

# Violating *the Spirit of the Law*



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Neh. 5:1–5, Exod. 21:2–7, Mic. 6:8, Neh. 5:7–12, Deut. 23:21–23, Neh. 5:14–19.*

**Memory Text:** “Restore now to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also a hundredth of the money and the grain, the new wine and the oil, that you have charged them’ ” (*Nehemiah 5:11, NKJV*).

To this day, we humans struggle with the question of wealth, poverty, and the gap between the rich and the poor and what can be done about it. Yes, Jesus said that “you have the poor with you always” (*Matt. 26:11, NKJV*), but that’s hardly an excuse to do nothing about helping them. On the contrary, Scripture admonishes us to do our part to help. We can barely call ourselves Christians otherwise.

How fascinating, too, that even amid the trials and tribulations of the returned exiles in rebuilding Jerusalem, this theme appears, not just that of poverty and the poor, but that of the even more problematic question of the rich oppressing the poor. This was a problem before the exile, and now, even back in their own land, it reappears.

This week we will see another manifestation of this age-old theme and how Nehemiah worked to deal with it. As we will see, what made this oppression even worse was that it was being done within “the letter of the law,” a powerful example of how we need to be careful not to let rules and regulations become an end in and of themselves rather than a means to an end, which is to reflect the character of Jesus.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 2.

## People's Grievance

**Read** Nehemiah 5:1–5. What is happening here? What are the people crying out against?

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The Jewish community seems to be united under Nehemiah's leadership against the outside pressures. But all is not well within the nation that is standing up to persecution and defending itself from foreign assaults. Despite the outward appearance of toughness and cohesive efforts against the enemy, the community is broken inside. The leaders and the rich have been using the poor and underprivileged for their own gain, and the situation has become so bad that the families are crying out for relief. Some families were saying that they did not have any food to feed their children; some were crying out that because of a famine they had mortgaged their property and now had nothing; other families moaned that they had to borrow money for the Persian tax and even their children were slaves.

It appears that the main culprit of the trouble was a famine and tax payments that caused the poorer families to seek help from their neighbors. The Persian government required a tax of 350 talents of silver annually from the province of Judah (*see note on Neh. 5:1–5 in the Andrews Study Bible, p. 598*). If a person couldn't pay the designated portion of the mandatory tax, the family would usually mortgage their property or borrow money first. If, however, they couldn't earn the money the next year, then they had to do something about the debt they now owed. Usually debt slavery was the next option. They had already lost their land, and now they had to send someone from the family, usually children, to be in the service of the creditor in order to work off the debt.

There are times in life we find ourselves in trouble because of the consequences of our own actions; of course, there also are times we end up sick or in financial straits through no fault of our own. The story above recounts a time that government policies disadvantaged the people, leading to intensified poverty. They were caught in the spiral of deepening poverty, with no way out.

**How fascinating that then, as now, people struggle with economic oppression. What message should we take from the fact that this is a topic the Bible often addresses?**

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## Against the Spirit of the Law

**Read** Nehemiah 5:6–8 (see also Exod. 21:2–7). Why does Nehemiah react in anger?

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However difficult for us to grasp today, slavery was a cultural norm in the ancient world. A parent could either become a slave himself/herself or sell a child. Socially and legally, the parents had the right to sell their sons and daughters. However, since God is all about giving freedom, He regulated the practice in Israel by requiring creditors to release their slaves every seven years. Thus, God protected people from becoming permanent slaves and demonstrated His desire for people to live freely.

Although lending was permitted by the law, charging interest was not (for biblical regulations against usury, see Exod. 22:25–27; Lev. 25:36, 37; Deut. 23:19, 20). And yet, the interest that the lenders charged was small compared to what the nations around them charged. They were asked to pay 1 percent every month. Mesopotamian texts from the seventh century show interest of 50 percent for silver and 100 percent for grain annually. Thus, the 12 percent interest per year was low compared to the practice of the countries in Mesopotamia. But overall, according to God's Word, the only thing the creditors did wrong was to charge interest (Neh. 5:10), and surprisingly, the people didn't even mention that in their grievance. Everything else was within the social norm as well as within the provisions of the law. So, why is Nehemiah "very angry"? Remarkably, he doesn't act right away but gives the matter some serious thought.

