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ELDER'S DIGEST



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What Will Happen This Year?

Who will be born? Who will die? What catastrophes will occur? What joys will warm and inspire us? For every Adventist, there is the perpetual question, *Will Jesus return this year?* I hope so! But if not, I will continue to joyously wait and simultaneously toil, sharing the everlasting gospel, so that all may be similarly excited about that glorious day.

Recently, I prayerfully reflected upon Bible verses that Adventists know well—possibly too well: “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words” (1 Thess 4:16–18, ESV).

When I reread them and meditated upon them, I was blessed.

Let me ask: Did you read them? Or, when you recognized them, did you just skip or skim through, because you know them so well?

I have read these words countless times—preaching them, bellowing them at evangelistic meetings, sharing them instructionally at Bible studies with prospective disciples, and weaving them into prayers during our family worships. Our kids were required to memorize them, too, for Bible classes at their school, and for a few days these verses were “parroted” around the house. Yes, I’ve heard, read, and recited these words very often—particularly at funerals to tear-streaked faces.

Familiarity changes things. Any significant and spectacular discovery can eventually become well known, common, cliched, depreciated, and even disrespected. We can take some stuff for granted,

like the air we breathe. We don’t really worry about it until it’s not there or so polluted that it’s poisonous. But so often, it’s the common that we need the most because we rely mostly on the familiar.

What troubles me is that it’s not just the familiarity of 1 Thessalonians 4:16–18. Could it be that the second advent of Jesus has become too familiar to *Adventists*? Our denomination is chalking up one anniversary after another, and bicentenaries are within sight. Have we become drowsy, tired, or even fallen asleep as we wait for the Blessed Hope?

No one can live in a state of heightened excitement for a prolonged—much less an indefinite—period. All the virgins in Jesus’ parable of Matthew 25:1–13, both wise and foolish, slept. But have we gone a step further? Having no oil, have we ditched our lamps and given up? Is there a sense of embarrassment that we believe in the literal return of Jesus? Has the wait not just affected our attentiveness, but also messed with our actual belief in the return of Jesus?

We haven’t been waiting that long, actually. Cumulatively, Adventists—believers in the return of Jesus—have been waiting less than two thousand years. I’m sure we all know of someone who has lived a hundred years. If you had twenty centenarians and placed their lives sequentially, their collective lifespans would take you back to a time prior to Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan in AD 27. In a modest-sized congregation of fifty people, where the average age of the attendees is forty, for example, the cumulative number of years lived by that congregation is two thousand. Two thousand years is not a long time in the whole scheme of history. And none of us have been asked to wait longer than a lifetime—and a lifetime is rather short, is it not?

“. . . This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11, ESV). Now is not the time to jettison our belief and trust in our Saviour, Jesus! Keep and treasure your faith!

ED



ANTHONY R. KENT | General Conference Associate Ministerial Secretary



SCAN FOR AUDIO

Reaching Jewish Hearts

NEW SERIES INTRODUCTION

In a cooperative venture with Adventist Mission, *Elder's Digest* is delighted to bring you a special series of eight articles outlining how Seventh-day Adventists can share the Three Angels' Messages with important specific people groups.

WHY AND HOW A JEWISH MINISTRY?

As Seventh-day Adventists, we are to herald the need to prepare for the second coming. It is important that Jewish people have a special place in our message. Our mission is described in Isaiah 40:3–5: “A voice cries out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of ADONAI, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley will be lifted up, every mountain and hill made low, the rough ground will be a plain and the rugged terrain smooth. The glory of ADONAI will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together.’ For the mouth of ADONAI has spoken” (Isa 40:3–5, TLV).¹ In Adventist circles this text describes the Adventist mission as a movement that should announce the second coming of Jesus. Indeed, even though the New Testament applies this text to John the Baptist, we must recognize that “the glory of ADONAI” in verse 5 will be fulfilled only at the second coming. Thus, this text has a double application: at the first coming and at the second coming. This is why we believe there should



be a “forerunner”—a group who will proclaim the second coming in advance. Adventists have believed from the very early stages of the Adventist movement that we are the ones to proclaim this message—the “John the Baptist” of the time of the end.

However, if we look carefully, we find this section of Isaiah 40 does not begin with verse 3, but with verse 1: “‘Comfort, comfort My people,’ says your God. Speak kindly to the heart of Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed. For she has received from ADONAI’s hand double for all her sins” (Isa 40:1–2). Thus, in preparing the second coming of Jesus we should seek to “comfort God’s people.” In Romans 11:1 Paul asks the question, “God has not rejected His people, has He?” It is clear that in Romans 9 to 11 Paul is speaking about Israel according to the flesh, and he still calls it “His people”—meaning “God’s people.” When reaching Jews, it is not the time to accuse them of killing or rejecting Jesus, but rather to comfort them, to “speak kindly to the heart of Jerusalem” to tell them that “her iniquity has been removed.” It is important to remind them of God’s love for them. In God’s plan, the church has not replaced Israel! That is why Paul continues to say “His people” when he speaks about Israel. We should therefore manifest the same love toward them that God has for Israel.

While the New Testament applies Isaiah 40 to John the Baptist, Jesus also applies the text of Malachi 4:5 to John the Baptist: “Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and terrible day of ADONAI” (Mal 3:23, TLV). Jesus says,

“I tell you that Elijah already came; and they didn’t recognize him. . . . Then the disciples understood that He was speaking to them about John the Immerser” (Matt 17:12–13). If we are the John the Baptist of the end time, we should also be the “Elijah” of the end time. He also announces the coming of the Messiah, but in a special way: “He will turn the hearts of fathers to the children, and the hearts of children to their fathers” (Mal 3:24, TLV, cf. Mal 4:6). Let us remember that this text is a symbolic text, not a literal one: the Elijah in Malachi 4 is not the literal Elijah who went to heaven in a chariot of fire; this text represents John the Baptist and also the church at the second coming. Thus, the fathers and the children should also be understood as symbolic representations. Since another entity will not arise to replace the church, this means the “children” represent the church and the “fathers” represent their ancestors, which means Israel. In fact, the mission of the messenger in Malachi 4 is the same mission as the messenger in Isaiah 40. According to Isaiah 40 the messenger should comfort Israel, and according to Malachi 4 he should “turn the hearts of fathers to the children,” which means reconciling Israel with the church. It is obvious that since Israel has suffered so much from the hands of the church or Christians during the last nineteen centuries (anti-Semitism, crusades, inquisitions, pogroms, expulsions, Holocaust, etc.), if we do not work on this reconciliation—even asking for forgiveness—Jews will never agree to read the New Testament or consider that Jesus could be the Messiah of Israel. The actions of the church have been so awful that they prevent Jews from think-

ing that this “Jesus” of the church could be a good Messiah to Jews, one who loves and saves.

“METHOD” TO REACH JEWS

Witnessing to Jews is important in our mission. Ellen G. White affirms this: “God expects His messengers to take particular interest in the Jewish people whom they find in all parts of the earth.”² We should recognize that we have a great debt of gratitude toward the Jews. Paul expresses this gratitude when he confesses, “For I would pray that I myself were cursed, banished from Messiah for the sake of my people—my own flesh and blood, who are Israelites” (Rom 9:3-4). This is the true spirit in which we should approach this ministry.

Paul also expresses why we must go to them and why we should have a feeling of gratitude toward Jews: “To them belong the adoption and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Torah and the Temple service and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs—and from them, according to the flesh, the Messiah, who is over all, God, blessed forever. Amen” (Rom 9:4–5). Paul is speaking in the present tense, which means that even after the death of Jesus and His rejection by the leaders of the Jewish nation, there are still those to whom belong all the spiritual gifts God gave to Israel for all of humanity: to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the Torah, the temple service, the promises, the patriarchs—and from them, the Messiah. Every spiritual blessing belongs to the Jewish people, and if we can claim these things as Adventists, it is because we received everything from them.

We must first build a friendship that is so strong that they trust us, and when they go to consult their rabbis they will prefer our interpretation, just because they have learned to trust us, and because of our prayers.

Friendship is crucial in Jewish evangelism, but it must be respectful friendship, knowing that our Jewish friends can teach us many things about the Bible, its transmission, and its original meaning. In this context, we should be careful not to go too fast. While we have legitimate reasons to say to them that Jesus is the Messiah they are waiting for, we must also remember that for each text we claim is a messianic text, their rabbi will likely have an alternate explanation. For example: some suggest that the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 is not a personal Messiah (the word “Messiah” is not in the text) but is about Israel who has been called in the previous chapters the “servant of God”; Daniel 9 is not about the Messiah, but an anointed one who has been killed centuries before. At the beginning of our relationship with our Jewish friends, they will prefer the rabbis’ interpretation over our interpretation. That is why we should not go too fast in doctrinal presentations. We must first build a friendship that is so strong that they trust us, and when they go to consult their rabbis they will prefer our interpretation, just because they have learned to trust us, and because of our prayers. The Lord can then work in their heart to show them what is truth.

We should also have gratitude toward the Jews because they were the first to spread the biblical messages of monotheism and even the gospel. Let us not forget that

the apostles, the first gospel messengers, and almost all the writers of the New Testament were Jews. Jesus was born as a Jew and died as a Jew. He was a faithful Jew, exactly as Jews try to be faithful to God in our days.

When I was a pastor in France, a local church was running a radio program. Since I was already motivated to witness to Jews, I went to the local synagogue and introduced myself to the rabbi as a pastor of the local Seventh-day Adventist Church. I explained that I wanted to develop a radio program discussing the Bible with him. He was not enthusiastic, as he had never spoken on the radio before. I encouraged him, saying that our program would be simple—just a talk show between him and me on the Torah text that was being read that Shabbat. He agreed, and we ran this program together for many years. I did not try to influence him in any obvious way to accept Jesus, but in all our conversations on the program I included comments demonstrating that we can discover the Messiah even through the texts of Moses. Of course, he knew that I was born a Jew, and the fact that I was a pastor intrigued him. One day he asked me, “Richard, I know most of the things Christians say about Jesus, but I want to hear from you, as a Jew, who is Jesus for you? How can you believe in Him?” By this time, I felt that we were friends and, while being respectful of his function as a rabbi,

I felt that he was ready to hear the truth about Jesus. We had many meetings together, and in everything I said I carefully showed how all of this was consistent with his Jewish knowledge. Progressively, his understanding became clearer, and the light came to his mind. After four years of friendship, he was ready for retirement and organized a party in his synagogue to say goodbye to his congregation. There in the courtyard of the synagogue, he confessed to me that he had accepted Jesus.

The relationship and friendship we might have with a Jew is not the same as we might have with anybody else. It is not a matter of giving a Jew twenty or thirty Bible studies and then baptizing him because he intellectually understands the material. To be engaged in Jewish ministry is a lifetime ministry. It is to build such a strong relationship and friendship that your Jewish friend would invite you to eat with him and his family and would come to eat in your home in spite of all the kosher specifications he has. It is so strong a friendship that your Jewish friend would believe you more than his rabbi. It is so strong a friendship that all the biblical truth you share with him would not only be intellectual truth, but truth that transforms his life and guides him to the One who says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life! No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6). ED

¹ All biblical quotations are from the Jewish-friendly Bible translation, *Tree of Life Version*, unless otherwise noted.

² Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 381.

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EDITORIAL
INTRODUCTION

This article is the first in a new four-part series on ministering to those with mental health issues.



SCAN FOR AUDIO

Ministering to Those in Despair

It is said that if you have never experienced depression yourself, you cannot fully understand the despair, darkness, and depth of it. Someone who most likely did experience it, was the apostle Paul. Sharing openly and honestly with the church in Corinth about his struggles, he writes, “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself” (2 Cor 1:8, NIV). When I, as a psychiatrist, read this statement by the great apostle, it seems to me that he might have been experiencing depression and thoughts of death. The challenges and problems were overwhelming, and depression was the result.

Reading the stories in the Bible, it seems like several others also experienced it. We know from church history, including Adventist church history, that many great men and women at times were afflicted with depression. Depression may truly happen to anyone, saints and sinners alike. It is a common response when faced with some of the harsh realities of this world. In Paul’s case the stressors were identifiable. For others they might not be. But depression is a serious matter no matter what. In this article, I will share with you what you ought to know about depression, so that whether or not you have experienced it yourself, you may help yourself and others going through this valley of darkness.

WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

The word “depression” indicates that something is pushed down. When someone suffers from a depressive disorder, what is pushed down is their mood, interests, and energy. We may all feel sad and emotionally drained when bad things happen. That is a normal, appropriate, and healthy response to negative events that occur to all of us in life. But depression is much more than that.

In depression, we may feel sad, angry, and distressed about almost everything—often, most of all about ourselves, who we are, and life itself. The self-criticism, self-judgment, and even self-contempt are especially heavy burdens to carry. We may lose interest in whatever used to give us joy and pleasure. We may feel exhausted and tired without having done anything. And, even though we rest, we cannot recover strength and energy.

Depression is therefore a serious medical illness that negatively affects how we think, feel, and act. It makes it difficult to work, love, and play as we otherwise would have the potential to do. It is emotionally painful, and severe cases may be so painful that people give up on life. Depression is a leading cause of death by suicide.

WHO STRUGGLES WITH DEPRESSION?

All around the world, in every nation and culture, many people struggle with depression. Right now, almost three hundred million people are suffering from a depressive disorder. It affects all kinds of people—any gender, any age, any financial status, any race and ethnicity, any religion. Depression is so common that many

of us will experience it at some point in life. All of us may know someone who is depressed—someone in our family, a friend, a neighbor, a colleague. Unfortunately, many suffer from depression alone without telling anyone and without getting any help, sometimes even without knowing it themselves. The ones who have depression truly suffer. They need and deserve compassion and support from family, friends, and the church community.

WHAT CAUSES DEPRESSION?

Though the symptoms may be similar, each person’s pathway down into depression is unique and often complex. To recover and heal from depression, it may be necessary to understand what caused the depression in the first place. There are four important dimensions to our lives: the biological, psychological, social, and spiritual. Excessive stress in these aspects of our lives can push us down. Let us look closer at each, as they are all relevant to the course of depression.

The biological dimension is about what goes on in our bodies. Problems like physical illness, deficient diet, insufficient exercise, sleep deprivation, addictions, and genetic dispositions may lead to depression.

The psychological dimension is about what goes on in our minds. Certain personality traits and patterns of thinking may increase our risk of depression. People who worry, ruminate, are perfectionistic, have low self-esteem, are excessively self-critical, or relationally insecure may be more vulnerable to depression and other mental illnesses.

The social dimension is about the relationships and context we live in. Sadly, many people suffer traumatic and painful experiences like neglect, abuse, conflicts, loneliness, and loss. Such experiences may leave deep wounds and lasting scars that take time to heal.

The spiritual dimension is about whatever gives us a sense of meaning, purpose, significance, and hope. If we feel disconnected from ourselves, family, community, work, nature, or God, life may feel empty and the future bleak. The good news is that when we fill each dimension of life with what is good, then they may lift us up, not push us down.

WHAT GOES ON IN THE DEPRESSED BRAIN?

A depressed brain may look like any other brain, but it functions differently. We are all surrounded by positive and negative things, but in depression, the brain gets stuck on what is negative. The depressed brain simply becomes hypersensitive to whatever is negative and misses out on what is positive. Because of this negative bias, depression easily becomes a downward spiral.

Beyond these functional changes, there are also physical changes in the depressed brain. The eighty-six billion nerve cells in the brain communicate by chemical messengers, neurotransmitters, in trillions of nerve connections called synapses. In depression, we may see decreased activity in neurotransmitter systems, like those of serotonin, noradrenaline, dopamine, and others. But depression is far more complex than simply a chemical imbalance or deficiency.

The connection and communication between parts of the brain

may be disrupted and changed, in particular between the thinking part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex, and the feeling part of the brain, the limbic system. Some parts of the brain may become hyperactive, while other parts are less active. Some parts of the brain may even shrink.

The immune system may also be involved in depression. Stress, trauma, physical illness, and poor lifestyle choices may trigger inflammation that may be toxic to the brain cells.

Because depression is the result of changes in the complex systems and interactions of neurotransmitters, nerve cells, brain structures, and the rest of the body, it may therefore be considered to also be a physical illness.

SELF-HELP IN DEPRESSION

To stop the downward spiral of depression, we have to push back. That is hard work, which is why the depressed need support, encouragement, and help along the way. Often, we have to do the opposite of what depression tells us to do. Exercise, healthy nutrition, and optimizing for quality sleep are excellent places to start. Beyond that, it is important to connect—with God, with other people, and with what gives life meaning and fulfillment. The church could and should be a place where social and spiritual connection is fostered and developed.

TREATMENT OF DEPRESSION

Seek treatment as soon as possible whenever depressive symptoms last for more than two weeks, when they significantly interfere with the ability to function,

or when someone has thoughts of suicide. The sooner appropriate treatment may start, the easier and quicker it may be to recover. Unfortunately, many delay seeking treatment for years or even refuse treatment altogether. This leads to a lot of needless and meaningless suffering.

There are many treatment options. Almost all cases of depression will significantly improve with appropriate treatment. Recommended and well-proven treatment strategies are counseling, psychotherapy, and medication. If these interventions are not sufficient, then hospitalization and various brain stimulation therapies may be required.

Still, even when someone has started treatment it is important to be patient. It often takes time to reverse depression. Since depression is so complex, you may have to try out different therapies or medications until you find the right one for you and your depression. Do not give up before finding what works for you.

MINISTERING TO THOSE WITH DEPRESSION

When someone has depression, the pain and emptiness of it becomes overwhelming and it is difficult to see or be part of anything else. Withdrawal from activities, friends, family, and church is common. Never tell them to “snap out of it,” “get over it,” “pull yourself together,” or “get your act together.” If they could, they would; no one wants to be depressed. Do not tell them to “cheer up,” “smile,” or “lighten up.” Again, if they could, they would. And definitely do not suggest they are struggling because of some spiritual or moral flaw or failure. That

will only double their burden. Instead, provide consistent practical, emotional, social, and spiritual support. Let the person share with you or someone else they want to talk to about what they are experiencing. Try to understand and empathize with what it feels like to be on the inside of that person’s life. And contribute whatever light you can into the darkness of their depression.

The apostle Paul, in sharing his love and care for the Corinthians, writes, “We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure” (2 Cor 4:7, NLT). We are seldom more aware of our human condition as fragile jars of clay than when we are depressed. But Paul did not give up. He focused on the light. He focused on what is promised and what is to be. He focused on God’s creative, restorative, and uplifting power rather than his own trouble and despair. That helped him endure.

“That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. For our present troubles are small and won’t last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So we don’t look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever” (2 Cor 4:16–18, NLT). ED

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Preaching in the Same Congregation for Many Years

For the last twenty-one years, I have had the wonderful privilege of pastoring in the church where I currently serve. There are many benefits—and a few challenges!—of pastoring in one church for an extended period of time. One of the great benefits is being able to take a lengthy, biblical journey with the same community of believers. Such a journey does have its challenges, certainly, but they are far outweighed by its benefits.

I have found the following realities to be vital for preaching in one location over the long haul.

Read the Bible. Daily. Weekly. Monthly. Yearly. Read it through. Read it *all the way* through. Then read it through again. And again.

I take an annual journey through Scripture. In my early years of doing this, I read the Bible through in the first two months of the year. I have now slowed down to a more leisurely pace by reading it all through the year. This annual journey has been nothing short of life-changing for me. Nothing can replace this consistent experience of Scripture. I keep paper and pen handy to jot down thoughts, lessons, questions, sermon ideas, and the like. Such a regular experience of Scripture builds one's discipleship commitment to Jesus in a way nothing else can. Pausing regularly to pray the text into one's life strengthens spiritual resolve. And that leads to the second reality.

Pray continually. Ellen G. White's statement that "prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend"¹ underlines the deep need the preacher has for prayer. If our best friend, God, opens His heart to us in Scripture, we must open *our* hearts to God in prayer. That two-way exchange builds deep and solid disciples.



SCAN FOR AUDIO



"Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend."

Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 93

For the preacher, it will do something else. Remember the words of Jesus: "Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old" (Matt 13:52, NIV). A deep and regular life of Scripture and prayer will provide "new treasures as well as old" for the one who preaches. A consistent engagement with Scripture will continually fill the preacher with the Spirit who offers life to his or her sermons.

Listen to life. Little will make preaching more timely than allowing the timeless truths of Scripture to speak to the trials of today. Fred Craddock suggests that there are two "journeys" the preacher must take. The first journey is *back*—back into the world of the biblical text. This journey comes in the study of Scripture, which we have already noted. It is on this journey that the preacher finds *what* to say. The sermonic themes will grow first and foremost out of the experience of this journey back.

The second is the journey *forward*—returning to *this* world, the world of the listener. To only journey *back* is to truncate the preaching of the Word and to risk that our sermons will only be the travelogues of a day long past. However, to also journey forward into *this* world is to make certain that what we discovered in Scripture has direct application today. But in order to recognize

where it applies, we must listen to life in our day and time.

The elder or pastor who preaches over a long period of time to the same listeners has the advantage of knowing their lives and world in unique ways. Such allows direct application—so direct that one would need to be careful to make certain not to "pick" on certain listeners!

Preach extended passages of Scripture. This is often referred to as "expository preaching." Preaching a series of sermons on Philipians, or on the life of Joseph, or on the psalms of lament, or on any other extended passage of Scripture will accomplish at least two ends. First, it will deepen both the preacher and the listener. Studying and applying one extended passage of Scripture over time allows us to enter deeply into the world of the original author of the text, of its intended audience, and forces us to grapple with the spiritual themes (and questions and quandaries) that they faced. When the Spirit of God works in us in the same way that the Spirit worked in them, true growth results.

The second end it accomplishes is that it helps the preacher avoid his or her "hobby horses." Every preacher has certain themes he or she loves to preach and others he or she would much prefer to avoid. This is especially challenging when in the same context over a long period of time. However, if one is preaching on a particular book of the Bible, one will have to face passages one might otherwise avoid. I have found that few things force me to preach "the whole counsel of God" like preaching on extended sections of Scripture. I highly recommend it! I love it and I dread it—simply because

it forces me to face some of those difficult passages and themes. But I can also say that I have learned more through this discipline than through many others.

