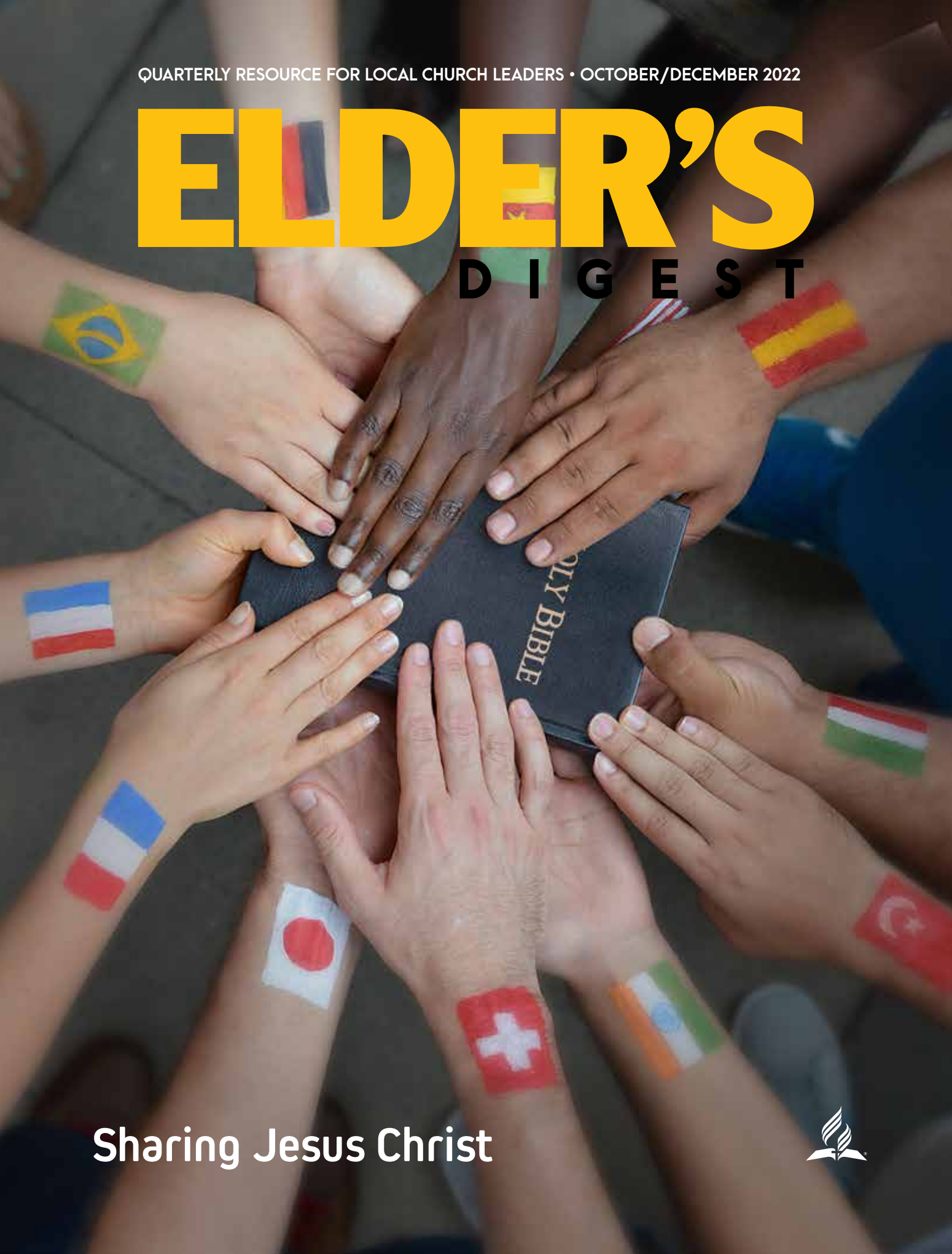


QUARTERLY RESOURCE FOR LOCAL CHURCH LEADERS • OCTOBER/DECEMBER 2022

# ELDER'S

## DIGEST



Sharing Jesus Christ



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**EDITOR**

Anthony R. Kent

**ASSISTANT EDITOR**

Alfredo Garcia-Marenko

**MINISTERIAL ASSOCIATION SECRETARY**

Ramon J. Canals

**MINISTERIAL ASSOCIATE SECRETARIES**

Jeffrey Brown, Aurora Canals, Robert Costa, Pavel Goia, Anthony R. Kent

**CREATIVE DIRECTOR**

Erika Miike

**PUBLISHER**

Ministerial Association - General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

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Kwame Kwanin Boakye

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**FEATURES**

- 4 INTRODUCING PASTOR RAMON AND MRS. AURORA CANALS >PART 1
- 8 SHARING JESUS CHRIST WITH MY NON-CHRISTIAN SOUTH ASIAN NEIGHBORS
- 12 MINISTERING TO THOSE IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH
- 19 SHARING THE THREE ANGELS' MESSAGES
- 22 WHAT DO ANCIENT TOMBSTONES TELL US ABOUT DEACONESSES?
- 24 CAN YOU HEAR ME?
- 27 DEALING WITH CONSPIRACY THEORIES >PART 1



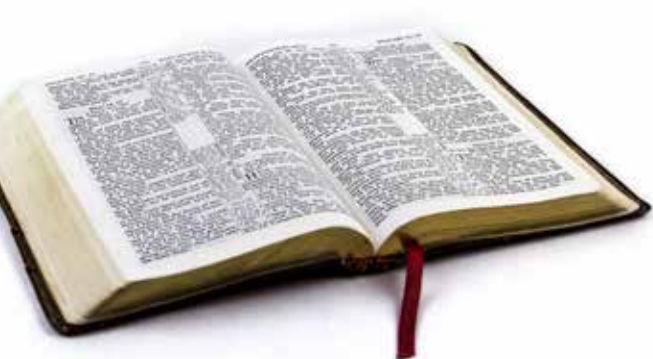
08

12



24

- EDITORIAL 3
- SERMONS 15
- KIDDER'S COLUMN 30



# More than a Book



SCAN FOR AUDIO

**The** Bible is magnificent. It has no literary peer. It shares an accurate record of history—the history that really matters. It offers significant insights into the future and speaks truth to our present time.

The real issues, as well as the purpose and meaning of life, are addressed. Most importantly, it reveals the loving Creator God and how we receive eternal life.

Jesus Christ is the theme of the Bible, and there's no better theme, but it is a mistake to limit Jesus to just a theme. Creator, Seed, Messiah, Lion, Lamb, Shepherd, Sacrifice, Saviour, Servant, Immanuel, Lord of lords and King of kings are a few of the characterizations of Jesus in Scripture. He's the greatest Teacher of people, respected and trusted, yet a Friend of sinners (Luke 7:34). And we know of these attributes *only* through the Bible.

The numerous fulfilled prophecies of the Bible support its validity and confirm our faith. It's so reassuring to know that the true God of the Bible has the power to reveal and determine the future of the universe (Dan 2:47).

Your Bible contains faithful records of inspiring miraculous stories. There's the story of the Hebrew people being rescued, by God's outstretched mighty hand, from slavery. He spectacularly parted the Red Sea and for forty years provided manna. There's not enough

space to recall all the biblical miracles, so here are just a few: the widow of Zarephath's unending supply of flour and oil during a famine and even the raising of her deceased son (1 Kgs 17:8–24); Elijah being taken up into heaven with chariots and horses of fire in a whirlwind (2 Kgs 2:1–12); the healing of Naaman by dipping seven times in the Jordan River (2 Kgs 5:1–14); the resurrection of the dead and decaying Lazarus (John 11:1–53); and the blind, lame, and lepers who were

healed by Jesus. God compassionately intervening to change the circumstances of desperate, helpless people is a wonderful revelation of His grace and love.

When I read these miraculous events in the Bible, I don't sense any exaggeration or embellishment. What makes the Bible so believable?

One reason is its honesty. The Scriptures demonstrate an accurate awareness of the true nature of humanity. Elite patriarchs like Abraham and Jacob and monarchs such as Saul and David are shown with vivid clarity—their desirable traits as well as their detestable acts. Readers can almost smell their body odor—the text is so real. There is no “spin” to protect reputations. Qualities and imperfections are revealed as life lessons. If modern-day church leaders emulated the appalling behavior of Abraham or Jacob, they would be banished from office. Current monarchs would be dethroned and imprisoned if they replicated the massacre of Nob or the murder of Uriah the Hittite.

It is this searing honesty that makes the miraculous stories so believable. Honesty equates to truthfulness, and truthfulness to trustworthiness. Yes, the Bible is worthy of your trust.

John 1:29 describes Jesus as “the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”<sup>1</sup> John 1:14 describes Jesus as being “full of grace and truth.” Each person must have this Jesus, His atoning sacrificial death, His grace and truth, to receive eternal life. Jesus is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). There's no other alternative. Forgiveness, acceptance, redemption, hope, comfort, salvation, and eternal life shine from Jesus.

What a privilege we have as elders, deacons, and deaconesses to share the Bible and the Jesus it reveals with our children, friends, relatives, Sabbath School classes, youth groups, evangelistic audiences, congregations, and even strangers. Sharing the Truth, so that people receive eternal life through Jesus. What a joy! **ED**

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.



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



EDITORIAL NOTE

Pastor Ramon J. Canals is the newly elected General Conference Ministerial Association Secretary and Aurora Canals is the newly elected General Conference Associate Ministerial Secretary for Pastoral Families. This is part 1 of a two-part interview. Part 2 will be featured in the next issue of *Elder's Digest*.

# Introducing Pastor Ramon and Mrs. Aurora Canals >PART 1

**Anthony R. Kent:**

*Thank you so much for this interview, Pastor and Mrs. Canals. Elder's Digest would like Seventh-day Adventist elders, deacons, and deaconesses around the world to be better acquainted with you. We want to give you an opportunity to share your experiences of meeting Jesus, as well as discovering your ministerial dream and vision at the beginning of your new roles. So, let me ask, how did your journey with Jesus begin?*

**Ramon J. Canals:**

Okay, let me begin, if you don't mind. God was preparing me to be a Seventh-day Adventist pastor early in my life.

My parents were not religious people. They never went to church, and they divorced when I was just one year old. Then I went to live with my grandmother, who was a very spiritual person. She went to the Roman Catholic Church all the time, almost every day, and she started taking



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me to her church. I fell in love with worship and activities in the Catholic Church. I enjoyed the singing, and the services, and I became an altar boy.

One of the things I enjoyed a lot was to go up to the roof of the cathedral with the priest and the other altar boys, to look at the stars. Those opportunities were amazing. I had an experience with God, looking at all those beautiful stars, and contemplating the universe. I spent most of my youth at the church, but I never read the Bible, even though I had this devotion to God. I often confessed my sins. That was in the Dominican Republic where I was born.

Then, when I was 16 years old, we moved to the great city of New York. Before I left the island, the priest gave me a Bible.

**AK:** *Was this the same priest who had shown you the stars?*

**RC:** Yes. We became really good friends. Before he handed me the Bible, he wrote in the first blank page, “So that you will always remember your friend, your soul, and God. Never forget God.”

I took the Bible, put it away, and I started to live my life in the city of New York.

I started to go to church in New York, but I got together with some friends that were not church people. Then I started to ask questions about God and religion, and I didn't find any answers in the Catholic Church, so I decided to just leave and began to live life as a hippie. I did not want to have anything to do with God.

Then one day, a friend of mine who was a drug dealer became converted. He had been raised as a Seventh-day Adventist, and his mother was always praying for him. Because of his mother's prayers, he was converted. After his conversion he started to talk to

me about Jesus. He invited me to his house and then he shared with me the book *The Desire of Ages*, and through that book, I fell in love with Jesus.

My friend taught me about my body being the temple of the Holy Spirit and the Sabbath. But I was a dancer; I loved to go to dances and discos. And I told my friend, “Saturdays are for dancing, not going to church!” He was very patient with me; I went to church with him three or four times but then I told him I didn't want to go anymore and that I didn't want anything to do with religion. My friend said, “I'll continue to pray for you.”

So, I left New York and moved to New Jersey, but every weekend I drove back to New York to dance. One night, when I was coming back from New York—it must have been three or four in the morning—I heard a voice saying, “Read the Bible. Read the Bible. Read the Bible.” It was not audible, but it was so clear in my mind and in my heart. When I got home, I started looking for that Bible.

