

# The Roots of Restlessness



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Matt. 10:34–39, Luke 12:13–21, Phil. 2:5–8, Luke 22:14–30, Matt. 23:1–13.*

**Memory Text:** “For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice” (*James 3:16, ESV*).

Aspens are beautiful trees, reaching 45 to 90 feet (15 to 30 meters) in height. They thrive in cold climates with cool summers. Their wood is used in furniture and also for making matches and paper. Deer and other animals often feed on young aspen trees during hard winters, as their bark contains many nutrients. Aspens need lots of sunshine, and they grow all the time—even in winter, making them important winter food sources for different animals.

Aspens, however, are most notorious for the fact that they have one of the largest root systems in the plant world. The roots spread by underground suckers and form a colony that can spread relatively quickly, covering large areas. Individual aspen trees can live up to 150 years, but the larger organism below the ground can live for thousands of years.

In this week's study, we want to discover some of the roots of our restlessness. There are many things that can prevent us from finding true rest in Jesus. Some of these are obvious and don't require much attention. Others may be less obvious to us, and, as with the huge aspen organism unseen beneath the ground, we may not always be conscious of the attitudes and actions that separate us from our Savior.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 17.

## Jesus Brings Division

Very few people enjoy conflict. We crave harmony and peace. We even teach seminars on peacemaking and conflict resolution in our churches or institutions.

**Read** Matthew 10:34–39. What does Jesus mean when He says that He did not come to bring peace but to bring a sword? What does this mean, considering that Jesus is “the Prince of Peace” (*Isa. 9:6*)?

Jesus’ statement in Matthew 10:34–39 is shockingly counterintuitive. The Savior, who came as a helpless babe instead of a powerful king surrounded by elite bodyguards, who preached love to both neighbors and enemies, now tells His followers that He brings division and struggles. His disciples and His audience may have wondered, as we are wondering: *How can this be?*

Matthew 10:35–39 is really about allegiances and loyalties. Quoting Micah 7:6, Jesus challenges His audience to make choices for eternity. A son should love and honor his parents. That was a legal requirement of the law that Moses had received on the mountain. It was part of God’s required mode of operation; and yet, if that love would trump the hearer’s commitment to Jesus, it required a tough decision. A father and a mother should love and care for their children. Yet, if that love would top the parents’ commitment to Jesus, it required a difficult decision. First things first, Jesus reminds us in this passage.

Jesus expresses this choice by formulating three sentences, each using the term *worthy*. Worthiness is not based on high moral standards or even overcoming sin. Worthiness is based on one’s relationship with Jesus. We are worthy when we choose Him above everything else—including mother, father, or children. We choose the suffering of the cross and follow Jesus.

“I have no higher wish than to see our youth imbued with that spirit of pure religion which will lead them to take up the cross and follow Jesus. Go forth, young disciples of Christ, controlled by principle, clad in the robes of purity and righteousness. Your Saviour will guide you into the position best suited to your talents and where you can be most useful.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 87.

**Sometimes we are forced to bear a cross not of our own choosing, and sometimes we voluntarily bear a cross. Either way, what is the key to bearing that cross faithfully?**

## Selfishness

As in the case of the aspen and its larger underground system, selfishness is part of the huge underground system called “sin,” which keeps us from finding true rest in Jesus. Of all the expressions of sin in our lives, selfishness seems to be the easiest to manifest, doesn’t it? For most of us, selfishness is as natural as breathing.

**Read** Luke 12:13–21. Describe the problem highlighted in Jesus’ parable. Is planning for the future selfish and expressing disregard for God’s kingdom? If not, or at least not necessarily, then what is Jesus warning us against?

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This parable appears only in the Gospel of Luke and is told in response to an anonymous question from the audience. Asked about a question regarding an inheritance, Jesus responds by rejecting the role of the arbiter between brothers. Instead, He opts to put His finger on the bigger underlying problem, namely, selfishness. He digs deeper to show the root mass underneath our individual actions.

**Think** about expressions of selfishness in your life. How does selfishness affect our relationships with God, with our spouses and families, with our church families, with our neighbors, and with colleagues at work? What key is found in Philippians 2:5–8?

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By focusing solely on his own needs and ambitions, the anonymous rich man of Jesus’ parable forgot to take into consideration unseen heavenly realities. Bigger, better, and more are not the foundational principles of God’s kingdom. Paul offers us a glimpse into what motivated Jesus as He decided to become our Substitute.

Philippians 2:5–8 describes the blueprint of unselfishness, humility, and love. If love for God and others does not drive our choices and priorities, we will continue to build more barns for ourselves here and put less treasure in heaven (*Matt. 6:20*).

**Why is it so easy to get caught up in the desire for wealth and material possessions? Though we all need a certain amount of money to survive, why does it seem to be that no matter how much we have, we always want more?**

## Ambition

Studying the last week of Jesus' ministry on earth prior to His crucifixion is always a source of encouragement and inspiration. It also offers a snapshot of how restlessness and ambition drive people to do and say ill-advised things.