Keep good records. One of the challenges of preaching for years in the same setting is the very human tendency to repeat oneself. How many times have I asked myself: *Did I already tell that story? Did I mention this particular lesson from this passage in another sermon? Have I ever preached a sermon on this text before?*

It may surprise some to think that a preacher might not remember the answers to such questions. But pause for a moment and ask yourself the same question about a Sabbath School lesson you taught eighteen years ago: *Did I tell this story back then?* Even when one is *certain* that one will remember, I can almost guarantee that there are many times—maybe *most* times—when, with the passage of time, one forgets.

There are few joys quite like the joy of taking a long journey with the same friends and believers. Along that journey, relationships deepen, friendships grow more steadfast, conflict is faced and resolved, losses are grieved, and joys are shared. What a delight, then, to have the privilege of preaching the Word along the way!

May God strengthen you to declare His full counsel in a timely and timeless fashion. ED

¹ Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1892), 93.

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Easing Tension on the Church Elders' Team

Dan has been the head elder in his local church for the past eight years. He knows his responsibilities and handles them well—perhaps even with a bit of pride. The entire church program has been running smoothly for quite some time. There are five other elders on the elders' team. Leadership duties have been shared among the team. Things have been running in a smooth and predictable rhythm.

Five months ago, one of the elders and his family moved to another city several hundred miles

away. To fill the vacancy in the elders' team, the church business meeting elected Fred as an elder. Fred became a Seventh-day Adventist about one year ago. Previously, there was little room in his life for spiritual things. But when his wife died suddenly, Fred began to think about life's big questions. A colleague at work offered to study the Bible with him and after several months Fred requested baptism. Everyone likes him. He is friendly, good humored, easygoing—a natural fit in this congregation. But he knows next to nothing about church

organization, church programs, and the traditional way of doing things.

Because of Fred's inexperience, other elders have had to take on more responsibilities and they have become somewhat critical of Fred's inability to step in and carry his share of the load. In Fred's absence the other elders comment among themselves about what they see as Fred's weaknesses and how he just does not seem to be fitting in. More and more they subconsciously exclude him from active engagement in planning and in caring for day-to-day duties.

Fred, on the other hand, is feeling overwhelmed. He is deeply honored that the church family elected him to a leadership role, but he feels rather lost among the complexity and intricacies of church life. He does not want to make any mistakes. His lack of knowledge and fear of failure make him very cautious about exercising any leadership role. Insecurity immobilizes him.

The head elder, Dan, is aware that not all is well on the elders' team. He can see that Fred is not really performing and that the rest of the elders essentially ignore Fred when it comes to performing any leadership functions. Dan is wondering what, if anything, can be done to improve the atmosphere among his team of elders.

Indeed, there are several things that can serve to build relationships among the elders while simultaneously helping Fred to gain valuable experience. Some initiatives can be taken by Dan and the other elders (see #1–3) and some steps can be initiated by Fred himself (see #4–5).

1 AFFIRM AND BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Dan and the other elders on the team need to understand that Fred is a relatively new church member. He has no background knowledge of how the church functions as an organization. He has limited awareness of Bible stories and the role of the church in God's mission through history. Yet he has become a member and the church has affirmed him by electing him to an important leadership role.

The other elders, people of experience and inside knowledge of

church life, need to affirm Fred, welcome him into their team, and recognize that many things will be new for him. They need to carefully consider how to encourage him in his spiritual journey as well as in his engagement in leadership roles.

Strengthening personal relationships with Fred can occur quickly by various elders inviting Fred to their homes, spending time together in social activities, or working on service projects with him. Getting to know Fred outside of his role as an elder will help Fred to know that he is valued and respected. Fred's fears about acceptance will diminish.

2 EQUIP FOR SERVICE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

Recognizing that Fred is relatively new to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, his fellow elders need to think about providing him with materials that will grow his understanding of the church—both the local church and its relation to the worldwide church. Fred should be given a copy of the *Seventh-day Adventist Elder's Handbook* and the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*.

One chapter at a time can become the focus for study and subsequent discussion at a meeting of the elders. Or, one of the elders may volunteer to meet on a regular basis with Fred and review the content of each chapter in these publications.

Encourage Fred to ask questions as he studies these two books. Let him know that everyone is a lifetime learner. Fred's fears from lack of knowledge will subside and he will become much more confident in embracing leadership tasks.

3 MENTOR AND TRAIN

A third way for the elders to build team strength is to offer mentoring for Fred. An elder who regularly visits in hospitals or conducts visitation to members who are confined to their homes due to illness or disability could invite Fred to join in several visits. Another elder might give a guided tour of the Sabbath School departments on a Sabbath morning. The elder who oversees the Pathfinder program might invite Fred to attend Pathfinder meetings for a while. The pastor would be wise to invite Fred to accompany the pastor on home visits and Bible studies.

As these activities are carried out, Fred will rapidly gain an understanding of church life and the ways in which elders serve to nurture members and advance church mission. Fred may have many natural abilities that become more evident in the exposure to the range of responsibilities borne by elders. His natural abilities need to be augmented by mentoring and training opportunities that broaden his experience and deepen his understanding of an elder's role.

4 ASK QUESTIONS—SEE YOURSELF AS A LEARNER

Fred also can take some initiative. Yes, he is fearful of failure and somewhat insecure due to his lack of knowledge and experience. But Fred is friendly and easygoing. He has good social skills. He need not be afraid of asking questions, of admitting his limited knowledge and experience.

In fact, his admission of inexperience and lack of knowledge will endear him to those whose counsel and advice he seeks. His openness to receive information and counsel will expose him to a wide variety of perspectives. In the process, he will not only learn much about what is expected from elders; he will also learn much about the members of the church, about what is important to them, about their personal lives and views, and about their needs and vulnerabilities. The insights he gains from asking questions will not only eliminate his insecurity, but will also equip him with a foundation for meaningful ministry to members.

5 OBSERVE ANALYTICALLY

Fred lacks know-how and this inhibits his ability to function on

par with others on the elders' team. But if he intentionally engages his powers of analytical observation, he will learn much and quickly. Watch carefully how the other elders perform their leadership roles. Observe not only how things are done, but consider thoughtfully why they might be done in this particular way. What are the advantages and disadvantages of these actions? How do others respond to this kind of leadership?

CONCLUSION

Fred's election as an elder in the local church presented Dan and the other elders with a few challenges. The situation could have deteriorated to one of dysfunctionality and alienation. Thoughtful and prayerful consideration of actions that could yield much better outcomes brought a new sense of belonging and synergy to the elders' team in Dan's church. Inac-

tion would never have resolved the situation. Deliberate and carefully designed behaviors restored harmony and set in place a legacy of influential leadership from Fred.

The dynamics among the elders may be different from one church to another. In one place the prevailing issue may be inexperience; in another it may be personal differences or theological convictions that bring stresses to the team. Perhaps some situations will need external intervention. In most cases, however, an attitude of thoughtful concern for each other, accompanied by mutual respect and a desire to grow in knowledge and service, will yield beneficial outcomes for all concerned. **ED**

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Divine Communication in Revelation and the Three Angels' Messages

God has chosen to communicate with humanity. Because God is God and not a human being, humans were dependent on God to initiate communication. In His grace He has done that. He speaks to us in various ways, preeminently through His Word/word—capitalized and non-capitalized. But often humans have turned a deaf ear to His messengers and messages. Yet, He has not given up because His love for humanity aims at our salvation. So, in Revelation He sends us various messages.

I. MESSAGES IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

The three angels' messages play an important role in Revelation (14:6–12). But they are by far not the only messages found there. In Revelation, many voices and persons are heard, heavenly and earthly. The book is replete with significant speeches, hymns, and other messages.

Human communication. On earth, believers and unbelievers are communicating. Among the believers are John (Rev 7:14; 22:20), the martyrs (6:10), the conquerors (15:3), and the bride (22:17). For instance, the great multitude of redeemed humans sings, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (7:10, ESV).

Communication of heavenly beings. Heavenly beings—angels, unidentified voices, the four living creatures, the twenty-four elders, the Holy Spirit, Jesus, and even God the Father—share crucial messages and insights. John exclaims, summarizing the entire content of Revelation,

"Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen" (1:4–7, ESV).

Jesus addresses the seven churches (2–3). He proclaims several beatitudes (16:15). Repeatedly, He promises to come soon (22:12, 20). God the Father speaks in Revelation 1:8 and 21:5–7, revealing Himself and what He is going to do about the new creation.

The importance of Revelation's messages. The three angels' messages are crucial messages to be proclaimed worldwide, but are not the only messages in Revelation. They are not even the only end-time messages. There are others that need to be heard. It is not only the immediate context of Revelation's central vision that determines the understanding of the three angels' messages, but also Revelation's other messages. For example, the first angel's message calls humans to fear and worship God and designates Him as Creator. But the questions about who and how God is and what He does is not sufficiently answered by Revelation 14:7. We need more information from other messages, and spe-

cifically from those coming directly from God the Father and Jesus Christ.

Some messages go beyond the three angels' messages and furnish more information on future events. The three angels' messages have little to say about positive eschatological developments, dealing more with the negative ones in judgment. They do not mention directly the second coming, the new heaven and new earth with the new Jerusalem, and the immediate presence of God among His people.

Other messages explain, for instance, in more detail (1) who God the Father, Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit are (1:4–8; 4–5). (2) They describe salvation—the involvement of Jesus in redemption, the cost of salvation, and how humans can be saved (1:5–6; 5; 7:9–10, 13; 12:10–11; 15:3; 19:1; 22:14). (3) They clarify what the eternal gospel is. (4) Creation is important to them, occurring with Jesus in 3:14, climaxing with the God of creation in chapter 4, and permeating chapters 21–22 as well as other parts of Revelation. (5) While worship begins with Jesus, worship of God the Father and the Lamb reaches a peak in Revelation 4 and 5.

While the three angels' messages are critical and decisive messages to be proclaimed in these days, they are not all-comprehensive and need to be understood in the context of the entire book of Revelation—especially its other messages. While they need to be shared with people, we should not forget that in the Great Commission Jesus charged His disciples to teach people to observe all that He had commanded them (Matt 28:20).

II. THE SETTING OF THE MESSAGES OF THE THREE ANGELS

The mega-narrative. The messages of the three angels are embedded in a large mega-narrative that determines their interpretation. The vision of Revelation 12–14 (more precisely of 11:19–14:20), which contains these messages, depicts the long conflict between good and evil and its outcome. The rest of Revelation supports and broadens this mega-narrative.