The fact that Nehemiah deals with the issue so decisively is very admirable. He doesn't leave a grievance alone just because it doesn't technically break the law or is socially acceptable, even "nice" compared to the practices of the land. It was the spirit of the law that was transgressed in this situation. Especially during a time of economic hardship, it was the duty of the people to help each other. God is on the side of the oppressed and needy, and He had to commission prophets to speak against the evils and violence committed against the poor.

**What are ways that, even unintentionally, we can follow the letter of the law while violating the spirit behind it? See Mic. 6:8.**

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## Nehemiah Acts

Seemingly, the rebuke to the nobles and rulers—“each of you is exacting usury from his brother” (*Neh. 5:7, NKJV*)—didn’t bring the desired results. Thus, Nehemiah did not stop there but continued to fight for the oppressed among them. He could have just said that he had tried to teach the nobles and rulers but it didn’t work, and so he was forced to drop the issue. After all, these were the rich and powerful of the land that he would be going up against. But he was not satisfied until a solution to the problem was implemented, even if he created powerful enemies in the process.

**Read Nehemiah 5:7–12. What are Nehemiah’s arguments against what is going on? What does he use to persuade the people to right the wrong?**

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Nehemiah calls a great assembly—all of the people of Israel are brought together to deal with this matter. He is most likely counting on the possibility that when all the people are present, the leaders will be ashamed, perhaps even afraid, to continue their oppression.

Nehemiah’s initial argument centers on slavery. Many of the Jews, most likely Nehemiah included, purchased freedom for other Jews in servitude to foreigners. Now, he asks the nobles and rulers whether they find it acceptable to buy and sell their own people. Does it make sense for the Israelites to buy Jews and give them freedom only to have them end up as slaves of their own people?

The leaders offer no response because they see that this argument is reasonable; therefore, Nehemiah continues. He asks them, “Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies?” (*Neh. 5:9, ESV*). Then, Nehemiah admits that he himself has been lending the people money and grain. By declaring “let us stop charging interest” (*Neh. 5:10, NIV*), he affirmed the law that forbade this practice with fellow Hebrews and demonstrated that under his governorship, he would like people to be solicitous toward each other. Amazingly, the response is unanimous. The leaders agree to restore everything to the people.

**Have you done wrong to anyone? Most of us, if honest, would have to answer yes. What’s stopping you, in whatever degree possible, from making restitution, even now?**

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## An Oath

**Read** Nehemiah 5:12, 13. Why does Nehemiah pronounce a curse against those who do not uphold their part of the agreement?

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Even though the leaders agree to restore and give back what they have confiscated, Nehemiah is not satisfied with mere words. He needs solid proof; therefore, he makes them swear an oath before the priests. This action also gave the proceedings legal validity in case he had to reference the agreement later.

But why does he pronounce a curse? Nehemiah performs a symbolic act of gathering up his garments as if to hold something in them and then shaking them out as a sign of losing it. Thus, those who would go against this oath would lose everything. It was customary to utter curses in order to impress upon others the significance of a certain law or rule. The people also were less likely to go against the law when a curse was associated with the breaking of it. Nehemiah apparently felt that this was such an important issue that he needed to do something drastic in order to enhance the probability of its success.

**What** do the following texts in the Old Testament teach us about the sanctity of oaths for these people? *Num. 30:2; Deut. 23:21–23; Eccl. 5:4, 5; Lev. 19:12; Gen. 26:31.*

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In the end, speech is a powerful gift that God has given to humans; it exists as something radically different from what animals have. And there is power in our words, the power even of life and death. Hence we need to be very careful in what we say, in what we promise to do, and in what verbal commitments we make. It also is important that our deeds match our words. How many people have been turned off to Christianity by those whose words sound Christian but whose actions are anything but?

