

QUARTERLY RESOURCE FOR LOCAL CHURCH LEADERS • JANUARY/MARCH 2023

# ELDER'S DIGEST



*Back to the Altar*



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# The Son of Encouragement

>PART 1



SCAN FOR AUDIO

**One** Bible character is often underrecognized. This lack of recognition doesn't tarnish his legacy. Instead, it diminishes us, because we are the poorer for not being more familiar with his wonderful story. The Bible describes him as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith" (Acts 11:24).<sup>1</sup> Very few Bible characters receive such words of commendation.

Most don't remember his original name: Joseph.<sup>2</sup> Let's face it, there are a lot of Josephs in the Bible. The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary* references fourteen and this Joseph is listed last.<sup>3</sup> We remember him best by his nickname: Barnabas. One of the key people in the New Testament, Barnabas is specifically referenced at least twenty-eight times.

There is so much more to Barnabas than just a travelling companion of Paul and the meaning of his nickname, "son of encouragement" (Acts 4:36). As a Levite he would have been among the best educated, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. Most importantly, Barnabas' life reflects and demonstrates a profound awareness of those Scriptures. Ellen G. White characterizes him as one "who had liberally contributed of his means to sustain the cause of Christ, and to relieve the necessities of the poor."<sup>4</sup> Acts 4:37 outlines how he "sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet." Surely Acts is highlighting Barnabas' faithful generosity because the very next event portrayed is the deceitful plot of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). They dishonestly lay a fraction of the property sale proceeds at the apostles' feet, and both ultimately die at the apostles' feet—never to be heard of again in the text. Barnabas, on the other hand, emerges as a heartwarming character.

Barnabas' ministry to Paul is inspirational. After Paul's transforming experience with Jesus on his journey to Damascus, Paul returned to Jerusalem. He was ostracized and viewed with contempt by everyone—except Barnabas (Acts 9:26). Even though Barnabas knew Paul's murderous past,<sup>5</sup> he reached out to Paul and renewed their acquaintance. When nobody believed Paul and his fabulous story of meeting the ascended Jesus on the way to Damascus, Barnabas did. "He fully believed and received Paul, took him by the hand, and led him into the presence of the apostles."<sup>6</sup> When Paul had no voice nor credibility and there was a very real danger of his divine calling being thwarted by

fellow believers, Barnabas spoke for and resolutely stood with Paul. Barnabas' advocacy and support empowered Paul. "Soon the voice which had so earnestly disputed with Stephen, was heard in the same synagogue fearlessly proclaiming that Jesus was the Son of God—advocating the same cause that Stephen had died to vindicate."<sup>7</sup>

Paul's fearless proclamation of Jesus in Jerusalem was endangering his life. For his safety, the church leaders arranged for him to return home to Tarsus. There he would remain, safe but obscured.

With few words and little fuss, Luke describes the next meeting of Barnabas and Paul: "So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch" (Acts 11:25-26a). Once again it was the "son of encouragement" who reached out to Paul. Barnabas, at his own expense (1 Cor 9:1-7), travelled from Antioch to Tarsus, likely an overland journey of 148 miles (238 km), over eight travel days. That's a round trip of three hundred miles<sup>8</sup> or sixteen travel days—no small feat by foot. He made this journey for one reason: to mentor Paul for ministry.

"Working with Barnabas strengthened Paul's conviction that the Lord had called him to work for the Gentile world."<sup>9</sup> Ellen White, writing of Paul, concludes, "There never lived a more self-denying, persevering worker."<sup>10</sup> Clearly, Barnabas had a powerful influence upon Paul.

What if Barnabas had not made that long journey to find Paul? Without the nurturing of Barnabas, what may have become of Paul's ministry? What could be missing from our Bibles today, if Paul had remained in Tarsus?

As an elder, deacon or deaconess, who can you mentor and encourage, just as Barnabas ministered to Paul? **ED**



**ANTHONY R. KENT** | General Conference Associate Ministerial Secretary

<sup>1</sup> All biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise indicated.  
<sup>2</sup> Identified as Joses in the KJV and NKJV. See Acts 4:36.  
<sup>3</sup> Siegfried H. Horn, "Joseph," *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1979), 618-621.  
<sup>4</sup> Ellen G. White, *Sketches from the Life of Paul* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1883), 36.  
<sup>5</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>6</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 37.  
<sup>8</sup> Approximately 480 kms.  
<sup>9</sup> Ellen G. White, *Unlikely Leaders* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2010), 60.  
<sup>10</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 367.

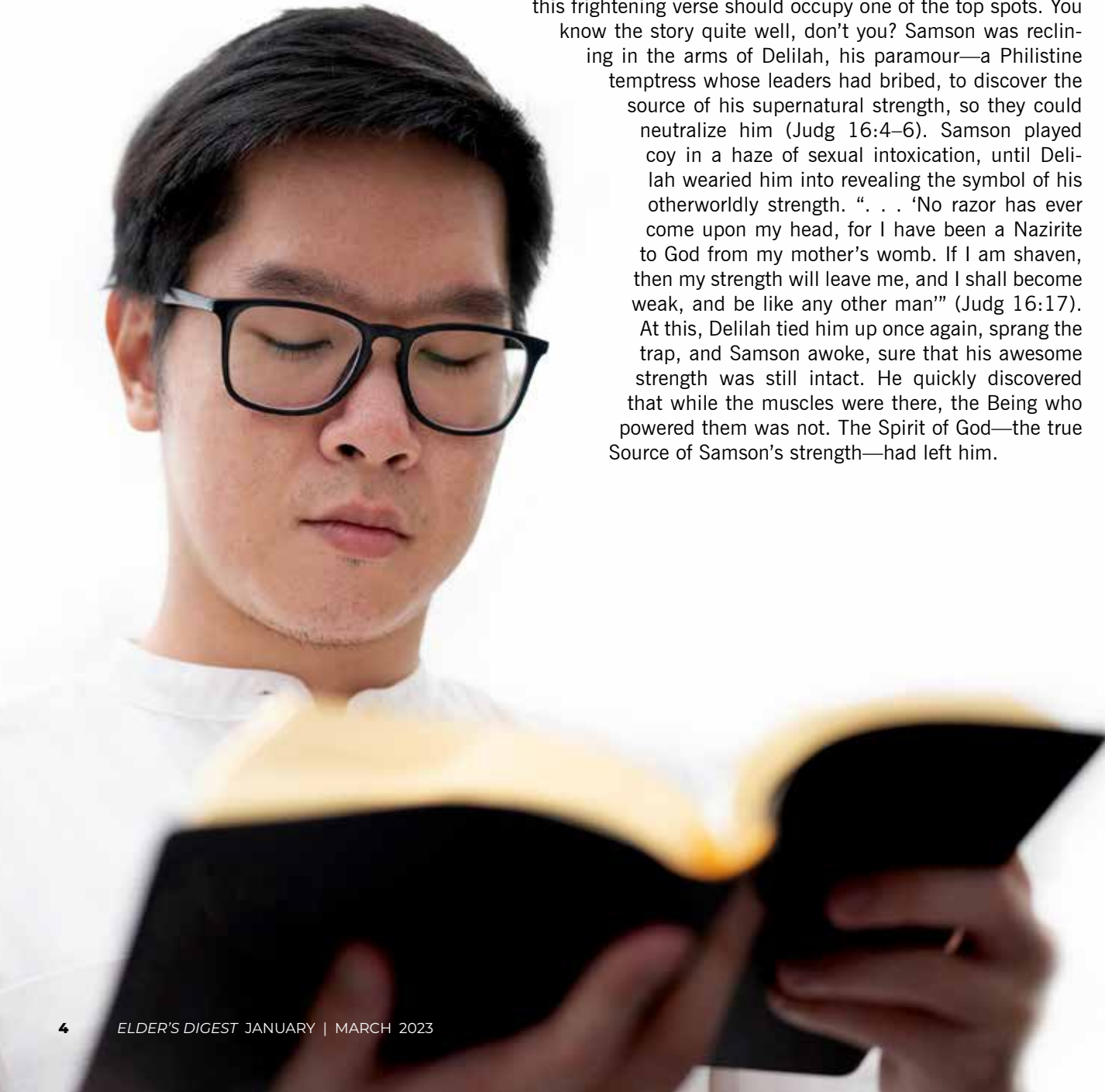


SCAN FOR AUDIO

# Back to the Altar: The Role of Elders

“And she said, ‘The Philistines are upon you, Samson!’ So he awoke from his sleep, and said, ‘I will go out as before, at other times, and shake myself free!’ But he did not know that the Lord had departed from him” (Judg 16:20).<sup>1</sup>

Among the catalog of saddest Scriptures in the Bible, surely this frightening verse should occupy one of the top spots. You know the story quite well, don’t you? Samson was reclining in the arms of Delilah, his paramour—a Philistine temptress whose leaders had bribed, to discover the source of his supernatural strength, so they could neutralize him (Judg 16:4–6). Samson played coy in a haze of sexual intoxication, until Delilah wearied him into revealing the symbol of his otherworldly strength. “. . . ‘No razor has ever come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother’s womb. If I am shaven, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other man’” (Judg 16:17). At this, Delilah tied him up once again, sprang the trap, and Samson awoke, sure that his awesome strength was still intact. He quickly discovered that while the muscles were there, the Being who powered them was not. The Spirit of God—the true Source of Samson’s strength—had left him.



## Now more than ever, God is calling Seventh-day Adventist individuals and families back to His heart—back to consistent times of refreshing in His presence.

### POWERLESSNESS

Have you ever “shook yourself,” only to discover that the Spirit of God had left you? As an elder, you provide spiritual leadership to God’s people, general oversight of church activities and functions, and you nurture members through godly counsel, encouragement, prayer, and much more. Surely you have never lacked spiritual power in a crunch, have you?

Whether we are willing to admit to moments of powerlessness in the work of God or not, the story of Samson paints a sobering picture of a life lived with a broken devotional altar. Samson’s birth was divinely predicted, his diet divinely prescribed, and his calling divinely outlined (Judg 13:2–5), but did Samson have a personal walk with God to match his divinely ordained purpose? There is no record of it in Scripture.

Reflecting on the faithfulness of Joseph versus the faithlessness of Samson, Ellen G. White notes, “Samson in his peril had the same source of strength as had Joseph. He could choose the right or the wrong as he pleased. But instead of taking hold of the strength of God, he permitted the wild passions of his nature to have full sway.”<sup>2</sup> Samson lacked the revival and reformation power of a vibrant devotional altar.

### GIFTS WITHOUT AN ALTAR

The life of Samson is a cogent reminder that gifts given for the glory of God are nourished by daily, consistent relationship with God. It is in these private moments with God that our foibles are unmasked, hearts converted, and service re-

focused. God has always wanted this connection with human beings. He came to visit Adam and Eve “in the cool of the day” after they had sinned (Gen 3:8). It can safely be assumed that this was not the first time God had done so; He was accustomed and committed to meeting with the holy pair every day. After the exodus from Egypt, God began to institute a devotional structure for personal worship with Him. Morning and evening worship experiences were to be the spiritual bookends of Israelite life. God signaled as much when He said to Moses, “One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight” (Exod 29:39). In short, God never intended for His children to attempt daily life or service without Him.