Revelation 12. Here is the storyline of Revelation's central vision: Chapter 12 introduces the characters of a woman—the true church—and a dragon-serpent—Satan. The conflict is already foreseeable. The woman gives birth to a child. The attention is drawn to Jesus' incarnation and the struggle He had to endure during His life on earth. As ruler of the nations, He "was caught up to God and His throne" (12:4–5). The reference to a woman, a serpent, the woman's seed, and enmity is based on the promise of the Redeemer after humanity's fall into sin (Gen 3:15). This promise of the Messiah has now been fulfilled. Satan's attack on Jesus is followed by his war against His church (12:6, 13–16). But there is also an immense heavenly battle between Michael/Jesus and the dragon (12:7–10). At the end, Satan is defeated but not annihilated. Consequently, the last verse of the chapter focuses on the massive conflict at the end of earth's history, in which Satan attempts to destroy Christ's faithful remnant (12:17; 13:1–18).

Revelation 13. This war is a proxy war. The dragon uses a beast from the sea to make war

against the saints. Unfortunately, the believers, who have "overcome" Satan "by the blood of the Lamb" (12:11), are now "overcome" by the sea beast (13:7) at least temporarily. They have gained spiritual victory but have not been able to escape persecution. Satan uses also a second, extremely deceptive beast, the land beast—later called the false prophet—which came out of the earth. Both beasts are so opposed to God that they divert worship from Him to the dragon and his allies. Their opposition to God's people consists of preventing believers from buying and selling (13:17) and thereby threatens their existence. In addition, non-worshippers of the image of the first beast, which was created by the second beast, are to be killed (13:15). Reading this narrative, the audience is left with the impression that God's faithful people have no chance of surviving the final evil onslaught.

Revelation 14. But suddenly the picture changes. Yes, there are survivors, and they are standing triumphantly with Jesus on Mount Zion. The vision of chapters 12–14 draws to an end with a description of the 144,000 (14:1–5); the messages of the three angels, which is probably their message (14:6–12); and the second coming of Christ (14:14–20).

In Revelation 12–14 the message of the three angels is the final and universal divine communication addressed to all people in the last time of earth's history. It reacts to the activity of the evil powers. It is God's response to the propaganda of these entities with their attempt to bring about undivided universal worship to themselves instead of to God.

III. THE PURPOSE OF THE THREE ANGELS' MESSAGES

In His grace, God communicates important messages including the three angels' messages: (1) He is looking for people who are willing to enter into an intimate relationship with Him. (2) He shows that the alternative, the evil powers' approach to life, is detrimental and that they are not as powerful and pious as claimed. (3) He points to the dramatic consequences for people following them knowingly or unknowingly and contrasts them with His faithful people who are fully committed to Him.

Why does He do that? He wants people to be saved and to live with Him for eternity. He wants to inform them about important present and future events. He gives humans—including us—another chance with the three angels' messages.

Many conversations are not communication in the truest sense, but are rather monologues in the presence of one or more witnesses. But real communication requires at least two parties fully engaged in the process. For God not to communicate in vain, it takes our response and witness. ED

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First Angel's Message: The Good News About God and Us (Rev. 14:6-7)

We get a lot of bad news every day because there are so many bad things happening these days—from natural disasters to political crises, from financial problems to greed, fraud, and military conflicts. Often bad news is overwhelming and depressing. But there are also some organizations and individuals who try to share good news. Here is an example: “Rookie to Pro: DC Police Officer Saves 9 Lives during First Year on the Streets.”¹ We can still find a lot of good news. Yet, apart from such good reports the best news of all time is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I. THE SETTING OF THE FIRST MESSAGE

Context. The three angels' messages must be understood in the context of Revelation 12–14 and the larger context of Revelation. Revelation 14:6 introduces the first angel's message and announces what will be shared (the eternal gospel) and who the audience will be (those who dwell on earth—that is, every nation, tribe, language, and people).

The eternal gospel. The term “gospel” (Gk. *euangelion*) means “good news.” It is followed by the verb “to proclaim good news” (Gk. *euangelizō*). The duplication of “good news” in noun and verb form highlights that the message is not primarily a threat of judgment, but rather is very positive with a focus on God's action in Jesus. The word “eternal” clarifies that the same gospel is found elsewhere in Scripture. It is the gospel of God's Son, Jesus Christ (Rom 1:9), the gospel of salvation (Eph 1:13) and peace (6:15), of truth (Col 1:5) and hope (1:23). This gospel appears already in the introduction to Revelation (1:5–6)—we are “freed from our sins by His blood”—although the term “gospel” is not used. Salvation is described in Revelation with wonderful imagery such as being purchased for God (5:9) from the earth (14:3), having washed one's robes (7:14), and having one's name written in the book of life (21:27). This is the starting point for the message that follows. Salvation has been secured. How to receive it?

II. THE CONTENT OF THE ANGEL'S PROCLAMATION

With verse 7, the first angel speaks. His proclamation consists of three strong imperatives: (1) The first calls people to fear God. (2) The second is to give God glory. As a reason, the hour of judgment is mentioned. (3) The third command is to worship Him because He is the Creator. Direct appeals to humanity are used only with the first message of the angels.

This message also touches on many important biblical themes. The background is salvation, as we have seen. But the major two emphases in verse 7 are who God is and how humanity is to relate to Him. This brings with it other themes such as creation, Sabbath (by the use of creation language of the fourth commandment), judgment, and worship within a sanctuary setting.

Fear God. Fearing God presupposes an acknowledgment of God's existence and of His claims to our lives. One cannot fear a nonexistent being. Therefore, an atheist or agnostic cannot admit to fearing God, at least not openly. But what does it mean to fear God? Scripture contains calls to fear (Gen 15:1; John 12:15) and also calls to fear God (Deut 6:24; 1 Pet 2:17). The respective

Greek verb can be translated as “to fear” and also as “to have deep respect” (Lev 19:30). It is used in this second sense in the first angel's message. In 1 John 4:18 the same author, John, states that we cannot approach God in love and simultaneously hide from Him in fear.

But love does not rule out respect. There is a certain tension in the sense that God is our beloved Father but He is not our buddy who only has to fulfill our egoistic wishes. “The message of the Apocalypse strikes at the heart of hypocritical and superficial religions. . . . Humanity no longer takes God seriously. He has become the good, harmless old father that we can manipulate or the sweet baby Jesus who is too cute to be real.”² But confessing Christians, even you and me, may also fall in the same trap.

Deep respect for God has ramifications. Respect leads to righteous actions and an ethical lifestyle. It is associated with obedience and keeping God's commandments (Deut 5:29), with loving like Jesus did and with serving God and humanity wholeheartedly (10:12). Those who “fear” the Lord do not mistreat and disrespect people (Lev 19:14, 32), nor do they wrong others (25:17).

Give Him glory. When humans give glory to God, they repent and turn to the Lord (Rev 16:9). When heavenly beings give glory to God, they praise and magnify God (4:9) for who He is: for His majesty, power, and holiness and what He has done (4:11). In Revelation 5:9–12 glory is attributed to Jesus because He has brought about salvation. Ellen G. White states, “To give glory to God is to reveal His character in our own, and thus make Him known.”³ So, we turn to God in repentance and while living our life with Him and proclaiming Him, people may notice that we “have been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13).

But this is not common to humanity at large. Babylon is considered “the glory of the kingdoms” (Isa 13:19). People speak of the glory of science and knowledge and glorify victorious armies and violence. On a personal level, we may glory in our achievements and fame. Yet, Paul admonishes believers, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31, ESV).

The urgency to repent and glorify God is supported by the fact that the divine judgment has come. This seems to relate to the first phase of the final judgment, the pre-advent judgment.

Worship the Creator God. Proper worship is found in Revelation 4 and 5—worship of God the Father as Creator and worship of Jesus as Saviour. This worship is God-centered and includes all members of the Godhead. It maintains a healthy balance between God's transcendence and immanence. It extols the character and nature of God and praises Him for His mighty works. It is universal and all-encompassing, provides a new perspective to life on earth, and is continuous and unending. Worship has also to do with practical issues such as caring for the needy and obeying God's will.

The issue in worship is not primarily whether we feel good and benefit from what we are doing, whether we are blessed or entertained; worship takes place for God's sake and must be directed to God only. Otherwise it becomes a form of idolatry.

In Revelation 12–14 true worship and false worship are seen in competition. No part of the Apocalypse is so dominated by the topic of worship as is its central vision. Of the eight usages of the term, seven apply to (1) the dragon (once), (2) the sea beast (three times), (3) the image of the beast (once), and (4) both sea beast and image of the beast (twice). In addition, this false worship is also universal and enforced by the evil powers. No wonder that the first angel's message must call the world to worship God. This call is weighty and determines humans' eternal destiny.

III. GOD AND JESUS, CREATOR AND SAVIOUR

Theology (Creator and Saviour). God created all things. He is the source of life, not part of creation. There is a marked difference between Creator and creation and always will be. Once having created, God wanted to be close to humanity. So the transcendent God drew close and met with His created beings. This is His immanence, especially manifested in the incarnation of Jesus for our salvation. From His uniqueness as Creator and Saviour derives His ownership of and authority over all creation. He can create, un-create, and re-create. He is the Almighty, the Alpha and Omega, the Holy One. He is to be worshipped because He is not a deist God, but sustains creation and cares for it. In Revelation the Creator is not only God the Father, but also Jesus Christ (3:14) and the Holy Spirit (11:11). While Jesus is Saviour par excellence, God the Father and the Holy Spirit are also strongly involved in the salvation of people. Revelation keeps creation and salvation together inseparably. You cannot have one without the other.

Anthropology (humanity). Creation and salvation also help to understand humanity. Humans are not an accident of nature. We are part of God's creation and yet can think beyond creation. Being moral beings with our own will and freedom of choice, we can distinguish between good and evil and can choose to accept salvation and fear God or opt for eternal death by opposing Him (Rev 14:6–12). To know what creation and salvation mean and how they closely link humanity to God allows us to find meaning in life.

CONCLUSION

The first angel's message may be understood as a summary of biblical creation and salvation passages. They are about the Godhead and us: Fear God. Give Glory to Him. Worship Him. Have an intimate relationship with Him and enjoy salvation. ED

¹ Caroline Patrickis, “Rookie to Pro: DC Police Officer Saves 9 Lives during First Year on the Streets,” 7News, August 15, 2021, <https://wja.com/newsletter/dc-police-officer-saves-9-lives-one-year>. Accessed December 1, 2021.

² Jacques B. Doukhan, *Secrets of Revelation: The Apocalypse through Hebrew Eyes* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002), 127.

³ Ellen G. White, “Our Constant Need of Divine Enlightenment,” *Manuscripts 16*, 1890.

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Second Angel's Message: Babylon and Christ (Rev 14:8)

Babylon has interested and fascinated many people and is popular today: There is a website "washingtonbabylon.com." A village with the name "Babylon" exists in Suffolk County, NY, USA. "Babylon Berlin" is a German public television series, and several movies carry the title "Babylon," as does a Lady Gaga song. "Babylon" translation software, "Babylon Health," "Babylon Lanes" of bowling, "Babylon.finance," and "Babylon Bee," a Christian news satire website, illustrate the popularity of Babylon.

In Scripture "Babylon" is typically understood negatively. Unexpectedly and without explanation, the second angel of Revelation 14:8 introduces Babylon for the first time by name in Revelation with, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great" (ESV).¹

I. HISTORICAL BABYLON IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Babylon in Genesis. Details about historical Babylon are provided in the Old Testament. Babylon was founded very early (Gen 10:10). From its beginning, the city stood for self-exaltation, apostasy from and rebellion against God. Here the famous tower of Babel was erected (Gen 11:4). In irony Babylon's name is identified with confusion (Gen 11:7, 9).