**AK:** *That Bible that the Catholic priest had given you? And it's four in the morning?*

**RC:** Yeah, it's four in the morning and I find it—my Bible. I had never read it, never opened it, all these years. Then I opened it and started reading. I read Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and I read some of the Apocrypha because it's a Catholic Bible, but I couldn't understand anything. So, I put it away and I went to sleep. A few hours later, around 7:30, I was awakened by the same voice telling me, “Go find a church. Go find a church. Go find a church.”

**AK:** *This is a Sunday morning?*

**RC:** It was Sunday morning. I got myself dressed up, got into my car, and drove around the city of

Paterson, New Jersey. I stopped and looked at several churches, at the people coming and going. But I didn't go into any of those churches. I went back home, parked my car, and as I was walking towards my home, there was this man working on his car. He had the hood up, and I said to him, “Good morning. Do you have a problem? Do you need any help?” He said, “Oh no, I'm just checking the oil.” So I said, “Okay, have a nice day.” And then he called me and said, “Hold on a second. I want to give you something.” I walked back to him, and he handed me two magazines, which I recognized because I had seen them in my friend's home in New York. It was like a lightning bolt coming to my mind and I thought, “Wow, this is interesting!”

So, I asked him four questions. “Are you a Christian?” He said, “Yes.” Then I asked, “Are you a Seventh-day Adventist by any chance?” He said, “Yes.” “When is the next time you're going to church?” I asked. He said, “Wednesday.” And the fourth question I asked, “Can you take me with you?” And then he said, “Sure!”

And so I went with him and his family. From that Wednesday until now, I have been attending the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

**AK:** *Prayers were being answered.*

**RC:** Yeah, I feel God called me directly to the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

After a few weeks, I told the pastor that I wanted to get baptized. He gave me some printed Bible studies to read. I studied the whole set of Bible studies in just a few days; I was so eager. The pastor couldn't believe it! He started asking me questions about the studies and I answered all his questions, and I was baptized soon after.

I didn't know how to preach; I didn't know how to do any of that stuff. I was just excited about what I had found, and I wanted to share it with everybody.



**AK:** *Wow, that's a wonderful touching testimony. What about you, Aurora? What's your experience with Jesus?*

**Aurora Canals:**

Well, I was also a Roman Catholic Christian.

**AK:** *Really?*

**AC:** Yeah, I grew up Catholic in my family. We were very devoted Catholics. We went to Mass every Sunday. I went to Catholic school, my whole elementary schooling. I started school in Colombia. I was born in Colombia, South America, and then came to the United States at the age of ten, to Paterson, New Jersey.

**AK:** *I can see where this is going . . .*

**AC:** Yeah, I lived in Paterson, I grew up there. When I was sixteen years old, my uncle Nestor met Ramon. They were taking some technical classes together on refrigeration and air conditioning. Uncle Nestor invited Ramon to our house. We lived on the first floor; my uncle lived on the second floor of the house. Ramon started Bible lessons with my uncle. Then Ramon noticed that our family lived downstairs, so he said, "Why don't you invite your brother and the family to come up for the lessons?" Uncle Nestor said, "Oh, they're very Catholic." But anyway, my father did go upstairs by himself first, just to see what Ramon was teaching.

When my father learned what Ramon was teaching, we all went upstairs, to study the Bible with Ramon. Ramon was an elder at the Paterson Seventh-day Adventist Church at that time. My whole family was converted, except my Uncle Nestor. My father, mom, brothers, sisters, and I, were bap-

tized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church through Ramon.

When Ramon was encouraging us to decide for Christ, he was new to the faith and inexperienced, so he brought the pastor from the church. Unbeknown to us, the pastor lived just a few houses from our house, but we didn't know him. But he came in and helped us with the decision to get baptized.

After we were baptized, Ramon and I developed a friendly relationship. We've been married ever since. [Aurora and Ramon both smile broadly as she says this.]

Ramon has always been a role model for me because he brought me to the Lord and helped me give my life to Jesus.

**AK:** *So, Ramon, you're first elder of the Adventist church in Paterson, New Jersey. How did you become a pastor?*

**RC:** Yeah, that's a good question. When I was baptized, the pastor said to me, "Now you are a missionary." I didn't know what a missionary was. I thought a missionary was someone who went to faraway countries. So I asked, "What is a missionary?" Someone told me, "Well, a missionary is just someone who tells somebody about Jesus, so you got to go and tell your friends about Jesus." "Oh, okay," I thought.

The church at that time did not have a lot of young people. The youth meetings were mostly attended by older people. So I said, "Okay, I'll go and tell all my friends about Jesus and the church." I started sharing with all my friends and bringing them to church. The church actually got packed with a lot of young people that the Lord helped me to bring.

I didn't know how to preach; I didn't know how to do any of that stuff. I was just excited about what I had found, and I wanted to share it with everybody. But when people

**Out of the blue, he says, “God is impressing me to tell you that you should go and study to be a pastor.”**

saw me, they thought that I was a pastor. The interesting thing is that I had to learn how to be an elder by myself.

It was during that time that I started feeling that God was calling me, by the testimony of people in the church and outside of the church, that were looking at me as a pastor. I felt like God was talking to me through people. And one day I was in a camp meeting, and I met this pastor who was the main speaker at the camp meeting. He said, “I’ve been watching you and your family.” We had our little daughter, Jessica. He asked, “Are you a pastor here at this conference?”

I said, “No.”

“Why not?” he asked.

“What do you mean why not? I’m just not a pastor. I’m an elder.”

“Well, you should be a pastor.”

I said, “Why do you say that?”

“You look like you could be a good pastor.”

I said, “Well, I’m not a pastor. I don’t want to be a pastor.”

I was doing well financially in my profession as a machinist and technician. We owned a house, and I was only in my twenties. But I felt that God was calling me, but I never paid attention to it.

So this pastor who had never met me before says, “I think you should go and study to be a pastor. I feel like God is impressing me to tell you this.”

And this pastor, he didn’t know anything about me. I had never seen him in my life, and he had never seen me. He didn’t know anything

about me. Out of the blue, he says, “God is impressing me to tell you that you should go and study to be a pastor.” And I confess, “I feel God has been calling me for the past five years. But I have been rejecting the call because I feel unworthy because of my background.”

And he said, “No. God doesn’t look at you as you were, but what you can become through Christ.”

When he said that, my heart was touched, and it made me want to study and be a pastor. Tears rolled down my cheeks. I talked to Aurora, “This pastor is telling me that I should study to be a pastor. At first I didn’t want to do it, but now I think we ought to go and study.”

**AK: Aurora, you married a machinist, a refrigeration technician, not a pastor. How did you feel when Ramon said this?**

**AC:** Well, for me it was hard enough being the wife of the first elder because I had only recently joined the church and we had a church in the basement of our house.

**AK: You had a church in your basement? Wow!**

**AC:** Yes, we remodeled the whole basement. We had chairs and a pulpit because on Sabbath afternoons we would bring our neighbors to our basement for meetings and Bible lessons. I would prepare meals for everyone, and we would work together. We opened our house to people learning about God. So, when he told me that he wanted to go to study, for me, it was very hard. But I saw his passion, and I said, “Okay, I am with you.”

**AK: But I guess there were complications?**

**AC:** We only had one child, Jessica, and Ramon wanted to

have a boy. Ramon prayed to God and gave God a challenge . . .

**RC:** Let me tell you this part. This part is very interesting, because it goes against all that we teach and tell people not to do. But I did it. I was fighting the call. Even though I made my decision, I was still unsure. I wanted to make sure that God was directing, that it was not just my own thinking, my own impression.

At the time, I did not have a high school diploma. I had studied vocational things and done well but a high school diploma was an entry requirement, and I didn’t want to go back to high school. So, I planned to take the high school equivalency test and I prayed that if I passed that test, that means that God is calling me. If I didn’t pass, then it would be clear that God was not calling me. Guess what? I passed!

But we wanted to have another child, and we didn’t want to have one while I was in school. So, I prayed that we want to have a child. After the child is born, then we go to study. But I also prayed that it must be a boy because we had a girl. Within the year, we had our son, Gabriel!

**AK: So, you passed the exam and you received Gabriel.**

**RC:** There was a third thing. Aurora says, “What are we going to do with the house?” We needed to sell it quickly because the school year was starting soon. We only told one person we wanted to sell it. Before we put it up for sale an interested person came and purchased it and with that money we went to study.

**AK: What an amazing journey of divine leading!**

ED

This interview will be completed in the next issue.



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EDITORIAL  
NOTE

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

# Sharing Jesus Christ with My Non-Christian South Asian Neighbors

The year was 1947. Elder Alfred Tarr, missionary from the United States, had two appointments: one with the Honorable Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru, the incoming prime minister of India, and the other with Mahatma Gandhi, former President of the Indian National Congress who had led the campaign for Indian independence. It was not the first time Elder Tarr had met Gandhi but it certainly would be the last—Gandhi died the following year. According to Elder Tarr, Gandhi surprised him every time they met. This time, Gandhi told Elder Tarr about his first encounter, some years before, with the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa. After the meeting with Elder Tarr, Gandhi accepted a gift from the Adventist Church, a copy of the book *Ministry of Healing* by Ellen G. White. Gandhi's secretary told Elder Tarr that Gandhi had heard about the book and was eager to read it for himself.<sup>1</sup>

Gandhi had a keen interest in health and was possibly impacted by the book *Ministry of Healing* by Ellen White. But Gandhi was no stranger to Jesus and Christianity. In fact, as someone outside of the Christian church, he actually provided some guidance on best practices for sharing Jesus Christ with the South Asian community. According to Gandhi, Jesus' example of suffering led him to adopt a nonviolent approach to life. He called Christians to a life of suffering like Jesus Christ. A second best practice by Gandhi is for Christians to see Jesus' mes-



SCAN FOR AUDIO



## New Testament accounts reveal that divine intervention is one of many approaches Jesus and the disciples used in their ministry among different people groups.

sage is for everyone. He stated, “If He were living here. . . . He would bless the lives of many . . . even [those who] never heard his name.”<sup>2</sup> A third best practice by Gandhi notes that Jesus did not preach a new religion, but offered a new life to all regardless of caste, class, or gender.<sup>3</sup> Gandhi stated, “You Christians, especially missionaries, should begin to live more like Christ.”<sup>4</sup> While this may seem like a rebuke for Christians, it was actually a helpful evaluation of how Christians were perceived by many non-Christians during his lifetime. And yet, Gandhi acknowledged that many of his values of life—the concept of nonviolence, loving your enemies, and lessons found in the Sermon on the Mount—came from Jesus Christ.

In the same way that Gandhi applied the teachings of Jesus to his life and the fight against injustices he saw, Adventists are well-positioned to mirror the life and teachings of Jesus Christ to the majority religion of South Asians. It is important to know that we cannot improve on Christ’s method: mingling, showing sympathy, ministering to needs, and bidding them to follow Him. The five basic principles for discipling a South Asian into Jesus Christ are embedded in Christ’s method.<sup>5</sup>

### **PRINCIPLE 1:** **Belonging before Becoming**

Becoming a disciple is truly a journey. “Belonging before becoming” refers to the stage before a non-Christian South Asian accepts Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour. Many models of discipleship assume that the person who is

being discipled has already accepted Jesus. However, most non-Christian South Asians do not have a Christian frame of reference for the God of the Bible, nor an understanding of Christian culture. In some ways, the South Asian culture and worldview are entirely out of sync with Christian doctrines.

Therefore, discipleship for non-Christian South Asians must begin before they accept Jesus and are baptized. They should be welcomed into the Adventist community and given the opportunity to taste and see that God is good. When South Asian families first experience the love and grace of Jesus Christ, the transition and discipleship process become more effective.

### **PRINCIPLE 2:** **Divine Encounter**

Many South Asians live their lives in fear of evil spirits. They practice a multitude of rituals with the hope that their families will be protected. Encounters with evil spirits are prevalent among non-Christian South Asians. However, many documented accounts reveal that many of these people are finding Jesus through healing and deliverance from evil spirits. Some are healed after praying to Jesus, and others are invited to follow Him through dreams or visions. Additionally, these accounts reveal that the discipleship process of leading non-Christian South Asians to Jesus often begins with a crisis. As a result, disciple-makers should present themselves as people of prayer. New Testament accounts reveal that divine intervention is one of many approaches Je-

sus and the disciples used in their ministry among different people groups (Matt 8:31; Acts 19:16). The Holy Spirit has been opening many doors of opportunity to connect and begin building friendships with non-Christian South Asians who need deliverance and who have already been delivered from the evil one.

