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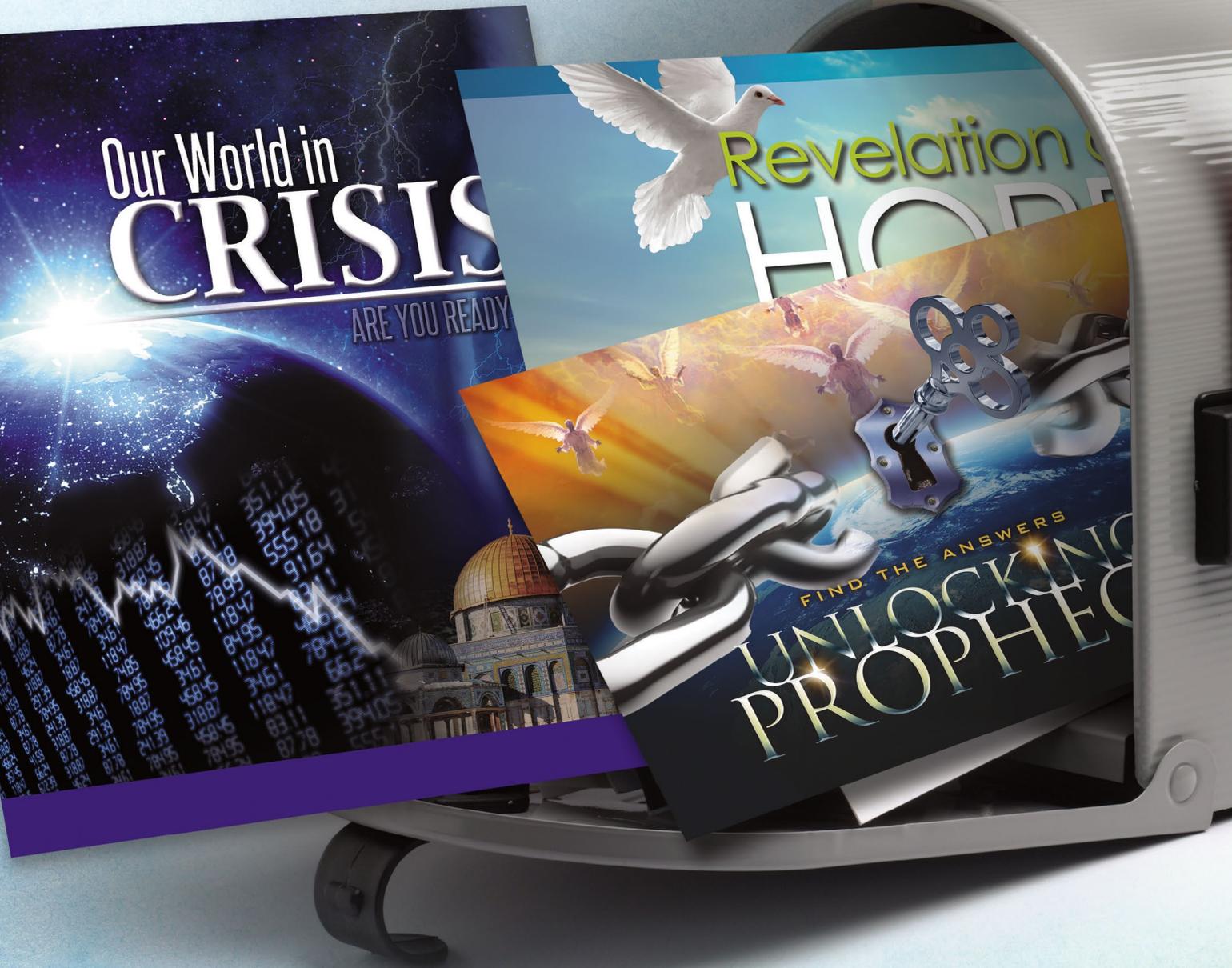
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR PASTORS



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THE BENEFIT OF CHRISTIAN FASTING

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**06 Gaining by denying: The benefit of Christian fasting—Part 1 of 2**  
*S. Joseph Kidder and Kristy L. Hodson*  
 The authors start this series by giving the background and advantages of all types of fasting.

**10 Reflections on Christian worship**  
*Marguerite Shuster*  
 Our Lord cares for the whole of this wounded and struggling world. His people should do the same.

**13 “Why do You hide Your face?”: Embracing apparent divine absence in spiritual life**  
*Dragoslava Santrac*  
 Though we may think God is absent, is He really?

**16 The parable of the rich man and Lazarus and tales of revelations from the afterlife**  
*Kim Papaioannou*  
 Does this parable and other epiphanies from the dead give validation to messages from the great beyond or is it a warning against them?

**21 Deep breathing of the soul: Honesty in prayer**  
*Jo Ann Davidson*  
 When trying to find an example for prayer in the Bible, we can look to Hannah, the psalmists, Bartimaeus, and Jesus.

**24 Spoken to, spoken for**  
*Sigve K. Tonstad*  
 When studying the Bible remember these two ideas.

Endnote 11 of The Discipleship Challenge by Michael Dörnbrack in the May 2016 issue of Ministry indicated that the discipleship course was being translated into English. The English translation is complete and can now be downloaded from <http://www.discipleshipcourse.org/>.

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**04 Letters**  
**05 Editorial**  
**26 Revival and Reformation**  
**27 Dateline**  
**29 Resources**  
**30 The Pastor and Health**

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*“A lot of work can be done from outposts even with churches established in the cities. As time passes, God will show people when to get out of the cities. But His counsel is to surely get out, while there must be dedicated individuals who will make the cities their burden.”*

### Living in the city? Or serving from outposts?

Thank you for Skip Bell’s article (“Serving Christ in the City”—March 2016). My view of Ellen G. White’s counsel regarding the cities takes a little different perspective. I certainly agree with the author that Mrs. White’s writings do not contradict themselves—even as the Bible does not contradict itself. We cannot say that the statements contextually give the right to live in cities today, for she spoke of the time of the end when we must leave the cities.

White writes in *Review and Herald*, September 27, 1906: “More and more, as time advances, our people will have to leave the cities. For years we have been instructed that our brethren and sisters, and especially families with children, should plan to leave the cities as the way opens before them to do so.

Many will have to labor earnestly to help open the way. But until it is possible for them to leave, so long as they remain, they should be most active in doing missionary work, however limited their sphere of influence may be. As they yield their talents and their all to God to be used as he may direct; as they live out their consecration by engaging in practical missionary work wherever opportunity affords, God will bless them with wisdom and discretion, and in his own way and time he will make it possible for them to place themselves where they will not be surrounded constantly with the contaminating influences of modern city life.”

Ellen White saw that there will be Adventists in the cities. Nevertheless, she saw the need for the masses in the cities to be reached. A lot of work can be done from outposts even with churches

established in the cities. As time passes, God will show people when to get out of the cities. But His counsel is to surely get out, while there must be dedicated individuals who will make the cities their burden.

—Ron Henderson, Alberta, Canada

### Spiritual growth

I read Dan M. Appel’s two-part series titled “How Does Spiritual Life Grow?” (January, March 2016) and found his concepts interesting—obviously derived from the stages of physical and moral development from Piaget and Kohlberg. I am not sure that this transposes to spiritual development. My concern is that this raises the same specter as contained in perfectionism. How well am I progressing? Have I progressed enough?

—William Johnson, Gosford, New South Wales, Australia

Recently, I forced myself to move through a rather large pile of reading that has been accumulating and growing on my desk for some time. The tyranny of the urgent has left me with little time for magazine perusal in recent weeks.

However, the article from Dan Appel (“How Does Spiritual Life Grow?”—Part 2 of 2) caught my eye, and I am so glad it did. I have re-read the article four times, and it has been so helpful to me. It would take hours to explain the full relevance, but his comment about how understanding these various stages of spiritual maturity will help us understand the different (and sometimes difficult) people in our lives yielded tremendous insight. What a breath of fresh air as well as a new goal to aspire to. It came at a good time.

It was a real encouragement in my day. Thanks for the great article and for your hard work in producing such a quality publication.

—Bob Cundiff, Westbrook, Maine, United States



# A final word to my friends

After wrestling with the call to join the General Conference (GC) Ministerial Association in 2005, I shared my decision with my Introduction to Pastoral Ministry students. I recall their shock that I was leaving university life. More than that, I remember the question one of my students asked. After I shared with him how conflicted I was while making my decision, he said to me, “What was there to struggle with? The GC is the pinnacle of success!”

Many times I have thought about that question and its ramifications for ministry; more so recently as the time has come for me to move to Berrien Springs, Michigan, where I will serve as a professor in the Christian Ministry Department at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary.

## Three questions

My thought process while contemplating this call did not differ from that of thousands of you who are reading this editorial. I can summarize my prayerful approach with three questions:

*Is this God’s will?* Admittedly while asking that question, I cannot ignore the potential impact on family, finances, and the future. My wife and two adult children fully participated in the nightly discussions. While those three factors played a role, the answer to those queries must not ultimately determine the path to take. That which supersedes the aforementioned is “What does God want me to do?”

*Will God be glorified through His gifts in me?* Dating back to my undergraduate years, I felt God’s call to a teaching ministry. And during the more than 30 years since I graduated, the Holy Spirit has nurtured His gifts within me. After I ran away from this most recent call for

a short spell, the LORD placed several people in my path who confirmed divine impressions upon me that years of service have suited me for this next challenge in life.

*Does God desire a greater faith walk for me?* Sometimes the journey requires that my faith be challenged more than it could be in my present circumstances. Moving from Texas to Maryland provided plenty of challenges that the LORD proved He was much bigger than. But I find that I need a refresher course—a reminder of God’s greatness. Addressing this question redirects the discussion from professional or personal considerations to spiritual realities. And spirituality and personal growth remain the greatest weapons in the ministerial arsenal, regardless of the role of the minister.

## Three words of counsel

The student to whom I alluded in the introduction isn’t the only one who thinks as he did. There are some who delight in titles and accolades (“I am the senior pastor of . . .” “I was privileged to baptize hundreds of souls last year.”). Many deem such accomplishments worthy of promotion. And for many, disappointment, hurt, embarrassment, and anger result when one is overlooked for a cherished position. But for us, as ministers of the gospel, *the focus must remain on the call to serve*. When we started in ministry, and definitely when we were ordained or commissioned to ministry, we vowed to serve wherever God placed us. Maintaining a focus on the call and not the job creates a healthy environment to bless God’s people.

Closely associated with the first point, *one should not strive to seek a “higher call.”* One can know they are

gifted to fill a position that many covet. But faith demands that we allow God to be God—allowing the Holy Spirit to move through the enlightened souls of decision-makers. The gifts He places in us will be recognized, acknowledged, and employed—not for our glory, but for God’s glory and the blessing of countless others.

Finally, in speaking with many men who have served as conference presidents, it became clear to me that *there is life after holding a position of major responsibility*. While it has been a distinct honor to serve in this capacity for a decade, I don’t see life in the GC as the ultimate ministerial experience. The office in which I sit, even as I’m typing, is not my office; rather, it is merely the work space that I have occupied for a season. The same will apply in the seminary building at Andrews University.

## The last word

There are too many people to acknowledge and thank in just a paragraph or two. But I must express my gratitude to all the hardworking ministerial secretaries throughout all 13 of our world-church divisions, their associates and staff, as well as countless pastors and professors that I have met over these last ten-and-a-half years. Your people are blessed because of you, and God will continue to bless you and bless through you.

And my undying gratitude belongs to Sheryl Beck, John Feezer, Clayton Kinney, John Fowler, Cliff Goldstein, Myrna Tetz, and the team at Pacific Press. We have worked together since my arrival here, and you have made me look better than I truly deserve. May God bless you all as you continue to faithfully serve Him. 🙏

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# Gaining by denying: The benefit of Christian fasting

## —Part 1 of 2

**F**asting is a spiritual discipline mentioned numerous times in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. The practice continued with the early Christians.<sup>1</sup> Reformers such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley encouraged regular fasting.<sup>2</sup> Adventist pioneers including James and Ellen White also advocated fasting.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, we do not hear today about the spiritual discipline of fasting unless it is in the context of times of distress or desire for revival.

Some may shy away from fasting due to misuses of the discipline or in an attempt to distance themselves from the legalistic ritual attached to fasting as proof of piety. Others do not feel the need to take part in what they consider antiquated customs or maneuverings for God's grace. In addition, fasting does not fit into our modern desire to compartmentalize the sacred and the secular. Yet, when we approach fasting as a way in which to deeply connect with the Creator of the universe, it brings with it great joy and spiritual renewal. The aim of this two-part article is to present a biblical view of fasting and demonstrate how and why it should be a part of every believer's individual and corporate Christian experience.

### The biblical meaning of "fasting"

The Old Testament uses four main words to denote fasting.<sup>4</sup> The most common of these is *tsowm*, used 26 times, and its cognate *tsuwm*, used 21 times. Each time these words are used in the context of temporarily denying oneself food. Fasts described with this word are usually declared by humans to beseech God's favor (Ezra 8:21), show repentance (Jon. 3:5), and/or as a sign of mourning (2 Sam. 1:12).

Another Hebrew word, *nazar*, translated in Zechariah 7:3 as "fast" (NIV), "abstain" (ESV), or "separating" (KJV), has been used ten times in the Bible. This word carries the sense of permanent or long-term separating and consecrating oneself for the sake of holiness. This term is most notably used (four out of the ten times) in respect to Nazarite vows (Num. 6:2–6).

The fourth word, *anah*, meaning "to afflict or humble," is sometimes used in the context of denying oneself through fasting. Two prominent examples of this use are in connection with the fast of the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 23:27–32 and David's intercessory prayer and fasting in Psalm 35:13.