**Read** Luke 22:14-30 and think about Jesus' emotions as He hears His disciples argue during this solemn meal over who among them should be considered the greatest (Luke 22:24). Why did the disciples get side-tracked from this momentous occasion and focus on human greatness?

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We seldom discuss with others who is the greatest in our church, our family, or our workplace. We may think about it a lot, but who, really, openly talks about it?

This was not the first time that this question was raised in the community of Jesus' followers. Matthew 18:1 reports the disciples' bringing the question to Jesus and framing it in a more abstract way: " 'Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' " (NKJV). Jesus' answer involves an object lesson. After calling a child, He sets the child in the center of the group. Eyes are opened wide; eyebrows are raised. Jesus' action requires an explanation, and in Matthew 18:3 the Master offers that, too: " 'Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven' " (NKJV).

Conversion is foundational for finding true rest in Jesus. We recognize that we need outside help. We suddenly realize that we cannot depend on ourselves but need to rely on Jesus. We experience a transformation of our values and ambitions. Jesus tells His disciples: *Trust Me and rely on Me as this child does. True greatness is giving up your rights and embracing kingdom values.*

Unfortunately, it seems that the disciples had not yet learned this lesson by the time Jesus ate the Last Supper with them. Their bickering and infighting ruined a moment of perfect communion that was never to be repeated.

All this, even after years of being with Jesus, ministering with Jesus, and hearing and learning at His feet? What a sad example of just how corrupt the human heart remains! On the more positive side, however, think about the ever-present reality of the Lord's grace, that despite this pathetic discussion among His followers, Jesus didn't give up on them.

**Why should keeping our focus on Jesus on the cross be a powerful remedy against the desire for self-exaltation, which, as fallen human beings, all of us are subject to?**

## Hypocrisy

A hypocrite is somebody who plays acts, who wants to appear to be somebody he or she is not. The term is used seven times in Matthew 23 in a discourse in which Jesus publicly shames the scribes and Pharisees, the very center of Jewish religious leadership (*Matt. 23:13, 14, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29*). The Gospels show us Jesus offering grace and forgiveness to adulterers, tax collectors, prostitutes, and even murderers, but He demonstrated little tolerance for hypocrites (*see the many additional references in Matt. 6:2, 5, 16; Matt. 7:5; Matt. 15:7–9; Matt. 22:18*).

**Read** Matthew 23:1–13 and list four main characteristics of a hypocrite mentioned by Jesus.

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Jesus associates four characteristics with the scribes and Pharisees. In the spectrum of Judaism in the first century A.D., the Pharisees represented the conservative religious right. They were interested in the written and oral law and emphasized ritual purity. On the other side of the spectrum were the Sadducees, a group of mostly wealthy leaders, often associated with the elite priestly class. They were highly Hellenized (i.e., they spoke Greek and were at home in Greek philosophy) and did not believe in a judgment or an afterlife. We would describe them as liberals. Both groups were guilty of hypocrisy.

According to Jesus, we are hypocrites if we don't do what we say, when we make religion harder for others without applying the same standards to ourselves, when we want others to applaud our religious fervor, and when we require honor and recognition that belongs only to our heavenly Father.

No matter how sharp and to the point His words, Jesus' engagement with those He called hypocrites was nevertheless full of love and concern, even for these hypocrites.

“Divine pity marked the countenance of the Son of God as He cast one lingering look upon the temple and then upon His hearers. In a voice choked by deep anguish of heart and bitter tears He exclaimed, ‘O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!’ ”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 620.

**Why do you not need to be a religious leader to be guilty of the kind of hypocrisy that Jesus so soundly condemns here? How can we learn to see any such hypocrisy in ourselves, if it exists, and how can we get rid of it?**

## Uprooting Restlessness

**Read** John 14:1–6. In the midst of our own restlessness, what can we do so that our hearts will not feel troubled? What is the key to overcoming division, selfishness, ambition, hypocrisy, and truly finding rest?

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Overcoming restlessness always begins with Jesus. He is *the* way, *the* truth, and *the* life. He knows the right direction when we wander aimlessly in the wilderness of our media-saturated world; as the divine Lawgiver He Himself is the personified Truth, and His Spirit will guide us into *all* truth (*John 16:13*). When we are hurt, tired, worn out, sick, and discouraged, He is *the* life—not just any life. In fact, He has promised us life in abundance (*John 10:10*). This includes our eternal home and eternal life, but it also entails a different quality of life here. The Creator surely is able to give abundantly and beyond measure, even now.

“Let not your heart be troubled” is an invitation to live in anticipation. When we feel low, He is able to put us on a higher plain. When we struggle with darkness and sin, He is the One who not only began but also will finish His good work in us (*Phil. 1:6*).