### **PRINCIPLE 3:** **Connecting with the South Asian Worldview**

South Asians are very protective of their family and cultural values. Based on historical facts and prior experiences, many believe that Christianity is a threat to these values. They also have real fears about what will happen to themselves and their families if they convert. Therefore, it is essential for us as Adventists to become known among South Asian communities as a blessing and not a threat. The model of Jesus, summarized by Ellen White, paves the way for connecting with non-Christian South Asians in a non-threatening way. “Christ’s method,” as succinctly described in the *Ministry of Healing*, is a tested and proven method among non-Christian South Asians. As non-Christian South Asians mingle with Adventists, they are exposed to a biblically shaped worldview. Hiebert notes that exposure to other worldviews is an important step in worldview transformation.<sup>6</sup>

Many non-Christian South Asians desire to have a Christ-like peace that they see among Christians. Spending quality time with non-Christian South Asians in a non-threatening environment provides them with an opportunity to be exposed to Jesus. This quality time is fundamental to establishing trust. In practice, such a connection can be created in many ways such as: centers of influence in the community, prayer ministries

**For example, if your non-Christian friends invite you to their home and you are offered food or something to drink but you refuse, your refusal can be viewed as a rejection of their friendship.**

that focus on healing (preferably in their homes or at church) as the Holy Spirit leads, inviting them to your home, or inviting them to special functions. Whatever the method, the goal is to connect with non-Christian South Asians in ways that lead them to direct exposure to Jesus.

**PRINCIPLE 4:  
Building Bridges with Non-Christian South Asians**

Every people group has its own ways of showing hospitality and its own methods of teaching its adherents. This is also true for South Asians. Hospitality is very important in their culture and is taught at a very young age. Adults

are expected to practice it and pass down these values to the next generation. According to South Asian scholars, hospitality is both a religious and social obligation. For non-Christian South Asians, entertaining visitors or strangers is nonnegotiable. It is taught that by showing hospitality to strangers or visitors, one will receive blessings.

In South Asian culture, friendship is formed when food is involved. As Adventists, misreading our South Asian friends' culture can lead to mistrust in our relationships with them. For example, if your non-Christian friends invite you to their home and you are offered food or something to drink but you refuse, your refusal can

be viewed as a rejection of their friendship. Thus, it is wise to be mindful of South Asian customs. Building trust among non-Christian South Asians takes time and patience. Once you have built trust with your Hindu friends, it will be easier to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

**PRINCIPLE 5:  
Studying the Bible with Non-Christian South Asians**

In general, most non-Christian South Asians are unfamiliar with the Christian worldview. For example, they most likely do not know the story of Moses or Adam or understand Christian terms such as "sanctification" or "justification." Therefore, it is best to avoid going from text to text when having Bible studies with non-Christian South Asians. Instead, tell them a story and explain the meaning and teachings of that story; non-Christian South Asians are familiar

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with this format of learning. The life of Christ and end-time events are usually appealing, and the stories of Ruth and the book of John are also good places to start when having a Bible study. However, keep in mind that non-Christian South Asians are confused about the concept of Jesus' death. Many believe that God cannot die. Using simple language will be most helpful.

These principles are just a few places to begin in sharing with South Asians. Revelation 14:6 is a constant reminder that all peoples will hear the Three Angels' Messages, and many will accept the final call to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. We may feel ill-equipped to reach out to non-Christians—we often don't speak their language or understand their customs and worldview. But Christ's method of ministry breaks down cultural barriers. And when people know that we love and care for them, they will happily overlook cultural mistakes we may make. ED

<sup>1</sup> A. F. Tarr, "Our Message in the New India," *British Advent Messenger*, August 1947, 1–2.

<sup>2</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *What Jesus Means to Me* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing, 1959), <https://www.mkgandhi.org/ebks/whatjesusmeanstome.pdf>, accessed January 19, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Jude Basebang, "Africa Needs Gandhi," accessed December 28, 2021, [https://www.mkgandhi.org/africanneedsgandhi/gandhis\\_message\\_to\\_christians.htm](https://www.mkgandhi.org/africanneedsgandhi/gandhis_message_to_christians.htm).

<sup>5</sup> Ellen G. White, *Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1943), 143.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 321.

**Clifmond Shameerudeen**, DMiss, is the director of the Center for South Asian Religions, Adventist Mission, at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, MD, USA.

## THE FIVE PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

A few years ago, after much prayer, a team of church members and I entered a South Asian community where there had been no Adventist presence. We began by providing monthly health fairs, including health lectures and blood sugar and blood pressure checks. These events were a real blessing to the community. Building on this success, we started a community center to meet the needs of the community by providing various services such as after-school tutoring, cooking classes, and family counseling. In a short time, we became known as a people who cared. A house church was established at our center that was well attended by our South Asian friends. Every Sabbath, we had special prayer for healing and protection against evil spirits. Many prayer requests were answered, which led to Bible studies and many accepting Jesus Christ as their Saviour. It was a blessing to see how God intervened in the lives of our non-Christian South Asian friends. A fellowship meal was part of the worship experience, and our friends from the community always provided the meals even if they were not able to attend. This experience is a reminder of Paul's words to us: "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph 6:12, NKJV).

Shanti began attending our Sabbath meetings at the community center. She would show up on time every Sabbath morning dressed in her traditional Indian wear. She became friends with many of the new believers who had recently become part of the family of God. After three months, I returned to visit the thriving house church at the community center. Shanti was up front as the lead singer for the worship service. After the service she came to me and said, "Pastor, I love Jesus. Every week I long to be here. Pastor, my family is against my decision to join the Adventist church. They are afraid that I will change into a different person. I am patient with them. They don't know the joy that had come into my heart in the last three months." Then she looked at me and said, "I have Jesus in my heart!" Shanti was experiencing the community we share in Christ and it was drawing her to Jesus and His truth. House churches like this provide safe places for non-Christians from South Asian background to be discipled in Christ.

After one year of service to the village, the Adventist church was no longer perceived as a threat to the way of life in this non-Christian community. Instead, we were acknowledged as a blessing. One of the influential people from the community approached me and said, "Pastor, over the last year, you and your team are no longer strangers but family. You have become a friend and someone who is respected by our community. You are always here for us." He continued, "I notice you take time to visit and pray with the elderly and those in need of help." Interestingly, this was the same person who told me, about a year earlier, that previous Christian groups had come to this village and left after three months. He expected us to do the same. Today, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is established and valued in this community. This success is a direct result of implementing the five principles as outlined in this article.

It is my prayer that God will give you strength as you seek to become like Christ to our South Asian brothers and sisters.



SCAN FOR AUDIO

# Ministering to Those in the Shadow of Death

## EDITORIAL NOTE

This article is the fourth and final in the series on ministering to those with mental health issues.

In the time it will take you to read this article, about ten people around the world will take their own life. In the few minutes it will take you to read this, many more will attempt to end their life. And, right now, millions around the world are thinking about suicide.

The French Algerian philosopher and author Albert Camus wrote, “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. . . . I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions. How to answer it?”<sup>1</sup>

The philosophers have wrestled with these questions and come up with different answers. They do not agree on whether life has meaning, much less what meaning it might have. They do not agree on whether suicide is justifiable or morally acceptable. It is safe to say that there is no worldly agreement on how to answer these questions.

For many of my patients, the questions of suicide and life’s meaning are not merely philosophical questions. They are questions of life and death—literally. And many do not know how to answer them. When life is smooth and things go well, these questions usually do not bother anyone. Blessed and privileged are those who “seldom reflect on the days of their life” (Eccl 5:20, NIV). But when the pains of living in a sin-broken world wash over us, we may ask, “Why all this suffering? Is it worth it? Is there any way out?” Suicide is a way out. Death is an end to suffering. But it’s not a solution to the problems.

As a psychiatrist, when I have asked my patients about thoughts of death and suicide, the majority either struggle with them now or have in the past. Such thoughts are so common that I’ve been surprised in the few cases where patients have told me that they’ve never had such thoughts. Still, I have yet to meet a patient I thought really wanted to die.



Questions about the meaning of life, death, and suicide are not only for philosophers and patients. Most of us, sooner or later in life, touch on these questions. They are responses to suffering. President Abraham Lincoln, considered by many to be the greatest American president, suffered from episodes of depression. Going through one of these episodes, the thirty-one-year-old Lincoln wrote to a friend, "I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on the earth. Whether I shall ever be better I can not tell; I awfully forebode I shall not. To remain as I am is impossible; I must die or be better, it appears to me."<sup>2</sup>

What Lincoln felt is what many may feel in the depth of suffering. None of us want to suffer. Yet suffering comes to all of us. When it does, it may feel like it's unbearable. When suffering dispels all sense of joy and purpose, we desperately seek solutions to the problems, to put an end to the suffering, and find a way out. Suicide is an escape option more than a genuine desire for death. Every cell in the body has the "breath of life" (Gen 2:7, NIV) and fights against death. The better way out of suffering is not suicide, but to alleviate the suffering and find ways to manage and cope with it.

### WHAT IS SUICIDE?

Suicide is when people harm themselves with the goal of ending their life, and they die as a result. Every year, about 800,000 people globally end their lives in suicide. That amounts to, on average, one suicide every forty seconds or more than two thousand suicides per day. Second only to accidents, suicide is the leading cause of death for teenagers and young adults around the world. In

principle, no one has to die from suicide. Every suicide is therefore a tragic loss of life.

A suicide attempt is when people harm themselves with the goal of ending their life, but they do not die. Estimates are that for every suicide, there are about twenty to forty suicide attempts. This means that someone, somewhere in the world, attempts suicide about every other second. Females are more likely than males to attempt suicide, while males are more likely to die from suicide as they often resort to more lethal methods.

A word of caution on how we talk about suicide: avoid using terms such as "commit suicide," "successful suicide," or "failed suicide attempt" when referring to suicide and suicide attempts, as these terms often carry negative connotations and may come across as insensitive. "Commit suicide" may be linked to ideas of suicide being a crime. It's recommended to rather use terms such as "death by suicide," "died by suicide," or simply "suicide," when possible.

### WHO IS AT RISK OF SUICIDE?

Suicide does not discriminate. Anyone may become suicidal. People of all genders, ages, ethnicities, and religions can be at risk. Suicidal behavior is complex, and there is no single cause. The most common risk factors for suicide are:

- depression, other mental disorders, or substance use disorder
- chronic pain
- a history of suicide attempts
- family history of a mental disorder or substance use
- family history of suicide
- exposure to family violence, including physical or sexual abuse
- presence of guns or other firearms in the home
- having recently been released from prison or jail

- exposure, either directly or indirectly, to others' suicidal behavior, such as that of family members, peers, or celebrities

Fortunately, most people who have risk factors will not attempt suicide. It is difficult to tell who will act on suicidal thoughts. Although risk factors for suicide are important to keep in mind, someone who is showing warning signs of suicide may be at higher risk for danger and need immediate attention. Some important warning signs are:

- talking about wanting to die or wanting to kill themselves
- talking about feeling empty or hopeless or having no reason to live
- talking about feeling trapped or feeling that there are no solutions
- feeling unbearable emotional or physical pain
- talking about being a burden to others
- withdrawing from family and friends
- giving away important possessions
- saying goodbye to friends and family
- putting affairs in order, such as making a will
- taking great risks that could lead to death, such as driving recklessly
- talking or thinking about death often

Other serious warning signs that someone may be at risk for attempting suicide include:

- displaying extreme mood swings, suddenly changing from very sad to very calm or happy
- planning or looking for ways to kill themselves, such as searching for lethal methods online, stockpiling pills, or buying a gun
- talking about feeling great guilt or shame

- using alcohol or drugs more often
- acting anxious or agitated
- changing eating or sleeping habits
- showing rage or talking about seeking revenge

Stressful life events such as the loss of a loved one, legal troubles, or financial difficulties, and interpersonal stressors such as shame, harassment, bullying, discrimination, or relationship troubles, may contribute to suicide risk, especially when they occur along with other suicide risk factors.