From consideration of these four terms, we can conclude that fasting in the Old Testament indicates a temporary denial of food and humbling

of oneself before God to show great sorrow or to seek God's favor.

The New Testament uses three Greek words, all from the same root, to indicate fasting: *nēsteuō* (used 21 times), *nēsteia* (8 times), and *nēstis* (2 times).<sup>5</sup> These can be literally translated as "not eating," yet the context tells us that these words are used to refer to a ritual or religious practice.<sup>6</sup> For many during the New Testament times, fasting had become more of a ritual to show piety or habit than a way in which to draw closer to God (Luke 18:10–12). There was no joy in their fasting, evidenced by the chastisement Jesus gave to those who intentionally brought attention to their fasting (Matt. 6:16–18).

Jesus and the first-century church promoted fasting with a purpose. For Jesus, fasting was an intimate, personal experience with God, done individually or collectively, to build up strength in spiritual warfare (Matt. 4:2; Mark 9:29). The early church continued fasting in this manner and also fasted when committing church leaders to the Lord (Acts 14:23).

### What fasting is

In the Bible fasting was denying oneself food and drink to focus on spiritual growth (Matt. 17:21; Acts 9:9), prayer (Dan. 9:3), consecration (Acts

13:3; 14:23), deliverance (Esther 4:16; Ps. 109:24), corporate festivals (Lev. 23:26–32), resolution of conflict (Judg. 20:26), repentance (Deut. 9:18; Jon. 3:5), mourning (2 Sam. 1:12; 1 Chron. 10:12), supplication (Joel 1:14; 2 Sam. 12:16), or seeking God’s will (Acts 13:2).

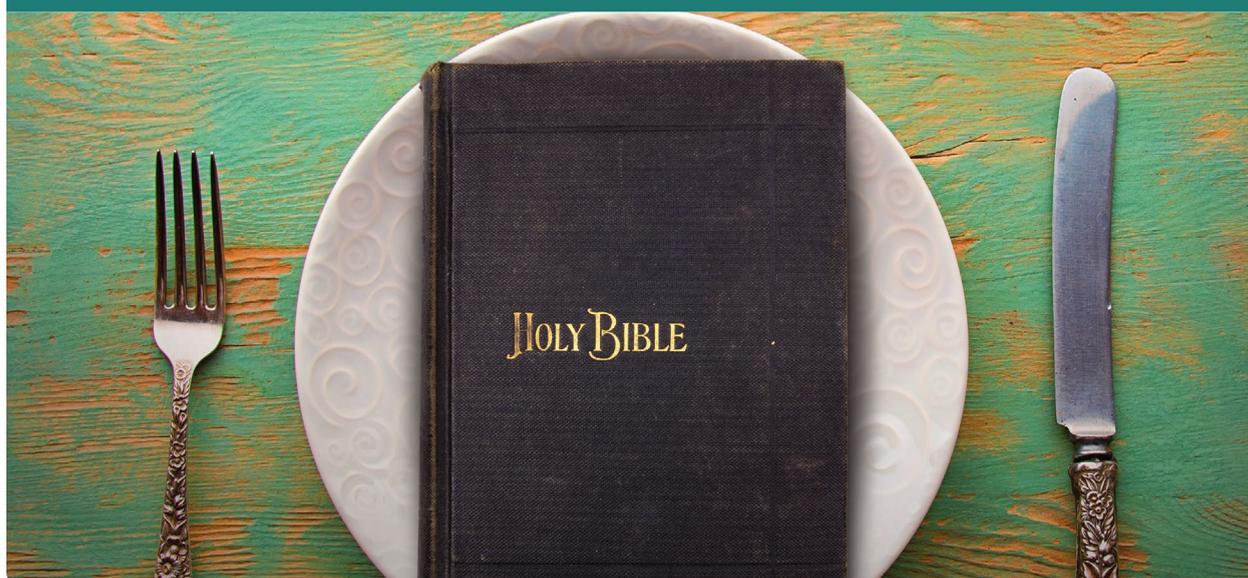
Fasting is seen in the Bible, not merely as an individual practice but,

individual fasts remained more common than corporate ones in both the Old and New Testaments.

While fasting usually refers to refraining from food and drinks (may not include water) for a specific period of time, some individuals may seek for a higher definition for fasting. Such Christians would define fasting as

In *The Upward Call*, one pastor refers to fasting as “blessed subtraction,” noting that the aim is to give up something—not necessarily a bad something—for the purpose of drawing closer to God.<sup>10</sup> I (Kristy) regularly set aside a block of time each year for a limited fast (anywhere from 3 to 40 days). When fasting I not only deny myself

*Fasting takes our attention away from ourselves and redirects it to heaven.*



also as a corporate exercise by the whole nation or a faith community. National days of fasting other than the Day of Atonement, which was a fast declared by God for the nation, were rare for the preexilic Israelites. Days of fasting were called as part of mourning a death, as was done by Israel after the death of King Saul (1 Chron. 10:11, 12), or in times of great crisis, famine, and invasion (Joel 1:14; 2 Chron. 20:3). National fast days increased during the postexilic period<sup>8</sup> to commemorate the destruction of the temple and the events leading to the exile.<sup>9</sup> However,

going beyond abstinence from food and drinks to include what they may consider to be lifestyle habits that may interfere with the ultimate goal of fasting, which includes a higher walk with God, a total devotion of time and thought to a closer communion with God, a fuller development of spiritual life, and fulfillment of a specific goal in the life of the individual or the faith community. Today such non-dietary items may include social media, shopping, sleep, sports, sex, or any other activity that may distract one from fully focusing on God.

something but also add something else. For example, by “fasting” from my usual wake-up time, I will get up one hour early and use that hour for extended quiet time and deeper devotionals. When the cravings for certain food items are felt, that becomes a trigger to pray for God’s blessing and guidance or to thank Him. It “is like tying a ribbon around your finger to remember God.”<sup>11</sup> A spirit of rejuvenation accompanies such periods of fasting.

Fasting without focusing on God means that we merely miss a diet. “The purpose is to notice the

false, non-life-giving things that [we are] attached to. And to purposely attempt to attach to the ways of God.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore the purpose of fasting is to enhance our relationship with God and go deeper in our prayer life. “When we fast, we are invited to feast on Jesus, the bread of life. . . . Fasting unto our Lord is therefore feasting—feasting on Him and on doing His will.”<sup>13</sup> Jesus, the Bread of Life and Gift from heaven, sufficiently satisfies our needs and leads to eternal life (John 6:32–48). Psalm 63:1–5 demonstrates that seeking after God wholeheartedly and praising Him will lead to a satisfaction that no food can bring. “You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water. . . . I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you” (vv. 1, 5).<sup>14</sup>

Ellen White encourages believers to fast, seeing abstaining from food as a way in which to focus on spiritual growth. “Men [and women] need to think less about what they shall eat and drink, of temporal food, and much more in regard to the food from heaven, that will give tone and vitality to the whole religious experience.”<sup>15</sup> This is the motivation when my (Joseph’s) wife Denise observes regular fasting. For her, scheduled fasting is about asking God for nothing more than a deeper connection to Him. The hunger she finds for God and the closeness to Him that she feels while fasting carry her through long after her fast has ended. Everyone can temporarily give up something in order to draw closer to God. By choosing to go against our human desires, we are allowing space for personal and spiritual growth. “Fasting helps to discipline the self-indulgent and slothful will which is so reluctant to serve the Lord, and it helps to humiliate and chasten the flesh.”<sup>16</sup> Fasting takes our attention away from ourselves and redirects it to heaven.

### What fasting is not

Fasting, as a spiritual discipline, has at times been misunderstood or used

in ways contrary to the will to God. In order to understand what fasting is, it is prudent to also look at what fasting is not.

**Coercion**—Fasting is not about twisting God’s arm. It is not some kind of spiritual hunger strike that compels God to do our bidding. God explains this in Isaiah 58: “ ‘ “Why have we fasted,” they say, “and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?” Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high’ ” (vv. 3, 4). Any pious intent was overshadowed by their lack of justice and compassion due to the evilness in their hearts (see Zech. 7:4–13). Their acts of fasting were not practiced in conjunction with the humbling of their hearts. Instead, their intentions were to force God into an action that the people did not merit. “They fasted merely to gain favor with God and to secure His approval of their evil deeds, as if abstention from food was of more importance in God’s sight than abstention from iniquity!”<sup>17</sup>

Attitude is everything when it comes to fasting. A group of more than 40 Jews in Acts 23:12–15 resolved to fast until they were successful in their conspiracy to kill Paul. They were not desiring God’s will, but their own selfish gain. Fasting is supposed to change us, not God.

**Penance**—God’s forgiveness of our sins comes with no requirement except confession and repentance (1 John 1:9). There was a time in church history, however, when fasting was “linked with a legalistic theology and the concept of meritorious works.”<sup>18</sup> This nonbiblical idea used fasting as a way in which to prove to God that one is worthy of forgiveness and to punish oneself. This false view of fasting has carried through to some corners of contemporary Christianity. There are those who undertake fasting as a way to punish the body for sinning or to force it into compliance. Fasting as penance

does not mean the same thing as the biblical concept of fasting for repentance (Jon. 3:5–9).<sup>19</sup> Repentance is the sign of a contrite heart and the desire to turn from sin, while penance is a self-inflicted punishment for the purpose of gaining God’s favor. Penance focuses on one’s selfish past; repentance focuses on one’s God-filled future.

Therefore, we should not deprive ourselves of food to punish ourselves to gain favor with God. We already have God’s favor through Jesus. “And all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:24; cf. 5:1).

### The purpose and benefits of fasting

Fasting is a discipline that is both physical and spiritual, building our faith muscles so that we can withstand the bigger contests that come our way. Fasting is more than just a spiritual training in self-control. Throughout Christian history, people have shared their positive spiritual experiences with fasting and its role in maintaining a balanced life.<sup>20</sup> One primary biblical reason to fast is to develop a closer walk with God and acknowledge our need for Him. We see this in the fast of the people of Nineveh marking their repentance (Jon. 3). By taking our eyes off the things of this world, we can focus better on Christ. An awareness of our physical needs reminds us of our spiritual needs. Jesus said: “ ‘ “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God’ ” ” (Matt. 4:4). Fasting reminds us that we can get by without most things for a time, but we cannot get by without God.

Fasting was an expected discipline in both the Old and New Testaments. Moses fasted for at least two recorded 40-day periods (Exod. 24:18; 34:28; Deut. 10:10). Jesus fasted 40 days (Matt. 4:2) and reminded His followers to fast: “when you fast,” not, if you fast (Matt. 6:16). David fasted for 7 days (2 Sam. 12:16–18); Mordecai, Esther, and her maidens fasted for 3 days (Esther 4:16); and the whole nation fasted on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:26–32).

Following are some biblical examples of why people fasted.<sup>21</sup>

- Fasting, combined with prayer, is a means that can be used to seek and find a more joyful, intimate relationship with God. “‘Even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.’ Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity” (Joel 2:12, 13).
- Fasting in the Bible is used as a way to humble oneself before God (1 Sam. 7:6; Ezra 8:21). David said, “I humbled myself with fasting” (Ps. 35:13).
- Fasting allows the Holy Spirit to work in you, showing you the “true spiritual condition [of your heart], resulting in brokenness, repentance, and a transformed life”<sup>22</sup> (Deut. 8:3, 1 Kings 21:27).
- Fasting transforms your prayer life into a more meaningful and personal worship experience (Luke 2:37, 38; Col. 3:17).
- Fasting can give you courage to do what is right in times of distress. Esther fasted, and asked those around her to fast, as she prepared to visit the king without being called. Such a visit could have cost her life, but it instead saved her people (Esther 4:16).
- Fasting and ministry go hand-in-hand. Jesus fasted at the start of His earthly ministry (Luke 4:1, 2). Paul fasted immediately after his Damascus road encounter (Acts 9:9). Elijah fasted to once again hear the voice of God (1 Kings 19:8). Prayer and fasting were part of the laying on of hands before sending out missionaries and appointing elders in the early church (Acts 13:3; 14:23). Prophets often fasted on behalf of their people (Dan. 9:1–19). “Then Ezra . . . ate no food and drank no water, because he continued to

mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles” (Ezra 10:6).

Fasting and prayer are strongly linked together in the Bible (Luke 2:37; 5:33).<sup>23</sup> When you fast, you will find yourself being humbled. You will discover more time to pray and seek God’s face. As He leads you to recognize and repent of unconfessed sin, you will experience special blessings from God.

## From fasting to feasting

The Bible presents fasting as something that is good, profitable, and beneficial. Fasting is not about a lack of food or depriving the body but rather a refocusing away from this world and feasting on the things of God. “Fasting is an exceptional measure, designed to channel and express our desire for God and our holy discontent in a fallen world. It is for those not satisfied with the status quo. For those who want more of God’s grace. For those who feel truly desperate for God.”<sup>24</sup> Fasting acknowledges our commitment to enhance our relationship with Him and helps us gain a new perspective and a renewed reliance upon God.

Part 2 will appear in the September 2016 issue of *Ministry*. 📖

- 1 The Book of Acts has at least four references to fasting as a spiritual act: Acts 10:30; 13:2; 14:23; and 27:9. In chapter 8 of the second-generation Christian work known as *The Didache*, believers are told to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays. *The Didache, or The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, trans. Tim Sauder, accessed January 14, 2016, [www.scrollpublishing.com/store/Didache-text.html](http://www.scrollpublishing.com/store/Didache-text.html).
- 2 See Martin Luther, “A Treatise on Good Works Together With the Letter of Dedication,” trans. and eds. Adolph Spaeth, L. D. Reed, Henry E. Jacobs, et al., accessed January 14, 2016, [www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/work-04.txt](http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/work-04.txt); John Calvin, “Institutes of the Christian Religion” 12:18, trans. and ed. Henry Beveridge, accessed January 14, 2016, [www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.vi.xiii.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.vi.xiii.html); and John Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount: Discourse Seven,” eds. Ryan N. Danker and George Lyons, accessed January 14, 2016, [wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-27-upon-our-lords-sermon-on-the-mountain-discourse-seven](http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-27-upon-our-lords-sermon-on-the-mountain-discourse-seven).
- 3 Both part 1 and part 2 of this article will provide details regarding the Whites’ views and experiences with fasting.