**Think about just how much impact your words have on others. How can we learn to be very careful in what we say, when we say it, and how we say it?**

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## Nehemiah's Example

**Read** Nehemiah 5:14–19. What reasons does Nehemiah give for not demanding “the governor’s provisions [fees]” (*Neh. 5:18, NKJV*) from the people?

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Nehemiah most likely wrote the account in these verses after his return to the court of King Artaxerxes, after his 12 years of governorship in Judah. Although governors were entitled to receive revenue from their subjects, Nehemiah never claimed this right, but rather financed his own living. Not only did he pay for his own expenses, but he also provided for his family, as well as the whole court. Zerubbabel, the first governor, is the only other governor whose name we know. When Nehemiah says “the former governors,” he is most likely referring to the governors in between Zerubbabel and himself. As a result, by the time he was done with his term in office, he very likely lost money. Rather than acquiring riches, as one would expect from a prestigious position, he probably forfeited wealth and possessions. Nehemiah was wealthy, which is why he could provide the daily food for many people, and he was generous in supplying plenty to others (*Neh. 5:17, 18*).

Though it was not the same thing as what Abraham did after the rescue of those taken captive by some of the surrounding nations (*see Genesis 14*), what Nehemiah does here nevertheless reveals the same crucial principle.

**Read** Nehemiah 5:19. What is he saying there, and how do we understand this in terms of the gospel?

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What we see with Nehemiah is an example of someone who put the Lord and the Lord’s work before his own personal gain and advantage. It’s a good lesson for us all, regardless of our particular situation. It’s easy to work for the Lord when it doesn’t cost us much.

**Read Philippians 2:3–8. In what ways, right now, can you reveal in your own life the self-denying principles expressed here?**

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**Further Thought:** Read Ellen G. White, “A Rebuke Against Extortion,” pp. 646–652, in *Prophets and Kings*.

“As Nehemiah heard of this cruel oppression, his soul was filled with indignation. ‘I was very angry,’ he says, ‘when I heard their cry and these words.’ He saw that if he succeeded in breaking up the oppressive custom of exaction he must take a decided stand for justice. With characteristic energy and determination he went to work to bring relief to his brethren.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 648.

“Jesus proceeded to lay down a principle that would make oath taking needless. He teaches that the exact truth should be the law of speech. ‘Let your speech be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: and whatsoever is more than these is of the evil one.’ R.V.”—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 67.

“These words condemn all those meaningless phrases and expletives that border on profanity. They condemn the deceptive compliments, the evasion of truth, the flattering phrases, the exaggerations, the misrepresentations in trade, that are current in society and in the business world. They teach that no one who tries to appear what he is not, or whose words do not convey the real sentiment of his heart, can be called truthful.”—Page 68.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Why does selfishness lie at the core of our human problems when dealing with finances and interpersonal relationships?
- 2 How can God’s people avoid greediness? What is God’s provision against it? (Study the following texts: *Isa. 58:3–12* and *Mic. 6:6–8*.)
- 3 Dwell more on the gift of speech and the power of our words. What does John 1:1, 2 mean when it calls Jesus “the Word”? How does this help us understand the importance of words and what they mean?
- 4 It’s amazing that thousands of years ago Jesus said that the poor would always be among us. We also are admonished to help those in need. How do these two ideas fit together in helping motivate Christians to work for those who are less fortunate?

## ***Part I: Overview***

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**Key Text:** *Nehemiah 5:11, 15, 16*

**Study Focus:** *Nehemiah 5*

Nehemiah 5 describes how Nehemiah deals with injustice among the exiles. While they rebuild Jerusalem's wall, uniting together to fight against their enemies, all is not well among the ranks. A famine in the land leaves some of the families without the financial ability to pay the Persian taxes or even to obtain food.

Therefore, the Jews mortgage their homes, fields, and vineyards. After mortgaging property fails to improve their financial situation, the people must figure out other ways to pay the tax and procure food. Because debt slavery was a common occurrence at the time, the Israelites, following the custom, sold their children or themselves to their own kinsman in order to be able to work off the debt. When Nehemiah finds out that the Israelites have been buying their own people in order to provide for those families, his anger flares. Although this custom was permitted by law, Nehemiah stands up against it as an injustice. He confronts some of the most powerful Jewish people and leaders. He asks whether it is just for the people to win their freedom by being brought to Israel only to lose it again at the hands of their own brothers and sisters. Eventually, he persuades the leaders that their behavior is ethically wrong and that they should restore all that they had taken from the poor. Nehemiah is an example of standing up for what is right, even when powerful people are involved in the injustice. Their position and prestige does not stop Nehemiah from speaking out against the wrong.

