

QUARTERLY RESOURCE FOR LOCAL CHURCH LEADERS • 3/2024

# ELDER'S DIGEST



Identity and Mission



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**EDITOR'S NOTES:** The articles in this publication have been revised slightly or updated to conform to the intended audience and nature of *Elder's Digest*.

**SUBSCRIPTION AND ADDRESS CHANGES:** One-year subscription, USD 18.00. Three-year subscription, USD 47.00. Please subscribe at [www.eldersdigest.org](http://www.eldersdigest.org) or send check to *Elder's Digest*, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904, USA. Please send address changes to [garciamarenko@gc.adventist.org](mailto:garciamarenko@gc.adventist.org).

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SCAN FOR AUDIO

# Your Bible and You

“If your house were on fire, what would you grab in those few seconds as you escaped?” This was a hypothetical question that we asked each other as kids.

Being the youngest in the family, with a strong, resourceful, and capable father, I knew that he would ensure all the family would get out safely. I also knew that money was not abundant in our family and any money of significance was secure in the bank away from the flames.

So, being assured that parents, brothers, sister, and money were going to be safe, what would I take?

Three things always came to mind. My cricket bat. I loved cricket but I loved batting more. Being made of English willow and generously nourished with linseed oil to preserve it, that bat would burn in an instant. My football boots were also a prized possession. I cleaned and polished them before every game.

But when I paused and really considered what mattered most, it was my Bible, sitting carefully placed on top of my bedside table—that’s what I would take with me when fleeing the hypothetical flames.

My mother had taught me how to respect and care for my Bible. Nothing was to be placed on the Bible—no other book, pamphlet, brochure. Nothing. It was superior to all other possessions. It wasn’t to be placed on the

floor; it was too precious. Before reading it, I was taught to make sure my hands were clean, lest the pages get grubby over time. Most importantly, my mother taught me to pray before reading it, seeking the Holy Spirit for guidance and an open heart to the Lord’s leading in my life through His Word.

It was my father who showed me how to read the Bible, unlocking the “code” of finding the book, chapter, and verse.

I’ll never forget the thrill of making that discovery, of finding a specific text in the Bible, and of reading it for myself.

Decades and several literally worn-out Bibles later, I still treasure my Bible. Yes, I have various versions of the Bible on my phone and computer. They are helpful at times. But the Bible I treasure most is my hard copy, ink on paper. Having purchased the Bible, I don’t need a SIM card nor pay for data, roaming, or additional fees to access it. It needs no battery nor electricity—just a little ambient light. But there are no pop-up notifications from social media, news outlets, sports apps, or commercial vendors trying to sell me things I don’t particularly need that interrupt my experience with the Saviour and His Word. My preferred pop-up notifications are from the Holy Spirit—prompting, beckoning, inspiring, and satisfying me.

Study after study has demonstrated that people absorb, retain, and recall more when they read from a hard copy book rather than from a digital electronic device.<sup>1</sup> If you don’t believe me, use one of those electronic devices and do a simple Google search on that question. (I’m smiling as I write this.)

While I’m reminiscing about my childhood, here’s another memory... Everyone attending our little church carried their own Bible on Sabbath. There seemed to be an eagerness to turn to every text referenced by a Sabbath School teacher or preacher. That, too, imparted a significant message about their values, priorities, and esteem for the Bible.

I hope that your house will not burn, so I won’t ask you the obvious question: “If your house were on fire, what would you grab?” Instead, I will ask: “Is it too hard, too inconvenient, too old fashioned to study a hardcopy Bible and bring it with you to church this Sabbath?” After all, according to Google, you’ll absorb, retain, and recall more if you do. ED



ANTHONY R. KENT | General Conference Associate Ministerial Secretary

<sup>1</sup> Heather Rose Artushin, “The Case for Paper: Books vs. E-Readers,” *Psychology Today*, February 2, 2024, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/well-read/202402/the-case-for-paper-books-vs-e-readers>.

> COVER FEATURE by Erton C. Köhler

# Identity and Mission: Deep Roots and Fruit



SCAN FOR AUDIO



We are coming to the conclusion of the program, and now it's time to add a new element, a new ingredient, to all these presentations. The new ingredient is *the mission of the church*. We must be united in the message, but we also must be united in mission. There is a vision behind all these presentations that you have heard yesterday and today. What is our vision? *To have a healthy church*.

When we think about a healthy church, we need to take into consideration two main elements. These two elements we can find in a Bible verse. It's an Old Testament verse that is very meaningful for me. Isaiah 37:31, "And the remnant that is escaped of the house of Judah shall again take root downward, and bear fruit upward" (KJV). This Bible verse shows two components of a healthy church: deep roots and many fruits.

In other words, a healthy church has a solid message, sourced from deep roots, but, at the same time, it has a strong commitment to the mission, demonstrated by the many fruits. If we only speak about the message and the identity, we will be an introspective egoistic church, only thinking of ourselves. If we only talk about the mission, we will be an empty church trying to share what we don't have. We need to put all things together: a solid message and a strong commitment to the mission. No message, no mission; no identity, no mission; no roots, no fruits. Both must be together.

We need to keep in mind that identity, message, and mission need to work together. After all, we are called to be the church that will prepare this world for the Second Coming of Jesus. And always, when I think of the Second Coming of Jesus, one quotation from

Ellen G. White comes to mind. It's one of my favorite quotations from her. I think that you like this quotation, too: "The Lord is coming. We hear the footsteps of an approaching God."<sup>1</sup>

Every time I read this quotation from Ellen White, I have a question in my mind: How close are these footsteps? To easily answer this question, we only need to look at all the signs of the Second Coming of Christ that we have in the Bible. If we consider all these signs, we will find two groups. And if we want to know if these footsteps are getting closer to us, we need to pay attention to them. When the signs of these two groups happen simultaneously, it means these footsteps are very, very close to us.

But what are those two groups? You can easily identify them in Matthew 24, but they are in the entire Bible. The first group we can call the negative signs of the Second Coming of Jesus. When I use the word "negative" I mean those signs where this world tragically suffers. These signs were never the intention of God. They don't come from the Lord, but are the work of the Lord's enemy. We can categorize all these as signs that **our world is falling dramatically toward destruction**.

If we put together another set of signs, which we can call positive signs, we can see **a church rising powerfully for mission**. These two groups of signs are directly related to the world's destruction and the church's revival for mission. When they happen together, we can recognize that those footsteps are very, very close to us.

But let us evaluate these two groups of signs. When we think about the first group, where **the world is falling dramatically toward destruction**, my dear colleagues, friends, brothers, and sisters, it is happening before our

#### EDITOR'S NOTE:

At the most recent General Conference Annual Council, there was a series of presentations on the identity, mission, message, and unity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This is the first of a series of feature articles focusing on these important elements.

The power to raise the church for mission comes from the Holy Spirit and we need to depend totally on Him. The foundation of the revival for mission comes from the Word of God. But the responsibility to involve the church in the mission is in our hands, as leaders of this denomination.

eyes. We don't need to spend time on that; we are seeing this situation every day on the news, on the internet, etc. The world is falling apart before our eyes, and it is getting worse and worse every day.

Despite our commitment to love, care, serve, and make the difference, the situation of this world doesn't depend on us. Everything that's happening in the world—the negative signs of the Second Coming of Jesus—are not caused by us. We can see these signs, we can ease the effects, we can care for those facing its consequences, but we can't change the course of things.

All these activities of the devil deserve our attention, but not our priority. Is it clear for you? They deserve our attention because we need to deal with them on a daily basis; they are around us and we can see their consequences among us. They are not the priority because they are not the heart of the Second Coming of Jesus. Our priority needs to be Jesus' priority to prepare the way for His Second Coming.

When we think about the second group—**our church rising powerfully for mission**—we are really focused on God's priority. This is the major sign that will prepare this world for the Second Coming of Jesus. But my question to you is: Is this set of signs already happening? I mentioned that both groups need to happen together: **a world falling toward**

**destruction, and the church rising powerfully for mission.** We can easily see a world falling apart, but is our church also rising powerfully for mission?

We have some amazing mission movements in specific areas of the world. But when we as a church consider and compare our current reality with the church's commitment to the mission of some years ago, it seems that today we need to double our efforts if we are to have half of the involvement we once had. What does this reality mean? While the world is falling faster to destruction, the church is slower to be involved in mission.

The power to raise the church for mission comes from the Holy Spirit and we need to depend totally on Him. The foundation of the revival for mission comes from the Word of God. But the responsibility to involve the church in the mission is in our hands, as leaders of this denomination. The situation of this world doesn't depend on us, but the responsibility to strategize, involve, and commit the church powerfully to the mission depends on our clear focus and our priority on the mission.

The mission was the priority Jesus assigned to His leaders, before ascending to heaven. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, former director of the Biblical Research Institute, reminds us that, "Christ clearly told His disciples that the time between His two appearances was to be filled with the mission of the

church (Acts 1:8; Matt. 24:45, 46)."<sup>2</sup> If the mission was Jesus' priority, it needs to be the priority of His church, His leaders, and His modern disciples.

I'd like to conclude this short presentation just by inviting you, in all your initiatives, to deal with **the world falling dramatically toward destruction**, and to prioritize **raising the church powerfully for the mission**. If we don't do that, we will be distracted by the negative signs around us, focusing on them, talking extensively about them, paying attention to them, suffering from them and opening the door to sensationalism and ultimately demotivation. We will spend all our time and energies them, forgetting that they don't depend on us. They will happen with or without us.

God is calling us to put our attention, our energies, our priorities, our strategies, our resources—all that we are and all that we have—into the mission of the church. Through the mission we can be distinct but not distant, using Christ's method<sup>3</sup> to serve and save, leading people to Jesus and His salvation. This is exactly what God placed in our hands. Let's make Jesus' priority our priority and raise the church powerfully for mission, preparing this world for the Second Coming of Christ. ED

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946), 219.

<sup>2</sup> Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, "How Long?," *Adventist World*, August 2020, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), 73.

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# A Journey of Possibilities

**Akachi** lives in the bustling city of Aba, Nigeria. From birth, she faced severe medical challenges that would isolate her from the world around her as she grew up. Born with bladder exstrophy, a rare condition where the bladder is located outside the body, Akachi lived with constant pain, incontinence, and the social stigma associated with her condition. However, her life dramatically changed at age eleven, when a God-ordained meeting opened the door for others, half a world away, to show faith, compassion, and unwavering support that transformed her life, offering her hope and a future filled with possibilities.

## **BEGINNING THE JOURNEY**

On a trip to Nigeria, Pastor Larry Evans learned of Akachi's situation. At the time he was an assistant to the General Conference president, focusing on Possibility Ministries. Her condition, known as bladder exstrophy, is a rare congenital disability. It is not only physically debilitating but also emotionally and socially isolating. She couldn't attend school or church or join in activities that most children take for granted, because of her condition. Her parents passed away when she was very young, and her uncle, Sylva Maduako, took on the responsibility of caring for her, despite his own very limited resources. Sylva Maduako's love for Akachi was evident, and he was desperate for a solution to her medical needs.