In spite of this fact, many Seventh-day Adventists appear to be doing just that. A 2018 worldwide survey of Seventh-day Adventists found that only 34 percent of families are having morning and evening worship and only 52 percent of Adventists have any devotional life to speak of.<sup>3</sup> These statistics are especially disturbing when one considers that the final message that we are to share with the world—the Three Angels’ Messages of Revelation 14:6–12—is a worship-centered message. Can a church with such low percentages engaging in personal worship effectively deliver a worship-centric message? In other words, can we do publicly what we are not doing privately?

### BACK TO THE ALTAR

Now more than ever, God is

calling Seventh-day Adventist individuals and families back to His heart—back to consistent times of refreshing in His presence. It is for this reason that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is launching the *Back to the Altar (BTTA)* initiative, a movement to encourage daily personal and family worship in the life of every Seventh-day Adventist. By 2027 we hope to see at least 70 percent of Adventist members engaged in daily morning and evening worship.

The restoration of personal and family worship among Seventh-day Adventists is the most pressing need of our time but doing so will require much prayer and effort. Today we face the challenge of technologies that, while providing some efficiencies, benefits, and conveniences, increasingly occupy our time while altering our minds. Widespread addiction to devices and media, especially social media, has left many of us anxious, irritable, lonely, stressed, depressed, sleepless, and unhappy with our station in life. Ironically, personal and family worship has the opposite effect. It calms our minds, decreases loneliness, reduces stress, increases peace, fulfills our emotional needs, and teaches us contentment.

### WHAT ELDERS CAN DO

Elders within the Seventh-day Adventist Church are leaders who have their hands on the pulse of local congregations around the world. You are indispensable to the work of God and the *BTTA* project. Here are three critical things that elders can do to help revive personal devotional life among church members.

**1. Lead by Example.** The personal devotional lives of God’s servants are the fountain from which they minister and serve. Jesus declared, “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides

in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). How important is this need to commune with Christ? Listen to Ellen White: “There is nothing more needed in the work of God than the practical results of communion with God.”<sup>4</sup> You cannot lead people where you yourself have not been with God.

**2. Share Your Walk with God.** Among the most powerful things that you can do as an elder is to share with members what God is doing in your personal time with Him. What is He showing you? What parts of Scripture or the Spirit of Prophecy are you studying? Sharing what God is doing in your life will inspire others to seek their own experiences with God!

**3. Encourage Healthy Uses of Digital Media.** The greatest challenge to devotional life today is the misuse of technology. Smart devices, social media, television, and the like have significantly reduced the amount of devotional time that people spend with God. To be sure, while some people use

smartphones and other devices as their means of worship, studies are increasingly showing the deleterious effect that devices are having on our capacity to think clearly, deeply, and creatively. One study concluded that the integration of smartphones into daily life appears to diminish such vital mental skills as “learning, logical reasoning, abstract thought, problem solving, and creativity.”<sup>5</sup> Watch for resources coming from the *BTTA* initiative to help facilitate proper mental digital hygiene. Share these resources widely. Speak often about this issue and model healthy digital usage in your own life.

The Adventist Church has wonderful spiritual/outreach initiatives. What it lacks is not another program; we lack what Jesus had—power from close, daily communion with God in His presence. Here’s how Ellen White describes the benefit of this experience with God: “Communion with God will ennoble the character and the life. Men will take knowledge of us, as of the first disciples, that we have

been with Jesus. This will impart to the worker a power that nothing else can give. Of this power he must not allow himself to be deprived. We must live a twofold life—a life of thought and action, of silent prayer and earnest work.”<sup>6</sup> Amen. ED

<sup>1</sup> All biblical quotations are from the New King James Version, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, October 13, 1881.

<sup>3</sup> “The Global Church Member Survey,” Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2018), 14.

<sup>4</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1909), 6:47.

<sup>5</sup> Nicolas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), 511.

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**The restoration of personal and family worship among Seventh-day Adventists is the most pressing need of our time but doing so will require much prayer and effort.**



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# Christ's Bridges: How to Share My Faith with Secular/Post- Christian Friends



SCAN FOR AUDIO

## EDITORIAL NOTE

This article is the fifth in the special series outlining how Seventh-day Adventists can share the Three Angels' Messages with important people groups.

**One** of the most critical aspects in mission is how to effectively build bridges of communication and trust with whom we wish to share the message of the eternal gospel (Rev 14:6). Did you notice? Eternal gospel. What does it mean? It means that the message and the mission are the same. However, we live in a very different world from a few decades ago. For instance, methods and strategies used in the 80s—even though they were successful back then—are not as effective today for one simple reason: people in 2023 are different! Profound and lasting sociocultural revolutions have brought new challenges for the church in the twenty-first century.

Among them, one of the most significant challenges is sharing Jesus with our irreligious, unaffiliated, secular, and—increasingly—post-Christian friends. But before we can talk about sharing our faith in today's secular reality, we need to better understand what is happening around us.

## THE END OF THE CHRISTIAN WORLD AS WE USED TO KNOW IT

Western areas of the world used to be known for their Christian roots. This is no longer the reality of today. According to surveys done by the Pew Research Center, around 30 percent of Americans identify as religiously unaffiliated, and 25 percent have a secular/nonreligious worldview. Very few Europeans are frequent churchgoers, and the proportion of Europeans who neither value nor care about Christianity is increasing. The rejection of religion is growing in Australia, following a similar trend. Nearly ten million Australians, or about 38 percent of the population, identify as religiously unaffiliated.

However, the effects of growing irreligiosity are not restricted to the Western world mainly because of the impact of globalization and advanced communication technology. For instance, this is an increasing trend across Asia,

where five of the ten least religious nations in the world—China, Japan, South Korea, North Korea, and Hong Kong—are situated. Similar sentiments are also seen among “cultural” Muslims and Jews, particularly among younger generations who identify with their religion in cultural and social connections but prefer to disassociate from the faith of their parents. Irreligiosity is also having a significant influence in Africa and Latin America. So, the corrosive effect of secularism can be found and perceived on every continent.

The preceding examples illustrate how the secular/post-Christian worldview disseminates irreligion worldwide. This leads to a gradual rise of religious pluralism, in which any religion or nonreligious attitude is ultimately appropriate and acceptable. At the same time, there is a growing distrust of institutions, which causes people to reject and feel separate from any kind of organized religion. Additionally, with the rise of

a relativistic view of religion, many people are now trying to create their own spirituality, exclusively based on their own feelings and personal choices.

## RELATIVISTIC RELIGION

Among the many mission challenges related to secularism, reaching the minds of those controlled by contemporary relativism, seen chiefly in urban areas, is a particularly daunting task. But what is it? Relativism, in a nutshell, means that nothing can be taken at face value, particularly regarding how we should approach truth and, consequently, religion.

The idea behind relativist thinking is something like this: what is true for you is not necessarily true for me. So, what is right for one person may be wrong for another. Why? Because truth is relative. To whom? Ourselves! This is a clever way to live without guilt, isn't it?

“Well, this is my lifestyle,” some say. Others think, “Being sincere to myself is what matters



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the most.” Really? But what if you are “sincerely” wrong? Think with me . . . You get up at night with a tremendous headache and start looking for some medicine, but you don’t turn the light on in the bathroom. Then, you grope around and pick up a container that you “sincerely” think is the medicine for the headache. But it is not! What if it is the stuff to unclog the sink? What will be the outcome if you drink it—even with a sincere heart? You will “sincerely” be on your way to the hospital with much more than just a headache!

Have you ever thought about what traffic would be like without rules and laws? What would happen in front of a red light if you were taught that it was just a “suggestion”? With relativism becoming the prevailing attitude of any contemporary society, do you know what is one of the central values that must be accepted? Tolerance. This is why tolerance is more valued today than truth—especially among younger generations. The problem is that the meaning of the word “tolerance” has changed. It used to mean treating people with respect, love, and dignity. Today it means that each idea is claimed to be equally valid and that we should accept every lifestyle.

Living the Truth (with a capital “T”) today means walking on a narrow path. The Word of God clearly presents that what is right is right, and what is wrong is wrong. So, truth matters. Without a doubt, it is not easy to communicate biblical truth in a relevant way within this new context. Still, we

must fulfill the mission that Jesus Christ left to His disciples. Do you remember His mandate? “Make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19, NIV). And here, the word “nations” (*ethnē*) refers not only to all ethnicities, but with even greater emphasis on groups of people, individually. But how can we effectively make disciples in today’s secular and post-Christian reality? Building intentional mission bridges may be a good start.

#### **BECOMING AN INTENTIONAL BRIDGE BUILDER**

As Seventh-day Adventist Christians, we are called by God to be “Christ’s representatives” (2 Cor 5:20, MSG). But to accomplish this glorious task, we have to break out of our Christian circles of isolation, out of our comfort zones, thus learning how to fill in the space—to bridge the gap—between the church and the world of our day.

This is precisely what Christ did between us and God: “For there is one God and one mediator *between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people*” (1 Tim 2:5–6a, NIV).<sup>1</sup> Christ was “the bridge” between us and God the Father.

Speaking of bridges, they are fascinating, aren’t they? Bridges are designed to bring things together, overcome obstacles, and connect two distant points. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we have the same privilege and responsibility. We ought to be bridge builders for

our Master. But what kind of bridges remain to be built? Irreligious, secular, and unaffiliated people often have intellectual, cultural, and even moral barriers that keep them from considering Christ as the ultimate purpose for human life. But here, I repeat, we can be Christ’s bridges for the proclamation of the eternal gospel. Just as Jesus left heaven to come and mingle with a sinful world, He left us with the glorious task of creatively reaching our world with the good news of God’s love and His soon Second Coming.

But how does one become a bridge builder for Christ in an increasingly secular world? While it is true that we need to understand the theology and message of the gospel, we also need to know how unbelieving people think, why they intentionally reject religion, and how they are impacted by today’s culture before we can effectively share our faith with them.<sup>2</sup> Only then, as Christ’s representatives, can we become the bridge between our Master and the world, communicating the everlasting gospel in the context of secular and post-Christian worldviews.

Furthermore, a bridge builder must be committed to understanding those from different backgrounds and beliefs, with the deliberate purpose of making Christianity relevant to them. So, to become an intentional bridge builder, we must go through at least a three-step process. First, we need to look at the problem of isolation found in the lives of many who claim to be followers of Christ. Second, we need to learn about Christ’s model and method of ministry, which will help us overcome the problem of isolation. And finally, we will only then understand and experience how our lives can build bridges between Christ and the world around us.

