

Turning Hearts *in the* End Time



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Mal. 4:5, 6; Matt. 11:14, 15; 17:10; 1 Kings 16:29–17:24; 1 Kings 18:20–45; Matt. 3:2.*

Memory Text: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers; lest I come and smite the earth with a curse” (*Malachi 4:5, 6, NKJV*).

Our lives are lived in stages. Sometimes those stages are going well; sometimes not. Sometimes families are intact and strong; sometimes they are fragile or even shattered.

Whatever the phase, whatever the stage, whatever the condition of ourselves or our family at the moment, we can and must live in the light of God's promises, clinging to them with all our heart and soul and might because, in the end, they are our only hope. But what a great hope they are. The Word of God exudes promises, promises that, whatever stage our life or our family is in, we can claim for ourselves, our loved ones, our family, and our church.

In this, the final week of the quarter, we are going to look at some Bible stories, promises, and experiences from a variety of contexts. As we do, we will seek to draw lessons for ourselves today, whatever our context happens to be. For, most likely, whoever you are, wherever you are, whatever the phase of your life, you have struggles, fears, worries. Fortunately, we worship a God who not only knows what we face but who is, we can be sure, ahead of them all, as well.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 29.

The Prophecy of Turned Hearts

Compare the prediction of the coming of Elijah with New Testament references to this event. *Mal. 4:5, 6; Matt. 11:14, 15; 17:10; Mark 6:15; Luke 1:17.*

In the days of Malachi, God’s appeal to the nation, “ ‘Return to Me, and I will return to you,’ ” met with the arrogant response, “ ‘ “In what way shall we return?” ’ ” (*Mal. 3:7, NKJV*). The frustrated prophet announced that one further opportunity for revival would be given. Recalling the heart-turning reform begun by Elijah (*1 Kings 18:37*), Malachi predicted his coming again to “ ‘turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers’ ” (*Mal. 4:6, NKJV*).

A Jewish tradition developed that Elijah would appear personally as the herald of the Messiah (*compare Matt. 17:10, Mark 6:15*). However, the New Testament presents John the Baptist as a fulfillment of the prophecy (*Matt. 11:14, 15; Luke 1:17*).

What do you think the phrase “turn the hearts” means?

Several applications are possible for this phrase: *It refers to the reconciliation of the people of Israel with the Lord.* God as Father (*Isa. 63:16*) has turned from His wrath toward His children (*Mic. 7:18, 19*) and calls them to return to Him (*Isa. 44:22, Mal. 3:7*). *It refers to the reconnecting of later generations with their faithful ancestors through covenant renewal.* The prophetic call for God’s people to follow the faith of the patriarchs was given repeatedly in the Old Testament. Whether the land continued as a blessed dwelling place was directly related to covenant faithfulness (*Deut. 4:29–31*). *It refers to the restoration and renewal of family relationships.* Parent-child relationships are a practical expression of covenant faithfulness with God. Here, too, fulfillment of responsibilities to parents and children are interwoven with continued inheritance of the land and God’s blessing (*Prov. 2:21*).

What is the connection between a restored relationship with God and restored relationships in our families? Why must one precede the other?

Family Reunion

The introduction of Baal worship into Israel by Jezebel, the Sidonian wife of King Ahab, hastened the nation's downward moral slide. The teachings of God that uplifted marriage, family, and sexuality were overshadowed by such practices as incest, prostitution, and other sexual perversions. Into this arena of conflict over worship stepped Elijah, whose very name, "Jehovah is my God," rebuked Baal.