- 4 Word counts taken from the Hebrew lexicon as related to Strong’s H6684, H6685, H5144, and H6031 at Blue Letter Bible, [www.blueletterbible.org/](http://www.blueletterbible.org/), accessed January 16, 2016.
- 5 Word counts taken from the Greek lexicon as related to Strong’s G3521, G3522, and G3523 at Blue Letter Bible.
- 6 Friedrich S. Rothenberg in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Reference Library, 1975), s.v. “Fast.”
- 7 Some manuscripts as used in the King James Version and New King James Version of the Bible note that Cornelius fasted in Acts 10:30 for this same purpose.
- 8 *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (TWOT), 1890.
- 9 The fasts of the fifth and seventh months, as kept during the 70 years of exile (Zech. 7:5), were two such fasts. John J. Collins, *Joel, Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, The New Collegeville Bible Commentary, ed. Daniel Durken (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 94.
- 10 Wesley D. Tracy, E. Dee Freeborn, Janine Tartaglia, and Morris A. Weigelt, *The Upward Call: Spiritual Formation and the Holy Life* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1994), 95.
- 11 Lynne M. Baab, *Fasting: Spiritual Freedom Beyond Our Appetites* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 11.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 13 Dallas Willard as quoted in Jan Johnson, *Simplicity & Fasting*, *Spiritual Disciplines Bible Studies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 30.
- 14 Unless otherwise noted, all Bible verses come from the New International Version.
- 15 Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Diet and Foods* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1938), 90.
- 16 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (1959; repr., New York: Touchstone for Simon & Schuster, 1995), 169.
- 17 “Isaiah” in *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, revised, ed. Francis D. Nichol (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1976), 306.
- 18 Robert D. Linder in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. W. A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), s.v. “Fast, Fasting.”
- 19 Biblical repentance has its roots in the concept of turning away from sin and turning towards God. Fritz Laubach in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, s.v. “metamelomai”; and “בָּנִי־שׁ”, TWOT, 2340.
- 20 Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 20th anniversary ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 56.
- 21 This list is partially inspired by Campus Crusade for Christ International, “Why You Should Fast,” accessed January 12, 2016, [www.cru.org/train-and-grow/spiritual-growth/fasting/personal-guide-to-fasting.2.html](http://www.cru.org/train-and-grow/spiritual-growth/fasting/personal-guide-to-fasting.2.html).
- 22 Campus Crusade for Christ International, “Why You Should Fast.”
- 23 Jacques B. Doukhan, *Secrets of Daniel: Wisdom and Dreams of a Jewish Prince in Exile* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2000), 94.
- 24 David Mathis, “Sharpen Your Affections with Fasting,” June 4, 2014, [www.desiringgod.org/articles/sharpen-your-affections-with-fasting](http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/sharpen-your-affections-with-fasting).

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## Reflections on Christian worship

**T**he worship wars”: the phrase evokes images of generational conflict over styles of worship and, especially, music and impassioned references to the demands of a changing culture marked by increasingly uninterested youth and disaffiliated former church members. The discussion tends to assume that there is something very peculiar about our own time that demands radical and maybe unprecedented action. It seems to fail to recognize that debates over the virtues and hazards of extemporaneous versus liturgical forms, and the admissibility of this or that form of musical expression, go back centuries. Indeed, the Pauline epistles make plain enough that even the early church was not of a single mind about, say, what spiritual gifts might appropriately be exercised in corporate worship (note, for example, 1 Cor. 12–14). “Worship wars” are not new news!

Since, though, worship is, or should be, determinative of our whole lives as Christians, perhaps we can take a step back from these contemporary debates and ask ourselves more fundamental questions about what we think we are doing, or should be doing, when we gather together as a worshipping community. A *worshipping community*: when we worship, we intend to come together before a holy, loving God to offer our reverent devotion. We might rightly hope to be met and addressed by God

and expect to be called to respond with hearts and minds and lives, both in the service itself and when we go out into the world. We need always to remember, however, that nothing of eternal worth will take place if God’s Spirit does not enable it. We may be energized and inspired, but this is not a venue for motivational speech enabling a better grip on our bootstraps. We may be instructed, but this is not mere lecturing where the goal is a firmer grasp of facts and principles. We may be helped in the living of our lives, but the service is not an embodied advice column. We may experience emotional healing, but much more is at stake than pop psychology can offer. We properly experience fellowship, but not on the same grounds as those provided by a service club or a gathering of friends with like interests. We may, we hope, appreciate the quality of the sermon and the music, but the service is not fundamentally a performance to be rewarded by applause. In short, while our worship may include features of any of these experiences, it is destroyed if it is, one way or another, reduced to them.

How, then, might worship be shaped so that the primary focus remains on our Lord’s address to us and on appropriate, reverent response on the part of the congregation? These two characteristics are so woven together that they cannot be torn apart in the service itself, but we can separate them

for the purposes of discussion and can look at common (not exclusive or exhaustive) components of each.

### God’s Word to us

Let us take first, then, God’s Word to us. Beginning at the beginning, it is fitting that the service start with a biblically shaped call to worship, making clear by its very form and content what those gathered are there to do and are called to do by God Himself. God is the Initiator. Contrast the increasingly common “good morning” opening with a sufficiently loud response sometimes extracted by main force from the congregation—an opening that, at best, taps into simply human fellowship but has no reference to God at all and fails altogether to set a worshipful and attentive tone. At best, a casual, secular welcome can fit a service where announcements and such precede the real beginning of worship, though a sharp shift in emotional tone can still be difficult; and a human welcome is not a manifestation of *God’s Word* to us.

A call to confession, with the prayer (which is itself part of our response to God) followed by a biblically framed assurance of pardon, may suitably come early in the service, in order that we may be reminded of who we are as needy sinners forgiven and redeemed by a gracious Lord. The impact of the assurance is greater when the worship leader speaks it in the second person to

the congregation than when we tacitly forgive ourselves. True, appropriation, perhaps indicated by an “amen” or the “Gloria Patri” or a suitable chorus, is good; but we need to hear again and again from outside of ourselves what we may know but have trouble believing. Human words really can be an important means of grace. Some leaders will prefer to state the assurance conditionally (e.g., “if you have truly confessed your sins”) as a way of avoiding cheapening God’s grace in a culture more prone to defend moral and spiritual failures than to grieve them.

The reading of Scripture—good solid chunks of it, generally from both testaments, and preferably passages that inform one another—can hardly be overemphasized, not least given the vast biblical ignorance of too many congregants. Many will have their only exposure to Scripture in the service of worship. Furthermore, Scripture properly informs and judges the service as a whole. The reader needs to rehearse the readings, not to provide a “dramatic reading” that calls attention to itself but, to read accurately and with feeling so that the living character of God’s Word comes through. Longer readings must not be rushed through to save time, which conveys the impression that the reading is not really very important.

Of course, we often think especially of the sermon when we consider God’s Word to us in the service. Let it be indeed God’s Word to us and not an address merely jumping off from a text to arrive at a tear-jerking presentation of an especially good anecdote or a view of the preacher’s personal experiences and agenda. Wherever it falls on the wide spectrum between the word-by-word exegetical and the topical, there should be no possible question that it is firmly grounded in Scripture. Over time, it properly ranges over the whole body of biblical revelation. Always, though—somehow, somewhere—the gospel (good news) needs to appear, for who knows when this will be the very last chance someone in attendance will have to hear it. And, of course,

*Our concern is not attracting an audience but nurturing faithful disciples who need to gather together as Christ’s body (Heb. 10:24, 25) and express their love of the Lord*

suitable connections of biblical truth to daily life must be made, and the whole presented coherently and attractively, if hearers are not to suppose that the very thought of a sermon is very bad news indeed. Make no mistake: preaching well takes far more preparation time than most preachers regularly give.

Beware of the “children’s sermon”! Not that having one is a bad thing, but it threatens to be a real hotbed of heresy that is often well remembered and taken to heart by adults as well as children in the congregation because of its clear, graphical nature. For instance, the eggshell/egg-yolk/egg-white analogy for the Trinity teaches tritheism; the ice/water/water-vapor analogy teaches modalism. Both of these takes on the Trinity depart seriously from orthodox faith.

The benediction conveys God’s Word of blessing. While it may be preceded by a charge, it is not itself instruction or a demand but a gift of grace. Most congregants’ lives are in one way or another hard. They need strength for the journey as they are sent out—not just additional burdens to carry.

Baptism and the Lord’s Supper may serve as a transition between discussion of God’s Word to us and our response. Whether we see them most fundamentally as indeed God’s Word to us—the Word made visible—or as our response

to the Lord’s explicit commands to practice them depends on whether we come from a sacramental tradition that emphasizes grace (somehow) actually conveyed by them or from a tradition that sees them as ordinances, in which adherents seek faithfully to be obedient to Christ’s commands. Very few traditions, in any case, do not observe them at all. At the very least, they give a bodily, sensory experience of deep truths of our faith, engaging us as whole persons. Their deep symbolism and communal character should be clear in their observance, never cheapened or sentimentalized by, say, a coke-and-pizza Communion service for the youth group, or a couple’s romantic bite of leftover roll and sip of wine at the close of a candlelit dinner. We sense that we are dealing with holy things when we recognize our resistance to playing Ping-Pong on the Communion table or putting goldfish in the baptismal font or pool.

### **Our response to God’s Word**

When we turn to our response to God’s Word, we might think particularly of prayer, music, and the giving of tithes and offerings—the first two usually scattered throughout the service. Some traditions put heavy emphasis on the simple saying of the “amen” by the congregation; others may be characterized

by a vigorous “call and response” style. One way or another, whether formally or informally, worshipers are properly participants in the service, not mere observers.

Prayer—including presenting our sins and needs, our praise and thanksgiving, to God—has a sort of primacy: we need to speak to God, and he has taught us to do so in the Lord’s Prayer (used regularly by most congregations). The prayer of confession, by contrast, has fallen on rather hard times, with many worship leaders fearing that reference to sin will be off-putting to seekers. Yet to fail to recognize our desperate need for redemption is to make a mockery of the whole of what Christ has done for us. Thus, if a printed, unison prayer of confession is used, it properly focuses on real sins of omission and commission—not on vaguely stated oversights, stresses, and needs for growth that imply we really deserve to be excused for understandable missteps—rather than the need for forgiveness.

When time for private confession is given, the leader should give *enough* time, most of us have more sins than the leader’s tolerance for silence accommodates. Pastoral prayers naturally and properly take up the particular needs of the local congregation but should not stop there. Christ’s kingdom is not a merely local one, and Christ’s followers need to pray for concerns beyond their own. Our Lord cares for the whole of this wounded and struggling world. His people should do the same. How we pray will tell us much about our understanding of God and of how God does and does not work in the world and in our lives. Examining our prayers could lead us to examine not just our theology but the whole of our practical faith.

Music is a famously common sticking point, given the variety of musical tastes. It should go without saying that musical forms, including instruments employed, should be appropriate to the culture, not imported from outside as if forms themselves were normative. Still,

some expressions are more suitable for worship than others. One Christian college reportedly has a rule that if a song could just as well be sung to one’s boyfriend or girlfriend as to Jesus it does not belong in chapel. The point, of course, is where the worshipers’ attention is actually likely to be drawn, whatever their pious intentions might be. But especially important is what the words of the song or hymn teach theologically. Like children’s sermons, lyrics can be a hotbed of heresy, and words linked to music are especially well embedded in our consciousness. In fact, since they utilize a different part of the brain than spoken language, they may remain accessible to those suffering from brain injury or dementia. We should strive to make sure that what sticks so well is worth keeping! Early on (mid-third century) the orthodox sought to suppress the writing of new compositions because heretics were so effectively communicating their beliefs through hymnody. Similarly, Martin Luther famously valued the hymnal second only to the Bible and held that he would be glad to let his theological opponents preach the sermons if he could write the hymns. Today, one may, upon close theological inspection, judge that occasional verses even of established hymns might better be omitted; and if musicians are not well trained theologically, their choices of songs and choruses might best be reviewed by those who are. The catchier the tune, the worse it is if the meaning it carries subtly or blatantly misrepresents what the Bible teaches. And while truly unskillful musicians disrupt everyone’s worship, if a wonderful choir or band supplants the song God asks from His people (Col. 3:16), something still more serious has occurred.

Turning to the offering, it is curious indeed that we might sing piously, with Isaac Watts, “All that we have is thine alone, / A trust, O Lord, from thee,” and stick on the actual contribution of our tithes and gifts. Watts’s theological point, not some more self-serving

“health and wealth” philosophy, rightly grounds our giving. Thus, no embarrassment need attend the passing of the plate and the presentation of the offering to the worship leader, though of course manipulation of any kind is altogether out of place, and churches must be scrupulous and transparent in their handling of finances. Jesus did not hesitate regularly to put devotion to God and devotion to money as alternatives. Faithful stewardship is not a merely optional Christian grace, and Christians’ relationship to money deserves more attention than it generally gets.