It is important to note that suicide is not a normal response to stress. Suicidal thoughts or actions are a sign of extreme distress and should not be ignored or dismissed. If these warning signs are evident, get help as soon as possible, particularly if the behavior is new or has increased recently.<sup>3</sup>

### HOW TO HELP SOMEONE WHO HAS SUICIDAL THOUGHTS AND PLANS

Whenever you have a suspicion that someone might be suicidal, and you are not aware that someone else is taking care of the person, you should seriously consider engaging with the person about it. You might help save a life. I have found that the best way to address such concerns is a straightforward approach, being direct, respectful, empathetic, and caring. Here are some recommendations on what to do:

**1. Ask:** “Are you thinking about killing yourself?” or something similar. It’s not an easy question, but studies show that asking at-risk individuals if they are suicidal does not increase suicides or suicidal thoughts. The more comfortable and direct you are able to be talking about it, the easier it may be for the person to be open and honest in return.

**2. Be there:** Listen carefully and learn what the individual is

thinking and feeling. Research suggests acknowledging and talking about suicide may reduce rather than increase suicidal thoughts.

**3. Keep them safe:** A person who is suicidal should never be left alone. Stay with them until someone else can take over. Ask them how they would kill themselves and eliminate, if possible, a suicidal person’s access to highly lethal items or places. If in doubt about what you should do, reach out to a suicide hotline and ask for advice.

**4. Help them connect:** If someone is having suicidal thoughts and plans, they require social and professional support. Depending on what they want, what is available, and what seems appropriate, help them make a connection with a suicide hotline, a trusted individual like a family member, friend, pastor, or mental health professional.

**5. Stay connected:** Staying in touch after a crisis or after being discharged from care can make a difference. Studies have shown the number of suicide deaths goes down when someone follows up with the at-risk person.<sup>4</sup>

### HOW TO MINISTER TO THOSE LEFT BEHIND AFTER A SUICIDE

Losing someone to suicide is emotionally painful and complicated. The bereaved often struggle with guilt, a sense of responsibility, and questions that may never be answered. Help them with practical aspects surrounding the death. Allow them space and time to express all their emotions, and to tell their story, and the story of the one who died. Processing loss is a process. Dealing with grief takes time. Most likely, they will never fully “get over it.” It may be beneficial for them to connect with others who have gone through similar experiences in a support group, and to have professional support from a counselor or therapist.

### WHERE IS GOD WHEN SOMEONE KILLS THEMSELVES?

As philosophers have struggled with what to think about suicide, so has the Christian church. A traditional view has been that suicide is a mortal sin, and such thinking has led to excessive pain for those left behind. My conviction is that whenever someone desponds and gives up on life because of unbearable suffering, God’s heart breaks. Every time. The apostle Paul says, “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:28–29, ESV).

I trust in God’s love and saving grace. He is the compassionate Judge and Saviour who knows all our struggles—also the struggles of those who contemplate suicide and those who take their own lives. Whether someone chooses to live or to die, they may still be in God’s love. I believe that whenever someone walks in the shadow of death, God is right there with them, ready to guide, to comfort, and lead them to greener pastures and calmer waters (Ps 23). His desire for us is life, but with sin, death entered our world. In the end, whether in life or in death, our hope is only in Him. **ED**

<sup>1</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage International, 2018), 3–4.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to John Stuart, Jan. 23, 1841.

<sup>3</sup> “Suicide Prevention,” National Institute of Mental Health, accessed July 28, 2022, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/suicide-prevention>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

**Torben Bergland, MD**, is a psychiatrist and an associate director of Health Ministries at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, MD, USA.

## Peasants, Prophets, and Patience

Patience! In everyday life we face the challenge of being patient. In the book of Revelation, the term “patience” is found seven times (1:9; 2:2, 3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12). Each time it is used in connection with believers or the church. Most well-known is Revelation 14:12. Patience is an important Christian virtue. Today we will study James 5:7–11, a passage which talks about the last days of this world and strongly emphasizes patience, and which may also shed light on patience in Revelation.

### I. THE CONTEXT OF JAMES 5:7–11

In his letter, James treats several topics. But patience is an important topic to him. What about Christ’s second coming? It appears indirectly at the beginning of chapter 5. James tells us there that despite its nearness people have only lived for material profit and have even oppressed the weaker ones (Jas 5:1–6). This reflects our current situation. But how should the church members, react? This question is answered by James 5:7–11.

### II. ANALYSIS OF THE PASSAGE

#### A. Outline and Overview

James begins in verses 7–10 with imperatives: “be patient,” “strengthen your hearts,” “do not grumble against one another,” and “take as an example” (NKJV). The readers and hearers are called to demonstrate Christian behavior.

In addition to these calls there are promises of divine intervention: “the coming of the Lord is near” and “the Judge is standing right at the door” (vv. 8–9).

And like Jesus, James uses examples: first an example from everyday life, a farmer, who waits for the crop (v. 7), and then biblical examples (vv. 10–11). The more general example of the prophets is followed by the specific example of Job, the man of patience and endurance. Six times in five verses we hear about patience.

Here patience has two dimensions. If patience is directed toward God, it should be understood in the sense of “waiting.” If patience is directed to fellow humans or to enduring suffering, the idea of perseverance prevails. James tells us, “Be patient. The Lord is coming. Wait for him,” adding, “Be patient and perseverant when fellow humans cause you problems. Do not take judgment in your own hands. On the other hand, do not adapt to worldly standards. Both conformity to the world as well as attack of the world are mistaken.”

#### B. Verses 7–8

James illustrates his call to be patient

until Christ’s coming by referring to a farmer in Palestine. Such a farmer cultivates the ground, sows seeds, and waits for the crop. Shortly before the harvest he may suffer hunger. He waits and practices patience no matter how hungry he is.

God’s children wait patiently for Christ’s return. James is persuaded of its nearness and wants his readers to be filled with strong confidence. Yet, he also knows about the time between sowing and harvesting. And he does not start calculating the time as some among us do. “Be patient, strengthen your hearts, the coming of the Lord is at hand.”

#### C. Verse 9

Before verse 9 we hear about patience. In the following two verses (vv. 10–11) we again hear about patience, but not here. How does this verse fit in the context?

Obviously, James knows his Christian brothers and sisters. They are waiting for the Second Coming. But as persecution or difficulties emerge or as they start to enjoy an easy life and tendencies to adapt to the world grow strong, the unity of the church is endangered. Church members may begin complaining about each other and attacking each other.

However, just as believers have no right to judge the world, they are not allowed to condemn each other. The judge is standing at the door.

Verses 7–9 look like an intensification:

Verse 7: “. . . until the coming of the Lord.” The nearness of the coming is not yet mentioned.

Verse 8: “. . . for the coming of the Lord is near.” Christians count on Jesus to return soon.

Verse 9: “Behold, the Judge is standing at the door!” Almost any moment Jesus can come.

#### D. Verses 10–11

Here is the final appeal of the passage. Examples encourage us. We are not the first ones called to manifest patience. Prior to us were the prophets. They endured patiently. The prime example for patience in afflictions is Job. James calls those blessed who persevered under difficult circumstances and tells us, “You will also be blessed if you remain steadfast and endure.”

Patience of the saints! They wait for their Lord, remain faithful in challenging times, and God blesses them.

### III. APPLICATION

In our passage we have found three important aspects of patience for us:

#### A. Patience in Waiting

Generations of Christians have waited

for Jesus’ second coming. Seventh-day Adventists have been waiting, but some have given up waiting. These people do not deny the possibility of a second coming, but do not live as if it would matter. They are not concerned about what the Bible teaches. They go by what society and culture accept. But we need patience and unwavering perseverance.

#### B. Patience in Human Relationships

Oftentimes, it is difficult to be patient with each other. This is true for marriage and family relations and also for the church. We have our peculiarities, unique perspectives, and some eccentric behavior. Church members can irritate each other. Therefore, the New Testament stresses patience so strongly. Paul admonishes the Christians in Ephesus to manifest humility, gentleness, and patience (Eph 4:2). To the believers in Colossae, he recommends a heart of patience (Col 3:12–13). The Thessalonian church members are called to “be patient with everyone” (1 Thess 5:14, NAU). Timothy is challenged to preach and teach with great patience (2 Tim 4:2). And in 1 Corinthians 13:4 he stresses that love is patient.

To be patient does not mean to accept or tolerate sin, but it means to love the other person no matter what. We are called to care for those at the margin of the church, those practicing a questionable lifestyle, and those holding strange theological positions—without accepting unbiblical behavior and views.

#### C. Patience in Suffering

Patience also includes endurance of hardship and perseverance in suffering. This trait was attributed to the Roman armies at the time of Jesus. They possessed a persistence that helped them, even after a lost battle, not to lose a war. Patience, endurance, persistence, and perseverance is the spirit that does not accept defeat.

### CONCLUSION

Patience in waiting, patience in human relationships, patience in suffering, because the Lord is near! “Here is the patience of the saints!” It is this patience that we need. It is this patience that we request from our Lord. It is this patience that we accept as a gift. And along with it we receive God’s blessing (Jas 5:11) and the crown of life (1:12). To Him we call, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.” ED

**Ekkehardt Mueller**, ThD, DMin, is a retired associate director of the Biblical Research Institute at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, MD, USA.

## Asa and the Queen Mother

Without question, parents should love their children, even if they do not live up to their parents' ideals. It is also no question that parents need to think about their own values when being confronted with the behavior, choices, and thoughts of their children; and vice versa. Experiences can change our perspectives on life. In some cases, this is good. If a daughter accepts Jesus as her Saviour and Lord or the Sabbath as God's day of rest, her non-Adventist parents are confronted with a new situation to which they have to react in one way or another. We would hope that the experience of a change in their daughter's life would trigger a positive change in their own lives. However, in other cases a change of perspective based on experiences may be detrimental. If experiences and our subjective interpretation of them determine our lives, we may bypass our reasoning powers and give up exercising faith in Scripture as God's Word.

Another issue is the strength of family ties. These can be very helpful. But family ties can also hinder our personal development and prevent us from doing what is right and needed.

1 Kings 15:13 reads, "He [King Asa] also removed Maacah his mother from being queen mother because she had made an abominable image for Asherah. And Asa cut down her image and burned it at the brook Kidron" (ESV).

### I. THE CONTEXT OF 1 KINGS 15

King Asa was king of Judah. The kingdom of Israel had been divided into two kingdoms under his grandfather Rehoboam. Since the division of Israel into two kingdoms, Judah was in apostasy to the Lord. Asa's father Abijam had reigned only three years. He did not follow God. Then came Asa, ruling forty-one years. He brought about a reform in Judah.

It must have been hard for him to choose a way of life so different from that of his father and grandfather. In addition, Maacah, functioning as queen mother, was an influential person and opposed to his belief system. We do not know why Asa turned to the Lord, while his family was involved in idolatry. But we know that he went against the tide and committed himself to the Lord.

This happens also in our days. The Holy Spirit touches the hearts of people. Some respond and become believers, as did Paul in the first century AD and many others later. Christians have been rid-

ded by their family members, rejected, disowned, persecuted, and killed.

### II. THE TEXT

Asa was most likely in a difficult situation. Oftentimes queen mothers were more influential than the king's wife/wives. The new king had to be grateful to his mother,<sup>1</sup> because she had helped him become king among other candidates. But Maacah was practicing open idolatry in an especially offensive way. The image erected through her was most likely worshipped by many people. By violating the Ten Commandments, she not only challenged God but also undermined the king's authority and his plans.

Throughout history people have excused, protected, and even supported their family members even when crimes were committed. The high priest Eli's sons were abusive priests, oppressing others and having sexual relations with women who served at the entrance to the tabernacle. While Eli admonished them, he wrongly did not remove them from office.

The term "nepotism" describes favoritism and partiality toward relatives. Nepotism is well known in politics, business, and even in the religious sphere. But Asa did not tolerate the idolatrous behavior of his mother. He removed her from her sphere of influence because of her apostasy and her bad example to the people. This was a courageous action. The short record of his life in 1 Kings 15 includes this incident. It is considered so important that it was reported. But by stressing this action, the biblical record indicates that in many other cases this was not so. Ahab did not stand up to his wife Jezebel but succumbed to her evil influence. King Herod did not dare to refuse the petition of Herodias' daughter to have John the Baptist beheaded. Yet King Asa stood up to the queen mother as the cause of the Lord was too important.