What experience of Elijah associated him with overturning heathen beliefs and bringing new life to families? *1 Kings 16:29–17:24; compare Luke 4:25, 26.*

Elijah was a marked man after announcing the curse of drought upon the land. God sheltered him in an unlikely place—at a poor widow's dwelling in Zarephath of Sidon, near Jezebel's hometown. Elijah greeted the widow with a grim test: to use her last bits of kindling, oil, and flour to feed him and to trust God for her future. Her faith became legendary. Jesus Himself would later commend her (*Luke 4:26*). As her oil and meal stretched out over many days, the woman came to understand more about Jehovah. Then, tragically, her only son fell sick and died. In expressing her grief to Elijah, she reflected the familiar religion around her, the perverted beliefs that now engulfed Israel, in which one's sin could require child sacrifice (*1 Kings 17:18; compare Jer. 19:5, Mic. 6:7*).

What effect did the reunion with her son have upon the Phoenician widow's spiritual experience? *1 Kings 17:24*. **What can we learn from her comments?**

The mother's response reveals the effect of the Elijah message. Faith in God and His Word arises in the heart as, by His power, life is restored and the family is reunited. Many today may give assent as doctrines are preached but are lukewarm in their spiritual experience. However, when the truths of God's Word are experienced personally and revival and restoration occur in home relationships, conviction comes ever so much more powerfully upon the heart.

What are some family reunions that you are still waiting for? What promises of God are you clinging to that give you hope of that reunion?

Turning Hearts at the Altar

Read 1 Kings 18:20–45. Write out on the lines below what, essentially, this whole episode is about. Though the context is totally different, how can the principles seen in this story apply to family life?

On Mount Carmel, Elijah longed for covenant renewal on the part of his nation, a turning back to the faith of their fathers that would bring healing to their lives, their homes, and their land.

The hour of the evening sacrifice. After the heathen priests' failure with their sacrifice, Elijah took his turn. He was deliberate. The time of day drew attention to God's redemptive plan revealed in the sanctuary service (*compare Exod. 29:41*). The invitation " 'Come near to me' " (*1 Kings 18:30, NKJV*) reminds us of the Savior welcoming sinners (*compare Matt. 11:28*). Parents who are pained at the waywardness of a child can be assured that God loves him or her as truly as He loved the Israelites. God works unceasingly to draw wayward ones to Him.

Elijah's focus on Jehovah's altar finds its equivalent in our time when Jesus and His saving grace are uplifted in families. Family worship is an opportunity to talk to Him in prayer, to speak of Him to one another, to receive anew His free gift of salvation, and to give our hearts time to reflect on His teachings.

The response Elijah requested would signal that God had taken them back to Himself. First Kings 18:37 says that " 'this people may know . . . You have turned their hearts back to You again' " (*NKJV*). We cannot turn our hearts to God; we can respond only to His grace, and that He freely gives.

The all-consuming fire fell, not upon the guilty but upon the sacrifice, pointing forward to Jesus, who was made "sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (*2 Cor. 5:21, NKJV*). Confession and praise burst from the people's lips. Because they did not respond to God's call, the false priests were executed. Then refreshing rains ended the curse upon the land.

In what condition is your home "altar"? In what specific ways can you "rebuild the altar" in your home, if indeed it needs some rebuilding?

Turning Hearts at the Jordan

Alongside Gabriel's prediction (*Luke 1:17*) and Jesus' confirmation of him as the predicted Elijah (*Matt. 11:14; 17:12, 13*), the Gospel writers affirm that John the Baptist was the "messenger" who would prepare the way of the Lord (*Matt. 11:10, Mark 1:2, Luke 7:27; compare Mal. 3:1*).

Note the main aspects of John's message. In what way was his message one of "heart turning"? *Matt. 3:2, 8; 14:4; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14.*

Like a farmer who plows hard ground to prepare it to receive seed, John denounced sin and urged sinners to repent. Human nature is such that, without self-examination, without an awareness of one's true condition, no need is felt for something better. His message turned people toward the holiness of God's requirements and their need of His perfect righteousness. Genuine repentance is always marked by humility and looking to God for help to change one's behavior. By exposing the shallow, self-centered hypocrisy of those who claimed Abraham as their father, he sought to open the deeper meaning of the faith of their fathers.