Let's go to the first of them: isolation. Unfortunately, many who claim to follow Christ live entirely isolated from the cultural reality of our days. Often afraid of "contaminating themselves with the world," they decide to live separately and forget that even though they are not from this world, they should dedicate their lives to reaching out to those around them. Jesus Christ expressed this concern in His special prayer to the Father in John 17: "They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. . . . As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world" (John 17:16, 18, NIV). Amazingly, between these two realities, in verse 17, Jesus intentionally pleads for His disciples: "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." (By the way, just to make sure you remember, truth matters!) Do you understand? Even

though we are not of the world, we are sent into the world by Christ as His disciples. But how? Following the model and method of Jesus.

Here we come to the second step: Christ's model and method of ministry are based on the very character of God. The Bible presents a God who continually seeks humankind by intentionally entering into humankind's cultural context. In the New Testament, we find God seeking His children by taking a "contextualized" form, the form of a man—Immanuel, "God with us" (Matt 1:23, NKJV)! In a simple definition, a contextualized approach involves becoming identified with the people to be reached. It requires breaking cultural barriers to establish relevant and effective communication of biblical truth.

Scripture clearly states that "the Word became flesh and dwelt

among us" (John 1:14, NKJV). Through the incarnation of Christ, God bridged a gigantic "cultural gap" to seek us out and identify Himself with us. God took over our context, and in doing so, He broke down all the barriers that prevented us from having a relationship with Him. Moreover, Christ's method is described in more detail with these well-known words: "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.' . . . Accompanied by the power of persuasion, the power of prayer, the power of the love of God, this work will not, cannot, be without fruit."<sup>3</sup>

And finally, just as God intentionally took on the context of

**Bridges are designed to bring things together, overcome obstacles, and connect two distant points. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we have the same privilege and responsibility. We ought to be bridge builders for our Master.**



Therefore, the basis for our mission is not only found in sharing the truths of our faith, but also in using our own lives as a meaningful channel for relating those truths with today's reality. In other words, the mission is more than just sharing information.

human life, we must, as Christ's bridges, enter the context of today's world. For that, we certainly need, with wisdom and intentionality, to explore new methods and strategies in order to focus our attention on those who today are influenced by the secular and post-Christian mindset but who are also objects of love and care from the One who is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6, NKJV).<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, the basis for our mission is not only found in sharing the truths of our faith, but also

in using our own lives as a meaningful channel for relating those truths with today's reality. In other words, the mission is more than just sharing information. The mission involves the sharing of something else. In the secular/post-Christian environment of the twenty-first century, the mission also includes the sharing of our life, our real experience with God. Only in this way will we be authentic "Christ's bridges" (see Matt 5:13–16; John 14:34–35; Eph 5:1; 1 Pet 2:9) to people who desperately—but also unknowing-

ly—need to know the truth that will ultimately set them free.

So, what can you do to bring your secular/post-Christian friend to God?<sup>5</sup> ED

<sup>1</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>2</sup> See Kleber D. Gonçalves, "Faith in a World of Unfaith: How to Share Christ with Unbelievers," *Adventist Review*, November 6, 2016, 32–25.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen G. White, *Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), 143–144.

<sup>4</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>5</sup> For further information on the Center for Secular and Postmodern Studies, visit <https://cspm.globalmissioncenters.org>.

**Kleber D. Gonçalves** is the director of the Center for Secular and Postmodern Studies (CSPM), Adventist Mission, at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, MD, USA.

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EDITORIAL NOTE

Pastor Ramon J. Canals is the newly elected General Conference Ministerial Association Secretary and Aurora Canals is the newly elected General Conference Associate Ministerial Secretary for Pastoral Families. This is part 2 of a two-part interview.



SCAN FOR AUDIO

# Introducing Pastor Ramon and Mrs. Aurora Canals >PART 2

**Anthony Kent:** *Ramon and Aurora, what is your greatest joy in ministry?*

**Ramon J. Canals:** For me, it's winning souls. The happiest time in my whole ministry is when I'm in the baptistry baptizing a person. That's the greatest joy for me.

**Aurora Canals:** Mine was when I worked with Ramon in evangelism in Oregon. It was really nice. It was a lot of work. I used to tell him, "I work harder than you, because when you have fifty people coming to your meetings, I have one hundred kids coming to the meetings." I did a lot of Bible lessons for those kids and that was really very rewarding.

**AK:** *With your experience as an elder, Ramon, and Aurora as a deaconess, what would you like to say to this very significant group in our church today? Is there something on your heart that you'd like to say to elders, deacons, and deaconesses?*

**RC:** Yes. The first thing that I would say is to enjoy the privilege of serving God, because there is nothing more rewarding, more beautiful, more important in life than to serve God. And to be called to be an elder, a deacon, or a deaconess is an honor. It's a call that comes from God. It does not come from people but God. Enjoy serving God because it's a tremendous privilege.

**AC:** And for me, be supportive of your husband's ministry because it's also your ministry. If he succeeds, you also succeed. When we had the church in our basement, I was able to see Ramon leading people to Christ. It was a blessing to see those folks change their lives. It was just so amazing to see them coming from the world and becoming Christians. It was such a joy.

**AK:** *How important are elders, deacons, and deaconesses? How significant are they? Are they just dutiful servants in a local church or are they more than that?*

**RC:** I believe they are very important because they have been called to prepare themselves and God's church for heaven. The service that they give to the church is valuable. They work with the pastor. They are a team with the pastor to give spiritual leadership to the church. And the church was organized for missionary purposes. This is why the church elects elders, deacons, and deaconesses. They are spiritual overseers of the church.

**AK:** *So they're elected because they're trusted and respected?*

**RC:** They are, yes, because of their character, because of who they are as people. And when the church elects them, it is because the church recognizes them as being called by God and gifted by God to serve in the church. What a tremendous privilege. It's just an amazing thing. These are very important positions. I had the privilege of serving as an elder as a young man. It's also a great responsibility. I knew that I needed to get into my Bible, that I needed to pray more, that I needed to be careful how I conducted myself. Because I knew that people were also watching me, and I could be a stumbling block for others if I did not behave appropriately.

**AK:** *Ramon, when you were pastoring, in what areas did you train your elders, deacons, and deaconesses? What did you really focus on in that training?*

**RC:** That's a good question. I see myself as a trainer, educator, and empowerer of leadership—the whole leadership of the church. When I came into the church, the pastor said, "Now you're a missionary." They asked me to be a Sabbath School teacher, an elder, and several other positions, but I was not trained. I had to learn on my own. When I became a pastor, I said to myself, "This is not a good way of doing things." I decided to teach my elders, and all the leaders of my church all the things that I learned in college and university, such as how to study the Bible, the prophecies, church organization, the life and teachings of Jesus, homiletics, etc. Mrs. White says that every church should be a training center where people learn how to do things, how to serve, how to teach the Sabbath School lesson,

how to give Bible studies, how to preach, how to work in the community. She says that very clearly. Every church is a training center.

**AK:** *What's the ideal relationship between pastor, elders, deacons, and deaconesses? I'm seeing a real emphasis on the closeness of that relationship. A harmonious, cooperative, supportive relationship, mutually supportive and one where the pastor trains. What else should characterize that relationship between pastor, elders, deacons, and deaconesses?*

**RC:** I believe there needs to be a spiritual connection. There also needs to be a social connection, where they all connect as servant-leaders. A coaching component is also essential because training and equipping needs to happen. I think the elders need to work together with the pastor. When I was pastoring, the elders were my right hand, and I considered them to be pastors.

**AK:** *Pastors?*

**RC:** Exactly. I would recognize them from the pulpit. It's important that the congregation sees elders as their spiritual leaders. I would say from the pulpit, "These are your spiritual leaders." Sometimes, what happens when the pastor has a multi-church district, attendance can drop when the pastor is away at one of the other churches. This can be a trust issue. We also need to ensure that our elders are powerful preachers and well respected by the membership. This is the only way elders can lead effectively.

You can't lead in a congregation if you're not trusted. I remember this lady, who was dying, and she wanted to be anointed. There were some of the elders she didn't want at her anointing. When the pastor asked her why she didn't

want some particular elders at her anointing, she said, “This is my life we’re talking about!” Clearly it’s important that elders be respected and trusted. I would like to see all elders trusted and respected.

**AC:** Ramon, there was another helpful thing you did when you were pastoring. Sometimes well-trained and competent elders were entrusted with further responsibilities like preaching, and you would invite them to preach in other churches. I can remember that this was very helpful to you in your ministry.

**RC:** One of the things I learned early in my ministry is that the pastor cannot do it alone. We need to work as a team. I enjoyed ministering as a team with my elders, deacons, and deaconesses. We can do more when we work as a team, when everyone is involved in the church. That was my main goal.

**AK:** *One of the significant initiatives of the global Seventh-day Adventist Church is: I Will Go. How do you see elders, deacons, and deaconesses being involved in I Will Go?*

**RC:** *I Will Go* is an initiative that excites me very much, because it talks to me personally. And elders, deacons, and deaconesses, they



*Pastor Ramon J. Canals and Mrs. Aurora Canals*

will go! We answered that invitation as individuals and said, “I will go and invite others to go.”

Also, *Total Member Involvement* is not just getting some individuals involved, but let’s all get involved! The elders, deacons, and deaconesses can do a lot with this initiative by being examples and by answering the call. This is a personal call to everyone. It’s a call! A lot of people think that God needs us to finish the work, but He really doesn’t. He wants us to be involved because it’s for our own benefit. He wants us to grow spiritually. And the only way that we can grow spiritually is when we get involved in the mission of the church. When you share with other people, you grow spiritually.

“If we would humble ourselves before God, and be kind and courteous and tenderhearted and pitiful, there would be one hundred conversions to the truth where now there is only one.”<sup>1</sup>

And so those five things: being humble, kind, courteous, tenderhearted, and pitiful, which means compassionate or merciful—if we have that alone, that’s when God can use us as instruments. We don’t have to know a lot, but just be humble and open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. I would say to any elder, deacon, or deaconess, stay humble, kind and loving, allowing God to use you as an instrument. He’s waiting for us to humble ourselves so that He can use us.

**AK:** *What books or resources would you encourage elders, deacons, and deaconesses to acquire and read?*

**RC:** That’s a good question. I would have in mind *Elder’s Digest*, the *Seventh-day Adventist Elder’s Handbook*, and the *Seventh-day Adventist Deacon’s and Deaconess’s Handbook*. But my number

one favorite book is the Bible. That’s where I get inspiration and energy. This is where I get everything! The Bible. That’s number one. Number two, the Spirit of Prophecy. I would recommend four books that have been very meaningful to me in my ministry: *The Great Controversy*, *Steps to Christ*, *The Ministry of Healing*, and *Christian Service*. And then besides that, I would say the *Church Manual*. Elders, deacons, and deaconesses need to know the *Church Manual* very well.

**AK:** *Is there a question that I haven’t asked that you would like to have been asked? Is there something that’s on your heart that you’d love to share?*

**RC:** What’s the most important characteristic of an elder? I would say the most important characteristic is to be a spiritual person. To be connected with God, to be in tune with the Holy Spirit. That’s where everything comes from. And the second, relates to character, to have integrity.

