

# Waging Love




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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Isa. 55:1–7; Isa. 55:6–13; Isa. 58:1–12; Isa. 58:13, 14.*

**Memory Text:** “If you extend your soul to the hungry and satisfy the afflicted soul, then your light shall dawn in the darkness, and your darkness shall be as the noonday” (*Isaiah 58:10, NKJV*).

A Jewish cantor (worship leader) and his wife who lived in Lincoln, Nebraska, began receiving threatening and obscene phone calls. They discovered the calls came from a leader of an American hate group, the Ku Klux Klan. Knowing his identity, they could have turned him in to the police. But they decided on a more radical approach. When they learned that he was crippled, they showed up at his door with dinner! He was utterly flabbergasted. His hatred melted before their love. The couple kept visiting him, and the friendship grew. He even thought of becoming Jewish!

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry . . . ?” (*Isa. 58:6, 7, NRSV*). Ironically, the couple in Lincoln kept such a fast by sharing their feast with a hungry *oppressor*, thereby setting him free from his own bonds of unjust prejudice!

Let's learn more about this important spiritual principle as depicted by the prophet Isaiah.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 13.

## Buy Something Free? *(Isa. 55:1–7)*

**Read** this text: “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!” (*Isa. 55:1, NRSV*). What contradiction do you see there?

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Suppose you took food and stood on the street in a big city and announced to the hungry and homeless there: “You who have no money, come, buy and eat!” (*NIV*). But how can they buy if they have no money?

However, if you add the words, as Isaiah did: “without money and without price” (*Isa. 55:1, NRSV*), the point becomes clearer. Isaiah appeals to people to accept forgiveness (*Isa. 55:7*) freely. Yet, the word “buy” emphasizes that what God offers people to meet their needs and desires is valuable; so, receiving it requires a transaction (transfer of something of worth). God freely offers forgiveness within the framework of a restored covenant relation with His people, but not because it was free for Him: He bought it at the terrible, blood-drenched price of His own Servant. Though free, it came at an astonishing cost to Himself.

**What** was the price for our salvation? (*See 1 Pet. 1:18, 19.*)

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**How** does Isaiah’s approach to salvation compare with that of the New Testament? (*Eph. 2:8, 9.*)

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Isaiah encapsulates the gospel in the Old Testament, and it is the same as the gospel in the New Testament. There was no “old-covenant” salvation by works, to be superseded by “new-covenant” salvation by grace. Ever since God’s promise of a Deliverer to Adam and Eve (*Gen. 3:15*), there has been only one way to salvation: by grace through faith (*Eph. 2:8*); “the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (*Rom. 6:23, NRSV*). From the ancient Gilgamesh, who did heroic exploits in a vain search for eternal life, to modern actors who believe in reincarnation, people have tried all kinds of different routes to salvation, but all are fruitless. This is why they need to know about Jesus and what He has accomplished for them at the cross.

**Salvation is free in that there’s nothing we can do to earn it. Our works can never be good enough to save us. Yet, at the same time, it can cost us everything. What does that mean?** (*See, for instance, Matt. 10:39, Luke 9:23, Luke 14:26, Phil. 3:8.*)

## High Thoughts and Ways *(Isa. 55:6–13)*

**Why** does God say His thoughts and ways are higher than ours, “as the heavens are higher than the earth” (*Isa. 55:8, 9, NRSV*)? What do you think that means?

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There’s no question that the God who created a universe in which even some of the simplest things contain mysteries that our minds cannot begin to fathom is a God whose ways are beyond what we can ever begin to fully grasp. This knowledge of His infinite superiority should, therefore, make it easier for us to humbly receive His help. (*See Isa. 57:15.*)

**Read** Isaiah 55:6–9. What is the context in which the Lord talks about how His ways and thoughts are higher than what we can imagine? What is He saying He does that is so hard for us to grasp?

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Of all the great mysteries of the universe, no doubt the greatest one of all is the plan of salvation, a mystery we can only barely begin to understand. (*See Eph. 6:19.*) That the Creator of the universe would stoop to clothe Himself in humanity, live a life of toil and suffering, only then to die in our behalf, a sacrifice for sin, all in order that He could pardon us and show mercy to us is a truth that will thrill the hearts of God’s created beings for all the ages of eternity.

“The theme of redemption is one that angels desire to look into; it will be the science and the song of the redeemed throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity. Is it not worthy of careful thought and study? . . .

“The subject is inexhaustible. The study of the incarnation of Christ, His atoning sacrifice, and mediatorial work will employ the mind of the diligent student as long as time shall last; and looking to heaven with its unnumbered years, he will exclaim, ‘Great is the mystery of godliness.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *My Life Today*, p. 360.