Pastor Evans was deeply touched by Akachi's story. He saw a shy girl, withdrawn from her peers, who desperately needed a chance at a normal life. Her situation resonated deeply, sparking a determination to do everything he could to help her. This commitment was not just a professional obligation but a personal desire to help. It was also a reflection of the core values of Possibility Ministries, which recognizes that although we all are broken in some way, all are gifted, needed, and treasured. He applied the three A's of Possibility Ministries: Awareness, Accep-

tance, and Action. Having become aware of Akachi's situation, Pastor Evans accepted the challenge to do something and acted.

### **POWER OF COMMUNITY**

Upon returning to the United States, Pastor Evans first shared Akachi's story with his Sabbath School class and then with the broader church community, emphasizing the urgent need for medical intervention. The response was overwhelming. Moved by Akachi's plight, people responded, working together to raise the necessary monies for her surgeries.

Donations came from various sources, as individuals who were inspired by Akachi's story wanted to contribute. Some gave from their resources, while others organized fundraising events to support her. The collective efforts reflected a deep sense of empathy and the belief that no child should suffer alone. It was a testament to the power of community support, driven by faith and compassion.

### **MEDICAL INTERVENTIONS AND CHALLENGES**

As the fundraising progressed, arrangements were made for Akachi to be evaluated and treated at Babcock University and a nearby hospital equipped to handle her complex medical needs. Unsurpris-

ingly, her journey was full of challenges. Initial plans for surgery were postponed due to Akachi's health conditions. With the delay, the estimated costs increased as more comprehensive care was needed.

Despite these setbacks, Pastor Evans's and the church's determination did not waver. Pastor Evans continued to coordinate efforts, keeping everyone informed and ensuring that the necessary resources were available. The medical team at Babcock University, led by dedicated professionals like Dr. Okoro, worked tirelessly to provide the best possible care for Akachi. During this time Akachi was given a new name—Possibility. The name was an affirmation of hope for a good outcome, but also a tribute to those who saw potential and possibilities in her.

### **MIRACLES ALONG THE WAY**


In the middle of the challenges, there were moments where there were clear divine interventions. Unexpected donations and timely support often arrived when they were needed most, reinforcing the belief that their efforts were being richly blessed by God. One such instance was when a division leader, moved by Akachi's story during a church visit, contributed a significant amount of money that helped cover the escalating medical expenses.

These miracles strengthened the resolve of the church and provided much-needed encouragement during difficult times. They served as reminders that compassion and faith can move mountains, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

### **NEW BEGINNINGS**

The surgeries were transformative. The first procedure successfully placed her bladder inside her body, relieving her of the constant pain she had endured. While she still faced challenges, such as incontinence, the improvement in her quality of life was significant. Akachi could now attend school and church, activities that had been impossible before. The final surgery completed the healing process. Akachi can now live a completely normal life, without the burden of her previous challenges.

Seeing the changes in Akachi's life was an inspiration for everyone involved. Her newfound ability to participate in everyday activities brought her immense joy and a sense of belonging. She could now interact with her peers without the fear of embarrassment or pain. Her transformation became a symbol of hope not only for her but also for the wider community that had rallied around her.



These miracles strengthened the resolve of the church and provided much-needed encouragement during difficult times.

Akachi's uncle expressed his profound gratitude in heartfelt messages, describing the joy and relief that Akachi felt. "My beloved Pastor, you have done for us what we never imagined possible," he wrote. "Akachi is now filled with hope and dreams of a future where she can live without pain and shame. God bless you all."

### CONTINUING THE MISSION

The journey of supporting Akachi did not end with her surgeries. Recognizing her ongoing needs, Possibility Ministries expanded its efforts to provide for those needs. This included ensuring that Akachi had the necessary supplies for school and personal care, as well as looking ahead to future medical needs.

In June 2024, Akachi had what is hoped to be her final surgery, which will resolve the last medical issues, making it possible for her to live a completely normal life.

Adventist Possibility Ministries has expanded its ministry to cover seven areas of need:

- Bereavement for Spousal Loss
- Blind and Low Vision
- Caregiver Support
- Deaf and Hard of Hearing
- Mental Health Disorders
- Developmental Challenges
- Orphans and Vulnerable Children
- Physical and Mobility Challenges

The ministry's focus on creating awareness, acceptance, and action has become a rallying cry for compassionate involvement at all levels of the church.

Akachi's story is a powerful testament to the transformative impact of Christ-centered compassion, combined with church and community support. It highlights how when we come together, we can make a profound difference in someone's life.

We are reminded of the importance of Possibility Ministries' three A's: To be aware, by looking both in our immediate surroundings and beyond for those who have different abilities. Having found them, to apply the second A, acceptance. Accept them as they are, people with possibilities, that even they may not recognize. Then apply the third A, action. Act by extending a helping hand to those in need. Faith and compassion are not abstract concepts but active components in changing lives. Akachi's story encourages us to embrace these values and continue supporting those who face significant challenges, offering them hope and a future filled with possibilities. Together we can make a difference! ED

**Audrey Andersson** is a general vice president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, MD, USA.

**YOU DON'T NEED TO BE AN EXPERT TO HELP PEOPLE MOVE THROUGH THE CHANGES OF GRIEF AND LOSS.**

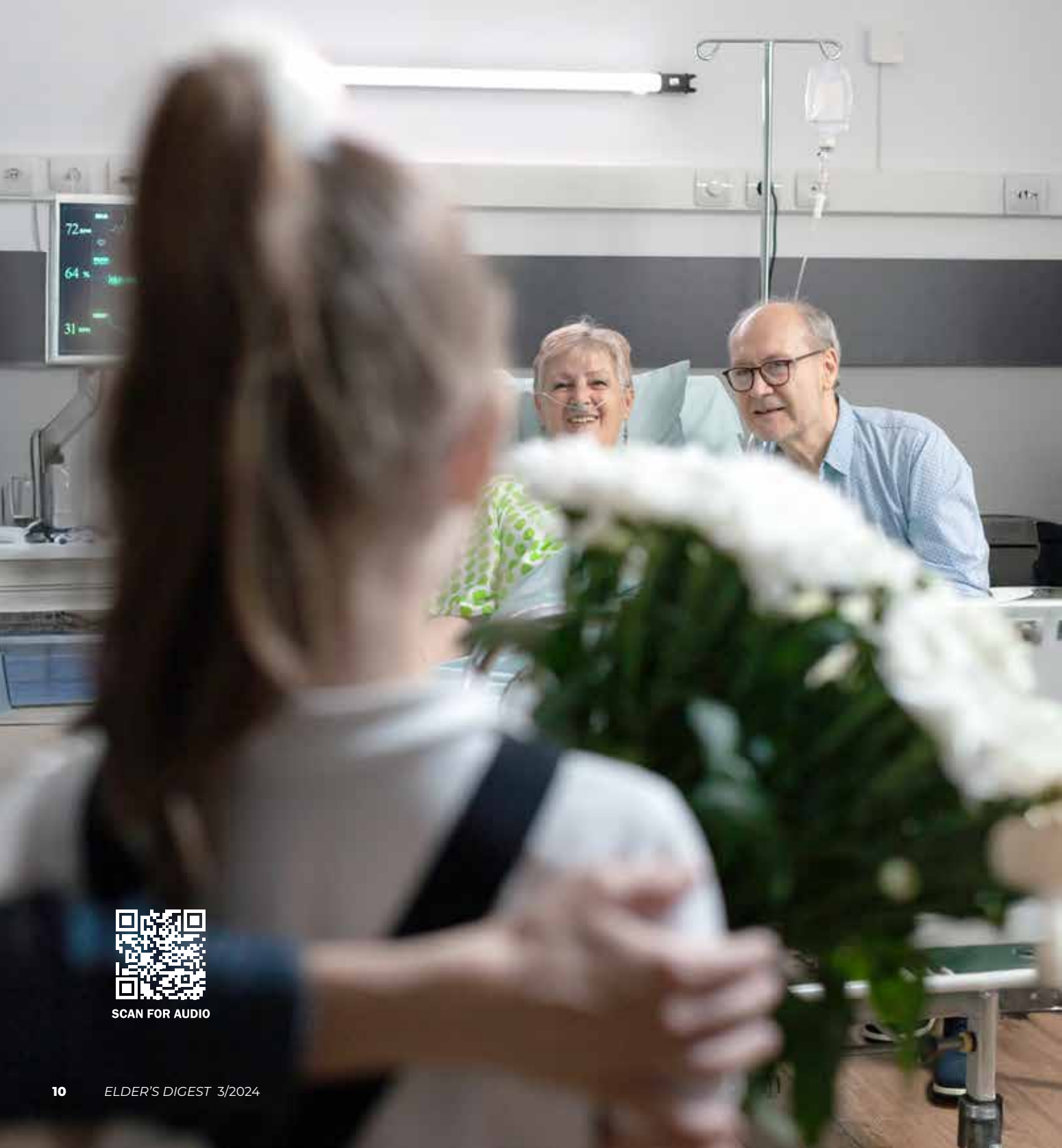
What you do need is a heart of compassion and a listening ear fashioned after the Master Jesus. SEASONS was designed in a way that you can follow the script through each session, allowing ample time for sharing.

SEASONS was created by those who have suffered grief and offers support to those who are grieving. They have experience in the medical, psychological, and practical process of grieving.

*Prepared by the Health Ministries Department of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America*

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# VISITING THE UNWELL



SCAN FOR AUDIO

# Admission,

questions, unfamiliar surroundings, revealing hospital attire, different bed, poked, monitored. So much happening, then waiting, alone. The care is thoughtful, but concerns arise expressed to staff and family. Their common reply is intended to calm: "Everything will be alright."

When the vicissitudes of life happen, individuals often feel vulnerable and in less control of their lives. The curse of sin interrupts daily living by the unexpected Cs of catastrophe, changes, body chemistry, circumstances, and crime. Christians are not immune to troubles, tragedies, and trauma. Though Christ defeated the devil at Calvary, rose from the dead, and ascended to heaven, Satan vents his wrath on humanity, especially those who are disciples of Jesus.

Each year approximately sixty million people die. Millions more suffer from accidents, conflicts, and various diseases. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), as of August 4, 2024, death was caused by illnesses associated with the heart, COVID-19, stroke, pulmonary/respiratory, cancers, Al-

zheimer's disease and dementia, diabetes, kidney, and tuberculosis (listed in descending order).