“But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone.”<sup>2</sup>

These verses reveal how the apostle Paul regarded his calling. He was called by God. It’s important for elders, deacons, and deaconesses to know that their call is from God. Their call is not from the pastor, the church, or any human. I think out of the whole interview, I think it’s the most important thing, that they know that their calling is from God. ED

<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1909), 9:189.

<sup>2</sup> Galatians 1:15–16, ESV.

## Living with a Limp

### INTRODUCTION

The story of Jacob is one of the longer stories in the Bible. It is important because it shows God at work in human lives despite human failings. This story is one of blessing promised, blessing mishandled, and blessing received.

### I. JACOB'S RESUME

Jacob, a descendant of Abraham, is the chosen one through whom the blessings promised to Abraham will flow to all people. The awareness of one's place in the plan of God can easily be obscured by the details and duties of daily living. The temporal overshadows the timeless. Mundane matters can obscure mission.

You will recall the contours of Jacob's life. He is one of a set of twins born in answer to fervent prayer. He and his brother Esau grew up in a rather dysfunctional family. The whole family disrespects the practice of inheriting family blessing. Esau, by bartering it for a bowl of lentils; Jacob, by resorting to trickery and deceit; Rebekah, by her scheme of deception; Isaac, by his plan of privately passing on the blessing in return for a good meal.

Esau's enmity towards his brother results in Jacob being sent to find a wife among relatives far away. In the darkest and loneliest hour of his life Jacob receives a vision of a stairway to heaven and hears the voice of God addressing him from the top of the stairs and promising prosperity, posterity, and protection.

In his uncle Laban's home, Jacob becomes the recipient of deceit and trickery. Laban substitutes Leah for Rachel at Jacob's wedding. Jacob also marries Rachel but serves Laban to earn the privilege.

Though in service to the crafty Laban, Jacob is miraculously blessed. But he is not fulfilled and decides to return to his homeland. The biggest test of his life is to reconcile with his brother, Esau.

He wants to be alone on the last night before meeting with his brother. But in the middle of the night, he is confronted by a Stranger. Jacob fights for his life but cannot prevail. Finally, he surrenders and pleads for a blessing. He has been wrestling with a divine being who blesses him with a hip injury. Jacob will forever walk with a limp. Furthermore, his name is changed from Jacob (supplanter) to Israel (he struggles with God).

Despite his fears, Jacob's reunion with Esau goes surprisingly well. He and his family are back in his homeland. Jacob renews his commitment to God at Bethel—the place where God appeared to Jacob when he was fleeing from Esau.

Jacob's twelve sons become twelve tribes. While blessing his grandsons, Ja-

cob recalls how God has watched over and guided his life.

### II. INSIGHTS FROM JACOB'S LIFE

The saga of Jacob's life, its setbacks and successes, offers profound lessons about one's journey with God. Here are a few examples:

#### A. Personal encounters with God transform character.

Conduct is the fruit of character. There is a marked difference between Jacob's life before and after the night of struggle. Jacob's whole life changed when he realized the extent of his dependence upon God—a dependence memorialized by the limp.

#### B. God selects His servants, not on their merit but on His love.

Almost nothing we have seen so far about Jacob qualifies him to be one of the great people in the lineage of God's blessings to humanity. His character is not desirable. But God makes audacious promises to a person who is undeserving of them (Gen 28:15). We see this same truth voiced by Moses concerning the people of Israel (Deut 7:7). God equips those He calls.

#### C. The life of God's blessing might not be the life envisaged.

It is often claimed by some preachers that if one believes firmly in God, everything in life will turn out rosy. The gospel of prosperity attracts many followers. The idea that God will fulfill all your desires is a treacherous deception. Yes, God does satisfy our deepest hungers but often we do not realize what those hungers are. Instead, we live on transient wants and desires and think of these as the things that God ought to fulfill if we are faithful.

How many of God's servants can you think of who had easy and prosperous pathways in life? Hebrews chapter 11 presents a listing of some giants of faith—none of whom had it easy in life (Heb 11:35–38).

“Let us remember that the life of God's children in this world is a pilgrim life. We have not wisdom to plan our own lives. It is not for us to shape our future. . . . Too many, in planning for a brilliant future, make an utter failure. Let God plan for you . . . God never leads His children otherwise than they would choose to be led, if they could see the end from the beginning and discern the glory of the purpose which they are fulfilling as co-workers with Him.”<sup>1</sup>

#### D. God often uses difficulties to discipline His servants.

Laban was an unsavory character. But, in Laban, Jacob met his match—perhaps even his superior. Laban was made of the same stuff as Jacob—cruel, cunning, crafty, and self-serving.

It is difficult to find something good to say about Laban. He is not an admirable

character or hero in this story. Yet it was because of Laban and all his tricks and all his meanness that Jacob finally began to develop humility.

God works in our lives through problems and problem people. Right now, there may be a Laban in your life or something that is a thorn in the flesh. Your prayers may be for God to remove that Laban. But perhaps before He does so, there is a discipline that God wants you to learn. The apostle Paul describes this kind of experience in 2 Corinthians 12:7–9.

#### E. God often disables before He enables.

God humbles us in order to build, not to crush. God often has to teach His servants to depend on Him rather than themselves. That is the lesson of Jacob's limp—a constant reminder of his limitations.

Ellen G. White cautions: “Human strength is weakness, human wisdom is folly. Our success does not depend on our talents or learning, but on our living connection with God. The truth is shorn of its power when preached by men who are seeking to display their own learning and ability.”<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps God has also blessed you with a weakness so that you “lean not on your own understanding . . . In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths” (Prov 3:5–6, NKJV).

#### F. God keeps His promises.

The story of Jacob is one of human failings and divine faithfulness. Late in life when Israel, formerly known as Jacob, is blessing Joseph and his sons, he declares, “God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has fed me all my life long to this day, the Angel who has redeemed me from all evil” (Gen 48:15–16, NKJV).

### CONCLUSION

God is faithful despite human faithlessness. In reviewing the story of Jacob, we will likely see reflections of our own lives—our weaknesses, compromises, moral, and ethical failures. But we must see more—the absolute faithfulness of God.

God does not give up on us! He does not call us one day and reject us the next. This is the blessedness of being God's child. His acts of grace are not reversed. God will blot out our sins and imperfections, but He will not blot out our names. And He will bring us home safely. All glory be to Him. ED

<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), 478–479.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1882), 5:159.

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## “All That I Have Is Yours”

### INTRODUCTION

The parable of the prodigal son is widely known. Though this story is couched in local customs, it addresses universal concerns about relationships, pride, guilt, forgiveness, justice, and grace (see Luke 15:11–31).

This story is best known as the parable of the prodigal son or the parable of the lost son. But the main message of the story is about the actions of the father. Perhaps it should be called the parable of the prodigal father.

From this story the word “prodigal” has acquired a very negative connotation. Prodigal activity is almost inextricably associated with immoral behavior. But we should recognize that the word itself is meant to describe an attitude about resources rather than an attitude about morality. Prodigal means profuse expenditure, disbursement without regard to risk, and unrestrained consumption of assets. One can be prodigal in a good way by using wealth to help others. Or one can be prodigal by wasting resources in reckless dissipation.

Let us consider briefly each of the three main characters in this incredibly timeless story.

### I. THE YOUNGER BROTHER

The younger son is disrespectful, self-centered, and downright careless! Despite belonging to a wealthy family, he is not happy at home. He wants to assert himself, to exercise autonomy, to enjoy freedom, to realize his dreams and aspirations. Living at home is a form of imprisonment.

Contrary to the normal customs of the time, he asks his father for his share of the inheritance which would only be his when the father died. The father yields to this shocking pressure. And the young man sets out to get a life!

We are not really given any specifics as to how he wasted his wealth in riotous living. The allegation of sexual immorality is a judgment pronounced by the older brother. It is not one of the objective facts in the story. Who knows what happened? Maybe he squandered his assets in betting on the outcome of camel races.

The reality is that he soon loses everything. The pleasure and freedom he dreamed of while at home have not been realized. He believed that joy and contentment would come to him from things he could acquire and the unhindered pursuit of desire. This kind of thinking is a fatal mistake. A profound truth in life is that “you can never get enough of what you don’t need because what you don’t need can never satisfy.”

Hardship forces him to face harsh realities. He begins to see things in an entirely new light—even the things of home which formerly had been so oppressive.

Such an experience is not isolated to one young man in an ancient story. How many people do not realize the value of what they have until it is lost? Having a job can feel burdensome until one has no job. The treasure of good health habits is not realized until health is compromised.

Economic, social, and emotional poverty awakens a new evaluation of his former life. Servants in his father’s house had a better life than what he now experiences. The freedom he had sought reduced him to involuntary slavery. Now he wishes to become a slave in order to gain some sense of freedom and security. He sets out for home, rehearsing his confession and request.

The pursuit of freedom from constraint and discipline can easily lead to captivity. Just ask any addict. Real freedom is the ability to continue making good choices.

### II. THE OLDER BROTHER

The older brother has remained at home. To someone observing from a distance, this man looks like the ideal son. He is obedient and circumspect in behavior. He does not dishonor his father outwardly. His life seems calm and without turmoil.

But the return of his younger brother exposes his true character. On the exterior he has done everything right. But on the interior he has nurtured pride, envy, and resentment. He does not see things as the father does. He cannot welcome his brother and he disgraces his father by refusing to go into the party. Notice the way he speaks to his father (Luke 15:29–30).

He bristles with anger towards his brother and bitterness towards his father. The harsh denunciation of his brother suggests jealousy and perhaps envy. The accusations about his father display the state of his mind and heart.

Neither son loved the father. They both wanted to use their father for self-serving purposes. One son broke the rules; the other son kept the rules, but both sons were seriously alienated from the father.

The two brothers are different yet alike in many ways. The younger one rebelled openly; his actions were a disgrace to himself and the family. The older son did all the right things, looked like a model son, but was alienated from both his father and his brother.

Neither son was content in the father’s home. Their hearts were focused on their father’s wealth rather than on his love. The younger was full of uncontrolled passion. The older was full of loveless obedience. But the younger surrenders his pride while the older justifies his discontent.

### III. THE PRODIGAL FATHER

Now we turn to the third person featured in the story—the one who might be

called the “prodigal father.” Remember the definition of prodigal, profuse expenditure, disbursement without regard to risk, and unrestrained consumption of assets.

When we recall why Jesus told this story, we immediately recognize that it is the action of the father rather than the sons that is the chief focus of the story. The behavior of both sons provides context for the most amazing and unexpected action of the father. The father’s behavior here provides a revelation of divine love, an explanation for why Jesus received tax collectors and sinners, and an appeal to the pompous, self-righteous scribes and Pharisees.

This is a story that exposes God from the inside. Let us consider five insights into the character and action of God when dealing with wayward people.

