

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the difference between the gospel as announcement and the gospel as explanation? Why does the difference matter for how we actually experience our faith?
2. Where have you seen – in yourself or in church life – doctrine functioning as a destination rather than a map back to the announcement?
3. Paul's structure in Ephesians is indicative first, imperative second – gift, then response. Where in your own spiritual life do you find yourself reversing that order, treating ethics as the entry point rather than the fruit?
4. If someone who knew nothing about your church watched how it spent its energy – its conversations, its conflicts, its emphases – would they conclude that the church's primary commitment was to an announcement or to a way of life? What would need to change?
5. The River Flow this week used the image of the gospel as a river, doctrine as the banks, and ethics as what grows in the land the river runs through. Does that image hold for you? Where does it help, and where does it feel incomplete?
6. What would it look like for your small group, your family, or your congregation to re-center regularly on the announcement itself – not on what you believe about it or how you live because of it, but on the news that Christ died, rose, and reigns? What practices might help with that?
7. Adventism has historically carried both a strong doctrinal identity and a strong ethical one. What is the gift of that combination, and what is the danger? How do you personally navigate the tension between holding convictions firmly and keeping the announcement primary?

RIVER Flow

Cascading Sabbath into the Week

May 24-30, 2026

FIRST COMES THE ANNOUNCEMENT

Gospel. Doctrine. Ethics. Three things the church has always needed, and one problem the church has always had: we forget which one is first. We rush past the announcement to explain it. We turn the explanation into the main event. We pile ethical expectation on top of that, and before long the whole structure is standing on everything except the one thing that can actually hold it up. It happens slowly, without anyone intending it, and it happens in the best communities – the ones that care most about getting it right. The caring itself becomes the problem. We are so eager to describe the river that we forget to drink from it.

This week's River Flow moves through seven days, each one dwelling in a different facet of this essential distinction. The gospel is the river. Doctrine is the banks – they give the river its shape and direction. Ethics is what the water grows in the land it runs through. The river comes first. The banks serve it. The growth follows. When you mix these up, you don't get more Christianity – you get something else.

May the Lord give you grace this week to receive the announcement freshly – and to let what you have received flow freely from your life into the lives of everyone around you.

- Pastor Mel Baga, D.Min.
Lead Pastor, Auburn SDA Church

DAILY DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

SUNDAY, May 24 – What Kind of Announcement is This?

"Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, was buried, and was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures."

– 1 Corinthians 15:3-4

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-5

Reflect: The word gospel is a translation of the Greek euangelion. In the ancient world, a euangelion was what a herald announced when he ran into a village – out of breath, voice ragged – with news from the battlefield. The king has won. The war is over. You are free. It was announcement, not argument. Declaration, not instruction. The herald didn't explain what winning meant or tell you how to celebrate. He told you what happened, and he trusted the news to do its own work.

That's the form the gospel takes in the New Testament. "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, was buried, was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and appeared..." Paul is not inviting reflection on a theological system. He is announcing an event. Something has happened in the world, and the world has not been the same since.

This is where everything begins – not with what you believe about it, not with how you intend to live because of it, but with the announcement itself. The gospel is, first and most fundamentally, news. News from outside you. News that arrives before you have done anything. News that does not wait for your response before it is true.

Respond: Spend a few minutes sitting with this. What feels different about receiving news, compared to receiving instruction?

Pray: Lord, let the announcement land today before I try to explain it or apply it. Christ is risen. That is enough for this morning. Amen.

MONDAY, May 25 – What Was Actually Announced

"God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." – Acts 2:36

Read: Acts 2:22-24, 36

Reflect: When Peter stood up at Pentecost and opened his mouth, he didn't begin with doctrine. He didn't outline a theological system or present a plan. He began with a story, and he made a declaration: "This Jesus, whom you crucified, God has raised up, and made him both Lord and Christ."

That is the kerygma – the core proclamation of the early church. It is a series of historical claims, each one explosive in its own right. Jesus of Nazareth lived. Jesus died. Jesus was buried. God raised him. God exalted him. He will return. And right now, today, he is Lord. Not a concept. Not a category. Lord – the one under whose authority everything else stands.