So you are a church leader and learn of a member or neighbor who has been hurt or is suffering illness. The pastor is unavailable, and a visit has been requested. What should you do? How should the visit be made either at the person's home or in the hospital? Ideally, a face-to-face visit by an elder, deacon, or deaconess of the church represents a caring church. When one member hurts, all are affected. Make the requested visit a priority as soon as possible after obtaining important information. (Note: the suffering individual has requested a visit, presumably for spiritual care and well-being. Do not self-deploy on a hunch that a visit is desired.)

Obviously, you need to know the full name of the requestor: family names, presence, and if they are aware of the situation; location of the requestor, and their present known condition. Is the member suffering an immediate life-threatening injury or illness? Once determined a visit is essential, prepare for the visit by seeking divine guidance that your presence and words will be helpful and appropriate.

Wear Sabbath attire for church. Take identification like a driver's license, and if you have it, some proof that you are a valid church leader. Conferences or your church should issue some kind of card verifying your membership and church position. Carry a small Bible with texts marked that might be helpful to the parishioner. Then drive with caution (no speeding) and travel safely to the location.

Some hospitals have security measures that require screening. Most will have an information desk to help you locate the parishioner's room, often some distance inside the hallways and possibly on a higher floor. Do not assume you can just barge in and head directly to the parishioner. Be courteous and respectful of the hospital's rules for visitors, their hours of visitation, and who and what can be brought inside. Don't come with a delegation of church members.

Ideally, after becoming a church leader, you would have exercised some initiative and made prior contact with the hospital to become acquainted with its policies. Meet with any hospital chaplain(s) on a prior courtesy visit. They are part of the medical staff; you are not. You are a



**Your words should inspire faith, communicate caring and represent the interests of the church. Acknowledge family members in the room and thank them for their care and support.**

visitor contacting a parishioner who has requested a visit from a church leader. Be informed of your country's laws regarding privacy. In the USA, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act [HIPAA] is a federal law that, among other matters, "protects the privacy and security of individually identifiable health information." Violation incurs consequences. As a lay elder, you do not have clergy status, but should practice the same principles of confidentiality of privileged information for ethical reasons. The state can require clergy to disclose certain communications (e.g., child abuse). In a court of law, you could be demanded to share privileged information and subject to "contempt of court" charges if you refused.

When you reach the ward where the parishioner is located, check in at the nurse's station, introduce yourself as a representative of the church, and ask if the parishioner is present and available for a visit. The patient may be absent, taken to another part of the hospital for lab work, X-rays, etc.

If so, wait patiently in the waiting room. If family or friends preceded you, introduce yourself and visit with them. Ask the nurses at

the station about any protocols you should follow. For example, the hospital may require you to use a hand sanitizer before entering the patient's room and after exiting the room. You might be asked to wear a mask or gown-up in protective clothing. You may be advised to keep the visit brief. Some medical procedures or treatments might be in progress and should not be interrupted. Even in dire emergency room situations of life and death, stay aside from the activity. You can still pray for the medical team and the patient.

The parishioner is now in their room, rarely private, more often occupied by two to six or more other patients. Knock on the door and ask if a visitor can enter. The parishioner could be eating, using the restroom, or sleeping. Treat the room as their temporary house. Introduce yourself to the occupants and move to the bedside of the parishioner. Unless a hand is extended to you to shake, don't initiate or sit on the edge of the bed. Stand near the head of the individual so they can see you without turning their head. Don't be surprised at medical monitors, breathing assistance, and intravenous fluid (IV) bags.

If the patient is of the opposite sex and in a private room, it is advisable, though not always necessary, to take your spouse or another person of the same sex as the patient with you for the visit. Use discretion and take steps to avoid any awkward situations.

The purpose of your visit is to listen to their concerns and needs, rather than pry into the details of their personal medical condition. They will tell you what you need to know. Often, most patients are reluctant to openly share too much personal information about their spiritual issues. In fact, during my years as a chaplain most patients prefer visits by the hospital chaplain over a visit from their church pastor. When asked if their pastor is aware of their hospital stay, and/or if they wish for me to contact the pastor, most decline and say, "They're too busy right now, and probably will come by later." Do not fall into the game of playing doctor and offering or questioning a physician's diagnosis. The patient will tell you what they trust you to know. Your presence should give assurance of God's presence, love, care, and healing through the experience and skills of the medical care



**The purpose of your visit is to listen to their concerns and needs, rather than pry into the details of their personal medical condition. They will tell you what you need to know.**

team. You did not come to judge or offer false hope. Your words should inspire faith, communicate caring and represent the interests of the church. Acknowledge family members in the room and thank them for their care and support. You might inquire if special needs exist that the church could assist meeting, such as lawn care, transportation, etc. Keep the visit short, under thirty minutes.

Sharing a passage or two from Scripture such as Psalm 103 or other appropriate texts is generally appreciated by parishioners. Don't assume prayer is desired. Ask if you can pray with them. It is helpful to also ask if there is anything specific, they would like mentioned in your prayer. Include any family or friends in the prayer and it is thoughtful to also generally include the other patients in the room. After praying, it is proper to bid farewell and depart promptly. If possible, leave contact information and a printed Scripture verse or uplifting piece of literature.

During your visit, a monitor might signal and have one of the nurses enter. Normally, they will check to ensure everything is functioning correctly and the patient is not in distress. Pause and let them do what needs to be done. If a medical procedure is necessary, offer to step out and wait until you are invited back into the room.

Occasionally, the subject of anointing surfaces. Anointing is Scriptural (Jas 5:13–15). As sometimes practiced, anointing is not the Adventist equivalent of “last rites.” Wise counsel is given in inspired writings for when it is appropriate and ways to administer.<sup>1</sup>

The visit is not complete without reporting to the pastor about the visit, so they are aware of any follow-up and future needs. Then, if the recovery is prolonged, periodic follow-up visits with the parishioner are important. With the parishioner's permission, inform the church of minimal general info about the status, progress or

ways they can help, and if cards or visits are acceptable. You will leave most visits greatly blessed in following the example of Jesus in this ministry of compassion (Matt 9:35–36). ED

<sup>1</sup> See the following for helpful guidance: Ellen G. White, *Pastoral Ministry* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference Ministerial Association, 1995), 232–234; General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Ministerial Association, *Seventh-day Adventist Minister's Handbook* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Ministerial Association, 2009), 189–192; and General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Ministerial Association, *Seventh-day Adventist Elder's Handbook* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Ministerial Association, 2016), 148–151.

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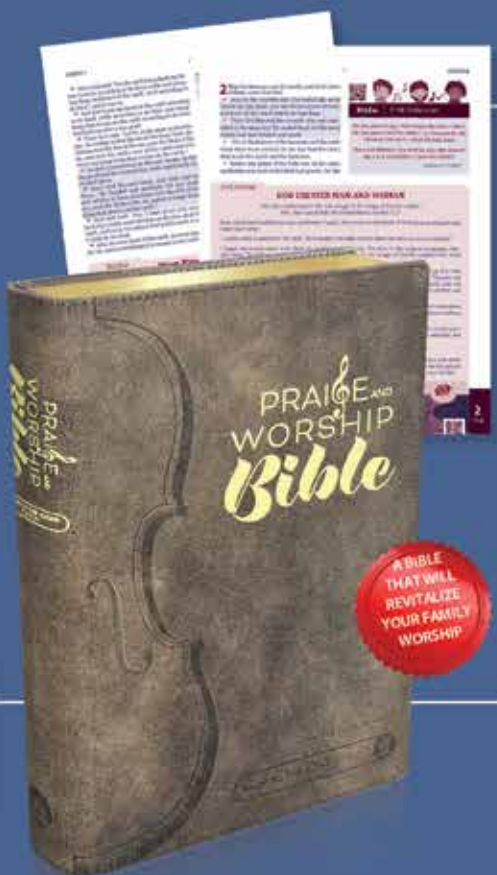
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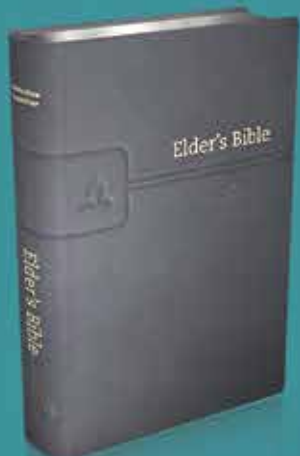


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# Thomas (Didymus)

## INTRODUCTION

Thomas and doubting have become an idiomatic expression, yet the Galilean's name means "twin." One wonders why the other half of the twin is never mentioned. Thomas is called by another name, Didymus, that also means the same (John 11:16; 20:24). Most Christians view Thomas negatively for requiring physical evidence before believing his peers' reports about a risen Jesus being alive (John 20:24–29). But such hasty judgments may reveal more about us than accurately describe Thomas. The Gospels reveal more about the man Jesus chose to be one of His disciples (Matt 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13).

## I. BRAVE THOMAS

When Jesus heard that His friend Lazarus was ill, He delayed going to Bethany two days, during which time Lazarus died. When Jesus decided to return to Judea, the disciples protested that the journey could lead to further confrontation with the religious leaders and result in their Master's death. Previously, Jesus was nearly stoned twice for His teachings (John 8:48–59; 10:31–39). Jesus started toward Jerusalem. Brave Thomas courageously influenced the other disciples to accompany Jesus with these heroic words, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him" (John 11:16).<sup>1</sup> His love for Jesus made him intensely loyal. Thomas may have had questions and doubts, but he was no coward. He was a practical realist who saw things as they were.

## II. INQUIRING THOMAS

Later in the upper room, Jesus tried to prepare the disciples for what would soon happen: His arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, and ultimate triumph over evil. He promised to prepare a place that where He was, they would be also. Sincerely wanting to understand spiritual complexities, Thomas asked Jesus, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?" (John 14:5). Jesus answered, "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). The answer mystified Philip, who was pragmatic also and wanted the facts, "Show us the Father" (John 14:8). Many people are like Thomas and Philip. They rely on common sense and what they can experience to determine the reality of spiritual truths. Accepting the theoretical is challenging and hard to grasp.

Faith links reality with theory and experience with knowledge. Faith reaches beyond common sense to uncommon knowledge. It discovers the invisible aspects of life. The biblical definition of faith is "the

substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Heb 11:1).

## III. QUESTIONING THOMAS

When Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, He told the mob, "If you seek Me, let these [His disciples] go their way" (John 18:8). Most of them fled to save themselves. Peter and John stayed to observe what was happening to Jesus. Apparently, Thomas went off by himself for the next ten days, and the other eight hid behind closed doors "for fear of the Jews" (John 20:19). Even when told by the women and confirmed by John and Peter that the tomb was empty, the disciples "did not believe" (Mark 16:11). The evening of resurrection day, Jesus came and stood in their midst. To allay their fears that He was not a ghost and convince them He was alive, "He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord" (John 20:20). Thomas was not present, but he was told of the event. He declared, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails [proof], . . . I will not believe" (John 20:25).