**A. God is generous beyond reason (Matt 5:44–45).** The father in this story divides his livelihood between both sons.

**B. God’s role as father breaks all defective earthly stereotypes.** To the original hearers of this story the father running toward the younger son and going out to reason with the older son would be a shocking reversal of typical and expected behavior. Unfortunately, there are many people today who have great difficulty in understanding God because they have an earthly father who is anything but godlike.

**C. Obedience to God arises out of love for God, not fear of Him (Rom 2:4).** It is a new realization of the father’s love that draws the boy homeward.

**D. God’s forgiveness involves restoration, not mere pardon.** The returning son begged to become a hired servant. Instead, he is restored to sonship. The situation is no less amazing for the older son who remonstrates that his father never gave him a goat—to him the father says, “All that I have is yours.”

**E. God specializes in joy, extravagant joy.** The father spares nothing in celebrating the return of his son. Jesus spoke about the joy in heaven when sinners repent (Luke 15:7).

### CONCLUSION

Changing the title of the story opens new insights. This is not just about rebellion and repentance. Instead, it is about God’s love, God’s forgiveness, God’s generosity, and God’s joy. The story carries an implied invitation to become like the prodigal father. When it comes to forgiveness, love, encouragement, and acceptance, is it possible to be known as the “Prodigal Church”? (Eph 4:32). ED

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# You Shall Never Wash My Feet!

## INTRODUCTION

We have come today to celebrate the Lord's Supper. It is well for us to review what took place on that Thursday evening so long ago—a decisive moment in time. History-altering events were unfolding for the world and for individuals—even for you and me.

Let us hear the story once again from the Gospel of John chapter 13: (*Read John 13:1–5*).

Notice that John describes four ideas that appear to be uppermost in the mind of Jesus.

1. Jesus knew that His hour had come—He would be killed.
2. Jesus knew that He would depart from this world.
3. Jesus knew that the Father had handed all things to Him.
4. Jesus knew He had come from God and would go back to God.

We have seen what was in the mind of Jesus. And we will briefly explore three vital lessons that flow from His thinking.

But it may also be important to understand what was on the minds of the disciples. Shortly before arriving at the place for the Passover meal, Judas had agreed to betray Jesus. We now know what was on his mind.

The Gospel of Mark informs us that while Jesus and His disciples were on the way to Jerusalem, James and John made a request for power and position: “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory” (Mark 10:37, NIV). Now we know what was on their minds.

Mark continues by saying that when the other disciples heard about the request of James and John, they became indignant towards James and John. Now we have an insight into their minds.

Can you imagine the scene? Twelve men and their leader assembled in proximity with each other but miles apart in their thinking and relationships—so much so that none of the twelve could even consider performing the customary courtesy of washing the feet of guests.

The service of foot washing can be such an awkward thing for us because we cannot experience the culture and custom of the day. We can only describe it and try to imagine what took place. This essential courtesy was the duty of slaves. No Jew was required or even expected to wash the feet of another Jew. In this situation it is each man for himself.

No doubt Jesus had things to tell them that would be of crucial importance to their lives after He was no longer with them. Later, He said to them, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12, ESV).

In this fractured and self-centered atmosphere where a thin veneer of fellowship disguised a competitive and judgmental relationship, Jesus seized the moment to convey a timeless lesson. He washed their feet! This was least expected of a teacher, countercultural, and contrary to the human spirit of self-importance. This He performs to their amazement and shame.

Here is the first message arising from this episode:

## I. THE PRIORITY OF SERVICE, HUMILITY, AND LOVE

No doubt Jesus had much He wanted to teach His disciples about propositional truth, about doctrine, maybe even about church organization and how they should carry on mission in His physical absence. After all, truth matters!

But it is evident from the action of Jesus that attitude in action is more important than accuracy in doctrine. It is possible to “know the truth” and yet be emotionally immature and relationally incompetent. In such cases the truth becomes weaponized and that which was meant to build and establish, is used to defeat and destroy.

The teaching and example of Jesus, the teaching and appeal of the New Testament writers, emphasizes the priority of love. When Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment He replied:

*(Read Matthew 22:37).*

And then He continued: *(Read Matthew 22:39–40).*

And Paul admonishes the church in Rome: *(Read Romans 13:8).*

We learn from this painful and embarrassing episode for the disciples. Jesus places priority on service, humility, and love—the readiness to put the interests and needs of others above one's own.

There comes quickly a second great realization from this act of Jesus washing the feet of His disciples. I call it:

## II. THE LIMITATION OF PRESENT UNDERSTANDING

Let us hear from John's description of events: *(Read John 13:6–7).*

Perhaps we can understand and even defend Peter for his objection to what Jesus was doing. Bold and assertive, Peter was offended and ashamed that his Master would stoop to such a menial task. Peter feels diminished by the humility of Jesus and wants to rescue himself, to spare himself shame, and, perhaps secondly, to protect the honor of Jesus.

In identifying with Peter let us not overlook the response of Jesus to the protest of Peter: *(Read John 13:7).*

Wouldn't we all admit that there are times, maybe many times, when we question what God is doing in our lives? We believe we have surrendered to Him and that He guides in every detail of our pathways. And then comes a diagnosis of cancer, a debilitating disease, the sudden death of a family member, a catastrophic financial disaster, a disruptive relocation for a new job, the loss of home, rejection from a trusted relationship . . . and the list goes on.

It is an essential part of Christian life that we realize we do not always know what is going on in our lives. We are called to live by faith, trusting in One who is committed to our best good. There will be many things we do not understand, things that have no apparent logic, things devoid of purpose. In these moments we must recall Jesus' words to Peter: “You will understand later.”

Learning to trust God, is a crisis moment for many believers. Accepting His ordering of our lives, when we are confused and hurting, can bring us to the edge of fear and faith. In those moments we must recall the assurance that Jesus gave to Peter—an assurance that we will understand later.

We now come to the third important insight from this humiliating experience for the disciple when Jesus washed their feet:

## III. THE FUTILITY OF SELF-RELIANCE IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

Let us again listen closely to the dialogue between Peter and Jesus: *(Read John 13:8).*

“If I do not wash you. . .” sounds very exclusionary. Yet is there not a revolutionary truth here. Spiritual transformation in my life happens under the power of God, not under my own effort: *(Read Eph 2:8–10)!*

Now we come to that awkward moment when we repeat a custom so removed from our time and temperament. Jesus said to His disciples: *(Read John 13:14–15).*

I believe Jesus was underscoring: the priority of humility, service, and love; the limits of present understanding and reliance on faith in Him; and the futility of self-reliance in the spiritual life—grace and power are provided by Someone else.

## CONCLUSION

May this be the frame of mind in which we serve each other and in turn receive a ministry of love from another. ED

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# Life's Most Important Questions

## INTRODUCTION

Websites for commercial enterprises often have a section for “frequently asked questions.” By clicking on a link one can find detailed information about various products or services provided by the company.

Have you ever considered the most frequently asked questions in your home? They might include:

- “Are we there yet?”
- “What’s for dinner?”
- “How do I look?”
- “What time is it?”
- “Where did I leave my phone/glasses/keys?”

These are rather mundane and incidental questions, though they may be extremely important for the moment. There are other questions that rank among the most frequently heard, the simplest, and yet most profound inquiries about life.

- Who are you?
- What are you doing?
- What is your goal in life?

These queries, or variations of them, were addressed to John the Baptist. His answers give important insights to profound issues in life.

## I. WHO ARE YOU?—A QUESTION OF IDENTITY

John 1:19–23 describes a scene where religious leaders inquire about John’s identity. (Read the text.)

“Who are you?” is a question about identity—how you see yourself and how others should regard you. The challenge is that we all have many identities and how we answer the question depends on where we are and who is asking. The question can be answered in so many ways—based on gender, age, ancestry, nationality, citizenship, job, education, accomplishments, relationships, possessions, or position.

John’s answer came not from his ancestry, his family, his education, his citizenship, or his hobbies. His identity was found in his calling: I am a messenger for God! This realization formed the foundation of his life, his behavior, and his habits.

No doubt, like us, John had many other identities too. But the dominant identity which shaped and prioritized his life was the simple realization that he was a messenger for God.

Why is identity so important? When a person is lost in the wilderness the most important question is “Where am I?” When a person is lost in life the most important question is “Who am I?”

We solve life’s moral, ethical, and behavioral questions based on how this one question is answered. Identity issues in life abound. You find them in the political arena (illustrate with names of political parties), in the religious realm (illustrate with names of

various religions), and in the social fabric of the community—rich/poor, foreigner/native, youth/elderly.

What mother has not heard a child voice this identity-based response: “Mom, I need those jeans. All the kids in school are wearing them. If I wear what you like, I’ll look weird!”

The Bible reveals that great moral issues have been resolved on the understanding of one’s identity:

- Moses (Read Heb 11:24)
- Joseph (Read Gen 39:9)
- Paul (Read 1 Cor 3:3–4, 9; Phil 3:20)

We live in a media-saturated society with influencers all around us who market ideas that shape our attitudes about ourselves, our values, our behaviors, and our use of resources. One of the most urgent issues in life is just this simple question: “Who are you?” How do you define yourself? What identity provides the ethical and moral basis for your lifestyle?

## II. WHAT ARE YOU DOING?—A QUESTION OF MISSION

The Pharisees didn’t understand who John was nor did they comprehend the reasons for his actions. So, they asked him: (Read John 1:25).

The religious leaders noticed that John lived and behaved differently from them. They wanted to understand who he was and why he was acting the way he did. John’s response to their question revealed the commitment that prompted his actions and way of life.

John’s work, his mission, was to bring attention to Jesus. For John, the question “What do you do?” is not a question about action; it is a question about intention.

The challenge to the church through all centuries has always been to keep the focus on Jesus. Church history, even our own, has too often been a story of doctrinal debate—this formulation of truth and correction of that error. Attention has been directed to standards and boundaries and when these become the central focus, they always bring imbalance. We need to learn how to make Jesus the center, then all the boundaries will find their proper place. John’s mission was to point to Jesus.

Mahatma Gandhi, from India, once observed that if Christians would be like Jesus the whole world would be Christian.

“What are you doing?” is not just a question about the activity of the moment. It probes into the defining purpose behind all that we do. And the challenging question for every follower of Jesus Christ is, “Does my life bring positive attention to Jesus?”

John’s sense of *identity* enabled him to solve moral and ethical challenges. His sense of *mission* released him from the prison and pressures of local culture. He was not concerned about fashion in clothing, diet, or lifestyle. He was an ambassador for the King

of kings, and he followed a lifestyle that enhanced his message.

Now the question is, “How does this affect an individual and the church?” A person without a sense of identity and mission is going to become a victim of the prevailing culture in which he lives.

“What do you do” is a probing question about purpose in life. What is it that you are striving to accomplish? Are you investing your energies in something worthwhile or in something as fleeting as a soap bubble?