### III. APPLICATION

#### A. We and Our Families

The message of this text is clear: God has priority. He comes first. Family ties are important (1 Tim 5:8). God established the family. Families are the foundation of society and need our support and love. So, should we care for and treasure our immediate and our extended family? Certainly. But should we make ourselves dependent on our family when it comes to our relationship with Jesus, faith, beliefs, and Christian lifestyle? Definitely

not! God comes first. If our family disregards God's will, we do not give in. We do not bend justice. We do not promote our own people. But we love them deeply.

According to Jesus, if we love father or mother, son or daughter more than Him, we are not worthy of Him. And if we have left our family for Jesus' sake, we will receive much more and "inherit eternal life" (Matt 19:29, ESV). Jesus comes first.

#### B. We and Our Experiences

This brings us to the other and related issue, our personal experiences. Experiences are important for our Christian walk. Who would like to miss the joy of an answered prayer, divine intervention in great danger, and the many little and big incidents that tell us that God cares for us? But not all experiences are good. There are tragedies in our lives, our community, and society. There are also experiences that may lead to completely wrong conclusions—for example, arriving at prejudices against certain people groups.

Although experiences are an important part of our lives, they cannot be our yardstick. They need to be evaluated. And the same experience can be interpreted differently by different people. We need a standard that allows us some kind of objective evaluation. We believe this standard is the Word of God, the Bible.

We rely on God's Word. If experiences challenge our practice and beliefs and this is supported by Scripture, we must change our thinking and lifestyle. If experiences challenge our practice and beliefs and this is not supported by Scripture, we must follow the Bible.

Jesus was clear on this issue: "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17, ESV). The Lord comes first—always—as does His Word.

#### CONCLUSION

Let us remember Asa who removed Maacah, his mother, from being queen mother because she served other gods. Let us be courageous and stand for what is true, even with family members. Let us not condone evil, but still love the persons involved in it and respect those with whom we must disagree on clear teachings of Scripture. ED

<sup>1</sup> Or grandmother, 1 Kings 15:2.

**Ekkehardt Mueller**, ThD, DMin, is a retired associate director of the Biblical Research Institute at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, MD, USA.



## Washed

How do we do our laundry? Typically, we use clean water and some detergent. We would not attempt to use engine oil, grape juice, hot chocolate, or blood to get the laundry clean. The use of these liquids would be disastrous.

Revelation 7:14 is a wonderful and yet paradoxical text. After one of the twenty-four elders around God's throne asked John, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come" (Rev 7:13),<sup>1</sup> John answered, "My lord, you know." The elder responded, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev 7:14, NAU).

### I. CONTEXT

Our text is part of the vision of the seven seals (Rev 4:1–8:1), which allows us to look into the heavenly world that describes earthly developments from the first century AD to God's future kingdom of glory. Revelation 7 answers the question of who will be able to stand at Christ's second coming (6:17).

Revelation 7:9–17 looks at the time after the parousia. The people of God have come out of the great tribulation and now worship and serve God in the heavenly sanctuary, experiencing peace, satisfaction, comfort, and joy. Wearing the white robes of conquerors, they praise God the Father and Jesus Christ for their redemption. But how did salvation come about?

### II. ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

#### A. They Have Washed Their Clothes and Made Them White in the Blood of the Lamb

Those who are saved have washed their robes in blood. The detergent is the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7:14).

(1) According to Scripture, clothes got dirty—by diseases (Lev 13:6; 14:8–9), carcasses (Lev 11:25), and sacrificial animals (Lev 16:26). Washing was necessary. Israel at Mount Sinai had to wash their clothes before their divine encounter (Exod 19:10). In the Old Testament such clothes were real garments; in Revelation they are symbolic robes. Revelation 7:14 assumes that we are sinners, needing cleansing and liberation from sin.

(2) Making clothes white describes the same process as washing does. But the whitening highlights not only the concept of purity, but also victory. No wonder that the people of God walk with Jesus dressed in white (Rev 3:4–5), that the martyrs are given white robes (6:11), and that the great multitude appears in white attire (19:9).

(3) But how can blood be used as a cleaning agent, and how can a lamb be a shepherd (Rev 7:17)? It is a paradox. True believers are

already saved here, but are not yet fully saved. The paradox here describes salvation as an ironic victory.

(4) Revelation 1:5 states that Jesus "has freed us from our sins by his blood." Because "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Heb 9:22), the divine Lord became a human being and died on the cross to provide forgiveness (1 John 1:7), freedom from the enslavement of sin, and eternal life. Salvation through death! It also implies that we cannot save ourselves but depend on the merits of Jesus to stand "before God in the spotless robes of Christ's . . . righteousness."<sup>2</sup>

(5) While Revelation 1:5 emphasizes Jesus' initiative, Revelation 7:14 indicates that it is also our responsibility to wash our clothes. However, neither can we save ourselves and make ourselves stand before God's throne (7:15) nor can we contribute to our salvation. It is still Jesus who saves, independent of human works. But we must accept the divine gift.

(6) Those whose robes are washed, belong to God, and participate in Jesus' victory, having been separated from sin and Satan. They have prayed with David (Ps 51:1–7) and rely on the divine promise given already to Isaiah (Isa 1:18). Nevertheless, salvation is a paradox and a miracle in many ways.

#### B. The Parallel Text in Revelation 22:14

A parallel text is found in Revelation 22:14 according to important manuscript witnesses:<sup>3</sup> "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates." While other people's lives end in eternal death (Rev 22:15), the believers enjoy eternal life.

The symbolic washing of their robes in the blood of the Lamb will have tremendously positive results. However, there is one important difference between Revelation 7:14 and 22:14. In Revelation 7:14 the meaning is a once-for-all washing: "they *washed* their robes." According to Revelation 22:14, believers "*are washing* their robes," which obviously refers to repeated washings. Both aspects are important. There is an initial and basic washing of our robes quite likely associated with baptism: Jesus provides those, who ask Him, with His merits, forgiveness, and eternal life.

There is also the continual washing of our robes: Those who have experienced Jesus' marvelous gift will follow Him in love and obedience. They allow His character to be developed in them, repenting of their sins that still may occur and renewing their covenant with Him by daily committing their lives to Him.

#### C. Summary

So, the washing in Jesus' blood points to justification and sanctification, our faith in

Christ and our faithfulness to Him, our assurance through Him, and our witness of Him.

### III. APPLICATION

Revelation 7:14 provides three insights for us:

#### A. The Issue of the Paradox

The first has to do with the paradox of salvation. Why does God speak in such a paradox? Paradoxes catch attention and help us remember. In addition, this specific paradox was foreshadowed by the Old Testament sacrificial system, in which an innocent creature died for a guilty person to provide forgiveness. Furthermore, washing dirty clothes in Jesus' blood is to show us: what is impossible for humans is possible by God.

#### B. It Is All about Jesus

The text focuses on Jesus more than on believers. Only He can save and transform us. That the focus is on Jesus is evident in the context. The four living beings and the twenty-four elders before the throne sing, "Worthy are You . . . for You were slain and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth" (Rev 5:9–10, NAU). The millions of angels sing, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing" (5:12, NAU). And the great multitude does not mention their troubles or achievements but cries out, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (7:10, NAU).

#### C. It Is About Us Making a Decision

Finally, the text calls us to a decision. Will we wash our robes and make them white in the blood of the Lamb? Will we continue to wash them to maintain eternal life in the presence of God? I would invite us to make or renew such a decision.

### CONCLUSION

The redeemed "have washed their robes . . . in the blood of the Lamb." So, do not forget: What is impossible with us is possible with God—our salvation. It is all about Jesus who died for us to grant us everlasting life. It is also about our decision for Jesus and life with Him. ED

<sup>1</sup> All biblical quotations are from the ESV, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing, 1979), 106.

<sup>3</sup> While some manuscripts speak about the "washing in blood, others talk about "doing His commandments." The one used here seems to be preferable.

**Ekkehardt Mueller**, ThD, DMin, is a retired associate director of the Biblical Research Institute at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, MD, USA.

## Eclipsing Joy?

Humans are longing for and seeking joy. Many advertisements focus on joy. There is “Joy Assisted Living,” “Digital Joy,” the “Joy of Travel.” While humans are hungry for joy, life is often devoid of it.

The political, economic, and social situation in this world and the burdens of life can eclipse joy in our lives. Hunger and homelessness are rampant in many parts of the world. Pandemics, natural disasters, and global climate change threaten us. How can people rejoice?

Our own burdens can also rob us of joy: illnesses, financial problems, challenges at the workplace or in marriage and family, lack of the meaning of life, extreme loneliness despite social media, our own inadequacies, and indifferent and violent behavior of others.

Where is the joy of Christian life when everything and everyone seems to eclipse it?

### I. JOY IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

The Gospel of Luke is the Gospel of joy: joy is found repeatedly in Christ’s birth narrative (e.g., Luke 1:47; 2:10). Even when Christians are suffering for Christ’s sake, they can rejoice because their “reward is great in heaven” (6:22–23).<sup>1</sup> The seventy disciples should rejoice that their names were recorded in heaven. Jesus Himself rejoiced (10:20–21). People rejoice over the glorious things done by Jesus (13:17). Joy is expressed six times in Luke 15 when the lost are found again. Zacchaeus rejoices that Jesus wants to come to his home, and the crowd of His disciples rejoices during Jesus’ triumphal entry (19:6, 37). Finally, Christ’s followers are filled with joy when they encounter the resurrected Christ. After His ascension they return “to Jerusalem with great joy” (24:41, 52).

#### A. Joy in Jesus’ Birth Narrative

Luke opens Jesus’ birth narrative with the birth of John the Baptist. Serving in the temple, Zacharias was told of the birth of his son: “You will have **joy** and **gladness**, and many will **rejoice** at his birth” (1:14, emphasis added). Why? John would be filled with the Holy Spirit and would bring about reformation. Best of all, John would prepare the way for Jesus.

Mary was told she would have a child by supernatural conception, the Son of God. While she was at Elizabeth’s place, the baby to be born, in Elizabeth’s womb, leaped for joy, because the child with whom Mary was pregnant was the Lord. Elizabeth’s expression of joy sparked Mary’s hymn of joy in which joy and salvation are connected. We rejoice because salvation has come through Jesus.

Later an angel appeared to the shepherds, telling them, “Do not be afraid; for be-

hold, I bring you good news of great **joy** . . . there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (2:10–11, NAU, emphasis added). All the people of Luke’s birth narrative had to bear their burdens. But they rejoiced.

#### B. The Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55)

Mary’s song of joy contains features that may help us today when we struggle with difficult situations and may tend to fall in depression or despair. Mary’s lot would not be easy. Her question to Gabriel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (1:34), indicates that she was not ignorant of biology. She may also have envisioned problems with Joseph, her fiancé, and her own reputation. She would be an outcast of society. People must have assumed that she got pregnant out of wedlock. Jesus was later told, “We were not born of fornication” (John 8:41, NAU), implying, “But you were.” But Mary accepted the privilege of being Jesus’ mother, along with the serious downsides as well.

This means we can react to the same situation differently: acceptance or rejection. Mary rejoiced in God. The secret of her joy is found in her faith in God. This is the crucial point: trust in the Lord leads to joy. Mary gives two reasons for exalting God and rejoicing: First, God has been gracious to her in her lowliness. Second, God has done great things for her and those fearing Him.

#### C. Jesus’ Parables in Luke 15

In Luke 15 Jesus does not play by the rules of the Pharisees. He mingles with people they would shun and call “sinners.” Jesus tells them three parables.

In the first parable a sheep is lost. The sheep needs to be sought and helped home. Although the shepherd still has ninety-nine sheep, he seeks the lost, the “sinner,” and finds it. There is joy in heaven when the sinner is found.

In the second parable a woman loses one of ten coins and searches until she has found it. When it is found there is joy by the angels, not by the Pharisees.

Finally, a father with two sons loses one son who walks away and squanders all his inheritance, finding himself in a dehumanizing situation. Remembering his father, he returns home repentantly and is received by his father with open arms. But the older brother, representing the Pharisees, gets lost at home. He does not participate in the joyful celebration of his brother’s return. So, the father leaves the feast and invites him to join.

One message of the parables is: salvation is more important than all earthly endeavors. If you are not saved, you are not at home; and if you are not at home there is no real joy. A second message is: Jesus is in the

business of saving people. In some cases, He takes the initiative; in others He waits so that people come to their senses and repent. The result is joy by the one who was searching, joy in heaven, and joy of the person who has been saved.