After fleeing from the garden, Thomas worked through despair and disappointment alone. He was not huddled in a house with the other disciples fearing the Jews. His reluctance to be swayed by the testimony of others gives proof of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus. A questioning mind may well be evidence of superior thinking rather than just trusting acceptance based on what friends say. Doubting is not necessarily wrong when it is exercised to make certain of facts and faith. Doubts can be stepping stones towards belief. God answers honest questions as He did for Job and Habakkuk. The issue is one of integrity. Are you humbly seeking to discover truth, or are you trying to show how smart you are by cynical insinuations and posing questions that instill and spread doubts? The Lord promises, "You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart" (Jer 29:13). So, "seek the Lord while He may be found, Call upon Him while He is near" (Isa 55:6). Thomas wanted to believe from personal conviction and experience, rather than from someone else's beliefs. He needed solid evidence as a firm foundation for faith.

## IV. CONVINCED THOMAS

A week later Jesus suddenly appeared amid the disciples again. This time Thomas was present. Jesus invited him to "look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing" (John 20:27). Egyptian census documents from AD 48 record people

identified by their scars. "A freed woman is described as medium height with honey-colored complexion, having a long face and large scar on her right knee."<sup>2</sup> Thomas saw Christ's scars and proclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). His declaration uses the word "Lord" as the sacred substitute for YHWH, thereby associating Jesus with the Jehovah God (*Yaweh*) of the Old Testament. Then he further ascribes deity to Christ equating Him with the Father by using the divine title *theos* or '*Elohim*, the living God. Thomas' confession is the most profound and far-reaching than any made earlier by the other disciples.

In response, Jesus pronounces another Beatitude, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29). If belief in the resurrection were limited to eyewitnesses, then only a hundred pagan soldiers guarding the tomb to keep the body of Jesus inside would be credible. Only those who saw Christ in His risen form could be expected to believe the report. You and I would have to accept it on hearsay. Thankfully, the unwillingness of Thomas to believe friends lends credence to the resurrection of Christ as a fact. He saw Jesus with his own eyes. Thomas experienced what we face today. Chrysostom observed, "He doubted that we might have faith." We must decide on what to base our faith.

## CONCLUSION

Thomas continued to actively serve Christ as one of the apostles. During the early years of church formation, Thomas participated in choosing a replacement for the betrayer, Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:13–26), and for the seven deacons (Acts 6:1–7). Tradition says he worked in Parthia and Persia. He may have been a missionary to Malabar on the coast of India where he is said to have died in Madras (AD 72).

When Thomas experienced the reality of faith, he openly lived and proclaimed his faith. Will you be like the faithful disciple Thomas, openly living and proclaiming faith in our soon coming Saviour and Friend, Jesus Christ? ED

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture references are from the NKJV.

<sup>2</sup> "Census," Biblical Training, accessed December 9, 2024, <https://www.biblicaltraining.org/library/census>.

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## Bartholomew / Nathaniel

### INTRODUCTION

The authors of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) refer to the disciple connected with Philip as Bartholomew, whereas the Gospel of John only mentions a disciple named Nathaniel. Are these the names of two different men, or two names for the same man? Scholarly evidence suggests the latter. Bartholomew is an Aramaic name meaning “great.” Nathaniel is Hebrew for “God has given.” The Hebrew root, Nethanel, is found in cuneiform records. Ten leaders in Old Testament Israel bore the name: a brother of King David, various Levites and priests, with several noted for being trumpeters.

### I. THE SEEKING NATHANIEL

Nathaniel was a native of Cana, the site of Christ’s first miracle turning water into wine, and a village not far from Nazareth. He, too, seems to have been a follower of John the Baptist and caught up in the Messianic fever of the times. Think of this young man as cautiously responsible, thoughtful, rather than skeptical. Nathaniel sought the shade of a fig tree as a refuge from the heat of the day and private place for quiet meditation and prayer. (Fig trees bear their fruit before leafing.) He pondered the familiar Messianic prophecies and messages of the “Wilderness Evangelist” John the Baptist. No doubt, he also reflected on the experiences of the patriarchs like Jacob fleeing the wrath of his brother Esau. Exhausted and alone, Jacob used a rock for a pillow and lay down to sleep. He dreamed of a ladder reaching from earth to heaven and on the ladder were many angels going up and down. Jacob beheld the Lord promising him the land, many descendants, and that the Lord would never leave him (Gen 28:10–22).

### II. NATHANIEL FINDS JESUS

When Philip invited Nathaniel to meet “Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (John 1:45, NKJV), Nathaniel’s response is not as harshly callous as it sounds. He was not judging a neighboring village as an evil place, but rather commented on its petty insignificance. Flavius Josephus, the Jewish historian of the era, listed two hundred towns in Galilee, but omits Nazareth, probably because it was inconsequential. Regardless, Nathaniel went with Philip. When Jesus saw Nathaniel approaching, the Lord declared, “An Israelite in whom is no deceit” (John 1:47, NIV). I like the way the New Living Translation states Christ’s words: “Now here is a genuine son of Israel—a man of complete integrity” (John 1:47, NLT). Jesus was not offended by the insinuation of Nathaniel about His heritage. He greeted him with a nice compliment that may have also included a little humor. Jews were descendants of Jacob, and Jacob was known

for being a deceiver and liar. Not until after wrestling with the angel all night did Jacob make peace with God and have His name changed to Israel meaning “Prince with God” (Gen 32:22–32). So, the compliment paid to Nathaniel was in contrast to a harsh stereotype.

Nathaniel seemed awed by the banter and asked Jesus how he was known to Him. They had not met previously. Christ’s answer about seeing Nathaniel’s meditations under the fig tree some time earlier prompted Nathaniel’s bold declaration that Jesus was “the Son of God! . . . [and] the King of Israel!” (John 1:49, NKJV). Jesus often read men’s minds and knew the hidden secrets of their lives, thereby giving them evidence of His divinity (Mark 12:15; Luke 6:8; 9:47; 11:17; John 4:16–19; 8:7–9). Nathaniel’s acknowledgment that Jesus was divine opened his life to even greater spiritual fulfillment than he could have imagined. Jesus promised Nathaniel that he would see greater evidences than was just revealed (John 1:50).

### III. LEARNING FROM NATHANIEL

The Bible reveals little about Bartholomew/Nathaniel’s life, but we can learn the following from him. Nathaniel was a sincere seeker after truth; he had a singleness of heart to know the Messiah; he knew the prophecies and wanted to be ready for His appearing. He spent time in a shaded sanctuary studying, meditating, and praying. When the Messiah came, he was spiritually ready. Nathaniel was not perfect, but Jesus knew his heart and saw in him great potential as a disciple. What does God see in us, and what would He say about our responses to Him? Are we seeking to know a living God, or only to acquire more religious knowledge (John 5:39; 17:3)?

The Bible depicts an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-seeing Deity. Unbelievers, unacquainted with either Scripture and/or experience with God, base their rejection of Christ and His church on unqualified impressions rather than studied facts. God is typically viewed as an angry judge and believers as pious hypocrites. Nothing could be farther from reality, at least as far as God is concerned. He says, “I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jer 29:11, NKJV). His dealings with humanity are described like a father toward His children who knows their weaknesses and yet does not deal with them according to their sins (see Ps 103). God’s divine love sent His Son to save the world rather than condemn it (John 3:15–17). Jesus sees in you and me what He saw in Nathaniel; however, our response only begins or ends His work with us. Before we claim entitlement

to divine blessings or rashly rush to join the Rabbi’s band of followers, we should carefully consider the commitment. Being prudent, like Nathaniel, is not wrong. Deciding about one’s destiny has everlasting outcomes.

### IV. THE COSTS OF DISCIPLESHIP

There are costs involved in discipleship. Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me” (Matt 16:24, NKJV). The offer causes some to turn away sorrowfully like the rich young ruler did (Luke 18:18–23), while others confess Jesus is the Son of God as did Nathaniel. One famous religious author, Ellen G. White, advises we spend an hour daily under a “fig tree,” a private place of contemplation on the life and death of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> When humbly submissive to the leading of the Holy Spirit who guides us “into all truth” (John 16:13, NKJV), study of God’s Word and His holy law reveals God’s character and will for us. It empowers us spiritually and leads to positive changes for good, a victorious life of overcoming temptation. “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Tim 3:16, NKJV). It discerns the thoughts and intents of the heart (Heb 4:12). When obeyed, it keeps us from sinning (Ps 119:11). Even more important than righteous living, we discover Christ in us, dwelling in us (Col 1:27) and we become “a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17, NKJV).

### CONCLUSION

Study of biblical prophecies gives hope and helps us prepare and be ready for the soon return of Christ. Many of the signs and events foretold have already come to pass, indicating our times are last days. Jesus warned, “Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Matt 24:44, NKJV; see also Matt 25:13). Jesus has gone to prepare a place where we can be with Him (John 14:1–3) that is beyond our imagination (1 Cor 2:9). As He told Nathaniel, heaven is opened. The “ladder” of Jacob’s vision is the cross of Christ that connects heaven to earth, God to humanity, and humanity to God. All the messages of the heavenly messengers (angels and prophets) point to Jesus as the means of entering paradise and being with the Lord eternally. ED

<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 83.

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# James

## INTRODUCTION

James and John go together like Bill and Bob, beans and rice. They were brothers, sons of Zebedee (Matt 4:21). James was the elder brother. James is almost always mentioned first. Like most Galileans they expected a coming Messiah to deliver them from the Romans and restore a Jewish independent kingdom.

## I. THE CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

When Jesus called James and John to follow Him, they immediately left their nets, boat, father, hired workers, and deep-water fishing business (Mark 1:20). Luke mentions James and John as partners with Simon (Luke 5:10). The Zebedee family must have had some economic and social standing. John was known to the high priest and permitted into Caiaphas' courtyard where he witnessed Christ's trial (John 18:15). For reasons never revealed, the brothers became some of Christ's closest disciples, though Andrew, Peter's brother, was not always included in this intimate circle, but he was when Jesus revealed the signs of the Temple destruction and the return of the Son of Man (Mark 13:1–37).

James experienced several special events with Jesus. He accompanied Jesus into Peter and Andrew's house, where Peter's mother-in-law lay sick with fever. He witnessed her being healed (Mark 1:29–31). Later, James was in the room when Jesus restored life to Jairus' dead daughter (Luke 8:49–56). After the visit to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus took Peter, James, and John to the top of a high mountain and was transfigured before them. James was privileged to see Moses and Elijah with Jesus (Matt 17:1–13).