For Paul, the gospel is not "you can be saved, and here's how." The gospel, for Paul, is "Jesus Christ is Lord." That announcement is what unleashes salvation. The two are not the same thing, even though one flows from the other.

This matters enormously. If the gospel is primarily a self-help announcement – here's how your life can get better, here's the plan for your personal peace – then it becomes about us first and Jesus second. But the apostolic announcement was always about Jesus first. What God did in him. What that means for the whole world. And then, as a result, what it means for you.

Respond: What would it look like to re-center this week on what was announced rather than on what you are trying to do?

Pray: Jesus, you are Lord before I understand it and before I deserve it. Let that be the ground I stand on today. Amen.

TUESDAY, May 26 – The Map Is Not the Territory

"You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me..."

– John 5:39-40

Read: John 5:39-40

Reflect: Doctrine is the church's faithful attempt to describe what the gospel announces. The creeds, the confessions, the great theological formulations of the centuries – these are maps. Good maps. Maps drawn by people who loved the territory deeply and wanted others to find their way through it without getting lost.

But a map is not the territory. The map of a river is not the river. You cannot drink from a map. You cannot swim in it. You cannot be carried by it. The danger is thinking that mastering the description is the same as receiving the thing described. It isn't.

Jesus said something jarring to the religious scholars of his day: you search the scriptures, he said, because you think that in them you have eternal life – and yet it is the scriptures that bear witness to me. They had the map. They could argue about the map. They had memorized every contour of the map. But they missed the territory standing right in front of them.

This is a particular temptation in traditions that prize doctrinal precision – and Adventism is one of them. The impulse to recover neglected biblical truth was real and good. But the pressure of defending and articulating and distinguishing can quietly produce a culture where faith becomes primarily doctrinal fidelity. Where being a good Christian means holding the correct positions. Where the map becomes the destination. Doctrine matters. It shapes how we understand the announcement, keeps us from going off the rails, helps us see connections we would otherwise miss. But the moment we start measuring faithfulness by how correctly someone can describe the gospel rather than how freely they have received it, we have confused the map for the river.

Respond: What doctrines about Jesus are you most confident in? And when did you last simply receive the announcement those doctrines are trying to describe?

Pray: Keep me from confusing the map for the river, Lord. Let every doctrine I hold lead me back to the announcement, not away from it. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, May 27 – When the Map Becomes the Destination

"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

– Romans 10:9

Read: Romans 10:9-10

Reflect: There is a particular kind of spiritual exhaustion that comes from trying to believe correctly as a primary act of devotion. If the goal is doctrinal precision – getting all the categories right, holding all the correct positions, standing on the right side of every theological boundary – then faith becomes a kind of intellectual performance. And performance is exhausting, because there is always another nuance, another question, another thing you might have gotten slightly wrong.

The answer to doctrinal exhaustion is not to care less about doctrine. It is to put doctrine back in its proper place – as the map that keeps returning you to the announcement, not as the destination itself.

This is a drift that happens quietly, and it doesn't require bad intentions to take hold. A community can be genuinely serious about Scripture, genuinely committed to truth, and still find that over time the energy of its common life has shifted – from receiving an announcement to defending a description of that announcement. When that happens, faith starts to feel like an exam you are always studying for rather than a river you are standing in.

The announcement is always already complete. Christ died. He rose. He reigns. That is not tentative. It does not depend on how precisely you can describe the mechanics of atonement. It does not wait for you to resolve every theological puzzle before it goes into effect. The announcement is made. You are invited to receive it.

Respond: Is there a place in your life where correct belief has slowly become a substitute for actually receiving the news?

Pray: Forgive me for the times I have explained you more than I have received you, Lord. The news is enough. Let it land again today. Amen.

THURSDAY, May 28 – Ethics as Response, Not Entry

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."

– Ephesians 2:8

Read: Ephesians 2:8-10; 4:1

Reflect: Ephesians is organized around a crucial sequence. The first three chapters are almost entirely announcement and description – here is what God has done in Christ, here is the reality you now inhabit, here is the new creation that has broken into the world. Then comes chapter four, and the hinge: "I therefore urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called." Therefore. The ethics come after. The ethics flow from. The ethics are a response to what has already been announced and received, not an entry requirement into it.