How did the message of John the Baptist prepare the way for Jesus? *John 1:35–37, 3:27–30.*

John had been shown that Jesus was the Lamb of God. When he introduced Jesus this way (*John 1:29, 36*), he literally turned people to the Lord. Andrew and another of John's disciples, John, the Gospel writer who wrote the account of that day, left the Baptist's side and became Jesus' disciples. Not only does the Elijah message point to the need for repentance; it identifies the One who saves from sin, generates excitement about Him, and introduces people to Him.

If John the Baptist were to step into your home, what do you think he would be saying to you?

Turning Hearts in the Last Days

In a sense, we as Adventists see ourselves in the role of John the Baptist. The herald of reform and repentance sought to prepare the way for the first coming of Jesus; we, as a movement, see ourselves doing the same for the Second Coming.

Read prayerfully Luke 1:17. How do these words capture our message?

Our heavenly Father has turned the hearts of His children back to Himself and has turned the hearts of His children to each other through the Cross of Christ. The Elijah message pleads with families to believe this incredible good news (*2 Cor. 5:18–21; compare Eph. 2:11–18*) and to be people filled with grace as His Spirit yields a harvest of love in them.

The world needs desperately a demonstration of unselfish, caring, lasting commitment—and unswerving devotion to God. By God’s grace Christian families can provide such a demonstration. Yet, we must remember that the message we have for the world also is for ourselves. Until the principles of gospel, unity, love, and self-sacrifice are made manifest among us, especially in our own families, we will be powerless to share this message with others. All the eloquent sermons, all the logic and biblical presentations, aren’t enough: The world needs to see manifest in our lives, especially in our family lives, the repentance, the turned hearts, the love, and the commitment we preach about. Just as John the Baptist had a power that changed lives and made his preaching effective, we can do the same through the grace of God—but only to the degree that we are willing to cooperate.

We are, through Jesus, part of the family in heaven (*Eph. 3:15*). Thus, whether we are a family of one or more, we are called to be witnesses for the God we profess to serve, and nothing can make our witness more effective than to show the world what a family, regardless of its size, can be through the power of the gospel.

What can you do, in a special way, to show those closest to you, whether immediate family or someone else, that you love and care about them?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “Carmel,” pp. 143–154, in *Prophets and Kings*; “The Voice in the Wilderness,” pp. 97–108, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“Our message must be as direct as was that of John. He rebuked kings for their iniquity. Notwithstanding the peril his life was in, he never allowed truth to languish on his lips. Our work in this age must be as faithfully done.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 1184.

Discussion Questions:

- ① As a class, discuss the relevance of the Elijah message to your local church. What can you do to help your church understand the message and the church’s role in helping to spread it?
- ② Have those who are willing share with the class their own personal experiences of having their “hearts turned.” What changes came about? What effect did this experience have upon their lives and the lives of their families?
- ③ If we see ourselves in the role of John the Baptist, what should we expect to happen to us? What is the implicit message in that answer?
- ④ As a class, work on a paragraph, a kind of “Declaration of Family Principles,” that best encapsulates what the biblical idea for a family is. What criteria would you use to help craft those principles? What have you learned this quarter that might have helped you in establishing what these principles might be? Be prepared to share it with the whole church.
- ⑤ What promises can you as a parent claim for children who, at least at this stage, have run away from the Lord?

My Three Wishes

By LU SHEN-XIONG

A year after my baptism, I applied for a new job as a truck driver because of Sabbath conflicts at my previous workplace.

During the job interview, I announced that I had three requests:

- No Sabbath work
- No pork in the company meal boxes
- A loan of 50,000 Taiwanese dollars

The boss was stunned by my boldness. But he said, “Go work today, and we’ll talk about this afterward.” He wanted to see how I would work.

After the workday finished, the boss called me over.

“You can work Sunday instead of Sabbath, but why don’t you eat pork?” he asked.