## II. DISCIPLINED AS A DISCIPLE

Shortly thereafter, Jesus began the journey towards Jerusalem. To shorten the long walk, He decided to go through Samaria. James and John are sent ahead to arrange lodging, but were refused, because their destination was Jerusalem. Incensed, James and John asked for fire to come from heaven and consume the inhospitable Samaritans (Luke 9:51–54). Jesus rebuked them, saying, "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of" (Luke 9:55, NKJV). As they neared Jericho, the mother of James and John sensed Jesus was about to establish His kingdom and sought Jesus to give her sons high positions of power. This earned the brothers the ire of the other ten disciples and another admonishment from Christ (Matt 20:20–28). Prior to His arrest in Gethsemane, Jesus asked His three trusted friends to pray for Him while He prayed for strength to fulfill His Father's will

for humanity's salvation. Three times Jesus found them sleeping and gently rebuked them (Matt 26:36–46).

James is the Greek form of Jacob, a Hebrew name, but Jesus gave him a new name, *Boanerges*, meaning "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17). No doubt the name described the vigorous personality and language of a man quick to take offense and to offend. Many Christians assume James wrote the epistle bearing his name, but James did not write that book. He was one of four men called James in the Bible; another James wrote the five chapters. In fact, sorting out the Jameses of the Bible and who early church historians referenced by that name is difficult to determine who did what.

## III. GROWING AS A DISCIPLE

All the quirks of temperament and individuality can be bent into vices or exalted into virtues. James was a capable, ambitious man, eager to be first, a pusher for power, self-seeking, yet trusted by Jesus. The church needs people of ability and resources rightly employed. Some people use church and religion to obtain recognition and honor. Ambition for whatever purpose can corrupt. Our motives must be pure. We need to be careful what we seek and what we promise the Lord. Jesus told James and John they did not know what they were asking when they sought positions of power. He asked them if they were able to drink the cup He was about to drink. They asserted, "We are able" (Matt 20:22, NKJV). Jesus said, "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matt 10:39, NKJV). James became a leader, but also lost his life.

## IV. THE FINAL YEARS

From the time immediately after Christ's ascension (Acts 1:9–13) until his execution by Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:2) around AD 44, nothing is recorded about James in Scripture. Some scholars attribute the prayer in Acts 4:24–30 to him. Herod sought to curtail the new religion called "The Way" by eliminating its leadership. Apparently, James led the early church effectively. Good leaders influence people, motivate action to reach goals, and delegate responsibility with commensurate authority. They inspire others through exemplary caring while humbly adhering to ethical and moral principles. James must have been that kind of leader; his leadership became known to the king. For some inexplicable reason, Herod chose to have James beheaded, rather than crucify him as was often done to Jews.

Unlike Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, and the ten older brothers and Joseph,

the Gospels make no mention of sibling rivalry between James and John. Perhaps, James did not act as the "big brother" to his little brother like some of us eldest children tend to behave. Birth order impacts life more than often realized, and sibling rivalry frequently occurs among brothers and sisters, even without the complications caused by blended families. Younger brother John lived around sixty years longer than his older brother. No doubt, James was missed. In the rush of life, too often brothers and sisters are not missed, until they are dead. Scripture advises us to love our brothers and refrain from judging and offending them.

## CONCLUSION

The premature death of a family member or friend raises questions and prompts a flood of emotions. It is hard to imagine justice or security in our little worlds we create for our lives that are supposedly safe, orderly, and follow a natural progression. When death or disaster strikes, and life expected is interrupted, we are threatened by the reality that it is only by the "Lord's mercies we are not consumed" (Lam 3:22, NKJV). I find solace in the thought from an Old Testament prophet that good people die, but life goes on. Few notice except for family and friends. The righteous are taken away, none considering that they are spared greater suffering or evil to come; they enter rest or peace (Isa 57:1–2a, paraphrased). David declares, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints" (Ps 116:15, ESV). How can that be true? Younger brother John, an apostle who had seen much death during his long life, wrote as instructed by a voice from heaven: "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Yes," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them" (Rev 14:13, NKJV). Though we cannot know the reason for everything, or the future, we can know "the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End," says the Lord, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev 1:8, NKJV). Jesus is the First and the Last. He declared, "I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen" (Rev 1:18, NKJV). Because He lives, we can face today and tomorrow, come what may, whether life be long or shortened. We trust an omniscient God to know what is best for all. ED

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## Judas Iscariot

### INTRODUCTION

Judas: the name is synonymous with betrayal, a false friend. It conjures up images of a dark undercover agent for the enemy. Several men are named Judas in the New Testament, so further identification is necessary. Judas Iscariot was the only disciple from Judea. Somehow, he learned about Jesus and was attracted to Him. Though Jesus knew one of His disciples would betray Him, He chose Judas (John 6:70–71). Judas was among the twelve Jesus called, wanted, and appointed to preach, heal, and cast out demons (Mark 3:13–19). For three years Judas witnessed the miracles of Jesus and listened to the Saviour's teachings. He went on a missionary journey, probably with Simon the Zealot. Judas was not a monster in the beginning of His association with Christ and other disciples.

### I. WHAT WENT WRONG?

What factors caused Judas to betray his Master? How does one willingly succumb to commit the treachery of being a traitor? The Gospel writers knew Judas. Apparently the other eleven admired and respected his executive abilities and made him their treasurer of the common purse. Yet, John called him a thief (John 12:6). The eleven other disciples missed indications that all was not right in Judas' heart. Christ was not fooled, and lovingly tried to win Judas to Him.

Judas loved money, which Paul calls "a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim 6:10, NKJV). Shortly before Passover, Jesus was the guest of honor at the home of Lazarus and his sisters. Mary anointed Jesus with the very costly and fragrant spikenard. Judas objected, asking, "Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" (John 12:5, NKJV). Jesus gave Judas a mild rebuke, "Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial" (John 12:7, NKJV). How often are nice words said in eulogies to honor a dead person. Saying them to the person when they are alive would be more meaningful. Luke wrote that the chief priests and scribes were plotting to kill Jesus at this time. Stung by Christ's rebuke, Luke says, "Satan entered Judas" (Luke 22:3, NKJV).

### II. THE DANGER OF CHERISHED SIN

Whether resentment or revenge was the motivation may never be fully known for sure. We do know cherished sin of any kind, small or great, preserved in a dark corner of the heart, leads to spiritual disaster. Rationalized and excused hidden sin hardens the heart, making it "stony" (Ezek 11:19–21), resistant to repentance, and harder to resist temptation. The devil waits for the opportune time to attack (1 Pet 5:8). Satan uses his victims, then cynically casts them

aside to writhe in the agony of remorse. Remorse is neither repentance nor conversion. It only turns us against ourselves and makes the soul act like the scorpion in a fire that stings itself to death. Also know, the door of the human heart cannot be opened from the outside; it can only be opened from the inside by you. Nobody can force you to love God or do evil.

### III. HOPE FOR A REVOLUTION

Like most first-century Jews, Judas longed for a Messiah to end foreign domination and restore the kingdom of Israel. When Jesus fed the multitudes, Judas, like many others, was filled with hope that Jesus would lead a revolution and become king. As a faithful disciple, Judas hoped for a high position in the new government. When Jesus made clear "the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing," "many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more" (John 6:63, 66, NKJV). "Then Jesus said to the twelve, 'Do you also want to go away?'" (John 6:67, NKJV). This incident may have been a turning point in the heart of Judas when he began to realize the kingdom of heaven being implemented by Jesus would not fulfill earthly political aspirations.

No doubt his disappointment led to resentment and a strategic plan to manipulate events that would benefit himself by either of two outcomes. Judas went to the chief priests of the Temple in Jerusalem and negotiated the betrayal of Jesus for thirty pieces of silver (Matt 26:14–15). In essence Judas sold himself, not Christ, for the price of a slave (Exod 21:32). Perhaps Judas reasoned that when Jesus is arrested, He will not allow Himself to be killed and in some miraculous way prove He is the Messiah. If He is accepted and becomes king, then I should be rewarded. If He is not the Messiah, my exposure of Him as another imposter will make me a hero to national leaders and I will still be rewarded in some way.

### IV. THE FAILED PLAN

Judas was not as clever as he supposed. His secret strategy unraveled and became exposed. Jesus was aware of the plot even as He washed Judas' feet (John 13:10–11). Next Jesus indicated who the betrayer was when he quoted Psalm 41:9 and acted accordingly (John 13:18). When Judas asked, "Rabbi, is it I?" He [Jesus] said to him, "You have said it" (Matt 26:25, NKJV). Judas had to know that Jesus knew about the betrayal, especially when He told Judas, "What you are going to do, do quickly" (John 13:27, ESV). And finally, the whole sinister sin came fully to light when Judas, feeling remorseful over what he had done, publicly confessed.

When Judas realized Jesus would be put to death, he rushed into the judgment hall and declared, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood" (Matt 27:4, NKJV). The priests and elders rejected his pathetic plea, "What is that to us?" (Matt 27:4, NKJV). "Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself" (Matt 27:5, NKJV). The money he returned was used by the priests to purchase "a field of blood" in which to bury strangers (Matt 27:6–10).

### V. REDEMPTION REJECTED

As Jesus observed the Passover with His disciples in the upper room, He gave Judas four discreet invitations to confess his disloyalty and seek divine forgiveness. First, Jesus performed a servant's role and washed each disciple's feet (John 13:1–17). Second, Judas sat next to Jesus, a place of honor. Third, following custom, Jesus passed the morsel of bread He dipped to the favored guest, who was Judas rather than John (John 13:18, 26–30). Judas hardened his heart, spurned Christ's appeals, and determined to sin. Fourth, when Jesus bid Judas go quickly to complete his grim task, Jesus did not unmask the traitor to the others. The Gospels record Judas went out into the night, led a detachment of troops to the Garden and consummated the betrayal of Jesus with a kiss (Matt 26:47–50).

In reality everyone has denied and betrayed Christ at some point in their lives. The Scriptures declare "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23, NKJV). Now is the time to confess our sins and claim the assurance of Christ (1 John 1:9).

### CONCLUSION

Paul declares God's goodness leads us to repentance (Rom 2:4). In His dealings with Judas, Jesus demonstrated God's gentle long-suffering, but Judas rejected God's grace and chose his own way to achieve his goals. God's love and mercy is greater than any sin. The only unpardonable sin is the one that we will not allow God to forgive. How tragic for someone to be a believer and church member for many years, yet presumptuously harbor a little sin, thinking it won't matter. Unfortunately, sin is like cancer. If left untreated, it grows until it destroys us like it did Judas. ED

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“So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?’ He said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’

He said to him,

**‘FEED MY LAMBS.’”**



“He said to him again a second time, ‘Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?’

He said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’

He said to him,

**‘TEND MY SHEEP.’”**



“He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?’ Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, ‘Do you love Me?’

And he said to Him, ‘Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.’