## Conclusion

In short, if our worship, in lifting our hearts to God and being instructed by Him, does not shape our entire lives, something has gone seriously wrong—with our worship and lives. An ancient Latin phrase, *lex orandi, lex credendi*, usually translated “the law of prayer is the law of faith,” teaches us that what we *do* drives what we *think*: our practices in worship end up influencing our doctrine, what we believe. And what we believe must surely drive our behavior. If it does not, we might rightly ask whether the belief itself has roots. It follows that what we do on our day of worship is of enormous importance. It deserves the most careful theological thought, the most careful planning. The idea is not that it must be rigidly scripted (though liturgical traditions have much of worth and beauty to offer) but that it be genuinely, intentionally focused on listening to God and responding to Him, rather than being seduced by secular agendas of whatever sort. Our concern is not attracting an audience but nurturing faithful disciples who need to gather together as Christ’s body (Heb. 10:24, 25) and express their love of the Lord. If the body is alive—attentive to the Lord, engaged with one another and the world, full of praise and self-sacrifice and genuine integrity—the rest will take care of itself. 🙌

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# “Why do You hide Your face?”: *Embracing apparent divine absence in spiritual life*

**B**iblical spirituality is often depicted as an intimate walk with God, communion with God, and knowledge of God’s character and will—all of which lead to a righteous life (Gen. 5:24; 6:9; 1 Kings 3:3; Isa. 38:3). God acts on behalf of, and abides with, those who call upon Him (Ps. 118:5; Isa. 55:6; John 15:1–10). Examples of closeness of God abound in the Scripture,<sup>1</sup> culminating in Christ’s incarnation (Matt. 1:23; John 17:21) and in the work of the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 1 Cor. 6:19).

Yet one of the greatest spiritual challenges that people of faith have experienced is the sense of the absence of God (Pss. 22:1; 51:11; Isa. 63:11–19; Joel 2:17). Although the absence of God is far from being a complete absence (and so is better depicted as the “apparent absence”), in this essay I refer to it as “absence” in order to stress how some people experience it; and not in order to convey a theological truth.

Just as Divine Presence comes to expression in a variety of ways, so does *divine absence*. I will attempt to elucidate some aspects of the “absence” of God, as experienced primarily in personal life. Attention to the absence of God motif, I believe, is significant for those who, like ministers, endeavor

to be responsive to people’s religious experiences and concerns.

## Absence of God in the experience of pious individuals

At times, the worshipers of God, and even their enemies, wonder, where is God? (Job 35:10; Pss. 42:3, 10; 79:10). The question of *why God has hidden His face* is frequently asked.<sup>2</sup> The faithful respond to the apparent absence of God with lament (Pss. 22:1; 27:9; 30:7). God’s absence is felt like intense thirst in a dry land (Pss. 42:1, 2; 63:1) or as abandonment and mortal anguish without end (Job 17:15; 23:3; Pss. 6:2, 3; 102:1–7; Lam. 5:20–22). Jesus’ dying words, “My God, my God why have You forsaken Me?” (Matt. 27:46),<sup>3</sup> give just a glimpse into the coldness and darkness that surrounded Jesus when deprived of His Father’s presence.

Joseph B. Soloveitchik, a modern Jewish philosopher, writes that a believer “oscillates between ecstasy in God’s companionship and despair when he feels abandoned by God” and is tormented by “the awesome dichotomy of God’s involvement in the drama of creation, and His exaltedness above and remoteness from this very drama.”<sup>4</sup> The experience of Soloveitchik’s “lonely man of faith” is shared by believers who

say that they cannot feel the nearness of God at all times. I do not speak here about unity with divine nature, or the experience of the divine within, but about the sense of connectedness with God—which is sometimes experienced as the exceptional touch of God.<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther’s periods of depression may be, in part, reflective of the ongoing conflict between feelings of abandonment by God as well as ecstasy over God’s unmerited grace.<sup>6</sup> Mother Teresa confessed that, for nearly a half-century, she could not feel Christ’s presence in her heart. She writes: “Do not think that my spiritual life is strewn with roses—that is the flower which I hardly ever find on my way. Quite the contrary, I have more often as my companion ‘darkness.’”<sup>7</sup> For her, “darkness” was “an apparent absence of God from her life, and, at the same time, a painful longing for Him.”<sup>8</sup>

I do not intend to evaluate the possible influences on people’s religious experiences nor to suggest that they all have common background. I point out simply that certain experiences of spiritual desolation have been shared by some believers of all times and faiths.

## Absence of God as response to human sin

Separation from God is the consequence of sin; thus, it is a common

*Moments of God's absence sometimes bring clarity to the experience of God's immediate presence in the past and help prepare believers for a new experience in the future.*

human experience (Deut. 31:18; Isa. 59:2; Rom. 3:23). In the Scripture, expressions of this experience often are confessions of sins and guilt (Pss. 51:9, 11; 89:38–52; Lam. 5:7, 16). At the same time, *confession and abandonment of sin* lead to a renewed relationship with God (Ps. 32; Jer. 31:34).

David C. Steinmetz remarks that the struggle for sanctity resembles, in some ways, the fairy tale about the princess and the pea. Royalty, unlike other people, is supposedly so sensitive to any foreign object that a genuine princess would, therefore, notice a tiny pea even if it were placed under her mattress. Similarly, genuine saints display greater sensitivity than do other people in the presence of the smallest sin. Yet, Steinmetz contends, “[t]he unfortunate effect of this sensitivity is that real progress in the spiritual life may strike the saint as no progress, and a robust faith may feel like hypocrisy or unbelief.”<sup>9</sup> Individuals who struggle with feelings of abandonment by God, which are caused by guilt and fear, should be encouraged to remember that sanctity is God’s gift to them and not theirs to God. Peace and assurance of salvation come with acceptance of God’s grace (Ps. 32:1, 2; Rom. 5:1, 2).

### **Absence of God and transcendence of God**

Believers appear to have a tendency to engage God either as

transcendent, holy, and distant or as immanent, loving, and intimate. Practically this is reflected in some trends to place a greater importance on either outer religious observance or inner spirituality. Deborah L. Geweke rightly argues that “an experience that is oriented toward an *integration* of both the forensic and the mystical provides a communal context for spiritual experience, which reflects an ecclesial *integration* between identity and relevancy, religion and spirituality, and liturgy and life.”<sup>10</sup>

Experiences of Divine Presence and absence are not always mutually exclusive. The apostolic church experienced God as the One who was beyond His people, with them, and within them (Rom. 8:11; Eph. 4:4–6). The notion of God’s coinciding nearness and remoteness is conveyed in, for example, divine epiphanies accompanied by clouds and fire that imply both divine revelation and hiddenness (Exod. 13:21; 19:9, 16–18). Some personal feelings of divine absence thus may point to God’s transcendence and otherness.

### **Absence of God and the elusive presence of God**

Divine absence reflects the apparent elusiveness of Divine Presence. “The fact, however, that the divine presence is elusive does not imply it is illusory or lacking in reality.”<sup>11</sup> Quite contrary, the strongly felt divine absence can

strengthen one’s experience of God’s direct presence.

Ralph L. Underwood comments: “[P]eople speak about an experience of the absence of God. I suggest that such experience is essential to an authentic sense of reality of God. The simple reason is that if we experience God as always present and always attending to our well-being, then we have no basis, at least in terms of our experiences, for distinguishing God from fantasy or wish fulfillment. Certainly a number of religions, Christianity not the least among them, teach that God is present everywhere and always. My point, however, is that this belief is not based on subjective experiencing of God as always present, and if it were we would have no abiding confidence in the veracity of our claim, for such an experience is not distinguishable from fantasy.”<sup>12</sup>

Moments of God’s absence sometimes bring clarity to the experience of God’s immediate presence in the past and help prepare believers for a new experience in the future (Pss. 22; 42). In history, God’s absence in connection with the exiles was a strong indication of the Divine Presence that the people had lost, and as such was to be a motivation to seek God with renewed fervor and appreciation (Pss. 74; 79; Isa. 54:7).

The apparent elusiveness of Divine Presence is, perhaps, implied in the notion that biblical faith involves uncertainty and suspense as much as confidence and assertion. While we trust that God has taken hold of us, we know that we have no full grasp of God. One can confidently assert that the Lord is *my* God, yet this is confessed with reverent awareness that God is not *my possession*. Spiritual life is, thus, commitment that we make in love, trust, and hope (1 Cor. 13:12, 13).

### **Absence of God and silence of God**

God’s absence is sometimes referred to as God’s silence, God’s seeming aloofness in times of believers’ distress (Pss. 28:1; 39:12; 83:1). The silence of idols is the proof of their nonexistence (Ps. 115:5), but God’s silence is the sign of His

sovereignty and His ability to respond when and how He chooses. Thus “the face of the silent and hidden God is a form of revelation.”<sup>13</sup> From a historical perspective, during King Ahab’s reign God broke His silence after three years and six months by sending fire to consume Elijah’s sacrifice (1 Kings 18; James 5:17). Later, Elijah was shown that the Divine Presence could be manifested in unexpected ways, such as in “a still small voice” (1 Kings 19:11–13; compare to 1 Kings 18:37–39). Ekman P. C. Tam comments: “[W]e must be careful not to fall into temptation of expecting God to relate to us in the one and single way that we favour. It is important to remember that the experience of the silence of God is not less true and less blessed than the experience of the charismatic touch of God.”<sup>14</sup>

In the Scripture, God seems present in and speaks through silence, but, unlike in some mystic traditions,<sup>15</sup> is not silence. In other words, the silence of God does not imply the silent God but culminates in divine intervention. This often precedes God’s judgment (Ps. 50:3, 21) and deliverance (Ps. 62:1; Ezek. 29:21). Martin Luther criticized negative theology (the *Via Negativa*), which promoted entering God’s silence as the cloud of unknowing and losing the conceptualization of God, and argued that believers should abide in the revelation of God in Christ on the cross.<sup>16</sup> God has made Himself known in Christ (John 1:18), and believers trustingly turn to this vision of God.

## Absence of God and invisible presence of God

The lives of some people of faith, like Joseph and Esther, demonstrate that the apparent absence of God is, in reality, God’s invisible presence that works “behind the scenes.” Elisha prayed that God would open the eyes of the young man to see that God was with His people (2 Kings 6:17). We are reminded that “[f]or now we see in a mirror, dimly” and “know in part” (1 Cor. 13:12). “We hope for what we do

not see” (Rom. 8:25). Yet by faith, which is “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1), believers can abide in the assurance of Divine Providence in their lives.

## Bearing the absence of God

The apparent absence of God poignantly reminds us that our walk is by faith and not by sight. If we have only what we have experienced, we have nothing; if we have the inspiration of the vision of God, we have more than we can experience. This calls for patience, commitment, and humility. Sometimes the experience of divine silence is designed to empower us to enter into a closer relationship with God by strengthening our hopeful anticipation of renewed closeness with Him.

The silence of God teaches us to let go of our expectations and demands for what God should do to us and build our relationship with Him on faith and trust. *Walking by faith* means not surrendering to doubts and feelings of desolation, but acting on one’s convictions. Though sometimes believers may have special feelings of nearness of God, feelings are not the ultimate measure of God’s presence.

The call for Christ’s disciples to partake of Christ’s sufferings (Gal. 6:17; Phil. 3:10; 1 Pet. 4:13) can sometimes take them through periods of God’s silence like those that Christ experienced (Matt. 4:1–11; 26:36–45; 27:46). Then we are brought closer to our Lord—who longed for an uninterrupted union with his Father and cried for the salvation of humankind.

God’s apparent absence in the personal life can lead believers to receive divine comfort in the community (Pss. 22; 42; Phil. 2:1). In Psalm 73, the concern for God’s people (v. 15) led the psalmist to the sanctuary where he experienced a remarkable transformation from doubting God’s presence (vv. 11–13) to enjoying it fully (vv. 23, 28).

The sense of the apparent absence of God also reminds us that we are still

not fully restored but remain part of this corrupted world (Rom. 8:19–26). This situation makes us long for the time “when this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality” (1 Cor. 15:53) and for a life of incessant communion with God in His kingdom (Rev. 21:3; 22; 23). **V**

- 1 For example, God’s presence is revealed in God’s past acts of creation (Isa. 40:28) and great deeds in Israel’s history (Pss. 78; 105), in His present blessings (Pss. 4:3; 18:3), and promises of future prosperity (Ezek. 43:7–9). God dwelt among His people in the sanctuary (Exod. 25:8) and engaged with his servants “face to face” (Gen. 32:30; Exod. 33:11).
- 2 For example, Job 13:24; Pss. 10:1; 13:1; 44:24; and 88:14.
- 3 This and other biblical quotations are taken from the New King James Version.
- 4 Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2, 47, quoted in Simon Cooper, “Theological Proximity: The Quest for Intimacy with God,” in *Jewish Theology in Our Time: A New Generation Explores the Foundations & Future of Jewish Belief*, ed. Rabbi Elliot J. Cosgrove (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2010), 131.
- 5 For a treatment of the distinction between unity with divine nature and connectedness with Christ, see Scott Hendrix, “Martin Luther’s Reformation of Spirituality,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (1999): 256–58.
- 6 Scott H. Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 181, 261.
- 7 Mother Teresa, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light; The Private Writings of the “Saint of Calcutta,”* ed. Brian Kolodiejchuk (New York: Doubleday Religion, 2007), 20.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 21, 22.
- 9 David C. Steinmetz, “Growing in Grace,” *Christian Century*, October 30, 2007, 10.
- 10 Deborah L. Geweke, “Ampersand Faith: Reintegrating Liturgy and Life through a Reappropriation of Mystical Theology and Praxis,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 38 (2010): 258. For Geweke “the mystical” is “that part of its [Christian] belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness for, and reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God.” (*Ibid.*, 259). “The forensic” refers to the legal aspects of justification. *Ibid.*, 257–58.
- 11 Ralph L. Underwood, “The Presence and Absence of God in Object Relational and Theological Perspectives,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 14 (1986): 301.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 302.
- 13 Paolo Torresan, “Silence in the Bible,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 31 (2003): 159.
- 14 Ekman P. C. Tam, “Silence of God and God of Silence,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 16 (2002): 159.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 157, 163.
- 16 For an overview of Luther’s critique of negative theology of the mystics, see Paul Rorem, “Martin Luther’s Christocentric Critique of Pseudo-Dionysian Spirituality,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 11 (1997): 291–307.