## ***Part II: Commentary***

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### **Structure of Nehemiah 5**

Nehemiah 5 has a clear thematic structure and can be divided into the following units:

- I. People's troubles and complaints and Nehemiah's decisive actions (*Neh. 5:1-13*)
  1. People's reasons for grievance (*Neh. 5:1-5*)
  2. Nehemiah's anger and rebuke (*Neh. 5:6-7a*)
  3. Nehemiah's call for a public assembly, and his charge against leaders (*Neh. 5:7b-8a*)

4. Leaders' silence (*Neh. 5:8b*)
5. Nehemiah's admonishment of leaders to walk in the fear of God and to return properties to people and repair the losses (*Neh. 5:9–11*)
6. Leaders' positive response (*Neh. 5:12a*)
7. Oath of leaders, Nehemiah's symbolic action, and people's grateful praises to the Lord (*Neh. 5:12b–13*)
- II. Nehemiah's 12 years of diligent and unselfish ministry (*Neh. 5:14–16*)
- III. Nehemiah's daily generous supply for numerous people and visitors (*Neh. 5:17, 18*)
- IV. Nehemiah's prayer for mercy (*Neh. 5:19*)

### Nehemiah Deals With Oppression or Injustice

In the midst of busy work for the Lord, there was a serious grievance expressed against the leaders of God's people. Poor people were oppressed, they experienced hunger, their children were enslaved, and their fields and vineyards were taken.

After Nehemiah is told what is going on among the Jews, he becomes "very angry." The Hebrew word for anger is *kharah* and means "to be angry" or "to burn with anger." *Kharah* denotes a strong response of anger. The word occurs often throughout the Bible. For example, it appears quite early in the Bible, referring to the anger of Cain when he realizes that his sacrifice is not accepted, or to the anger of Moses when he sees the people dancing and worshiping the calf (*Exod. 32:19, 22*). But *kharah* also is used of God's anger, which flares when the people of Israel act wickedly (*Exod. 4:14; Exod. 32:10, 11; Num. 11:1, 10, 33*).

However, the exact phrase "was"/"became very angry" occurs significantly in the following passages. In Genesis 34:7, we find this phrase used when Dinah is raped and her brothers (sons of Jacob) become very angry and eventually act in retaliation against the Shechemites by killing all the men of the city. In 2 Samuel 13:21, King David becomes very angry when he hears that his son Amnon raped his daughter Tamar (Amnon's own sister) although he does not act on the anger to address the injustice. A third usage of this phrase is in Nehemiah 4:7 when the enemies of the Jews find out that the Israelites are rebuilding the walls. The enemies get very angry because they see the rebuilding project as a serious threat to their power over the land. Two of the passages concern very serious offenses of rape, which gives us cause to see the story of injustice in Nehemiah as a serious offense, as well. Nehemiah is just as angry at what he hears as those who heard about the rape of their own sister or daughter. Nehemiah views injustice and unethical behavior on the same level. He also sees oppression in the same light. It is sobering and convicting to realize that oppression evoked such strong feelings of

anger in Nehemiah. He reacted to the oppression of the Jews personally, as if members of his own family were hurt.

But far from acting rashly, Nehemiah gives the situation some “serious thought” (*NKJV*). The words used for this phrase are *malakh* and *levav*. *Malakh* has two main meanings: (1) “to reign as king,” or “to be made a king,” and (2) “to ponder,” or “consider carefully within oneself.” *Levav* means “the heart.” Literally the verse says “in my heart.” Putting it together, it states that Nehemiah considered the matter carefully in his heart. Given that heart and mind are synonymous in Hebrew thought, Nehemiah is pondering and carefully assessing what should be done about the oppression and injustice among the Hebrews. Therefore, another important lesson we can learn from Nehemiah in this story is that we should not react in anger to injustice. Rather, we should take time to process what the best course of action will be.