## III. WHAT IS YOUR LIFE GOAL?—A QUESTION OF PRIORITIES

John’s own disciples became anxious about John’s future as the popularity of Jesus increased. Though they did not ask a straightforward question, you can clearly hear it in this dialogue: (Read John 3:26–30).

The ministry of Jesus and John overlapped for a time. For a while John had been the center of attention. People flocked to hear him. He was just reaching full stride when Jesus began His ministry—and then people began to go to Jesus instead of to John. Jesus was becoming more popular than John.

How easy it would have been for John to feel injured, neglected, threatened, and forgotten. John didn’t fall into that trap. He had settled the question of what was most important in life. For John, that most important thing was the kingdom of God, and therefore he could joyfully say, “He must increase but I must decrease.”

## CONCLUSION

John was prepared to play a subordinate role. In his view it was a noble thing to serve God where you are. If you are a tax collector, be a good one. If you are a janitor, do your job to the glory of God. If you are a teacher, a secretary, or a receptionist—view your work as ministry for God. Whether you are in the limelight or in obscurity it makes no difference, for a God-given task of any size is a noble calling. If God wants to use you, He doesn’t need to give you a position of leadership.

The subtle question that lay behind the questioning of John’s disciples was really this: “What ultimately concerns you? What are you spending and being spent for? What cause consumes your life?” These are questions for us today—when it is so easy to commit our lives to finite things of transitory worth.

The life of John the Baptist teaches us how to live in two worlds—how to cope with a world in which we are aliens until we reach the home where we have our citizenship. Life’s biggest questions are character questions involving identity, purpose, and priorities. **ED**

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# A Consecrated Ministry

>PART 1

## EDITORIAL NOTE

This is the first of a three-part series featuring “A Consecrated Ministry,” chapter 34 from *The Acts of the Apostles* by Ellen G. White. While the author clearly had Seventh-day Adventist pastors in view when she wrote this chapter, the fact that it was included in a volume with an intended broad audience makes it readily apparent that Ellen White, her editors, and advisors clearly saw that this chapter has important applications for all disciples of Jesus—particularly elders, deacons, and deaconesses. This chapter highlights the value of a soul, provides valuable counsel about the priorities of life and ministry, and inspires all readers to consecrated selfless service. It has been reprinted with the permission of the Ellen G. White Estate.

**In** His life and lessons Christ has given a perfect exemplification of the unselfish ministry which has its origin in God. God does not live for Himself. By creating the world, and by upholding all things, He is constantly ministering to others. “He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.” Matthew 5:45. This ideal of ministry the Father committed to His Son. Jesus was given to stand at the head of humanity, by His example to teach what it means to minister. His whole life was under a law of service. He served all, ministered to all.

Again and again Jesus tried to establish his principle among His disciples. When James and John made their request for pre-eminence, He said, “Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many.” Matthew 20:26–28.



SCAN FOR AUDIO

**Christ's ministers are the spiritual guardians of the people entrusted to their care. Their work has been likened to that of watchmen. In ancient times sentinels were often stationed on the walls of cities, where, from points of vantage, they could overlook important posts to be guarded, and give warning of the approach of an enemy. Upon their faithfulness depended the safety of all within.**

Since His ascension Christ has carried forward His work on the earth by chosen ambassadors, through whom He speaks to the children of men and ministers to their needs. The great Head of the church superintends His work through the instrumentality of men ordained by God to act as His representatives.

The position of those who have been called of God to labor in word and doctrine for the upbuilding of His church, is one of grave responsibility. In Christ's stead they are to beseech men and women to be reconciled to God, and they can fulfill their mission only as they receive wisdom and power from above.

Christ's ministers are the spiritual guardians of the people entrusted to their care. Their work has been likened to that of watchmen. In ancient times sentinels were often stationed on the walls of cities, where, from points of vantage, they could overlook important posts to be guarded, and give warning of the approach of an enemy. Upon their faithfulness depended the safety of all within. At stated intervals they were required to call to one another, to make sure that all were awake and that no harm had befallen any. The cry of good cheer or of warning was borne from one to another, each repeating the call till it echoed round the city.

To every minister the Lord declares: "O son of man, I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore thou shalt hear the word at My mouth, and warn them from Me. When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die; if thou dost not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Nevertheless, if thou warn the wicked of his way to turn from it, . . . thou hast delivered thy soul." Ezekiel 33:7-9.

The words of the prophet declare the solemn responsibility of those who are appointed as guardians of the church of God, stewards of the mysteries of God. They are to stand as watchmen on the walls of Zion, to sound the note of alarm at the approach of the enemy. Souls are in danger of falling under temptation, and they will perish unless God's ministers are faithful to their trust. If for any reason their spiritual senses become so benumbed that they are unable to discern danger, and through their failure to give warning the people perish, God will require at their hands the blood of those who are lost.

It is the privilege of the watchmen on the walls of Zion to live so near to God, and to be susceptible to the impressions of His Spirit, that He can work through them to

tell men and women of their peril and point them to the place of safety. Faithfully are they to warn them of the sure result of transgression, and faithfully are they to safeguard the interests of the church. At no time may they relax their vigilance. Theirs is a work requiring the exercise of every faculty of the being. In trumpet tones their voices are to be lifted, and never are they to sound one wavering, uncertain note. Not for wages are they to labor, but because they cannot do otherwise, because they realize that there is a woe upon them if they fail to preach the gospel. Chosen of God, sealed with the blood of consecration, they are to rescue men and women from impending destruction.

The minister who is a co-worker with Christ will have a deep sense of the sacredness of his work and of the toil and sacrifice required to perform it successfully. He does not study his own ease or convenience. He is forgetful of self. In his search for the lost sheep he does not realize that he himself is weary, cold, and hungry. He has but one object in view—the saving of the lost.

He who serves under the bloodstained banner of Immanuel will have that to do which will call for heroic effort and patient endurance. But the soldier of the cross stands unshrinking in the forefront of the battle. As the enemy presses the attack against him, he turns to the stronghold for aid, and as he brings to the Lord the promises of the word, he is strengthened for the duties of the hour. He realizes his need of strength from above. The victories that he gains do not lead to self exaltation, but cause him to lean more and more heavily on the Mighty One. Relying upon that Power, he is enabled to present the message of salvation so forcibly that it vibrates in other minds.

ED



SCAN FOR AUDIO

# Deacons and Deaconesses as Caregivers to the Sick and Needy

There is an interesting parallel between the work of deacons and deaconesses, and those who work in the nursing profession. Recounting the history of the nursing profession, Janice Rider Ellis and Celia Love Hartley state, “The deaconesses of the Eastern Christian Church represent one group of particular significance to the history of nursing. These dedicated young women practiced ‘works of mercy’ that included feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, sheltering the homeless, caring for the sick, and burying the dead.”<sup>1</sup> Ellis and Hartley continue to say that these deaconesses are often cited as being the earliest counterparts to the community health nurses of today. They carried a basket that contained food and medicine that they distributed as they visited the homes of the sick. Their basket is the forerunner of the contemporary visiting nurse’s bag. Phoebe is often referred to as the first deaconess and first visiting nurse in books about nursing history.<sup>2</sup> Owen Chadwick also points out that during the 1500s, deacons and deaconesses were used as managers of hospitals in the Netherlands.<sup>3</sup>



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The ministry of deacons and deaconesses in the twenty-first century is a continuation of that history of caring for the sick and needy. In its list of duties for deacons and deaconesses, the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* includes the following statement:

Deacons and deaconesses are charged with assisting the sick, poor, and unfortunate and should keep the church informed of their needs and enlist the support of members. Money should be provided for this work from the fund for the poor and needy. The treasurer, on recommendation from the board, will pass over to the deacons or deaconesses whatever may be needed for use in needy cases.<sup>4</sup>

Eurico Tadeu Xavier concludes that the work of deacons and deaconesses is indispensable to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Among all of the services that they render, caring for the sick and helping the poor and suffering are important responsibilities that they carry out. He also states that the deacons or deaconesses may accompany an ordained minister or

elder of the church to give communion to a homebound member who happened to be sick, or who for any other reason could not leave home to participate in the communion service.<sup>5</sup>

Earl S. Johnson indicates that deacons assist senior citizens and visit shut-ins or members who cannot attend church services regularly. They organize transportation for those who cannot drive to their medical appointments. They provide meals and housing for the homeless, organize advocacy programs for those in legal trouble, and minister to those in jails and prisons.<sup>6</sup>

Ellis and Hartley relate the story of Pastor Theodore Fliedner and his wife Friederike who revived the deaconess movement in Europe by establishing a training institute for deaconesses at Kaisewerth, Germany, in 1836. Later they opened a small hospital. Gertrude Reichardt, the daughter of a physician, was recruited as their first deaconess. The endeavors at Kaisewerth included care of the sick, visitations and parochial work, and teaching. A course in nursing was developed that included

lectures by physicians. In 1849, Pastor Fliedner traveled to the United States, where he helped to establish the first motherhouse of Kaiserwerth deaconesses in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. With the help of four deaconesses, the Motherhouse of Kaiserwerth Deaconesses assumed responsibility for the Pittsburgh Infirmary, which was the first Protestant hospital in the United States. The hospital is now called Passavant Hospital.<sup>7</sup>

A great legacy has been left by the deaconesses and deacons of past generations. If today's deacons and deaconesses would continue this legacy by working with the nurses and other healthcare professionals in their churches and communities, a lot of suffering would be alleviated. ED



**Deacons and deaconesses are charged with assisting the sick, poor, and unfortunate and should keep the church informed of their needs and enlist the support of members.**

<sup>1</sup> Janice Rider Ellis and Celia Love Hartley, *Nursing in Today's World: Trends, Issues and Management*, 8th ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2004), 117.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Owen Chadwick, *The Early Reformation on the Continent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 105.

<sup>4</sup> General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2022), 84.

<sup>5</sup> Eurico Tadeu Xavier, "Deacons Take Care of Almost Everything," trans. Antonio A. Rios, *Elder's Digest*, January–March 2004, 6–7.

<sup>6</sup> Earl S. Johnson Jr., *The Presbyterian Deacon: An Essential Guide* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2002), 31.

<sup>7</sup> Ellis and Hartley, *Nursing in Today's World*, 123.

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SCAN FOR AUDIO

# Exercise the Muscle of Delight

I have a friend who, every time he sees a whale, texts me saying, “I JUST SAW A WHALE!!!” That might not seem like much, but I live by the Humpback Highway where thousands of whales pass each year to warmer waters. Keep your eyes on the horizon for five minutes and you’re bound to see one breach. These whale notifications therefore come in as frequently as fake postmen texts saying I have a delivery arriving and overseas numbers advising me to upgrade my electricity. At times I’ve even responded to said messages, “Oh . . . just another whale text.”

But when I stop to think about it, it’s quite admirable. While many others run by and cease to look out at the water, my friend is still able to find excitement over something that—at least where we live—is quite a common sighting.