Neo-Babylonia. Later, the Neo-Babylonian Empire of the seventh and sixth centuries BC plays a significant role in the Old Testament and forms the major background to Revelation's Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar had invaded Jerusalem in 605, 597, and 586 BC, deported Jews to Babylon, and destroyed the temple. The Babylonian exile was one of the most dramatic experiences in Jewish history. Major Old Testament prophets dealt with Babylon and its demise. In 539 BC the empire fell into the hands of the Medes and Persians, who allowed the Jews to return to Palestine. Isaiah, foreseeing this event, had written, "Babylon is fallen, is fallen!" (Isa 21:9). His call to go out from Babylon (Isa 48:20) became a possibility with the Persian conquest.

In Revelation, Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon becomes a type for the great and horrible city Babylon of the end time. Babylon had been an enemy of the people of God and a power opposed to God. So it is with end-time Babylon.

II. END-TIME BABYLON IN REVELATION

While the Old Testament background is very important, the Babylon John has in mind is the universal and symbolical end-time Babylon, not a limited, literal Babylon. The term "Babylon" appears in John's Apocalypse always in an end-time setting (14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21). Babylon is also called "the great harlot" (e.g., 17:1), "the woman sitting on many waters" (17:1) and "on a scarlet beast" (17:3), "the great city" (18:10), and is associated with the "Euphrates river" (16:12). Judgment will come upon Babylon under the sixth and seventh plagues (16:12–21), being spelled out in more detail in Revelation 17–19.

So, what is Babylon? This question is to be answered by the context of Revelation's central vision (11:19–14:20). There, the most prominent and powerful opponents of God and His people are introduced as the "satanic trinity": the dragon (Rev 12), the sea beast (Rev 13a), and the beast from

the earth (Rev 13b). Under the seventh plague, Babylon will be split into three parts—evidently its original components (16:19). The message of the fall of Babylon is repeated in Revelation 18:2. There the information is followed by the call, "Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues" (18:4).

How should "fallen" be understood? The fall of Babylon could be taken as judgment, following Isaiah. However, the more likely option would be to understand it as the moral fall of the largely religious system of Babylon. It would be comparable to the fall of the church of Ephesus, which had grown cold in its love to Jesus and each other (2:4–5). While the people of God were called to leave Old Testament Babylon *after* its judgment had occurred, the people of God who are still in end-time Babylon are challenged to leave it *before* Babylon's judgment (Rev 18). Therefore, "fallen" should not refer to judgment. If the second angel's message is understood as a horrendous moral fall, a chronological sequence may be provided with the three messages: (1) All people are called to repent, fear God, and worship Him (14:7). (2) They are warned against the counterfeit system of Babylon that has perverted the gospel and is continuing to do so progressively (14:8). (3) They are informed about the impending judgment on Babylon's followers (14:9–11) and in Revelation 17–19 on its constituent entities.

What, then, is the problem with Babylon?

The second angel explains that "she . . . made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality" (14:8). She is the great harlot (17:1). God's true church of Revelation 12 is contrasted with this ugly and dangerous counterimage, Babylon. Babylon's preeminent characteristic of sexual immorality into which she draws all peoples (14:8; 17:2) stands for idolatry and apostasy from God. It is oftentimes found in syncretism and dual allegiance. But drawing people away from Jesus implies deception (see also 18:23) and/or force. They are intoxicated by her teachings and blinded by her approach to life. Babylon has corrupted the gospel and God's commandments so that only the remnant are still following Christ (14:12).

Revelation has more to say:

- Babylon the great has enormous, universal influence (17:1–2, 15, 18) and makes humans dependent on her.
- Babylon associates with the blasphemy of the beast on which she sits (17:3). Blasphemy is primarily directed against God (13:5).
- Babylon persecutes, particularly God's people, and is drunk with the blood of true believers (17:6).
- Demonic-spiritualistic elements are found in her (18:2).
- Babylon's sins reach to heaven (18:5). Her evil deeds require a corresponding judgment (Rev 18).

• Babylon pretends to be a queen (18:7) and exercises royal reign over the kings of the earth (17:18). However, the real King of the nations is God (15:3), and Jesus is King of kings (19:16). Obviously, Babylon claims divine sovereignty.

• Finally, Babylon's prosperity and wealth (Rev 18) are contrasted with the wealth of the Lamb (5:12). Babylon's wealth was gained

through exploitation and suppression (18:13); Jesus' wealth through His self-sacrifice.

III. BABYLON AND JESUS

Jesus Christ. Jesus is not mentioned in the second angel's message, and yet He is very much present—indirectly, as we saw. The descriptions of Babylon show that this entity is opposed to Jesus and His people, while trying to take on His prerogatives.

The context is permeated with Jesus. The first and third angels' messages deal with Jesus more directly. The eternal good news (14:6) of salvation is unthinkable without Jesus' victory on the cross. The third angel's message mentions the Lamb (14:10) and Jesus (14:12). The 144,000, who seem to proclaim the messages, are proleptically standing with Jesus on Mount Zion (14:1). His name is on their foreheads, and they follow Him wherever He goes (14:4). In Revelation's central vision Jesus is prominent elsewhere. We find, for instance, His incarnation and ascension (12:4–5), His battle with Satan (12:7–8), His authority (12:10), and His death on the cross (12:11). Chapter 13 mentions "the book of life of the Lamb who was slain" (13:8) and the vision ends directly after the messages of the three angels with a symbolic description of Jesus' second coming (14:14–20). The entire Apocalypse focuses on Jesus "who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father" (1:5–6). The second angel's message is thus surrounded with Jesus' life, ministry, death, and parousia.

Babylon's attractiveness. Babylon's deceptive wine is a counter-gospel that attempts to deny and undo what Jesus has done. Supposedly, salvation works differently and submission to another "lord" is enforced. Babylon's philosophy and lifestyle may be quite attractive. Her teachings may appeal to people's taste and self-assertion. Babylon may promise the highest degree of personal freedom and happiness without limits, obligations, and commitment: the God of the Bible and the Jesus of true Christianity are no longer needed; the will of God is irrelevant. Even Christians, surrounded by a Babylonian culture and worldview, may be in danger of concocting their own religion and their own god to suit themselves, and of rationalizing their wrongdoings.

But deceitful Babylon is morally and spiritually bankrupt: No peace. No salvation. No love. No real hope. Still, the great harlot and great city is dangerous and murderous, and has nothing of true value to offer.

CONCLUSION

The message of the second angel—to be accepted and shared—is: Do not get involved in Babylon's apostasy. Come out of and stay away from it. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Commit yourself completely to Jesus and follow Him wherever He goes. ED

¹ All biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version.

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Third Angel's Message: Rest or No Rest (Rev 14:9-13)

"Rest" is an interesting term with various shades of meaning. It can refer to physical and emotional rest (Mark 6:31), it can describe spiritual rest, and it can refer to resting in death in Jesus until the first resurrection takes place. Revelation 14:9-13 uses the same terminology as does Matthew 11:28-29—the noun "rest" and the related verb "to rest." One group experiences rest. The other has no rest, day or night.

I. THE THIRD MESSAGE

The third angel's message is the longest of the three messages. It is sobering. It consists of two parts: a long part dealing with idolatrous worshippers and their judgment (Rev 14:9-11) and a contrasting part, emphasizing characteristics of true believers (14:12). An addendum is found in verse 13. People have made wrong decisions and did not take to heart the message of the first angel, while others have accepted God and Jesus, based on the three messages.

A. Those Who Have Rejected the Third Message

The idolaters. The long section refers back to the sea beast, the image of the sea beast—erected by the beast from the earth—and the mark of the beast, which allows people who have taken it to continue buying and selling (Rev 13). Many worship these entities now and will do so in the future. Others will then be pressured, and some may give in to false worship. Their type of worship is a rejection of the Creator God. The third message is individualized, addressing persons one by one. With it God counters the message of the image of the beast.

Consequences. This long section begins and ends with worshippers of the beast and its image, the recipients of the beast's mark (14:9, 11). Between these bookends their judgment is described in three elements with vivid imagery and future tenses: (1) He/she will drink from the wine of the wrath of God, (2) he/she will be tormented with fire and brimstone, and (3) he/she will have no rest, day or night.

The choice. In the central element Jesus appears. The judgment of those who do not worship God occurs in the presence of the angels and the Lamb. This passage contains so-called casuistic law: *if* you do what is not right, *then* this will be the consequence. This indicates conditionality. So, even the third message, which does not condemn humanity indiscriminately, is indirectly an invitation to make the right choice for one's own benefit. You can choose to worship evil powers and suffer the consequences, or you can choose to worship God and enjoy the related benefits. If you follow Jesus, you will reflect His character. If you choose to follow evil powers, you will become like them, one of the earth dwellers, who persecute and kill true believers (6:9-10). These are not innocent people who just made a wrong choice unknowingly. Rather they support the economic boycott and death decree directed against believers.

God and judgment. The strong and provocative language of judgment serves as a warning. It may be partially figuratively, and the torment may be more psychological and spiritual than

physical—although the latter is not excluded. The enemies of God find themselves in the presence of the Lamb, must admit that God is just in His judgment, and notice that their decision has become irrevocable. Life cannot be sustained without God. They will die the second death (20:14-15). An angel affirms God's fairness in His judgment: "Just are you, O Holy One, . . . for you brought these judgments. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink" (16:5-6, ESV). Judgment has not only to do with justice, but also with the deliverance of the followers of Christ and the eradication of sin from the universe.

Jesus. Judgment before the Lamb and His angels does not mean that Jesus triumphs when His adversaries suffer. It must hurt Him because He came to save people by His supreme sacrifice on the cross. Those lost people are not only suffering from extreme despair, but they are also confronted with Jesus, the Source of life (John 14:6), whom they have rejected, and whose people and cause they have combatted. Now they have no rest and peace.

B. Those Who Have Accepted the Third Message

The "saints" of verse 12 (see also 13:10) are in this context also the remnant (12:17) and the 144,000 (14:1-5). Here three of their characteristics are highlighted: patience, obedience, and faith. In other places there are more—for example, holding to the testimony of Jesus (12:17) and following Jesus wherever He goes (14:4). These characteristics are not only important because they identify God's people, but also because indirectly they tell them who they are and how they should live. In addition, they tell the audience what the group of the lost is not. They also help to understand what the mark of the beast is.

Patience. "Patience" expressed more actively can be translated with the terms "endurance" and "perseverance." In all adversity, distress, and misery the "saints" do not give up, do not allow their relationship with God to fade away, and do not distance themselves from the hope of Jesus' soon return. They overcome evil. Patience (1:9; 2:2, 3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12) is crucial for the church in Revelation. It is in no way secondary to the other two characteristics.