It is good and important to show strong emotions against injustice; however, this does not justify being angry against any cause. For example, Cain’s anger was improper toward his brother Abel. Indifference against evil is one of the worst sins. When people see injustice and turn away from it as if it were not their problem, they demonstrate their coldness and loss of sensitivity toward sin. It is very dangerous when we are emotionally frozen and do not react to injustice. Our God is the God of justice; He is always on the side of the oppressed. Often prophets rebuked God’s people for failing to stop injustice. The prophets encouraged the people to treat the poor well by helping them, instructing the people to be gracious toward widows, orphans, and foreigners (for examples, see *Deut. 10:18, Deut. 14:29, Deut. 24:19, Deut. 27:19, and Zech. 7:10*).

After rebuking the Jewish nobles and rulers, who were silent and did not respond, Nehemiah calls together a “great assembly” so that all leaders would be confronted with the massive implications of their oppressive behavior and how it affected many people. Moreover, a large crowd would be intimidating, and the leaders would be much more likely to accede to his demands. Most important though, Nehemiah appealed to their responsibility before God. “‘Should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, or enemies?’” (*Neh. 5:9, NKJV*). Nehemiah uses the phrase “the fear of God” several times in the book (*Neh. 5:9, 15; Neh. 7:2*).

The concept of the “fear of God” was to remind the Jews of their desire to “walk” with God, make their decisions in respect to His will, and to live for Him. That is why the Jews came back to Jerusalem; they came in order to be and live as “responsible people of God.” They realized that their forefathers had abandoned God, and they wanted to

reverse that. Nehemiah's rebuke silences them because they finally realize that they have not been living without reproach and have fallen back into the habits they have been taught in the past or that they have picked up from the nations around them. They cannot be a light to the nations around them if they act the same way (even in a lesser measure) as before, oppressing the less fortunate for personal gain.

Nehemiah was not protesting the act of lending, as he himself was lending people grain and money. He spoke against charging interest. Thus, he demanded that the leaders return the properties they confiscated and pay back the interest they charged.

Amazingly, the leaders respond positively and promise to restore everything. Afterward the priests are called so that an oath may be sworn between the rulers and the priests (*Neh. 5:12, 13*). The people "did according to this promise" (*Neh. 5:13, NKJV*). The text implies that after this oath, all the people—the nobles, the officials, and the general population—worked together, creating new business methods that upheld the rights of all the people.

### **Nehemiah Models Care**

The chapter ends with an excerpt that explains that Nehemiah was the governor of Judah. Although he had every right to exact taxes from the people he governed, he lived by his conscience and did not add more burdens to the already-stressed population who had to send taxes to the Persians. Instead, Nehemiah used his own money (wages from Persia) to provide for the people of his household and all who needed a place to eat. He generously offered what he had to others. He did not do his job in order to become richer but in order to serve. Nehemiah lived out Mark 10:43, 44: "Whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all" (*NKJV*). He promoted justice and a humble attitude of service.

## ***Part III: Life Application***

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Use the following question as an opener to the lesson for the week:

- 1. What is, or was, the hardest thing you have ever had to do to take care of your family or loved ones? Share with the class.**

As a teacher, be willing to share something personal. When you as a leader share, you encourage others to share too. Mutual sharing will lead to greater

closeness in your group. Just as Nehemiah cared for people, we also demonstrate we care by sharing with each other as brothers and sisters. We all go through tough times, and it is encouraging to hear from others about what they experienced and how they handled certain situations as followers of Jesus.