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# The parable of the rich man and Lazarus *and tales of revelations from the afterlife*<sup>1</sup>

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus<sup>2</sup> (henceforth, the parable) has long perplexed Bible students. For conditionalists like me, who believe that death is a state of no consciousness and hell a place of ultimate destruction, it poses a twin challenge: (a) it depicts continued, conscious existence after death; and (b) the fire torments rather than destroys.

Though often cited as support, the parable does not back the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. This story depicts not immortal souls floating in heaven or hell but actual persons with full physical capacities to see, hear, speak, and feel heat and cold. Indeed, the existence of the two protagonists seems a completely reversed continuation of their lives before death with only the location changed.

The parable is unique, with no direct or even remote relation to other Bible stories. Darrell Bock has called it the “most complex” of Jesus’ stories.<sup>3</sup> For such reasons, scholars of different outlooks advise that it should not be viewed as a road map of the afterlife.<sup>4</sup>

## Previous defense

Be that as it may, the parable is very difficult to fit into a conditionalist outlook. The main conditional defense has been to utilize Adolf Jülicher’s approach

to parables, namely, that parables are example stories with one main point, with the details serving only as props.<sup>5</sup> In this parable, the main point may be that there is no opportunity for repentance after death.

This line of defense is not without merit but raises difficult questions. Why would Jesus tell a parable with so many details if the details were unimportant? And why use theologically awkward details? The same main point could have been made in much better and theologically palatable language. Seemingly, something deeper is at stake, and the attempt to dismiss the importance of the details ultimately fails to satisfy.

In this short study, I argue that Jesus shows His familiarity with a genre of stories prevalent throughout the ancient Mediterranean world and deconstructs this story in such a way so as to both discredit the genre and reinforce the biblical outlook.

## Nonbiblical narratives

Scholars recognize that no direct parallel to this parable exists in the Bible. They also recognize that similar stories were prevalent throughout Mediterranean cultures. Two types of stories can be discerned: (a) those of reversal of fortune in the afterlife that

have direct parallels to the parable; and (b) those about revelations from the afterlife that offer a broad, general background into views of the afterlife.

*Stories of reversal of fortune: The search for an immediate background.* A number of reversal of fortune stories may be noted. The best known is an Egyptian folktale (first century AD).<sup>6</sup> An Egyptian magician, Si-osisir, returns from Amente, the land of the dead, and is reincarnated into the poor family of Setme. One day father and son come across two funerals—one of a rich man, complete with splendid honors; the other of a poor man, who is cast into a common necropolis. On seeing this, Setme wishes for an end similar to that of the rich man. The young Si-osisir, however, knows otherwise. He therefore takes his father on a tour of Amente, where they see the rich man in torment vividly described, while the poor man stands justified by the side of Osiris, the judge of humankind.

A similar Jewish story is the Bar Mayan tale (first–second century AD).<sup>7</sup> Bar Mayan, a sinful and rich tax collector, dies and receives a splendid funeral. A poor torah scholar also dies, unnoticed, and receives a most humble burial. This leads an onlooker to question the justice of God. In reply, God reveals that the fate of the two reversed after death.

Bar Mayan had done one good deed in his life, and he receives his reward in his splendid funeral. The poor scholar had done one bad deed, atoned for through his poor burial. The tax collector can now face the torments of hell without respite while the poor scholar faces the joys of heaven without hindrance.

Ronald Hock points to a similar story told by Lucian (c. AD 120–180) from a Hellenistic background.<sup>8</sup> Three men die and are taken to Hades—the rich tyrant Megapenthes, the poor shoe-

report what he has seen, presumably to warn the living.

Plutarch (AD 46–120) tells a similar story about Thespesius and Clearchus of Soli about Cleonymus.<sup>11</sup> The latter tale has an interesting twist. While in Hades Cleonymus meets another temporary visitor. They agree that, once they return to the land of the living, they will maintain contact with each other.

Lucian tells another tale of return. A man called Cleomenes falls ill. But his time has not yet come. In a case

Jannes informs Jambres of his sufferings and of the justice of his fate and urges Jambres to repent, though we do not know the outcome.<sup>14</sup>

We see, therefore, that stories of reversal of fortune at death, as in the parable, as well as revelations from afterlife, as requested in the parable, abounded in the ancient world. We have a very clear background which Jesus' audience would have been aware of and against which the parable can be understood.

*With one bold stroke, with one powerful statement, Jesus dismisses all supposed revelations from the dead!*

maker Micyllus, and a philosopher. In judgment, the philosopher and Micyllus are found spotless and are sent to the blessed isles, while Megapenthes, found guilty, is punished accordingly.

What do these folktales show? They show that the motif of a reversal of fortune in the afterlife was common among different cultures of the Mediterranean world.<sup>9</sup>

*Accounts of revelations of the afterlife: Establishing a broader background.* While stories of reversal in the afterlife form the most direct background to our parable, another broader background needs to be understood: the existence of stories of revelations from afterlife, involving a return from the dead, since the parable explores (but rejects) such a return. Such stories abound. I will discuss a few here.

Plato (428–348 BC) tells the story of a soldier, Er the Pamphylian,<sup>10</sup> who is killed in battle but revives several days later. While “dead” Er visits Hades and sees a judgment in which the good go to heaven and the wicked are punished. He is specifically told to return and

of mistaken identity, he is brought to Hades, only to be informed that his neighbor Demylus should have been brought instead. Cleomenes is therefore sent back and within a few days Demylus dies.

Such tales, though from a pagan background, quickly found their way into Jewish and Christian tradition. The Babylonian Talmud (second–fifth centuries AD)<sup>12</sup> tells an apocryphal story of Samuel the prophet—to whom some orphans entrust a substantial amount of money that he deposits with his father, Abba. Abba hides the money but dies before informing Samuel where he put it. Desperate to retrieve the entrusted money, Samuel visits Abba in the land of the dead, learns the location of the hidden money, restores it to the orphans, and all becomes well.

A Christian example is the story of Jannes and Jambres (first–second century AD)—two magician brothers who, according to tradition—opposed Moses in Pharaoh's court.<sup>13</sup> Jannes dies. Jambres calls Jannes's spirit up from hell through necromancy, and

### Three common elements

Three common elements connect all the relevant nonbiblical tales into a coherent genre. First, revelations from the dead were always told with the purpose of bringing some improvement to the living, including repentance. Contrary to the Bible, which declares that the dead “know nothing” (Eccles. 9:5), such stories presuppose that the dead know more than the living and so can benefit the living.

Second, a message from the dead could come in a variety of ways, like a visit to the dead in bodily form (e.g., Samuel) or as disembodied spirits (Er or Cleomenes). At other times, the dead could visit the living as ghosts or in visions (Jannes), on their own initiative or by being called through necromancy (Jannes). Bodily resurrection is never involved because in the pagan cultures where such tales originally developed, there was no bodily resurrection (Acts 17:32).

Third, revelations from the dead always include an eyewitness, usually named and well-known. The presence

of named and known eyewitnesses served to lend credibility to such tales which otherwise would sound incredulous. Interestingly, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is the only one of Jesus' parables with named characters.<sup>15</sup>

With this background we can now turn our attention to the parable.

### The parable's first part—deconstruct to discredit

The parable has two parts: (a) the rich man's request for relief and (b) his second request that Lazarus be sent to his five living brothers. Bauckham suggests that often the point where a story departs from the expected is where its importance lies.<sup>16</sup> Now we will see how both the first and second parts of the parable depart in very important ways from stories of supposed revelations from the afterlife and gauge the importance of such departures.

The first part of the parable begins as a typical tale of reversal of fortune—a rich and a poor man die, and at death their fortunes are reversed. Despite this conventional beginning, a number of peculiarities immediately begin to trouble the reader.

First, Lazarus, while alive, tried to be “fed” by crumbs falling off the rich man's table (Luke 16:21).<sup>17</sup> The Greek verb *chortazō* does not mean “fed” but “being filled,” “satisfied,”<sup>18</sup> or filled with food to the full. Can someone really be filled and satisfied with crumbs falling off a table?

Second, when Lazarus dies, he is taken to “Abraham's bosom” (Luke 16:22). What is Abraham's bosom? The phrase appears only here. Most assume it to be a byword for heaven.<sup>19</sup> However, in the parable it appears as a literal description: the rich man looks up and sees “Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom” (Luke 16:23). Do the righteous dead sit in Abraham's bosom? How many can sit there?

Third, when the rich man saw Abraham in the distance, he “called out/cried” (ESV/NKJV) to him (Luke 16:24). The Greek word is *phonizō*. It means, “to call out,”<sup>20</sup> and carries no drama. A

person in severe torment, like the rich man, would have “shrieked,” “cried out” (Greek, *krazō*), or at least call out “with a very loud and pain-filled voice.” But the rich man does not. He raises his voice, just enough to be heard, but perhaps not so loud as to disturb, “Father Abraham . . . helloooo . . .”

Fourth, the rich man in Hades experiences torment (KJV/NKJV) or anguish (ESV/RSV) (Luke 16:24). The Greek *odunōmai* and the cognate *odunē* are used four other times in the New Testament<sup>21</sup> and refer to emotional anguish, grief, and sorrow.<sup>22</sup> So the rich man is in literal flames, but experiences emotional anguish, which he tries to quell with literal water!

Fifth, to quell his pain, the rich man requests that Lazarus dip “the tip of his finger” (Luke 16:24) in water and bring it over. He could have asked for a bucket of water—or at least that Lazarus scoop some water or dip his garment in water. How much water can the tip of the finger carry? And would it remain on the finger and fresh while carried through the fires of torment? Here Joseph Fitzmyer sees a hyperbole to highlight the severity of the torments.<sup>23</sup>

Sixth, the rich man expects that minuscule amount of water to “cool” his tongue (Luke 16:24). The Greek is *katapsuchō*,<sup>24</sup> a compound word made up of the verb *psuchō* “to make cold” and the prefixed preposition *kata* that functions to make something more emphatic.<sup>25</sup> To illustrate, in Modern Greek *katapsuchō* refers to the compartment of the refrigerator that freezes the food. The rich man therefore expects the minuscule amount of water, carried on the tip of Lazarus' finger over the tormenting fires, to freeze his tongue and quell his emotional anguish!

Why does Jesus use such weird descriptions? And so detailed? Surely they are not just props. Neither are they incidental.

I would like to propose that such descriptions have a tint of sarcasm and aim to discredit the type of genre that they emulate, the vast pool of stories of supposed revelations from the afterlife. Sarcasm is often the best

tool to deconstruct a system of thought and is used elsewhere in the Bible.<sup>26</sup>

### The parable's second part—deconstruct to reinforce the biblical outlook

In contrast to the first part of the parable, the second is solemn and poignant. Here Jesus hits the nail on the head, so to speak, when it comes to death and the supposed visits of the dead to the living.

We noted that all stories from nonbiblical backgrounds shared three common characteristics. Revelations from the dead (a) can enlighten the living; (b) do not include resurrection; and (c) include eyewitnesses. Jesus deconstructs all three points.

First, when the rich man requests that Lazarus be sent to the five living brothers to warn them, he is confident this will be so: “ “I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment” ’ ” (Luke 16:27, 28).

The reply shocks him: “ “They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them” ’ ” (Luke 16:29). Evidently the witness of Scripture (“Moses and the prophets”) is more than adequate.

The rich man replies, “No” (Luke 16:30). The Greek *ouchi* is not a simple negation “no,” but an emphatic “No!” The rich man who has accepted, without complaint, his miserable fate, as well as Abraham's refusal to send relief, cannot accept that a revelation from the dead is immaterial to repentance and rebels. His incredulity probably reflects the incredulity of the masses who similarly believed in the efficacy of revelations from the dead.

To drive home the point, Jesus repeats the statement with more emphasis: “ “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead” ’ ” (Luke 16:31). Supposed revelations from the dead cannot bring repentance; only obedience to Scripture can. “If they do not listen

to the voice of God in His word, the testimony of a witness raised from the dead would not be heeded.”<sup>27</sup>

From an interbiblical perspective, there is a connection here with the resurrection of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. The Pharisees had rejected the testimony of Scripture about Jesus as well as the biblical preaching and teaching of Jesus. Having rejected these, when Lazarus was raised from the dead, they rejected the manifested power of Jesus. Instead of believing in what Jesus did, they sought to put Lazarus to death (John 12:10).

Second, the parable makes a case for the return from the dead. In Luke 16:27 the rich man requests that Abraham “send” Lazarus to his living brothers. When this request is denied, Luke 16:30 reinforces the request that if one from the dead “goes” to the earth, his brothers will listen. Neither statement indicates resurrection. Any one of

the modes of communication between the living and the dead prevalent in the Mediterranean worldviews and discussed in the section on the nonbiblical background is probably fine.

To the rich man’s open-ended request, Abraham affirms that the only way a person can return from the dead is through bodily resurrection: “ ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead’ ” (Luke 16:31).