We see this kind of joy in children all the time, and we admire it in them as we grow older. We watch them scream with wide eyes over bubbles or sand or a bird on the fence, and we can’t help but laugh at their response. As we age, many things war against these moments, and we become dulled to all the small pleasures life has to offer. We get busy, take on responsibilities, experience hurt and worry about the world around us. It’s not that we forget about pleasure. We just tend to gravitate towards the large, momentary kind like holidays, fancy meals, thrills and gadgets.



There are many things that, if I stopped to pay attention to, could bring me joy at little cost and effort: a smile from a stranger, rain on a tin roof, patterns on leaves, rocks you can sink into, the crack of a watermelon, the reflection of the moon on the water. Like a child who screams, “Wow! Do it again!” is how I should respond. But often, I’m distracted by life, and I pass on.

It makes me wonder about God’s response to the things of creation. Does He make each sunrise like we make our beds, or does He delight in each one like a child with a new pack of crayons? Does He point to stars that fly through the sky, or is His head in His hands with all there is to do? Does He swoon at the spray of an ocean wave, or did He make the mountains like we mow our lawns?

After suffering a massive stroke, Jean-Dominique Bauby, editor of a French fashion magazine, found

himself completely paralyzed, mute, and half deaf. Letter by letter, with his one functioning eyelid, he dictated to a nurse a memoir called *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. As he lay in hospital for the remaining few years of his life, he recalled moments he longed to experience again: a cup of milky tea in his hands; deep armchairs; fish straight from the water; maneuvering the bath taps with his toes; a simple soft boiled egg; cradling his children in his arms; stairways down to the beach that are now dead ends; the ability to return an “I love you.” Though his life was now deprived of most pleasures and was what he described as “a jellyfish existence,” Jean continued to find small treasures. The final words he dictated in his memoir just two days before he died were, “We must keep looking.” Even though confined to a hospital bed, Jean could still appreciate the sight

of the sea out his window and a friendly hand stroking his numb fingers.

So often, struggle clouds our eyes and hinders us from enjoying what’s around us. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Yale University released a course called “The Science of Well-Being,” designed to give people tools to increase their happiness. One psychological tool was called “savoring,” which means to step outside of an experience and review and appreciate it. The challenge was for people to pick one experience to savor every day, whether it be as small as a nice shower or a walk outside. They were then to share the experience with another person or think about how lucky they were to enjoy the moment. Studies have shown that savoring moments enables us to notice and enjoy more of life’s experiences, helps us cope with stress, and even increases our creativity.

**There are many things that, if I stopped to pay attention to, could bring me joy at little cost and effort: a smile from a stranger, rain on a tin roof, patterns on leaves, rocks you can sink into, the crack of a watermelon, the reflection of the moon on the water.**

It's no coincidence the Bible tells us to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps 34:8), and when we're waiting on something or need strength to "see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living" (Ps 27:13). We're not instructed just to read and believe, but to experience and know God by paying attention to the gifts He gives daily. Doing this provides more than just a few seconds of enjoyment. From it, we cultivate an attitude of worship, admiration, and thankfulness, and we grow in our ability to see good and to see God. As author Tish Harrison Warren says in *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, "we must take up the practice—the privilege and responsibility—of noticing, savouring, revelling, so that, to use Annie Dillard's phrase, 'creation need not play to an empty house.'"

My guess is that our God is not a boring God—that He not only delights in the little things, but He also delights in our delight in them. We

cannot deny that life can be hard. But the small joys around us can be a resting place for hope and sustain us in what can sometimes seem like a sea of disappointment. We can appreciate a knowing look from our pet and be reminded that God sees us. We can look at the paint strokes on a seashell and know that He is full of detailed care. We can feel the grass between our toes and be reminded that He so wisely builds the foundations of our lives. We can trust that when our bodies respond in a way that shouts "Do it again!" He will gladly do so over and over because He loves to see our faces light up.

In *Letters to Malcolm*, CS Lewis wrote he once thought he had to start "by summoning up what we believe about the goodness and greatness of God, by thinking about creation and redemption." Instead, he says to start with the pleasures at hand—for him, a babbling brook and cushiony moss.

As I write this, it's blue sky after weeks of rain and the sound of my neighbor singing at his piano.

As we grow older, we must relearn the skill of merriment and exercise the muscle to delight in life. So, in the words of CS Lewis, "begin where you are." Focus your gaze on the wonder, beauty, and delight God has placed here for us, and when you find yourself even mildly excited, take a deep breath and let out a loud, resounding "WOW!" Say thank you to God and share your "whale moment" with a loved one. With time, the little things might start to feel like the biggest and best things. **ED**

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SCAN FOR AUDIO

# Dealing with Conspiracy Theories

>PART 2

## EDITORIAL NOTE

This article is the second of a two-part series that addresses suitable responses to conspiracy theories.

## HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH ONE ANOTHER

Talking with someone who firmly believes in a conspiracy theory can be challenging. Many find themselves so deeply convinced about their beliefs that significant parts of their life and worldview center around them. That is why simple arguments often do not change the mind of another person, but tend to only reinforce our prior opinions. Nevertheless, here are a few things that can help when we talk with one another on this issue:<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Appreciate the People

Reaching the hearts and minds of those who hold different opinions only works if I have a *genuine* desire for the appreciation and well-being of the other person. This does not mean that I approve of everything they believe. I simply distinguish between the person and their opinions and acts. This is what Jesus practiced in His interactions with other people. Only reaching out to others in order to prove that I am right does not foster a trusting relationship. It matters *how*

**Nobody is inclined to listen to people who are cynical, sarcastic, or who ridicule others. We need to learn to listen attentively and to meet people respectfully. The power of attentive listening is a sign of respect that one shows for the other person and is an expression of our care.**

we talk to each other. If I want to succeed winning another person, it is easy to conclude that the ends justify the means. “But it is worth remembering that the means are a measure of our character. When we succeed in changing someone’s mind, we shouldn’t only ask whether we’re proud of what we’ve achieved. We should also ask whether we’re proud of how we’ve achieved it.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, don’t take things personally if they disagree with you. Some people won’t change their minds, no matter what you say. Research has shown that merely listing counterarguments to a hypothesis that is promoted does not lead people to change their minds. Often *how* we communicate is far more important than what we say to the other person. So, stay calm and stay friendly.

## **2. Listen—Don’t Preach**

As it is true for any other person who has firm convictions, people who believe in conspiracy theories will not be swayed by people who mock their views. Nobody is inclined to listen to people who are cynical, sarcastic, or who ridicule others. We need to learn to listen attentively and to meet people respectfully. The power of attentive listening is a sign of respect that one shows for the other person and is an expression of our care. It can open the door to our hearts so that we are more willing to listen to each other. For this to succeed, try focusing on the person you

want to reach—not the myth that you want to debunk. Instead of lecturing them, listen attentively and learn to ask good questions, such as how they became interested in this theory, where they get their information from, and whether they have considered other explanations. Try to find out if certain fears are behind the interest in particular conspiracy theories. Try to learn what they are afraid of and how they think this theory might help them cope with or respond to their fears. Fears are powerful motivators and need to be taken seriously. Good questions often can be more convincing than the best argument. Whenever possible, have the conversation offline and in person.

## **3. Check the Sources**

Always carefully check the sources and their authenticity and credibility. Look who wrote the content and who is quoted in it. Are they named? Do they have expertise in the area, and do they have experience in the particular subject that lends credibility to their claims? In a time when deepfakes<sup>3</sup> and fake facts are increasingly widespread, careful fact-checking becomes essential.<sup>4</sup> Are other viewpoints mentioned in the article? Be wary of claims made by “insiders,” anonymous internet posters, or anyone citing hearsay as fact. Also, check the dates: misinformation peddlers often post old photos or news stories and claim they’re new. Similarly,

verify extraordinary claims. If you read something that makes an incredible claim—one that seems too good, too awful, or too weird to be true—check to see if it’s being reported elsewhere. If it’s an important story, other outlets will confirm the details. Be cautious of explosive claims if they’re only being made on one website or by one social media user.

## **4. Check the Context**

On the internet and in social media it is now extremely easy to copy and share information that might not be wrong in and of itself, but that originally was stated in a specific context and was connected to a different setting than that in which it is now being used. In such copying, the elimination of sentences or words often can create a very different message than was originally intended. In such creative editing of information, the original text is freed from its context and decontextualized by combining it with new and different contexts. The information that is thus converted into bits and pixels becomes available everywhere and is rather difficult to protect and almost impossible to control. Try to check the original source that is cited and see if the quote distorts the original meaning or even leads to false conclusions.

## **5. Be Wary of Content that Plays on Emotions**

Misinformation and conspiracy theories often exploit feelings of anger, fear, or other intense emotions. Be cautious of content that features strong emotional language, or that seems intended to make others outraged. Also be mindful of your own use of language. If something really gets you fired up, wait until your emotions have cooled before reposting or sending anything to friends.

Be cautious of content that features strongly emotional language, or that seems intended to make others outraged. Also be mindful of your own use of language.

### 6. Expand Your Media Diet

Checking a variety of news sources—including some mainstream local, national, and international outlets as well as reputable fact-checking websites—is the best way of staying informed and avoiding rabbit holes of misinformation and conspiracy theories. Don't rely solely on social media for your news.

### 7. Be Aware of Connecting the Dots Properly

Be mindful of theories that ratchet up from small events that might be true, to much larger global events. Often a global or universal extent makes it less probable and less likely to be true. When a conspiracy theory tends to comingle facts and speculations without properly and appropriately distinguishing between the two and without assigning degrees of probability or of factuality, be alert and cautious. Often events are connected that need not be causally related. When no solid evidence supports these connections except the allegation of that conspiracy or when the evidence fits equally well to other causal connections—or to randomness—the conspiracy theory is likely to be false. We certainly all must gain greater media literacy where we learn to discriminate between reliable and unreliable sources of information and we need to be aware that the results of our Google and Facebook searches are not necessarily “the truth” and often may not reflect reality but, to a large extent, our own personal preferences. Be aware that falsehood spreads more easily than truth.

### 8. What Impact Does the Conspiracy Theory Have?

Find out and sense what impact the conspiracy theory has on the life of the person who believes in it as well as on those around them. If it encourages cynicism, derogatory sentiments, anti-Semitic theories, paranoia, or end-time fear and anxiety, something is wrong. When these theories slander perceived enemies with innuendo and unsubstantiated allegations, a red flag should go up. If the knowledge of such a theory promotes pride and self-righteousness, be warned. As the apostle Paul says, “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor 8:1, NKJV).

As Christians we are told to “examine everything carefully” and to “hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thess 5:21, NASB). We are also encouraged to “love your enemies, and do good” (Luke 6:35, NASB). This also applies to those who espouse different opinions. This spirit of Christ should characterize all our interactions as we share the hope of Christ's salvation and trust God's promises when we encounter various conspiracy theories. ED

<sup>1</sup> In some of the subsequent points we follow the tips of the Associated Press in “How to Talk to Believers of COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories,” April 6, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/how-to-talk-to-believers-covid-19-conspiracy-theories-fc2a0c3e9d6816629da61d9b-c3f317e5> and the information provided by the European Union on identifying conspiracy theories: “Identifying Conspiracy Theories,” European Commission, accessed April 9, 2023, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/identifying-conspiracy-theories\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/identifying-conspiracy-theories_en).