James had already developed the concept of patience in the end-time setting of James 5:1-11. He speaks about three dimensions of patience of the believers: (1) patience in waiting for the return of Jesus, (2) patience in human relationships, and (3) patience in suffering. Patience is one of the most prominent attributes of God Himself, because He is "merciful and gracious, patient, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exod 34:6). His patience aims at our salvation (2 Pet 3:9, 15).

Keeping the commandments. The most important among the commandments—apart from the commandment to love God and neighbor—are the Ten Commandments. This is indicated by the context. The ark of the covenant (Rev 11:19) had already indirectly referred to them. Revelation stresses the first table (no idolatry,

no abuse of God's name, no disregard for the Sabbath as the seventh day) and does not disregard the second (e.g., no sexual immorality, no killing, no lying; Rev 21:27; 22:15). The observance of the biblical Sabbath is anchored in the first angel's message (14:7: "Who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water") and recalls Exodus 20:8-11. Keeping God's commandments is not so much a matter of duty and an act of agreeing with them intellectually, but must be a matter of the heart. Although keeping the commandments is extremely important and is part of the new covenant, ratified through the death of Jesus on the cross, Revelation does not teach that keeping the commandments saves humans. Therefore, faith is highlighted next.

Faith. The "faith of the saints" has been mentioned before (Rev 13:10). Here the Apocalypse speaks about *the pistis Iesou*. This phrase can mean (1) our faith in Jesus or (2) the faith of Jesus. The second option would understand faith as a body of beliefs, which Jesus held and taught. In addition, *pistis* can also mean "faithfulness." This opens two additional options: (3) our faithfulness to Jesus or (4) the faithfulness of Jesus. In case of various possible interpretations, the context has to be used to determine the exact meaning. However, at times the context may be intentionally ambiguous. John may be ambiguous by purpose to cover all aspects of our relation to Jesus and His relation to us: While the saints keep faith in Jesus and are faithful to Him and His teachings, they can rely on Jesus' faithfulness, who by grace has justified and saved them. Faith of the saints describes their trust in and reliance on the Lord, their confidence in deepest distress, their faithfulness in the face of martyrdom, and their absolute commitment to Jesus Christ. They live with the assurance of salvation because salvation is a gift and cannot be attained by human effort. Therefore, faith and observance of the commandments point to saving faith, from which works of love result.

Addendum in 14:13. This addendum to the three angels' message mentions the Lord and the Holy Spirit. It creates another contrast to the idolaters. Followers of the Lord experience spiritual rest, which is associated with Sabbath rest. Therefore, those who die in Jesus in the end time rest in death with the certainty of resurrection to eternal life. Followers of evil powers have no rest (14:11), no peace, and no hope. They do not benefit from Christ's solidarity with humanity when He took it upon Himself to become one of us, live, suffer, die, resurrect, and save us.

CONCLUSION

"Lord, help me to choose wisely, follow You, and experience rest. As I proclaim your message, help me not to shy away from difficult teachings that people may not like to hear. Help me to share your Word truthfully, faithfully, and wisely." ED

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SCAN FOR AUDIO

EDITORIAL
INTRODUCTION

At the 2021 General Conference Annual Council, the following letter was read to all attendees. The General Conference leadership has requested that this document be shared widely with the Seventh-day Adventist membership. The purpose of this dissemination is to facilitate prayerful preparation, with the special request for God's guidance of the decisions that will be made at the General Conference Session, which is scheduled to convene in Saint Louis, MO, USA, June 6–11, 2022.

Ellen White's Earnest Appeal

TO THE GENERAL CONFERENCE DELEGATES IN
PREPARATION FOR THE 1888 SESSION IN MINNEAPOLIS

HEALDSBURG, CALIFORNIA
AUGUST 5, 1888

DEAR BRETHREN WHO SHALL
ASSEMBLE IN GENERAL CONFERENCE,

We are impressed that this gathering will be the most important meeting you have ever attended. This should be a period of earnestly seeking the Lord, and humbling your hearts before Him. I hope you will regard this as a most precious opportunity to pray and counsel together; and if the injunction of the apostle to esteem others better than ourselves is carefully heeded, then you can in humility of mind, with the Spirit of Christ, search the Scriptures carefully to see what is truth.

The truth can lose nothing by close investigation. Let the Word of God speak for itself, let it be its own interpreter, and the truth will shine like precious gems amid the rubbish.

It has been shown me that there are many of our ministers who take things for granted, and know not for themselves, by close, critical study of the Scriptures whether they are believing truth or error. If there was much less preaching by such and far more time spent upon their knees before God, pleading for Him to open their understanding to the truth of His Word, that they might have a knowledge for themselves that their feet were standing on solid rock, angels of God would be around about them, to help them in their endeavors.

There is a most wonderful laziness that is indulged in by a large class of our ministers who are willing others should search the Scriptures for them; and they take the truth from their lips as a positive fact, but they do not know it to be Bible truth, through their own individual research, and by the deep convictions of the Spirit of God upon their hearts and minds.

Let every soul now be divested of envy, of jealousy, of evil surmising, and bring their hearts into close connection with God. If all do this, they will have that love burning upon the altar of their hearts which Christ evidenced for them. All parties will have Christian kindness and Christian tenderness. There will be no strife;

for the servants of God must not strive. There will be no party spirit; there will be no selfish ambition.

Our people individually must understand Bible truth more thoroughly, for they certainly will be called before councils; they will be criticized by keen and critical minds. It is one thing to give assent to the truth, and another thing, through close examination as Bible students, to know what is truth.

We have been apprised of our dangers, the trials and temptations just before us; and now is the time to take special pains to prepare ourselves to meet the temptations and the emergencies which are just before us.

If souls neglect to bring the truth into their lives, and be sanctified through the truth, that they may be able to give a reason of the hope that is within them, with meekness and fear, they will be swept away by some of the manifold errors and heresies, and will lose their souls. I beg of you, my brethren, for Christ's sake, to have no selfish ambitions.

As you shall assemble together at this general meeting, I beseech of you to make a personal effort to cleanse soul and spirit from every defiling influence which would separate you from God. Many, many will be lost because they have not studied their Bibles upon their knees, with earnest prayer to

God that the entrance of the Word of God might give light to their understanding. All selfish ambition should be laid aside, and you should plead with God for His Spirit to descend upon you as it came upon the disciples who were assembled together upon the day of Pentecost. "They were all with one accord in one place, and suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing, mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them, and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the spirit gave them utterance." Let every heart be subdued before God. Let there be a taking hold by living faith for victory over Satan.

If all who claim to believe the Bible did believe it as the oracles of God, as actually a divine communication teaching every soul what to do in order to be saved, what a different effect would follow their labors. It is because so many who handle the Word of God in opening the Scriptures to others are not diligent students of the Scriptures, or doers of the Word themselves, that they make so little advancement in growth of grace and in coming to the full stature of men and women in Christ Jesus. They take largely the interpretation of the Scriptures from others' lips,

but do not put their minds to the tax of searching the evidences for themselves, to know what is truth.

All misunderstandings and controversies may be happily and successfully adjusted by the living testimonies of the Word of God. One of the greatest hindrances to our spiritual success is the great want of love and respect evidenced for one another. We should seek most earnestly, by every word and action, to answer the prayer of Christ, and to encourage that unity which is expressed in the prayer of Christ, that we may be one as He is one with the Father.

Every feeling of indifference for one another should be strenuously overcome, and everything that would tend to variance with brethren should be put away from us. The love of Jesus Christ existing in the heart will consume these little things, or greater things, which tend to divide hearts. Satan sees that in unity there is strength; that in variance and disunion there is weakness.

Heaven's enlightenment is what is needed, so that when we look upon the faces of our brethren, we may consider: These are they that have been purchased by the price of the blood of Christ. They are precious in His sight. I must love them as Christ has loved me. These are my fellow-laborers in the harvest field. I must be perfectly united with them; I must speak only words that will tend to encourage and advance them in their forward movement.

My brethren, you are Christ's soldiers, making aggressive warfare against Satan and his host; but it is grievous to the Spirit of God for you to be surmising evil of one another, and letting the imagi-

If souls neglect to bring the truth into their lives, and be sanctified through the truth, that they may be able to give a reason of the hope that is within them, with meekness and fear, they will be swept away by some of the manifold errors and heresies, and will lose their souls.

Our interests must be bound up with our brethren's, and it is decidedly nothing but the work of the devil to create suspicion and jealousies between the two branches of the work in our publishing houses.

nation of your hearts be controlled by the power of the great accuser, whose business it is to accuse them before God day and night. Satan has his soldiers trained for the special work of breaking up the union which Christ made so great a sacrifice to establish between brethren.

We are to be bound to one another in sacred bonds of holy union. But it is the work of the enemy to create a party spirit, and to have party feelings, and some feel that they are doing the work of God in strengthening prejudices and jealousies among brethren. God would have a sacred order to exist among His co-workers, that they may be bound together by Christ in the Lord God of Israel. We are to be faithful, frank, and true to the interests of each other. We are constantly to be listening for orders from our Captain, but not be guilty of listening to reports against our brethren, or imagining evil of our brethren.

Our interests must be bound up with our brethren's, and it is decidedly nothing but the work of the devil to create suspicion and jealousies between the two branches of the work in our publishing houses. We are working for the same cause and under the same master. It is one work; for the preparation of the people of God in these last days.

The prosperity and reputation of these institutions are to be zeal-

ously guarded, as we would have our own honor and reputation preserved. Everything like evil-speaking, every word that savors of sarcasm, every influence that would demerit our brethren or any branch of the work of God, are all working away from the prayer of Christ. Satan is at work in this matter, that the prayer of Christ may not be answered, and he has helpers in the very men who claim to be doing the work of God.

Everything that is said to create suspicion, or to cast a slur, or to demerit those engaged in these appointed agencies, is working on Satan's side of the question. It brings only weakness to our own souls, and is a great hindrance to the advancement of the work of God.

For years it has been shown me that everything of this character was grievous to the Spirit of God, and was giving the enemies of our faith great advantage to have misconceptions of the truth that God's laborers were seeking to advance. Some who think that they are really doing the Lord's work are traitors in the cause. They are dropping words that if they would consider they would know are the very line upon which Satan is at work to create dissension and to separate hearts. Envy is more common than we imagine, and prejudice is encouraged and becomes strong by indulgence in the hearts of those who should discern its bale-

ful influence and spurn it from the soul-temple. Jealousy is as cruel as the grave, but Satan makes this a masterly temptation, not only to estrange friends, but brethren.

It is high time that every soul intrusted with responsibilities should examine his own heart diligently by the lighted candle of God's Word, to see whether he is indeed in the faith and in the love of the truth. The spirit of love for one another, as Christ has evidenced for us will lead us to closely examine every impulse, every sentiment and feeling indulged, in the light of the holy law of God, that the heart may be opened to conviction whether or not we are keeping the principles of that holy law, or not. It is a positive duty, which God enjoins upon our souls, to bring our will and spirit under the control of the divine influence of the Spirit of God. When we do this, we shall rise above all these cheap and unconsecrated feelings, and every victory that is gained by our brethren we shall be just as glad to see as if it were gained by ourselves.