Jesus said to him,

**‘FEED MY SHEEP.’”**

JOHN 21:15-17 (NKJV)

**PASTOR  
APPRECIATION DAY  
SABBATH, OCTOBER 11, 2025**





SCAN FOR AUDIO



# Sermon Preparation

>PART 1

## WHY PREACH?

High above the Tarn River in southern France stands a spectacular and breathtaking feat of twenty-first-century engineering—the Bridge of Millau. Opened in 2004, it showcases the beauty of the French countryside. The aim of the bridge was to remove the bottleneck on autoroute A75 between Clermont Auvergne in the north and Béziers in the south, thus ending a four-hour trek through the small town of Millau at the height of summer. The significance of the bridge’s construction is the sheer enormity of its seven slender, elegant concrete and steel pillars suspending eight road sections. The highest pillar is three hundred meters (984 feet) tall, surpassing even the Eiffel Tower in Paris. Designed by the English architect Sir Norman Foster, the viaduct spans the valley at a height of 270 meters (885 feet) with the “delicacy of a butterfly.”

Deuteronomy 4:39 reads, “The Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other.”<sup>1</sup> The preacher’s primary task is to link heaven and earth, like the Bridge of Millau links the two sides of the gorge. The bridge provides an apt metaphor for the preacher, who is seeking to reach the world on behalf of Christ. These days, spreading the Gospel requires more than a hop, skip, and jump. It requires first understanding the constantly shifting culture and presenting the everlasting Gospel of Jesus Christ to people in a genuinely sincere manner.

We have been given the mandate of Jesus: “And He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.’” (Mark 16:15). Isaiah 55:11 promises, “So shall My word be that goes out from My mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

You have been asked to preach next Sabbath. Don’t panic; help is on the way. This series of articles is just for you. Whether you are a seasoned pastor or a dedicated layperson, sermon construction can be stressful. But it doesn’t have to be. Essentially, a sermon is storytelling. Telling God’s story. He chose you to proclaim the good news. “God chose what is foolish in

the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor 1:27). God could have proclaimed the Gospel through a myriad of ways to reach the world, including angels; but instead, He chose you, a sinful human being created in His image. Motivated by love. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Since Genesis, we have been recalling and sharing stories. Humans were wired for stories and storytelling. People like stories. Hollywood producers like to tell stories, which is why they produce movies. But the preacher is presenting the greatest blockbuster of all time in that the Creator of the universe sent His Son down to redeem humanity. The stories we share from the Bible are God’s story, involving sin and salvation, and how God rectified the problem caused by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden by giving us Jesus, His beloved Son.

The preacher’s task is to present the truth of Luke 19:10: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” Everything flows out of this statement; it is the *raison d’être* (sole purpose for something) for preaching. The preacher is called to follow through with what Jesus started and what He expects those following Him to do. Matthew 24:14 reads, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” The Gospel is the good news. Preaching is and always will be God’s means of reaching people.

I have a friend, not by choice but possibly by divine intervention. Parking my car one day to go up one of my favorite mountains, Mark came up to me and asked if I wanted a companion. Why not? I agreed, and we spent most of the

day together scrambling up and down some tricky terrain. Mark is a Munroist. A Munroist is a person who climbs the 282 Munros in Scotland, which were classified by Sir Hugh Munro (1856–1919) as having the magic height of over three thousand feet (914.4 meters). Munros attract people from all over the world to complete all 282. I told him I was a Christian, but not much else. Mark vaped on his e-cigarette all day; it was like being followed by a dragon. At the end of the day, he told me he didn’t swear around me that day because I was a Christian. In a later article, I will tell about another adventure that almost ended in disaster.

One might say, “I just need to witness, and the rest will follow.” But that is incorrect; no one’s actions are sufficient. We need to preach. There is only one person who has lived an exemplary sinless life, and that is Jesus Christ.

“Our testimony must be both in deed and in word. The spoken word is never really effective unless it is backed up by the life. The living deed is ultimately inadequate without the spoken word. The reason for this is obvious. No life is good enough to speak for itself. Any person who says, ‘I don’t need to witness; I just let my life speak,’ is unbearably self-righteous.”<sup>2</sup>

We are to unconditionally reach out into our topsy-turvy world which desperately needs a Saviour. We are bombarded by media outlets whose main agenda is to undermine God and His world. Social media platforms and their digital technology such as Google, Facebook, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, Telegram, and TikTok, have become juggernauts that are influencing every aspect of life, all seeking our attention. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with these platforms; however, it is important to understand that they have an impact on society, includ-

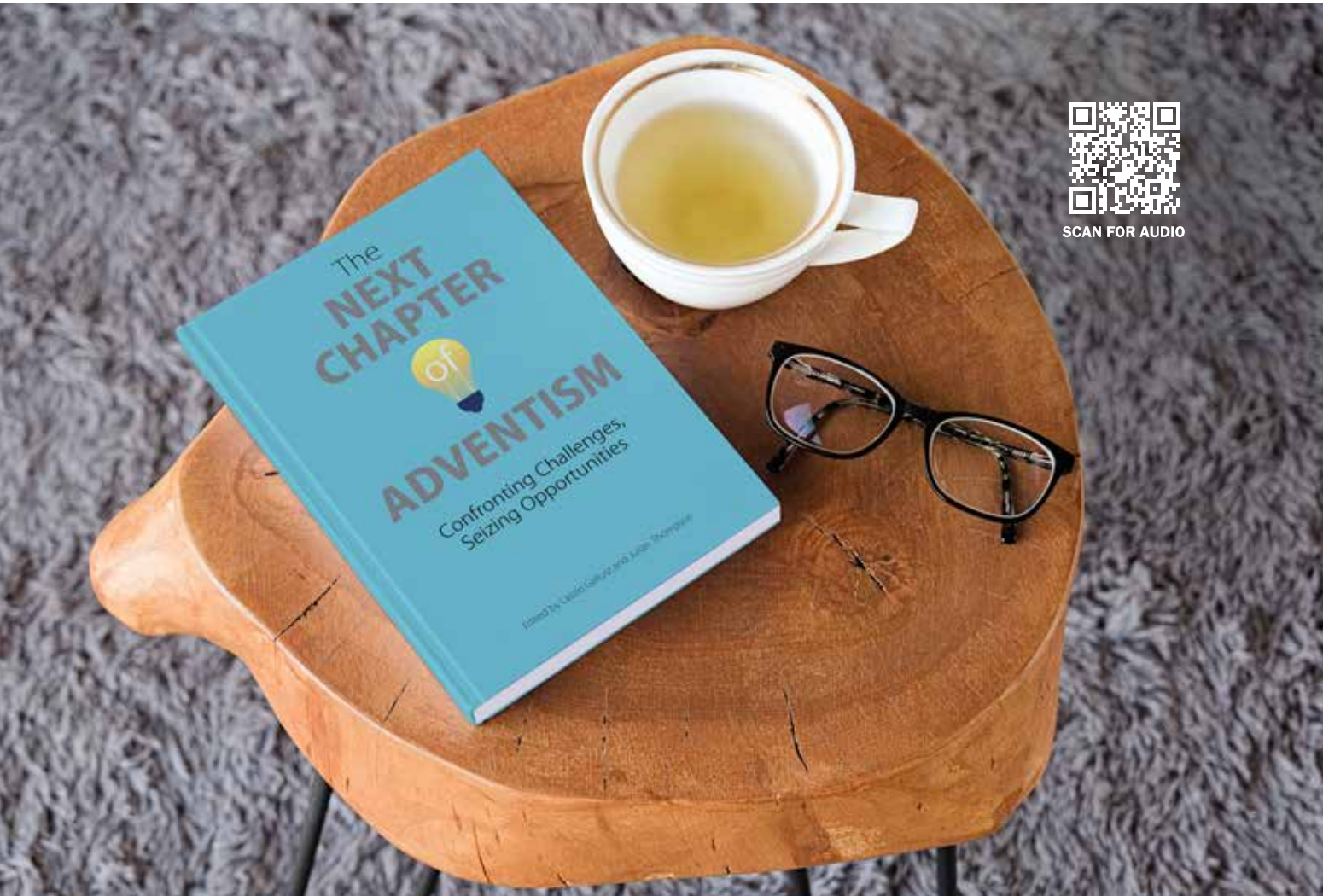
ing our church. The world we live in is saturated with AI (artificial intelligence), algorithms, bots, likes, dislikes, thumbs-up, thumbs-down, percentages, and statistics, all of which influence how people live and the choices they make. These platforms have a hold on shaping our worldview. They influence what we choose to believe. They dictate what is and is not important; consequently, many people are chasing the wrong things instead of seeking God. So far removed from Philipians 2:5: “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.” We need to preach about the God of our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Hosea proclaimed, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hos 4:6). The prophet Hosea wrote this at a time in Israel’s northern kingdom when it was at its lowest point in its history. Soon, the kingdom of Israel would be taken captive by the Assyrians. “Because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God” (Hos 4:6). In 2024, the situation is similar; the world has rejected God and is fast reaching a tipping point in its history. Fortunately, as God’s chosen remnant, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has the true Gospel of the Three Angels’ Message to share with a broken, anthropocentric world (putting humanity at the center of the universe) that desperately needs Christ—the same world that “God so loved.” Why preach? Because it is God’s chosen method to reach humanity. It is about changing lives for eternity. ED

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> Rosalind Rinker, *You Can Witness with Confidence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 47.

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# *The Next Chapter of Adventism: Confronting Challenges, Seizing Opportunities*

**BY LASZLO GALLUSZ AND JULIAN THOMPSON  
PUBLISHED BY STANBOROUGH PRESS (2024)**

Recently, I was very pleased to receive a copy of a slim but impactful volume entitled, *The Next Chapter of Adventism: Confronting Challenges, Seizing Opportunities*, edited by Laszlo Gallusz and Julian Thompson, both of whom lecture at Newbold College of Higher Education and who are among the contributors to the book, published by Stanborough Press in the United Kingdom. My pleasure arose from the collective imagination to write, from multiple perspectives, on the social, cultural, conceptual, and theological landscape within which Adventism “lives, and moves, and has [its] being” (Acts 17:28, NRSV), to borrow a phrase from Paul who, in turn, borrowed it from the sixth century BC poet Epimenides. And, perhaps it is apropos to the contextual questions being asked and explored by the authors: What does it mean to cherish truth and purpose, meaning and mission, love for God and love for humanity, in the contemporary environment?

Through a compilation of scholarly, yet accessible thirteen articles, this volume speaks into the myriad of intersecting and overlapping challenges faced by the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a denomination and as a collective of believers living in challenging times while maintaining a sense of expectation of the Second Coming of Christ. To write exhaustively on the subject would be a monumental feat, however, this volume claims neither exhaustive nor definitive status. Stemming from a love for the church—both as denomination and as Christ-believing people—thought leaders share their observations and reflections on the contextual, cultural, and theological landscape within which the contemporary Adventist Church in Europe lives


as both witness and testimony.