<sup>2</sup> Adam Grant, *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know* (New York, NY: Viking, 2021), 160.

<sup>3</sup> In deepfake, powerful techniques from machine learning and artificial intelligence are used in which a person in an existing picture or video is replaced by someone else's likeness. This has garnered widespread attention for their manipulative uses in pornography, fake news, hoaxes, and financial fraud.

<sup>4</sup> This fact checking should be done through institutions and websites that are certified by the International Fact Checking Network (IFCN). See “International Fact Checking Network (IFCN) Codes and Principles, RAND, accessed April 9, 2023, <https://www.rand.org/research/projects/truth-decay/fighting-disinformation/search/items/international-fact-checking-network-ifcn-codes-and.html>; and “International Fact-Checking Network,” Poynter, accessed April 9, 2023, <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/>. Among the credible organizations is dpa-Faktencheck; see Credibility Coalition, accessed April 9, 2023, <https://credibilitycoalition.org/credcatalog/project/dpa-faktencheck/>, with an extensive list of numerous other fact-checking organizations.

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The following resources are helpful in analyzing and understanding conspiracy theories better:

Michael Butter, *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).

Joseph E. Uscinski, ed., *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Michael Butter and Peter Knight, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (London: Routledge, 2020).



# Christ Is the Mediator of All Things

**When** two or more parties wish to move from discordance to harmony with one another, oftentimes it is helpful to call in someone to help with the process: a mediator. Mediation refers to a third party's intervention into a relationship for the purpose of helping achieve resolution. A mediator is the one who steps into the middle of a broken relationship and works as a go-between for everyone to settle conflict. As such, a mediator is on everyone's side, wishing to see relationships mended and brought into harmony once more. This is the role that Jesus chose to take on so that you and I could be reconciled to God. Divine mediation has been the plan ever since the first introduction of sin.

## **THE WORK OF MEDIATION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

In Genesis 3, when sin entered the world, immediately there was a fracture in humanity's relationship with God. "But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear" (Isa 59:2).<sup>1</sup> Through the course of the Old Testament, a system of atonement was created to demonstrate the work of repairing man's relationship with God. In the book of Leviticus, special instruction was given to set aside priests who would perform symbolic ceremonies in God's tabernacle. The established sacrificial system, and



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particularly the Day of Atonement, were put into place as a means of bridging the gap of sin between God and man (see Leviticus 4 and 16). “And the priest, who is anointed and consecrated to minister as priest in his father’s place, shall make atonement . . . and he shall make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly” (Lev 16:32–33). However, the sacrificial system was an imperfect means of repair. It required repeated sacrifice, over and over again, and even then the sacrificial system did not bring a complete wholeness back to the divine-human relationship.

### **THE WORK OF MEDIATION IN THE PERSON OF JESUS CHRIST**

The beautiful truth is that Jesus came to earth, died for our sins, and now offers Himself as our per-

fect Mediator, the One to bring the fullness of reconciliation between us and God. “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:19; see also Col 1:20; Rom 5:10). Jesus is the perfect go-between in the divine-human relationship because He is both God and man. Jesus declared, “I and My Father are one” (John 10:30). The apostle Paul also affirmed the full deity and humanity in the person of Christ: “For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Col 2:9). By possessing both a divine and human nature, Jesus is the perfect Mediator to create true connection between us and our Heavenly Father.

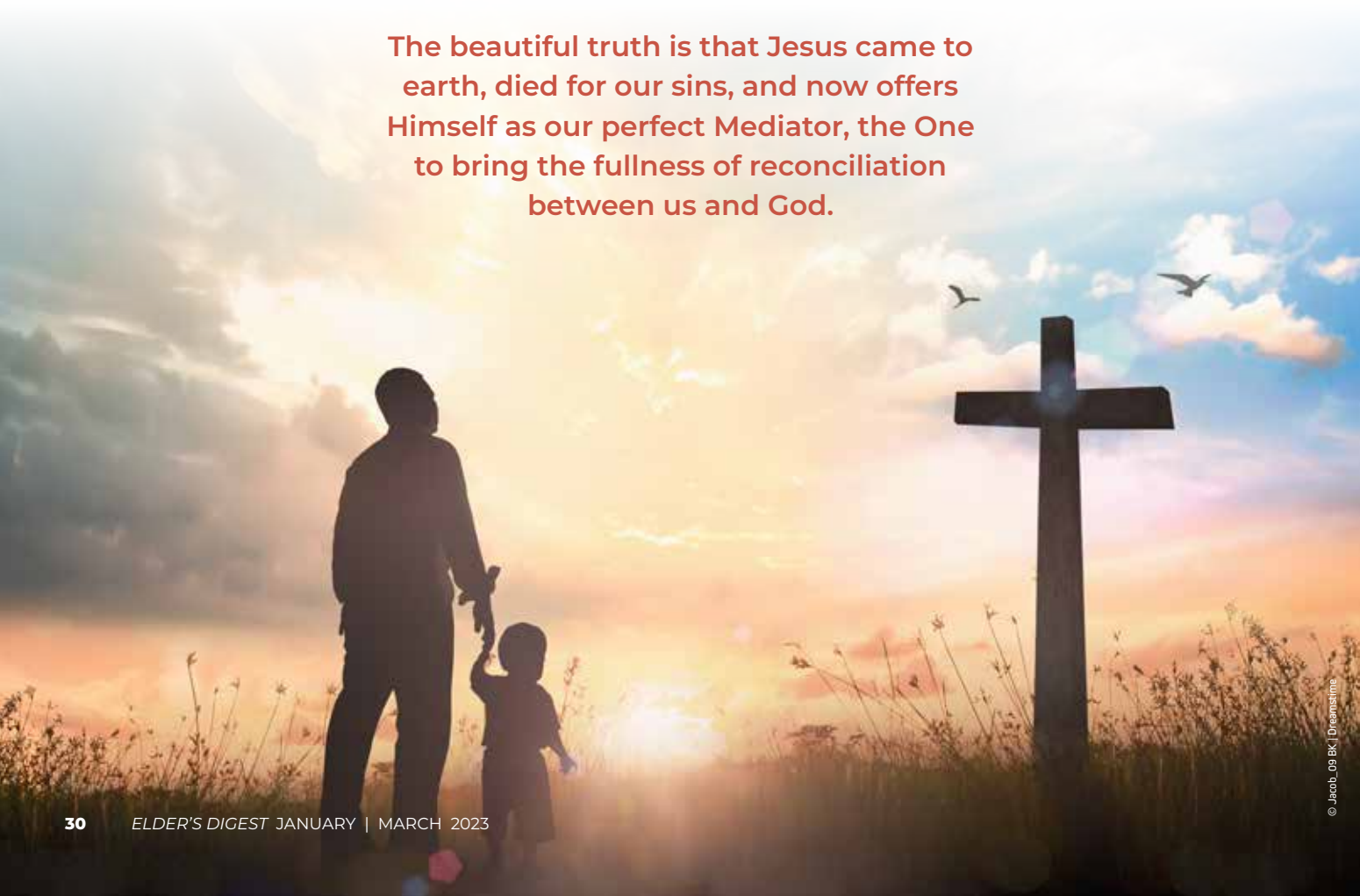
We will now discuss three important functions of Christ’s mediation on our behalf.

### **JESUS IS OUR DIRECT ACCESS TO GOD**

Because of Jesus, we have direct access to the throne of God. “Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:16). As our Mediator, Christ creates a way—the only way—of access between ourselves and our heavenly Father. Coming to earth, our mediator Jesus Christ fully understands what it means to be human, experiencing pain, suffering, and temptation. But He has also become our High Priest, able to sympathize with us and offer grace and help in our times of need. “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15).

This divine mediation is something only Christ can do for us.

**The beautiful truth is that Jesus came to earth, died for our sins, and now offers Himself as our perfect Mediator, the One to bring the fullness of reconciliation between us and God.**



**Through Christ, we are made one with the Father: a true atonement. In Jesus, we have a Mediator who provides us direct access to God, a true Sacrifice providing full forgiveness of our sins, a High Priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses, and a constant divine Intercessor. Jesus is everything to us.**

“For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5; see also John 14:6). It is only through Christ’s mediation that we have the wonderful privilege of approaching our heavenly Father at any time, any place, and under any kind of circumstances.

### **JESUS IS OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS**

Under the old covenant, a sacrifice was required each time a person sinned. In this way alone could atonement between God and man be made. However, through the blood of Jesus, a new covenant was established. No longer must we depend upon the continual sacrifices offered by a human priest for the forgiveness of our sins and alleviation of our guilt. Jesus’ sacrifice is enough and has made Him our true Mediator. “And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance” (Heb 9:15; see also 12:24).

Ellen G. White further writes of this holy work which connects us to our Father:

This Saviour was to be a mediator, to stand between the Most High and His people. Through this provision, a way was opened whereby the guilty

sinner might find access to God through the mediation of another. The sinner could not come in his own person, with his guilt upon him, and with no greater merit than he possessed in himself. Christ alone could open the way, by making an offering equal to the demands of the divine law. He was perfect, and undefiled by sin.<sup>2</sup>

With Jesus’ sacrifice, we are offered a new covenant, and through this covenant He offers us forgiveness and righteousness. As our Mediator, all who accept Jesus are made a new creation, found blameless before God (see 2 Cor 5:17).

### **JESUS IS OUR INTERCESSOR**

An intercessor is one who intercedes in some fashion on behalf of someone else. In the Old Testament, the priest would intercede on behalf of the people when performing sacrifices to God. Now we have the ultimate Intercessor praying for us—Jesus. “Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb 7:25). In John 17, Jesus petitions His Father for His disciples, including you and me. Here are a few things He prayed for, interceding for us, in this chapter:

- Protection by God’s name (v. 11)
- Spiritual safety (v. 12)
- Protection for them from the evil one (v. 16)
- Sanctification and that they would be sent into the world (v. 17)
- Belief in Him (v. 20)
- Unity among them (v. 21)
- Jesus’ dwelling in their hearts (v. 22–23)
- That they would be with Jesus (v. 24)
- That they would continue to know Jesus (v. 26)

It is wonderful to know that others pray on our behalf. But how much greater is it to know that Jesus Himself is our dedicated Intercessor!

### **CONCLUSION**

We no longer rely upon the temple sacrificial system to bring any reconciliation between us and God. Through Christ, we are made one with the Father: a true atonement. In Jesus, we have a Mediator who provides us direct access to God, a true Sacrifice providing full forgiveness of our sins, a High Priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses, and a constant divine Intercessor. Jesus is everything to us. ED

<sup>1</sup> All biblical quotations are from the New King James Version.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, December 17, 1872.

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