**Look at the bad things you have done: the people whom you have hurt, the unkind words you have spoken, the ways in which you have disappointed others, not to mention yourself. And yet, through Jesus, you can be forgiven for all these things and stand, right now, perfect and righteous in the sight of God. If that isn’t a mystery, what is?**

**Fast Friends** (*Isa. 58:1–8*)**What** is the “fast” referred to in Isaiah 58:3?

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This must be the fast of the Day of Atonement, the only fast commanded by God (*Lev. 16:29, 31; Lev. 23:27–32*). This is confirmed in Isaiah 58:3 by the parallel expression “humble ourselves” (*NRSV*), which follows the terminology of Leviticus. Humbling or afflicting oneself referred to various forms of self-denial, including fasting (*compare Ps. 35:13; Dan. 10:2, 3, 12*).

The Day of Atonement setting explains God’s command to “Lift up your voice like a trumpet!” (*Isa. 58:1, NRSV*). This kind of ram’s horn trumpet, called a shofar, was to be blown as a memorial or reminder 10 days before the Day of Atonement (*Lev. 23:24*). Furthermore, every fiftieth year, on the Day of Atonement, it was to announce the beginning of the jubilee year of freedom (*Lev. 25:9, 10; compare Isa. 27:13*).

**Read** Isaiah 58:3–7. What is the Lord complaining to them about? What was wrong with their “fast”?

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It seems the people were expecting the Lord to congratulate them for their “piety.” Of course, they had it all backward. Practicing self-denial on the Day of Atonement was to express their gratitude and loyalty to Him on the day the high priest went before God to cleanse the sanctuary and thereby cleanse them from sins for which they had already been forgiven (*Leviticus 16, compare Leviticus 4*). Their acts should have been done in thankfulness and gratitude to the God who saved them in the day of judgment, not in order to get God’s approval for their “piety” and “devotion.” After all, it was the sins of the people that had defiled God’s sanctuary. It had to be cleansed with blood that was shed because of *what they had done*.

**One of the crucial lessons that comes from these texts points to the difference between being merely religious and truly being a follower of Christ. How do we see the difference there? How do we, as individuals, face the same danger as the individuals presented here, which is believing that our religious rituals somehow show we are really following the Lord as He asks us to?**

## Fast Fight *(Isa. 58:1–12)*

Ten days after trumpet blasts have reminded God's people that the Lord is acclaimed as their King on the very Day of Atonement when their humility through self-denial is to affirm their loyalty to Him as King, the prophet lifts up his voice like a trumpet to declare that they are rebelling against Him (*Isa. 58:1*).

**Read** through Isaiah 58:6–12. What are acts that God considers true acts of self-denial? After all, what's harder: to skip a few meals or to use your own time and money to feed the homeless in your town? What is the principle to be seen behind these acts? How do these acts comprise true religion?

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Anyone can be religious; anyone can go through religious rituals, even the right rituals, at the right time, with all the right formulas. But that alone is not what the Lord wants. Look at the life of Jesus. However faithful He was to the religious rituals of His time, the Gospel writers focused so much more on His acts of mercy, healing, feeding, and forgiveness to those in need than on His faithfulness to ritual.

The Lord seeks a church, a people, who will preach truth to the world. But what will better attract people to the truth as it is in Jesus: strict adherence to dietary laws or a willingness to help the hungry? Strict rest on the Sabbath or a willingness to spend your own time and energy helping those who are in need?

**Read** Matthew 25:40 and James 1:27. What do they tell us?

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Look at the blessings in Isaiah 58 that God says will come to those who seek to minister to the less fortunate. What do you think the Lord is saying to us here? Are these promises of supernatural intervention in our lives if we do these things? Or, perhaps, is He telling us of the natural blessing we receive by giving of ourselves to others as opposed to being selfish, greedy, and self-absorbed? Explain your answer.

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## A Time for Us *(Isa. 58:13, 14)*

**Why** does Isaiah discuss the Sabbath in Isaiah 58:13, 14? What connection does this have with the Day of Atonement setting of the earlier verses?

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The yearly Day of Atonement *was* a sabbath day. This special ceremonial sabbath was like the weekly Sabbath in that all work of any kind was prohibited (*Lev. 23:27–32*). Therefore, as recognized by early Seventh-day Adventists, the rule that the Day of Atonement period of rest lasted from evening to evening (*Lev. 23:32*) informs us that the same must be true of the weekly Sabbath. Similarly, although the primary context of Isaiah 58:13, 14 is the ceremonial Day of Atonement Sabbath, its message also applies to the weekly Sabbath.