Brethren, when we are doers of the Word and not hearers only, we shall think much less of self, and esteem others better than ourselves. The greatest curse among our ministers today is, seeking for the highest place, full of self-importance and self-esteem, they do not feel their need of the constant grace of Christ to work with all their efforts. Whatever you are in Christlike character, in purity, in persevering energy, in devoted piety, will give you position and will make others appreciate you. We should closely examine the oracles of God. The garments of self-righteousness are to be laid aside. Let

the Word of God which you take in your hands be studied with simplicity. Cherish for it reverence, and study it with honesty of purpose. We are not to set our stakes, and then interpret everything to reach this set point. Here is where some of our great reformers have failed, and this is the reason that men who today might be mighty champions for God and the truth, are warring against the truth.

Let every thought, every word, and the deportment savor of that courtesy and Christian politeness toward each other, which the scriptures enjoin. God designs we should be learners, first from the living oracles, and second, from God how to treat our fellowmen. This is God's order. The Word of God is the great detector of error; to it we believe everything must be brought. The Bible must be our standard for every doctrine and practice. We must study it reverentially. We are to receive no one's opinion without comparing it with the Scriptures. Here is divine authority which is supreme in matters of faith.

It is the Word of the living God that is to decide all controversies. It is when men mingle their own human smartness with God's Words of truth in giving sharp thrusts to those who are in controversy with them, that they show that they have not a sacred reverence for God's inspired Word. They mix the human with the divine, the common with the sacred, and they belittle God's Word.

We must in searching the Scriptures be filled with wisdom and power that is above the human, which will so soften and sub-

due our hard hearts that we will search the Scriptures as diligent students, and will receive the ingrafted Word, that we may know the truth, that we may teach it to others as it is in Jesus.

The correct interpretation of the Scriptures is not all that God requires. He enjoins upon us that we should not only know the truth, but that we should practice the truth as it is in Jesus. We are to bring into our practice, in our association with our fellowmen, the spirit of Him who gave us the truth. We must not only search the truth as for hidden treasures, but it is a positive necessity, if we are laborers together with God, that we comply with the conditions laid down in His Word, and bring the spirit of Christ into our hearts, that our understanding may be strengthened, and we become apt teachers to make known to others the truth as it is revealed to us in His Word. All frivolity, all jesting and joking, all commonness, and cheapness of spirit, must be put away by Christ's ambassadors. All pride, all envy, all evil-surmisings and jealousies, must be overcome by the grace of Christ, and sobriety, humility, purity, and godliness must be encouraged and revealed in the life and character. We must eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of God. This is in doing His Word, in weaving into our lives and characters the Spirit and works of Christ. Then we are one with Christ as Christ was one with the Father. Looking unto Jesus we see how completely every attribute of God has been portrayed in the perfection of Christ. We are changed by beholding His image. Then we

are partakers of the Divine Nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.

There is no assurance that our doctrine is right and free from all chaff and error unless we are daily doing the will of God. If we do His will, we shall know of the doctrine. We shall see the truth in its sacred beauty. We shall accept it with reverence and godly fear, and then we can present that which we know is truth to others. There should be no feeling of superiority or self-exaltation in this solemn work.

All who have the truth can afford to be fair in discussion, for truth will bear away the victory. This is the only way the Word of God can be investigated with any success. If self is brought in there will not be an investigation of truth in the Spirit of Christ. All phariseism is to be put aside. All assumptions and pre-conceived opinions are to be thoroughly tested by the standard of truth.

The soul that is in love with God and His work will be as candid as the day. There will be no quibbling, no evading the true bearing of Scripture. God's Word is our foundation of all doctrine. Some think it is a mark of intelligence and smart in them to get up side issues, and they twist the Scriptures in a certain way which covers over the truth. ED

Ellen G. White

Letter 20, 1888, as published in *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials* (Washington, DC: Ellen G. White Estate, 1987), 38-46.



Deaconesses in the First-Century Christian Church

First Timothy 3 provides undisputed evidence that the office of bishop (elder) and deacon existed in the first-century Christian church. But what about deaconesses? Some believe that verse 11 supports their existence. Nancy Vyhmeister is a proponent of this view. The text states, “Even so must their wives be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things” (1 Tim 3:11, KJV). Vyhmeister states, “The Greek word, which can be translated ‘women’ or ‘wives,’ has been variously translated as ‘women,’ ‘women deacons,’ or ‘their [deacon’s] wives.’ . . . The suggestion that the term refers to wives of deacons presents difficulties, for in the Greek [manuscript] there is no possessive.

Whose wives were they? On the other hand, if one takes the context seriously, these women serve the church as do their male counterparts. Quite probably, these women were female deacons, as was Phoebe.”¹

Shirley A. Groh also believes that these women were deaconesses. She writes, “In 1 Timothy 3:8 ff. Paul speaks of the duties of a deacon. Then in v. 11 he says, ‘The women likewise must be serious, no slanderer, but temperate, faithful in all things.’ R.S.V. Many believe this refers especially to Deaconesses. They were to be cultured and devoted women.”²



Dorcas was a succourer—a helper, a protector, one who shields from suffering, and goes out to the aid of those in distress.

Other Scriptures indicate that female deacons or deaconesses existed in the first-century Christian church. In Romans 16:1–2, the apostle Paul writes, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord as befits the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a helper of many and of myself as well” (RSV).

The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* states that “the use of this term [deaconess] suggests that the office of ‘deaconess’ may already have been established in the early Christian church. At least Phoebe was in some sense a servant or minister in the congregation at Cenchreae.”³ Harold Nichols concurs with the idea that deaconesses were present in the first-century Christian church. He says,

In the New Testament church, when seven individuals were chosen to minister to widows and serve tables, all of them were men (cf. Acts 6:1–6). Nevertheless, the New Testament does record the presence of women workers in the churches. Paul wrote to the church at Philippi: “Help these women, for they have labored side by side with me in the gospel. . . .” (Phil. 4:3). In the letter to the Romans Paul wrote: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae . . .” (Rom. 16:1–2). These references imply that many, if not all, early churches had in them

women who served and were called deaconesses.⁴

Philip Schaff states that “Paul mentions Phoebe as a deaconess of the church of Cenchreae, the port of Corinth, and it is more than probable that Prisca (Priscilla), Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis, whom he commends for their labor in the Lord, served in the same capacity at Rome.”⁵ Schaff also indicates that deaconesses had charge of the poor and sick in the female portion of the church, due to the rigid separation of the sexes in that day. Groh gives this vivid picture of the deaconesses caring for the sick:

When we stop to remember that there were no hospitals, we can begin to imagine what a big job is implied even in the words saying that the deaconess “administered to the poor and sick.” No provisions were made for the sick except by this one woman worker. Imagine even a small out-break of flu with only deaconesses to administer help and probably care for sick mothers’ families yet, too. This is a full time job. People’s physical surroundings had to be set in order that Christ might better work in their hearts. In addition to this social work and nursing, the deaconess had the more strictly religious duties of teaching, doorkeeping, and assisting at baptisms. Here was no small task, and it required, as one author said, “A gifted individual with personal endowments of a religious kind” plus much courage to perform all these tasks.⁶

Therefore, Maurice Riley is correct by likening deaconesses to “Angels of Mercy.” She refers to Phoebe and Dorcas as biblical examples of such.⁷ Luke gives us the account of Dorcas in Acts 9:36–43. The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* states, “By some, Dorcas is regarded as a deaconess in the church at Joppa. . . . [She] may have had special care of the widows of the church.”⁸

Like Phoebe, Dorcas was a succourer—a helper, a protector, one who shields from suffering, and goes out to the aid of those in distress. She showed compassion for the underprivileged of Joppa, and made coats and garments to protect them from the weather. What an example for today’s deaconesses. **ED**

¹ Nancy Vyhmeister, “The Ministry of the Deaconess through History,” *Ministry*, July 2008, 18.

² Shirley A. Groh, “The Role of Deaconess through the Ages,” December 1955, <http://www.wlssays.net/GrohRole.pdf> (accessed October 13, 2008).

³ “Servant,” in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, ed. Francis D. Nichol, vol. 6, *Acts to Ephesians* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1980), 649.

⁴ Harold Nichols, *The Work of the Deacon and Deaconess* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1964), 86–87.

⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 1, *Apostolic Christianity (A.D. 1–100)* (1910; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 500–501.

⁶ Groh, “Role of Deaconess.”

⁷ Maurice Riley, *The Deaconess: Walking in the Newness of Life*, 2nd ed. (Newark, NJ: Christian Associates Publications, 1993), 33.

⁸ “Full of Good Works,” in Nichol, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 6:242.

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The Theology of Life

> PART II

In the religion of humans, change is expected to be external and immediate. But in the religion of God, of the grace of Jesus, the work of the Spirit is internal and takes time.

A BIBLICAL THOUGHT – 1

“See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. *For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh. But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.* For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.”—Galatians 6:11–16 (NASB, emphasis added)

In our last biblical thought we discussed the contrast between the religion of humans and the religion of God. In the religion of humans, change is expected to be external and immediate. But in the religion of God, of the grace of Jesus, the work of the Spirit is internal and takes time.

Concerning this, and Paul’s use of the language of farming and the space between sowing and reaping, one of my favorite authors, Eugene Peterson, writes, “The person . . . who looks for quick results in the seed planting of well-doing will be disappointed. If I want potatoes for dinner tomorrow, it will do me little good to go out and plant potatoes in my garden tonight. There are long stretches of darkness and invisibility and silence that separate planting and reaping. During the stretches of waiting there is cultivating and weeding and nurturing and planting still other seeds.”¹

In this issue we are coming to the end of the series “The Theology of Life” based on the book of Galatians. Here Paul is reviewing the issues that led him to write the letter in the first place: people changing the gospel of the grace of Jesus for another gospel—a gospel marked by human works and external obedience (circumcision). The temptation to make this change is ancient! It is at the very beginning of the Christian church. But Paul is arguing that there are motivations behind the desire to create a religion based on external things. Recently I read a powerful quote by author Timothy Keller that summarizes what is at stake in Galatia and in all Christian churches ever since: “The gospel is good news about what has been done to save you, not what you have to do to save yourself.”²

So with this in mind, notice how Paul begins the conclusion of his letter: “For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh.” Paul is exposing the method of the preachers of the alternative gospel and showing the true intentions of those emphasizing the works of the law. His argument: They do not keep the law! They do not care about the law! They do not care about God or you! They only care about making you into their own image, so that they can boast in their finished work, in their work

of making you into their image and likeness. So whenever someone who heard these preachers of the alternative gospel got circumcised, the preachers did not thank God; they thanked themselves for making another disciple—for making another person rely on them for truth, ethics, and life.

And within this context, Paul says, this is not my case!

What a contrast!

While some people in Galatia prided themselves in making people think and live as they did, Paul boasted in what Jesus did and does for people.

So our work, our job, is not to make people look like us, and show signs of external obedience. Far from it! Our job is to bring people to Jesus, so that in Him they can experience the joy of salvation, the joy of His completed work, and the joy of knowing that through Him we have the privilege of serving others in love, as He did. We are His workers; we are to sow the seed of truth and we are to wait for the work of the Spirit to begin in the life of those who believe.