His company, like many companies in Taiwan, provided employees with daily meal boxes. “Pork is cheaper than chicken and beef, so why don’t you eat it?” he questioned.

“This is my religious belief,” I replied.

The boss thought for a moment.

“Fine,” he said. “I won’t give you pork to eat. But why the loan of 50,000 Taiwanese dollars?”

I explained that I had been injured in a car accident recently and had no money after the hospital bills and the expense of buying a new car.

“If I give you 50,000, how will you pay it back?” he asked. “Will you give me 10,000 a month or maybe 20,000 per month?”

“No,” I said. “I’ll give you 1,000 a month.”

The boss couldn’t believe his ears. A monthly payment of 1,000 Taiwanese dollars meant it would take more than four years to return the loan.

But something—or Someone—impressed the boss to give me a chance, and he agreed to this last request.

Six months into the new job, the boss called me over.

“I’m forgiving your debt because you are such a good worker,” he said.

Now I couldn’t believe my ears. Working for God is good!

Before the job interview I had prayed to God, “I want to interview for this new job, but You know that I have these three wishes. Please intervene.” God answered my prayer.

When we do gospel work, nothing can stand in our way.



Nearly 20 years on, LU SHEN-XIONG, 60, continues to work full-time as a truck driver. He also is recognized as one of the most effective lay church leaders in Taiwan, turning three struggling congregations into robust churches. Read more at the link: bit.ly/taiwan-truck-driver.

Part I: Overview

Whether one is reading the covenant curses laid out in Deuteronomy 28 or the stinging rebukes of the prophets (Isaiah through Malachi), a certain pattern emerges. It goes something like this:

- A. I, God, have saved you and treated you well.
- B. You have rejected Me.
- C. Terrible devastation will follow your rebellion.
- D. In the end, I will forgive, save, and restore you.

Part C is sometimes so bleak and graphic (*Deuteronomy 28, Ezekiel 23*) that one would pause before using it for a family devotion. But if one keeps turning the pages, a light of hope emerges—hope that prophets will return (*Mal. 4:5*), hearts will turn (*Mal. 4:6*), and God will restore all things.

Can we apply this hope to families that are falling apart, spouses who don't believe, or children who are giving the world a try? This week's lesson encourages us to do just that. God's restoration of this sin-fallen planet is an irrevocable promise. We can't apply that promise in a way that undermines free will. But if anyone can persuade a heart, the Spirit of God can. In this hope we place our confidence.

Elijah's experience testifies that God will go to great lengths to regain the loyalty of His people. A drought, the raising of a widow's dead son, and a showdown with the opposing tribal god Baal shows that God does not give up easily on Israel (*1 Kings 17:1, 17:22, 18:19*).

Can you imagine the family conversation at dinner tables the night Israel saw fire come down from heaven? When God sees Israel, what He really sees are its people and their families. From this angle, all of God's attempts to woo Israel back to Himself are an attempt to reach the family.

John the Baptist is the New Testament Elijah (*Matt. 11:13, 14*). He has Jesus' endorsement as being both more than a prophet and unparalleled among "those born of women" (*Matt. 11:11, ESV*). His message and life ought to hold our attention, especially in regard to encouraging others (and perhaps ourselves) to return to the Lord.

Part II: Commentary

Scripture

The life and words of John the Baptist provide rich material for a few

lessons on the subject of returning to the Lord that could be used in a variety of contexts, including the family. The following texts and commentary serve as starting points for you, as the teacher, for further study or for class discussions.