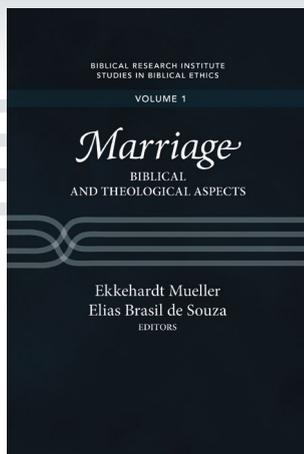
Third, and perhaps most important, is the eyewitness. In the parable, apart from Abraham, Lazarus is mentioned. This is the only parable that names characters. “Lazarus” is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Eliezer. Eliezer was Abraham’s most trusted and only named servant (Gen. 15:2).

In Jewish, nonbiblical, non-conditionalist cosmology, Abraham was the highest human in heaven. So if heaven were to send a message from

the dead to humanity, the best candidate would be Abraham’s most trusted servant, Eliezer/Lazarus! Of course, the parable does not state that Lazarus served as Abraham’s servant Eliezer. But fairly obviously, in the audience’s mind some connection between the two would be made. As such, Eliezer/Lazarus would be the ideal candidate to return from the dead.

So the parable creates the ideal eyewitness from the dead, but refuses to send him, not because God cannot send someone back from the dead through resurrection; neither because God does not want to help the five brothers in need of repentance; but because it is not necessary or useful. “ ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead’ ” (Luke 16:31).

And God will not do that which is unnecessary. And if God does not do something now because this task is



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unnecessary, He has not done it in the past and will not do it in the future. This means that all the supposed eyewitnesses from the dead, who came to bring enlightenment to the living, have not been sent by God and their supposed revelations are not from God.<sup>28</sup> What a statement! With one bold stroke, with one powerful statement, Jesus dismisses all supposed revelations from the dead!

In essence, through the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus repeats the prohibition of Deuteronomy 18:10–12: “There shall not be found among you anyone . . . who practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For all who do these things are an abomination to the LORD, and because of these abominations the LORD your God drives them out from before you.”

## Conclusion

Jesus told the parable of the rich man and Lazarus to invalidate the popular tales of revelations from the dead. The first part of the parable undermines the credibility of such a genre by using humor and sarcasm in its depictions of the afterlife, as understood in such stories.

However, the main thrust of the parable comes in the second part where Jesus demolishes popular expectations as reflected in the request of the rich man and emphasizes that (a) supposed revelations from the dead do not bring repentance—Scripture does; (b) any return from the dead will come only through bodily resurrection, not through any other means; and (c) there are no eyewitnesses with tales from the dead outside the Bible.

Today, as in the time of Jesus, tales of revelations from the afterlife abound, whether in the form of near-death experiences, dreams, visits from ghosts, or other means. Even within Christian circles such stories circulate, and their

revelations are even used as a witness to call people to repentance.

To all such, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, properly understood, is a stark reminder that the only tool in bringing people to repentance and saving faith is Scripture, the sure and powerful Word of God. Anything supposedly coming from the dead is not from God and should be shunned. ❖

- 1 Main thoughts of this article come from Kim Papaioannou, *The Geography of Hell in the Teaching of Jesus: Gehenna, Hades, the Abyss, the Outer Darkness Where There Is Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013).
- 2 The absence of features that identify this literary unit as a parable, and the use of a proper name for the poor man (unique in parables), have led to speculation on whether this narrative does indeed constitute a parable. Some consider this not a parable but a true-life story. However, the details of this parable, as discussed in this study, and its depiction of the afterlife do not reflect the biblical view of death. The unit begins with the phrase “There was a certain rich man,” similar to the introductions to three other Lukan parables (Luke 14:16–24; 15:11–31; 16:1–8). On the other hand, verses 19–31 contain strong similarities with a number of folktales, as will be discussed. We may therefore call it a parable modeled on popular folktales. Le Roy Froom, interestingly, calls it a “parabolic fable.” Le Roy Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*, vol. 1 (Washington DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1966), 239.
- 3 Darrell Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1986), 1377.
- 4 E.g., see the cautions of Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 607, 08; William Smith, *Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1869), 1038.
- 5 Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1888, 1899); Froom argues eloquently along these lines. Interestingly, he sees a connection between this parable and fables that circulated at the time, though he does not develop the contrast, as we do here. Froom, *Conditionalist Faith*, 234–51.
- 6 The tale was first pointed out by Hugo Gressman, *Vom reichen Mann und armen Lazarus: Eine literargeschichtliche Studie* (Berlin: Königliche Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1918). The story dates from a first century AD manuscript but is probably much older.
- 7 Jerusalem Talmud, *Haggadah*, 2.77.
- 8 Ronald Hock, “Lazarus and Micylus: Greco-Roman Backgrounds to Luke 16:19–31,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106, no. 3 (Sept. 1987): 55.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 455–63.
- 10 Plato, *Republic*, 10.614B–621B.
- 11 Richard Bauckham, “The Rich Man and Lazarus: The Parable and the Parallels,” *New Testament Studies* 37, no. 2 (1991), 225–246.

- 12 Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 18b.
- 13 This tale is told in *The Apocryphon of Jannes and Jambres*. Genesis neither numbers nor names the magicians who opposed Moses, nor does it state they were brothers. Jewish tradition named them as Jannes and Jambres, a tradition known in 2 Timothy 3:8.
- 14 We do not know whether Jambres repents, because the text is fragmentary and the conclusion of the story missing.
- 15 V. Tanghe considers Lazarus to be Abraham’s envoy, since Lazarus is the Greek version of the Hebrew Eliezer, Abraham’s servant (Gen. 15:2; cf. 24:2). The parable does not make such a connection. However, in light of its relation to stories about the afterlife where a known eyewitness usually has a prominent role, it is likely that such a connection between Lazarus and Eliezer could be made in the minds of the audience. V. Tanghe, “Abraham, son fils et son envoye (Luc 16,19–31),” *Revue Biblique* 91 (1984): 557–77.
- 16 Bauckham, “The Rich Man and Lazarus,” 328.
- 17 Unless otherwise noted, Bible references are from the New King James Version.
- 18 Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans., ed., and aug. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958), s.v. “*chortazō*.”
- 19 Compare the translation “Abraham’s side” (e.g., ESV and NIV).
- 20 Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. *phonizō*; Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, revised by Henry S. Jones, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), s.v. *phonizō*.
- 21 Luke 2:48; Acts 20:38; Romans 9:2; and 1 Timothy 6:10.
- 22 Compare Genesis 44:31; Exodus 3:7; Deuteronomy 26:14; Proverbs 29:21; Isaiah 21:10; 40:29; 53:4; Lamentations 1:12; Haggai 2:14; Zechariah 9:5; and 12:10. Also Genesis 35:18 where, though Rachel’s son is born in the physical pain of birth, she names him Ben-Oni—*uios adunēs*, “son of sorrow”—highlighting perhaps her emotional anguish over her physical pain.
- 23 Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 28a, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 1133.
- 24 Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. *katapsuchō*. Liddell and Scott define it as “cool,” “chill,” or “refresh,” while they render the related adjective *katapsuchros* as “very cold.”
- 25 E.g., See Stanley E. Porter, Jeffrey T. Reed, and Matthew Brook O’Donnell, *Fundamentals of New Testament Greek* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 132, 33.
- 26 E.g., 2 Samuel 16:20; 1 Kings 18:27; 22:13–16; Isaiah 46:6, 7; Jeremiah 10:5; 12:5; Matthew 23:24; Mark 7:25–30; John 1:45, 46; 2 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 5:12.
- 27 Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1941), 265.
- 28 The Bible contains numerous stories of persons who died and were raised back to life, the best known being Lazarus. However, none told tales from the afterlife because there were no such tales to be told. The dead “know nothing” (Eccl. 9:5).

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# Deep breathing of the soul: *Honesty in prayer*

**H**onesty in prayer is crucial for our life with God. Prayers in Scripture teach us this. Many biblical prayers are filled with grief and protest, but God does not turn away. He is not offended by our honest complaints. One of the primary characteristics of prayer in the Bible points to honesty, often expressing hurt and frustration. For example, the core of Exodus explains the act of placing pain before God: “Then the children of Israel groaned because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry came up to God because of the bondage. So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God acknowledged them” (Exod. 2:23–25).<sup>1</sup>

## The prayers of Hannah

When studying 1 Samuel, the narrative of Hannah (1 Sam. 1–3) is often passed over to concentrate on the life of her noble son, Samuel. However, the length of her narrative implies that Hannah deserves attention.

Hannah’s first prayer is an intense cry to God in “bitterness of soul and . . . in anguish” (1 Sam. 1:10). She does not have her husband, Elkanah, pray for her in the sanctuary—she prays. And her prayer is the first by a woman recorded in the Old Testament. Before her, other women, such as Rebekah,

prayed to God (Gen. 25:22), but their words are not recorded. Hannah prays and pledges to God that if granted a son, he would be dedicated as a Nazarite (1 Sam. 1:11). Earlier God provided the Nazarite vow to those who would personally choose such consecration (Num. 6). In this case, Hannah makes such a vow for her unborn child, one yet to be conceived. Later Hannah brings Samuel to Shiloh in fulfillment of her vow to God: “Now when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with three bulls, one ephah of flour, and a skin of wine, and brought him [Samuel] to the house of the LORD in Shiloh” (1 Sam. 1:24).

Note the significance of Hannah initiating this service. Elkanah was a Levite (1 Sam. 1:1; 1 Chron. 6:33–38), and he had the prerogative of bringing his son to Shiloh. Yet it was Hannah who went to the tabernacle to fulfill her vow. She brings a very expensive offering as she dedicates her son, Samuel, to God’s service and returns home without Samuel, leaving him in the temple—an offering without parallel in Scripture.

At this moving moment, Hannah again pours out her heart to God. This second prayer is not a gentle lullaby as typically attributed to mothers. Instead, she has vigorous shouts of triumph, speaking of war where the enemies of the Lord will be broken in pieces and concluding by mentioning a king (1 Sam. 2:10). In Hannah’s day

there was no monarchy. Yet, Hannah’s prayer refers to an anointed king. This devout woman prophesies the glorious Messiah king!

One cannot help but be impressed with the strength of Hannah’s relationship with God as reflected in her prayers. She prayed so intensely that the high priest chided her for being drunk. She also praised God exuberantly. We can learn many valuable lessons from Hannah’s prayer life.

First, Hannah goes straight to God to pour out her pain and grief in her first prayer. She did not consider prayer a proper eloquent exchange between a polite, reverent believer and God. No, when Hannah was hurting, she cried out in anguish. She also profusely praised God, demonstrating that He does not act as just a last resort in times of crisis. She represents part of the extensive biblical tradition of praying that reveals a depth and intensity, unlike many today who rush through prayer as a ceremony.

Hannah’s prayer in extreme distress encourages us, knowing that God is mindful of our negative emotions—that we do not need to pretend positive feelings when we come to Him. In fact, God appreciates our complete honesty. He already knows, even before we pray, of our most hidden thoughts. He must be glad when we finally face ourselves truthfully. Biblical prayers reflect this kind of integrity.

Second, note Hannah's attitude of thanksgiving in her second prayer. Indeed, this prayer is one of the rare ones in Scripture that do not ask God for anything. Instead, the prayer is the outpouring of Hannah's profound faith in and praise of God's sovereignty: "My heart rejoices in the LORD; my horn is exalted in the LORD. I smile at my enemies, because I rejoice in Your salvation.

"No one is holy like the LORD, for there is none besides You. Nor is there any rock like our God.

to be reprimanded by God. The ark was about to be captured by the Philistines. Yet Hannah does not withdraw from sanctuary worship. Nor does she give up her faith in despair. Rather, she steadfastly maintains her communion with God during those troubling times.

To Hannah, faith was more than positive thinking. To her, God was not a type of celestial valet doling out blessings upon request. Nor was He some impersonal force maintaining the universe. To her God was very real. Apparently she often communed with

thou hide thy face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?" (Ps. 13:1, 2, RSV).

The third one speaks of a person who has been waiting a long time and finally explodes. Rage has been festering, and now the prayer erupts in distress with blunt charges. Many Christians may be surprised at the depth of hostility this prayer seems to reveal and wonder whether this is the proper way to speak to God. But notice,



*If we really want to learn how to pray, we need to deepen our grasp of Christ's death for our sin.*

"Talk no more so very proudly; let no arrogance come from your mouth, for the LORD is the God of knowledge; and by Him actions are weighed. . . .

"He will guard the feet of His saints, but the wicked shall be silent in darkness.

"For by strength no man shall prevail. The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken in pieces; from heaven He will thunder against them. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth. He will give strength to His king, and exalt the horn of His anointed" (1 Sam. 2:1-3, 9, 10).

Hannah's prayer life portrays the faith life of a person who maintains a vital relationship with God even when struggling with difficult personal problems. This occurred at a time when her faith community was not healthy. Eli, the high priest, was soon

Him<sup>2</sup> and knew she could be completely honest with Him. Hannah's prayers are part of the rich Old-Testament tradition of prayer.

### The prayers of the psalmists

The psalmists often cry out in pain and protest. Note three of the many such examples in the Psalter. The first one speaks of an inner turmoil, a weakening of the heart, and an outward expression of the burning of the psalmist experiences: "I was dumb and silent, I held my peace to no avail; my distress grew worse, my heart became hot within me. As I mused, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue" (Ps. 39:2, 3, RSV).

The second one is a lament and a daring protest: "How long, O LORD? Wilt thou forget me forever? How long wilt

this prayer actually includes hope: "And now, Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in thee. . . . I am dumb, I do not open my mouth; for it is thou who hast done it. Remove thy stroke from me; I am spent by the blows of thy hand" (Ps. 39:7, 9, 10, RSV).

This painful complaint is not completely despairing. The person hangs on with an almost painful hope, still believing there is a God to whom this prayer can be addressed. This is not an atheist cursing God. Rather, this is a believer's honest faith wrestling with God in an unjust and sin-filled world.