No matter how bad things get here (and yes, they can get bad), look at the promise we have been given in Jesus. He is preparing a “place” for us, a place where our pain, restlessness, and suffering will forever be banished. That is the hope we have been given in Christ Jesus, and it is offered to all of us, no matter who we are, no matter our background, and no matter how sordid our lives have been or are now.

The key, however, is for us to come to God anyway in our weakness, in our hurt, in our brokenness, and in our general fallen state, knowing that He accepts us despite these things. That is what grace is all about, and why we must believe that we have been given it if we seek for it in faith.

**Read** Jeremiah 3:22. What does God ask us to do, and then, what will He do for us in response?

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**Think about Jesus’ words:** “ ‘I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also’ ” (*John 14:3, NKJV*). What should this tell us about how central and crucial the promise of the Second Coming is? Especially for us as Adventists (with our understanding of death), why is the promise of the Second Coming so precious?

**Further Thought:** “There can be no growth or fruitfulness in the life that is centered in self. If you have accepted Christ as a personal Saviour, you are to forget yourself, and try to help others. Talk of the love of Christ, tell of His goodness. Do every duty that presents itself. Carry the burden of souls upon your heart, and by every means in your power seek to save the lost. As you receive the Spirit of Christ—the Spirit of unselfish love and labor for others—you will grow and bring forth fruit. The graces of the Spirit will ripen in your character. Your faith will increase, your convictions deepen, your love be made perfect. More and more you will reflect the likeness of Christ in all that is pure, noble, and lovely.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, pp. 67, 68.

In dealing with issues between church members, “conversation has been protracted for hours between the parties concerned, and not only has their time been wasted, but the servants of God are held to listen to them, when the hearts of both parties are unsubdued by grace. If pride and selfishness were laid aside, five minutes would remove most difficulties.”—Ellen G. White, *Early Writings*, p. 119.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, think about practical ways of overcoming selfishness. How can you keep each other accountable so that these ideas can become a reality?
- 2 Ambitions are not inherently bad. Yet, how can we anticipate and imagine great things from God without falling into the trap of being consumed by ambition?
- 3 Most of us don't show ambition, hypocrisy, selfishness, or envy on the outside. We are very capable of offering a more benign facade. Like the huge root system of an aspen tree, however, all these negative characteristics lurk below the surface. What does Spirit-guided character transformation look like in practice? How can we overcome the root of restlessness and find true rest in Jesus?
- 4 Dwell more on your answer to Thursday's final question about the importance of the Second Coming. After all, without it, what hope do we have? Without it, what good would Christ's first coming have done for us, knowing that the dead sleep until the resurrection, which happens only at the Second Coming?

# Mystery Bible

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

A COVID-19 lockdown left Sandile Khumalo on his knees in South Africa's biggest city, Johannesburg. The national lockdown, among the most stringent in the world, shuttered the three churches where Sandile serves as pastor in the city of 5.5 million people. Tough regulations closed parks and banned jogging, dog walking, and even the sale of cigarettes and alcohol.

Like many pastors, Sandile moved his ministry online and livestreamed sermons to members of his three churches: Johannesburg Central, Johannesburg CBD, and Johannesburg Innercity. Sometimes he received encouraging messages from people inspired by his preaching. But he longed to do more. He earnestly prayed to God to send an unbeliever who needed to meet Jesus during the pandemic. What happened next surprised him.

One day, Sandile received a WhatsApp text message from an unfamiliar number. The sender introduced himself as Hilton and sent a photo of a Bible that he had found in a minivan taxi while traveling to work. Minivan taxis, which carry multiple passengers, are a common sight in Johannesburg.

"I picked up your Bible in the taxi," Hilton wrote.

He explained that he had opened the Bible and, finding Sandile's name and contact information inside the cover, decided to write.

Sandile looked at the photo with interest. He owned several Bibles but did not recognize the one in the photo. The Bible looked new, and its burgundy-red leather cover indicated that it was not cheap. Furthermore, Sandile had not ridden in a minivan taxi in years. He checked with his wife and other family members, and they confirmed that he had never owned such a Bible.

Hilton was not bothered that Sandile did not recognize the Bible. He was more interested in finding out what the Bible said. He had never read a Bible, and he was eager to start. He asked Sandile whether he would be willing to help him read it. He wanted Bible studies.

Sandile knew at that moment that God had heard his prayers for an unbeliever who needed to meet Jesus during the pandemic. God had answered his prayers in a miraculous way. "I praise God for this unique opportunity for ministry of which I still cannot make sense," Sandile said. "I hope our interactions will lead to Hilton accepting Jesus Christ as his personal Savior."



*This story illustrates a key component of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's I Will Go strategic plan: "Demonstrable increase in total members and congregations in all urban areas of one million people or more" (KPI 2.3). Learn more about the strategic plan at [IWillGo2020.org](http://IWillGo2020.org).*