the expert in the law.) After the reenactment, ask the participants to describe how they felt as they played their individual roles. Ask tangible questions. For example, ask the beaten man how he felt lying on the ground, seeing two men walk by without helping him. What did they look like from his perspective lying down? Ask the priest and the Levite about what they were thinking as they walked past. Were they emotionally torn in any way? Did they feel any guilt? And make sure to ask the expert in the law about how he felt when Jesus finished telling the story.

Discuss with the class the key meaning of this parable, which is not just about being nice to people. It centers on the question of our neighbor's identity and stretches our understanding of who is included in the wideness of God's mercy and salvation. Discuss how each person felt during the reenactment. Ask the class about the significance of the expert in the law's response to Jesus—"He who showed mercy on him" (*Luke 10:37, NKJV*). Did he have trouble even saying the word *Samaritan*? Who would be the equivalent of Samaritans in our community today?

## ►STEP 4—Create

**Just for Teachers:** An appreciation for God's provision for those who have never heard the gospel story should not leave the class with an attitude of "Well, I don't have to do anything if God is going to sort it all out anyway." Use this final section of the lesson study to focus on the benefits of sharing the good news for those doing the sharing and also for those who hear it.

**Activity:** Draw two columns on a chalkboard or white board. (If you don't have this equipment, just discuss with the class.) Make the headings "Sharing" for column 1 and "Receiving" for column 2. As the class participates in the discussion, summarize their ideas on the board.

Ask the following types of questions: What differences does it make in the life of a Christian when this individual witness shares his or her faith? Invite class members to share from their own experiences or from what they've observed in others. Can you be a Christian and not share your faith? Why, or why not?

After discussing the effects of witnessing on the person doing the sharing, now focus on the person receiving. What practical difference should it make in a person's life when he or she hears the gospel? Again, invite personal testimonies of how hearing the good news has affected people's lives.

Finally, invite the class to make a list of practical ways in which they can become involved in God's mission to the world.

# CONFLICT OF THE AGES



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