In addition, the concept of rejoicing with someone else occurs. The shepherd and the woman called friends to rejoice with them. Rejoicing with someone else enhances our own joy.

### II. JOY FOR US

In a time of distress and challenge to biblical teachings, of consumerism, relativism, and extreme individualism, of maneuvering for power and status, of social media encroaching on our time with God, of the collapse of moral values, and of our struggle with our own limitations, we remember the great joy described in Luke’s Gospel!

Max Lucado distinguishes contingent joy from courageous joy:

Contingent joy says . . . I’ll be happy when I have a new house or a new spouse . . . when I’m healed or when I’m home. Contingent joy depends upon the right circumstance. Since we cannot control every circumstance, we set ourselves up for disappointment. . . . Contingent joy turns us into wounded people. . . . Courageous joy sets the hope of the heart on Jesus and Jesus alone. Since no one can take your Christ, no one can take your joy.<sup>2</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Jesus lived among us, is with us, and cares for us. He saves us, forgives our sins, and builds His kingdom in all the mess that surrounds us. He has His faithful people in bleak times, the Zachariases and Elizabeths, Marys and Josephs, the shepherds, and hopefully you and me, people who rejoice and rejoice with others.

So, do not allow your joy to be eclipsed! Trust the Lord and “greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory” (1 Pet 1:8, NAU). Do not focus on evil and problems; focus on the Lord of your salvation. This does not deny that we may need to seek help from fellow humans in certain situations. But there is good news of great joy! We are invited to meet the Messiah. Rejoice!

ED

<sup>1</sup> All biblical quotations are from the ESV, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> Max Lucado, “Contagious Joy” (February 2016), accessed February 3, 2023, <https://maxlucado.com/contagious-joy/>.

**Ekkehardt Mueller**, ThD, DMin, is a retired associate director of the Biblical Research Institute at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, MD, USA.



# Sharing the Three Angels' Messages

The Three Angels' Messages are specific messages in Revelation 14:6–12, relevant for the end time. An important question is: how should the messages be shared once their content is at least partially understood by the presenters? This question is related to another one: if the messages are to go to all people, this would include people from all walks of life, from all cultures, with very different worldviews, and from all world religions, as well as people who are secular and claim to be nonreligious, atheist, and agnostic. How would, for instance, a Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, or an adherent to indigenous religions understand the messages? A simple reading or narration of Revelation 14:6–12 may not mean much to them and may even be unintelligible. There are some basic questions to be answered before dealing with the identification of Babylon, the beast, the image of the beast, etc. Who is the God of the Three Angels' Messages, bearing in mind that some audiences will even doubt the existence of any god? Other key questions are: What is His character? How does He relate to humans and what are humans? Why is it important to “fear” Him? How can He torment forever those who have not decided to worship Him? Does He want humans to follow Him because He is powerful and will otherwise destroy them? Who is the Lamb? Obviously, the messages need to be unpacked.

## To fear God, give Him glory, and worship Him presupposes people to have or receive some basic knowledge about who this God is.

But before that happens those who are willing to share or proclaim them must have appropriated them, understood them at least partially, and must be living what they are going to present. The messages are not only about doctrines, but also about a way of life, practical Christianity. Here are some suggestions:

First, the three messages are primarily about God and Jesus. Proclaiming the Three Angels' Messages would mean explaining who God is and who Jesus is. People would need to know about God's character, about His authority, and about His sphere of influence. People would especially need to be introduced to Jesus because in Him God has become tangible and has revealed Himself. To fear God, give Him glory, and worship Him presupposes people to have or receive some basic knowledge about who this God is. Otherwise, they may just hate or ignore Him.

Second, since the first message is introduced by the mention

of the "eternal gospel," people need to know what the gospel is, why the gospel is necessary, and how they can be saved. Humanity's problem with sin, their desperation, and their apparent meaninglessness of life must be addressed. The plan of salvation may need to be explained, remembering that other people may not have the same concept of sin and forgiveness and eternal life—some may not even desire the latter—as we do. Obviously, the gospel is not only a means for people to reach a situation of unending life or to escape the circle of reincarnation. Salvation is about reconciliation with God and with a life in intimate fellowship with the One who is Life.

Third, in this context creation can be addressed. The biblical God is alone Creator in the comprehensive sense and the One who is able to create *ex nihilo*. He is the Author of creation and the Owner of creation who has created beings as an expression of His love and His desire to communi-

cate with His creatures, bless them, and allow them to participate in His goodness. Almost all other theological insights rest on the fact that God decided to create. Thus God's creative act has provided a model for people to live in healthy relationships with Him and each other.

Fourth, the Three Angels' Messages refer to God's commandments, including the Sabbath. God's law needs to be explained—its purpose, its benefits, its relation to salvation. While the Sabbath is very important, the context of God's central vision points also to the first commandments of the Decalogue—no other god, no image of God, no blasphemy of God—and also to the second table—no killing, no deception and falsehood, no adultery (even if understood primarily in a metaphorical sense in Revelation), no coveting. All of the Ten Commandments need to be maintained and taught—not only the Sabbath commandment, but especially the Sabbath commandment.

Fifth, the problem of evil powers should be presented—at least in a rudimentary way. This includes the great controversy, which is expressed most clearly in Revelation 12–14. It also permeates the Three Angels' Messages.

# Revelation

seven golden lampstands, <sup>13</sup>and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," <sup>14</sup>dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his waist. <sup>15</sup>His head and hair were white like wool, and his eyes were like fire. <sup>16</sup>His feet were like bronze glowing with fire, and his voice was like the

**Revelation does not end with chapter 14 or chapter 20. It does not conclude with so-called negative aspects of judgment—namely, the eradication of the wicked. It tells us about a wonderful future, about a new heaven and new earth, a new Jerusalem, the end of all pain and turmoil, and about direct fellowship with God.**

The issue is not only that some powers are opposed to God almost from their very beginning, but also that there are powers who started out as God-honoring movements but turned their back more and more on the Creator and Redeemer God.

Sixth, divine judgment is also important. What does it mean? Why does God judge? How does He do that? What will the outcome be? Judgment touches also on the question of theodicy, especially when people expect the just God to intervene when they deem fit, while God does not seem to do anything.

Seventh, the Three Angels' Messages are not only about head knowledge, although cognitive truth is very important. People need to be challenged to turn to God, follow Jesus, and love the Lord with all their heart, soul, and mind and their neighbor as themselves. This has very practical implications and will lead to a lifestyle which in the positive sense singles out people as disciples of Christ.

One of the questions to be raised is whether the Three Angels' Messages replace all other messages in Revelation or other places of Scripture—for instance, Jesus' Great Commission in Matthew 28—or if they are additional and final messages that call humanity to make a decision for God. It is suggested that the Three Angels' Messages, while under-

stood as the final messages, are nevertheless built on other messages and need to be understood through these, due to their brevity. We also acknowledge that they do not cover all areas of biblical truth and when it comes to eschatology they focus mainly on the judgment of evildoers.

But John's Apocalypse does not stop there. It has more to say. For instance, Christ's second coming is mentioned very frequently in Revelation, but it is not found in the Three Angels' Messages. While creation occurs in Revelation 14:7, it is the Genesis creation—that which was made (Rev 14:7)—not directly the new creation which *will* be made. In this respect creation looks back to the past because the original creation was and is foundational to whatever follows for humanity. But it does not speak of the creation which will be established and will surpass everything of the past, especially through the direct presence of God and His throne among redeemed humanity.

Revelation does not end with chapter 14 or chapter 20. It does not conclude with so-called negative aspects of judgment—namely, the eradication of the wicked. It tells us about a wonderful future, about a new heaven and new earth, a new Jerusalem, the end of all pain and turmoil, and about direct fellowship with God. This must also be proclaimed. The Three Angels' Messages talk

about God, creation, redemption, and judgment. Judgment may appear threatening to some people and as a negative motivation to “fear God.” The positive motivation is the concept of salvation in the Three Angels' Messages and the new creation in communion with the God of love, holiness, and justice which is proclaimed in Revelation 21–22.

## CONCLUSION

The Three Angels' Messages have to be understood in an end-time context of extreme pressure on the saints, even in a context of persecution and martyrdom. In such a context they make a lot of sense. Judgment can and should also be understood as a positive event because it is linked to God's justice. This justice will overturn unjust verdicts of earthly courts. It will make things right. Perpetrators will not be able to get away with all the evil and bloodshed they have brought on humanity. And the problem of sin will be solved once and for all. God's astonishing plan of salvation will be finished.

To be warned of a judgment to come and to be encouraged to reconsider one's life, to make things right with God, and to accept the gift of eternal life is of inestimable value. So, the Three Angels' Messages are a call to the world's population and to all sincere people to turn to God and come out of fallen Babylon, even if one was not aware of being part of it. Therefore, listen to the eternal gospel of salvation, fear God, give glory to Him, and worship the Creator and Saviour, the One who loves us (Rev 14:6–7; 1:4–8). **ED**

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**Ekkehardt Mueller**, ThD, DMin, is a retired associate director of the Biblical Research Institute at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, MD, USA.



SCAN FOR AUDIO

# What Do Ancient Tombstones Tell Us About Deaconesses?

**Ute** E. Eisen presents some interesting discoveries from the inscriptions written on the tombstones of female deacons or deaconesses during the fourth through the seventh centuries. In this statement, he predates proof of their existence in Asia Minor to the second century. Eisen says, “The number of surviving inscriptions concerning women deacons in Asia Minor is very extensive. Very early, 1 Tim 3:11 and Pliny, Ep. X, 96, 8 attest the presence of women deacons in Asia Minor in the second century. The abundant epigraphic evidence suggests the continuity of an office of women deacons in Asia Minor from the very beginning.”<sup>1</sup>

Based upon inscriptions written on the tombstones of the husbands of female deacons or deaconesses, it can be concluded that their holding the office of deaconess was not dependent upon their husbands being deacons. A woman deacon named Basilissa dedicated an inscription to her deceased husband and his family. The inscription reads, “The first man of the village, Quintus, son of Heraclius, with his wife Matrona and his children Anicetus and Catilla, all four lie in this grave. The wife of Anicetus, the deacon Basilissa, has erected this pleasant tomb together with her only son Numitorius, who is still an immature child.”<sup>2</sup>



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Three things can be deduced from this inscription. The first thing is that “it is certain that Basilissa was an officeholder in the church, while her husband bears no official title.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the church during the second century did not require women to be married to male deacons in order to serve as female deacons, as some interpret 1 Timothy 3:11. A better interpretation of this Scripture is that these women are women deacons/deaconesses whether or not they were married to male deacons. Another example of this is the “deacon Strategis from Goslu, who together with her son Pankratios dedicated a gravestone to her husband Menneas, her sister-in-law Alexandria, and her son Domnos.”<sup>4</sup>

The second deduction is that women deacons were not in every case required to be virgins. It varied according to regions. Here are two examples of women deacons in Macedonia, the region of Edessa. One of them is a virgin; the other is not. The inscriptions read, “Monument of Agathokleia, the virgin and deacon” and “Monument of the deacon Theodosia and the virgins Aspelia [Aspilia?] and Agathokleia.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, virgins and women deacons were two distinct groups. The family situation of these women in Asia Minor varied. Many of them were wives and mothers, and others were members of monastic orders. However, the family situation of women deacons in the region of Moab was different. In Moab, “none of the women named in the inscriptions is connected with a family of her own [same as] for the male deacons of this region. This points to the probability that the epigraphically attested women deacons of this time and region lived celibate lives, as demanded by Canon 15 of the Council of Chalcedon [451] for all officeholders with the exception of lectors and cantors.”<sup>6</sup>

The third and final deduction is that the women deacons/deaconesses and widows were two distinct groups. John Wijngaards agrees with this assessment. He states, “During the first centuries, however, confusion in terminology and practice remained. In 517 AD the Synod of Epaon speaks of ‘widows whom they call deaconesses.’ Deaconesses are sometimes referred to as ‘widow and deaconess.’ It is likely, however, that the two roles have always been somewhat distinct.”<sup>7</sup>

A few more facts revealed by these ancient tombstones are: all of these women officeholders held the official title of διάκονος or διακόνισσα (“deacon” or “deaconess”). On some of their tombstone inscriptions, the title was abbreviated as διακ or δκ (“deac.” or “dc.”). Also, the inscription on the tombstone of a deacon Maria states that she died at the age of thirty-eight. This indicates that younger women were ordained to the diaconate during the seventh century.<sup>8</sup> Concerning some of the responsibilities carried out by deaconesses, Deacon Maria’s tombstone inscription reads, “Here lies the deacon Maria of pious and blessed memory, who according

to the words of the apostle raised children, sheltered guests, washed the feet of the saints, and shared her bread with the needy. Remember her, Lord, when she comes into your kingdom.”<sup>9</sup> What a rich history today’s deaconesses can be proud of. ED

<sup>1</sup> Ute E. Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 173–174.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>7</sup> John Wijngaards, “The History of Women Deacons,” 3, accessed October 13, 2008, [http://www.womenpriests.org/tradition/deac\\_his.asp](http://www.womenpriests.org/tradition/deac_his.asp).