Ask the following questions at the end of the lesson as further development of the concept and application:

1. **Brainstorm with your class about what you can do specifically to help the poor, marginalized, or the hurting in your area. How can you promote diversity? What project can your class adopt to make a difference in someone's life?**

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2. **In what ways can you be like Nehemiah and stand up decisively against injustice? Think about the following:**

- a. **In what ways can you stand against injustice at home?**

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- b. **At work?**

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- c. **At school?**

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- d. **With friends?**

3. **In Nehemiah's time, the oppression came from lending and charging interest, and demanding servitude of persons. In today's world (or in your profession), what are the ways we need to guard against to avoid oppressing others?**

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## TOTAL MEMBER INVOLVEMENT TIME

### *What is Total Member Involvement?*

- ▶ Total Member Involvement (TMI) is a full-scale, world-church evangelistic thrust that involves every member, every church, every administrative entity, every type of public outreach ministry, as well as personal and institutional outreach.
- ▶ It is a calendar-driven, intentional soul-winning plan that discovers the needs of families, friends, and neighbors. Then it shares how God fulfills every need, resulting in church planting and church growth, with a focus on retaining, preaching, sharing, and discipling.

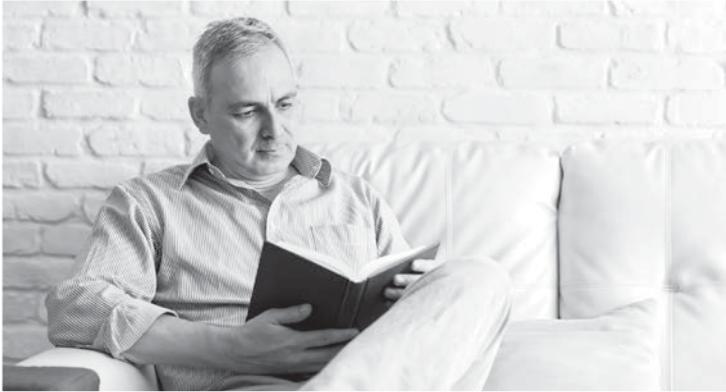
### HOW TO IMPLEMENT TMI TIME IN SABBATH SCHOOL

#### *Dedicate the first 15 minutes\* of each lesson to plan, pray and share:*

- ▶ **TMI IN-REACH:** Plan to visit, pray, care for missing or hurting members, and distribute territory assignments. Pray and discuss ways to minister to the needs of church families, inactive members, youth, women and men, and various ways to get the church family involved.
- ▶ **TMI OUT-REACH:** Pray and discuss ways of reaching your community, city, and world, fulfilling the Gospel Commission by sowing, reaping, and keeping. Involve all ministries in the church as you plan short-term and long-term soul-winning projects. TMI is about intentional acts of kindness. Here are some practical ways to become personally involved: 1. Develop the habit of finding needs in your community. 2. Make plans to address those needs. 3. Pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.
- ▶ **TMI UP-REACH:** Lesson Study. Encourage members to engage in individual Bible study—make study of the Bible in Sabbath School participatory. Study for transformation, not information.

TMI	Time	Explanation
Fellowship Outreach World Mission	15 min.*	Pray, plan, organize for action. Care for missing members. Schedule outreach.
Lesson Study	45 min.*	Involve everyone in the study of the lesson. Ask questions. Highlight key texts.
Lunch		Plan lunch for the class after worship. <b>THEN GO OUT AND REACH SOMEONE!</b>

*\*Adjust times as necessary.*

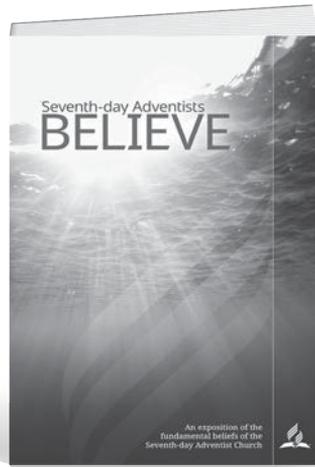


**Explore, appraise, study, and substantiate each doctrine truth for yourself.**

# Seventh-day Adventists Believe

General Conference Ministerial Department

*Seventh-day Adventists Believe* is the official statement of Seventh-day Adventist beliefs, including any changes voted at the 2015 General Conference Session. Each chapter begins with a short summary statement of the belief as voted by the General Conference in session. Study questions for deeper insight can be found at the end of each chapter.



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