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The *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* is prepared by the Office of the Adult Bible Study Guide of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. The preparation of the guides is under the general direction of the Sabbath School Publications Board, a subcommittee of the General Conference Administrative Committee (ADCOM), publisher of the Bible study guides. The published guide reflects the input of worldwide evaluation committees and the approval of the Sabbath School Publications Board and thus does not solely or necessarily represent the intent of the author(s).

Daniel, Aristotle, and the End

About four centuries before Christ, the Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote about “the end,” meaning the final purpose of things, that to which all things aim. “For Aristotle, “the end of the medical art is health, that of shipbuilding a vessel, that of strategy victory, that of economics wealth.” Applying this principle to humanity, he said that the end of humanity, its ultimate purpose, is “happiness”—that which we seek “always for itself and never for the sake of something else.”

Not a bad conclusion for someone working without revealed knowledge. But although happiness can, certainly, be a laudable goal, it hardly answers the crucial questions about the end and purpose of life, especially when that life always ends in the grave, where the issue of happiness is, indeed, rather irrelevant.

In contrast to Aristotle, the prophet Daniel (a few hundred years earlier) also wrote about “the end” but from a radically different perspective. For Daniel, the end wasn’t found within humans themselves, as some natural result of who and what they were; instead, the end was something brought about by the supernatural intervention of an all-knowing, all-powerful God who promised that “the end”—meaning the end of this world—was, in fact, the beginning of a new one. In short, while Aristotle looked within humanity for its end, Daniel (as do all the Bible writers) puts the end in something that transcends humanity, and that is the God who first created humanity.

How thankful we should be, too, because if our “end,” our purpose, were limited only to ourselves, it hardly seems worth the effort to reach that end. Why expend all the energy and pain of eking out an existence here, only to have it all culminate in death? In contrast, Daniel shows that “the end” is, really, a new beginning.

Of course, one of the great purposes of the Bible is to show us not only what our ends are but how we can reach those ends. And the book of Daniel, our topic for the next three months, fulfills a unique role in helping us do just that. In it are impressive prophecies that, perhaps better than anywhere else in Scripture, help establish a firm and rational foundation for our faith in the One who, through the work of Jesus Christ, has assured us our end: eternal life in a new creation (*Isa. 66:22*).

Whether through the stories (where we are shown God’s intervention in the lives of individuals) or through the grand, sweeping prophecies (where we are shown God’s sovereignty over the world), the book of Daniel not only reveals the presence of God in our world but, in a sense, helps prove that existence and intervention.

Daniel belongs to what is called “apocalyptic” literature. “Apocalyptic” comes from the Greek *apokalypsis*, meaning “an unveiling” or “a revelation.”

The apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation describe, by means of symbolic visions, important stages of human history. But even more so, they reveal to us “the end”—that is, the end of all things as they are now but not what they will be forever.

Throughout the Christian Era, the stories and prophecies of Daniel have inspired poets, artists, and philosophers. They have given comfort and hope to the weary, yet at the same time they have challenged the minds of historians and theologians.

Above all, the book has shown that our world is not an iceberg drifting toward some unknown and unforeseen end but that, behind the scenes

***Anyone can write history;
only inspiration can tell
the future.***

and in ways we cannot imagine or now understand, our God is working to bring all things to a grand and glorious conclusion.

“As we near the close of this world’s history, the prophecies recorded by Daniel demand our special attention, as they relate to the very time in which we are living.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 547.

Even Jesus Himself points us specially to Daniel, saying, “When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand:)” (*Matt. 24:15; see also Mark 13:14*).

Considering the importance of the book of Daniel, it shouldn’t be surprising that the enemy would hate it and has gone to extraordinary lengths to weaken its impact. For instance, though Daniel himself in various chapters dates his writing, higher critical scholars dismiss those dates as fabrications, placing the book hundreds of years later and focusing it on events that are not the concern of Daniel. In this way, by arguing that Daniel wrote after the events he described, scholars weaken the impact of the book and the powerful prophecies within it. After all, anyone can write history; only inspiration can tell the future. As Seventh-day Adventists, we must firmly reject the humanistic attempts to undercut the supernatural origins of these writings.

This quarter’s Bible study guide was written by Gerhard Pfandl, an associate director at the Biblical Research Institute at the General Conference. A native of Austria, where he pastored and taught for almost twenty years, Dr. Pfandl also worked for several years in California and Australia. He is married and has two grown children. A longtime student of Daniel, he is more than qualified to teach us about a book that so powerfully, and convincingly, reveals an end that Aristotle—with all his knowledge—never could have imagined or even dared to hope for.

How to Use This Teachers Edition

The teachers comments demonstrate different methods of teaching the Standard Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide. Five parts make up the teachers comments:

- ▶ **Key Text, Lesson Aim, and Outline:** The key text is taken from the standard edition guide. The lesson aim is designed to: (a) help class participants understand and know about the lesson material, (b) evoke an appropriate feeling about the lesson material that complements the lesson content and helps to internalize it, and (c) help class participants apply the lesson material to their daily lives. The lesson outline may not always follow exactly the material that appears in the standard guide. It may reflect additional perspectives as it attempts to stimulate class discussion.
- ▶ **The Commentary** follows the traditional teaching methods of Sabbath School. It explains Bible passages and provides appropriate information leading to spiritual applications.
- ▶ **The Inductive Bible-Study Method** emphasizes careful, methodical discovery of the meaning in a text. The teacher encourages and supports the learner's investigation and discovery, using distinctive approaches: (a) Study a text thoroughly and systematically before drawing a conclusion. (b) Look for textual meaning carefully and thoroughly; understand the passage in context; avoid misquoting the author. We must not develop opinions without biblical proof. (c) Share insights through group discussion as students examine a Bible passage together. (d) Apply the text to life today. (e) Allow the Holy Spirit to minister to class members during Bible study.
- ▶ **The Focus-on-Witnessing Approach** should be used in conjunction with other methods of Bible study to demonstrate how particular passages of Scripture can be used to encourage people to commit their lives to Christ and to nurture spiritual life once it has been awakened.
- ▶ **The Life-Application Approach** demonstrates how issues that grow out of Bible study can be shared in a small-group setting. This section uses an approach suitable for discussion in a small group in which interpersonal sharing and dialogue are key elements.

Use a combination of teaching methods. Within one class period it is often possible to draw from all five methods demonstrated in the teachers comments. Some teachers will prefer to focus on one method of teaching, drawing heavily on the material in the teachers comments.