### The prayer of Bartimaeus

Honesty in prayer is also evident in the New Testament. Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, hears that Jesus is passing

by and cries out loudly to Him, “Son of David, have mercy” (Mark 10:47). The people around him try to silence him, telling him to be quiet (v. 48), holding that it was not “proper” for blind beggars to cry out to such a prominent and important person. However, in an act of urgent hope and desperate honesty, Bartimaeus cries out all the more. And Jesus hears him and heals him—reassuring him, “Your faith has made you well” (v. 52). The urgent cry brought a divine response. Calling out to God in pain requires great faith, and this cry of faith brought Bartimaeus a new life. “Immediately he received his sight and followed [Jesus] on the way” (v. 52, RSV).

## The prayers of Jesus

Christ’s prayer life is astonishing. The Gospels are filled with references as to how much Jesus valued and spent time in prayer.

Immediately following His baptism, He prayed (Luke 3:21). Says Ellen White, “Upon coming up out of the water [at His baptism], Jesus bowed in prayer on the river bank. . . .

“The Saviour’s glance seems to penetrate heaven as He pours out His soul in prayer. Well He knows how sin has hardened the hearts of men, and how difficult it will be for them to discern His mission, and accept the gift of salvation. He pleads with the Father for power to overcome their unbelief, to break the fetters with which Satan has enthralled them, and in their behalf to conquer the destroyer. . . .

“Never before have the angels listened to such a prayer.”<sup>3</sup>

Regarding Jesus’ prayer in Mark 6:46 after feeding the 5,000 and resisting the crowd’s desire to crown Him king, Ellen White states, “For hours He continued pleading with God. . . . He prayed for power to reveal to men the divine character of His mission, that Satan might not blind their understanding and pervert their judgment. The Saviour knew that His days of personal ministry on earth were nearly ended, and that few would receive Him as their

Redeemer. In travail and conflict of soul He prayed for His disciples. They were to be grievously tried. . . . For them the burden was heavy upon His heart, and He poured out His supplications with bitter agony and tears.”<sup>4</sup>

Preceding His transfiguration, Jesus spent hours in prayer (Luke 9:28, 29). Ellen White notes that “the Man of Sorrows pours out His supplications with strong crying and tears. He prays for strength to endure the test in behalf of humanity. He must Himself gain a fresh hold on Omnipotence, for only thus can He contemplate the future. And He pours out His heart longings for His disciples, that in the hour of the power of darkness their faith may not fail.”<sup>5</sup>

Jesus encouraged Peter with the assurance that He had prayed for him so that his faith would not fail (Luke 22:32).

Although the Jewish religion and worship had a long tradition of praying, when Jesus’ disciples heard Him pray, they realized how much they had to learn about prayer and asked Jesus to teach them how to pray (Luke 11:1).

All four Gospels frequently portray Jesus communing with His Father. The description of His Gethsemane prayer is especially wrenching: “As the agony of soul came upon Him, ‘His sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling to the ground.’ . . .

“... The humanity of the Son of God trembled in that trying hour. He prayed not now for His disciples that their faith might not fail, but for His own tempted, agonized soul. The awful moment had come . . . which was to decide the destiny of the world. The fate of humanity trembled in the balance. . . . [Then] the words fall tremblingly from the pale lips of Jesus, ‘O My Father, if this cup may not pass away from Me, except I drink it, Thy will be done.’ . . .

“Having made the decision, He fell dying to the ground.”<sup>6</sup>

Of the many lessons we need to learn about prayer, seeing God praying to God this way surely ranks supreme. At Gethsemane, Jesus prayed the hardest, “Thy will be done.” This prayer

forces us to a deeper understanding of what prayer really is.

Prayer is not a heavenly slot machine where we deposit a prayer and automatically get something and certainly not a magical device. We do not offer suggestions to God to assist Him in helping us. Even worse is supposing that those who get what they pray for are closer to God or have more faith. The refused prayer of Christ in Gethsemane is answer enough to that notion. If we really want to learn how to pray, we need to deepen our grasp of Christ’s death for our sin. And then, “our prayers will be more and more acceptable to God, because they will be . . . *intelligent and fervent.*”<sup>7</sup>

Prayer—if we have the courage to watch Jesus pray in Gethsemane—seems particularly to involve being completely honest with God and surrendering ourselves fully to Him. Like Christ, we need to wrestle with ourselves and cry to God until we are victorious.

All through Scripture we find women and men praying with honesty and intensity, their prayers repeatedly displaying a fervor and honesty not often seen today. They surely valued prayer as “breath of the soul.” They lived with a full understanding that prayer “is the secret of spiritual power. No other means of grace can be substituted and the health of the soul be preserved.”<sup>8</sup> 📖

1 Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is from the New King James Version of the Bible.

2 Ellen White says, even when sewing for the child Samuel, “every fiber of the little garment had been woven with a prayer that he might be pure, noble, and true.” Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1913), 572.

3 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1940), 111, 112.

4 *Ibid.*, 379.

5 *Ibid.*, 419, 420.

6 *Ibid.*, 689–93.

7 Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1956), 89, emphasis added; See also, “pride and self-worship cannot flourish in the soul that keeps fresh in memory the scenes of Calvary.” White, *The Desire of Ages*, 661.

8 Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1948), 254, 255.

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# Spoken to, spoken for

I have been spoken to. How else can I put it? Perhaps a statement by Samuel Coleridge will help explain what I mean: “In the Bible there is more that finds me than I have experienced in all other books put together.”<sup>1</sup>

It has been that way for years. When I was in high school, one evening, the encounter between Jesus and Pilate in the Gospel of John spoke to me so vividly that time and place and distance disappeared—it was no longer a story about Jesus and Pilate. Jesus was speaking to *me*. I was contemporaneous with Christ; Christ appeared in *my* time no less than at the time of Pontius Pilate. I was spoken to.

## Spoken to

I have been an avid reader of the Bible since that encounter with the text. The experience of being “spoken to” has changed and matured but not so as to make it necessary to describe it some other way. My approach to Bible reading can hardly be called “reading” in the usual sense. Through the years I have gone through many Bibles, but my approach may be better characterized as “mutilation” rather than reading. I have underlined to the point of disfiguring the text, destroying Bibles in the process, and then, taking pleasure in buying a new Bible, only to start the process again.

While in medical school, I interviewed H. M. S. Richards Sr. at his home. He told me of his Bible-reading habits. They included reading through the entire Bible each January, a flyover to

ascertain yet again the lay of the land, and then reading the Bible through more slowly the rest of the year. It became his habit to write SER in the margin, short for *sermon*, as though texts were clamoring for attention and exposure. “Preach me!” they seemed to shout to Pastor Richards. Texts that spoke *to* him expected to be spoken *for*.

I adopted the same habit, writing SER in the margin whenever a text seemed to speak to me, mostly to acknowledge that I had been spoken *to* but also with the recognition that the text expected to be spoken *for* and would pile on pressure until I delivered. A similar dynamic held sway in my habits and priorities in pastoral work: I preached on texts, not on topics. The text set the tone and agenda—texts led the way, and I sometimes pictured myself finding a text big enough for the next sermon that I could hide behind it so as not to get in its way.

The years have passed since the early days of being spoken to. I have finished medical school, worked as a physician, doubled as a church pastor, completed a PhD in New Testament studies, written books, and now find myself in the classroom as a teacher of religion and the Bible. It is an interesting life, still in the present tense, and the journey is not yet over. But the part that captures what is most meaningful is still the experience of being spoken to.

Familiarity with the Bible has not changed or diminished the experience, because familiarity is an illusion. The

text has more on its mind than I expect. Close reading and close-up study discloses more than I thought was there. Working now in a more scholarly vein is not a less spiritual way of handling the texts of the Bible. Perhaps it is only now, working my way slowly through texts word for word in the original languages, that I see and hear what is there. Time and again the prior assumptions turn out to be inadequate. I am not exaggerating when I say that texts of Scripture put me at attention; they pin me to the wall; they refuse to let me go. And yes, again and again, when they do let me go, I leave in tears and not infrequently in a state of trembling. Bible texts have contexts that cannot be ignored except at the peril of missing the point.

Bible texts also do tone of voice. They have body language. They present excruciating moments of silence, the most intense of which is Abraham’s walk with Isaac to the Mount of Seeing (Gen. 22:6, 7). In the book of Job, in the last of the cycle of speeches between Job and his friends, Job seems to repeat what his friends have been saying almost word for word. Have the friends persuaded him? Is he ready to concede that they are right and he is wrong? Not at all. In the end, they concede defeat (Job 32:1). But Job’s clincher can be understood only if we do *tone of voice*. He repeats the friends’ sterile, inauthentic arguments, and the case is closed. The sclerotic arguments, now heard in playback, secure their defeat when repeated by Job. In the Gospel of John, there are double meanings,

irony, tone of voice, and puzzled facial expressions—texts that are simple on the surface but emotionally, theologically, and psychologically as complex as can be imagined.

During the past eight years, I have worked on some of the most important and tantalizing passages in the Bible. I have been in the Garden of Eden—hearing, as it were, in ten different versions—the tone of voice of the serpent’s speech (Gen. 3:1). I have listened to Cain’s toxic speech with himself, a detail that even the most astute translations of the Bible struggle to convey (Gen. 4:8). I have walked with Abraham to the Mount of Seeing (Gen. 22:1–18), aided immensely by Søren Kierkegaard’s meditation on the story, a meditation that has given birth to enduring schools of thought in theology and philosophy over the past 150 years.<sup>2</sup> I have been to Bethlehem both physically and in my mind; *not* (as you might expect) to see the hills David roamed as a child or the place where Jesus was

wrapped and laid in a manger. I came to relive the story of the concubine in Judges 19, running in the early morning hours from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and back, intending to participate in her last journey. Then, in the evening after dark, I managed to get to Gibeah, where the unnameable deed took place. This took a close reading to discover that she was not unfaithful to him, as some translations suggest. Instead, he made her do it; he prostituted her until she left in disgust (Judg. 19:2). He goes to win her back. There is frightening procrastination on his part. She walks with him from Bethlehem to Jerusalem and then to Gibeah as darkness falls on the land. At night, the villagers attack the house in Gibeah, where they are staying. The Levite forces his concubine out over her pleading (Judg. 19:25). They abuse her all night, retreating only at sunrise. She crawls to the house in the cold morning hours, dying in utter loneliness with her hands reaching for the door (Judg. 19:27). It is unspeakable.

And yet I have been spoken to, here, too, in the darkest and most neglected corner of Scripture.

### Spoken for

In this and many other stories, being spoken to will not be separated from the demand of these texts to be spoken for. The texts expect and accept nothing less, whether the story of Adam, Eve, and the serpent; Cain and Abel; or the stories of better-defined characters like Abraham, Moses, or Elijah. Of course, these texts have been spoken for many times in the history of interpretation—often with unsettling results. The most influential interpretations of the story of Cain and Abel are a case in point; interpretations of the book of Job another.

Now, in our time, the texts must be spoken for in the presence of new challenges, the greatest of which by far is the Holocaust of the twentieth century. The Holocaust brings new obligations to bear on our interpretations, but it also

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*Interpretation is irreducibly communal, an act of listening to and participation with others who have been spoken to and have spoken for what they found.*

comes with new opportunities, and it provides for underappreciated resources to get their due. When we read the Bible within sight of Auschwitz, as I mean to do, we cannot pass by Bethlehem without paying attention to the rape and dismemberment of the concubine in Judges 19. David and Jesus will no longer be the only luminaries from Bethlehem. The Bethlehem Hall of Fame now has added a person—a woman, a concubine—seen and remembered in texts wanting to be spoken for. I do not

see the Holocaust as a problem that defeats belief; I see a reality, rather, that demands a religious and theological account of human existence.

I have been spoken *to*. And I have spent years speaking *for* the texts that have spoken to me, lately mostly in writing. My motivation and sense of obligation have come mostly from the texts themselves. Life's most precious moments are the times of feeling spoken *to*, these times enhanced and made more intense during attempts to speak

for the most important texts to which a human being has access. In that sense, speaking *for* and being spoken *to* are two sides of the same coin and discipline.

### Conclusion

And now what? Reading the Bible can be solitary and even lonely, but it will never be a completely private matter. Interpretation is irreducibly communal, an act of listening to and participation with others who have been spoken to and have spoken for what they found. I am indebted to mentors within and without my community. Spoken *for* is not only a matter that has reference to a text but also has reference to the community to which I belong—its reason for existence and its witness to the world. I admit to my community that I work with a sense of obligation to you. I hope you, too, will feel spoken *for*. ❧

- 1 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Letter II" in *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge, 3rd ed. (London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street, 1853), 47.
- 2 Originally published in 1843 as *Frygt og Bæven* in Danish under the pseudonym Johannes de silentio (John of the Silence), an English version of this classic is Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (London: Penguin Books, 1985).

## My earnest efforts to know Christ

Revival and reformation in my life does not happen by accident, nor does it happen while I sleep or come as a surprise one morning when I wake up. Revival and reformation take decided and consistent efforts on my part. In His high priestly prayer in John 17:3, Jesus said: " 'And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent' " (NKJV). Therefore, it is vital for every follower of Christ to know how to get to know Jesus and remain in Him.

We are told that Jesus was completely dependent on His Father for

everything He did (John 5:19, 20). He maintained His close relationship with His Father by praying and studying the Scriptures.

Jesus invites us to have a close relationship with Him. Through daily study of His Word, as well as through prayer and witnessing, we can have a close relationship with Jesus. But maintaining my relationship with Jesus takes time, not just a few minutes a day, reading a text and a quick prayer. No, it takes much more time during the day. It requires a lot of effort to consistently set aside this time for Jesus

every day, seven times a week. Revival and reformation is a by-product of my earnest efforts to get to know Jesus and to maintain my relationship with Him.