<sup>8</sup> Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 161.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 164–167.

**Vincent E. White Sr.**, DMin, is a retired pastor and author of *The Twenty-First Century Deacon and Deaconess: Reflecting the Biblical Model*, *The Twenty-First Century Deacon and Deaconess: Reflecting the Biblical Model Workbook*, and *Problem Solvers and Soul Winners: A Handbook for Deacons and Deaconesses*.

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# Can You Hear Me?

## HOW TO HELP THOSE WITH HEARING DIFFICULTIES FEEL LIKE THEY BELONG

**Having** a sense of belonging is important, yet despite the emphasis on inclusion some have been left feeling isolated and excluded. This is true of those who struggle with hearing loss. It is sometimes called an invisible disability. The impact of hearing loss affects all relationships, whether it be in the family or the church. It often affects spoken language, which in turn impacts learning development in children and dementia in older adults. The social well-being of the individual is an important part of spiritual growth and, if not realized, can lead to emotional effects such as loneliness, isolation, depression, and anxiety.<sup>1</sup> A study by the World Health Organization states that the annual cost of unaddressed hearing loss is in the range of \$750–790 billion globally.<sup>2</sup> But while the economic burden is enormous, what cannot be quantified is the personal distress caused by the loss of communication, its effects on education, and the social integration that accompanies it. Studies indicate that the number of people with hearing loss is going to rise in the coming decades.

The question remains for pastors and local church elders, deacons, and deaconesses: How can churches accommodate the needs of members who are deaf or hard-of-hearing?

The first step is to acknowledge that the problem exists. The impact upon relationships within families and the church itself is significant. Once that is recognized, then leaders can begin to build an informed and supportive church environment that



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is both welcoming and inclusive towards those who have difficulty in hearing. Major improvements in assistive listening technology have recently been made. These improvements are a significant help for the hard-of-hearing, especially in crowded areas like churches.

It is important to understand the differences between those who regard themselves as “deaf” and those with a partial hearing loss (commonly referred to as “hard-of-hearing”). The two conditions are entirely different, and a caring church community should know how best to meet the needs of either condition.

### THE HARD-OF-HEARING

Those with partial hearing loss may or may not use hearing aids. In most cases, they can still function within a community with normal hearing, albeit with a higher stress level as they try to follow a normal conversation. Some with profound hearing loss may use sign language as a supplement. Most hard-of-hearing people, however, will avoid using signs or in any way being seen as part of the deaf community.

### THE DEAF

Those who are deaf do not have enough residual hearing to benefit from any amplification technology. Instead, they rely entirely on a visual mode of communication such as sign language. Today, most Western countries recognize sign language for the deaf as being on a par with any other ethnic language and are often entitled to the same government-funded interpreting services as any ethnic language group.

### ASSISTIVE LISTENING DEVICES

Many hearing aid users experience a reduced ability to follow a conversation in noisy places. This

is because microphone technology in hearing aids and implants cannot match the ability of undamaged normal hearing to focus on one voice in a crowd. This is especially true in large halls filled with many people speaking at the same time. The stress level for hard-of-hearing persons attempting to understand and communicate in these circumstances is much higher than for someone with normal hearing. The ideal solution lies in the informed use of assistive listening devices (ALDs).

ALDs are a group of technologies designed to help hard-of-hearing people overcome the reduction of speech clarity experienced in large, people-filled areas like churches. ALDs allow individuals to wirelessly connect to public address systems. This improves the audio and provides better clarity with the background noise largely removed.

There are many ALD systems available on the world market. Wading through the maze of options requires careful research by people with a good knowledge of audio systems and hearing aid technology. Where possible, the expertise of professional audio engineers and/or audiologists can be very helpful. A useful booklet titled *How to Equip Your Church or Venue for People with Hearing Problems*<sup>3</sup> makes it easier for churches to find the system that would work best for them.

### AUDIO LOOPS

One of the earliest and most common ALD systems still in use in many churches and public venues today is the audio loop. Despite increasing redundancy as new technologies emerge, it is still widely promoted by suppliers with vested interests as the assistive listening system of choice. However, audio loops present significant disadvantages in the face

of new hearing aid technologies. Audio loops *only* work with hearing aids or implants fitted with audio loop receivers. But increasingly fewer new model hearing aids are equipped with loop receivers (unless a patient specifically requests it) and therefore, will not work with audio loops.

### A NEW DIRECTION: DIRECT-STREAMING TECHNOLOGY

Hearing aid manufacturers and audiologists today tend to promote new hearing aids fitted with Bluetooth or direct-streaming technology. This new technology enables wireless connection with cell phones, computers, and TVs and eliminates most of the issues associated with electronic interference, variable reception, and “drop-outs” experienced with audio loops.

Typical of new technology ALDs that utilize cell phones is the Listen EVERYWHERE Wi-Fi system from [www.listentech.com](http://www.listentech.com).



The Listen EVERYWHERE system streams audio from in-house sound systems direct to cell phones or tablet computers via a free app. Users can listen via their earbuds or headphones or connect wirelessly to their hearing aids (if equipped with the new direct streaming technology). This system also enables language translation. Other ALD systems that don't use phones are available.<sup>4</sup>

## PROVIDING SERVICES FOR THE DEAF

The following strategies may be helpful for local church leaders:

1. Provide qualified sign language interpreters at centralized churches in urban areas with high concentrations of deaf people.

2. Raise funds to train and employ a Bible worker with fluent sign language skills to work in selected urban areas near churches with interpreted services.

3. Create a long-term goal to establish dedicated signed services for the deaf in a separate room or adjoining building as an annex to a supportive church.

4. Create a scholarship fund to support a suitable person fluent in sign language—particularly a deaf person or couple—to train as a minister to the deaf.

As the World Health Organization has rightly pointed out, “hearing loss cannot and must not

continue to be a silent epidemic.” The need is evident and we must ensure that hindrances to hearing the spoken gospel are removed as much as possible.<sup>5</sup> **ED**

<sup>1</sup> GBD 2019 Hearing Loss Collaborators, “Hearing Loss Prevalence and Years Lived with Disability, 1990–2019: Findings from the Global Burden of Disease Study 2019,” *The Lancet* 397 (2021): 996–1009, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(21\)00516-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)00516-X/fulltext), accessed September 29, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization, “Executive Summary,” in *Global Costs of Unaddressed Hearing Loss and Cost-Effectiveness of Interventions* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2017), <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/254659/9789241512046-eng.pdf>, accessed September 29, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Available at “Deaf & Hard of Hearing Ministry Resources,” Adventist Possibility Ministries, accessed February 3, 2023, <https://www.possibilityministries.org/resources/deaf-ministry-resources/>.

<sup>4</sup> See *How to Equip Your Church or Venue for People with Hearing Problems*.

<sup>5</sup> For further detailed information about ministering to the deaf, see targeted articles at Adventist Possibility Ministries, accessed February 3, 2023, <https://www.possibilityministries.org/ministries/deaf/>.

**Graham Weir**, MA Counsl. (Wash.D.C.), Cert. Aud. (SoA) (Syd.), is a retired hearing rehabilitation specialist with a profound hearing loss since a near-fatal attack of meningitis at the age of eight. He serves on the General Conference Adventist Possibility Ministries Taskforce for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

**Larry R. Evans**, DMin, prior to his retirement in October 2022, was the assistant to the General Conference President for Adventist Possibility Ministries at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, MD, USA.

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# Dealing with Conspiracy Theories

>PART 1

## EDITORIAL NOTE

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

**Conspiracy** theories seem to be flowering these days and have become the focus of much public attention.

While conspiracy theories have always thrived during times of crisis and upheaval, they now seem to be all pervasive in large segments of society and even in some quarters of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Since some 50% of the American population believe in at least one conspiracy theory, chances are high that we will be confronted with this phenomenon in one way or another. This calls for discernment and prudence.

If I am inclined to such thinking, I am probably tempted to see myself to reflect a healthy and natural skepticism, particularly directed toward the common interpretation by the powers that be, in a given society, social context, or what is disseminated by mainstream media. Sometimes this skepticism is also directed toward the established findings of science. Hence, proponents offer alternative and often counterintuitive hypotheses to explain the events of the world. I might even wonder why everyone else seems so blind and deceived. On the other hand, if I am more hesitant about conspiracy thinking, I might be tempted to see followers of such theories in not so positive a light and even might have the impression that some of them are paranoid in their suspicion and fear. The danger I face, then, is to use the phrase “conspiracy theory” in a derogatory sense to discredit people and their ideas as unscientific and flimsy. With this more negative view of people who espouse conspiracy theories, I might think that they never trust anything or rather only trust those claims that fit their preexisting worldview and perspective.

But perhaps even more crucial is the question of what I can do when I notice these preconceptions in my own thinking and how we relate to each other when we are faced with such thinking. To tackle this issue, it seems that we must first understand the difference between real conspiracies and conspiracy theories.

## HOW DOES A CONSPIRACY DIFFER FROM A CONSPIRACY THEORY?

The essential meaning of a conspiracy is “a secret plan made by two or more people to do something that is harmful or illegal.”<sup>1</sup> The English word “conspiracy” is derived from the Latin verb *conspīro/conspirare* and means “to plot/unite,” or “to act in unison,”<sup>2</sup> or “to act in accordance with someone.”<sup>3</sup> A conspiracy, therefore, is never the work of one individual, but always of a group, whether small or large. But here we encounter a conundrum. Actual conspiracies do exist. So how do we differ-



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**But we must keep in mind that Jesus never told His followers to be concerned with “secret” events or conspiracies. Interestingly, all the events Jesus pointed to as signs of the times for His coming were observable.**

entiate between genuine conspiracies and those plots that we usually associate with conspiracy theories? One difference is that in a conspiracy theory a conspiracy no longer must be proven but has become the basic prerequisite for one’s further explanations and thinking. When I no longer carefully evaluate various hypotheses and probabilities, but instead my suspicion and my doubts have become an ideology where no supervisory authority is trusted anymore, a threshold has been crossed. The fact that politicians sometimes lie and corporations at times cheat does not mean every event is the result of tortuous conspiracy. Another difference between real conspiracies and a conspiracy theory is that actual conspiracies are deliberately hidden, real-life actions of people working together for their own malign purposes. Conspiracy theories, in contrast, are deliberately complex and reflect an all-encompassing worldview. Instead of trying to explain one thing, a conspiracy theory attempts to explain everything, discovering connections across domains of human interaction that are otherwise hidden. In doing so, conspiracy theories often oversimplify world events in order to find a scapegoat or an explanation for events that otherwise appear unexplainable or threatening. Furthermore, conspiracies are usually relatively short-term projects, whereas conspiracy theories almost always posit a much larger timeframe over a period of years and decades and even centuries, often on a global scale. Real conspiracies are usually the work of a small group of people,

whereas conspiracy theories involve scenarios where at least dozens but usually far more people are involved. A gigantic deception like the staging of the moon landing or the 9/11 attacks would require hundreds if not thousands of insiders and accessories. But the large number of insiders that are necessary for such a complex plot militates against the reality of their existence because it is virtually impossible to keep the activity of such a large group secret. We also must keep in mind that historical events are complex sets of facts, involving an extremely large number of interacting agents, each of whom has their own set of goals and agendas. This poses a significant problem for conspiracy theories where large-scale plots are presumed. For a conspiracy to be successful all parties would have to set aside their own interests and devote themselves entirely to the service of such a global conspiracy. However, to assume that different groups all act in concert is something which is very unlikely, if not impossible. For this to happen one must assume that human beings can direct the course of history according to their own intentions by linking together disparate phenomena defying all probability. In other words, for conspiracy theories to succeed one must assume that history is plannable. We have to keep in mind, however, what philosopher Karl Popper has aptly argued—namely, that the relevant question when explaining dramatic historical events is not “Who wanted something to happen?” but “Why did things not happen exactly in the way that somebody wanted?”<sup>4</sup>

While there seems to be no single definition of what a conspiracy *theory* is, one expert lists the following three basic criteria that are characteristic: (1) nothing happens by accident, (2) nothing is as it seems, and (3) everything is connected.<sup>5</sup> Wherever these three elements are present, a conspiracy theory is at work that asserts the existence of a plot. This leads us to the question of why some Christians seem to be so attracted to conspiracy theories.