**Read** Isaiah 58:13. What kind of day is the Sabbath supposed to be? How can we make our Sabbath experience like the one depicted here? Also, when you think about what the Sabbath represents, why should it be the kind of day described in this text?

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Isaiah 58 deals with three main themes: self-denial, social kindness, and the Sabbath.

What are the connections between them?

First, all three involve concentration upon God, His priorities, and recognition of our dependence upon Him. Second, by doing all three, humans pursue holiness by emulating God (*see Lev. 19:2*), who, in the form of Christ, humbled Himself (*Phil. 2:8*), who demonstrates self-sacrificing kindness (*John 3:16*), and who ceased from labor on the Sabbath at the end of the Creation week (*Gen. 2:2, 3; Exod. 20:11*).

**Look at these other ties between the themes of self-denial, social kindness, and the Sabbath as depicted in Isaiah 58: Sabbath freedom from weekly toil is kind to people because it lets them be refreshed (*Exod. 23:12, Mark 2:27*); Jesus showed that kind acts are appropriate on the Sabbath (*Mark 3:1–5, John 5:1–17*); true Sabbath keeping brings joy (*Isa. 58:14*), as does helping others (*Isa. 58:10, 11*). What must change in your own life in order to experience these blessings yourself?**

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**Further Thought:** “No one can practice real benevolence without self-denial. Only by a life of simplicity, self-denial, and close economy, is it possible for us to accomplish the work appointed us as Christ’s representatives. Pride and worldly ambition must be put out of our hearts. In all our work, the principle of unselfishness revealed in Christ’s life is to be carried out. Upon the walls of our homes, the pictures, the furnishings, we are to read, ‘Bring the poor that are cast out to thy house.’ On our wardrobes we are to see written, as with the finger of God, ‘Clothe the naked.’ In the dining room, on the table laden with abundant food, we should see traced, ‘Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry?’ Isaiah 58:7.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 206.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Look at the question Isaiah asked the people of his time: “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” (*Isa. 55:2, NRSV*). Ask yourself, in what ways, if any, are we doing the same thing, laboring for that which does not satisfy? Why is it so easy to fall into that very trap?
- 2 If self-denial, social kindness, and the Sabbath were important on the Day of Atonement in Isaiah’s day, are they just as important in the end-time day of atonement (*Dan. 8:14*), during which God’s jubilee trumpet will signal ultimate freedom at the second coming of Christ (*1 Cor. 15:52; compare Lev. 25:9, 10*)? Explain your answer.
- 3 In class, open up a discussion on the question of Sabbath keeping. What do you think Isaiah means when he says we should turn away from doing our own pleasure on the Sabbath, and yet, at the same time, call it a delight (*Isa. 58:13*)? How can we do both? Keep in mind the context of the complete text of Isaiah 58.

**Summary:** In Isaiah 55 and 58, the prophet appeals to his people to give up their thoughts and ways and return to God, whose ideal for their happiness is so much higher than their own. He mercifully pardons and then insists that the pardoned be merciful, in harmony with the spirit of the Day of Atonement and the Sabbath, because the gift of God’s forgiveness, if it is truly received, transforms the heart.

## Unequally Yoked

By ZENG-MEI CHANG

I didn't want to marry my husband because I was raised a Seventh-day Adventist and he belonged to another Christian denomination in southern Taiwan. But our parents wanted us to get married, and we had to obey them.

So, I told my future husband, Ming-Huang Wu, "We can get married, but I will not change my religion." He didn't have a problem with that.

But then we started to discuss the wedding. I wanted it to be held in an Adventist church, but he said, "No! I am the husband, so it should be in my church."

I tried to find a compromise. "Let's have the wedding outside then, not in any church," I said. "But an Adventist pastor must officiate at the wedding."

We argued back and forth. Finally, I said, "If it is not an Adventist pastor, then I will not marry you." He asked his mother for advice, and she gave permission for an Adventist pastor. But she had secret plans. She thought that I would join her faith after the wedding. She also wanted me to change her son, who drank.

I remained uncomfortable with the idea of marrying outside my faith, and I told this to Ming-Huang. But by that point the whole village knew about the wedding. If we called it off, we would lose face. Ming-Huang became an Adventist so he wouldn't lose face. A month before the wedding, he took Bible studies and was baptized. I'll never forget that day. He wept as he came out of the water because he wanted to get married, but he didn't want to leave his old life of drinking.