“*‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’*” (Matt. 3:2, *ESV*). This command of John’s is the identical phrase that Jesus spoke in His ministry (Matt. 4:17). *Commanding* people to repent may sound tactless in our ears today, but it’s important to remember that John was relatively successful. People were baptized, “confessing their sins” (Matt. 3:6). What gave such impetus to this message? It was that something big was right around the corner—the kingdom of God. To have God’s kingdom finally break into history was the covenant climax and the hope and dream of every Jew. “The coming of God’s kingdom is what we have waited for our entire lives, for generations!” one could hear people say. John and Jesus leveraged Israel’s anticipation for, and hope in, God’s kingdom (Luke 11:20, 17:21). Their message, in large part, applies to us today. The revolution Jesus began, and the kingdom He inaugurated, is still in full swing. The Spirit has been poured out, is accessible, and is changing hearts now as He did in New Testament times. The consummation of Christ’s kingdom at His second coming is drawing near. What, one might ask, are you waiting for?

“*‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’*” (Matt. 3:7, *ESV*). Obviously, the command to repent wasn’t strong enough for a Pharisee or Sadducee (Matt. 3:7). Usually when we think of “turning the hearts” of family or friends to the Lord, we think of those uninterested in God or those blatantly abandoning any semblance of Christian ethics. But what about churchgoers’ hearts that have grown cold and critical? Who’s warning them that they are in danger? The answer often is no one. The Pharisees and Sadducees are the religious leaders of their day, who, along with others in positions of respect, dole out criticisms toward others but can’t tolerate the same toward themselves. From them, John asks for *more* than verbal repentance. Words are cheap; these folks are masters of religious verbosity. John’s imperative for them is somewhat obscure in older translations, “Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance” (Matt. 3:8). What does *that* exactly mean? It means that we must dispense with the religious jargon and instead do actions (fruits) that *are worthy of, give evidence of, or prove* that we have repented (changed, turned) toward God. Our words, our beliefs, and our love are all authenticated by actions. This outward display of an inward conversion is the test the hypocrite, unless transformed, can’t pass.

“*‘For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, “He has a demon.” The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!”*’ ” (Matt. 11:18, 19, *ESV*). Local churches and the

unfortunate cliques and politics that are sometimes found therein can get in the way of a believer's sincere efforts to encourage a friend or loved one to return to Jesus. How many times has it been said, "How can I invite so-and-so to church with all that is going on here?" There is definitely a spectrum of beliefs and practices within our church that can cause tensions. However, the fact that Jesus and John were condemned for appearing to be on opposite ends of that spectrum should offer some perspective. John's strict lifestyle pegged him as being demon-possessed. Jesus' preferred associations resulted in His being labeled as an indulgent glutton. Yet, Messiah Jesus and His prophetic forerunner John were both on the same page. There existed a profound harmony between them, coupled with a deep commitment to God and to spreading His kingdom message.

This harmony is encouraging news for one returning to the Lord and starting to attend church again. It means that the different "camps" within a given church, though looking very different, may both be striving to please the same God. It means that God accepts their worship, imperfect though it may be. It also means that one does not have to figure out which camp is the "right" one and then feel obligated to join. You can never go wrong in joining Jesus' side—proving all things and holding on to the good (*1 Thess. 5:21*). This perspective does not mean that all groups are equally correct in what they maintain. But it should serve to remind returning members that intrachurch factions have no authority to set the stage for an individual's church experience. Always look for the third option between two extremes and remember the wise words of G. K. Chesterton:

"The whole modern world has divided itself into Conservatives and Progressives. The business of Progressives is to go on making mistakes. The business of the Conservatives is to prevent the mistakes from being corrected."—*Illustrated London News*, April 19, 1924, retrieved from https://www.christiantoday.com/article/the_wit_and_wisdom_of_gk_chesterton_10_quotes_to_make_you_think/54937.htm.

Both John and Jesus led lifestyles that others pointed to in order to discredit their relationship with God. Remind people returning to the Lord that if the people in Jesus' day did that to the Son of God and the greatest " 'born among women,' " people in our day might do it to them too. Brace yourself and count it a privilege to walk in those men's shoes.