—Gerhard Pfandl, PhD, now retired, served as an associate director, Biblical Research Institute, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States.

Revival  
and REFORMATION  
YOU, YOUR FAMILY, YOUR CHURCH, YOUR COMMUNITY



## ► New vice chancellor pledges advancement, excellence, and adventure for the Adventist University of Africa

**Nairobi, Kenya**—In April 2016 the Adventist University of Africa (AUA) celebrated the inauguration of **Delbert Baker** as its new vice-chancellor. The celebration was attended by church and government officials along with a host of other leaders and dignitaries from Adventist institutions, the local community, and the Seventh-day Adventist General Conference headquarters.

The installation service was led out by **Ella Simmons**, a general vice president of the Seventh-day Adventist General Conference and chair of the AUA Council, along with **Blasious Ruguri**, president of the Adventist Church's East-Central Africa Division and chancellor of AUA. The event culminated with special celebratory speeches from Seventh-day Adventist General Conference president **Ted Wilson**, Adventist General Conference general vice president **Geoffrey Mbwana**, education director for the Adventist Church **Lisa Beardsley-Hardy**, Oakwood

PHOTO BY PHILIP BAPTISTE



University president **Leslie Pollard**, and a host of others.

In his remarks, the new vice-chancellor challenged the university family to join him in pursuing “unstoppable advancement, academic excellence, and adventures under the Almighty.”

During the ceremony, Blasious Ruguri said, “We are delighted to welcome Dr. Baker to the vice-chancellorship of one of the greatest

Adventist universities in the world. He has an outstanding reputation as both a denominational and academic leader in the Adventist church. We look forward to working with him to help take AUA onward and upward.”

Prior to coming to AUA, Baker served as a general vice president for the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. *[Philip Baptiste/East-Central African Division]*

## ► Memorandum of Understanding to benefit Adventist hospitals across Inter-America

**Miami, Florida, United States**—A Memorandum of Understanding, signed April 18, 2016, between administrators of Health City Cayman Islands (HCCI) and Adventist Health Services Inter-America (AHS-IA) will seek to

provide free cardiac surgeries to children and minimally invasive surgeries at affordable costs across Adventist-operated hospitals in the Caribbean. HCCI is a state-of-the-art tertiary care hospital located in Grand Cayman,

which provides world-class-affordable medical care.

“We are honored to be part of this project,” said **Chandy Abraham**, CEO of HCCI, as he addressed Inter-American Division church leaders. “The



PHOTO BY LIBNA STEVENS/INTER-AMERICAN DIVISION



Seventh-day Adventist Church has mission hospitals across the Caribbean islands which align with the way we think.”

“This is a significant moment for the Inter-American Division,” said **Israel Leito**, president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s Inter-America Division. “This joint project will expand the mission of this world-renowned institution and our Adventist hospitals to the general public where we are operating.”

The AHS-IA affiliation with HCCI will bring the institutions to the same level and grant direct access to professional, technical, and other resources, according to **Elie Honore**, AHS-IA president. “This is a good opportunity to serve our community at a very high level, where we would not be able to assist otherwise,” added Honore. The aim is

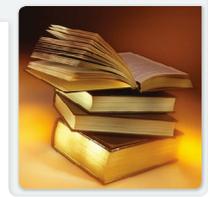
to refer 100 patients, 0–18 years of age, for free surgeries to HCCI per year. “Our hospitals will be crucial in screening patients that can benefit from this wonderful missionary ministry in our health institutions,” explained Honore.

In the agreement document AHS-IA agrees to refer patients needing adult and pediatric services to HCCI, such as cardiothoracic and vascular surgery, cardiology, orthopedics, sports medicine, oncology, neurosciences, pulmonology, GI and bariatric surgery, and other specialties.

The agreement will be initially for the five hospitals

in the Caribbean and one in Mexico, but leaders hope this project can be extended to the rest of the 14 hospitals managed and operated by Adventist Health Services Inter-America. [Libna Stevens/Inter-American Division] 

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## He Spoke and It Was

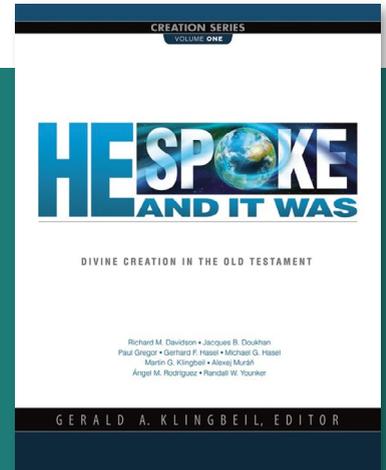
edited by Gerald Klingbeil, Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2015.

If you have ever wondered why Adventist thinkers insist on reading the early chapters of Genesis as history, I recommend that you read *He Spoke and It Was*. In this well-researched book, editor Gerald Klingbeil engages in conversation with select Adventist thinkers—scientists, theologians, and biblical scholars—to investigate how the biblical account of creation influenced the composition of virtually all genres in the Old Testament (OT). This is not a small accomplishment, since the Genesis account of creation plays a foundational role in Christian theology in general and in Adventist theology in particular.

In relation to Adventism, I observed that the reason Adventist thinkers have insisted on approaching Genesis as history is often misunderstood. Mark Noll, for example, claims that the reason Adventist thinkers have taken this approach is that they “wanted to show that the sacred writings of Adventist-founder Ellen G. White . . . could provide a framework for studying the history of the earth.”<sup>1</sup> Ronald Numbers suggests that Adventist thinkers have taken this approach because they want to strengthen biblical support for “their distinctive Sabbath doctrine.”<sup>2</sup> While it is difficult to deny that there is some truth to these claims, I find it odd that neither Noll nor Numbers took time to mention the primary reason Adventists insist on interpreting early Genesis as history. The primary reason is the undeniable theological dependence of the wisdom literature, the prophetic books, the gospel, and biblical eschatology on the biblical account of creation.

This is not a topic that can be easily dismissed. In fact, the recognition of this influence is theologically essential to Christianity, because virtually all genres in the OT contain information used to identify Jesus as the promised Messiah.

*He Spoke and It Was is a well-crafted piece of scholarly literature that strengthens the argument in favor of the biblical approach to origins.*



Consequently, if the OT is built upon the premise that early Genesis contains the record of a historical event, but this premise is denied to favor an evolutionary approach to origins, then the theological foundation of the OT books used to validate the claim that Christ is the Messiah is wobbly and its claims untenable.

To address challenges such as this, the authors of *He Spoke and It Was* offer the reader a variety of biblical and theological arguments that support the historicity of the creation account in Genesis and show how biblical authors have built upon this premise. For example, they argue that biblical eschatology is undeniably contingent on biblical protology. In other words, “Scripture is able to speak about the end of the world and humanity only because God is the Creator of that world and humanity” (13). This approach to protology and eschatology alone should raise concerns about Christian scholars who deny the historicity of the Genesis account of creation or who categorize the Genesis account as issuing from ancient Near East (ANE) mythology. In fact, *He Spoke and It Was* disputes the idea that Hebrew cosmology is fundamentally based on the ANE cosmology. In the book the

authors show that this notion appeared in the late nineteenth century but that it “has been virtually abandoned by subsequent scholarship” (25). One of the reasons for this abandonment is that scholars are coming to the realization that the Genesis account of creation does not mirror ANE mythology. The Genesis account is “deconstructing the alternative theories and speculation of origins available in the ancient Near East” (170) instead.

*He Spoke and It Was* is a well-crafted piece of scholarly literature that strengthens the argument in favor of the biblical approach to origins. The book shows that the biblical account of creation is an inseparable theological component of virtually all genres in the OT. All in all, this book is a must read for laypersons, pastors, and scholars who want to be in sync with those currently dialoguing about origins.

—Reviewed by Sergio L. Silva, MA, who serves as chaplain at Grandview Medical Center, Dayton, Ohio, United States. 

- 1 Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 189.
- 2 Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: A. A. Knopf, 1992), 74.



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# Antidote to pastoral burnout

**M**ental-health literature is replete with definitions and discussions of what is commonly called professional “burnout.” It is often defined by emotional exhaustion characterized by cynicism, depersonalization, and inefficiency.<sup>1</sup> A conference ministerial director I recently spoke with was certain that half of his pastors had at least one of these cardinal features. The caring professions seem especially vulnerable, but job burnout is not a new idea, and it can strike people who work in most professions.

The problem with the kind of data mentioned by the ministerial director is there are no adequate controls. It is common for many people at various points in life to experience one or more of these cardinal symptoms. The real question is whether this is more than in a control population—and whether the symptoms are persistent or transient.

What are the alleged causes of burnout? Of course, there are many, but several categories come to mind:

1. *Overwhelming demands and work overload* are often associated with sleep deprivation and a need to be “superhuman.”
2. *Breakdown of work-life balance.* What proportion of one’s time is spent on work responsibilities versus family, hobbies, study, and vacation?
3. *The lack of, or perceived lack of, resources.* This can be felt in, for example, inadequate secretarial help, insufficient lay support, or lack of help with church property maintenance.
4. *The “absence of fairness.”* This angst tends to characterize the spirit of our times. The lack of “fairness” is discussed universally in various contexts, leading many groups to feel marginalized.
5. *Insufficient rewards.* While pastors generally do not choose the

profession for its monetary rewards, the nonmonetary rewards of being respected and contributing meaningfully to the community, if lacking, may contribute to burnout.

If you are struggling in these areas, what can you do? Before we look at some specific antidotes for avoiding burnout, it is important to consider what it means to be a professional. One of the central features of any profession is the characteristic of altruism. This means considering the feelings and well-being of others over those of oneself.<sup>2</sup> Success in a profession is meaningfully measured by the ability to help others. Parishioners are willing to share with pastors some of the most intimate and personal details of their lives because they have confidence the pastor cares more about them than about himself or herself. The life of Jesus is a prime example of an outward/others focus that demonstrates a major antidote for burnout by being a true professional.

In my four decades of pastoral, departmental, and academic ministry, I have at times had feelings that might have led to burnout. However, I praise God that His Word and communion with Him have helped me apply the following seven principles at critical points of my life to prevent burnout:

1. *Work in a truly resource-limited environment.* Learn from those pastors who are functioning effectively with far fewer resources than you have. Traveling to various corners of the earth can be very enlightening on this point. You do not need to travel far to find resource-limited environments where you can witness amazingly good things happening. This will help you feel less sorry for yourself!
2. *Empathize with your parishioners, but do not expect them to empathize with*

*you.* This is not always easy. Pastors must minister to people who are very different from themselves politically and socially, but it should have no bearing on being a professional. Becoming offended by the way parishioners treat you is a certain road to feeling burned out.

3. *Recognize work is part of life and life is part of work.* Today it is popular to discuss the need to set “boundaries.” While this may at times be necessary, the more you think about a parishioner’s difficulties and challenges, the happier you will be with your own situation. If you try too hard to carve out time for “life” versus “work,” you will become frustrated.
4. *Learn to maintain a sense of humor.* Do not take yourself too seriously. There are many ironies in life, and one of the best ways of dealing with them is to laugh.
5. *Study history.* When you do, you will discover you are not the only one who has lived through this. When I think of those who have gone before me, it is a powerful tool to fight off the symptoms of burnout.
6. *Be a mentor.* There were people who mentored you. Never forget that you can help pass the baton to the next generation. Seek to share your experiences with others.
7. *Be realistic.* Challenges and frustrations are a part every life. Solving the challenges and overcoming the frustrations with the help of Christ are what a professional pastor does.

Never forget God called you—and with that call comes enabling strength. 

<sup>1</sup> *Miller-Keane Encyclopedia and Dictionary of Medicine, Nursing, and Allied Health*, 7th ed., s.v. “burnout,” accessed May 10, 2016, medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/burnout.

<sup>2</sup> Louis K. Brandeis, “Business—The New Profession,” *La Follette’s Weekly Magazine* 4, no. 47 (November 23, 1912): 7.

# “Everyone a Sower.”

—Ted N.C. Wilson



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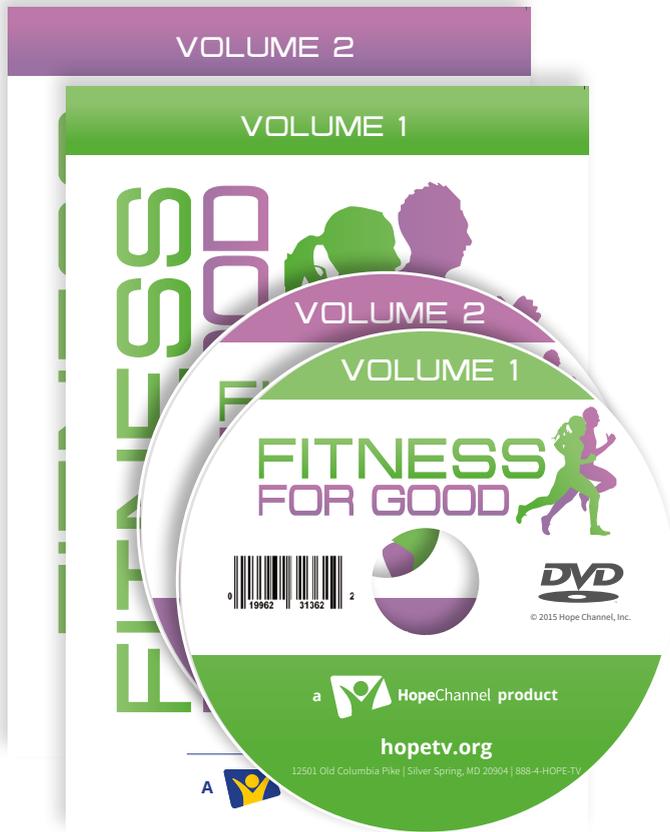
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