Ming-Huang was a beaten man. He lost a great deal of self-esteem by marrying me. During the first seven months of our marriage, I also fed him healthy food and taught him how to live a healthy lifestyle. Our neighbors noticed that he wasn't the same. "You're a new man," they said.

Ming-Huang, however, didn't want to be a new man. After our daughter was born, he returned to drinking.

Ten years passed, and we had a second daughter. We had many conflicts over faith. One day it was too much, and I took the two children, our baby and 10-year-old girl, to the home of friends. I wanted my husband to be alone in the house and to get a taste of what divorce would be like.

Ming-Huang didn't want a divorce. He looked for me for three days and when he found me, changed his ways. He truly became a new man.



Today, he is a caring husband and father. He also is a church elder. However, I wouldn't follow this "missionary" path again. I married him because I thought I could change him with God's help. But the Bible is right when it says, "Do not be unequally yoked" (*1 Cor. 6:14, NKJV*). It's better to marry a spouse of your own faith. Solomon, the world's wisest man, learned this lesson the hard way. Me too.



**Study Focus:** *Isaiah 55****Part I: Overview***

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Isaiah 55 is a unique chapter. It has brought many people to an understanding of how salvation is mediated to all sinners who want to be saved. Salvation is not so much about what people do; it is all about what God has done in behalf of them through the Servant of the Lord.

The chapter can be divided into two sections. The first one encompasses verses 1 to 5, and the second one encompasses verses 6 to 13.

This lesson explores the two important expressions “to live” and “to seek” in connection with the loving invitation “Return unto the LORD.”

The three topics that will be explored are (1) mercy for everyone, (2) the way to get a true life, and (3) “return unto the LORD.”

***Part II: Commentary***

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**Mercy for Everyone**

The song of the Suffering Servant describes in a lively way the work of the Messiah in behalf of human beings. He suffers a vicarious death. Isaiah 54 reminds us that everything that God does for us is undertaken in order to procure our salvation: “For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you” (*Isa. 54:10, NRSV*). The chapter finishes with the assurance to His people that “their righteousness is of me, saith the LORD” (*Isa. 54:17*).

Thus, in loving language, Isaiah speaks of the redemption that God provides. However, the free and gracious invitation to all who are “hungry and thirsty” needs to be accepted. That is the topic discussed in Isaiah 55: ultimately, people need to accept the salvation that the Lord has provided. For this reason, the chapter opens with the following invitation:

“Every one who thirsts, come to the waters;  
And you who have no money come, buy and eat.  
Come, buy wine and milk  
Without money and without cost” (*Isa. 55:1, NASB*).

This invitation opens the door for everyone, which includes people

from everywhere. The invitation goes far beyond the borders of Judah. No one need pay, because the impossible debt has been miraculously satisfied for each one of us.

In Isaiah 55:3, in clear parallelism, the author explains more about what that invitation entails:

- A. "Incline your ear,  
     B. and come unto me:  
 A'. hear,  
     B'. and your soul shall live."

It is interesting to note that the natural result of *come unto me* is that *your soul shall live*. The Hebrew verb in the last sentence is *hyh*, and the basic meaning is "live," or "remain alive" (David J. A. Clines, ed., *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, vol. 3, pp. 204, 205). It has the connotation of "to save the life." C. F. Keil has suggested that this expression reflects the idea of not only remaining alive but of obtaining the possession of true life (*Minor Prophets*, Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978], vol. 10, p. 279). What seems to be suggested here is that *hyh* is used in the sense of "to come alive again, or to revive."

Thus, according to Isaiah 55:3, the only way to find true life, as a national entity and as individuals, is by hearing the invitation of God and coming to Him.

### The Way to Get a True Life

The second section in Isaiah 55, verses 6 to 13, reinforces the ideas expressed in the first section. It does so by using another key expression. That expression is the Hebrew verb *drš*, which the NASB has rendered "seek," as in

- "Seek the LORD while He may be found;  
 Call upon Him while He is near" (*Isa. 55:6, NASB*).

The verb *drš* is used in the imperative, which means that it is not simply advice but a command. The basic meaning of *drš* is "to seek," which has the connotation of "worship and commitment." Other possible meanings are "consult, inquire of, seek guidance of; seek with care" (David J. A. Clines, ed., *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, vol. 2, p. 473; Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, p. 233).

Seeking the Lord is not something alien to the experience of the nation of Israel. The Israelites are advised to seek the Lord when they live among the pagan nations: "But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul" (*Deut. 4:29, NASB*).