### **WHY ARE SOME CHRISTIANS SUSCEPTIBLE TO CONSPIRACY THEORIES?**

If conspiracy theories encompass the three aspects mentioned previously, one can see why some conservative Christians could easily be seen as being potentially receptive to conspiracy thinking. Seventh-day Adventists and Bible-believing Christians accept the existence of supernatural forces and realities, be they evil (Satan and demons) or good (God and His angels)—something that more liberal theologians and people who accept a naturalistic worldview would deny. According to the Bible, forces between good and evil are at work in this world. They influence kings and political leaders (Rev 13:12–17; 17:2). But we must keep in mind that Jesus never told His followers to be concerned with “secret” events or conspiracies. Interestingly, all the events Jesus pointed to as signs of the times for His coming were observable. We do not have to guess or speculate about them. And we should not be troubled by rumors (Matt 24:6). Jesus called us to be watchful (Matt 24:42; 25:13; 26:41; etc.). In conspiracy theories, however, there is a tendency to link disparate phenomena and connect them in such a way that a grand plot emerges where nothing happens by accident.

Perhaps another reason why some Christians are receptive to such grand conspiracy theories is

that in their thinking events are divinely predetermined and do not happen by accident—even more so for some conservative Christians, who are influenced by Calvinistic theology. Calvin proposed that everything in the spiritual realm is predestined by God.<sup>6</sup> This led Calvin to propose his infamous concept of double predestination, where God predestined from eternity not only those who would be saved, but also those who would be eternally condemned.<sup>7</sup> Such an all-encompassing understanding of predestination can easily lead people to believe that everything in this world is interconnected, and that everything follows a secret, predestined divine plan.

While there is biblical truth to the fact that God knows the future and is in control of world events, and while the Bible acknowledges that there is a great controversy between God and Satan and his evil forces, we must be mindful of some other important biblical perspectives that are equally present in Scripture. Otherwise, we will distort the biblical teaching and by implication also the character of God and reality. First, the Bible also teaches that there is genuine human freedom, which Calvin and Luther denied when it comes to matters of our salvation. Seventh-day Adventists believe that, biblically speaking, we are sufficiently free to choose whether we want to accept God's salvation or not and hence we are responsible for our decisions. Furthermore, according to the Bible, not everything in this world is predetermined. We must take into consideration that sometimes humans do plain stupid things. If there is original sin, then there also exists original stupidity. Otherwise, the existence of sin would have a reason and thus be excusable. We must allow for stupid and accidental things to happen in the course of history. Some of the bad things that happen are not planned. They happen uninten-

tionally. The Bible affirms that some things happen accidentally.<sup>8</sup> In other words, in this world many things happen that are not planned, and not all our plans always work out as planned.

But God's plan to save us will work out and will be successful in the end, the Bible tells us! It is important, therefore, to remember that the Bible, when it speaks about the great controversy between good and evil, always has God's salvific perspective in mind that focuses on the success of God's ultimate salvation for us. The biblical writers are aware of Satan's schemes (Eph 2:2) and his deceptive practices (John 8:44) and they warn us to be alert. But the clear focus of the biblical writers is on God's grace and power to save us and on Jesus Christ as the victor in the controversy between light and darkness. Jesus is the cornerstone of our salvation. Especially the prophetic information in the apocalyptic books of the Bible focuses on Jesus' victory over sin amidst all the intricacies of the evil powers who are at work in this world. Yes, evil forces exist, but when we invent all kinds of conspiracy theories and focus our attention on those negative schemes, we veer off in our focus. Our focus should be on the mighty God of Scripture, who is powerful to save and who is utterly capable and able to deliver us from sin and evil. Our trust should be in God—not in our knowledge of secret conspiracies. Our knowledge of conspiracies and their secret plots will not save us. Only God saves. And despite all that God has revealed to us about the future and the time of the end, we know there will still be an element of surprise in what is going to happen (Matt 24:44). As the prophet Habakkuk indicates about God's declaration of action in our behalf: "I will work a work in your days which you would not believe, though it were told you" (Hab 1:5 NJKV). So, let's remember that the Bible tells

us that the righteous will live by his faith (Hab 2:4; Rom 1:17), not by his knowledge of large-scale conspiracies. Therefore, let us be people who are aware, alert, but not afraid.

In a follow-up article we will look at some practical aspects that can help us not to uncritically fall prey to a conspiracy theory and discuss how I can talk and communicate effectively with people who believe in conspiracy theories. ED

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<sup>1</sup> Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, s.v. "conspiracy," accessed February 3, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conspiracy>.

<sup>2</sup> Latdict, s.v. "conspire, conspirare, conspiravi, conspiratus," accessed February 3, 2023, <https://latin-dictionary.net/definition/13479/conspiro-conspirare-conspiravi-conspiratus>.

<sup>3</sup> Latin Dictionary, s.v. "conspiro," accessed February 3, 2023, <https://www.online-latin-dictionary.com/latin-english-dictionary.php?lemma=CONSPIRO100>.

<sup>4</sup> As quoted in Jovan Byford, "How to Spot a Conspiracy Theory When You See One," The Open University, accessed February 3, 2023, <https://www.open.ac.uk/research/news/how-spot-conspiracy-theory-when-you-see-one>. See also Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, vol. 2, *The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 1962), 93–95, as quoted in Michael Butter, *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 21–22.

<sup>5</sup> Butter, *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster: John Knox, 1960), III.xxiii.7, 955–956. Luther had a similar understanding of predestination, albeit not as pronounced as Calvin.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin himself admits that "the degree is dreadful indeed" (*Institutes*, III.xxiii.7, 955–956) because it fosters a fatalistic mindset. See also Calvin, *Institutes* III.xx.17.

<sup>8</sup> The Bible acknowledges accidental sins—that is, sins that were not planned or intended. Cf. Numbers 35:11, 15 and Joshua 20:3, 9. It also reports incidents where people disguised themselves and suffered the unexpected and accidental consequences of unintentional acts like the shooting of a deadly arrow that hit the disguised King Josiah in 2 Chronicles 35:22–24 and led to his death.

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**Frank M. Hasel**, PhD, is an associate director of the Biblical Research Institute at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, MD, USA.



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# How Is Your Courage?

**Life** is like a roller coaster. Roller coasters have ups and downs and all sorts of banks and turns. Anyone riding one will literally experience their world turning upside down. Life can sometimes feel like that as well. In my family I, Boris, am the only one who loves roller coasters. I was delighted when I discovered that my wife Cheyenne also loves roller coasters. Although we both share the love of this type of mechanical ride, there is one type of ride I am not fond of. In fact, I am terrified of them. Cheyenne, on the other hand, loves them. You may ask, if he loves roller coasters, what kind of ride is it that he is afraid of? The answer is the intimidating and nerve-racking Ferris wheel.

There are many reasons why I dislike Ferris wheels. This past summer I was reminded of all of them during the Berrien County youth fair. Ferris wheels, unless they are built at an amusement park, are never permanent. They get built and taken apart constantly. As a result, I have never had much confidence in their structural integrity, though I must admit I have never seen one fail and I pray I never do. On this occasion, Cheyenne wanted to go on the Ferris wheel. Being a loving husband, I agreed despite my fear. The loading platform was shaking along with my knees right before we boarded. The door to the basket did not have what I would qualify as secured locks on the door. Upon sitting there, I held on to the center post and the side of the basket with all my might, and my fear and nerves started to take control of my actions. Through it all, Cheyenne was calm and did nothing but smile the entire time. She also tried to



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assure me that we would be safe on this ride.

As the wheel turned, I saw how the horizon disappeared beneath my feet. The wind started to sway our basket lightly. Every time the wheel went around, there was the sound of hundreds of unidentified items rolling down the inside of the wheel itself. All these sounds and experiences did nothing more than aggravate my fear. Seeing my distress, Cheyenne lovingly held my hand to help me calm down. It wasn't until I focused on her and not on all the noise that I was able to relax and enjoy my time on that Ferris wheel.

Many people today have a similar experience as mine when it comes to daily life as opposed to being on a Ferris wheel. Noise comes from all around and commands our attention. Our fear in life is aggravated by the noise of politics, global health crisis, economics, and the many challenges that we face in our places of work and with our families. The sound of it all can be so deafening that it renders us unable to see the Creator and Saviour of the world holding our hands, sustaining us in our times of difficulty and need.

This is true of all of those who have experienced the power of the Lord in their lives, such as Elijah. God called His servant in difficult times, according to the biblical record. Ahab was the king of Israel and was not fond of the prophets of Yahweh. Seeing the apostasy of the kingdom drove Elijah to pray that there would be no rain for three and a half years. God sealed the heavens and the drought on the land was severe.

Under those conditions, Elijah issued the challenge against the prophets of Baal that would ultimately be won by Yahweh. On the night of that victory, one would think that Elijah would feel fearless and invincible. God had displayed

His power with such might that there was no doubt that He was the one true God.

It would be fair to say that Elijah had a mountain-top experience, however he was still susceptible to fear. Upon learning about the deaths of Baal's prophets, Jezebel sought to kill Elijah (1 Kgs 19:2). This filled him with fear—so much so that he ran away from Jezebel. His fear and despair drove him to even ask God to take his life (19:4). Why would he ask God to take his life? When fear takes control of our mind and actions, it can drive us to do things that may not make sense. God did not grant Elijah his wish to die. I am thankful that God does not always give us what we pray for. Sometimes we get discouraged because our lives on earth are hard and difficult. We may pray for healing, but God is silent. We may pray for a wayward child to return to the Lord, but nothing happens. We may ask God to provide for us, but He doesn't. We look to God for answers, but He comes to us in ways we do not expect—just like He came to Elijah in the still small voice.

God did not grant Elijah's wish to die. Instead, He gave him food and time to rest (19:5–6). God did not come to Elijah with a great display of power, such as making Jezebel's death threat disappear. When God appeared to Elijah it was not in thunder and lightning or in spectacular manifestations of nature. When the wind destroyed the boulders, the earthquake shook the firmament, and the fire devoured the land with its heat, God was not in them (19:11–12). When life is loud with noise, the solution is not a louder sound. Rather, the solution is changing our focus from our situation to seeing the hand of God still holding on to us.

Elijah was surrounded by many sounds, a death threat, hunger, loneliness, the fire, the wind and

the earthquake. All of these were indeed loud, but none contained what Elijah needed. He found strength and peace in the gentle whisper that followed the fire. When life is at its loudest with the destructive noise of fear, we must remember that through it all Jesus has been with us all the time. God holds our hand. We are not alone. He is with us. He smiles and assures us that we will be safe on this Ferris wheel of a life. His assurance will come even from places we have never imagined.

One Sabbath I was distraught and deeply discouraged with the pressures that come with ministry. After my sermon, a little girl came to me and from her bag she pulled a page from a coloring book. It was signed with her name, and she said, "Pastor, thank you for all you do. I appreciate you a lot and I made this for you! Have a happy Sabbath." What that little girl did, lifted my spirit with words of love and encouragement. This is what God did to Elijah, and this is what He does to us.

Through all the noise God gave me a still small voice that reminded me He was with me. On that terrifying Ferris wheel Cheyenne held my hand to remind me that I was not alone. As she held my hand I changed my focus from the noise of the Ferris wheel and the wind. My eyes were fixed upon her and I found calm. Several revolutions of the wheel went by but now the noise, though still present, no longer had control over my mind. That is what Jesus does for us. Stretch out your hand and hold on to His. ED

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**Joseph Kidder**, DMin, is professor of Christian ministry and discipleship at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Berrien Springs, MI, USA.

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**Boris Reyes**, MDiv, SDA Theological Seminary, Berrien Springs, MI, USA.

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