Paul's pattern is consistent throughout: even where he begins with an imperative, he is always thinking back to the indicative that precedes it. "Imitate God as beloved children; walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave himself up for us." The command always draws back to the gift. The imperative always rests on the indicative. God initiates. We respond.

This sequence is easy to name and hard to maintain. Adventism knows this in its bones, because the tradition has always carried both a strong doctrinal identity and a strong ethical one – distinctive beliefs and a distinctive way of life. That combination is not wrong. But it creates a particular pressure. When a community is defined by what it knows and how it lives, the announcement can quietly migrate to the background. The doctrines become the thing to be mastered. The ethics become the thing to be maintained. And somewhere in the busyness of both, the news that made the whole thing possible stops being received with any freshness. What we might call doctrinism – the rush to define the gospel in precise doctrinal terms rather than simply announce it – is the theological version of this drift.

A person can recite every article of faith and still never have let the announcement do its actual work.

This is the difference between ethics as fruit and ethics as root. When ethics become the root – when the Christian life is primarily about trying to live correctly – everything gets heavy and anxious. Am I doing enough? Am I changing enough? Am I holy enough? But when ethics are the fruit – when they grow out of a gospel already received, an announcement already trusted – they take on a completely different character. Not I must change to be accepted. But I am accepted. Now watch what grows.

Respond: What is one area of your life where you have been treating ethics as the entry point rather than the response?

Pray: Lord, I want to live well because you have loved first – not in order to earn what you have already given. Root my obedience in your announcement, not my anxiety. Amen.

FRIDAY, May 29 – When the Good Life Replaces the Good News

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel."

– Galatians 1:6

Read: Galatians 1:6-9; 3:1-3

Reflect: Paul was alarmed. Not gently concerned – alarmed. "I am astonished," he wrote to the Galatians, "that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by grace." What had happened? The Galatians had not abandoned Jesus. They still believed in him, still gathered in his name, still practiced their faith. What they had done was subtle and devastating: they had added ethical performance back into the center. Behavioral markers that said: you have to do this to fully belong.

It looked devout. It felt serious. It carried the weight of ancient practice. But Paul called it a different gospel, which is no gospel at all. Because the moment ethics move from fruit to root, from response to requirement, the announcement is undermined. It is no longer free news. It becomes conditional news. And conditional news is not good news.

The same drift happens today. A church can become so focused on ethical seriousness – lifestyle standards, dietary practice, Sabbath observance, moral rectitude – that the announcement itself fades into background noise. The people in the pew know what they are supposed to do. They are less sure, some of them, of what has been done for them. The good life has quietly replaced the good news. And a church held together

primarily by shared ethics rather than shared announcement is always one generation away from losing the plot entirely.

Respond: What does a life look like that keeps returning to the announcement as the source of its ethical energy rather than as a reward for ethical effort?

Pray: Keep the announcement at the center, Lord. Let everything I do this Sabbath grow from what you have done – not the other way around. Amen.

SABBATH, May 30 – Back to the River

"Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat."

– Isaiah 55:1

Read: Isaiah 55:1-3; Revelation 22:17

Reflect: Sabbath is not primarily about rest from labor, though it includes that. It is about rest from the deeper labor – the labor of earning, proving, performing, maintaining. It is one day in seven when the whole liturgy of the week says: the river runs whether or not you are paddling. The announcement is still true. Christ is still Lord. The gospel does not depend on your doctrinal precision or your ethical performance to remain what it is.

Come. Come to the waters. You who have no money, come and buy. This is the invitation of the whole Bible, concentrated in Sabbath – the good news that there is a river you do not have to dig, a feast you do not have to earn, a rest you do not have to manufacture.

The gospel is always upstream from everything else you believe and everything else you do. Doctrine flows from it; it does not replace it. Ethics grow from it; they do not substitute for it. The river keeps running. The announcement keeps being made. And the invitation, every Sabbath, every morning, every quiet moment when the noise stops, is simply this: come and drink.

Respond: Sit quietly for a few minutes. Let the announcement be enough today. Christ has come. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. That is the river. Let it carry you.

Pray: Thank you for a day that asks nothing of me but to receive what you have already given. I come to the river. I am not bringing anything. Amen.