" 'He must increase, but I must decrease' " (*John 3:30, ESV*). John the Baptist was the first prophetic voice in 400 years since Malachi. Through him, the return of Elijah was fulfilled. John had disciples who called him

rabbi. He received the highest endorsement from the Messiah Himself. His fame was real and widespread throughout Jerusalem. But his influence and popularity were about to take a nosedive in contrast to the skyrocketing fame of his younger cousin. His response to that was “ ‘Therefore this joy of mine is now complete’ ” (*John 3:29, ESV*). If there is a quality of John’s character worth imitating, it is his humility. Returning to the Lord, and perhaps to a church one once belonged to, can be a humbling experience. But humility is a beautiful thing. If it can be embraced on one’s journey back to Christ, the journey will be all the sweeter.

Part III: Life Application

Joseph invited “lost sheep” back to church and then watched them stand bitter and cold as smiling church members and old friends greeted them welcomingly. Afterward, Joseph asked them how their experience had gone, and they said, “No one was nice to us. They just stared. They were probably judging us.” What actually happened was that they projected onto everyone else their own feelings of bitterness and resentment, while the members were doing all they could to be kind. But indulging this perspective allowed them to walk away from church and God feeling justified because “those ‘church people’ think they are better than everyone else.”

Oh, for the humility of a John the Baptist in these cases. A man who could watch his disciples and influence migrate to another. A man whose greatest joy was not in being in the spotlight of the admiration of others but in seeing his Lord exalted. Church is a place to worship. It is a place to sing to God, pray to God, study God, and commit one’s life to God. If we go to church but ignore the purpose of why we go—if we ignore God—then our wounded egos will take His place.

- 1. Recount the above story to your class. What kind of prework could/should be done before bringing the “lost sheep” through the church doors?**

- 2. Ask the class to share testimonies they've heard of regarding why someone returned to church. What, if any, are the patterns that emerge? What can they teach us? How can they help us become more successful in our efforts to woo members back and retain them?**

Jesus talked about the importance of helping the needy. “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me” (*Matt. 25:40, NKJV*).

Along with proclaiming the great truths about salvation, the sanctuary, the state of the dead, and the perpetuity of the law, we are to minister to the needs of others. As Ellen G. White famously wrote: “Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me.’ ”—*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 143.

And yet is it not even better when helping others in their immediate and temporal need, also to point them to the “reason for the hope that is in you” (*1 Pet. 3:15, NKJV*), and that is the promise of eternal life in Christ?

This quarter’s study, entitled “*The Least of These*”: *Ministering to Those in Need*, by Jonathan Duffy, will focus on what God’s Word says, and it says a lot about our duty to minister to the needs of those around us.

Lesson 1—God Created . . .

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **God: A Glimpse of Creation** (*Gen. 1:1*)

MONDAY: **A Complete World** (*Gen. 1:31*)

TUESDAY: **Stewards of the Earth** (*Gen. 2:15*)

WEDNESDAY: **A Broken World** (*Gen. 3:1–5*)

THURSDAY: **The Family Web of Humanity** (*Matt. 22:39*)

Memory Text—*Proverbs 14:31*

Sabbath Gem: Our world continues to be something that God loves, despite sin. While God set in motion His plan for redeeming and re-creating the world, He also has given us roles to play in the fulfillment of His larger plans.

Lesson 2—Blueprint for a Better World

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **The God Who Hears** (*Exod. 3:7*)

MONDAY: **The Ten Commandments** (*Exod. 20:1–17*)

TUESDAY: **Slaves, Widows, Fatherless, Foreigners** (*Exod. 22:21–23*)

WEDNESDAY: **Second Tithing** (*Deut. 26:12*)

THURSDAY: **The Year of the Jubilee** (*Lev. 25:10–17*)

Memory Text—*Leviticus 19:18*

Sabbath Gem: With the creation of the people of Israel, God was now working with an entire nation. So, He set about giving them laws that would be a way to live so that those who were blessed by God would be able to bless others, as well. This principle still exists today.

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