Paul ends this section saying, “And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.” This is true Israel—those who depend on God to do the work for them and for others; who join Jesus in the ministry of reconciliation, of bringing people to the Father through the Son; and who

have learned to love truth, and not just believe it.

Think about this powerful quote from Ellen G. White: “Many take it for granted that they are Christians, simply because they subscribe to certain theological tenets. But they have not brought the truth into practical life. They have not believed and loved it, therefore, they have not received power and grace that come through sanctification of the truth. Men may profess faith in the truth; but if it does not make them sincere, kind, patient, forbearing, heavenly-minded, it is a curse to its possessors, and through their influence it is a curse to the world.”³

My dear reader, may we never lose sight of our true work—the work of bringing people to Jesus—so that we might boast in what Jesus does, not what we do, and let the truth take root in our lives.

A BIBLICAL THOUGHT – 2

“For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. . . . From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brandmarks of Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brethren. Amen.”—Galatians 6:15, 17–18 (NASB, emphasis added)

Now we conclude our journey through Paul’s letter to the Galatians. It has been a wonderful experience for me to study and share these words, to be reminded of the gospel of grace of Jesus and its effect upon the lives of all who believe. It is a gospel that sets us free from the bondages of the old religion to live a life of freedom to love and serve God and others based on the accomplished work of Jesus.

In the last verses of the letter resides a final lesson. Before Paul says

This is true Israel—those who depend on God to do the work for them and for others; who join Jesus in the ministry of reconciliation, of bringing people to the Father through the Son; and who have learned to love truth, and not just believe it.

Translating this to any church around the world there ever was, we are all one in Jesus. If we ever forget this, we will have forgotten one of the central teachings in the gospel.

his final goodbye to the church, he reminds them that “neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.” What is Paul saying here? When I read these words, I could not believe how appropriate and timely they are for any congregation.

Paul argues here that before the death of Jesus, the communal experience of worship and religion was divided between those who were circumcised and uncircumcised—those who were like “us” and those who were not like “us.” After Jesus’ death, as the young Christian church started expanding, the traces of the old religion were still present. People were still evaluating people by the dichotomy between “us” and “them.” This evaluation of the “other” got to the point where, as we saw previously, people tried to circumcise others in the Christian church so that “they” would become “us.” But the problem here is that this “becoming” took place by human effort—by human obedience to a law that was undone by the sacrifice of Jesus! So Paul argues that through Jesus’ sacrifice, all of the divisions that surrounded worship and religion are no more. And we know this because we remember Paul writing to the Galatians in chapter 3: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (v. 28, NIV).

When someone is in Christ, a new creation takes place. This new creation does not limit itself to the individual, but rather extends

to the community as well! In the past, worship and religion were articulated by differences and distances. But now, in Christ, the church is a new creation, a new corporate reality. The divisions of the world do not apply to the church because those in Jesus are a new creation. And to live in this new reality means looking at the “other” in a radically new way! No more divisions, no more distances; we are all one in Jesus. The new creation God works in those who believe individually, leads into the new creation of a corporate reality.

Translating this to any church around the world, we are all one in Jesus. If we ever forget this, we will have forgotten one of the central teachings in the gospel.

My dear reader, may the gospel open our eyes to see that there are no walls in a church built by the Spirit. And as we move forward together, may we value people, may

we value this unity we have in Jesus, and may we be thankful for the work of the Spirit in our midst. It is not only a work that Jesus prayed for, but it is the ultimate proof for the existence of God! So I would like to end our study with this prayer of Jesus: “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; *that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You*; that they also may be one in Us, *that the world may believe that You sent Me*” (John 17:20–21, NKJV, emphasis added).

ED

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 3.

² Timothy Keller (@timkellernyc), “The gospel is good news about what has been done to save you, not what you have to do to save yourself,” Twitter, May 14, 2019, 2:23 p.m., <https://twitter.com/timkellernyc/status/1128365111666724864?s=20&t=FGlu58UHK4sD5kdjuMrmhQ>.

³ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 309.

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“For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22, NKJV).¹

NEW LIFE IN CHRIST

Salvation in Christ expands to more than just redemption from the curse of sin; it also includes the start of a new life in Christ. This life begins when the old life is surrendered, a result of repentance.² Ellen G. White describes repentance the following way: “Repentance includes sorrow for sin and a turning away from it. We shall not renounce sin unless we see its sinfulness; until we turn away from it in heart, there will be no real change in the life.”³ Through Christ's sacrifice, we no longer have to stay slaves to our sinful ways. Instead, we are given the opportunity to turn away from our sinful choices and seek forgiveness. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). This is the promise God has given us: a life surrendered to Him is a life cleansed of sinfulness.

Because of our natural tendencies to sway towards evil, God has also gifted us with the experience of sanctification offered through the Holy Spirit. Sanctification refers to the process by which the Spirit forms believers to be more and more like His Son. Ellen White writes that “the atonement . . . is a divine remedy for the cure of transgression and the restoration of spiritual health. It is the Heaven-ordained means by which the righteousness of Christ may be not only upon us but in our hearts and characters.”⁴ God desires that His righteousness would be reflected in our thoughts and deeds. The Scriptures give us several ideas of how this can be accomplished.

Imitate Christ: “Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma” (Eph 5:1–2).

Renewing by the Holy Spirit: “He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior” (Titus 3:5b–6).

Beholding Christ: “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor 3:18).⁵

Through Christ's sacrifice, we no longer have to stay slaves to our sinful ways.

The technical word for this spiritual growth is “sanctification.” “By sanctification is meant the continued transformation of moral and spiritual character so that the life of the believer actually comes to mirror the standing which he or she already has in God’s sight.”⁶ Sanctification comes through a cooperation between us and God: God demonstrates His character to us, we position ourselves towards Him, and the Holy Spirit moves us closer to Him to be shaped in His image. We are told to “work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12) and to “walk in the Spirit” (Gal 5:16), meaning that God gives us the gift of being actively involved in the process. At the same time, it is only through the power of the Holy Spirit in us that real change begins to take place—a change in which we are meant to continually grow. “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 3:18).⁷ This is God’s desire for us, to let His sacrifice for us continue to make an ongoing difference in our lives.

By God’s grace, we are gifted with the experience of salvation. But that experience does not end with Christ paying our debts; it continues on to even more. We are given a new birth, a new creation, and a new life⁸ in which we may

live in union with Christ according to God’s plan for us. This concept can be seen within the Seventh-day Adventist worldview and is expressed in the 28 Fundamental Beliefs. Chapter 10, entitled “The Experience of Salvation,” states, “Through Christ we are justified, adopted as God’s sons and daughters, and delivered from the lordship of sin. Through the Spirit we are born again and sanctified; the Spirit renews our minds, writes God’s law of love in our hearts, and we are given the power to live a holy life. Abiding in Him, we become partakers of the divine nature and have the assurance of salvation now and in the judgment.”⁹

This is such a beautiful element of the great controversy. Because of what Christ has done for us, we are now empowered by His Spirit to live life the way He intended. Thus, He begins to enact His transformational work within us. Ellen White says, “The Christian’s life is not a modification or improvement of the old, but a transformation of nature. There is death to self and sin, and a new life altogether. This change can be brought about only by the effectual working of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰

The basis of both justification and sanctification is the love of God. It was out of God’s love for us that He sent His Son to die upon the cross in our place. It is out of God’s love for us that He empowers us with the Holy Spirit to live a new and better life. Given this knowledge, how should we respond? By loving Him as He loved us.

Sanctification comes through a cooperation between us and God: God demonstrates His character to us, we position ourselves towards Him, and the Holy Spirit moves us closer to Him to be shaped in His image.

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Some common questions that worldviews seek to answer are: *What is the basis for morality? What should be the motivation for my actions?*, and *How should I behave?* First John 4:19 answers all of these questions simply by saying that “We love . . . because . . . [God] first loved us.” What is the basis for morality and our motivation for behavior? The very love of God. How should we act and live our lives? Because He loved us, we are to live in a loving way towards Him and towards others.

Christ is our Redeemer and Rescuer, our Purpose and Motivation, our Example and Sculptor. Although once separated from God by sin, we are now reconciled to Him by the love and blood of Christ. It is through Him that we are saved from our own sin and brought before God as blameless. Because of the grace extended to us, we are able to be the people we were intended to be. Ellen White very beautifully combines this sentiment of Christ's work for us and in us, saying, “The righteousness by which we are justified is imputed; the righteousness by which we are sanctified is imparted. The first is our title to heaven, the second is our fitness for heaven.”¹¹

CONCLUSION

At the very center of a biblical worldview is the concept of a loving God who is both transcendent and imminent.¹² Jesus' work of redemption exemplifies this picture of who

God is—one who is compassionate and full of both justice and mercy (see Exod 34:6–7; 1 John 4:16). All of this can be seen in Christ's sacrifice. Ellen White writes, “It is the glory of God to be merciful, full of forbearance, kindness, goodness, and truth. But the justice shown in punishing the sinner is as verily the glory of the Lord as is the manifestation of His mercy.”¹³

While through the fall we were separated from God by the curse of sin, now through the grace of God we are reconciled to Him. In Christ sin and its barrier are destroyed. Through the work of Christ, our wickedness is cleansed, and we can stand before God faultless. No longer will sin keep us from Him. Instead, we will be reunited. This is the beautiful news of Christ's redeeming sacrifice. Our personal realities and destinies are caught up with this grace-filled act.

Through Jesus we are justified of our sins. Through Jesus we are gifted a heavenly mediator. Through Jesus we can receive sanctification. Through Jesus we see the true heart of God. “What kindness! What great compassion! The Lord, who is ‘righteousness in all His ways,’ offers His own perfect righteousness to any and every poor, weak, helpless, hopeless sinner who will believe what He says.”¹⁴ We have been given the perfect gift of righteousness, and in Jesus we may experience a re-creation. In the next article we will see what this re-creation will look

like, how it continues to answer questions of worldview, and what kind of impact it has on our lives today. ED

¹ All biblical quotations are from the New King James Version.

² “‘To turn from evil, and to turn to the good.’ Most critical theologically is the idea of returning to God, or turning away from evil.” “Repentance,” in *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), quoted in Bible Study Tools, accessed March 10, 2022, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/>.

³ Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press), 23.

⁴ Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1900), 419–420.

⁵ See also 1 Cor 11:1; 2 Tim 2:7, 14.

⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 875.

⁷ See also Rom 5:2–6, 20–21; 1 Cor 3:2–8; 13:10–12; 2 Cor 9:6–10; Eph 4:11–16, 20–24; Col 1:9–10; 2:6–7; Heb 5:12–14; 1 Pet 2:2–3; 2 Pet 1:5–8.

⁸ See 2 Cor 4:16–17; 5:17; Col 3:9–10.

⁹ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrine*, 3rd ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald, 2018), 135.

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 172.

¹¹ Ellen G. White, *Messages to Young People* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing, 1930), 35.

¹² James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 1998), 23–26.

¹³ Ellen G. White, “Laborers Together With God,” *The Review and Herald*, March 10, 1904.

¹⁴ Arthur Grosvenor Daniells, *Christ Our Righteousness* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 2009), 16.

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