**Witness:** in the sense that we, like the prophets, the apostles, and Gospel writers, are among those who notice, observe, collaborate with, record, and cherish the activity of God in our time and in our places. **Testimony:** in the sense that we announce, declare, and “show forth” (Ps 19:1–4, NRSV) the glory, presence, and work of God over the course of human history while anticipating the continued redemptive activity of God on behalf of humanity. This perspective is reflected, for example, in Gifford Rhamie’s article, “Justice Is What Love Looks Like in Public,” where on page 17 he describes social justice as “the dogged historical legacy of the Old Testament Hebrew prophets . . . [who] . . . channelled God’s displeasure and righteous indignation against rulers . . . who fostered hostile environments that oppressed the poor, the widows, and the orphans.” The legacy of witness and testimony, not only as something that we look back on but as something within which we actively live, is a repeated nuanced theme through the book, with each author making contributions from a variety of angles.

Each author’s chosen vantage point explores a potential or existing challenge for Adventism while also offering suggestions on where opportunities for enhanced understanding and wider ministry and mission might be explored, or where our collective and individual practice might be reviewed and renewed. For example, Jan Barna’s article “Google, Adventism and Algorithmic Truth” invites reconsideration of our approaches to determining and deciding in matters of faith and belief. These thoughtful chapters invite the reader to consider the way we read and understand Scripture, the shifting cultural Western land-

The legacy of witness and testimony, not only as something that we look back on but as something within which we actively live, is a repeated nuanced theme through the book.

scape, digital innovation, and the challenges presented by “churchless spirituality” while having the mind led back to the themes of witness and testimony, and how they might appear in contemporary settings while anticipating the soon return of Christ.

Spiritual leaders from elders serving in local congregations, to pastors and administrators, are already engaging these same challenges and wondering where meaningful opportunities for ministry and mission exist—especially those serving in urban and Westernized contexts. And for those whose context does not yet feel as changed or diverse as that terminology might suggest, the themes around witness and testimony are no less significant or culturally prophetic, for we all must minister in the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. That is where the value of this thoughtful volume lies: in the willingness to not only shed light on our present, but to also faithfully stretch into the immediate future expecting to find that God is already there. 

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# The Silent Threat: The Subtle Currents Pulling Us Away from the Church Community



SCAN FOR AUDIO

## The drifting may occur subtly and, when we realize it, it may be too late! Only by paying more careful attention can we evade the perils of life's seas.

**The** Apostle Paul's concern for the spiritual well-being of the early Christian community is evident in the pages of Hebrews. In Hebrews 2:1–4, he uses the analogy of a drifting ship to urge the readers to maintain a steady course.

Envision a ship being subtly, almost imperceptibly, steered off course by a hidden current until becoming hopelessly disoriented in the open sea. Now, we're up against the same threat of subtle spiritual drift. No one is safe from this silent threat, neither the freshly baptized soul nor the seasoned spiritual traveler.

So, what unseen dangers must we watch out for while we travel across life's rough seas?

### THE CURRENTS OF LIFE!

I hail from an island realm in the only kingdom in the Pacific, a fragment of land embraced by the vast expanse of the ocean. Living in such a setting, you become intimately aware—sometimes through harrowing experiences—that the sea's currents are not to be trifled with. Some bodies of water masquerade as calm, their surface as smooth as glass, yet beneath the facade lie currents swift and treacherous as a thief in the night. Others, audaciously tempestuous, churn and whirl, pulling water in anarchic directions like an orchestra without a conductor. The takeaway is unmistakable: all currents, whether they whisper or shout, are laden with peril.

This maritime reality mirrors our spiritual odyssey with God. In the sea of life, we encounter vari-

ous currents—subtle and overtly tumultuous. You might find yourself in the tranquil waters of prosperity or the swirling eddies of adversity. You may wade through the gentle ripples of daily temptations or be caught in existential crises. But let's be abundantly clear: even the most seasoned spiritual swimmers can find themselves overmatched if they neglect the lifebuoys and lighthouses God provides for our protection.

It's not enough to merely recognize the danger; one must also embrace the safeguards—the prayers, the sacred texts, the community of believers—that function as our spiritual flotation devices. These provisions grant us the buoyancy to navigate any current, however menacing, allowing us to keep our heads above water as we traverse the ever-challenging, ever-unpredictable seas of our earthly journey. So, the next time you find yourself in life's currents, don't underestimate them. Instead, heed the signs, cling to the divine lifelines, and remember: still waters can run deep, but so too can the reservoirs of God's grace and protection.

The current of “unbelief” is the risk of a slow, gradual, and insidious decline of our spiritual relationship with God beyond mere “neglect.” We are in jeopardy of taking the Holy Spirit for granted as He whispers to us daily (Heb 3:7–8, 15; 4:7). Through unbelief, the heart inevitably hardens by the relentless encroachments of the deceitfulness of sin. For “if we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the

truth, no sacrifice for sins is left” (Heb 10:26, NIV), but unwittingly, relinquishing the genuine experience of present and future “rest” in Jesus (Heb 4:3, 6).

The undercurrent of “over-familiarity” poses an insidious risk, particularly to those enamored with the sea. Their intimate dance with the ocean can foster a false sense of security, closing their eyes to its erratic and hazardous temperament. Analogously, there's a mirrored threat to followers of Christ—not that the Christian path itself is dangerous. Still, the danger emerges when the transformative power of salvation starts to feel pedestrian. Instead of progressing into spiritual adulthood, we can find ourselves perennially trapped in spiritual infancy, content with a basic grasp of God's intricate tapestry of wisdom (Heb 5:11–14).

Heaven forbid we should ever grow so complacent in our understanding of divine truths that we become lackadaisical or aloof, no longer propelled by a burning desire to claim the promises before us (Heb 6:11–12). Over-familiarity with the Gospel resembles staring at a masterpiece painting until all you see are blobs of color. Both are risks of losing the more prominent, beautiful picture. So let us continually strive to move beyond elementary understandings, pressing onward to more profound, mature relationships with God—ever mindful that the same waters that cradle us can also carry hazards we should never underestimate.

The riptide of “self-reliance” starkly contradicts Paul's eloquent focus on the “collective” of believers as an essential engine for mutual accountability (Heb 10:25). There's a burgeoning allure to the notion that one can go solo in spiritual matters. Some argue that solitary Bible study or sitting before a Christian TV show in the privacy of one's home is enough.

But Paul's message drives home the quintessential human yearnings for closeness, unity, and emotional warmth—not for separation or splintering.

There's a palpable power and bolstering support in the crucible of shared faith. It's not just a confluence of souls but a fusion of spiritual energy that amplifies each individual's walk with God. Paul's passionate call to action challenges us: "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds" (Heb 10:24, NASB). His words resonate with heightened urgency as we inch closer to the grand finale of earthly time.

So, let us recognize that while self-sufficiency might have merits in certain domains, it contradicts the biblical communal vitality and interdependence model. By breaking free from the illusion of spiritual self-reliance, we open ourselves to the deeper, collective fortitude that emerges when the family of God unites in purpose and love.

Indeed, be vigilant against the deceptive tides and whirlpools of existence, lest we lose sight of that radiant instant when the lamp

of truth first illuminated our path (Heb 10:32). "Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward," for "He who is coming will come, and will not delay" (Heb 10:35, 37, NASB).

So, let us not let the fleeting ripples of doubt or the undertows of despair pull us away from our core beliefs. Instead, cling to that untarnished faith and the promise that our steadfastness will be met with divine affirmation, for He who has promised is ever-faithful and eternally punctual.

### **WEATHERING THE CURRENTS!**

The apostle offers a twofold secret strategy for weathering the currents of life.

First, he admonishes us to "pay more careful attention" (Heb 2:1, NIV). Imagine if you were in a boat with a slow-moving current! Failure to be awake and pay continuous attention leads to drifting and defeat. The drifting may occur subtly and, when we realize it, it may be too late! Only by paying more careful attention can we evade the perils of life's seas.

Second, we must pay closer attention "to the things we have heard" (Heb 2:1, NKJV). Failure to do this results in "drifting." The Word of God must become a priority in our lives today. There is no replacement for personal study, an active prayer life, and sharing the good news with others. The Scripture is our sure anchor against the tides of life. We hear God speak to us as we study His Word. Let us not harden our hearts by failing to pay closer attention to the voice of God (Heb 3:7, 15).

None of us is immune to the silent risk of drifting away from the harbor of salvation. There is too much at stake. Paul's concern is we take salvation for granted, leading to the attitude of carelessness and disregard. We must preserve at all costs God's gracious provisions for our salvation. What excuse will we have if we "drift away" through "neglect" of this glorious salvation? What substitute can God offer us if we neglect heaven's only means of saving us? ED

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**So, let us not let the fleeting ripples of doubt or the undertows of despair pull us away from our core beliefs.**



# The Ministry of Deacons and Deaconesses

**THE FIRST CHRISTIAN MARTYR >PART 1**

## **EDITORIAL NOTE**

The ministry of deacons and deaconesses had its beginning in apostolic times and was related to service of different kinds in the early church. It is a commonly accepted belief that the work of the deacons began with the selection of seven men, including Stephen and Phillip, by the apostles to care for the charitable work of the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:5–7). Later, the New Testament also mentions the service of female deaconesses, such as Phoebe (Rom 16:1). Thus the ministry of deacons and deaconesses is biblical in origin. The leadership of Moses teaches us timeless principles for today's diaconate. A totally converted life of godliness, moral and spiritual uprightness, identity with God's people and His cause, and wisdom and discernment are some of the essential qualities of those called to church leadership. The following is an invaluable perspective on the ministry of deacons and deaconesses for the service of the church. This selection is from *Acts of the Apostles* by Ellen G. White.<sup>1</sup>



**SCAN FOR AUDIO**



**Stephen,** the foremost of the seven deacons, was a man of deep piety and broad faith. Though a Jew by birth, he spoke the Greek language and was familiar with the customs and manners of the Greeks. He therefore found opportunity to preach the gospel in the synagogues of the Greek Jews. He was very active in the cause of Christ and boldly proclaimed his faith. Learned rabbis and doctors of the law engaged in public discussion with him, confidently expecting an easy victory. But “they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.” Not only did he speak in the power of the Holy Spirit, but it was plain that he was a student of the prophecies and learned in all matters of the law. He ably defended the truths that he advocated and utterly defeated his opponents. To him was the promise fulfilled, “Settle

it therefore in your hearts, not to meditate before what ye shall answer: for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist.” (Luke 21:14, 15).

#### **STEPHEN, A DEDICATED DEACON**

As the priests and rulers saw the power that attended the preaching of Stephen, they were filled with bitter hatred. Instead of yielding to the evidence that he presented, they determined to silence his voice by putting him to death. On several occasions they had bribed the Roman authorities to pass over without comment instances where the Jews had taken the law into their own hands and had tried, condemned, and executed prisoners in accordance with their national custom. The enemies of Stephen did not doubt that they could again pursue such

a course without danger to themselves. They determined to risk the consequences and therefore seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin council for trial.