To seek the Lord is also a personal experience. Rebekah seeks the

Lord during her difficult pregnancy: “But the children struggled together within her; and she said, ‘If it is so, why then am I this way?’ So she went to inquire of the LORD” (*Gen. 25:22, NASB*). In the same way, God’s people are encouraged to look for the Lord particularly in times of crisis.

Second Kings 22 narrates the experience of King Josiah when he says, “Go, inquire of the LORD for me and the people and all Judah concerning the words of this book that has been found” (*2 Kings 22:13, NASB*).

In some cases, the experience of seeking the Lord is related to true worship, and it stands as the antithesis to idolatry (*Jer. 8:2*). “But there is some good in you, for you have removed the Asheroth from the land and you have set your heart to seek God” (*2 Chron. 19:3, NASB*).

To seek the Lord also is linked with a covenant relationship: “They entered into the covenant to seek the LORD God of their fathers with all their heart and soul” (*2 Chron. 15:12, NASB*). And likewise, of Jehosaphat it is said that he did not walk in the way of the Baals, “but sought the God of his father,” David, and “followed His commandments” (*2 Chron. 17:4, NASB*). The psalmist avers, “How blessed are those who observe His testimonies, who seek Him with all their heart” (*Ps. 119:2, NASB*).

Not to seek the Lord leads, as a consequence, to behavior that misses the mark, as is seen in the case of Rehoboam, of whom it was said, “He did evil because he did not set his heart to seek the LORD” (*2 Chron. 12:14, NASB*). Not seeking the Lord also reflects a lack of understanding: “The LORD has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God” (*Ps. 14:2, NASB*).

A legal use of *drš* with Yahweh as subject carries the sense of a requirement. David Denninger suggests that “prophets warn against two abuses: seeking [those] other than Yahweh and seeking him emptily” (Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 1, p. 995).

In short, the act of seeking the Lord is always indicative of restoring the relationship and getting true life. Isaiah 58:2 provides more insights about seeking the Lord:

“Yet they seek Me day by day and delight to know My ways,  
As a nation that has done righteousness  
And has not forsaken the ordinance of their God.  
They ask Me for just decisions,  
They delight in the nearness of God” (*NASB*).

### “Return Unto the LORD”

Isaiah 55 begins with an open invitation for those who desire salvation. It is open to everyone. It is an invitation that brings radical change in one’s

life, as the recipient moves from one salvific experience to another. Why is such a change necessary? It is because of sin.

The book is clear about what sin represents to God. The message of hope for Judah in Isaiah 40 starts by saying, “She [Jerusalem] hath received of the LORD’s hand double for all her sins” (*Isa. 40:2*). Sin in Isaiah is defined as walking far away from the ways of the Lord. It is to live in opposition to the instruction of God (*Isa. 42:24*). In other words, choosing a life of sin is to choose to live in alienation from God: “But your iniquities have separated between you and your God” (*Isa. 59:2*). Thus, sin is a serious impediment in the relationship between God and humanity.

Isaiah 55, particularly verse 7, takes the same tack: “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts.” Here *forsake* means “to relinquish, to leave.” Thus, it does not include the idea of saving a human being in (or with) his or her sins, but from his or her sins. It is important to notice the sympathetic relationship between “way” (in the Hebrew Bible it denotes “to live”) and “thoughts.”

The first part of verse 7 helps us to understand the process that we must undergo in order for God to bestow upon us a restored life. The way to forsake the life of sin is to return to the way of the Lord. It is on the way toward the Lord that the sinner forsakes *his or her ways* and becomes, step by step, a new person, thereby acquiring a new life:

- A. “and let him return unto the LORD,
- B. and he will have mercy upon him;
- A'. and to our God,
- B'. for he will abundantly pardon.”

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

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1. ***Listen or hear*** are imperative verbs that the Bible often uses to frame God’s counsel to His people through His messengers. For instance, in Deuteronomy 4:1, we read: “O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you” (*NASB*). What has been your experience with hearing and listening to the Word of God?
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2. Meditate upon the following excerpt in relation to God's love: "Can you believe that when the poor sinner longs to return, longs to forsake his sins, the Lord sternly withholds him from coming to His feet in repentance? Away with such thoughts! Nothing can hurt your own soul more than to entertain such a conception of our heavenly Father. He hates sin, but He loves the sinner, and He gave Himself in the person of Christ, that all who would might be saved and have eternal blessedness in the kingdom of glory. What stronger or more tender language could have been employed than He has chosen in which to express His love toward us? He declares, 'Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee' (Isaiah 49:15)." —Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 54. How have you experienced the reality of God's love in your own life?

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3. Ask members of your class to talk about their experiences in "seeking the Lord."

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