Learned Jews from the surrounding countries were summoned for the purpose of refuting the arguments of the prisoner. Saul of Tarsus was present and took a leading part against Stephen. He brought the weight of eloquence and the logic of the rabbis to bear upon the case, to convince the people that Stephen was preaching delusive and dangerous doctrines; but in Stephen he met one who had a full understanding of the purpose of God in the spreading of the gospel to other nations.

#### **STEPHEN, AN ENDURING EXAMPLE**

Because the priests and rulers could not prevail against the clear, calm wisdom of Stephen, they determined to make an example of him; and while thus satisfying their revengeful hatred, they would prevent others, through fear, from adopting his belief. Witnesses were hired to bear false testimony that they had heard him speak blasphemous words against the Temple and the law. “We have heard him say,” these witnesses declared, “that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.”

As Stephen stood face to face with his judges to answer to the charge of blasphemy, a holy radiance shone upon his countenance, and “all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.” ED

**Not only did he speak in the power of the Holy Spirit, but it was plain that he was a student of the prophecies and learned in all matters of the law. He ably defended the truths that he advocated and utterly defeated his opponents.**



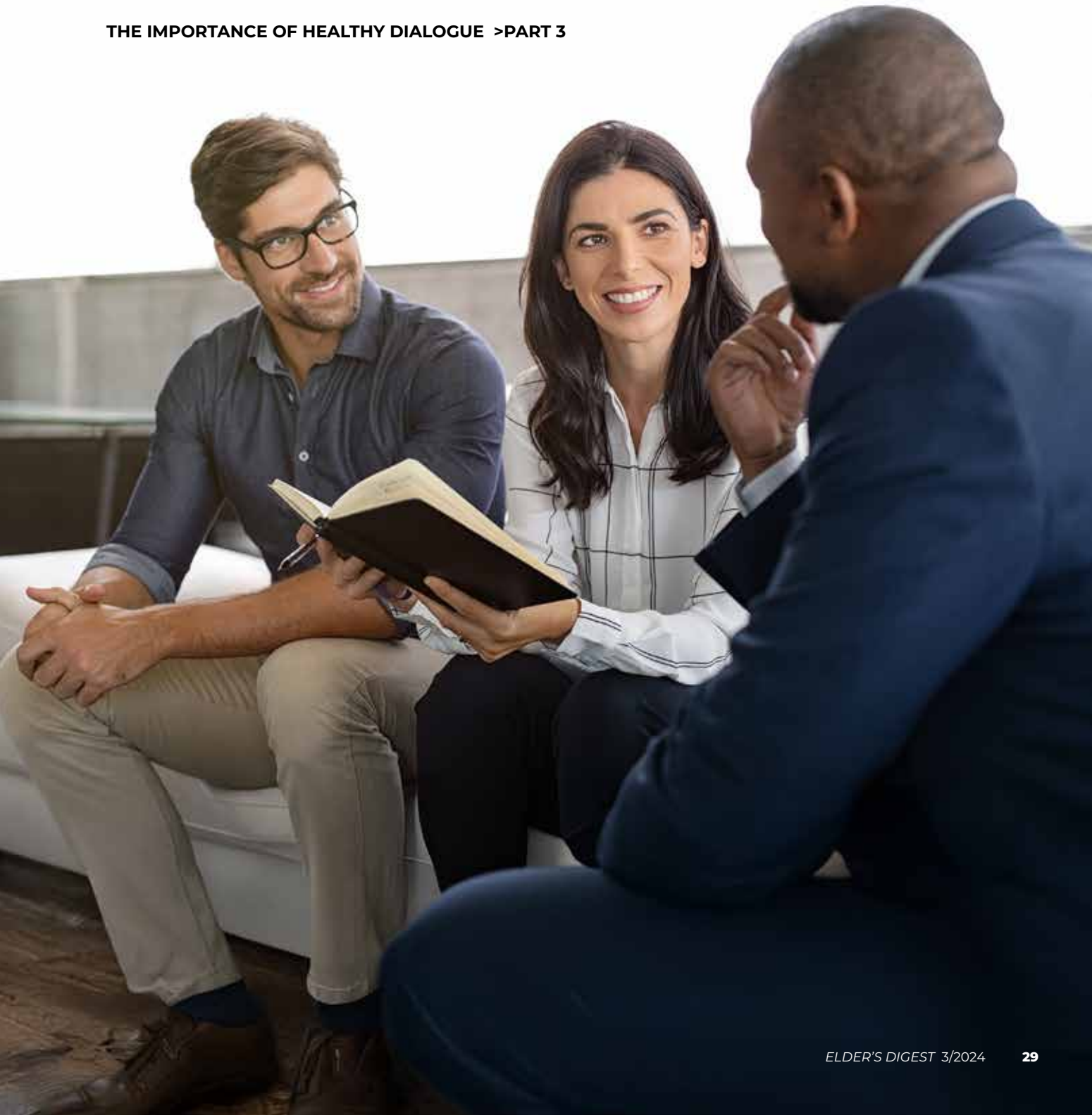
<sup>1</sup> Except for the subheadings, the entire portion that follows is from Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 87–96, and is based on Acts 6:1–7. All scriptural quotations are from the KJV and scriptural references are placed in parentheses.

# How to Deal with Theological Conflicts



SCAN FOR AUDIO

THE IMPORTANCE OF HEALTHY DIALOGUE >PART 3



**When** we talk to people who bring up controversial theological issues, many times emotions, personal preferences, pride, and lack of focus get in the way of having a productive conversation. This article looks at the practical elements of having a healthy and constructive conversation with someone who doesn't see some of these theological issues the same way you see them.

**PRACTICAL TIPS  
FOR WORKING WITH  
THEOLOGICAL CONFLICTS**

**Stay focused.** Conversations that are disjointed and scattered are seldom productive. As you listen to church members share their views, they might jump from one topic to the next, or from one verse to the next. They may need to get all this off their chest, but when you are working with them on a specific issue, do your best to

keep the conversation focused. It may be helpful to set a ground rule at the beginning of the conversation, such as, "Today we are going to talk about the Trinity," or "Today we will talk about the Holy Spirit in the book of Genesis." And if a different issue comes up, affirm it but schedule it for the next meeting. A good example from Scripture is the way Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well. Whenever she steered the conversation toward temporal issues, He masterfully turned the conversation back toward eternal issues (John 4). Be aware, however, that sometimes the root issues for a theological issue can be personal disagreements, family problems, or trauma from a person's past. So while you try to stay focused, also be open to where the Holy Spirit might guide the conversation.

**None of us have all the answers.** Don't pretend to be an expert on every theological issue!

Instead, admit your weaknesses, and pray humbly that God will lead you—and the conflicted church members—to discover the truth regarding the issue. Come to the conversation with the attitude of a learner, willing to see how God will guide you both into His truth. Even if the conversation does not bring them to your point of view, pray that you will be able to disagree as friends, and continue to live in harmony within the church family.

All the apostles of Jesus began as learners at His feet and continued to learn throughout their lives. Their humility made them receptive to acquiring and sharing the truth. As leaders, we should also have this attitude, embodying the humility of the Ethiopian eunuch, who was unafraid to ask for help to understand the Scriptures. In Acts 19, Paul met some disciples of John the Baptizer, who had not yet heard of the Holy Spirit. Ellen G. White writes, "It was by cher-

**Arguments don't win souls. Even difficult people in your church are souls that Jesus died for and is desperately trying to save.**



ishing a humble, teachable spirit that these men gained the experience that enabled them to go out as workers into the harvest field.”<sup>1</sup> Addressing us today, she continues, “There are many who make but little progress in the divine life because they are too self-sufficient to occupy the position of learners. They are content with a superficial knowledge of God’s Word. They do not wish to change their faith or practice and hence make no effort to obtain greater light.”<sup>2</sup> When dealing with difficult theological issues, both parties must have a teachable spirit, ready to learn from the Scriptures by the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

#### **Arguments don’t win souls.**

Even difficult people in your church are souls that Jesus died for and is desperately trying to save. Having a heated discussion with the church members will almost never lead them to change their mind—except to make them like you less! So even if they are angry, pray for strength from Jesus to remain calm, and for the Holy Spirit to guide you to listen carefully and see where they are coming from. Once you have really listened to them, you will have a better idea of what they believe, and why they believe it, and you’ll be better prepared to continue the conversation.

In the Bible we find multiple appeals to care for each other. In the Old Testament, these appeals are often for the care of the orphans, the widows, and the foreigners. In the New Testament, these appeals broaden to care for each other. Jesus urges His conflicted disciples to “love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12, NKJV). Paul, distressed about the factions among the believers, begs the Christian church to “walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing

with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:1–3, NKJV). As we work with difficult people, we must obey the words of Jesus and of Paul, and gently love, even if internally we vehemently disagree.

**Not every issue is important enough to fight over.** It is critical to use discernment in knowing which issues are going to be “dealbreakers.” Too often we hear of churches who split, or families who leave the church, because of conflict over various theological issues. Some issues may be critical, such as our 28 Fundamental Beliefs. Other issues may not be as important, such as the correct identification of the seven seals of Revelation, the exact interpretation of Daniel 11, or the precise order in which all the final events will occur. There’s nothing wrong with studying these issues, but they shouldn’t be grounds for arguments or fights. As we study these issues, we must always respect the conclusions other people come to, recognizing that these are not salvation issues.

As we study the Bible, and especially as we study controversial passages or topics, we are likely to come to different conclusions. Trying to get everyone to view a passage or topic in one particular way will only cause conflict in the church. Ellen White addressed this directly, writing that even if a person comes to a wrong conclusion in a particular passage, it should not be cause for disunion. She continued, “We cannot then take a position that the unity of the church consists in viewing every text of Scripture in the very same shade of light.”<sup>3</sup> True unity in the church does not come from viewing every topic in the same way. Instead, true unity will come, she writes, “when you as individual members of the church love God supremely

and your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>4</sup> Let’s aim for this unity as we interact with others.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this article we have looked at some of the more practical issues of having conversations with church members who have different theological ideas. We have highlighted the importance of remaining focused and humble, avoiding harsh arguments, and knowing which issues are important and which are not. Doing all this does not guarantee that people will come to agree with you, but it is much better than creating dissension and disunity in the church through endless arguments. The way in which we disagree matters. If we do it the right way, hopefully we will all come to a better understanding of the truth, and we will have unity in the church. Loving others is more important than disagreements over theological issues. Jesus did not say, “By this all will know you are my disciples, by the logic of your arguments,” but rather, “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35, NKJV). Let’s love one another as Jesus commanded us to do. ED

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 283.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen G. White, “Letter to Brother and Sister Buckner,” Letter 29, 1889, in *Letters and Manuscripts*, vol. 6, 1889–1890 (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate), para. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

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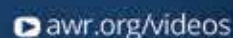
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